

Stress as a Mediator of the Association between Forgiveness and Health-Related Variables

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INTRODUCTION

Empirical support for the association between forgiveness and physical health is growing (Webb, Toussaint, & Conway-Williams, in press).

Experts have suggested that there is a salutary relationship between forgiveness and health and that, likewise, stress may be a key factor from cognitive, emotional, and physiological perspectives (Maton, 1989; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007).

However, not all students who endorse higher levels of stress will endorse increased physical health symptoms, perhaps due to the protective factors of forgiveness.

Although the psychological study of forgiveness is burgeoning, little work has been done to assess the nuances of stress in the context of the forgiveness-health relationship

Purpose of the Study: To help improve the understanding of the relationship between forgiveness, stress, and physical health.

General Hypothesis: Stress will mediate the relationship between forgiveness and physical health, such that higher levels of forgiveness will be associated with lower levels of stress, which, in turn, will be associated with better health related variables.

METHODS

Design & Participants:

- Cross-Sectional
- Undergraduate college students (n=363)
- ♀ = 74.38%; n = 270
- Caucasian = 88.15%; n = 320
- $M_{age} = 22.11$; $SD = 6.15$

METHODS (con't)

Analysis:

Statistical mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2008)

- Adjusted for demographic variables

Measures:

Demographic variables

(i.e., gender, age, education, ethnicity, marital status)

Religious Background and Behaviors

Questionnaire - Lifetime

(Connors, Tonigan, & Miller, 1996)

Physical Health Questionnaire

(Schat, Kelloway, & Desmarais, 2005)

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales

(Lovibond, S. H. & Lovibond, P. F., 1995)

Multidimensional Measurement of Religion & Spirituality – Forgiveness Short Form

(Fetzer Institute, 1999)

HALT

(Webb & Brewer, 2010)

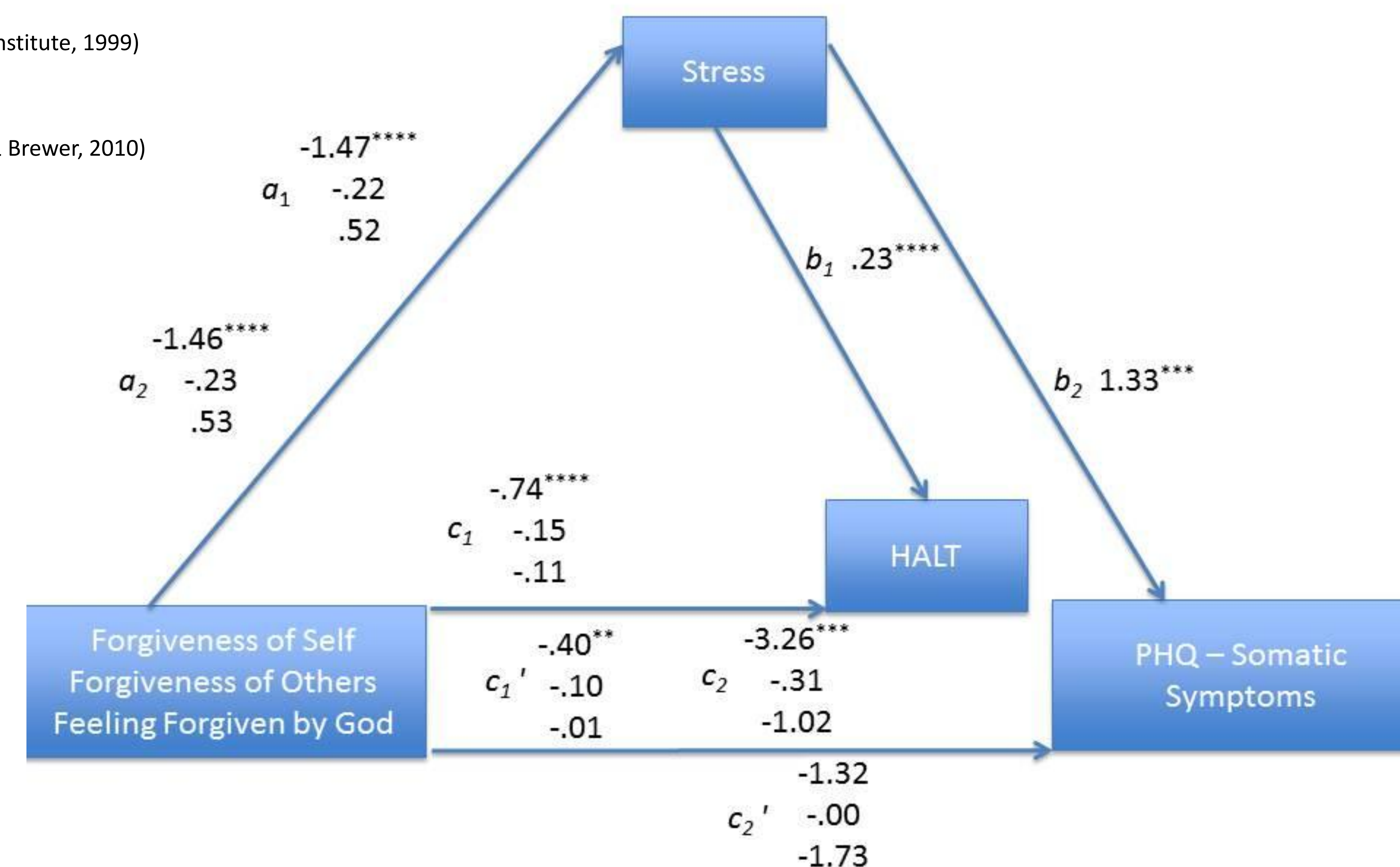


Figure 1: Effect of Forgiveness on Health Symptoms as Stress

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; **** $p < .0001$

RESULTS

For general physical health – somatic symptoms, the full model was significant ($R^2 = .31$ ****).

- Only Forgiveness of Self was associated with physical health – somatic symptoms.
- This relationship was fully mediated by stress.

For HALT, the full model was significant ($R^2 = .32$ ****).

- Only Forgiveness of Self was associated with HALT.
- This relationship was partially mediated by stress.

In sum, the association of FS with physical health symptoms was both direct and indirect, through stress.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with prior theory and research (Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Worthington, et al., 2007), our findings suggest that stress may play a role in the relationship between forgiveness and health.

However, much of the prior work has been in the context of forgiveness of others, only; in consideration of our findings, it appears that when multiple dimensions of forgiveness are measured, forgiveness of others may not be associated with health.

The association between higher levels of FS and lowers levels of stress may contribute to fewer health-related symptoms by facilitating a positive outlook, lowering anxiety and depression, supporting the ability to cope, and future orientation (Zaleski, Levey-Thors, & Schiaffino, 1998).

Furthermore, this forgiveness-stress relationship may lessen the likelihood of health compromising behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use (Webb, Hirsch, & Toussaint, 2011; Zaleski, et al., 2007)

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