

The Varieties of Forgiveness Experience: Working toward a Comprehensive Definition of Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT: The definition of forgiveness was explored in a group of 270 young adults, and the underlying dimensions of their definitions compared with those of philosophers, theologians and psychological researchers. Three dimensions were identified: orientation (self, other), direction (passive letting go of negative experiences, active enhancement of positive experiences) and form (emotion, cognition and behavior). Definitions employing a passive letting go of negative experiences were associated with more state forgiveness. Gender differences were found in state forgiveness and in the employment of passive vs. active dimensions of forgiveness.

KEY WORDS: forgiveness; definitions; religiousness; spiritual well-being.

“The cost of forgiveness is too high for many people. Consequently, they invent and turn to cheaper versions of forgiveness, ones that will enable them to “feel” or “think” better about themselves—or simply to “cope” with their situation—without having to engage in struggles to change or transform the patterns of their relationships”. (Jones, 1995, p. 6)

“We do forgiving alone inside our hearts and minds; what happens to the people we forgive depends on them”. (Smedes, 1996, p. 177)

“Forgiveness is defined as the emotional replacement of (1) hot emotions of anger or fear that follow a perceived hurt or offense, or (2) unforgiveness that follows

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ruminating about the transgression, by substituting positive emotions such as unselfish love, empathy, compassion, or even romantic love". (Worthington, 2001, p. 32)

"Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell... Forgiveness is for you and no one else. You can forgive and rejoin a relationship or forgive and never speak to the person again". (Luskin, 2002, pp. 68–69)

Forgiveness is a concept with philosophical, theological and psychological implications. It is highly valued by all major religious worldviews and is a serious topic of philosophical discourse (e.g., Jankelevitch, 1967/2005; Murphy & Hampton, 1988). As greater emphasis is placed on positive psychology, forgiveness has risen to major status as a concept with positive implications for psychological and physical well-being (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Worthington, 2005). However, in spite of such thought and effort, we have yet to develop a consensual definition of forgiveness. Psychologists, philosophers and theologians all differ in what they mean by forgiveness (Denton & Martin, 1998); presumably ordinary folk also differ and this confusion has considerable import. Understanding antecedents of forgiveness, exploring the physiology of forgiveness, and training people to become more forgiving all imply that we have a shared meaning for the term. This paper is an attempt to clarify the specific dimensions on which researchers and philosophers differ in their ways of defining forgiveness, and to examine the relationships of everyday, working definitions of forgiveness in laypersons to these considered and proposed ways of thinking about forgiveness.

Issues of definition

As exemplified by the quotations at the beginning, there is no dearth of forgiveness definitions in the psychological literature. In the recent *Handbook of Forgiveness*, Worthington (2005) begins the final chapter with the question, "What is forgiveness?" He found two predominant definitions: an individual or intrapersonal experience of forgiveness and an interpersonal process of forgiveness. Interestingly, while the majority of psychological research and clinical definitions have focused on the intrapersonal aspects of forgiveness (Luskin, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the philosophical and theological literatures, that provide the historical foundation for this theoretical work, consistently emphasize the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness. As Jankelevitch (1967/2005) wrote, "Forgiveness is not a monologue, but a dialogue (p. 129)"; similarly, Moberly (1901) indicates that "Forgiveness is an attitude of a person to a person (p. 54)". Jones (1995) also criticizes the internalization and

privatization of forgiveness, even within the current theological literature, influenced as it has been by the dominance of psychological thinking. Thus, there is substantial disagreement among psychologists (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000), and between psychologists and philosophers or theologians on the focus of forgiveness, whether it is within or between individuals. In understanding the antecedents and consequences of forgiveness for laypersons, it will be instructive to discover how they view forgiveness.

The process of forgiveness

Worthington (2005) and McCullough et al. (2000), among others, have drawn attention to two primary processes that may underlie forgiveness: (1) the reduction of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and (2) the enhancement of positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors. In examining laypersons' definitions of forgiveness, one may discover which of these processes (or both) predominates in their thinking about forgiveness. Presumably, one may claim a greater or lesser degree of forgiveness depending upon how one conceives of it. For example, if I define forgiveness as letting go of anger, then with time alone, I may find that this reduction has occurred and conclude, therefore, that I have forgiven. However, if I define forgiveness as completely forgetting the event and returning a relationship to the status it had before the event, I might find forgiveness a more challenging and difficult endeavor.

This raises a second issue. Worthington (2005) and others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Luskin, 2002), claim that there is clear consensus that forgiveness is distinct from and not to be confused with several other concepts: excusing, condoning, justifying, pardoning, forgetting and reconciling. While this is undoubtedly true at the theoretical level, one may ask whether these concepts are absent from everyday definitions of forgiveness. To the extent that individuals think of forgiveness as forgetting or as reconciling, then their responses to questionnaires that attempt to determine degree of forgiveness will be tapping other constructs as well.

The forms of forgiveness

Whether one views forgiveness as a reduction of negative experiences and/or an enhancement of positive ones, these responses take a variety of forms. While no one has decreed a "gold standard" expression of forgiveness, researchers have emphasized different aspects of that experience. Worthington and colleagues (e.g., Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Worthington, 2001) have focused on affective components; DiBlasio (1998) and Luskin (2002) have emphasized the conscious choice (cognition) to control behavior, referred to as "decision-based" forgiveness; McCullough (2001) has

directed attention to motivational factors, and their behavioral inhibition, particularly revenge and avoidance. Finally, Witvliet (2005) has focused on physiological responses. Whether one or all of these components captures the essence of forgiveness is unknown; in addition, we do not know which components figure in the accounts of laypersons.

The contexts of forgiveness

Professional writers frame the experience of forgiveness in terms of betrayal or perceived transgressions (McCullough et al., 2000). To that end, they have often examined factors predicted to vary with forgiveness, such as severity of the event, presence of an apology, or time elapsed since the event. Prior relationship status, such as degree of closeness or commitment, has also been included as a contextual factor that may enhance forgiveness (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). However, philosophical and theological writing have emphasized a different set of contextual factors (Roberts, 1995).

Murphy (1988) defines forgiveness as the forswearing of resentment on moral grounds and argues that these moral grounds must be compatible with self-respect, respect for others as moral agents, and respect for the rules of morality or the moral order. Moberly (1901) sets up criteria for forgiveness based on the possibility, or reasonable hope, of a restoration or amendment of character [in the offender], however remote that hope might be. Finally, Jankelevitch (1967/2005) specifically limits the context of forgiveness to one in which the offender exhibits remorse. He states "This elementary condition is the distress, the insomnia, and the dereliction of the wrongdoer; and although it is not up to the person who forgives to require this condition, this condition is nevertheless that without which the entire problematic of forgiveness becomes a simple buffoonery. To each person belongs a task: to the criminal belongs desperate remorse, and to the victim belongs forgiveness (p. 157)". Macaskill (2005) reported that the general public, as well, perceives repentance as necessary for forgiveness. In the lay definitions of forgiveness, it will be instructive to observe the types of contextual factors raised by non-professional thinkers of forgiveness in their own lives. Will they cite moral justification, repentance, remorse, apologies or severity of the event?

Previous narrative accounts of forgiveness

In 1989, Rowe, Halling, Davis, Leifer, Powers, and van Bronkhorst conducted a phenomenological analysis of forgiveness. Reflecting on their own experiences, they considered the nature of the injury and their initial responses, as well as the outcomes of forgiveness. In contrast to many of the definitions

proposed by researchers, they noted that “First, it is a process that is most immediately experienced as *interpersonal* (italics mine, p. 239)” and that has transformational qualities (see also Pargament, 1997). Finally, they found that forgiveness was more often experienced as a revelation, a moment of recognition that it had already occurred, rather than as an active journey toward a goal. This research revealed a number of unanticipated dimensions and further supports the investment in descriptive work on forgiveness.

Kearns and Fincham (2004) examined students’ views of forgiveness with prototype analysis. Describing five studies, they found that students agreed on the centrality of several features, such as “moving on”, “empathy”, and “acceptance”. However, this analysis did not define critical features of individual definitions, nor did they examine degree of reported forgiveness in the light of one’s definition.

Younger, Piferi, Jobe, and Lawler (2004) conducted a preliminary examination of college students’ and community adults’ definitions of forgiveness. Both groups defined forgiveness primarily as an intrapersonal process, with two main themes of “acceptance, dealing with the event, or getting over it” and “reduction in negative feelings, letting go of grudges (p. 841)”. Students defined the expression of forgiveness more in terms of behavior, while community adults focused more on the reduction of negative feelings, leaving open for both the question of a change of heart toward the offender, without which, according to Worthington (2001), forgiveness is shallower and less enduring. Reconciliation, a concept explicitly excluded in most professional definitions was endorsed by 24% of the students and 16% of the community adults. This is consistent with results found by Macaskill (2005): clergy reported that reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness.

Perhaps the most detailed study of narrative descriptions of forgiveness is Wohl, Kuiken, and Noels (2005). A total of 26 male and female college students completed a written description of granting forgiveness. Constituents or paraphrases were derived from statements expressed by three or more participants, and hierarchical cluster analysis performed. This yielded three types of forgiveness experiences: (1) one in which the offender and the victim openly discussed the transgression leading to a decrease in negative feelings *and* to reconciliation, (2) one in which the victim’s attitudes and self-discovery played a role in subsequent reconciliation, and (3) one labeled pseudo-forgiveness in which forgiveness was employed as a means of maintaining the relationship, which continued to decrease in quality. While the authors describe these clusters as different “types” of forgiveness, the presence of interpersonal focus, reconciliation, and moral context all map onto the philosophical and theological definitions cited above. Constituents regarding not holding a grudge and forgiveness in the service of personal health and well-being reiterate themes in the psychological literature. The enumeration of the constituent list of expressions reinforces the value of working inductively from the lived experiences of the participants.

Rationale for the present study

Given the inconsistencies in the literature about the orientation, process, form, and context of forgiveness, it is unclear what research on antecedents, correlates, and outcomes of forgiveness is addressing. We categorized the responses of a large group of young adults with regard to betrayal experiences, reasons for forgiveness and their definitions of forgiveness. In addition, given the magnitude of religious writing that provides both a background and a foundation for work in forgiveness, we assessed religious affiliation, religious involvement and spiritual well-being in the participants.

We compare the working ideas of laypersons about forgiveness to those proposed by professional researchers and philosophers with regard to several questions. The first involves the underlying dimensions of forgiveness: (a) interpersonal or intrapersonal, (b) active enhancement of positive or passive release of negative responses, and (c) forms of the forgiveness response. Second, what contextual factors frame the participants' definitions of forgiveness? Thirdly, if our thinking about forgiveness shapes our experience, how do forgiveness definitions relate to state forgiveness and what role does religiousness play in these definitions?

Method

Participants

A total of 270 college students were recruited from an introductory psychology student population at a large, public, nondenominational university. They ranged in age from 18 to 33, with a mean age of 18.8 years. There were 95 males and 173 females (2 omitted gender); 70.4% were Caucasian, 7.8% African American, and 7% other. Almost 11.5% indicated that they did not have a religious affiliation, while the remaining 88.5% indicated some denomination. As for frequency of church attendance, students rated their involvement from 1 (not at all) to 5 (more than 4 times a month). Out of the 270 students, 23 (8.5%) checked not at all, 63 (23.3%) a few times a year, 42 (15.6%) about once a month, 77 (28.5%) 2–4 times a month and 61 (22.6%) more than four times per month. A further breakdown of sample characteristics can be found in Table 1; as shown, females and males differed in state forgiveness and religious well-being. Thus, all subsequent analyses either include gender as a factor, or examine genders separately.

Procedure

Participants reported to the Health Psychology laboratory in groups of 8–12. They sat around a table, with a research administrator, and completed a questionnaire packet. The administrator was available should there be any

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Sample and Basic Questionnaires

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>N</i>	270	95	173	
Age	18.8	19.1	18.6	
Ethnicity (% Caucasian)	82.6	78.0	83.2	
Religious (% affiliated)	88.4	88.4	88.4	
Frequency of attendance	3.34	3.39	3.31	
State forgiveness	154.2	160.9	150.6	.02
Religious well-being	48.2	45.8	49.6	.01
Existential well-being	46.7	45.5	47.5	.07

questions, but there was no discussion among the participants and the atmosphere was quiet. The packet was completed in 30–45 min.

The packet was titled “Research project on interpersonal conflict and forgiveness”. Part of it was narrative and part consisted of questionnaires. On the first page, students were asked to describe a time “when someone deeply hurt or betrayed you and you forgave him/her for it later”. In addition to writing out the description, the following details were included: relationship (for example, friend, father, romantic partner, etc.), how long ago it happened, and rating of seriousness (from 1 (trivial) to 5 (very serious)). After the description, students were asked, “Why did you forgive him/her?” whether the offender ever apologized, whether they continued to have any grudges or bad feelings toward the offender and, if so, to rate them from 1 (hardly any) to 5 (very strong). Finally, they indicated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (totally), how fully they had forgiven the offender.

On the second page, they were asked for their definition of forgiveness, or “What does forgiveness mean to you?” The goal was to activate working definitions of forgiveness, rather than memorized or purely linguistic definitions. By having participants first describe a time when they forgave, and why, we hoped to activate any underlying forgiveness schemata.

Questionnaires

Subsequent to the narrative section on forgiveness, students completed the following questionnaires: the Acts of Forgiveness (AF) scale, the demographic sheet (age, gender, religious affiliation, and frequency of attendance), and a spiritual well-being scale.

The AF scale is a measure of state forgiveness for a specific event (Drinnon & Jones, 1999). It contains 45 items, such as “I can never trust the person in question again” and is answered on a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. It has strong internal reliability ($\alpha = .96$) and test–retest reliability of .90 over 3 months.

Spiritual well-being was assessed by a scale developed by Ellison and Smith (1991). It has 20 items, answered with a 6-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. It has good internal reliability (α of .78–.89) and good test–retest reliability (.86–.96). Examples of items are “I believe there is some real purpose for my life” and “My relationship with God helps me not to feel lonely”.

Coding of the definitions

Ratings of the forgiveness definitions were made by five individuals, all four authors (one faculty member (K. L-R.), one graduate student (C. S.), and two undergraduates (R.R. and E. M.)) and an additional undergraduate student. All were trained by the faculty member and worked from a Scoring guide for Forgiveness Definitions that was developed before the coding, and modified when additional details were noted. The scoring guide (available from the senior author) indicates that the definition is scored in three ways: Orientation (focus of attention on self (intrapersonal) or on other (interpersonal)), Direction (positive action taken or negative action inhibited; this can also be thought of as active, such as “moving on”, vs. passive “letting go”.), and Form (emotion, behavior, general thought (or attitude) and specific thought). Examples of participant definitions from each category can be found in Table 2.

Inter-rater agreement for the coding across all five raters was 82.8% for Orientation (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal), 85.4% for Direction (offering something positive vs. withholding something negative), and 84.3% for Form (cognitive, emotion, behavior). Any discrepancies were discussed by the group and consensus achieved. Each definition was assessed individually and every category that was contained in the definition was included in the scoring. Thus, one definition might be uniquely intrapersonal, emotional, and withholding something negative, such as “Forgiveness is not having bad feelings about what happened” while another could have both Orientations and Directions, such as “Letting go of an event [self, passive] and moving on in the relationship [other, active]”. Similarly, if participants included more than one Form, all were included in that person’s definitional coding.

Results

Is forgiveness intrapersonal, interpersonal, or both?

Each definition of forgiveness was coded as intrapersonal, or focusing on the self, interpersonal, or focusing on the other, or both (see Table 2 for examples of each category). Based on all participants, 45.6% were coded as intrapersonal only, or focusing on the self; 31.1% were coded as interpersonal only, or focusing on the offender; and 20.4% were coded as including both intrapersonal and interpersonal features. Looking at the breakdown by gender, about

TABLE 2
Examples of Definitions in Each Category

Intrapersonal: focus on self

“When you let the complete situation be in the past, but you never really forget”.

“To realize that people make mistakes just like myself and if you don’t forgive and have hate in your heart it will affect you for the rest of your life”.

“Letting go of the wrong done to you”.

Interpersonal: focus on other

“Still accepting someone and remaining friends with them in spite of the events”.

“Understanding that someone is sorry, accepting what they did and being able to stay friends”.

“Completely letting the offender know that their mistake is ok”.

Active: an active response involving positive behaviors, thoughts and feelings

“Accepting one’s apology for something they did wrong”.

“Forgiveness is basically giving someone a second chance to redeem him/herself”.

“The act of making up with someone who has hurt you emotionally or physically”.

Passive: a passive response of letting go or releasing negative behaviors, thoughts and feelings or refraining from making a negative response

“No bad feelings or grudges”.

“Forgetting what happened”.

“Forgiveness is letting the past die. After forgiving, the act is not brought up any more”.

Forms of forgiveness: behaviors, emotions, specific thoughts, general attitudes

Behaviors:

“moving on”

“being able to say, “yes, you upset me, but I am over it now”.

Emotions

“letting go of the hurt and anger...”

“showing love and compassion...”

Specific thoughts

“forgetting what happened”

“not judging someone else based on one or more events”

General attitudes

“realizing we all sin and are not perfect”

“understanding that people will make mistakes...”

20% of both men and women included both self and other in their definitions. For the remaining males, the focus on self or other was about the same, with 38.9% defining forgiveness in terms of self-focus and 36.8% in terms of other focus. For the women, 49.1% defined forgiveness in terms of self-focus, compared to 27.7% in terms of focus on other. χ^2 analysis indicated that there was an effect of category ($\chi^2(2) = 26.6, p < .0001$); more people chose self than other, and more chose other than both. However, the frequency of category choice did not differ between genders. Examination of the preceding stories indicated that neither offender closeness nor event severity bore any relationship to the focus on self or other.

Is forgiveness a passive reduction in negative, or an active increase in positive, responses?

Each definition was coded as either a passive decrease in a negative response, such as “letting go of a grudge”, an increase in a positive response, such as “bringing them back into your heart”, or both. Out of 256 classifiable definitions, approximately 20% of them incorporated both a passive “letting go” and an active “moving on”, while the remaining 80% were fairly evenly split between the two categories. However, the pattern of male and female definitions differed. While approximately 20% of both groups had definitions incorporating both reductions and increases, more men defined forgiveness only as a passive reduction (46.3%) rather than an active taking on (30.5%), while women showed the reverse pattern (active: 45.7%; passive: 28.9%). χ^2 analysis confirmed the overall interaction pattern ($\chi^2 = 8.8, p < .02$) as well as the difference between active and passive for males ($p < .02$) and between males and females on proportion of passive definitions ($p < .05$).

Do the dimensions underlying forgiveness definitions relate to measured state forgiveness?

If our beliefs, or ways of thinking about forgiveness, shape our experience, then they may have an impact on our reported level of forgiveness. To test this possibility, we calculated an analysis of variance on state forgiveness scores with three between-groups factors: Orientation (3: self, other, both), Direction (3: passive, active, both), and Gender (2). There were two significant effects: a main effect of Gender ($(1,235) = 4.46, p < .036$) and an interaction of Orientation by Direction ($(4,235) = 3.61, p < .007$). As noted above, males had higher state forgiveness scores than females (161.4 > 149.9; means differ slightly from Table 1 due to changes in sample size based on coded definitions). As shown in Table 3, when orientation was Other, then a direction that included *both* active and passive components (or increasing positive and decreasing negative responses) was associated with more forgiveness than passive alone ($p < .004$) or active alone ($p < .088$). When the direction was *both* passive and active, then orientation to other was associated with more state forgiveness than orientation to self ($p < .02$) or both ($p < .01$). Clearly, one group (orientation to Other

TABLE 3
State forgiveness for Orientation and Direction Categories

<i>Direction</i>	<i>Orientation</i>		
	<i>Self</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Both</i>
Active	148.8	146.2	155.0
Passive	154.6	158.0	173.8
Both	148.3	182.0	152.2

and direction both passive and active) exhibited the highest forgiveness scores.

What is the form of forgiveness?

All definitions were coded for the expression of forgiveness into four categories: behaviors, emotions, cognitions, and attitudes. Out of the 270 definitions, 77 were coded as describing behaviors (28.5%), 95 as emotions (35.2%), 103 as cognitions (38.1%) and 19 as attitudes (7%). Predominant were descriptions of emotions and cognitions. Emotions were described as negative ones to be let go or reduced, such as “holding a grudge”, “hard feelings”, “being angry”, and “hateful feelings”, or positive ones to be offered, such as “trust”, “bringing the person back into your heart”, “loving them just as though it never happened”, and “compassion”. Contrasting those who combined emotion with reducing negative feelings ($n = 52$) with those who combined emotion with enhancing positive feelings ($n = 19$), there were accompanying differences in state forgiveness. Passive emotion or letting go of negative feelings was associated with more forgiveness ($159.02 > 139.21$) than defining emotion as offering positive feelings ($F(1,67) = 4.728, p < .03$).

Almost all cases describing forgiveness as behaviors were associated with active behaviors, such as “moving on”, “accepting an apology”, “giving them a second chance” and “reconciliation”. However, cognitions included both active or enhancing thoughts ($n = 39$) and passive or letting go ($n = 35$) thoughts. In this case, analysis of variance also found an effect on state forgiveness: passive cognitions, such as “letting the past go”, “forgetting”, and “looking past the thing that happened” were associated with more forgiveness ($169.7 > 147.2$) than active cognitions, such “accepting them even if it hurts”, “understanding a person’s wrongdoing” and “realizing that the offender is sorry” ($F(1,70) = 4.7, p < .03$). Thus, with regard to both emotions and cognitions, focusing on the release of negative responses was associated with more forgiveness than defining forgiveness in terms of offering positive thoughts and feelings.

What role do contextual factors play in forgiveness definitions?

Philosophical and theological writing about forgiveness generally define forgiveness as occurring in the context of a moral wrong. The word “wrong” was used by 22 (8%) participants in their definitions (for example, “person who wronged you”). Thus, this is a salient contextual factor, though by no means one used in the majority of cases. Interestingly, the word “mistake” was used in 18 definitions (7%), a context in which one might consider that forgiveness is not necessarily needed. One participant included both: “Realizing that you yourself make plenty of mistakes and sympathizing with the offender. Putting in your past the wrongs they have committed against you”. Either it is the case that people in general, and individuals themselves make mistakes, while offenders commit wrongs, or these students are not using the words to mean different levels of severity.

The other frequently mentioned contextual factor was remorse on the part of the offender. Nine definitions framed forgiveness as a response to an apology, such as “accepting an apology” and 13 more included realizing that the offender was “sorry”. Thus, for 22 individuals (8%) the context of offender remorse and apology entered into their definitions.

Finally, despite this being a fairly religiously affiliated sample, only seven definitions included any reference to religion or God, such as “that you accept the wrong someone has done to you and pray about it and move on” or “acknowledging a breach of trust and overlooking it because God said so”. Thus, forgiveness may be viewed as more of a general, interpersonal skill rather than a religious belief, despite its significance to virtually all-religious worldviews.

Forgetting and reconciling: attributes of forgiveness?

As noted above, researchers consistently agree that forgiveness excludes a number of concepts, particularly forgetting and reconciliation. We found these two ideas mentioned in many definitions. With regard to forgetting, it was coded as a specific cognitive form of passive letting go when the participant wrote that “forgiveness is forgetting” and as a specific cognitive form of active response (i.e., remembering) when the participant wrote that “forgiveness is *not* forgetting”. Forty-four participants (16%) included forgetting in their definitions; two-thirds of those ($n = 29$) specifically stated that “forgiving is forgetting” while the remaining one-third ($n = 15$) said that “forgiving does not mean forgetting”. Clearly these concepts are linked to forgiveness in the lay public.

Similarly with reconciliation, researchers specifically indicate that forgiveness need not involve any interaction with the offender. However, reconciliation was included in 12% ($n = 32$) of the participants’ definitions. Examples of definitions that incorporated reconciliation are “still being able to have a relationship with someone because you love them”, “reconciling with those you have offended your true feelings or personal beliefs”, and

“continuing a relationship with someone after they have hurt you”. As with forgetting, the lay public has a broader net of ideas within forgiveness than the research community.

Religious involvement, spiritual well-being and orientation of definitions

Analyses of variance was used to compare Orientation and Direction groups on frequency of religious involvement, religious and existential well-being. There were no significant Orientation or Direction group differences in any of these measures. Furthermore, there were no significant correlations between frequency of religious involvement, religious or existential well-being and state forgiveness.

Discussion

The first goal of this research was to develop a definition of forgiveness based on the underlying dimensions employed by lay individuals in their use of the term. Two primary dimensions were identified: Orientation, to self or other, and Direction of change, from letting go of negative to enhancement of positive responses. While definitions proposed by researchers, such as those at the beginning of this paper, often endorse one end of these poles as defining forgiveness, it is clear from the definitions written by participants that *both* poles of *both* dimensions are part of the everyday understanding of forgiveness. Thus, forgiveness has at least two dimensions, with two levels: it is both intrapersonal, focused on self, *and* interpersonal, focused on the other, and individuals can employ either level, or both, in their thinking about forgiveness. Similarly, forgiveness involves *both* the withdrawal or reduction of negative responses as well as the enhancement of positive ones, and individuals can employ either direction, or both. Within these two dimensions, forgiveness can be experienced as a behavior, from “moving on” to “reconciling”; as an emotion, whether negative, such as “letting go of hard feelings” or positive, such as “regaining the trust”; and as a thought, whether specific to the event and offender, such as “forgetting what happened” or “letting the event be in the past”, or a general attitude, such as “understanding that no one is perfect”.

This three dimensional model (orientation by direction by response type) is useful for thinking about forgiveness. Rather than trying to define forgiveness as one orientation, such as “intrapersonal”, or direction, such as “letting go of negative thoughts and feelings”, it is clear that forgiveness has multiple dimensions and includes both poles of orientation and direction, as well as at least four ways of responding. Thus, there may be many pathways into the experience of forgiveness; where one path seems impossible for a person, this multiple pathway approach suggests a variety of alternative forgiveness routes. Where one pathway has been taken, but a residual of judgment and

grudge-holding remains, alternative and supplementary pathways can be proposed. In addition, there is no one “right way” to express forgiveness; for some, it is related to emotional feeling, while for others, it is expressed in thoughts or behaviors. With the exception of general attitude, the proportion of people choosing behavior, emotion or cognitive forms was approximately equal, nor were there gender differences.

Contextual factors have played a significant role in the philosophical and theological writing about forgiveness, with an emphasis on forgiveness in the context of a moral wrong and on the role of offender remorse. While lay participants often defined forgiveness in a context-free way, the most common context mentioned was the wrongdoing of the offender. However, in contrast to serious writing, they seemed to make little distinction between a moral wrong and a mistake, assuming that forgiveness applies equally well to the latter as to the former. The idea of reserving forgiveness for situations in which there are no excuses, no sense that anyone might have behaved as the offender did, may be a useful distinction to present to clients. Forgiveness may be viewed as deceptively easy when applied primarily to “mistakes”.

What was evident was that event-related contextual factors did not play a role in the forgiveness definitions. Neither event severity nor relationship closeness related to the choice of forgiveness as directed to self vs. other, or conceived of as reducing negative responses vs. enhancing positive ones. Furthermore, the tradition of defining forgiveness by exclusion, so common in research papers, was not followed by these lay participants. Forgiveness was often defined as including forgetting, reconciliation, and empathy, which was sometimes extended to the point of excusing the person’s behavior. Using the multidimensional model proposed here, there is no *a priori* reason to exclude either forgetting or reconciliation. Forgetting is one example of a passive, letting go of negative thoughts and reconciliation is one example of an active, other-oriented, behavior. Both are possible facets of the forgiveness experience, without either being necessarily included or necessarily excluded. In fact, Jankelevitch (1967/2005) notes that the power of forgiveness is derived from its relation to forgetting. As he stated, “Forgiveness becomes an issue precisely because we cannot go back and undo what has been done....Forgiveness cannot literally undo the past misdeed, but it can make it *as if the misdeed never had occurred*. (italics mine, p. xx)” It is in this vein that laypersons describe forgetting as a part of forgiveness.

One of the most interesting findings was the discovery that how individuals employ these dimensions to define forgiveness may be related to state forgiveness, or degree of forgiveness in a particular context. First of all, men had greater forgiveness scores than women and men more frequently defined forgiveness as a passive letting go response, while women more frequently defined forgiveness as an active response. Furthermore, across all participants, passive emotional definitions were associated with greater forgiveness than active emotional definitions. Similarly, passive cognitive definitions were

associated with more forgiveness than active cognitive definitions. Thus, at least within the forms of emotional and cognitive responses, defining forgiveness in terms of passive letting go was associated with greater forgiveness.

Denton and Martin (1998) also found a gender difference in their assessment of clinicians; in that case, male clinicians were more favorable to a provided definition of forgiveness and to its benefits than female clinicians. In the majority of forgiveness interventions, the first step involves acknowledging the hurt and its attendant negative emotions. To the extent that men are more comfortable acknowledging feelings of anger toward an offender, they may more readily complete the release of such feelings. For women, behaving in an active positive fashion *while feelings of anger lie unresolved* may lead to unconscious conflicts, in which case forgiveness may be less beneficial.

We also found an interaction between the two dimensions of forgiveness: orientation and direction. For both men and women, having an orientation toward the other, rather than the self, combined with a more complex definition, consisting of both passive and active components, was associated with higher state forgiveness. While these associations would need to be replicated, it seems likely that how an individual thinks about forgiveness would be related to how much forgiveness they are aware of granting. Men seem to grant more forgiveness than women, and passive letting go approaches seem to lead to greater forgiveness than efforts to behave in an actively forgiving manner. While orientation alone had no effect on forgiveness, thinking about forgiveness both as focused on the offender and including both active and passive components yielded the highest levels of forgiveness.

In summary, forgiveness is experienced in the lay public in a manner that corresponds more to religious and philosophical than to psychological approaches. At least half of the participants defined forgiveness as an interpersonal phenomenon and did not limit it to the self. In addition, almost 60% included active positive responses as defining forgiveness, and that inclusion did not depend on either a close relationship with the offender or a less serious offense. Finally, behaviors, emotions and cognitions were all included as modes of expressing forgiveness. The focus in the literature on the passive release of emotions is not characteristic of the majority of lay definitions. Moreover, contextual factors were mentioned, but rather than severity or time since offense, most individuals raised the issues of a moral wrong and offender remorse. Finally, while religious factors may emphasize the importance of forgiveness, they were related neither to the dimensions employed in defining forgiveness nor to the degree of forgiveness offered. Future longitudinal research may illuminate whether these categories are uniquely related to forgiveness or whether, for example, it is important to first experience a letting go of negative responses and only after that may employing active responses lead to even greater forgiveness.

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