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Who forgives others, themselves, and situations? The roles of narcissism, guilt, self-esteem, and agreeableness

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Abstract

This study extended forgiveness research by examining the relationships between narcissism, guilt, self-esteem, Agreeableness, and forgiveness of others, self, and situations ($N = 176$). Narcissistic entitlement was negatively related, and Agreeableness positively related, to forgiveness of others. Narcissism and the other personality variables were related to self-forgiveness and forgiveness of situations. After controlling for self-esteem and shame, entitlement retained a unique relationship with forgiveness of others, and guilt retained a unique relationship with self-forgiveness. Agreeableness mediated the relationship between entitlement and forgiveness of others, and guilt and self-esteem mediated the relationship between narcissism and self-forgiveness. Although the distinction between forgiveness of self and situations requires clarification, it appears that narcissism and proneness to guilt have the potential to distinguish who forgives others and the self.

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1. Introduction

Research on forgiveness has increased dramatically over the past 15 years, with a large number of studies addressing the dispositional characteristics and correlates of forgiveness. The

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overwhelming majority of studies has focused on interpersonal forgiveness, and indicates that personality and individual difference factors, particularly the Big Five, are related to a forgiving disposition. Highly agreeable and extraverted individuals have been found to be more likely to forgive. People who score high on Neuroticism and related affective traits of anger, chronic hostility, anxiety, and depression have been found to be less likely to forgive. The other Big Five factors, Openness and Conscientiousness, appear to be unrelated to interpersonal forgiveness (for a review, see [Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005](#)).

A closely-related construct, self-forgiveness, has, however, attracted relatively little empirical attention. Self-forgiveness is relevant when a person has done something to hurt another, is aware of the nature and extent of his or her actions, and may consequently experience debilitating degrees of guilt, shame, self-loathing, or some similar response. A person may also experience the same negative reactions in relation to self-inflicted hurts where the primary victim is the self, such as engaging in acts that violate one's moral code or lead to failure or regret. Individuals may also inflict psychological harm on themselves through perceived wrongful thoughts, feelings or desires ([Hall & Fincham, 2005](#)).

Irrespective of whether harm has been done to another or the self, self-forgiveness is conceptually quite similar to interpersonal forgiveness in that it involves prosocial motivational change ([McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997](#)). That is, the individual moves from being negatively motivated to positively motivated towards the self ([Hall & Fincham, 2005](#)). More specifically, self-forgiveness entails acknowledging and accepting one's responsibility for a hurtful act or failure, overcoming self-resentment, and respecting and liking oneself again.

Taking responsibility is a key aspect of self-forgiveness, distinguishing it from the related process of the self-serving bias, where individuals take responsibility for positive outcomes but not negative outcomes ([Heider, 1958](#)). Self-forgiveness may be confounded with a self-serving bias to the extent that in effect one absolves oneself of the negative emotions associated with an event. The difference, however, is that in forgiving the self, individuals do not abdicate responsibility for their part in a negative outcome, nor do they transfer blame to circumstances or another.

The few self-forgiveness studies that have been conducted suggest that some of the personality and individual difference correlates of interpersonal forgiveness are also related to self-forgiveness. Individuals who score high on Neuroticism ([Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001](#)), anxiety, depression ([Maltby et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2005](#)), and guilt ([Zechmeister & Romero, 2002](#)) have been found to be less likely to forgive themselves. There is some evidence that extraverted individuals may be more self-forgiving ([Walker & Gorsuch, 2002](#)).

Researchers ([Thompson et al., 2005](#)) have recently argued for a third focus of dispositional forgiveness, situations. Situations represent that aspect of the source of a perceived transgression that might not be easily identified as being another or the self ([Thompson et al., 2005](#)). Individuals may blame an actual situation, for example, the circumstances surrounding a debilitating illness or accident. More likely, however, they may react to the perceived abstract source of the circumstances that led to the situation, by blaming what happened on 'life', or 'an unjust world', or 'fate'. Situations might also be implicated in a transgression committed by the self or other. For example, an individual upset about the consequences and implications of a serious car accident may feel the need to blame a friend for suggesting they take a drive at that time; themselves, for not taking appropriate measures to prevent the accident; and also 'the cruel world' that brought about the circumstances which caused the accident. So long as an individual perceives

intentionality on the part of the source behind the cause of the situation (e.g., as reflected in cognitions such as ‘the world is against me’; ‘life is so unfair’; ‘it was all due to fate’, in the case of an abstract source), then theoretically it is possible for individuals to in turn express a forgiving attitude towards a situation that they believe was the cause (or partial cause) of any hurt they are experiencing.

One study (Thompson et al., 2005) has empirically addressed forgiveness of situations. Consistent with previous research on self and other forgiveness, individuals with a disposition to forgive situations were less likely to be depressed, angry, and anxious, and more likely to be satisfied with life.

Although much is now understood about the personality and individual difference correlates of interpersonal forgiveness, relatively little is known about their relationship to self-forgiveness, and even less about their relationship to forgiveness of situations. The aim of the present study was to extend existing research by addressing the relationships between interpersonal forgiveness, self-forgiveness, forgiveness of situations, and personality, specifically, narcissism and proneness to guilt.

Narcissism and proneness to guilt are the focus of the study because of their potential to differentiate the three forgiveness components. Put simply, narcissists are more concerned with their own well being, whereas guilt-prone individuals tend to be more concerned with others’ wellbeing. Little or no research has been done, however, to test their influence. Narcissism has not been studied in relation to either forgiveness of self or situations, and the few studies on narcissism and dispositional forgiveness of others yield conflicting results. Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel (2004) found a moderate negative association between narcissistic entitlement and dispositional forgiveness of others, whereas Eaton, Struthers, and Santelli (2006) reported a weak negative relationship between narcissism and dispositional forgiveness of others, and Brown (2004) found no relationship. The relationship between guilt and forgiveness of situations has not been examined, and only single studies have addressed the relationship between guilt and self-forgiveness (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002) and dispositional forgiveness of others (Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001).

Guilt is conceptualized as an emotional response to a behavior or failure that one perceives was hurtful and/or a violation of an internal moral code (Lewis, 1971). The response is usually experienced as some combination of tension, anxiety, regret and remorse, and is directed towards the behavior but not generalized to the self, i.e., a guilty person feels bad about a behavior, but not about themselves. The distinction is important, for two reasons. First, it distinguishes guilt from shame, which does reflect an impaired sense of self (Tangney, 1991). Second, guilty feelings encourage a desire to find a way to make amends for one’s wrongdoing (Tangney, 1991), through conciliatory behaviors such as apologizing, constructive or non-hostile discussion, and reparative or symbolic restitution.

A defining aspect of guilt is that it is associated with increased empathy and awareness of another’s distress, and an awareness of being the cause of that distress. Such a link has implications for forgiveness theorizing to the extent that empathy has been shown to be an important component in the interpersonal forgiveness process (McCullough et al., 1997). Because people prone to guilt are highly attuned to their role in interpersonal transgressions, possess an elevated sense of empathy, and tend to be concerned with redressing a transgression, it was predicted that proneness to guilt would be positively related to a disposition to forgive others. Although a person

might not experience empathy for a situation or its abstract cause, it was hypothesized that because a situation is external to the individual guilt-proneness would also be positively related to forgiveness of situations.

Conversely, proneness to guilt was posited as a barrier to self-forgiveness. Individuals prone to guilt are more likely to experience emotions such as anxiety, remorse, and regret in response to perceived wrongdoings on their part. Because such emotional responses encourage guilt-prone individuals to seek to make amends for a transgression, they may do this by punishing themselves, i.e., not allowing themselves to get away with causing a hurt. Thus, it was hypothesized that proneness to guilt would be negatively related to self-forgiveness.

Narcissism reflects an inordinate degree of self-love, i.e., a grandiose and inflated sense of self. Narcissists' self-focus is loosely manifested in two ways (Watson & Morris, 1991). One is a general preoccupation with self-functioning, which reflects a heightened sense of self-confidence and esteem, and beliefs that one is special, unique, and superior to others (Raskin & Terry, 1988), for example, in terms of one's attractiveness, intelligence, achievements, and contributions in groups (Campbell, 1999). Because narcissists have an inflated view of their own self-worth, they should be more likely to forgive themselves for apparent transgressions. Thus, it was hypothesized that the self-functioning component of narcissism (hereafter referred to as narcissism) would be positively related to self-forgiveness.

The other is a sense of entitlement, which is more explicitly concerned with interpersonal relations with the focus on presumptions that one should be given special, preferential treatment by others (Exline et al., 2004). Narcissists' elevated sense of entitlement has detrimental implications for their interpersonal relationships, which are characterized by indifference, a need for power and an eagerness for admiration, and a lack of empathy, perspective-taking, agreeableness, and intimacy (Campbell & Foster, 2002). At the same time, narcissists are overly sensitive to criticism, respond more aggressively than others to insults and negative feedback (Raskin & Terry, 1988), and are more likely to report that they encounter interpersonal transgressions in their everyday lives (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003). Entitlement leads narcissists to believe that they should not be wronged. Consequently they should be less disposed to forgive others. Because situations are by definition external to the individual, theoretically the same prediction should apply to forgiveness of situations.

The study also explored explanations for the different narcissism–forgiveness links. Much previous research (Berry et al., 2005) indicates that the Big Five factor, Agreeableness, consistently predicts forgiveness of others. That is, individuals predisposed to ensure harmonious social relationships are more likely to forgive others. Entitlement is also concerned with interpersonal relations, however, the focus is on how others should treat the self, and often at the expense of a relationship (Campbell, 1999). Consequently, it was predicted that entitlement would be negatively related to Agreeableness, which in turn would be positively related to forgiveness of others. That is, Agreeableness was expected to mediate the relationship between entitlement and forgiveness of others and also forgiveness of situations.

Two factors were identified that may provide an insight into why narcissists may be more forgiving of the self. One is guilt-proneness. As noted earlier, guilt-prone individuals should be less forgiving of the self. Narcissists, however, are unlikely to feel guilty for apparently hurtful behavior, possibly because they are either unaware they have violated any moral standard, or they are too concerned with self-enhancement to allow the event to adversely affect their cognitions. What-

ever the rationale, narcissism should be negatively related to guilt, which in turn should be negatively related to self-forgiveness.

The second potential mediator is self-esteem, a variable long associated with narcissism (Brown, 2004). Almost by definition, narcissism is positively associated with a positive evaluation of the self, which in turn should be positively related to forgiving oneself. In short, it was predicted that guilt and self-esteem would mediate the relationship between narcissism and self-forgiveness.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 176 undergraduates (126 women, 50 men) at a large, Australian university, participating as part of their course requirement. The mean age of participants was approximately 20 years.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed a packet of questionnaires during class, administered in multiple, random orders, and described next.

Dispositional forgiveness of others, self, and situations was assessed using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005), the only instrument that currently measures all three components of dispositional forgiving. The HFS consists of 18 items, with three six-item subscales. Items are measured on seven-point Likert scales (1 = *almost always false of me*; 7 = *almost always true of me*), with higher scores reflecting higher levels of each form of forgiveness ($\alpha = .72$ [forgiveness of others]; $\alpha = .79$ [forgiveness of self]; $\alpha = .77$ [forgiveness of situations]).

Narcissism was measured using the Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI consists of 40 forced-choice dichotomous items with higher scores reflecting higher levels of narcissism. The six-item entitlement subscale of the NPI was scored separately. Cronbach's alpha for the subscale was low, $\alpha = .45$, however, this is consistent with previous published work (e.g., Exline et al., 2004 [$\alpha = .44$] and Raskin & Terry, 1988 [$\alpha = .43$]). Cronbach's alpha for the remaining 34 items in the NPI was acceptable, $\alpha = .77$.

Self-esteem was measured using Bachman and O'Malley's (1977) adaptation of Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scales. Participants rate 10 statements about themselves on five-point Likert scales (1 = *never true*; 5 = *always true*); higher scores represent higher self-esteem ($\alpha = .87$).

Proneness to Guilt was measured with the guilt subscale of the revised Harder Personal Feelings Questionnaire (PFQ2; Harder & Zalma, 1990). Participants rate on five-point Likert scales (0 = *means that you never experience the feeling*; 4 = *you experience the feeling continuously or almost continuously*) how common six different feelings are for them (e.g., 'worry about hurting or injuring someone'; 'feeling you deserve criticism for what you did'). Higher scores reflect higher levels of proneness to guilt ($\alpha = .74$). To distinguish guilt from the related construct of shame, the 10-item *Shame* subscale of the PFQ2 was also included (items included, for example, 'feeling disgusting to others'; 'feelings of blushing') ($\alpha = .73$).

Agreeableness was measured using the 12-item Agreeableness subscale of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO-FFI is considered appropriate for research purposes when time is limited and only global information on personality is required. Items are measured on five-point Likert scales (0 = *strong disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher levels on a factor ($\alpha = .67$; removing an item improved the coefficient to .73, but had negligible impact on results).

3. Results

Table 1 shows the correlations between the dispositional forgiveness variables and each of the personality variables. It may be seen from Table 1 that entitlement was negatively related to forgiveness of others, Agreeableness was positively related, and narcissism and guilt were unrelated. Guilt was negatively related to forgiveness of self and situations, narcissism was positively related, and entitlement was unrelated. Self-esteem correlated relatively strongly with self-forgiveness, moderately with forgiveness of situations, narcissism, and guilt, and not at all with entitlement. Self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations each correlated moderately and positively with each other.

Three separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which narcissism and guilt predicted dispositional forgiveness of others, self, and situations, respectively. In each regression, the influences of self-esteem and shame were controlled for by entering them at step 1; narcissism and guilt were entered at step 2 (for forgiveness of others and situations, entitlement was entered). As Table 2 shows, after controlling for self-esteem and shame, entitlement retained a unique association in the predicted direction with forgiveness of others, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 171) = 5.18, p = .01$. Guilt retained a unique association in the predicted direction with forgiveness of self, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 172) = 7.29, p = .01$. Entitlement and guilt retained no unique relationships with forgiveness of situations, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 171) = 1.45, p > .05$.

Table 1
Pearson product moment correlations between dispositional forgiveness variables and personality variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Forgive others								
2. Forgive self	.32**							
3. Forgive situations	.47**	.64**						
4. Entitlement	-.22**	.02	-.05					
5. Narcissism ^a	.04	.40**	.24**	.35**				
6. Proneness to guilt	-.07	-.55**	-.32**	-.08	-.32**			
7. Agreeableness	.37**	.19*	.21**	-.41**	-.14	-.22**		
8. Self esteem	.15*	.67**	.48**	.08	.50**	-.51**	.20**	
9. Shame	-.12	-.45**	-.28**	-.06	-.39**	.58**	.57**	-.48**

^a Does not include entitlement subscale.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Summary of hierarchical regression analyses for the prediction of dispositional forgiveness of others, self, and situation, by personality variables

Step	Predictor variables	Forgiveness of others		Forgiveness of self		Forgiveness of situation	
		$R^2\Delta$	β	$R^2\Delta$	β	$R^2\Delta$	β
1	Self esteem	.03	.12	.47**	.59**	.23**	.45**
	Shame		-.07		-.17**		-.07
2	Narcissism ^a	.06**	-.23**	.04**	.06	.00	-.09
	Guilt		-.04		-.26**		-.09
	Total R^2	.08*		.51**		.25**	
	Adjusted R^2	.06*		.50**		.23**	

^a For forgiveness of others and situation, the predictor variable was entitlement.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

A third aim of the study was to examine the effect of potential mediators on the relationships between narcissism and forgiveness. The preconditions for a test of mediation are that each of the predictor, potential mediator, and outcome variables are significantly correlated (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Table 2 indicates that the correlations between entitlement, Agreeableness, and forgiveness of others met the criteria, as did the correlations between narcissism, guilt and self-esteem, and forgiveness of self. Contrary to theorizing, forgiveness of situations was not significantly related to entitlement; it was, however, significantly associated with narcissism and self-esteem and guilt. Furthermore, it was more highly correlated with forgiveness of self than others, suggesting possible conceptual or measurement confounds. Thus, for exploratory purposes, the study examined the extent to which guilt and self-esteem mediated the relationship between narcissism and forgiveness of situations.

Separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted for each of forgiveness of others, self, and situations. For each analysis, the appropriate narcissism variable was entered at Step 1, and the potential mediators at Step 2. Mediation is demonstrated when the partial regression coefficient (Beta value) for the predictor variable at Step 1 is substantially reduced at Step 2 after the potential mediator has been included in the regression equation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Table 3 shows the results of each of the hierarchical regression analyses. It may be seen from Table 3 that for forgiveness of others, the Beta value for entitlement reduced from significance to non-significance once Agreeableness was included in the equation. Sobel's (1982) test indicated that the decrease in Beta value was significant, $z(1, 173) = 3.53, p = .001$. For forgiveness of self, the Beta value for narcissism reduced from significance to non-significance once self-esteem and guilt were included in the equation, with each retaining significant unique associations. Sobel's (1982) test indicated that the decrease in Beta value was significant for both self-esteem, $z(1, 173) = 5.95, p = .001$, and guilt, $z(1, 173) = 3.82, p = .001$. Similarly, for forgiveness of situations, the Beta value for narcissism reduced from significance to non-significance once self-esteem and guilt were included in the equation, with self-esteem retaining a unique association. Sobel's (1982) test indicated that the Beta value decrease was significant for self-esteem, $z(1, 173) = 4.79, p = .001$.

Table 3

Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses (Beta values) for the prediction of forgiveness of others, self, and situations

Step	Predictor variables	Forgiveness of others		Forgiveness of self		Forgiveness of situations	
		$R^2\Delta$	β	$R^2\Delta$	β	$R^2\Delta$	β
1	Narcissism ^a	.05**	-.22***	.16***	.40***	.06***	.24***
2	Narcissism ^a		-.08		.07		-.00
	Agreeableness	.10***	.34***				
	Guilt			.35***	-.28***	.18***	-.10
	Self esteem				.50***		.43***
Total R^2		.15***		.51***		.24***	

^a For forgiveness of others, the predictor variable was entitlement.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

As predicted, narcissism is positively related to self-forgiveness, and proneness to guilt is negatively related. This was the first study to examine the potential relationship between narcissism and self-forgiveness. The finding for guilt, meanwhile, is consistent with previous research (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). It appears that individuals who experience some combination of anxiety, tension, remorse and regret in response to their wrongdoing may be more likely to punish themselves. The result for narcissism is less clear. When shame and self-esteem are taken into account, guilt, but not narcissism, retains a unique relationship with self-forgiveness. The relationship of self-esteem to narcissism is unsurprising, given that the self-functioning component of narcissism emphasizes self-love, or an elevated, grandiose sense of self-esteem. Thus, although self-enhancement may be implicated in self-forgiveness, it may be that the key to self-forgiveness is more a positive self-regard, whereas proneness to guilt may be a barrier.

It is also not clear the extent to which narcissists may be engaging in the self-serving bias when they forgive themselves. In forgiving the self one also takes responsibility for one's part in a hurtful action, whereas in the self-serving bias one does not. Because narcissists have an inflated sense of the self, and therefore are arguably unable or unwilling to accept responsibility for hurting others (or the self), they may in fact be self-serving when they claim to be self-forgiving. Future studies should delineate the potential relationship between the two constructs.

This was the first study to focus on the relationship between personality and forgiveness of situations. Unexpectedly, however, entitlement is unrelated to forgiveness of situations, whereas the self-functioning component of narcissism is. Furthermore, the relationships are in the opposite direction to what was predicted, with narcissists more likely, and guilt-prone individuals less likely, to forgive situations. An indication of why these counter-intuitive findings may have emerged may be seen in the relationships between narcissism and guilt and forgiveness of situations, which tend to mirror those for self-forgiveness. In addition, forgiveness of situations is more highly correlated with self-forgiveness than forgiveness of others, with the direction and strength of the relationships quite similar to those reported by Thompson et al. (2005).

There are two possible explanations. One concerns measurement. An inspection of the items in the situations and self-subscales of the HFS (Thompson et al., 2005) reveals that all six of the situation items consist of ‘I’ statements, suggesting that the situation items may be interpreted as being focused as much on the self as on situations (e.g., ‘I eventually make peace with bad situations in my life’), rather than as external to the self. Alternatively, it may be that individuals do not perceive situations as necessarily external, and that forgiveness of self and situations may in fact be conceptually the same thing. It is possible, for example, for individuals to implicate themselves in a hurtful situation (e.g., ‘I should not have put myself in that situation’), and therefore in forgiving a situation they are actually forgiving themselves. Although forgiveness of situations may offer an intriguing new dimension to forgiveness theorizing, further refinement is required to achieve conceptual and measurement clarity.

As predicted, entitled narcissists are less likely to forgive others, and the relationship holds after controlling for shame and self-esteem. This finding is consistent with Exline et al. (2004), who also focused on entitlement. It is notable that the self-functioning component of narcissism is unrelated to forgiveness of others, and entitlement is unrelated to self-esteem, a variable that shares a relatively large amount of variance with the self-functioning component. Taken together, these relationships suggest that it may be the element of entitlement, rather than a sense of superiority or a concern with self-enhancement, which discourages narcissists from forgiving others.

It appears that the extent to which entitlement is related to forgiveness of others may be explained by entitled narcissists’ lack of concern for the maintenance of good social relations (i.e., Agreeableness mediates the relationship between entitlement and forgiveness of others). As narcissism theorizing suggests, entitlement has an interpersonal focus, but the focus is less on relationships and more on what they achieve for the entitled narcissist. Also as hypothesized, narcissists are more likely to be kind to themselves following apparent hurtful behavior. This may be due largely to their strong positive self-regard and unwillingness or inability to feel bad for, or perhaps even be aware of, hurtful things they might have done (i.e., self-esteem and guilt mediate the relationship between narcissism and self-forgiveness).

Finally, proneness to guilt appears to be unrelated to forgiveness of others. Although unexpected, the result is somewhat congruent with previous research (Konstam et al., 2001), which found that guilt was only weakly related to dispositional forgiveness of others. A possible explanation for the null finding is that although guilt-prone people have been found to be concerned with repairing harm, this has been when they are the ones who have caused the harm (Tangney, 1991). A guilt-prone individual may certainly be more likely to be aware of their role in a wrongdoing, and to have some empathy for the other person, but it may be that when harm is done to guilt-prone individuals, it is traits such as empathy, perspective-taking, and accommodation (McCullough et al., 1997), rather than guilty feelings, which become relevant to the dispositional forgiveness of others.

The central purpose of the study was to apply two conceptually-opposite individual difference variables, narcissism and proneness to guilt, to distinguish between three components of dispositional forgiveness. While the distinction between forgiveness of self and situations requires clarification, the results suggest that narcissism and proneness to guilt may be usefully applied to distinguishing who forgives others and themselves. Narcissists—or more specifically, individuals with high positive self-regard and/or a low sense of guilt—are more likely to forgive themselves, whereas narcissistic entitlement may be a barrier to interpersonal forgiveness.

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