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**The measurement of dispositional self-forgiveness**

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### **The Measurement of Dispositional Self-Forgiveness**

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### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I critique measures of dispositional self-forgiveness. I conclude that existing measures are limited because they are concerned with measuring only one facet of the self-forgiveness construct, specifically, self-regard. In addition, the majority of studies are correlational in nature and focus on relations with other trait-level variables. Relatively few studies test relations between dispositional self-forgiveness and responses to victims in the context of specific transgressions. As such, it is difficult to know how to interpret the existing literature. I therefore identify ways in which researchers could improve upon present measures of dispositional self-forgiveness. I also suggest ways in which researchers could better test how a person with a strong self-forgiving disposition may act in response to specific transgressions.

*Keywords:* dispositional self-forgiveness, pseudo self-forgiveness, measurement, personality

## **The Measurement of Dispositional Self-Forgiveness**

Researchers measure self-forgiveness at both the dispositional and state levels. In this chapter, I focus on dispositional self-forgiveness, and its relation to various affective, mental health, dispositional, and transgression-specific variables. In so doing, I cast a critical eye over the way that dispositional self-forgiveness is measured, and the implications for interpreting the associated research. To provide some context for my critique, I first reiterate some fundamental points that others make in this handbook about what is involved when forgiving the self.

### **Conceptualizing Self-Forgiveness**

First, self-forgiveness is relevant when a person perceives that he or she has done something that transgresses important personal values or moral standards. Positioning self-forgiveness as a response to betrayed values or standards accounts for circumstances in which a person has hurt another (e.g., “hurting another person goes against what I stand for”), and also when they have done something solely ‘against’ the self (e.g., “I keep drinking even though I know I shouldn’t”).

Second, self-forgiveness becomes relevant when people feel distressed by what they have done. They feel that they need to do something to assuage the distress. However, self-forgiveness does not mean simply letting oneself off the hook.

Third, self-forgiveness therefore means acknowledging and taking responsibility for one’s actions, and seeking to restore oneself to the moral circle by acting reparatively.

Fourth, self-forgiveness is a process. One cannot arrive at self-forgiveness without first having properly reflected about one’s actions and, often, acted restoratively. So, self-forgiveness takes time and effort.

Fifth, self-forgiveness involves experiencing restored positive self-regard (e.g., Enright & The Human Development Group, 1996) that is *conditional* upon not repeating the behavior, variously conceptualized in terms of self-esteem (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2005), self-concept (e.g., Griffin et al., 2015), self-acceptance (e.g., Cornish & Wade, 2015), and self-trust (e.g., Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, 2014).

An important theoretical thread running through the various facets of self-forgiveness is that self-forgiveness must be *responsible*. ‘Responsibility’ has several meanings in the context of self-forgiveness. In one sense, it refers to the fundamental requirement that offenders acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions. If a person does not take responsibility, there is no recognition of moral failure, and therefore there is nothing to forgive. In another sense, ‘responsible’ self-forgiveness refers to self-reflecting, acting reparatively, and exerting genuine efforts to change. In so doing, one avoids repeating the same (or similar) behavior. If a person forgives themselves but then acts badly again, we might question how genuine their self-forgiveness was. Importantly, responsible self-forgiveness means a person has ‘earned’ the right to restored positive self-regard. As such, *responsible* self-forgiveness represents the important difference between genuine and pseudo self-forgiveness. The latter occurs when individuals simply let themselves off the hook (for detailed coverage of all of the ideas addressed in this section, see Cornish & Wade, 2015; Griffin et al., 2015; Hall & Fincham, 2005; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, 2014).

### **How Dispositional Self-forgiveness Is Measured**

The preceding section should give an indication of the multi-faceted and complex nature of self-forgiveness. However, as we are about to see, existing measures of dispositional self-forgiveness endeavor to operationalize the construct almost entirely on the basis of *one* particular facet—self-regard.

When we measure constructs at the dispositional level, we are measuring people's tendencies to act, think, and feel in a certain way over time and across situations. In addition, such trait-level measures are typically self-report. In effect, they capture individuals' perceptions of what they think they are like across situations and time. Dispositional self-forgiveness therefore refers to the extent to which a person generally considers himself or herself a self-forgiving person.

Mauger, Perry, Freeman, Grove, McBride, and McKinney (1992) developed the first dispositional self-forgiveness scale. Their Forgiveness of Self subscale (FOSS) consists of 15 true or false statements, such as "I find it hard to forgive myself for some things that I have done", "I often feel like I have failed to live the right kind of life", and "I often feel that no matter what I do now I will never make up for the mistakes I have made in the past". Higher scores reflect lower levels of self-forgiveness.

The FOSS seems to possess some limitations. In terms of construct validity, many of the items might be measuring something other than self-forgiveness, for example, "I often get in trouble for not being careful to follow the rules" and "It is easy for me to admit that I am wrong." Furthermore, some of the items may not resonate with non-religious respondents, e.g., "If I hear a sermon, I usually think about things that I have done wrong," and "I rarely feel as though I have done something wrong or sinful." While some researchers have gotten around these issues by simply removing apparently problematic items (e.g., Macaskill, 2012), construct validity concerns remain. The FOSS could be confused with tendencies towards self-criticism.

A more widely used measure is Thompson et al.'s (2005) self-forgiveness subscale of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). This consists of six items measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *almost always false of me*; 7 = *almost always true of me*), with items reverse-scored where necessary. Items are, "Although I feel bad at first when I mess up, over

time I can give myself some slack,” “I hold grudges against myself for negative things I’ve done” (reversed), “Learning from bad things that I’ve done helps me get over them,” “It is really hard to accept myself once I’ve messed up” (reversed), “With time I am understanding of myself for mistakes I’ve made,” and “I don’t stop criticizing myself for negative things I’ve felt, thought, said, or done” (reversed). As Worthington et al. (2014) note in their review of forgiveness measures, one could construe five of the six items as referring more to the absence of self-condemnation. Thus, the HFS self-forgiveness subscale is open to the same criticism as Mauger et al.’s (1992) FOSS scale. Indeed, the scales are reasonably correlated, for example,  $r = .55$  (Ross, Kendall, Matters, Wrobel, & Rye, 2004), and  $r = .61$  (Thompson et al., 2005).

Finally, Tangney, Boone, Fee, and Reinsmith (1999) developed a scenario-based measure of self-forgiveness, as part of their Multidimensional Forgiveness Scale (MFS). Whereas the previous mentioned scales measure an individual’s idea of what he or she is like, the MFS measures behavioral inclinations, consistent with the fundamental view of personality as a conglomeration of a person’s behaviors across time and place. The MFS presents participants with eight different scenarios (e.g., “Imagine that your brother or sister tells you a secret, and specifically asks you not to tell anyone. The very next day, you let the secret out”) and asks them how likely they would forgive themselves in each scenario. Researchers aggregate scores across the scenarios to provide an indication of a person’s generalized level of self-forgiveness.

Notably, the MFS does not define self-forgiveness, instead leaving it up to respondents’ idiosyncratic ideas of what self-forgiveness means to them. This is problematic, in two ways. First, there is not a clear theoretical basis upon which to interpret MFS scores. Second, it means the MFS is vulnerable to respondent self-presentation bias, a charge that one may also level at the FOSS and the HFS. I elaborate on this issue shortly.

### **A Restrictive Operationalization of Dispositional Self-forgiveness**

I observed earlier that the HFS and FOSS seem to be measuring reduced self-condemnation rather than positive self-regard. In fact, that is the least problematic aspect of these measures. There is a bigger issue. Scholars have been careful to emphasize that, in the context of self-forgiveness, positive self-regard is contingent upon transgressors meeting several other requirements of the self-forgiveness process, including acknowledging wrongdoing; taking responsibility; engaging in self-reflection; doing reparative work; and making an effort to change for the better (see, for example, Cornish & Wade, 2015; Griffin et al., 2015; Hall & Fincham, 2005; Wenzel & Woodyatt, 2013, 2014). Yet, the FOSS and the HFS measure only self-regard (or, more specifically, absence of self-condemnation, which does not necessarily imply that one has positive self-regard).

Thus, two inter-related problems emerge when we measure dispositional self-forgiveness solely on the basis of self-regard. First, we cannot account for the possibility that respondents are engaging in pseudo self-forgiveness. Although all self-report trait-level measures are open to self-presentation biases, those relating to self-forgiveness are particularly susceptible. They require people to introspect and be honest about acting poorly. Yet, as tests of attribution theory have shown time and again, humans tend to downplay their own bad behaviors or inclinations (e.g., Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), and prefer to present themselves in a positive light. For example, Thompson et al. (2005) reported a significant positive correlation of .27 between their self-forgiveness subscale and socially desirable responding. Each of the MFS, HFS, and FOS lacks a mechanism for identifying when a respondent is a pseudo self-forgiver.

Second, as we will see shortly, studies have tended to rely on bivariate relations with variables measured using the same method, at the same (trait) level, and which are concerned with states and traits of the self-forgiver (e.g., wellbeing, shame) rather than outcomes for the



other person who has been hurt. Taken together, the twin issues of restrictive operationalization and predominance of correlational methodology make it difficult to know how to interpret the literature on dispositional self-forgiveness.

### **An Illustrative Review of the Literature**

In Table 1, I summarize the direction of relations generally found between dispositional self-forgiveness and measures relating to affect, mental health, physical health, personality and other dispositional variables, and transgression-specific responding. The studies indicated in Table 1 are representative, rather than exhaustive. Thus, the following review is also not meant to be exhaustive, but, rather, illustrative.

To exemplify the problem of restrictive operationalization, first consider the finding of a relatively strong positive correlation between the HFS and self-esteem ( $r = .67$ ; Strelan, 2007a;  $r = .64$ ; Strelan, 2007b). These relations suggest that the HFS, at least, may indeed be little more than a proxy for positive self-regard (or, more specifically, reduced inclination towards self-condemnation). Now consider that shame-proneness and dispositional self-forgiveness tend to be moderately negatively related (e.g., Strelan, 2007a). If we think of dispositional self-forgiveness as reflecting predominantly positive self-regard, then we have little difficulty interpreting the negative relation with shame-proneness (“I like myself so I generally don’t feel ashamed”). However, we know that dispositional self-forgiveness should also involve characteristics such as responsibility taking, self-reflection, and effort to repair and change. In the absence of items measuring these additional qualities, interpreting the relation with shame-proneness becomes more difficult. We do not know whether dispositional self-forgivers are well adjusted or are inclined to let themselves off the hook.

Because current measures of dispositional self-forgiveness may be conflated with reduced proclivity to self-condemnation, and studies are predominantly correlational, it is perhaps not surprising to find, therefore, that dispositional self-forgiveness is negatively

associated with other undesirable affective inclinations, including guilt-proneness (Strelan, 2007), trait anger (e.g., Thompson et al., 2005), and negative affect (e.g., Yao, Chen, & Yu, 2016).

Similarly, in terms of mental health outcomes, researchers report that dispositional self-forgiveness is negatively associated with trait anxiety (e.g., Macaskill, 2012), a ruminative style (Thompson et al., 2005), and depressive symptoms (e.g., Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001). Davis et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis of up to 65 studies on relations between dispositional self-forgiveness measures and various affective and wellbeing outcomes is congruent with these findings, indicating that dispositional self-forgiveness is positively associated with measures of psychological well-being ( $r = .46$ ). Davis et al.'s meta-analysis also reports a positive relation between dispositional self-forgiveness and physical health ( $r = .32$ ;  $k = 19$ ).

It may be further unsurprising to read that dispositional self-forgiveness is positively associated with the desirable traits of Agreeableness (e.g., Leach & Lark, 2004), Conscientiousness (e.g., Ross et al., 2004), Extraversion (Ross et al., 2004), trait gratitude (Strelan, 2007), and trait-level forgiveness of others (see Macaskill, 2012). Moreover, dispositional self-forgiveness is negatively associated with Neuroticism (e.g., Ross, Hertenstein, & Wrobel, 2007).

The literature reviewed thus far suggests it would be desirable to possess a self-forgiving disposition. Such a disposition would seem to buffer individuals from the deleterious effects associated with a dysregulated and dysfunctional emotional response style in relation to personal wrongdoing or mistakes, and would seem to be associated with approach-oriented interpersonal dispositions. Of course, as noted earlier, we do not know whether respondents have simply been engaging in pseudo self-forgiveness. To speak to that point, another set of studies demonstrates precisely why we should be conservative when

interpreting the apparently beneficial effects of dispositional self-forgiveness. These particular studies suggest that, actually, dispositional self-forgivers are self-absorbed individuals with little regard for others, and a lack of awareness—or a propensity to discount—that they are capable of hurting others or acting contrary to personal values.

First, there is evidence that dispositional self-forgiveness is positively associated with narcissism (Strelan, 2007a; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005). Narcissists possess inflated levels of self-regard. They believe they are special, unique, and superior to others (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Accordingly, their relationships are characterized by indifference, power concerns, and an inability to see others' perspectives and recognize others' needs (Campbell & Foster, 2002). In addition, they believe they are beyond reproach. Because they view themselves as special, they do not believe that they do much, if anything, wrong. When others point out their mistakes and transgressions, they tend to respond poorly.

Second, on the rare occasions that researchers have measured dispositional self-forgivers' reactions to specific transgressions, they have found that dispositional self-forgivers are less likely to feel distressed at causing another's misfortune, feel empathy, fear negative evaluation, engage in constructive anger management strategies (Tangney et al., 2005), and feel remorse and self-condemnation (Fisher & Exline, 2006).

In summary, a vexatious question lingers. Would the literature yield the same relations if researchers had measured dispositional self-forgiveness with additional items that captured the true breadth and depth of the self-forgiveness construct; that is, items that reflected the idea that an individual generally acts in ways that earn him or her the 'right' to be generally forgiving of the self? Clearly, the dispositional self-forgiveness literature is not conclusive. There is great scope for researchers to improve upon existing measures and methods and subsequently build a more complete and coherent profile of the dispositional self-forgiver.

### Ideas for Future Research

Future studies should consider addressing several inter-related issues. First, there is a need for a measure of dispositional self-forgiveness that taps more clearly into positive self-regard rather than a reduced tendency towards self-condemnation. For example, researchers could modify Wohl, DeShea, and Wahkinney's (2008) state-level scale, which includes items such as, "As I consider what I did that was wrong, I ... feel compassionate towards myself; show myself acceptance; I believe I am ... decent; worthy of love").

However, in so doing, researchers would need to address a second, and more critical point. That is, they must account for the possibility that some people do not take responsibility for their actions (if indeed they are aware that their actions might be hurtful), or discount actions that contravene their personal values, and do not particularly care if they have behaved poorly. By extension, being responsible in the context of self-forgiveness also means engaging in self-reflection, doing reparative work, and making a genuine effort to change. In effect, researchers need to work out how to disentangle genuine self-forgiveness from pseudo self-forgiveness at the trait level. One approach may be to modify Woodyatt and Wenzel's (2013) state-level 'Differentiated Process Scales of Self-Forgiveness' (DPSSF). Woodyatt and Wenzel developed the DPSSF on the premise that state-level self-forgiveness is a process, one in which genuine self-forgiveness is characterized not by positive self-regard but, rather, by self-reflection and effort to change for the better (the *genuine self-forgiveness* subscale, e.g., "I don't take what I have done lightly"). Notably, positive self-regard is but *one outcome* of the self-forgiveness process. Just as importantly, the DPSSF distinguishes genuine self-forgiveness from two other possible responses when one transgresses, each of which could stifle efforts to change: self-condemnation (the *self-punitive* subscale, e.g., "What I have done is unforgivable") and excusing (manifested in the *pseudo self-forgiveness* subscale, e.g., "I wasn't the only one to blame for what happened").

An attractive feature of the DPSSF is that Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) avoid conceptualizing self-forgiveness purely as some desirable goal involving positive self-regard. Instead, genuine self-forgiveness is the culmination of a transformative learning process. There would seem to be several benefits to transposing this model to dispositional self-forgiveness. First, it provides a template for measuring and controlling for both pseudo self-forgiveness and self-condemnatory tendencies at the trait level. Second, it would advance theorizing on the nature of dispositional self-forgiveness, moving the focus away from positive self-regard as a defining (but perhaps problematic) characteristic, and instead re-positioning the dispositional self-forgiver as one who takes responsibility, is capable of self-reflection, is an approach-oriented problem-solver, and is willing to change for the better.

Third, researchers may consider alternative measurement approaches that do not rely on self-report. For example, Bast and colleagues have been developing and testing a self-forgiveness IAT (Implicit Association Test; e.g., Bast & Barnes-Holmes, 2014). An IAT is a reaction-time test that purportedly measures individuals' underlying attitudes towards a particular target. It is claimed to be advantageous because responding is effectively beyond participants' conscious control. As such, an IAT is meant to be able to provide a measure of particular attitudes that, theoretically, is untainted by self-presentation biases (for an overview, see Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). A self-forgiveness IAT would therefore be useful, particularly when employed alongside an explicit measure of self-forgiveness (for an example of an other-forgiveness IAT, see Goldring & Strelan, 2017). Thus far, Bast and colleagues have not yet investigated the relation between implicit and explicit measures of self-forgiveness, although they report negligible correlations with an explicit measure of self-compassion (e.g., Bast & Barnes-Holmes, 2014).

Fourth, and finally, there is now an imperative to move beyond correlational designs and examining associations with other trait-level variables. Once future researchers are

confident they have developed an improved measure of dispositional self-forgiveness, they should concentrate on designs in which [a] dispositional self-forgiveness is a *predictor* of [b] *behavior* in [c] the context of *specific transgressions*. Shifting the focus, so that dispositional self-forgiveness is clearly a predictor and outcome variables are indicators of transgression-specific behavior, will help get around the fundamental problem of pseudo self-forgiveness. Individuals can claim to possess certain characteristics but, as the well-worn cliché goes, actions speak louder than words.

Longitudinal studies would therefore be helpful in terms of providing evidence of causal relations between dispositional self-forgiveness and affective, mental health, and relationship-oriented outcomes in relation to specific transgressions. For example, presuming that genuine dispositional self-forgiveness requires individual qualities of self-awareness and ability to engage in effortful change, we should find that dispositional self-forgivers in fact take *longer* to arrive at a point where they believe they can give themselves ‘permission’ to forgive themselves. The same presumption should also lead us to predict that, all things being equal, genuine dispositional self-forgiveness will motivate negative affective responses and reduced self-regard immediately following a transgression (e.g., Griffin et al., 2015; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, 2014). However, after reparative effort, dispositional self-forgiveness will be negatively associated with such responses.

Similarly, mediation models will be useful for testing theoretically relevant process variables. For example, if dispositional self-forgiveness is fundamentally approach-oriented, then, following a transgression against another person, individuals scoring high on dispositional self-forgiveness should feel ashamed about their particular behavior, because shame functions to alert the self to when one’s social bonds are threatened (i.e., as a consequence of one’s poor behavior; see Cibich, Woodyatt, & Wenzel, 2016). Transgression-specific shame, in turn, should motivate reparative behavior. Conversely, if dispositional self-

forgivers consider themselves beyond reproach, then they should be less likely to judge that an apparently negative action was wrong, more likely to deny their role in a hurtful event, and subsequently less likely to feel ashamed about a particular transgression. As a result, they should be less likely to act reparatively.

Finally, researchers should examine the interaction between dispositional self-forgiveness and manipulated features of a transgression. Doing so would help us to understand the conditions under which dispositional self-forgiveness is relevant, specifically, *when* having a self-forgiving disposition hinders or helps (see, for example, related research indicating when state-specific self-forgiveness can be negative or positive, e.g., Wohl & McLaughlin, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

What sort of person is the dispositional self-forgiver? We cannot yet say for sure whether dispositional self-forgivers are emotionally stable and well adjusted, or they are self-concerned individuals who care little about others. There would seem to be a two-fold explanation for the present lack of clarity. First, current measures of dispositional self-forgiveness are limited, insofar as they cannot account for the possibility that high scorers also possess a generalized tendency to let themselves off the emotional hook when considering any wrongful actions in their lives. The way forward demands a more nuanced operationalization of dispositional self-forgiveness. It is hard to argue with the idea that dispositional self-forgiveness must involve some level of positive self-regard despite being aware of one's moral failures. But, at the dispositional level—and taking a cue from state-level self-forgiveness theorizing and research (e.g., Cornish & Wade, 2015; Griffin et al., 2015; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, 2014)—*responsible* self-forgiveness also requires measuring inclinations towards acting in ways that earn a person the 'right' to be generally forgiving of the self. As such, improved measures of dispositional self-forgiveness are

required, and they need to be multi-faceted, so that dispositional self-forgiveness is not restricted to simply reflecting self-regard.

Second, the literature is characterized by a preference for trait-level studies that are susceptible to mono-measure bias. We need to do more research on how dispositional self-forgivers *behave*, in response to specific transgressions. Clearly, there is much scope for future researchers to extend our understanding of this intriguing construct.

I use the word “intriguing” because, at the dispositional level at least, we have yet to persuasively demonstrate that dispositional self-forgiveness is the “good” that our research community started out (quite reasonably) presuming it to be. A large literature shows that, all things being equal, its older conceptual sibling interpersonal forgiveness is usually a good idea, both for the restoration of valued relationships (McCullough, 2008) and the self (e.g., Worthington, 2001) although there are critics (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). A generalized inclination to forgive the self *ought* also to be a good thing. It is adaptive to be able to move on from one’s harmful actions and retain positive self-regard. Indeed, the literature suggests that this is exactly what dispositional self-forgivers do. However, until we are able to show beyond reasonable doubt that self-proclaimed dispositional self-forgivers are *responsible* self-forgivers, suspicions will remain about just how genuine a dispositional self-forgiver is.



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*Table 1*

Summary of the direction of relations generally found between dispositional self-forgiveness and trait- and state-level measures relating to affect, mental health, personality, and transgression-specific responding

	<u>Dispositional self-forgiveness</u>	<u>Representative empirical studies</u>
<u>Emotion variables</u>		
Trait Shame	-	Carpenter et al., 2016; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Macaskill, 2012; McGaffin et al., 2013; Strelan, 2007a; Ranganadhan & Todorov, 2010
Trait Anger	-	Macaskill, 2012; Seybold, Hill, Neuman, & Chi, 2001; Thompson et al., 2005
Trait Guilt	-	Strelan, 2007a
<u>Mental health outcomes</u>		
Psychological wellbeing	+	Davis et al., 2015
Depression	-	Cheavens, Cukrowicz, Hansen, & Mitchell, 2016; Maltby et al., 2001; Seybold et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2005
Ruminative style	-	Thompson et al., 2005
Anxiety	-	Macaskill, 2012; Thompson et al., 2005; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002
Negative affect	-	Thompson et al., 2005; Yao et al,

		2016; Romero et al., 2006
<u>Physical health outcomes</u>	+	Davis et al., 2015
<u>Big Five Personality factors</u>		
Agreeableness	+	Leach & Lark, 2004; Strelan, 2007a
Conscientiousness	+	Leach & Lark, 2004; Ross et al., 2004
Neuroticism	-	Kim, Johnson, & Ripley, 2011; Leach & Lark, 2004; Maltby et al., 2001; Macaskill, 2012; Mauger et al., 1992; Ross et al., 2004, 2007; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002
Extraversion	+	Ross et al., 2004
<u>Other dispositional variables</u>		
Gratitude	+	Strelan, 2007b
Self-esteem	+	Strelan, 2007a, 2007b; Tangney et al., 2005; Yao et al., 2016
Narcissism	+	Strelan, 2007a; Tangney et al., 2005
Trait forgiveness of others	+	Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005; Macaskill, 2012; Mauger et al., 1992
<u>Specific transgressions</u>		
Angry ruminations	-	Barber et al., 2005
Remorse	-	Fisher & Exline, 2006
Empathy	-	Tangney et al., 2005
Retaliation	+	Tangney et al., 2005
Anger management	-	Tangney et al., 2005

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