Relational Spirituality and Dealing With Transgressions: Development of the Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression (REST) Scale

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In the study of spirituality and forgiveness, researchers have begun to look at how dynamic spiritual experiences influence forgiveness. In three studies, we develop the Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression (REST) Scale, which assesses the extent to which victims actively engage a relationship with the Sacred to deal with a specific transgression. In Study 1, exploratory factor analysis was used to determine the factor structure of the REST. In Study 2, the factor structure was replicated using confirmatory factory analysis. The REST was correlated with religious commitment and negatively related to avoidant attachment to God. In Study 3, evidence supporting the scale’s construct validity was adduced. REST scores were correlated with other appraisals of relational spirituality. Structural equation modeling was used to compare theoretical models. REST scores were related to dedication to the Sacred and viewing the transgression as a desecration. In addition, REST scores were positively related to empathy, which was positively related to forgiveness. Furthermore, REST scores predicted forgiveness above and beyond other appraisals of relational spirituality.

For many people, forgiveness is a deeply spiritual theme. Research on spirituality and forgiveness has expanded rapidly in the last two decades. There are now more than 150 empirical articles that have examined the relationship between spirituality and forgiveness (PsycINFO Search conducted on January 5, 2009). Unfortunately, most studies on this topic have treated spirituality as a relatively static construct, similar to a personality trait. In such a strategy,
investigators study whether more religious individuals tend to forgive more than less religious individuals.

With this strategy, research has generally found that more religious people are more forgiving than are less religious people. However, religious beliefs can affect how religiosity is related to forgiveness. For example, Christians tend to believe one should forgive unconditionally (i.e., without requiring apology or restitution) more than do Jews (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006). Moreover, a discrepancy has emerged. Whereas the relationship between religiosity and trait forgivingness tends to be fairly robust (correlations on the order of .4), religiosity has been a weaker predictor of whether a person has forgiven a specific offense (correlations on the order of .25; see McCullough & Worthington, 1999, for a review). McCullough, Tsang, & Hoyt (2005) provided initial evidence that a recall bias, caused by the way researchers have studied forgiveness of specific offenses, may partially explain this discrepancy. When participants are asked to remember a hurtful transgression, they probably select an unforgiven offense, which might attenuate any differences between more religious and less religious people.

The problem with comparing forgiveness between different groups (i.e., more or less spiritual people) is such an approach cannot further knowledge on how to promote forgiveness in spiritual individuals. For this, researchers must consider how the victim’s spiritual experiences, such as spiritual appraisals of the transgression, promote or hinder forgiveness. This approach has been termed relational spirituality (see Davis, Hook, & Worthington, 2008; Shults & Sandage, 2006).

The most central part of relational spirituality is someone’s experience of a relationship with the Sacred (Shults & Sandage, 2006). Consider a highly religious father, John. After his wife cheated on him, he tried for months to repair the relational damage, but when conflict continued to escalate, his spouse decided to end the marriage and to leave him for another man. Since the divorce, John cannot understand why God let this happen to him. He feels an unutterable protest toward God. He harbors resentment toward his wife for destroying their marriage, which he considered deeply sacred. Moreover, he sees her in a different light. He once felt a deep spiritual connection with her. Now he deeply questions her faith and her relationship with God. He cannot imagine how he will work with her civilly as parents of their two children.

To study experiences such as John’s, in which spirituality is a component of how a victim experiences an offense, we can apply a model of relational spirituality and forgiveness (Davis et al., 2008). The model is based on a stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness (Worthington, 2006) and theorizing by Shults and Sandage (2006) on spiritual transformation and relational spirituality. Specifically, the model suggests that the way in which a victim interprets the relational context of a transgression affects his or her emotional response to that transgression, which in turn affects whether he or she forgives the transgressor. Following theorizing by Exline and her colleagues, emotional forgiveness occurs when the victim replaces negative emotions with positive, other-oriented emotions like empathy, sympathy, or love (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). Victims appraise the components of a forgiveness experience—their own beliefs and values, the offender’s beliefs and values, and the nature of the transgression. Of importance, victims also appraise the relationships between the victim, offender, and transgression. Victims who are spiritual may appraise how the Sacred is related to the victim, the offender, and the transgression. These spiritual appraisals may influence the likelihood of forgiveness. Namely, spiritual appraisals that lead to positive emotions and
intentions to behave in prosocial ways toward the offender can promote emotional forgiveness, whereas spiritual appraisals that lead to negative emotions and motives to seek vengeance or avoidance can make emotional forgiveness more difficult (Davis et al., 2009).

According to the model, victims may appraise three spiritual relationships (see Figure 1): the relationship between the Sacred and themselves (VS), the Sacred and the transgression (TS), and the Sacred and the offender (OS). From our example, John’s reactions may differ based on various spiritual factors. He may experience strong anger at God (VS). Anger at God promotes powerful, negative emotions that can make forgiveness more difficult (Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999). He might also perceive the divorce as a destruction of something Sacred (TS). Appraising a transgression to be a desecration has also been found to make forgiveness difficult (Davis et al., 2008). Furthermore, he may view the offender as dissimilar at a spiritual and even a human level (OS). John’s appraisal of his ex-wife’s relationship with God might make it difficult to experience any empathy toward her. Research has found that victims who see an offender as spiritually similar are more likely to forgive (Davis et al., 2009). Despite the articulation of the model of forgiveness and relational spirituality, and a few studies that suggest that the constructs explain incrementally beyond established measures (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005), the specification of the model and measures that would be required to operationalize it are at a rudimentary level. Most of the previous work has (a) come from a single lab (Davis et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2009) and has (b) focused on a victim’s appraisal of these three spiritual relationships. Those researchers have

FIGURE 1  Spiritual appraisals of relationship in model of relational spirituality and forgiveness. Note. OS = victim’s appraisal of the relationship between the offender and the Sacred; VS = victim’s appraisal of his or her own relationship with the Sacred; TS = victim’s appraisal of the relationship between the transgression and the Sacred. Figure reprinted from Davis, Hook, and Worthington (2008). Reprinted with permission.
not considered how a victim’s appraisals might affect a victim’s tendency to actively engage the Sacred.

In the following section, we use the Christian faith as one particular illustration of relational spirituality (i.e., see Shults & Sandage, 2006). Religious people of other faiths might engage the Sacred in ways that are not always compatible with Christian belief and practice. A Christian might engage the Sacred in a variety of ways, such as prayer for the offender, meditation on God’s word (i.e., the Bible), engaging in religious rituals, increased church attendance, seeking spiritual direction, or participating in Christian counseling. In the particular study below, we include a focus on a common response among Christians—prayer.

A few studies have examined prayer specifically as it relates to forgiveness. McMinn et al. (2008) asked Christians to describe how they recently forgave an offender, and more than half spontaneously said they relied on prayer. Likewise, in a nationwide study on religious small groups, Wuthnow (2000) found that people subjectively felt that prayer in their small group helped them to forgive. More broadly, research has found that prayer can decrease stress (e.g., Tartaro, Luecken, & Gunn, 2005). According to a coping model of forgiveness (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2008), people who can experience positive emotions through prayer should also experience greater emotional forgiveness.

The purposes of the current studies were to (a) create a measure that assesses the extent to which a victim has actively engaged the Sacred through spiritual activities, such as prayer, in order to improve his or her relationship with an offender, and (b) to relate this measure to the broader model of relational spirituality and forgiveness put forth by Davis et al. (2008). In Study 1, we create the Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression (REST) Scale, and we examine the factor structure of the measure using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). In Study 2, we replicated the factor structure using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and provided initial evidence of construct validity by examining how the REST was related to several measures of personality. In Study 3, we examined the relationships between the REST and several measures related to forgiveness, including measures of relational spirituality (e.g., desecration and dedication to the Sacred).

STUDY 1

The purpose of the first study was to use EFA to examine the factor structure of the REST items and refine the scale by dropping poor items. In addition, we hypothesized that scores on the REST would show evidence of estimated internal consistency.

Method

Participants

Participants were 200 undergraduate students (118 female) from a large, mid-Atlantic university with a multiethnic student body. The mean age was 19.3 years ($SD = 3.3$), and the sample was ethnically diverse (56.6% White/Caucasian, 15.5% Black/African American, 13.0% Asian/Asian American, 2.0% Latino/Latina, and 18% Other or did not report). Participants reported a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs (65.2% Christian, 3.8% Muslim, 2.7% Buddhist, 2.7% Hindu, 0.5% Jewish, 16.3% Agnostic/Atheist/None, and 8.8% other).
Measures

Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression (REST) items. Items were generated based on the model of relational spirituality (Davis et al., 2008). Expert reviewers who had published in the areas of psychology of religion, spirituality, and forgiveness examined the items and suggested additional items. The final pool included 19 items. Items described ways the victim might engage the Sacred when coping with a specific transgression (see Pargament, 1997). Items were completed using a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). An example item is “I tried to view him/her as a child of God.” All items reflected a variety of appraisals or active behaviors related to the Sacred for a particular transgression.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes and participated as part of a course requirement or in exchange for partial course credit. Participants gave consent and then recalled a time when they had been hurt or offended. They completed the 19 items, were debriefed, and were given the contact information of the researcher should they have any questions.

Results and Discussion

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

The covariance matrix for all relational engagement of the sacred items was analyzed using an EFA with principal components analysis with an oblique rotation. A three-factor solution fit the data based on the Eigenvalue rule (Kaiser, 1960) and the Scree test (Cattell, 1966). After examining the content of items, the three factors were named Relational Engagement of the Sacred (e.g., “I prayed for him or her”), Spiritual Similarity (e.g., “I believe that he/she is a similar spiritual person to me”), and Human Similarity (e.g., “I thought to myself that this person was a brother/sister human”).

We decided that the 14 items on the Spiritual Similarity and Human Similarity factors were theoretically different than the Relational Engagement of the Sacred factor (see the development of the Similarity of the Offender’s Spirituality Scale; Davis et al., 2009). The present article focuses on items that assess engagement of the Sacred through prayer. Consequently, 14 items were dropped. The remaining 5 items loaded at least .50 on a single factor related to engaging the Sacred for a transgression. We dropped an item that was highly redundant with another item (only one word was different), resulting in the 4-item final version of the REST. One single factor accounted for 76.1% of the variance of the 4 items. Descriptive statistics and factor loadings for the final 4-item version of the REST are listed in Table 1. The Cronbach’s alpha of the REST was .89. The findings from Study 1 provide initial evidence that scores on the REST represent one factor and have good estimated internal consistency. However, because items were winnowed based on the characteristics of the present sample, replication of the factor structure was needed.
TABLE 1
Exploratory Factor Analysis on REST (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>REST Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I tried to view him/her as a child of God.</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I asked God to help me see his/her good points.</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried to pray for him/her.</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe God wants us to mend our relationship.</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Items were completed using a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). The midpoint was 3 (neither agree nor disagree). REST = Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression.

STUDY 2

The purposes of the second study were to (a) replicate the factor structure of the REST on an independent sample using CFA, (b) present additional evidence for estimated internal consistency, and (c) demonstrate evidence for construct validity. We hypothesized that the REST, which assayed an engagement with the Sacred through prayer, would be positively correlated with religious commitment and negatively correlated with avoidant attachment to God. Individuals who are more religious should be more likely to draw on a relationship with the Sacred to deal with the stress of a transgression. Individuals with an avoidant attachment to the Sacred, however, were hypothesized to be less likely to engage this relationship through prayer to deal with a transgression. Consistent with attachment theory, they were hypothesized to withdraw from a relationship with God when psychologically threatened, as in the case of an offense (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Method

Participants

Participants were 201 undergraduate students (103 female) from a large ethnically diverse urban university. The mean age was 19.6 (SD = 2.1). The sample was ethnically diverse (52.2% White/Caucasian, 21.4% Black/African American, 10.9% Asian/Asian American, 3.0% Latino/Latina, and 6.0% Other or did not report). Participants reported a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs (56.7% Christian, 3.0% Muslim, 2.5% Buddhist, 4.0% Hindu, 21.4% Agnostic/Atheist/None, and 4.0% other/did not report).

Measures

REST Scale. The final four-item version of the REST was used to assess the extent to which a person actively engages their relationship with the Sacred in order to deal with a specific transgression. Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .90.

Religious commitment. The 10-item Religious Commitment Inventory–10 (RCI–10; Worthington et al., 2003) was used to assess one’s commitment to a religion. Participants rated
their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all true of me) to 5 (totally true of me). An example item is “My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.” Worthington et al. found Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .88 to .98. Estimates of temporal stability (3 week and 5 month) were .84 to .87. The RCI–10 also showed evidence of construct validity. The Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .95.

**Attachment to God.** The nine-item Attachment to God Scale (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002) was used to assess avoidant (six items) and anxious (three items) attachment to the Sacred. Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 7 (very characteristic of me). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for Avoidance and Anxiety subscales were .92 and .80, respectively (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). An example item is “God seems impersonal to me.” Furthermore, the Attachment to God Scale showed evidence of construct validity. Rowatt et al. found that, after controlling for social desirability, intrinsic religiousness, doctrinal orthodoxy, and loving God image, the avoidance factor predicted a sense of immortality from religion and agreeableness, and the anxiety factor positively predicted neuroticism, and negative and positive affect. The Cronbach’s alpha for Avoidance and Anxious subscales in the current sample were .87 and .71, respectively.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes from the same university as Study 1, and the procedure was identical to that of Study 1. Participants rated the REST regarding a specific transgression.

**Results and Discussion**

**Comparisons by Gender, Ethnicity, and Religious Affiliation**

We examined whether scores on the REST differed by gender, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. Analyses of variances were conducted, followed by Tukey’s post hoc tests. Scores differed by gender, \( F(1, 191) = 9.34, p = .003 \), with women (\( M = 12.35, SD = 7.40 \)) scoring higher than men (\( M = 9.31, SD = 6.31 \)). Scores also differed by ethnicity, \( F(3, 177) = 9.86 \), with Caucasian/white (\( M = 9.08, SD = 7.08 \)) and Asian/Pacific-Islander (\( M = 10.55, SD = 5.46 \)) scoring lower than African American/Black (\( M = 15.44, SD = 5.61, ps < .001 \) and .03, respectively). Of importance, scores differed based on religious affiliation, \( F(2, 174) = 38.34 \), with Christians (\( M = 13.80, SD = 6.13 \)) scoring higher than Other Religious Affiliations (\( M = 6.88, SD = 5.61 \)) and atheists or those reporting no religious affiliation (\( M = 5.00, SD = 5.86 \)). Consistent with our theoretical approach, Christians were more likely than individuals of a different religion to report engaging the Sacred through prayer, which is a common practice of the Christian faith, following a transgression.

**CFA**

To assess whether the factor structure of the REST would replicate in an independent sample, a CFA with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was conducted on the covariance matrix of the REST items using MPLUS (Version 8.1). The one-factor model showed evidence of good fit,
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\[ \chi^2(5) = 7.28, p < .01; \chi^2/N = 1.46 \] (comparative fit index [CFI] = .99, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .05, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR]) = .02. All fit indices were considered to indicate acceptable fit of the data to the model. The REST was positively correlated with religious commitment \((r = .47, p < .01)\), as hypothesized. The REST was negatively correlated with avoidant attachment to God \((r = -.66, p < .01)\), as hypothesized. The REST was not associated with anxious attachment to God, consistent with the findings of Davis et al. (2008). Thus, the factor structure of REST was replicated on an independent sample. In addition, the REST showed evidence of construct validity as it was positively associated with religious commitment and negatively related to avoidant attachment to God.

STUDY 3

The purpose of Study 3 was to provide additional evidence of construct validity for the REST by relating it to other constructs within the model of relational spirituality and forgiveness. We tested the following hypotheses. First, we predicted that the REST would be associated with appraisals of relational spirituality (the causal mechanism might work in different directions for different people or through a general religiosity). Specifically, we hypothesized that engaging the Sacred through prayer would be positively related to evaluating a transgression as a desecration of the Sacred (Pargament et al., 2005). In prior research, religious commitment has been found to positively predict desecration and use of spiritual coping (e.g., Davis et al., 2008). Highly religious individuals tend to appraise their relationships through spiritual categories (Worthington et al., 2003). We also hypothesized that the tendency to engage the Sacred through prayer would be related to one’s dedication to the Sacred. Stanley and Markman (1992) theorized that commitment within a relationship is composed of two components: dedication and constraint. Dedication is a sense of positive attraction that holds one in relationship to an object of commitment. Constraint refers to factors that make it difficult to disengage from an object of commitment. In the present study, we used a measure that assesses dedication to the Sacred (Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Van Tongeren, in press). Second, we hypothesized that the REST would be related to both forgiveness (McMinn et al., 2008) and empathy (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). Third, we evaluated a theoretical model consistent with the theorizing by Shults and Sandage (2006) and Davis et al. (2008). A victims’ experiences of relational spirituality affect engagement of the Sacred, which increases empathy and thereby forgiveness. Several competing models were compared. Fourth, we hypothesized that the REST would show evidence of incremental predictive validity by accounting for forgiveness scores above and beyond other appraisals of relational spirituality.

Method

Participants

Participants were 296 undergraduate students (205 female) from the same university as Studies 1 and 2. The mean age was 19.8 years \((SD = 3.4)\). The sample was ethnically diverse \((60.5\%\) White/Caucasian, \(15.9\%\) Black/African American, \(12.2\%\) Asian/Asian American, \(2.4\%\) Latino/Latina, and \(4.7\%\) Other or did not report). Participants reported a variety of spiritual
and religious beliefs (60.8% Christian, 3.4% Muslim, 2.0% Buddhist, 1.0% Hindu, 18.5% Agnostic/Atheist/None, and 11.9% other/did not report).

**Measures**

**REST Scale.** The final four-item version of the REST was used to assess the extent to which a person actively engages their relationship with the Sacred in order to forgive an offender. The Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .84.

**Forgiveness.** The 12-item Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998) was used to assess state forgiveness. The TRIM has two subscales: Revenge (TRIM–R; five items; e.g., “I’ll make him/her pay”) and Avoidance (TRIM–A; seven items; e.g., “I keep as much distance between us as possible”); furthermore, TRIM–R and TRIM–A may be summed to obtain a score of unforgiveness. Items were completed on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Lower scores indicate higher forgiveness. McCullough et al. reported Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for scores on both subscales ranging from .85 to .93 and estimates of 3-week temporal stability ranging from .44 to .65. Scores on the scale showed evidence of construct validity and were found to be negatively correlated with other measures of forgiveness, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. The Cronbach’s alpha for unforgiveness, avoidance, and revenge in the current sample was .93, .95, .88, respectively.

**State empathy.** The eight-item Batson Empathy Adjectives (Batson, 1986; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978) were used to measure emotional empathy toward the offender. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). An example item is “concerned.” Cronbach’s alphas for scores on this scale ranged from .79 to .95 (Coke et al., 1978). Scores on the scale show evidence of construct validity and were found to be positively correlated with empathic concern, perspective taking, and helping behavior (Coke et al., 1978). The Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .93.

**Dedication to the Sacred (DS) scale.** The five-item DS Scale (Davis et al., in press) was used to assess a person’s level of dedication commitment to the Sacred. The scale was adapted from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley et al., 2002). Items were completed using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An example item is “My relationship with the Sacred is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.” Alphas ranged from .93 to .94 (Davis et al., in press). The DS scale also showed evidence of construct validity. Scores on the DS scale were positively related to religious commitment and forgiveness. In addition it predicted forgiveness over and above other appraisals of relational spirituality. The Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .91.

**Viewing the transgression as a desecration.** The 10-item Desecration subscale of the Sacred Loss and Desecration Scale was used (Pargament et al., 2005). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). An example item is “This event was both an offense against me and against God.” Cronbach’s alphas for Sacred Desecration subscale was .92 (Pargament et al., 2005). In addition, the subscale showed evidence of construct validity, being related to anger and rumination. The Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .95.
**Procedure**

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes and participated as part of a course requirement or in exchange for partial course credit, as in Studies 1 and 2. Again, a procedure identical to Studies 1 and 2 was implemented. Participants recalled a specific transgression and completed measures describing their reaction, including completing the REST.

**Results**

*Intercorrelations of REST With Other Constructs*

To examine evidence of construct validity, we examined the correlations of the REST with other constructs. Means, standard deviations, alphas, and intercorrelations of all variables are reported in Table 2. As predicted, the REST was associated with appraisals of relational spirituality and forgiveness (see Table 2). Specifically, as hypothesized, scores on the REST were negatively correlated with revenge and avoidance motivations, and were positively correlated with empathy, dedication to the sacred, and perceiving the transgression as a desecration.

**Mediational Analysis Using SEM**

We employed SEM with ML estimation in MPLUS 5.2 to test our proposed model. Based on recent recommendations (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002; Williams & O’Boyle, 2008), we parcelled items. Parcelling improves reliability of parameter estimates (Kishton & Widaman, 1994) by reducing the number of parameters that must be estimated in a model (Coffman & MacCallum, 2005). We used EFA to assign items alternately to one of three parcels for each latent construct (Little et al., 2002). The four items of the REST were not parcelled.

We first estimated the fit of the measurement model before examining the overall structural model. We used four goodness-of-fit indices to evaluate model fit: the chi-square test, the CFI, the RMSEA, and the SRMR. A CFI above .95, an RMSEA less than .08, and an SRMR less than .10 suggest good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Millsap, 2002). For the measurement

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>REST</th>
<th>EMP</th>
<th>REV</th>
<th>AV</th>
<th>UNF</th>
<th>DS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REST</td>
<td>18.01</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>0–24</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMP</td>
<td>21.85</td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td>0–40</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>REV</td>
<td>12.82</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>5–25</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
<td>−.47**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>AV</td>
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<td>8.13</td>
<td>7–35</td>
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<td>.67**</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>UNF</td>
<td>30.28</td>
<td>12.64</td>
<td>12–60</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
<td>−.58**</td>
<td>.88**</td>
<td>.94**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DS</td>
<td>21.53</td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td>5–35</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>−.20**</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.12*</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desecration</td>
<td>21.44</td>
<td>10.87</td>
<td>10–50</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* REST = Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression; EMP = state empathy; REV = revenge; AV = avoidance; UNF = unforgiveness; DS = dedication sacred.

*p < .01. **p < .01.
model, we found adequate fit on all indices, $\chi^2(94) = 122.50, p < .001, \chi^2/N = 1.30$ (CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .04). After examining the measurement model, we conducted chi-square difference tests to compare alternative structural models.

Model 2 is depicted in Figure 2. Dedication to the Sacred, desecration, engaging the sacred, and empathy were regressed on unforgiveness scores. Dedication and desecration were exogenous variables at the first level. Engaging the Sacred in prayer was entered at the second level, and empathy was entered at the third level. Model 2 revealed adequate fit, $\chi^2(95) = 218.70, p < .001; \chi^2/N = 2.30$ (CFI = .97, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .13).

We then conducted several nested model comparisons in Models 3 to 5. We compared models using a chi-square difference test to determine whether model fit worsened after removing paths. In Model 3, we removed the direct path between dedication to the Sacred and unforgiveness. Constraining this path to zero caused no degradation in fit, $\chi^2(1) = 1.01, p > .05$. Next, we removed the paths between dedication to the Sacred and empathy and between desecration and empathy (Model 4). Constraining these two paths to zero caused no degradation in fit, $\chi^2(2) = 3.40, p > .05$. Finally, we removed the direct path from engaging the Sacred to unforgiveness (Model 5). Constraining this path to zero caused no degradation in fit, $\chi^2(1) = 2.12, p > .05$. Thus, we retained Model 5 because it exhibited superior fit as the most parsimonious model, $\chi^2(99) = 224.23, p < .05, \chi^2/N = 2.25$ (CFI = .97, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .12). The model suggests that the effect of dedication to the Sacred was fully mediated by engaging the Sacred in prayer after a transgression. Moreover, engaging the Sacred in prayer was associated with forgiveness, and this relationship was explained by the victim’s empathy for the offender.

Hierarchical Regression Model to Test for Incremental Predictive Validity of REST

To test for evidence of incremental predictive validity, we conducted a hierarchical regression to predict forgiveness scores. Appraisals of relational spirituality (i.e., desecration and dedication to the Sacred) were entered in a first step, and scores on the REST were entered
in a second step. Appraisals of relational spirituality accounted for 5% of the variance in unforgiveness scores, \( F(2, 251) = 5.93, p < .01 \). In a second step, the REST accounted for an additional 9% of the variance in unforgiveness scores, \( \Delta F(1, 250) = 24.64, p < .001 \).

Discussion

In Study 3, we found evidence that the REST was related as hypothesized to appraisals of relational spirituality, forgiveness, and empathy. In particular, we found that those with greater dedication to the Sacred were more likely to engage the Sacred than those who were less dedicated. A perhaps counterintuitive finding was that appraisals of desecration (perhaps a negative coping indicator) were positively related to engaging the Sacred (perhaps a positive coping indicator). This finding may occur because people who are more religious are more likely to make spiritual appraisals and rely on spiritual coping, in general, than people who are less religious. Moreover, we tentatively suggest, based on our theoretical model, that individuals who perceived a transgression as a desecration might tend to engage the Sacred as a compensatory reaction aimed to restore the negative spiritual relationship. However, given the cross-sectional design, we cannot determine the causal direction of this relationship. Finally, we found that REST scores accounted for variance in forgiveness above and beyond other appraisals of relational spirituality.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous research on spirituality and forgiveness has largely treated spirituality as a static construct rather than a dynamic and changing experience. A model of relational spirituality and forgiveness describes how victims spiritually experience and respond to a transgression. Prior research on the model focused on how victims spiritually appraise a transgression (Davis et al., 2008; Davis et al., in press; Davis et al., 2009). The current set of studies looked at the extent to which victims actively engage the Sacred in prayer to deal with a transgression (see McMinn et al., 2008). In three studies, we developed the REST Scale and provided evidence that its scores have a stable factor structure, good estimated internal consistency, and evidence for construct validity.

The findings from Study 3 contribute to previous research on prayer and forgiveness. Previous studies have found that people believe prayer helps them forgive (e.g., McMinn et al., 2008; Wuthnow, 2000). Likewise, people who tend to pray more have been found to report more forgiveness (e.g., Fox & Thomas, 2008). The present study is the first to provide empirical evidence that engaging the Sacred in prayer for a specific transgression might lead to forgiveness. Engaging the Sacred was found to be positively related to empathy, which may explain how engaging the Sacred in prayer after a transgression positively affects forgiveness.

Limitations

The present set of studies had several limitations. First, only self-report instruments were
used. We did not examine the physiological correlates of engaging the Sacred to deal with a transgression. Second, cross-sectional, correlational designs were used. Experimental or longitudinal designs would allow researchers to test the causal relationships implied by our model. Third, only college students were studied. It is important to examine how engagement of the Sacred affects forgiveness in explicitly religious contexts, both in Christians and in other religious populations.

Future Research

We see several potentially fruitful directions for future research. First, the REST includes items related to prayer, which is just one way that victims may engage the Sacred to deal with a transgression. We encourage researchers to develop measures of other spiritual experiences, such as worship, meditation, and reading spiritual texts. Researchers also might try to measure aspects of prayer associated with spiritual struggle, confusion, or disillusionment with the Sacred, because such experiences might increase a victim’s negative emotions and make forgiveness difficult.

Second, longitudinal designs should be used to help researchers understand how engagement with the Sacred affects the course of forgiveness over time. However, longitudinal studies should be carefully designed and interpreted cautiously. For instance, Krumrei et al. (2008) found that people who turned to God more for support had worse relationships with the offender over time than those who turned to God less for support. Perhaps victims rely on spiritual coping strategies when they are having difficulty forgiving. Thus, severity of the transgression should be controlled statistically or methodologically.

Third, interventions could be developed that encourage spiritual participants to engage with the Sacred to promote forgiveness. Religiously spiritual participants might be experimentally assigned to various ways of experiencing the Sacred (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, or reading religious literature, etc.). Researchers might examine the psychological and physiological correlates of such experiences to determine which promote more engagement with God and which promote more healing and forgiveness.

Conclusion

In recent years, research on spirituality and forgiveness has taken a fruitful turn. Instead of focusing on whether spiritual groups tend to forgive more than less spiritual groups, researchers have started to examine the types of spiritual experiences that can promote forgiveness. How would someone like John ever forgive his ex-wife for destroying a sacred marriage? Such transgressions can shake a person’s deepest beliefs, causing a breach in his or her relationship with God (Kushner, 1981). A relationship that was once a source of strength and resiliency can become a source of suffering and disillusionment. However, a person’s relationship with God can also catalyze changes in other relationships (Shults & Sandage, 2006). Experiencing positive emotions, such as gratitude or reverence toward the Sacred, might fuel emotional forgiveness. As knowledge about how relational spirituality affects forgiveness accumulates, it should help psychologists and religious leaders better understand how to help people experience spiritual growth and forgiveness.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression

In dealing with the harm done to you, for each statement, please indicate the degree to which you would disagree or agree whether it has played a part in your relationship to the transgressor.

0 (completely disagree)
1 (mostly disagree)
2 (somewhat disagree)
3 (neither disagree nor agree or uncertain)
4 (somewhat agree)
5 (mostly agree)
6 (completely agree)

1. I tried to view him/her as a child of God.
2. I asked God to help me see his/her good points.
3. I tried to pray for him/her.
4. I believe God wants us to mend our relationship.