Working Through Psychological Needs Following Transgressions to Arrive at Self-Forgiveness

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Through intention or inattention humans can commit transgressions, violate important values, or do wrong. We can harm others. Sometimes those we hurt are those we love the most. Painful emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, disappointment) often accompany knowledge that we have wronged people, especially those we care about. We are fundamentally motivated to maintain communion with others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014) and, related to this need for belonging, to think of ourselves as relatively good people, as appropriate group members and relationship partners (Leary, 2000). This need can be classified as a need to maintain *moral-social identity* (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). We are also motivated to maintain a sense of *agency* (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014), to perceive ourselves as relatively in control of ourselves, and as purposeful and powerful actors in our own stories. However, when we commit a transgression our needs to maintain a positive moral-social identity and a personal sense of agency can appear to be pitted against one another.

For example, imagine you have betrayed somebody's trust by revealing a secret. To protect your social-moral identity, you may see the betrayal as not representing your true self, but this raises questions about your agency: who or what made you do it? Alternatively, you may maintain your agency and accept the choices you made, but then this raises questions about your morality: how could you do it—are you even a good person? These conflicting needs can elicit problematic self-protective strategies (i.e., defensiveness or self-punishment) as attempts to reduce one or both of these threats. Understanding the nature of the psychological needs that arise following a transgression may be essential to successfully resolve the

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experience of having committed a transgression, but in such a way as to lead to a renewed sense of self, reconciliation, and a pro-social orientation.

In this chapter, we will explore the psychological needs that arise following transgressions, and how these needs shape our understanding of the difficulties of the process of self-forgiveness, particularly difficulties relating to taking responsibility. We propose that the work of self-forgiveness is not simply to reduce the negative self-evaluations or aversive emotions associated with wrongdoing, which can be achieved through processes that simply deflect responsibility. Rather the challenge is to *work through* a process whereby people reestablish their senses of both moral-social identity and agency. We describe value reaffirmation as a means of harnessing moral-social identity and agency in a process of self-forgiveness that facilitates the restoration of the offender, victim, and those in the surrounding community.

The Need for (and Challenge of) Self-Forgiveness

> And he got sick, both of us got sick, but Jack was the one who died. And he might have lived if I hadn't been such a bad person. If he'd been 'enough' for me, he'd never have got HIV….Jack died thirty years ago. I dream about him almost every night. It's good to see him alive. For a moment, I don't have to blame myself for his death.
>
> –Humans of New York, September 13, 2016 (Humans of New York, 2016)

When we consider the above example, two points stand out in relation to self-forgiveness. First, self-blame and its emotional correlates can be painful and enduring, potentially lasting a lifetime—especially when we have hurt others. Given the psychological, relational, and physical correlates of chronic self-blame and shame (Cibich, Woodyatt, & Wenzel, 2016; Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004), it is understandable that clinicians and researchers have applied themselves to helping individuals to cope with these experiences. However, when we consider our example above, a second observation emerges: there are things for which self-blame can be warranted because we do carry some responsibility. In these contexts, a complete absence of self-blame would seem immoral. These are situations where the need for self-forgiveness arises, where, on one hand, there is a person that needs to be released from chronic or debilitating self-blame, but, on the other hand, there is a real wrong that has occurred.

Specifically, what is needed is *genuine self-forgiveness*. Genuine self-forgiveness does not release the offender (the self) from responsibility for wrong actions, blame, guilt, and shame, but rather implies the severance of the negative link between responsibility and positive self-regard (Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012). Simply restoring one's self-regard by releasing the self from responsibility or 'letting oneself off the hook' represents *pseudo* self-forgiveness only (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005; Wenzel et al., 2012). It does not qualify as self-forgiveness because, with the blame erased, there is actually nothing left to forgive. Genuine self-forgiveness has been so termed to distinguish pseudo self-forgiveness from a form of self-forgiveness where the offender accepts responsibility, experiences the negative

resulting emotions, and then works through their actions, thereby moving toward a renewed self-regard. However, as the above example illustrates, working through one's actions can be easier said than done. This is the difficult work of self-forgiveness.

A Needs-Based Approach: Transgressions Threaten Basic Psychological Needs

Why is it that perceived transgressions are so hard to recover from, particularly when we hurt others? Psychologists have argued that one reason transgressions are so problematic is that they relate to two fundamental human psychological needs, mapping closely onto the "Big Two" dimensions of content in social cognition: communion and agency (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Specifically, proponents of the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, 2015) argue that committing a transgression threatens an offender's need for moral integrity and social acceptance, and if unresolved this need can form a barrier to reconciliation with a victim. We have argued that this need for social-moral identity can relate to how a person is able to work through their wrongdoing and reconcile with themselves (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014; Woodyatt, Wenzel, & Ferber, 2017). Further, offenders (like victims) may also feel threats to their sense of agency, power, and control (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014; SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Halabi, 2016; SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Mori-Hoffman, 2017). We propose that both the need for moral-social identity and the need for personal agency are placed under threat in the process of working through one's own transgression. We argue here that these needs are difficult to process and under some conditions can lead to problematic self-protective tendencies to satisfy one need at the expense of the other.

Transgressions Threaten Our Need for Moral-Social Identity

The need for moral-social identity is derived from our need for belonging. This need can also be referred to as need for acceptance, relatedness, or communion (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, 2015). Given the necessity of relationships for survival, it is critical that we maintain a secure place within social groups. As Leary (2000) has argued, we are motivated to maintain a global sense of being an "appropriate" relationship partner or group member. Appropriateness is guided by our perception of group norms, values, and expectations. Violation of these norms, values, and expectations threatens our sense of belonging because groups can choose to marginalize or exclude those who threaten a group's *way of being,* in order to maintain group cooperation, reciprocity, and cohesion (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994).

Related to the need for belonging, psychologists have long argued that we are motivated to protect our sense of self-integrity, self-consistency, or self-determination

(Festinger, 1957; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Our needs for self-consistency and social belongingness are entwined because our sense of morality (i.e., being a "good" person) is intimately connected to our group memberships, via internalization of group norms, values, and expectations. Thus, our need for social-moral identity—of being a "good" person—is developed and defined by the internalization of the norms, values, and expectations of the groups to which we belong; and our conformity to those group norms, values, and expectations is what makes us a "good person." Indeed, some have argued that our desire for self-consistency only matters to the extent that it has an impact on our social survival (Leary, Raimi, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2015).

The perpetration of a transgression represents a threat to people's interconnected sense of belonging and sense of self-consistency—together referred to as the need for moral-social identity (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). A transgression reflects that offenders are not true to their values, socially defined and internalized; they are not conforming with their group's norms and values and thus do not seem to share values that define the group's identity and their mutual belonging. In fact, they may be seen as undermining or challenging those group values, to which the group may respond, possibly with exclusion. Emotions such as shame and guilt (and other self-conscious emotions) are thought to be indicators of an underlying threat to social-moral identity (for a review, see Cibich et al., 2016). These emotions highlight to us the possibility that we have done something that implies we are less than a good person/group member.

Transgressions Threaten Our Sense of Agency

Agency (from a psychological perspective) refers to the capacity to act, take initiative, and have an influence over one's own life situation (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Agency includes personal perception of competency and status, power and control, and strength or capacity to act. While a transgression may sometimes be felt as taking control, the perpetration of a transgression can also represent a threat to the offender's sense of agency, first, because of social consequences and sanctions the offender may fear. The victim may seek revenge and/or the group impose a punishment, degrading the offender's status, disempowering the offender, and potentially incapacitating the offender (e.g., through incarceration) (see Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2008). Second, offenders may perceive their transgression as a symptom of lack of self-control, as weakness in giving in to temptation, and the inability to take charge of their lives. Indeed, agency also includes the capacity to understand or make sense of what has occurred. If we do not understand why something has occurred, our capacity to act is undermined because we do not know how to respond in order to achieve a predictable outcome. On the other hand, if we understand the cause of an action, we remain effective agents with the potential to respond to the behavior and to prevent it from reoccurring in the future. Thus, motivations for power, control, and understanding are key components of a sense of personal agency in the context of transgressions.

While concerns about agency have been traditionally explored in the context of victim rather than offender needs (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015; Wenzel et al., 2008), researchers have recently presented evidence that a need for agency may also apply to offenders, at least in some contexts. For example, Okimoto et al. (2013) found that offenders who withheld an apology experienced an increase in both their sense of self-consistency (to their own values) and their sense of status/power. The apology refusal seemed to repair concerns for both agency and concern for violated values, which was in turn associated with higher self-esteem. Also, offenders who see themselves as both offenders and victims (in the context of an intergroup conflict) have been shown to have a need for agency similar to the need experienced by victims (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2016).

Following from the view that we may experience needs for both agency and moral-social identity when committing a transgression or wrongdoing, we may be faced with a psychological conundrum. On one hand, we want to be moral, good, and consistent. In that case when confronted with our own bad actions we might think, *How could I have done this? I am a good person, I wouldn't do something like this.* To make sense of our moral failure we deny our responsibility—our agency. On the other hand, we want to be agentic. We might think, *I am in control, I chose to act*. In order to make sense of our behavior, we may then try to deny that what we have done was wrong. We might, therefore, betray our morality. With the needs for moral integrity and agency thus appearing mutually exclusive, offenders may be tempted to satisfy one by sacrificing the other.

Attempts to Resolve these Dual Concerns

Following a transgression there are multiple ways that we can cope with a threat to our moral-social identity. One way is to minimize the threat to our moral-social identity (i.e., I am a good person/group member) by denying our agency, claiming we are victims of circumstances, outside pressures, actions of others, or even parts of ourselves over which we have no control (Bandura, 1999). But if we are not in control of the circumstance, how can we predict, control, or affect what will happen in the future? How can we stop it from happening again, take charge, change, and move forward? Thus, over time maintaining our sense of personal morality can undermine our sense of agency if moral-social identity maintenance is our chief priority. Alternatively, following a transgression we can strive to maintain (or regain) a sense of agency (i.e., of being in control of our own actions) by denying our moral failing. Attempts to maintain our agency may include strategies like claiming our actions were justified, or claiming that we were acting in accord with a higher ideal. However, self-justification of this sort is likely to be challenging because others (e.g., those we have hurt) may not agree with us. Maintaining a sense of moral agency by denying moral failing may require us to avoid thinking about the event, or to avoid people connected to the event who may remind us of our actions. And we may know, or at least have a lingering feeling, that we should have done otherwise

(Wenzel, Woodyatt, & McLean, 2016). This sense of dissonance might, over time, even lead us to disconnect from those communities or abandon the underlying moral values we have violated. Thus, by attempting to maintain our sense of agency, we sacrifice our sense of morality.

Moral disengagement describes the manner in which people distance themselves from the guilt and self-reproach associated with harming others (Bandura, 1999). The theory outlines eight processes of disengagement, but we can cluster them into two broad types: (1) one type minimizes threats by proposing the transgressor is agentic (in control) but essentially denying that any immoral action was committed (e.g., devaluation/dehumanization to exclude the victim from the community of moral concern, minimization of harmful consequences). (2) Another type of disengagement processes maintains morality but reduces agency by shifting responsibility onto others (e.g., minimization of role, diffusion of responsibility). These processes are part of a range of defensive strategies through which humans brush off threats to the self that arise as a result of failures and negative feedback, processes that in other contexts help us to maintain perseverance and move forward with goal-directed action. However, in the context of transgressions, these behaviors can lead to ongoing perpetration of harm. These responses have been labeled *pseudo* self-forgiveness because they are processes by which a person can renew their sense of self-regard and reduce self-condemnation, but by denying their responsibility for their actions (see also Tangney et al., 2005; Wenzel et al., 2012).

On the other hand, rather than shrugging off the threat to moral-social identity, *self-punishment* may reflect an attempt to repair both needs. By acknowledging one's responsibility for the wrong and taking actions to show contrition, one is agentic, and simultaneously confirms that one knows right from wrong. However, self-punishment can be problematic as well. While seemingly opposite to defensive strategies, research suggests that self-punishment *can* similarly function to simply purge one's guilt (Bastian, Jetten, & Fasoli, 2011; Inbar, Pizarro, Gilovich, & Ariely, 2013). By taking justice in one's own hand, offenders-turned-punisher maintain their agency while, through a self-directed act, they may attempt to expunge their guilt without necessarily changing or repairing any harm that has occurred (Bastian et al., 2011; van Bunderen & Bastian, 2014). When an offender self-punishes instead of making amends, threat to moral-social identity may remain unresolved.

Alternatively, where self-punishment is not intended as a quick fix of purging one's guilt, offenders may feel they cannot let go of their self-punishment lest they betray their moral values. However, holding onto self-punishing thoughts may become paralyzing in the longer term and eventually undermine agency. Indeed, many self-punishers find it difficult to move on from self-reproach and in fact report feeling worse after instances of self-punishment (de Vel-Palumbo, Woodyatt, & Wenzel, 2017). It is as though a self-punisher attempts to reinforce their moral-social identity (*I know right from wrong*) but at the same time concedes their immorality (*I am a bad person deserving of punishment*). Similarly, while self-punishment asserts agency (*I am the one who acts, who is responsible*), self-punishment may also undermine agency by conceding that the self needs to be controlled via punishment (Holmgren, 2012). Thus, there is the possible fallacy that self-punishment

(just like pseudo self-forgiveness) attempts to restore agency at the expense of moral-social identity repair or that it commits to a moral-social identity yet at the expense of agency over time. In order to satisfy both of these psychological needs, an alternate process is needed.

Self-Forgiveness as Moral Engagement

Here is the challenge of *genuine* self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness that is genuine typically requires the application of time and effort to *work through* one's actions and responsibility (agency) in order to restore one's moral-social self (Holmgren, 2012). We posit that pathways to self-forgiveness are achieved through moral *engagement*, working through these core questions about the self, rather than bypassing or avoiding them or by going too far in the opposite direction of excessive self-blame. Finding the fine line of appropriate responsibility allows offenders to reconcile moral-social identity and agency issues, rather than pitting them against each other.

Self-Forgiveness is not Simply Making Ourselves Feel Better

Early self-forgiveness work tended to define self-forgiveness (in measurement and intervention) as reduced self-resentment and self-condemnation, and increased self-compassion, generosity, and love toward the self (Enright, 1996b; Mauger et al., 1992; Tangney, Boone, Fee, & Reinsmith, 1999). However, when researchers focused on achieving these outcomes a pattern emerged. Increased positive self-regard and reduced self-condemnation were not positively associated with change, responsibility, or amends, neither correlationally, longitudinally, nor following interventions (Bell, Davis, Griffin, Ashby, & Rice, 2017; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Wohl & Thompson, 2011; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2017; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). For example, applying the logic of self-affirmation, it might be expected that if we can reduce negative affect associated with transgressions perhaps we can reduce avoidance and thereby increase approach-orientated behaviors (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Empirically, this was tested in the context of interpersonal transgression using traditional self-affirmation (i.e., individuals reaffirm personal values unrelated to the domain of failure; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014), self-compassion (i.e., expressions of kindness toward and common humanity of the self; Woodyatt, Wenzel & Ferber, 2017), or affirmation of belonging (i.e., recall of experiences of feeling loved and accepted; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). In all cases, participants felt better—but they did *not* take increased responsibility or make amends. Over time they actually trusted themselves *less*. Apparently, feeling better about the self does not necessarily mean that offenders engage in moral repair or reform—it might in fact be antithetical to it. Importantly, while responsibility was a key component in self-forgiveness theory, it was only

peripherally addressed (for discussion, see Wenzel et al., 2012; Woodyatt et al., 2017) and so self-forgiveness seemed equated to simply letting oneself off the hook. Thus, the empirical research to date suggests that emotion-focused and self-focused interventions are effective at reducing negative feelings toward the self, but not necessarily effective at encouraging genuine self-forgiveness that also promotes responsibilitytaking and amend making.

Given the painfulness of negative feelings such as shame and guilt, it is not surprising that their alleviation had become the focus of self-forgiveness research and practice. However, potentially this approach is equivalent to focusing on the symptoms rather than the cause (Woodyatt et al., 2017). Emotions are indicators or guides that help us to negotiate our social environment and to pursue the satisfaction of psychological needs and goals (see Gilbert & Woodyatt 2017, Chap. 3; Leach 2017, Chap. 2. Simply ridding us of negative emotions means failing to utilize the self-regulatory functions of those negative emotions. Put differently, perhaps a lack of self-condemnation and presence of positive self-regard are not necessarily indicators of success at working through one's transgressions. Self-condemnation (and the associated aversive emotions) is an adaptive response to *moral* transgressions and indeed a sign of normal psychological well-being. As such, self-forgiveness may be best achieved by understanding and addressing the psychological needs to which our emotions are alerting us, rather than by avoiding them.

Self-Forgiveness Involves Understanding One's Responsibility

> [Interviewer] "What do you feel most guilty about?"
> [Respondent] "Going to Iraq and killing people."
>
> –Humans of New York, October 25, 2014

Researchers and clinicians have come far over the past decade in empirically demonstrating the important role of responsibility-taking and of feelings like guilt, remorse, and even shame in the process of self-forgiveness (Wenzel et al., 2012). Self-forgiveness interventions specify the need for responsibility as part of the self-forgiveness process (Woodyatt, Worthington, Wenzel, & Griffin, 2017). However, responsibility represents the first major hurdle to self-forgiveness, because there are several barriers that can inhibit responsibility-taking.

Responsibility-Taking is Hard Recognizing our wrongdoing is likely to *increase* rather than decrease aversive emotions such as shame, guilt, or remorse. By acknowledging our responsibility, we admit, yes, we did violate group values. That acknowledgement actually increases our threat to moral-social identity (at least initially). In this way, responsibility-taking is necessary for self-forgiveness, but is psychologically costly and painful (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Hall & Fincham, 2005). Emotions of guilt, shame, and remorse are part of the process of self-forgiveness rather than a sign of a failure to self-forgive. To understand the role of negative emotions is an important part of working through self-forgiveness. A useful analogy is that of a fuel gauge

(originally used by Leary, 2000, when explaining self-esteem). Our emotions are gauges of underlying psychological needs. The issue is not the gauge per se, it is the deficit (or potential deficit) to which we are being alerted. That is, just as our fuel gauge alerts us to our threat of running out of fuel, our emotions alert us to threatened psychological needs. Of course, sometimes our gauge can be misaligned or inaccurate. In relation to our moral-social identity, our past history, our relationships, particularly the security with which we view our attachments, may lead to our "rejection gauge" alerting us preemptively or inappropriately to this threat, experiencing heightened shame or guilt even when we have little or no responsibility. Part of working through self-forgiveness is figuring out to what extent our "gauge" is accurate.

Perceived Difficulty of Moral Repair can have an Impact on Taking Responsibility Signs of stigma and rejection by others can inhibit acknowledgement of shame. For example, Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) found that social rejection from the victim, either in the form of perceived hostility or lack of willingness to forgive, exacerbated pseudo self-forgiveness—the defensive downplaying of responsibility and wrongdoing. One possibility is that social rejection and stigma communicates to an offender that the pathway to repair is difficult, or even impossible. Recent research on shame suggests that shame leads to avoidance, when it is perceived to be difficult to repair (Cibich et al., 2016; Leach & Cidam, 2015; Leach 2017, Chap. 2). That is, to the extent that there are available pathways to repair one's moral-social identity and sense of agency, we expect that transgressors will be able to acknowledge shame/responsibility and move toward repair.

Social stigma may not be the only factor that impacts perceived reparability. Other issues such as distance from the perceived victim (i.e., physical, relational or temporal distance from the transgression event) or indeed the death of the person involved can mean that the potential response of the other person is not clear and the pathway to repair seems costly or difficult. Interestingly, at least in one study, third-party responses seemed to be as important as victim responses for offenders evaluating reparability (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, Study 2), where perceptions of stigma/rejection (versus respect) can similarly impact responsibility. Third-party respect may communicate to an offender both pathways to reenter the community and a belief in the person's agency. By extension, contexts such as group interventions (see Worthington, Griffin, & Wade, 2017), where norms of respect are established, may be useful for self-forgiveness interventions. There are likely a range of other cognitive and individual difference variables such as perceived malleability of the self that may also impact on whether the self is perceived as reparable or not, and these should continue to be explored in the context of self-forgiveness and responsibility.

Responsibility is Hard to Nail Down Perhaps one of the more challenging issues relating to self-forgiveness concerns what the "appropriate" amount of responsibility actually is in a given situation. For some individuals, their sense of responsibility is inappropriate or disproportionate. Consider the following examples:

> I used to ride motorbikes for fun. I feel guilty that my choice to go out riding that day has impacted on the quality of life of my wife and children now that I am in a wheelchair.
>
> –Male participant

> I just feel as though it is my fault, if only I picked up some sign that he was lying, if I saw that he wasn't the person he pretended to be, then maybe I could have avoided all this mess.
>
> –Female participant

For both these cases, the negative events that occurred to these people were possibly outside of their control (Woodyatt et al., 2017). In fact, in many stories of people struggling with self-forgiveness this theme, of not controlling the uncontrollable, is present. These examples illustrate how questions about agency also play into self-forgiveness. A threat to their agency may lead individuals to take greater responsibility than is perhaps warranted (see Bulman & Wortman, 1977). Critically, there is little empirical work exploring how people can accept the uncontrollable while maintaining a personal sense of agency more generally. For these situations, self-forgiveness may involve acknowledging the *limits* of one's responsibility for negative events, so that one can avoid descending into despair and ongoing self-punishment. However, it is important perhaps to note that practically it may be difficult to discern whether an individual is accurate in their attributions of responsibility, as there is often no objective criteria as to what degree of responsibility was real. However, we propose that the degree to which the person can redirect their attention toward the core aspects of the moral-social failure (rather than just a failure to be omniscient/omnipresent/omnipotent) helps to assess the underlying concern more accurately and provides a pathway to repair.

Value Reaffirmation as a Means of Moral Engagement

One proposed way of addressing the needs underlying a transgression is via reaffirming the values that have been violated in a transgression (Wenzel et al., 2012). Value reaffirmation is identifying which value(s) we have transgressed. Then, by demonstrating our commitment to those shared values we are able to reaffirm the shared group membership underlying those values. Thus, social-moral identity can be reinforced through recommitment to these shared values (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). Moreover, values affirmation may address the issue of agency by helping the person to work through the questions (and limits) of personal responsibility.

Acts of value reaffirmation can be varied. Confessions and apologies can function as reaffirmation of values (Wenzel et al., 2012). Indeed self-punishment, as we have described, may act as a means of reaffirming underlying transgressed values. All of these behaviors are ways of demonstrating to others that "I know what I did was wrong". This commitment to shared group values decreases the chance of rejection for the behavior and reinforces one's belonging to the group that the values symbolically represent. Value reaffirmation does not remove the threat to moral-social identity, thereby eliminating the need to change one's behavior; rather, it elicits a desire to act in ways consistent with one's values and reinforces that one is capable of repairing one's moral-social identity. Across several studies, Wenzel and Woodyatt have demonstrated that this process of moral engagement through value reaffirmation encourages processing one's wrongdoing reflective of genuine

self-forgiveness, in a way that leads to reconciliation and repair, as well as improved self-trust, and a state of self-forgiveness over time, without the pitfalls of self-punishment or defensiveness (Wenzel et al., 2012; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2017).

Value Reaffirmation: A Research Paradigm with Practical Implications

Value reaffirmation, as we use it in the context of interpersonal transgressions, encapsulates several questions that participants in our studies work through. What value do I think my behavior has violated; Why is this value important; When are other times in the past that I have acted in ways consistent with that value? Here, we explore each question and some of the nuances we have found in research and speculate on some possibilities for practice.

(1) What value do I think my behavior has violated?

This is an important question because it allows a person to focus specifically on what has occurred. Rather than bypassing or avoiding the event, the person engages with what occurred and harnesses the negative emotions they may experience, to address the underlying psychological threat. Articulating the value violated in the transgression targets the source of the identity threat. As we have discussed, traditional self-affirmation, which involves affirmation of values unrelated to the transgression, bypasses the social-moral threat. In essence, this shifts the focus from the failure to other domains of the self in which one is successful. Interestingly, we found that when given the choice of values in traditional self-affirmation tasks, participants tended to self-select transgression or relationship relevant values. Selecting values relevant to the transgression was, in turn, associated with responsibility and repair (Detweiler, 2015). Consistent with other research, these findings suggest that people generally have a preference for countering the threat in the most relevant and direct domain, even if this process is uncomfortable (Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997).

We suggest that it is important that these values are self-generated. Any attempt to dictate a transgressor what values they have violated may create defensive responses and reduce moral engagement. However, relying on the self-generation of values does pose the problem of how to help people take responsibility when they are unwilling to acknowledge any wrongdoing and value violation. Further research is needed to explore strategies for reducing psychological defensiveness and increasing responsibility taking in such cases. However, in instances where self-blame is disproportionate and the person cannot identify an underlying value that has been violated due to no real transgression having occurred, a clinician would be able to move to emotion-focused strategies (self-compassion, mindfulness, self-affirmation). Alternatively, as shame is still likely to relate to social-moral dimensions, helping a client to strengthen relationships of security and acceptance may also be part of releasing the self from self-punishment.

Less is known about the role of agency in self-forgiveness and restoration following transgressions. We suspect, due to the positive relationship between value reaffirmation and self-trust, that articulating the values that have been violated will help a person to begin to make sense of their actions, and this will increase a sense of agency. This hypothesis is yet to be explored. There are likely to be other ways of addressing agency in a self-forgiveness framework that also warrant research. Some initial research suggests that affirmations of agency can be helpful in the context of intergroup conflicts (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2016); however, these have not been tested in the context of self-forgiveness.

(2) Why do you think this value is important?

Reflecting on why the identified violated value is important to the individual allows them to explore further their commitment to the value, thereby reinforcing their moral-social identity. By examining the importance of the value they violated the person can reassert their agency, including their awareness and understanding of their own choices and actions. However, in some instances this may actually lead a person to reject the basis for their feeling of self-condemnation. They may recognize that they have violated a value, but that the value is not actually personally important. For example, a woman may feel ashamed for falling pregnant outside of marriage. However, if during this stage she identifies, "actually this is my parents' value, not my own," she may come to understand where her shame is arising from (e.g., the desire to please others). In this instance, processes such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, in which the person identifies the values that are actually important to them personally and in what setting or occasion, would allow them to reestablish new boundaries for their social-moral identity.

(3) Describe some times in the past when you acted in a way consistent with this value

A reflection on how the individual has acted in ways consistent with the identified violated value allows them to find evidence to support their understanding of themselves as a person committed to shared values. This may encourage the person to redefine their moral-social life as broader than this one specific occurrence. It may also impact on perceived reparability of the wrong, although this has not specifically been tested. However, it is possible that the transgression has occurred on more than one occasion or that the person has trouble generating past times when they did act consistent with the value; such cases could be problematic for the value affirmation process. Ways to help people to develop a sense of moral-social identity where this is absent may be necessary for moving toward self-forgiveness. How to do this remains an issue for future exploration.

In sum, our experimental research used these three steps as facets of value reaffirmation tasks. Compared to control groups, the research showed positive effects of values affirmation, usually with time, on participants' willingness to engage in conciliatory behaviors as well as their restored self-regard or self-trust, mediated by self-reported engagement with their own shame or guilt, increased genuine self-forgiveness,

and reduced defensiveness (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2017). However, these experimental investigations were with nonclinical samples only (university students) and largely related to self-reported interpersonal transgressions. Furthermore, research is yet to investigate the relevance or effects of each of the three elements of the value reaffirmation task, or systematically attempted to maximize its effectiveness as an intervention. The development of an intervention tool for clinical practice and its evaluation with clinical samples are tasks for further research.

Conclusions

In our research, addressing the underlying psychological threats to moral-social identity and personal agency through value affirmation increases the chance of people accepting responsibility and moving toward repair on their own accord. We propose that accepting responsibility via values affirmation will not damage one's self-regard because it reflects the renewed commitment to the violated values and affirms one's membership within community. This pathway to self-forgiveness will then best be maintained by continued focus on these core values and the implied commitment to future actions consistent with those values (be they reparation, apologies, or plans to change). In this way, the focus is not only on repairing the harm, but on the development of the transgressor's sense of agency and social-moral identity moving forward. We suggest that, by satisfying both of these psychological needs, in the long term, this strategy will hold more promise than the paths of defensiveness and self-punishment. Of course, while the evidence for this theory is promising, it has so far only been tested under restricted conditions. For example, research is yet to examine repeat offenders, ongoing chronic behaviors, very severe transgressions, or victimless transgressions. Further work is needed to develop practical interventions and their empirical evaluation in the field.

Furthermore, value reaffirmation is not necessarily a solitary activity, but rather would commonly be an interactive social process. Offenders may engage with victims and/or third parties in a process of identifying the violated value, establishing its importance and recalling past behaviors or relationship rituals demonstrating an active commitment to pursuing the value. And an offender's recommitment to the value may be mirrored and confirmed by the victim's or third party's belief in a value consensus, providing the offender the social-moral identity they crave and allowing victims (or third parties) to forgive (Wenzel, 2016). Ultimately, the challenge of restoration is that people are experience re-humanization, becoming again moral agents, empowered actors, and valued members of a community. This is relevant for both victims and offenders following transgressions.

> I had lost my humanity because of the crime I committed, but now I am like any human being.
>
> –Dominique Ndahimana (Voices of Reconciliation, 2016) (New York Times, 2016).

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