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The Experience of Forgiveness in Adults with Different Sacred Belief Systems

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Abstract

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Christy Heacock

MEd, South Dakota State University, 1999

BS, University of South Dakota, 1978

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Forgiveness is the act of moving beyond shame, guilt, anger, or blame, and it has been linked to psychological well-being, prosocial behavior, and religion/spirituality (R/S). However, the research on why and how people forgive is inconsistent, as the concepts involved are complex and difficult to define and operationalize. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to provide a better understanding of why and how people are cognitively and emotionally able to forgive and the role of R/S in that process. Goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories were used as frameworks for understanding the forgiveness experience. First-person, semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 persons from 10 different sacred belief systems who had experienced forgiveness of a major transgression. Data were analyzed using the IPA process, and five themes emerged: what is forgiveness?; why forgive?; how to forgive; the relationship between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others; and developing a forgiveness disposition. All participants described forgiveness as an effortful, transformative process. Their motivation to forgive was based on a learning goal orientation and benefits to personal well-being and relationships. Participants forgave through making supportive R/S and/or social connections, finding the courage to confront transgressions, and resolving issues with compassion and creativity. A model of forgiveness was proposed that researchers can apply to future research efforts, and that mental health providers, clergy, and other helping professionals can use with clients in therapeutic applications of healing from major transgressions.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore forgiveness as experienced by people from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. Forgiveness is advocated by the world's major religions (Davis, Hook, VanTongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Smith, 1991) and has been empirically linked to psychological well-being and prosocial behavior (Johnstone et al., 2012; Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012; Korner et al., 2015; Scull, 2015; Sternthal, Williams, Music, & Buck, 2010; Touissant, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001). Social scientists have joined theologians and philosophers in the past several decades in the study of the forgiveness process (Watts, Dutton, & Gulliford, 2006). Religion and spirituality (R/S) have been empirically linked to forgiveness, but inconsistently, because of differences in definitions of terms and lack of clarity in specifying and operationalizing components of the two concepts (Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008).

In this study, I clarified the role of a sacred belief system in the forgiveness process. The results of this study will be used to educate mental health providers and leaders who use the forgiveness process to enhance psychological well-being and relationships. The results will also be of value to individuals who are seeking information regarding the process of forgiveness and the meaning it may have for their lives. These applications will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

This chapter provides background information on the study of forgiveness, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and research questions. The nature of the

study, delimitations, limitations, and theoretical frameworks are discussed. Terminology is defined and the significance of the research is explained.

Background of the Study

There is a gap in the literature pertaining to rich, contextual knowledge of why and how people are able to forgive. There is a need for more studies that include participants from heterogeneous religious traditions. More in-depth data on the meaning of forgiveness, especially as it applies to people from diverse cultures and religious traditions, will help in better understanding the motivation and ability to forgive. Misunderstandings can occur if people believe that forgiveness is excusing, pardoning, or condoning a hurtful behavior (Goman & Kelley, 2016; Kleinman, 2006; Umbreit & Blevins, 2015). Forgiveness does not mean ignoring an injustice, dysfunctional relationship, or personal weakness that should be confronted for long-term well-being (DeVries & Schott, 2015; Kleinman, 2006; Riek & Mania, 2012; VonDrehle, Newton-Small, & Rhodan, 2015).

Forgiveness is often viewed as a coping strategy and has been described as letting go, healing, transformation, freedom, and liberation. These words convey a release from the pain of shame, anger, and victimhood, and a lessening of harmful, negative emotions and actions (Davis et al., 2012; Goman & Kelley, 2016; Johnstone et al., 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Forgiveness is also viewed as a process that facilitates social harmony and enhances relationships. Individualistic cultures may focus more on intrapersonal benefits such as peace of mind and personal growth, while collectivist cultures may emphasize group responsibilities and interpersonal benefits

(Hook, Worthington, Utsey, Davis, & Burnette, 2012; Mutsumoto, 2001; Myers, 2007; Narula, 2015; Sandage & Wiens, 2001). Forgiveness can involve forgiving oneself, others, or a situation such as a natural disaster or illness (Sapmaz, Yildirim, Topcuoglu, Nalbant, & Sizir, 2015; Thompson et al., 2005; Toussaint et al., 2001).

Many scholars see forgiveness of a significant hurt as an effortful process that takes time and occurs in stages (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015a; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Menahem & Love, 2013; Milhalache, 2012; Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015). Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) described four main stages of forgiveness: (a) uncovering the hurt, (b) developing an accurate understanding of forgiveness and making a decision as to whether it is a worthwhile goal, (c) understanding and accepting the painful event, and (d) realizing all persons need to accept and receive forgiveness. The time taken to forgive varies with the individual.

Various factors affect the ability to forgive. Researchers have demonstrated reliable, consistent associations of forgiveness with empathy, meaning the ability to understand what others are experiencing from their point of view (Davis et al., 2012; Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008; Kidwell et al., 2012; Menahem & Love, 2013; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Riek & Mania, 2012). Humility, meaning openness to accepting and recognizing a person's own weaknesses and strengths, has also been linked to forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c; Exline et al., 2008; Lavelock et al., 2014; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Sandage & Wiens, 2001). Humility may prevent persons from viewing transgressors as morally inferior and allow for more empathy and

compassion toward an offender. It may also allow for greater acceptance of human failings.

Age has been associated with forgiveness, possibly because of increases in individuals' ability to empathize and better understand the perspectives of others (Milhalache, 2012; Riek & Mania, 2010; Touissant et al., 2001). Situational factors such as the degree of hurt, the perceived ability to cope with the hurt, and the closeness of the relationship have been related to forgiveness (Davis et al., 2012; Emmons, 2000; Exline et al., 2008; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Schultz, Tallman, & Altmaier, 2010; Watts et al., 2006). It may be easier to forgive minor offenses, especially if individuals believe they are able to cope with them. There may be more motivation to forgive someone in a close relationship to facilitate social harmony and belonging.

What is missing from the literature is a deeper, more complex understanding of the forgiveness experience as it occurs across sacred beliefs. This study adds a rich, in-depth, contextual understanding of the forgiveness process to the literature. It contributes to a better understanding of the forgiveness process and the role of sacred beliefs in that process, and can be of benefit to individuals, mental health providers, and leaders working with persons from diverse religious backgrounds.

Problem Statement

Scholars are unclear as to what inspires people to forgive, how they are able to forgive, and the role that religion and spirituality play in the process (Davis et al., 2012; Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Scull, 2015; Seedall, Butler, & Elledge, 2014). Cross-sectional quantitative studies have not captured the

developmental, multifaceted nature of forgiveness (Mihalache, 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012). More in-depth, contextual data are needed to clarify and understand the dynamics of forgiveness, especially as it applies to diverse cultures and religious traditions (Carr & Wang, 2012; Davis et al., 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to explore why and how people with diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds experience forgiveness. The intent of the study was to describe the forgiveness process and identify common elements of forgiveness that transcend any particular religious tradition. In addition, the theoretical foundations of goal orientation and cognitive restructuring were used to better comprehend the motivation and ability to forgive. The relationship between self and other forgiveness was explored to increase depth of understanding regarding the experience of forgiveness across diverse sacred belief systems.

Research Questions

The primary research question I addressed was the following: How is forgiveness experienced in adults with different sacred beliefs? The following subquestions were examined:

- What are the common experiences (contextual and developmental) that give purpose and meaning to forgiveness?
- What common set of beliefs give purpose and meaning to forgiveness?
- How does goal orientation affect the experience of forgiveness?
- What is the role of cognitive restructuring in the process of forgiveness?

Theoretical Frameworks

Goal orientation theory was used as a theoretical framework in understanding why people forgive. Cognitive restructuring theory was used to explain how people are able to forgive. According to goal orientation theory, goals fall into two general categories: learning/mastery and performance (Rusk, Tamir, & Rothbaum, 2011). Learning/mastery goals are inspired by a desire to achieve personal growth. They are based on the belief that people are capable of change and development (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Persons with learning goals and a belief in the capacity for change may, therefore, be motivated to engage in an effortful process such as forgiveness that requires analyzing and restructuring cognitions of self and others.

Performance goals are focused on external factors, such as pleasing others or avoiding punishment (Rusk et al., 2011). Performance goals have been linked to a fixed mindset in which human capabilities are static (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Persons with performance goals see others and self as either good or bad and without growth possibilities; therefore, they may be unmotivated to engage in the forgiveness process. They may be unwilling to put forth the energy necessary to understand a transgressor and struggle with alternative ways of appraising a hurtful event and regulating negative emotions.

Cognitive restructuring theory is based on the idea that detrimental thoughts can be interpreted in a new light and the restructuring of cognitions can alter emotions and behaviors (Ellis, 1998; Myers, 2007). Ellis (1998) noted that human beings tend to overgeneralize and evaluate themselves, others, and situations globally. When self or

others behave offensively, they are then judged as totally bad, and a hurtful situation is viewed only through a negative lens. Cognitive restructuring is a process in which persons examine expectations and desires as to the way life and people should be. They strive to accept human fallibility and tolerate actions and events that disrupt rigid personal perceptions of right and wrong, which allows for a positive restructuring of cognitions.

Religious and spiritual beliefs and goals can provide individuals with a framework for meaning that motivates them to forgive and cognitively restructure painful events (Johnstone et al., 2012; Maynard, 2013; Schultz et al., 2010). This study provided a clear, rich understanding of religious and spiritual beliefs and connections that motivate and sustain persons in the forgiveness process.

Nature of the Study

Forgiveness is something that is experienced. It cannot be easily measured quantitatively because the meaning of forgiveness can vary (Goman & Kelley, 2016). Religion and spirituality are also complex concepts with individualized meanings and are consequently difficult to assess quantitatively (Day, 2010; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Ji et al., 2016; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Measures such as the Heartland Forgiveness Scale can quantify the results of the forgiveness process using Likert scales (Thompson et al., 2005), and quantitative studies can link variables related to or predictive of forgiveness. However, the understanding of how persons seek to forgive others or themselves requires a qualitative approach that provides rich, thick descriptions about meaning, motivation,

and beliefs (Johnstone et al., 2012; Scull, 2015; Seedall et al., 2014; Sternthal et al., 2012).

IPA, which examines the meaning individuals make of their life experiences, was chosen as the approach for this study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA is based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, and it was chosen because it includes both interpretation and description of phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Snowball sampling was used in seeking a heterogeneous sample of persons with different sacred beliefs who had experienced forgiveness. Semistructured, first-person interviews with persons of different sacred belief systems were conducted and examined with a focus on both the personal and social domains (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Definition of Terms

Adult: Person 21 years or older.

Attachment: Persons' ability to develop trust in their relationships and a sense of connection with others (Myers, 2007).

Empathy: Capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from their perspective or frame of reference (Exline et al., 2008).

Forgiveness: The ability to cognitively reconstruct a perceived transgression so that responses are transformed from negative to neutral or positive (Thompson et al., 2005), but does not mean pardoning, excusing, or condoning, which could lead to negative consequences such as exploitation, avoidance, and unhealthy power differentials (Bast & Barnes-Homes, 2014; Menahem & Love, 2013).

Humility: Willingness to accept and an ability to clearly perceive one's strengths and weaknesses (Emmons, 2000; Lavelock et al., 2014).

Religious: Organizational and institutional beliefs and practices that are considered sacred (Day, 2010; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

Sacred belief: A belief that is considered holy, virtuous, and worthy of reverence; set apart from that which is ordinary (Hyman & Handal, 2006).

Spiritual: Personal, sacred quest for meaning and attachment to God or a higher power (Day, 2010; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

Transgression: An action that goes against expectations and assumptions (Thompson et al., 2005).

Assumptions

Forgiveness was assumed to be a process that can enhance relationships and improve psychological well-being. It was expected that sacred beliefs play a role in forgiveness. The information gained from this study was presumed to be useful to persons seeking to forgive and to mental health professionals who are helping persons with forgiveness. Researchers have validated the benefits of forgiveness and the usefulness of information that leads to a clearer understanding of the forgiveness process. More information was needed to understand the role of various sacred beliefs in the forgiveness process, as health professionals in the United States work with people from numerous cultures and religions.

In this study, I assumed that participants would share their experiences honestly and that insights would be gained from their interviews. I assumed that I would be able to

bracket personal biases and suspend preconceived ideas. I also anticipated that a high-quality sample of persons from heterogeneous faith backgrounds would participate in the study and provide rich, thick data; in addition, I assumed that those interviews would be sufficient to reach a point of saturation. In order to address those assumptions, steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data with a focus on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Scope and Delimitations

This study was limited to a purposeful sample of adults who spoke English and to which I had interview access. I only speak English fluently. The focus of this research was on how people with different sacred beliefs define forgiveness, why they make the choice to forgive, and how they experience the process of forgiveness. Given the focus of the research and time constraints, the participants in the study were limited to persons who had experienced forgiveness and did not include persons who did not believe forgiveness was beneficial or who had trouble forgiving. Participation was limited to adults 21 years and older because younger-aged participants might exhibit developmental issues that would be beyond the scope of this study. The study required the collection of thick, rich data and so participation was limited to adults who were willing and able to share their major forgiveness experience and be audiotaped during face-to-face or telephone interviews.

Limitations

Time constraints and being a sole researcher limited the number of participants who could be interviewed as IPA requires detailed, interpretative analysis of data. My

sample was small, purposeful, and used a snowball method of recruitment. Saturation appeared to be reached, but it is possible that a larger sample would have produced more divergent data. It cannot be known how transferable study results are to the readers' experience or to other individuals. However, to increase transferability, I have provided contextual information to enhance comparability and detailed description to facilitate understanding of developmental and situational factors.

Time limited the ability of participants to share all their experiences with forgiveness. In addition, forgiveness is a process that occurs over time and may fluctuate as situations change.

There are limits to my knowledge of different cultures and sacred traditions, so when participants described concepts or persons with whom I was unfamiliar, I did further research. I naturally have biases based on my own experiences and cultural background so I took steps to bracket my own personal perceptions and remained open to new insights that participants provided. I sought content and methodology experts to review my research and interview questions. In order to authenticate my findings, I involved participants in member checking my findings and interpretations of data. This is described in more detail in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to knowledge concerning the motivation and ability to forgive plus the role of sacred belief systems in the experience. Forgiveness issues touch everyone, as the experience of being hurt and causing hurt is universal. The inability to forgive others or a situation can result in anger and resentment, and unforgiveness of self

can cause debilitating guilt and shame (Bash, 2015). Regulating the negative emotions and behaviors that can result from hurt and regret can provide a release from unnecessary stress and pain and contribute to personal growth and productive problem solving (Mihalache, 2012; Rusk et al., 2011). It can also increase prosocial behaviors and enhance relationships (Johnstone et al., 2012; Kidwell et al., 2012; Korner et al., 2015; Scull, 2015; Sternthal et al., 2010; Touissant et al., 2001).

This study contributes to positive social change by identifying, describing, and explaining the elements of forgiveness that transcend religious and spiritual beliefs. Findings will be distributed to individuals as well as mental health professionals and leaders who are guiding a diversity of people in the forgiveness process.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced an IPA study exploring why and how people with diverse sacred beliefs are able to forgive. Goal orientation theory and cognitive restructuring theory were used as theoretical frameworks. Snowball sampling was chosen to recruit a heterogeneous sample of adults with diverse sacred beliefs who had experience with forgiveness. Data were analyzed for consistent forgiveness themes and patterns that contribute to an enhanced understanding of the process.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature, and in Chapter 3, I explain the design and methodology of the research. In Chapter 4, I report the data, and in Chapter 5, I explain interpretations, implications, and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Forgiveness is the act of moving beyond guilt or blame, and it is advocated by the world's major religions (Smith, 1991). Forgiveness has been empirically linked to psychological well-being and prosocial behavior (Johnstone et al., 2012; Kidwell et al., 2012; Korner et al., 2015; Scull, 2015; Sternthal et al., 2010; Touissant et al., 2001). During the past several decades, the quest to understand forgiveness and its benefits has inspired social scientists to join theologians and philosophers in the study of the forgiveness process (Watts et al., 2006). Forgiveness involves the ability to cognitively reconstruct a perceived transgression so that responses are transformed from negative to neutral or positive (Thompson et al., 2005), but does not mean pardoning, excusing, or condoning, which could lead to negative consequences such as exploitation, avoidance, and unhealthy power differentials (Bast & Barnes-Homes, 2014; Menahem & Love, 2013). Individuals may struggle with forgiveness of an offender, forgiveness of self, and/or forgiveness of a situation out of an individual's control, such as a natural disaster or disease (Thompson et al., 2005).

R/S have been linked to forgiveness and mental health, but the findings have been mixed; primarily, because of differences in the definitions of terms and lack of clarity in specifying and operationalizing components of R/S (Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008). Certain components of R/S may be more predictive of psychological well-being because of their ability to help persons cope during times of stress. Forgiveness was the only component of the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (BMMRS) scale that predicted good mental health after personality characteristics were

considered in Johnstone et al.'s (2012) correlational study of 160 individuals from diverse religious traditions.

Although links have been found between mental health, R/S, and forgiveness, the relationships are not clearly understood, especially as they apply to different sacred belief systems (Johnstone et al., 2012; Maynard, 2013; Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Schultz et al., 2010; Sternthal et al., 2010). More in-depth, contextual data are needed to clarify and understand the dynamics of forgiveness as it is experienced by diverse cultures and religious traditions (Carr & Wang, 2012; Davis et al., 2012). The literature is still unclear as to (a) what inspires people to forgive and (b) what enables them to forgive in a way that leads to better health and enhanced relationships (Davis et al., 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and better understand commonalities in why and how people from diverse sacred belief systems forgive. Shared elements of the forgiveness process that transcend any particular religious tradition were identified, with a focus on goal orientation and cognitive restructuring strategies.

This chapter will provide an overview of the major world religions' and wisdom traditions' sacred texts and beliefs regarding forgiveness and a brief history of the more recent study of forgiveness that links theology with psychology and the social sciences. Definitions of forgiveness will be explored and evaluated, as an individual's or group's definition of the concept affects the cognitive appraisal of a hurtful situation and the motivation to forgive. A synthesis of major quantitative and qualitative studies related to self, other, and situation forgiveness will summarize dispositional, developmental, and

social-cognitive factors influencing the forgiveness process. An explanation of goal orientation theory and cognitive restructuring theory will identify their role in the forgiveness process. The relationship between those theories and sacred belief systems and values will be explored with an emphasis on understanding why and how people experience forgiveness.

Literature Search Strategy

Quantitative and qualitative research studies were used in this academic literature search as were books written by persons with doctoral and/or medical degrees. PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, PsychTESTS, SAGE Premier, SocIndex, and ProQuest Central were the main search engines used when searching for information containing the key terms of *forgiveness* coupled with *spirituality and religion*. Other key search terms used in conjunction with forgiveness were *humility, empathy, guilt, shame, attachment, justice,* and *conflict resolution*. Studies that involved different cultures and religions were a focus, with an emphasis on differences between collectivist and individualist cultural concepts of forgiveness, as well as spiritual beliefs and perceptions of the sacred that contribute to forgiveness.

The search process used was iterative. Researchers indicated the multidimensional nature of forgiveness as it applies to others, self, and situations. Humility, empathy, justice, and attachment were identified as areas related to forgiveness and were then added and paired with forgiveness in the search process. Google Scholar weekly provided a list of recently published articles and books related to forgiveness for review. Quantitative studies were used to identify key factors, but they also indicated the need for

qualitative studies that could add context and a more holistic understanding of forgiveness.

History of Forgiveness

Theological and Philosophical Background

Misunderstandings, mistakes, and hurtful actions have occurred in the lives of all human beings throughout time and place. Therefore, the construct of forgiveness has been observed as central to human survival from both theological and adaptive perspectives (Bash, 2015). The willingness to forgive affects the quality of personal, family, and community relationships (Paz, Neto, & Mullet, 2007). Individuals and groups need a way to deal with hurtful situations and escape the damaging decision making that can result from anger and shame (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015a; Kleinman, 2006).

Theologians from the world's faith traditions have grappled with the issue of forgiveness, struggled with its meaning and consequences, advocated its importance, and extolled it as a virtue (Davis et al., 2012; Freke, 1998; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Smith, 1991). Literature from Hebrew, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist perspectives contains themes of forgiveness in a moral context (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015a). Throughout human existence the need to control anger, limit vengeance, and regulate negative emotions has been important in creating a stable society.

The ancient Greeks debated the meaning of forgiveness and included scenes involving it in their classic literature. In Homer's *The Iliad* (8th century BCE), characters who had sought revenge and hurt each other were able to recognize their common humanity and similarities and reach what the Greeks referred to as *syngnome*, which

means an understanding (Adamos & Griffin, 2013). Euripides' *Hippolytus* (5th century BCE) portrayed two characters that were able to forgive each other based on a realization of their common humanity and mortal nature (Adamos & Griffin, 2013). Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (4th century BCE) focused on the virtues of justice, truth, and generosity, but Aristotle also noted the need for syngnome, as human nature was described as often ignorant of wrongdoing or affected by extremely stressful conditions (Adamos & Griffin, 2013). Understanding the viewpoint of others and finding common ground have been important dimensions of the forgiveness experience.

Communities benefit from forgiveness, but the importance of forgiveness to an individual's peace of mind and spiritual growth was also recognized in the world's wisdom traditions. Scriptures from the major religions have stated personal transformation is only possible when evil is met with goodness (Freke, 1998). Anger and retaliation are viewed as imprisoning an individual in self, whereas forgiveness recognizes the essential unity of humankind in the oneness of God or what is deemed sacred (Freke, 1998).

Christianity, currently the world's most populous religion, bases its beliefs on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who is said to be the son of God (Smith, 1991). The Bible is Christianity's sacred text, and it contains a special prayer in which Jesus advises persons to ask God for daily bread and also to forgive their trespasses or debts, as they are to forgive others (Smith, 1991). It is believed that Jesus died for the sins of humankind and that at his crucifixion he asked God the father to forgive his crucifiers because they did not understand what they were doing (Thompson, 2014). In the Bible's

book of Matthew, Jesus is said to have advised a disciple that forgiving seven times would not be adequate and to instead forgive "seventy times seven" (Thompson, 2014). The book of Matthew also states Jesus taught followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them (Thompson, 2014).

Although Christian theologians agree that Jesus asked persons to forgive, there are different opinions on the meaning of that forgiveness. The Bible includes writings on forgiveness that emphasize different aspects of the process, which creates a mixture of interpretations (Bash, 2015; Thompson, 2014). For example, theologians debate the relationship between divine and interpersonal forgiveness and whether forgiveness should be given as a gift or only given after atonement (Bash, 2015).

Islam's holy book, The Qur'an (4. 35) states "Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then someone with whom you were divided by enmity will become like a bosom friend" (as cited in Freke, 1998, p. 79). In the Qur'an, Allah is described as forgiving and merciful, and a Muslim believer is to follow Allah's example (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015b). In Islam, people need to be forgiven because of their own spiritual ignorance, and others need to also be forgiven because of their unawareness (Johnstone et al., 2012). Forgiveness can be requested from both God and from those who have been wronged (Johnstone et al., 2012). In Islam, as in other religions, interpretation of Holy Scripture and areas of emphasis differ according to the believer. For example, Scull (2015) found that devotion to Islam did not in and of itself predict forgiveness, but a belief in the importance of forgiveness to the Islamic faith did.

The Jewish Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9.4, speaks to the unity and oneness of all people and describes vengeance as a person "who, having cut one hand while handling a knife, avenges himself by stabbing the other hand" (as cited in Freke, 1998, p. 79). Believing in the oneness of all people with God makes vengeance ludicrous and forgiveness expected (Freke, 1998). Yon Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, is a holy day in the Jewish faith tradition, and obtaining the forgiveness of someone wronged is related to God's forgiveness (Johnstone et al., 2012). Judaism has rules for a perpetrator to follow in earning forgiveness. If a transgressor feels remorse, admits guilt, apologizes, and provides compensation, victims are encouraged to forgive, with final cleansing a decision to be made by God (Hunter, 2007). Beliefs about forgiveness vary; for example, some rabbis believe murder can never be forgiven because only the person who was killed can do the forgiving whereas others disagree (VonDrehle et al., 2015).

Eastern religions similarly guide people to forgiveness. Hinduism, the world's oldest organized, written religion, discusses forgiveness (ksama) in the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu universal scripture (Hopfe & Woodward, 2001; Hunter, 2007). Forgiveness is referred to as a divine quality to which spiritually-minded persons should aspire. Hindu Vedic hymns included the message that there is atonement for sin against God, others, and self. The philosophy of Hinduism recognizes all living beings as essentially one and the same, and one with God, which leads to the conclusion that there is no "other" at which to direct anger (Hunter, 2007; Smith, 1991). The complexity of the concept was also recognized by Hindu philosophers who, like religious leaders from other traditions, debated the meaning and benefits of forgiveness (Hunter, 2007).

Hinduism urges persons to remain calm and detached when confronting hurtful events, but also not to repress anger and feelings of revenge because they will lurk in the subconscious and erupt at some future point (Hunter, 2007). Therefore, active, willing participation in the forgiveness process and mental purification is necessary with a commitment to analyzing and coming to terms with the past (Hunter, 2007). Mindfulness of a person's own shortcomings and failures aids people in the process of forgiving others, as the Hindu scripture, Ramayana, Yuddha Kanda 115 stated, "A noble soul will ever exercise compassion even toward those who enjoy injuring others or those of cruel deeds when they are actually committing them – for who is without fault?" (as cited in Freke, 1998, p. 78). Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, stated his tolerance of those who oppressed him stemmed from awareness of his own failings (Freke, 1998).

A belief in reincarnation leads those of historically Eastern faiths (ie., Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism) to conclude that even the worst sins can be forgiven through suffering, experience with life, and multiple reincarnations (VonDrehle et al., 2015). An acceptance of karma, the belief that a person's actions in past life determine reincarnations and events in the present, can facilitate forgiveness of others. Karma implies that problems in life are created because of an individual's own previous behavior. There is no need to seek revenge because retribution will come through reincarnation (Hunter, 2007).

Buddhism began as a reform movement that separated from Hinduism in the 6th century BCE and was later subsumed by it. Missionaries spread Buddhism from greater India to China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia (Hopfe & Woodward, 2001). Buddhist

tradition has stated two different virtues compose the concept of forgiveness: forbearance and compassion. Compassion involves empathizing with an offender and forbearance includes having the strength to be compassionate and renounce anger and resentment (Paz et al., 2007). Loving kindness is another Buddhist term that encompasses forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015b).

Buddhism has gained popularity in the United States and is acquiring its own characteristics there with an emphasis on meditation and social and ecological responsibility (Hopfe & Woodward, 2001).The Dalai Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist who has been honored with the Nobel Prize, referred to the importance of forgiveness when receiving the award and has written a book on the topic (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015b). Buddhist philosophy has laid a foundation for forgiveness counseling in certain practices because of its inclusion of the components of compassion, common humanity, acceptance, and nonjudgment, all of which can aid in the forgiveness process (Korner et al., 2015; Menahem & Love, 2013).

In China, persons have historically practiced a combination of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Ji et al., 2016; Smith, 1991). All three advocate forgiveness as a way to keep harmonious relationships and achieve peace of mind (Ji et al., 2016; Smith, 1991). The concept of forgiveness is related to the Confucian values of balance and harmony as well as Taoist and Buddhist values of mercy and benevolence (Ji et al., 2016). Theological recognition of forgiveness as a part of spiritual development leading to wisdom is reflected in historic Chinese Taoist practices and scripture such as the Tao Te Ching 79, which states “The Wise act well without demanding others do. Someone

who ignores Natural Goodness is always concerned that they are properly honored. Someone who knows Natural Goodness honors their side of the relationship, regardless." (as cited in Freke, 1998, p. 79).

Religious and philosophical doctrines have historically provided motivation to forgive because of the concept's importance in maintaining harmony, creating a stable society, regulating emotions, and enhancing peace of mind. Although the major religions encourage forgiveness, they also grapple with the complexity of the concept and individual definitions vary within sacred belief systems.

Merging of Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology

Early civilizations and scholars such as Plato did not draw lines between the studies of theology, philosophy, and psychological thought (Sotillos, 2013). However, the rise of the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire (962-1806) in the West produced theological doctrine with a political purpose that stifled free thought and critical inquiry. Separation from the influence of religious doctrine used to maintain power over thought was a liberating experience that led to advances in knowledge and the spread of information during the West's Renaissance period spanning the 14th to 17th centuries (Cortright, 1997). Western civilization's 18th century Enlightenment period produced enthusiasm for the scientific method and a belief that systematic reason alone would provide the path to a better society (Ramirez, Stearns, & Wineburg, 2008).

Psychology emerged as a science in 1879 when Wundt established a lab to study human thought and behavior through observation and analysis (Myers, 2007). During this modernist phase, which lasted until approximately 1970, science became the accepted

path to the truth, and religious doctrines were increasingly questioned and eschewed (Patton, 2002). The human psyche became disassociated from the spiritual domain, and psychology became a substitute for spiritual traditions (Sotillos, 2013).

The modernist era of psychology embraced the theoretical perspective of positivism, that contended objective facts and causes of social phenomena were the basis of good research (Patton, 2002). Positivists such as Comte and Durkheim asserted that knowledge needed to be based on verifiable claims and experience (Patton, 2002). Theology, which included myths and articles of faith, did not meet that criteria and was, therefore, differentiated from psychology.

Challenges to positivism began in the 1960s when social scientists experienced the need for qualitative data that could provide deeper, richer descriptions of research topics and fuller, more holistic understandings. Phenomenology gained respect as a theoretical perspective emphasizing an understanding of individuals' subjective experiences with the world and their personal perceptions of reality (Patton, 2002). This allowed the entrance of religion and spirituality into psychology based on the condition that research including those factors was methodologically rigorous and procedurally formal (Patton, 2002).

As phenomenology and qualitative research gained credibility, social scientists became more willing to study the insights provided by the world's great spiritual traditions. Spiritual seeking was recognized as an element of human motivation, wholeness, and awareness (Cortright, 1997). Perennial philosophers studied the common core of the world's religions and wisdom traditions and started erasing the lines drawn

between philosophy, psychology, and theology (Wilber, 2000). They explored what is called *The Great Nest of Being*, which included body, mind, and spirit (Wilber, 2000) and their influence inspired contemporary psychologists to better understand how mind, body, and spirit are integrated (Grof, 2000). Transpersonal psychology became a force that combined the wisdom of the world's religions with the learnings of psychology and brought attention to spiritual perspectives that had been neglected because they did not meet positivist criteria (Cortright, 1997).

The topic of forgiveness has been studied by theologians and philosophers throughout time and place, but the concept's identity as a religious and spiritual term kept social scientists from studying it empirically until the past several decades (Paz et al., 2007; Seedall et al., 2014; Toussaint et al., 2011). Recognition of the mental and physical health benefits of forgiveness along with a greater acceptance of holistic models of human behavior that include spirituality have contributed to increased interest by social scientists (Day, 2010; Grof, 2000). Forgiveness is being studied as a complex process that can increase psychological well-being and enhance relationships. Religion and spirituality are also being recognized as complex concepts that can play a part in forgiveness. Researchers are moving from simplistic studies of whether or not religion can be a positive factor in human behavior to exploring the impact of various aspects of R/S on forgiveness and other topics (Davis et al., 2012; Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Seedall et al., 2014; Watts et al., 2006).

Introducing an R/S component into the forgiveness process has become more acceptable to psychologists and therapists. Sixty-nine percent of respondents in a survey

conducted by McLaughlin (2004) felt that spiritual beliefs should be discussed during therapy. The Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life (2014) found that 89% of Americans reported they believed in the existence of God or a universal spirit. Religion was very important in the lives of 53% of the 35,000 respondents' lives and somewhat important to 24% of the participants.

Most people describe themselves as religious and spiritual, and do not distinguish their spiritual development from their religious affiliation (Day, 2010). For some people who disapprove of religious institutions, spiritual is an explicitly anti-religious term (Day, 2010; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). A currently popular workshop on forgiveness called "A Course in Miracles" has a spiritual component but recognizes persons may have negative preconceptions about certain religious terms. Therefore participants are urged to change terminology like Holy Spirit or God to words they are more comfortable with if needed (Krajca, 2015).

Psychologists are undertaking innovative work in the area of forgiveness and surpassing theologians in research and discussion regarding interpersonal forgiveness (Bash, 2015). Forgiveness is now being looked at more holistically as a process that encompasses cognitive, affective, behavioral, and spiritual components (Ilbay & Saricam, 2015; Mihalache, 2012). Discussions are moving away from whether or not R/S can be beneficial to the forgiveness process to a better understanding of which aspects of R/S support persons seeking to give or receive forgiveness (Davis et al., 2012).

Defining Forgiveness

Forgiveness is viewed as a virtue in the major religions and psychologists recognize its power to reduce stress and enhance relationships (Davis et al., 2012; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012). Interpretations vary but forgiveness definitions generally agree that the concept involves reacting to a perceived transgression by others, oneself, or a situation in a mentally healthy way that leads to personal growth and/or prosocial relationships.

Forgiveness is often viewed as a coping strategy and has been described as letting go, healing, transformation, freedom, and liberation. Those words convey a release from the pain of guilt, anger, and victimhood, and a lessening of harmful, negative emotions and actions (Davis et al., 2012; Goman & Kelley, 2016; Johnstone et al., 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Researchers Sapmaz, Yildirim, Topcuoglu, Nalbant, and Sizir (2015) at the University of Turkey defined forgiveness as the displacement of damaging attitudes such as anger and revenge with positive attitudes such as compassion and tolerance. The *Course in Miracles*, a program that has guided people through a process of forgiveness, defined forgiveness as a state of mind that tolerantly observes without judging or attempting to twist reality (Krajca, 2015). Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) view forgiveness as a path to healing that frees persons from the pain of avoiding or burying negative emotions, and provides a compassionate alternative to confronting problems that does not involve vengeance and retribution.

Forgiving what is perceived as a significant hurt does not come automatically and occurs through a cognitive and affective process. Thompson et al. (2005) developed the

Heartland Forgiveness Scale and defined forgiveness as reframing or cognitively reconstructing a perceived transgression in such a way that responses change from negative to neutral or positive (Thompson et al., 2005). A transgression was described as an action that goes against expectations and assumptions (Thompson et al., 2005). Defining forgiveness in terms of cognitive appraisal acknowledges that the portrayal and intensity of a transgression is subjectively interpreted by each individual.

Some definitions of forgiveness also include moral aspects. For instance, Ilbay and Saricam (2015), in a Turkish study of forgiveness, defined the concept as a manner of reaction initiating a high level of moral behavior and improvements in healthy conduct. Scull's (2015) study of Middle Eastern war survivors operationalized forgiveness as offering a moral gift of love and beneficence as well as providing the psychological benefits of releasing anger and resentment. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) define their forgiveness therapy as providing individuals' with a moral response to transgressions and unfairness.

There is continuing debate as to whether forgiveness requires individuals to develop positive feelings for an offender or whether neutral feelings without negativity will suffice (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015). Cultures that place great value on social harmony are more likely to include positive feelings and sometimes reconciliation in definitions of forgiveness (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015). However, reconciliation is generally not included as a requirement of forgiveness and in some cases would be impossible given that offenders may have died or disappeared from an individual's life.

An unequivocal definition of forgiveness is probably not possible because it represents a multifaceted concept that has been interpreted in various ways and is not easily constricted by words (Adamos & Griffin, 2013; Bash, 2015; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Goman & Kelley, 2016). Academic disciplines, cultures, and lay persons have varying perspectives on the definition of forgiveness (Goman & Kelley, 2016). Strelan and Covic's 2006 literature review noted the challenges researchers had in clearly defining forgiveness (Mihalache, 2012).

In a review of how forgiveness is conceptualized in family therapy, counseling, and clinical psychology literature, researchers Legaree, Turner, and Lollis (2007) questioned the value of a single definition of forgiveness. They noted the importance of considering and respecting clients' diverse views regarding forgiveness based on their personal experiences, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and other unique individual factors. The authors discussed the desire for a universal conceptualization of forgiveness, but also the harm that could be done if a full understanding of the meaning of forgiveness to both therapist and client were not explored in terms of context, power relationships, and personal values.

Forgiveness Misunderstandings

Forgiveness can be misunderstood or misinterpreted as simply excusing, pardoning, or condoning a hurtful behavior (Goman & Kelley, 2016; Kleinman, 2006; Umbreit et al., 2015). Legaree et al.'s (2007) literature review found concern by therapists that misunderstandings could lead to the continuation of oppression, inequality, unintentional disrespect for diverse personal values, and harmful pressure to forgive.

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring an injustice, dysfunctional relationship, or personal weakness that should be confronted for long-term well-being (DeVries & Schott, 2015; Kleinman, 2006; Riek & Mania, 2012; VonDrehle et al., 2015). German priest Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before dying in a Nazi concentration camp, warned against cheap Christian grace being used to allow injustice to remain (VonDrehle et al., 2015). Voltaire is said to have observed that "I like to sin, God likes to forgive, really the world is admirably arranged" (as cited in Thompson, 2014, p. 51). For forgiveness to be beneficial, it needs to be clearly defined in such a way that persons do not believe it will excuse abusive behavior or an injustice, nor feel it will contribute to the continuation of an unsafe or unfair situation (Bellucia, 2015; Fehr & Gelfand , 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Kleinman, 2006; Maynard, 2013; Menahem & Love, 2013; VonDrehle et al., 2015; Watts et al., 2006).

The concern that forgiveness may indicate weakness or avoidance of confronting justice issues was illustrated when a white supremacist killed nine persons in a Charleston, South Carolina, church Bible study in 2015, and some persons in the congregation offered forgiveness swiftly. That action was criticized by those who believed being quick to forgive meant ignoring an unfair, racist system and missing an opportunity to pursue justice (VonDrehle et al., 2015). Michal (personal communication, September 14, 2015), a Palestinian Christian in Israel, also equated forgiveness with weakness and avoidance and stated, "We cannot forgive when an injustice happens over and over. I cannot forgive when Israeli soldiers continue to abuse us and the Israeli government continues to issue and enforce laws that oppress us." If the 'F' word has

become toxic in a community because of its association with oppression and injustice, words describing forgiveness such as empathy, humility, and dignity for all may do a better job of conveying its meaning and producing a beneficial result (Umbreit et al., 2015). Another option that can counter misconceptions is to include clarification that forgiveness and justice can be pursued at the same time, and the two values can complement each other (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Ilbay & Saricam, 2015).

Therapists have observed that seeking justice and positive social change can be difficult and uncomfortable (Freedman & Zarifzar, 2015; Goman & Kelley, 2016). In the short term, it may be less painful and effortful to superficially forgive the hurtful or unfair offense than to understand it and work toward rectification (DeVries & Schott, 2015; VonDrehle et al., 2015). However, holding other persons and/or oneself accountable for a transgression or injustice is responsible and ethical, not vindictive, and can lead to more positive results than avoidance or denial (Bast & Barnes-Holmes, 2014). Goman and Kelley (2015), in an interpretive analysis of persons who had experienced traumatic events, found that forgiveness often required intentionally remembering and confronting problems so they could be dealt with and lessons could be learned. Acknowledgement of a wrong and the validation of anger are first steps in creating a safer, more ethical environment, better relationships, and positive behaviors (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Ilbay & Saricam, 2015; Umbreit et al., 2015).

Cultural Considerations

The definition of forgiveness is influenced by culture as individualist and collectivist values regarding morality and relationships vary. In collectivist cultures social

harmony, belonging, and group responsibilities are viewed as most important; whereas in individualist cultures personal achievement and individual rights are prominent values (Narula, 2015; Hook et al., 2012; Mutsumoto, 2001; Myers, 2007; Sandage & Wiens, 2001). In collectivist cultures morality is defined more by social networks than in individualist cultures that encourage persons to develop their own personal conclusions as to right and wrong (Myers, 2007). Collectivist values are associated more with Eastern cultures and individualistic values with Western cultures (Sandage & Wiens, 2001). The key word for happiness in some Asian languages is relationship or togetherness (Narula, 2015).

Hook, Worthington, Utsey, Davis and Burnette's (2012) study of 298 ethnically diverse undergraduates in the southeastern United States found that a collectivist worldview was related to viewing forgiveness as an interpersonal process that included reconciliation. Decisional forgiveness, defined as the behavioral intention to forgive based on duty, was differentiated from emotional forgiveness, defined as an internal experience in which negative emotions are replaced by positive ones. The authors found that participants with collectivist worldviews were more likely to respond to transgressions with decisional forgiveness but not necessarily emotional forgiveness, indicating a greater desire to maintain social harmony than regulate personal emotions.

Kadiangandu, Gauche, Vinsonneau, & Mullet (2007) compared forgiveness beliefs in persons from Congolese collectivistic culture and French individualist culture. Their study involved 276 Congolese and 343 French participants, female and male, with mean ages of approximately 40. They found that the Congolese participants

conceptualized forgiveness as a more interpersonal construct that led to the end of resentment toward the transgressor and reconciliation than did the French participants. The French viewed forgiveness as a more intrapersonal process. The Congolese collectivist culture also viewed individuals primarily as members of groups and so were more likely than the French to extend forgiveness to members of a group. The authors inferred that an emphasis on social harmony may be highly functional when close contacts with others are an everyday necessity.

Zoughbi & Rainey (2015) practiced community-based mediation in Palestine and found the need for social harmony was strong in close communities. They found that shame was a powerful factor in persons with a collectivist worldview, and the concept of self often expanded to nuclear and extended family members. Shame-based worldviews of forgiveness involved humility and honor, whereas guilt-based worldviews were more focused on internalized moral convictions and individual guilt. Family honor and respect for tradition and the moral authority of the community were found more in persons with a collectivist, rather than an individualistic, perspective (Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015).

A literature review conducted by Sandage and Wiens (2001) examined socio-cultural factors affecting the meaning of forgiveness and humility in collectivist and individualist cultural contexts. Collectivist values emphasized social harmony and relationship enhancement, whereas individualist values prioritized personal concerns and self-honor. The authors noted that forgiving oneself could be seen as a legitimate goal in an individualist culture, but as insufficient in a collectivist culture that perceives forgiveness as granted through traditional rituals and the authority of the community

(Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Zoughbi & Rainey). Sandage and Wiens (2001) also stated that their review indicated that integrating forgiveness with empowerment in therapy may help balance collectivist and individualistic worldviews and achieve more equal relationships. Understanding and respecting individual cultural differences may enhance therapists' ability to facilitate forgiveness.

Hypothetical versus Actual Forgiveness

Research studies distinguish between hypothetical forgiveness and actual forgiveness. Measures of hypothetical forgiveness occur when individuals are given scenarios and asked to predict whether they would forgive in those situations. Actual forgiveness refers to a genuine experience of forgiveness that has occurred in an individual's life.

Believing one should forgive or hypothetically forgiving is different than actually completing the difficult process of healing from a hurtful experience. In a forgiveness meta-analytic study, Riek and Mania (2012) reviewed 158 samples that met their criteria of measuring interpersonal forgiveness and its relationship to at least one other variable. Samples were chosen from PsycINFO articles published through June 2010, references from book chapters and articles, and unpublished papers found on social psychology listserves. They found differences in the results of studies depending on whether hypothetical or actual forgiveness experiences were considered. For instance, the relationship of forgiveness to religiosity, attributions, and negative emotions was significantly stronger when hypothetical questions or scenarios were used in the research rather than actual incidents. Davis et al. (2012) and Sandage and Crabtree (2012) found

that religion predicted a greater valuing or viewing of oneself as forgiving, but not forgiveness of actual offenses. For clarity and reliability purposes, Riek and Mania (2012) advised differentiating between studies measuring viewpoints on whether individuals should forgive versus data measuring forgiveness based on actual experience. It is difficult to predict one's response to a very difficult forgiveness situation, and thinking one should forgive is different than actually being able to emotionally and behaviorally complete the forgiveness process (Riek & Mania, 2012).

Forgiveness of Self, Others, and Situation

Forgiveness can involve forgiving oneself, others, or a situation such as a natural disaster or illness (Sapmaz et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2005; Toussaint et al., 2001). These three forms of forgiveness have similarities and differences and can be interrelated. All involve coping with a hurtful experience, but the perceived cause of the hurt varies.

Forgiveness of self. Self-forgiveness involves coping with the guilt and shame that can result from individual failure and regrets and entails constructing an understanding of oneself after a transgression that restores a positive self-image (Bast & Holmes, 2014; Toussaint et al., 2001). Research studies have linked self-forgiveness to compassion and the ability to control negative emotions, resist destructive self-critical behaviors, and increase psychological well-being (Korner et al., 2015; Miller, 2015; Sakiz & Saricam, 2015) Reconstructing a positive image entails accepting personal responsibility for an offense without excuses or projecting blame on to others (Bast & Holmes, 2014). For example, Mudgal and Tiwari (2015), researchers from India, defined self-forgiveness as a process by which offenders choose to take responsibility for

wrongdoing while retaining a sense of personal worth based on the capacity to learn and grow from mistakes.

Forgiveness of others. Forgiveness of others involves forgiving another for a harm done or a perceived hurt and is also referred to as interpersonal forgiveness (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Ilbay & Saricam, 2015; Napeah & Lian, 2016; Toussaint et al., 2001). Forgiveness of an offender may occur without the involvement of the offender or it could involve a process of reconciliation, meaning the reestablishment of cordial relations. Reconciliation is not a necessary component of forgiveness of others, as sometimes an offender has passed away or is not accessible. It is not advisable if the transgressor does not recognize or take responsibility for the hurtful behavior and, therefore, the person may be in danger of further exploitation or abuse (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Menahem & Love, 2013). In some situations, such as in a family or community that depends on and values social harmony, reconciliation may be seen as a necessary part of the forgiveness process (Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Seedall et al., 2014).

Forgiveness of situation. At times, persons are angry at situations that have no human object to blame. Natural disasters, disease, or random accidents can create angry, resentful feelings that can be directed at a God figure or fate (Thompson et al., 2005). Persons may feel they are being unfairly punished by God and question why they are the victim of a bad, uncontrollable situation in their life (Sapmaz et al., 2015).

Some studies have differentiated between forgiveness of self, others, and situations and found divergent associations with mental and physical health. Thompson et

al. (2005) conducted six studies using students at a large public Midwestern university and found that forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situations were more positively related to psychological well-being than forgiveness of others. Toussaint et al.'s (2001) study using national (USA) probability methodology to sample 1,423 respondents examined age differences associated with forgiveness and health. They found that self-forgiveness was related to mental health for persons of all ages, while forgiveness of others was significantly related to mental and physical health in persons 65 and older only.

Sapmaz, Yildirim, Topcuoglu, Nalbant, and Sizir (2015) studied the relationship of different forms of forgiveness to subjective well-being in a sample of 443 university students in Turkey. They found that forgiveness of self and situation were positively related to happiness, but there were no significant correlations between forgiveness of others and happiness. Forgiveness of situation also predicted happiness while forgiveness of self and others did not.

In summary, self, other, and situation forgiveness all involve the motivation and ability to cognitively and affectively reconstruct a painful event in a process that leads to enhanced mental health and prosocial relationships. Forgiveness in all three areas involves compassion, fortitude, empathy, and humility. Improvements in one area of forgiveness may facilitate the ability to forgive in others. For example, some meditation and healing interventions based on Therevada Buddhism have found it efficacious to ask for and experience forgiveness of self before moving on to forgiveness of others (Brach, 2015).

Definitions of Religiosity, Spirituality, and Sacred Belief System

Researchers have struggled to define what it means to be religious and spiritual and have been challenged to design measures that capture the experience, intensity, and breadth of these concepts. Studies over the last several decades that attempted to operationalize religiosity or spirituality in a singular measurement produced mixed results and untrustworthy conclusions (Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Seedall et al., 2014). Religiosity and spirituality, like forgiveness, are complex, multi-faceted concepts that can be interpreted in various ways (Day, 2010; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Emmons, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Furthermore, R/S researchers are now realizing the importance of considering context and culture, as well as the limitations of using singular factors such as church attendance or prayer frequency, to form sweeping generalizations (Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008).

Most people do not separate their religious affiliation from their spiritual development (Day, 2010; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). In scholarly explorations, spirituality was not distinguished from religion until the rise of secularism created new interpretations of the two terms (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). The general consensus is that religion refers more to organizational and institutional beliefs and practices, while spiritual pertains to more personal quests for meaning and attachment to God or a higher power (Day, 2010; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

Hyman and Handal (2006) interviewed 32 religious professionals, including three imams, 13 priests, 11 ministers, and five rabbis, and found that all agreed the concepts of religion and spirituality overlapped and both pertained to that which is considered sacred.

Sacred was defined as that which is considered holy, virtuous, and worthy of reverence; set apart from that which is ordinary. The participants differentiated between the terms religious and spiritual by conceptualizing religion as referring to more objective, external rules and beliefs regarding the sacred, while spiritual emphasized subjective, internal, personal relationship aspects of the sacred. The researchers concluded that many measures of R/S are applicable across religious groups because of similarities in the basic functions of religion and spirituality.

The subjective meaning of the terms religious and spiritual is affected by cultural context and past experiences. Zinbauer et al. (1997) studied 346 persons from a wide range of Christian and secular backgrounds to determine their personal definitions of religious and spiritual. They found that most persons integrated the two terms. Persons who identified as solely spiritual, not religious, were generally more critical of religious institutions and their beliefs and did not participate in as many traditional practices such as attending church. The researchers concluded that individuals held a variety of perspectives on the terms religion and spirituality and therefore single-item self-report measures were not adequate in defining those complex terms.

Even if persons disassociate themselves from religious institutions, other societal institutions have affected their worldview and their experiences, leading to their conceptualization of what is sacred (Day, 2010; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Hill and Pargament (2008) conducted a literature review and found that spiritual norms are closely associated with cultural norms that promote healthy development and well-being. Spiritual expression develops in a social

context, and sacredness is what distinguishes religion and spirituality from other constructs (Day, 2010; Hill & Pargament, 2008).

Spirituality has been conceptualized by Emmons (2000) as a personal set of capacities that guide goal setting and problem solving and contribute to resilience. Emmons (2000) noted personal spiritual beliefs are influenced by cultural and religious context and determine values and issues of ultimate concern. Individual beliefs pertaining to the sacred and value systems play an important role in the motivation to forgive as well as the ability to cognitively restructure a hurtful situation in a constructive manner (Kidwell et al., 2012; Krajca, 2015; Maynard, 2013; Schultz et al., 2010). Spiritual feelings of connection with the sacred and all of humanity may be necessary in coping with painful events that require courage and compassion to overcome (Brown, 2010).

In summary, the terms religious and spiritual both pertain to what individuals hold sacred, with religious pertaining more to institutional, external practices, and spiritual pertaining more to personal, internal perceptions. An individual's sacred beliefs are influenced by cultural and social factors as well as individual experiences, emotion, and reasoning. This qualitative study allowed persons to describe internal and external factors affecting their sacred beliefs in relationship to forgiveness, creating a holistic picture of the role R/S had in their forgiveness experiences. Their descriptions contribute to a deeper, clearer understanding of what aspects of a sacred belief system facilitate the motivation and ability to forgive.

The Forgiveness Process

Forgiveness of a significant hurt is a process that combines behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual components (Menahem & Love, 2013). The forgiveness process has the power not only to heal, but to transform individuals through personal and spiritual understanding and growth (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015a Milhalache, 2012; Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015). Research studies have found that a new, healthier identity can be created as persons work through issues of anger and shame and develop a deeper understanding of forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Milhalache, 2012).

Many studies of the forgiveness process suggest that forgiveness takes time, as an individual generally needs to confront and regulate undesirable emotions, understand the hurtful act, accept that the action occurred, reconstruct cognitions, and find safety from continued harm (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Howes, 2009; Menahem & Love, 2013). Scarre (2015) described forgiveness as both a journey and a destination. Reaching the goal of forgiveness involves a dynamic process and a time schedule that varies according to the disposition of the individual, intensity of the perceived transgression, and context in which the process is occurring (Carr & Wang, 2012; Howes, 2009; Kidwell et al., 2012; Mihalache, 2012; Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015). Trying to rush the process or expecting a person to forgive instantly can result in frustration, subconscious resentments, or ignoring issues that should in fact be confronted and handled (Belluccia, 2015; Kleinman, 2006; Maynard, 2013; VonDrehle et al., 2015).

Forgiveness is often conceptualized as moving through stages. Through research at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and clinical work in the Philadelphia area, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) compiled empirical evidence on the benefits of using the forgiveness process as a tool for resolving excessive anger and shame problems. They described the first phase as "uncovering," which involves emotional release and gaining insights as to the impact of the transgression on an individual's psychological health. Individuals may feel not only angry at a perceived injustice, but also embarrassed and ashamed because they have been treated unfairly. Painful emotions and feelings of hurt need to be acknowledged and explored without judgment (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Maynard, 2013; VonDrehle et al., 2015). Only then can persons start to think clearly about why the transgression occurred and seek to understand and accept what happened.

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) stated the second phase of forgiveness involves developing an accurate understanding of forgiveness, realizing old strategies are not providing beneficial results, and then deciding to commit to the process. The definition of forgiveness used should make clear that the concept does not allow exploitation of the individual or condoning, excusing, or forgetting a transgression. It does involve abandoning resentment, even though individuals have a right to it, and working toward attitudes of compassion and kindness. Forgiveness involves strength, not weakness, and justice can still be pursued, but in a positive manner that does not create more harm than good (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c). Forgiveness is effortful, and it is therefore important that individuals believe it is a worthwhile goal to pursue (Ilbay & Saricam, 2015; Mihalache, 2012).

The third phase described by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) is working to cognitively understand the offender and see them in a new light, in addition to bearing and accepting the pain caused by the hurtful event. This stage involves empathizing with an offender, defined as a morally neutral act that seeks to understand without judging. It also involves compassion, which is a moral emotion because it seeks the good of others (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c). Bearing and accepting pain is part of this stage as is identifying as a survivor, not a victim. This serves to keep individuals from displacing anger onto others. During this stage, cognitions are reconstructed and negative emotions regulated (Howes, 2009; Menahem & Love, 2013). This phase is described as the most difficult and also the most important by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c).

The last phase as conceptualized by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) is deepening, in which individuals develop a greater sense of humility and a realization that all persons need to both give and receive forgiveness. A sense of universality develops that realizes all persons experience injustice and make mistakes. This realization allows for an adjustment in expectations and a feeling of connectedness with others that leads to greater peace of mind and emotional stability (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c). The ability to let go of a perceived wrong is also affected by whether individuals feel relatively safe from either their own or another's capacity to do further harm (Howes, 2009).

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) found wide differences in the time individuals spent in each of the four phases and the ease in which they were able to accomplish the goals. It is possible that persons can significantly improve their mental health in 12 weeks with forgiveness therapy, but the process will vary depending on the individual and the

situation. Mihalache's (2012) qualitative heuristic study of transformational forgiveness found that continued healing may be facilitated by helping others through the forgiveness process.

Factors Affecting the Forgiveness Process

Researchers have explored both secular and sacred factors affecting forgiveness as well as individual and contextual variables related to forgiveness. Riek and Mania (2012) concluded in their meta-analytic review of 158 published articles on forgiveness that except for the dispositional trait of agreeableness, the main factors influencing forgiveness were state or context dependent. The most proximal antecedents of forgiveness were social-cognitive factors which included empathy, ruminations, and attributions. Humility and attachment have also been linked to the ability to forgive.

Empathy. Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from their perspective or frame of reference. The ability of persons to empathize has reliably been linked to the ability to forgive (Davis et al., 2012; Exline et al., 2008; Kidwell et al., 2012; Menahem & Love, 2013; Noor et al., 2008; Riek & Mania, 2012). Empathy helps persons better understand why and how a transgression occurred (Kidwell et al., 2012). An example of empathy from a participant in Noor et al.'s (2008) study of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland who were struggling to forgive reads as follows:

> I wanted to meet Pat to put a face to the enemy and see him as a real human being. I have realised that no matter which side of the conflict you're on, had we all lived each other's lives we could all have done what the other did (p. 481).

Empathy was a direct predictor of forgiveness in that study.

Exline et al. (2008) conducted seven studies using correlational and experimental designs that measured the relationship between forgiveness and empathy using hypotheticals as well as recall of actual life experiences. All seven studies indicated that people are more forgiving of transgressors if they see themselves as capable of committing similar offenses. Forgiveness was predicted more strongly when persons' own transgressions were similar to the offense to be forgiven in both severity and type. The researchers were able to increase the predictability of being forgiving in hypothetical situations when participants were asked to focus on commonalities with offenders and the universality of human frailty. Understanding factors in an offender's life contributing to the transgression increased forgiveness as did reminders of times in participants' lives in which they needed to be forgiven (Exline et al., 2008).

Exline et al. (2008) noted the ability to empathize is impeded when individuals seek to contrast their actions with an offender's in order to obtain a safe moral distance and to enhance self-esteem. The need to reestablish a position of strength and safety after a hurtful event occurs can lead to demonizing an offender as morally inferior and totally bad. The tendency to morally distance oneself from an offender hinders empathy.

Therapists have successfully used the development of empathy in forgiveness efforts (Brown, 2010; Kidwell et al., 2012; Milhalache, 2012). For example, Menahem and Love (2013) provided two case studies in which they utilized perspective taking and empathizing with an offender as a way to facilitate understanding. Empathy provides a key to understanding a transgressor, and that makes it a vital part of the forgiveness process.

Attachment. Attachment refers to a person's ability to develop trust in their relationships and a sense of connection with others (Myers, 2007). It has been associated with forgiveness as persons who feel confident and secure in their relationships may be less fearful that imperfection and mistakes will be condemned and punished (Sandage & Crabtree, 2012). A secure attachment to other persons or God can provide individuals with the courage to accept failures and disappointments, learn from them, and move forward toward personal growth (Haidt, 2013; Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010). For example, Sandage and Crabtree's (2012) study of graduate students at a Christian seminary found a significant relationship between dispositional forgiveness and a belief by participants that God was helping them put their plans into action.

In-groups versus out-groups. Splitting people into in-groups and out-groups with good and bad category labels has been related to unforgiveness (Galen, 2012; Noor et al., 2008; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012). Mistakes and failures may be seen as signs confirming that someone is "bad" and therefore should be excluded from a group or from divine love and forgiveness. At times, both parties may feel like victims and actually compete in a contest to determine who has endured more suffering and/or who has been treated more unfairly (Noor et al., 2008). In those cases, both parties are working to forgive each other and there is no clear differentiation between transgressor and victim. Competitive victimhood may be exacerbated through group identification. For example, Noor et al. (2008) conducted a study of forgiveness and reconciliation with a sample of 318 Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. They found that empathy predicted

forgiveness, but strong identification with an in-group and high levels of distrust of an out-group significantly mediated that connection.

Too much sympathy from others or condemnation of an offender from one's group blocks the motivation to understand and empathize (Maynard, 2013; VonDrehle, 2015). Maynard's phenomenological study of the role of others in the forgiveness process found that 9 out of eleven participants felt social support was important. However, the participants cautioned that there could be negative support from others, including sympathy that encouraged victimhood, friends who steadfastly labeled transgressors as evil, and persons who conveyed their belief that it was offensive to forgive an injustice. Peers and family members may inspire forgiveness or unforgiveness, depending on whether they are supporting or protesting the process (Galen, 2012; Haidt, 2013, Maynard, 2013; Noor et al., 2008).

Humility. Humility is defined as a willingness to accept and an ability to clearly perceive one's strengths and weaknesses. It can be viewed as a spiritual asset (Emmons, 2000; Lavelock et al., 2014). Humility has been considered a master virtue because of its transformative power to open minds, regulate egoistic, selfish behaviors, and enhance moods (Lavelock et al., 2014). Lavelock et al. (2014) conducted an experiment to determine the relationship between humility and forgiveness. Seventy participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental or a control condition. A humility workbook intervention was created and administered to persons in the experimental condition, and data was collected from both groups both before and after the intervention. The results showed that the humility intervention significantly predicted greater forgiveness.

Forgiveness can be a costly process in terms of pride (Exline et al., 2008). People may protect their egos and maintain a safe distance from a transgressor by believing they would never be culpable of a similar offense. If an offender is viewed as morally inferior and a lesser being, it is harder to forgive than if the transgressor is seen as similar and doing the best he or she can do at the time (Exline et al., 2008). Humility can open doors to empathy and the understanding and compassion necessary for forgiveness. Recognition of the need for forgiveness in all human beings can lead to diminution of anger and greater calm as experienced by the person in the following quote:

> Silent, still, I lay there, aware for the first time that I was capable of vicious, killing hatred. Aware that all men everywhere--despite the thin, polite veneer of society—are capable of hideous violence against other men. Not just the Nazis or the Zionists or the Palestinian commandos—but me. I had covered my hurts with Christian responses, but inside the anger had gnawed. With this sudden, startling view of myself, a familiar inner voice spoke firmly, without compromise: *If you hate your brother, you are guilty of murder.* Now I understood. (Chacour & Hazard, 2013, p. 171.)

Viewing a transgressor as morally inferior blocks the capacity to empathize and perceive needs other than one's own (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c; Exline et al., 2008; Lavelock et al., 2014). However, an overemphasis on humility can be detrimental to persons who struggle with low self-esteem or oppression as it may exacerbate feelings of shame and guilt (Sandage & Wiens, 2001). Sandage and Crabtree (2012) conducted a study of Christian seminary students and found a curvilinear effect of spiritual grandiosity on forgiveness. They inferred that persons low in spiritual grandiosity may be too self-effacing and prone to shame and guilt, while those who are more narcissistic lack humility and are not motivated to forgive. Persons who scored in the middle of the

spiritual grandiosity scale were more likely to forgive, indicating that feeling inferior or superior to others lessens the relationship to forgiveness. A balanced view of oneself as a person who can be both a victim and an offender allows the adoption of a broader perspective and facilitates forgiveness (Lavelock et al., 2014; Sandage & Wiens, 2001).

Developmental factors. Age has been associated with forgiveness as the ability to empathize with, accept, and understand human weaknesses and failures has been related to age. Riek and Mania's (2010) meta-analytic review found that age was a moderating factor of forgiveness because of its relationship to increases in perspective taking and decreases in neuroticism, variables that shape individuals' ability to empathize and their interpretation of events. Toussaint et al. (2001) found that middle (45-64) and old (65 plus) age adults were more able to forgive others and feel forgiven by God than young adults (18-44).

Milhalache (2012) viewed forgiveness as a developmental construct culminating in psychological and spiritual transformation. She interviewed 12 persons who felt transformed by the process of forgiveness and described forgiving as a process of becoming versus something dispersed. The results of her qualitative heuristic study revealed nine stages of forgiveness which included the decision to forgive, cognitively and emotionally processing the hurtful experience, humbly confronting one's own potential to cause hurt, and generating empathy and compassion.

Age may affect the health benefits received from forgiveness. Toussaint et al.'s, (2001) study of forgiveness in different age groups found that forgiveness of self was related to mental and physical health in all age groups, but forgiveness of others was only

significantly correlated with health in the older age group. This suggests that older persons may be more cognizant of time and feel greater relief from interpersonal forgiveness than young individuals who feel less pressure to let go of hurts and mend relationships.

Situational factors. Each situation that needs forgiveness varies in some way, plus the same situation may be perceived and interpreted differently based on an individual's disposition, experiences, and cultural background (VonDrehle et al., 2015). Forgiveness involves individuals' subjective assessments of hurt, harm, and threat as well as an appraisal of one's ability to cope with the challenge that is being perceived (Emmons, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Watts et al., 2006). The degree of a perceived transgression's hurtfulness can affect the ability to forgive as it is easier to forgive minor offenses than major ones (Davis et al., 2012; Exline et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2010). For example, Schultz et al. (2010), in a diverse sample of 146 adults, found that the more hurtful a transgression was perceived by the individual, the more revenge and avoidance responses were utilized as opposed to forgiveness.

The ability to forgive others can be affected by the closeness of the relationship with the offender, as researchers have found that persons are more likely to forgive those socially close to them than distant others (Exline et al., 2008; Karreman & Aartz, 2006; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2012). Exline et al.'s (2008) seven studies of forgiveness and empathy found that people were more likely to forgive when offenses occurred in close, committed relationships. Avoidance is a difficult and sometimes impossible response in a close relationship and vengeance will destroy the relationship. Close relationships may

provide more motivation to forgive as well as greater opportunity to understand the transgressor and the situation.

Karremans and Aarts (2006) conducted four studies involving automaticity and forgiveness in the context of close relationships. Intimate relationships develop over time, and transgressions tend to occur frequently in familiar relationships. In order to maintain a close relationship, it is necessary to engage in a high level of forgiveness. Karremans and Aarts (2006) found that participants in their studies needed fewer cognitive resources to forgive a close other compared to a non-close other. They concluded that individuals may become habituated to forgiving someone close to them and respond to the positive reinforcement they receive from the action.

The motivation for forgiveness may also vary according to relationship closeness and the need for value consensus versus the need for status and power. Wenzel and Okimoto (2012) conducted two studies with participants of various ages from an Australian university, one involving a forgiveness scenario and the other involving autobiographical recall of a forgiveness experience. They found that in both forgiveness situations involving close offenders, the victim's perceptions of value consensus mediated justice-restoring effects of forgiveness, whereas status/power mediated forgiveness expressed toward distant offenders. Persons socially close play a role in an individual's identity and may be viewed as part of a greater self. Therefore perceiving an offender's values as coinciding with an individual's own is of heightened importance in close relationships. Respect and justice issues are of more importance when persons are from a different group or when power issues are involved.

In summary, factors that have been related to forgiveness include the ability to empathize with and understand the perspective of a transgressor, a skill that sometimes increases with age. The need for belonging can affect forgiveness. Persons with secure attachments may have more courage to accept failure and disappointments. Peers and family members may increase or decrease an individual's motivation to forgive depending on whether they encourage or discourage forgiveness. Humility has been linked to forgiveness as it provides individuals with an acceptance of universal human weakness and avoids the extreme of narcissism, which creates a sense of superiority, and very low self-esteem, which produces feelings of inferiority. Certain situations are harder to forgive than others and factors associated with the situation are degree of hurt, perceived ability to cope with a transgression, and relationship closeness. This study examined forgiveness contextually in order to create a holistic picture of the experience.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to better understand why and how people forgive, the theoretical frameworks of goal orientation and cognitive restructuring were used. Goal orientation theory lays a foundation for understanding why certain motivations to forgive are more effective than others. Once individuals decide they want to forgive, the process moves into an understanding and acceptance stage that requires cognitively appraising a transgression from a new vantage point that will allow for healing and transformation. Cognitive restructuring is a component of cognitive therapies which assist persons in altering interpretations of events that are causing pain and dysfunction. Transforming negative cognitions into more constructive thoughts provides emotional and behavioral

benefits (Myers, 2007). R/S beliefs and behaviors play a role in both goal orientation and cognitive restructuring and were explored in this study.

Goal Orientation Theory

The premise of goal orientation theory is that persons are motivated to achieve goals based on the purpose of a task as well as the subsequent affect, cognitions, and behaviors necessary to obtain a task objective (Cesasoli & Ford, 2014; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). It is a social-cognitive theory of motivation that originated in the early 20th century and was first used to explain why students engage in academic work (Anderman, 2015). The theory has been expanded to help explain behavior in the domains of sports, health, and social psychology (Anderman, 2015).

Carol Dweck is a researcher and professor known for her work on goal orientation theory and the effect of a growth or fixed mindset on motivation. She initially examined goal orientation's effect in academics, but expanded the theory out into social and moral domains as well as into interactions with others and beliefs in others' ability to change (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Rusk et al. (2011) used the theory to design a measure that related goal orientation to emotional regulation.

The main effects of goal orientation theory occur when there is confusion or difficulties that create a need for persistence, effort, and creative strategizing and cognitive restructuring (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Goal orientation theory's application to social and moral domains as well as emotion regulation makes it a relevant foundation for understanding forgiveness, which involves the desire to regulate the angry and sad thoughts and emotions that result from hurt, disappointment, guilt, and shame.

Goals fall into two general categories, learning/mastery and performance. A learning or mastery goal orientation is generally seen as an intrinsic desire to obtain personal growth or mastery (Rusk et al., 2011). A performance goal orientation is extrinsically based with a focus on pleasing or impressing others (Rusk et al., 2011). Intrinsic motivation is the self-desire to do something for its own sake rather than because of external pressure (Myers, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsically motivated persons may do something because they find it enjoyable, interesting, or challenging (Anderman, 2015; Myers, 2007). Intrinsic motivation exists within the individual, whereas extrinsic motivation relies on influences outside of the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An extrinsically motivated person is interested in rewards, recognition, or avoiding punishment from others (Anderman, 2015; Myers, 2007).

Sternthal et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study using a probability sample of 3,105 adults in the Chicago area in which they researched the relationship between depression, anxiety, and religious life. They found that intrinsic motivation better predicted good mental health than did extrinsic motivation. An extrinsic orientation may motivate an individual to forgive to please others, but cognitive dissonance may result if there is no internalized, intrinsic desire to do so. Goals that are intrinsically motivated and freely chosen without external pressure are generally more motivating (Spinath & Steinmayr, 2012).

Intrinsic motivation channeled into mastery/learning goals can provide persons with the drive, effort, and persistence needed to pursue challenging tasks such as forgiveness (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014). Internalized R/S motivation that involves both

emotional and cognitive components has been positively related to mental health, healing, and forgiveness (Emmons, 2000; Ilbay & Saricam, 2015; Sternthal et al., 2010).

Learning/mastery and performance goal orientations are linked to persons' implicit theories of capacity for achieving goals and completing tasks. Individuals who believe abilities and capacity for change are fixed are unlikely to put forth effort and persist in achieving challenging, difficult tasks, as they view chances for success as limited and failure as likely (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Persons who have a malleable or incremental view of the capabilities of self and others are motivated to engage in an effortful, demanding process they believe will lead to improvement and learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The forgiveness process is effortful as it involves coping with negative emotions and altering cognitions about both oneself and others. Viewing forgiveness as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth facilitates the process (Kidwell et al., 2012; Milhalache, 2012).

Research into goal orientation's moral domain by Dweck and Leggett (1988) found that a fixed mindset and a focus on performance were related to self-validation efforts and a tendency to judge others. If self and others are seen as either good or bad, without significant improvement possibilities, there is no incentive to empathize with and understand someone in the bad category nor is there motivation to cognitively restructure a situation seen as static. Without an implicit belief in the possibility of change and transformation, rumination and vengeance cycles may be repeated and defensive or avoidance measures taken (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Learning/mastery and performance goals have been related to attachment. Secure attachments provide persons with the confidence needed to accept human failures and explore and develop without fearing separation from others or the divine (Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010). When persons are focused on belonging and seeking security, their ability to learn and grow through the forgiveness process may be hampered, as conforming to group norms and performing well for others is prioritized over personal healing and growth tasks (Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010).

Religion and spirituality are inherently focused on moral values and ethics that guide beliefs as to what goals are important and how to appraise our own and others' behaviors. Spirituality is related to personal goals and a vision of what persons should be striving for in life (Emmons, 2000). Pursuing spiritual growth is comparable to seeking learning/mastery goals in the moral and social domain. Persons seek spiritual growth in their relationship with a higher power and their understanding of what is sacred. Forgiving oneself as well as forgiving others can be seen as an opportunity for transformation and becoming a more spiritually mature person (Brach, 2015; Krajca, 2015; Maynard, 2013; Mihalache, 2012; Seedall et al., 2014; Umbreit et al., 2015). For some persons, that entails drawing closer to a divine, sacred presence that supports the journey to forgiveness and developmental progress (Brown, 2010; Krajca, 2015; Maynard, 2013).

Goal orientations provide an understanding of why persons choose to forgive and insights into the development of the process. If persons believe forgiveness will lead to learning and personal growth they may be motivated to work on understanding a

transgression and cognitively restructuring a hurtful experience or situation. Persons may also be motivated to forgive based on a desire to please others and external pressures, but cognitive dissonance and reduced healing may be the result if persons do not internalize a belief that positive change and transformation are possible (Devries & Schott, 2015; VonDrehle et al., 2015). For example, persons may tell others they forgive a group member because of peer pressure and a desire to please others, but may not personally believe forgiveness is warranted or possible. Therefore they harbor resentments and feel continued emotional hurt.

Cognitive Restructuring Theory

Cognitive restructuring theory can be traced to cognitive therapists such as Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis who found that negative ruminations and catastrophizing beliefs colored feelings and guided behaviors (Myers, 2007). All individuals face failure, disappointment, and hurt in their life which requires emotional regulation and coping skills (Ellis, 1998). Restructuring detrimental thoughts can help persons interpret events in a new light and alter the way people act and feel (Myers, 2007). Refraining from turning wishes and desires into rigid shoulds and musts can reduce anger and guilt and allow persons to move on to greater mental health (Ellis, 1998).

Ellis (1998) proposed three main ways in which individuals' negative thinking affects their emotions and behaviors, which can be related to forgiveness of self, others, and situation. Ellis stated that individuals rate themselves and others globally and tend to overgeneralize. When self or others act in a way that they perceive as wrong, individuals may rate the whole person as bad instead of accepting human frailty and offering

unconditional acceptance. People may also rate their environmental conditions globally, and so a situation with both negative and positive aspects becomes simply bad and difficult to tolerate. The inability to accept or tolerate actions or events that go against expectations and desires can block healing and growth (Ellis, 1998).

Forgiveness is healing when persons are able to cope by reconstructing a transgression in such a way that it leads to beneficial actions and emotions (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Menahem & Love, 2013; Mihalache, 2012). Cognitive flexibility has been positively linked to forgiveness, whereas depressingly ruminating over a transgression is negatively linked to forgiveness (Thompson et al., 2005). Persons with a learning goal orientation may be motivated to cognitively restructure a hurtful situation in such a way that it will lead to personal and spiritual growth. A performance goal orientation may inspire persons to reframe a transgression in such a way that relationships can be enhanced and/or a group can be impressed.

Emotions, cognitions, and behavior are intertwined and form a system in which each affects the other (Ilbay & Saracam, 2015). Individuals' cognitive appraisals affect their emotions and behavior, but emotions guide cognitions, and behavioral changes lead to emotional and cognitive adjustments. Emotions may provide persons with a type of information processing, and many studies have found that feelings need to be recognized and explored if genuine healing through cognitive restructuring is to be accomplished (Brach, 2015; Haidt, 2013; Howes, 2009; Kidwell et al., 2012; Menahem & Love, 2013; Mihilache, 2012). For instance, Menahem and Love (2013) used two case studies to illustrate how the forgiveness process was facilitated when people believed their story

had been heard and their right to feel pain and anger acknowledged (Menahem & Love, 2013).

The human mind processes information through stories that include emotions, thoughts, and actions (Haidt, 2013). Cioni (2007) noted that forgiveness often entails not only reconstructing cognitions, but also reimaging hostile imaginings about an offender and transforming them in such a way that their threat is diminished and healing can occur. Empathizing with an offender and developing a more compassionate perspective can help change cognitions and emotional images that may be impeding the forgiveness process.

The role of R/S in a person's life will affect the cognitive restructuring process. Persons interpret scripture in different ways and individually emphasize different aspects of their religion. A religious person may emphasize warmth values such as love, forgiveness, and humility, or conscientiousness–based virtues such as justice, responsibility, and reciprocity (Lavelock et al., 2014). Persons of the same faith may view God differently. Some may perceive of a punishing God that plays favorites and expects perfection, while others may view God as more merciful, inclusive, and accepting of human imperfection (Tripathi & Mullett, 2010; Umbreit et al., 2015; Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015). These evaluations will determine how a person applies religious principles to the cognitive restructuring process of forgiveness. It may be easier for a person who holds warmth values and views God as merciful to forgive than it is for someone whose beliefs are based on conscientiousness and perfectionism.

Forgiveness, inspired by R/S, can help persons regulate negative emotions and improve their health and relationships. It can be conceptualized as a coping strategy (Johnstone et al., 2012; Maynard, 2013). Religious and spiritual beliefs and goals can provide individuals with a framework for meaning that helps in cognitively restructuring traumatic events (Schultz et al., 2010). Literature reviews by Hill and Pargament (2008) and Galen (2012) found that factors such as church attendance and self-rated measures of R/S did not provide useful, predictive information on forgiveness. This study provides a holistic, in-depth understanding of R/S beliefs and concepts that motivated and sustained persons in the forgiveness process. The role of a sacred belief system in goal orientation and cognitive restructuring was explored with participants and is described in detail.

Previous Methodological Approaches

Forgiveness has been empirically studied both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative research has established a connection between forgiveness and both psychological well-being and prosocial relationships (Kidwell et al., 2012; Korner et al., 2015; Scull, 2015; Shultz et al., 2010; Sternthal et al., 2010; Sternthal et al., 2012; Toussaint et al., 2001). Empathy and the personality trait of agreeableness have been quantitatively linked to forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012). Gratitude, humility, and attachment have also been related to forgiveness (Narula, 2015; Lavelock et al., 2014; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012). Those variables all have in common their association with interpersonal strengths and relationship building.

Quantitative studies have linked forgiveness with religion and spirituality, but inconsistently (Davis et al., 2014). This inconsistency has been caused by difficulties in

operationalizing complex concepts such as forgiveness, religion, and spirituality. Quantitative research links variables but cannot fully describe their meaning and the developmental and contextual influences involved in forgiveness (Mihalache, 2012). Forgiveness is a dynamic process, and quantitative studies have been unable to explain changes in an individual that occur over time (Carr & Wang, 2012).

Qualitative studies and narratives have explored the developmental and transformative nature of forgiveness. Although narratives and case studies cannot provide statistical generalizations or causal data, they can describe the forgiveness experience over a person's lifetime with in-depth information regarding context and situation. Phenomenological research has empirically analyzed themes and patterns from interviews and data that have contributed to a richer understanding of forgiveness. In addition, qualitative studies have been able to aid in understanding how individuals can be transformed through forgiveness (Mihalache, 2012; Umbreit et al., 2015). They have clarified individual and cultural differences in the definition of forgiveness and provided greater understanding of forgiveness as a process that occurs in a cultural and situational context (Sandage & Wiens, 2001).

Riek and Mania's (2012) meta-analytic study found that social-cognitive variables that reflect the individual's subjective construction of a hurtful experience are the most proximal antecedents of forgiveness. The main factors influencing forgiveness were state or context dependent, indicating the need to view forgiveness holistically.

In summary, quantitative studies have been useful in providing knowledge as to factors that are related to a forgiveness disposition and the ability to forgive. Qualitative

studies have added contextual data and descriptions of the forgiveness process that allow a greater understanding of how forgiveness can lead to personal growth and transformation. More studies are needed that explore the forgiveness process from the perspective of persons from diverse cultures and sacred belief systems (Johnstone et al., 2012; Maynard, 2013; Sakiz & Saricam, 2015; Seedall et al., 2014; Sternthal et al., 2012) and that provide holistic descriptions of forgiveness that aid persons in deciding why and how they would engage in the process (Bash, 2015; Davis et al., 2012; Johnstone et al., 2012; Maynard, 2013; Sakiz & Saricam, 2015; Scull, 2015; Seedall et al., 2014; Sternthal et al., 2012; Toussaint et al., 2001; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2012).

Conclusion

Forgiveness affects all people as mistakes, failure, and hurtful behaviors are part of everyday human existence. Some transgressions are deemed insignificant and easy to forgive, but other hurts are deep and an effortful process is necessary for healing, personal growth, and enhanced relationships. Forgiveness contributes to a stable society, positive relationships, and personal well-being and therefore has been included in religious and spiritual teachings throughout history. In the last several decades, psychologists have become interested in empirically exploring the benefits of forgiveness and its relationship to R/S.

Forgiveness is considered a virtue, but its definition varies. There is general consensus that forgiveness means responding to a perceived transgression in such a way that responses change from negative to neutral or positive, resulting in greater psychological well-being and enhanced relationships. The object of forgiveness can be

self, others, or a situation. Definitions of forgiveness from collectivist cultures place more value on social harmony and group norms than individualist cultures, which place more emphasis on personal, self-constructed ideas of right and wrong. People may be unforgiving because they incorrectly believe forgiveness means condoning, excusing, or encouraging unfair or hurtful behavior. Forgiveness requires acknowledging an injustice, not avoiding or denying it, and engaging in a process that leads to prosocial changes.

Forgiving a significant hurt is a process that takes time but has the power to inspire personal growth and transformation. Factors that affect the process include empathy, which facilitates understanding; humility, which creates an openness that allows acceptance of human weakness; and attachment, which can provide the security and trust needed to forgive. Developmental and situational factors such as closeness of the relationship and degree of hurt also affect the ability to forgive.

R/S has been positively and negatively related to forgiveness and more research is needed to fully understand which aspects of R/S motivate and facilitate forgiveness (Davis et al., 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Galen, 2012). In-group bias can prevent forgiveness of religious out-group members, but may facilitate forgiveness of those persons considered similar. Certain R/S beliefs may help regulate negative emotions and encourage compassion and spiritual growth through the forgiveness process, whereas other R/S beliefs may work against forgiveness by focusing on judgment and condemnation. Persons struggling with guilt or anger because of a transgression they have not forgiven need information as to why forgiveness could be beneficial and how to

engage in the process. They can benefit from a better understanding of how R/S components affect forgiveness goals and cognitive appraisal.

This study contributes to the literature by providing a better understanding of why and how people are able to forgive and uses goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories as frameworks. Goal orientation theory explains that persons are generally more motivated to engage in a difficult emotional process such as forgiveness when they have a learning and growth focus that views the human capacity for change as malleable, not fixed. This study explored how goal orientation affected the motivation to forgive and the willingness to engage in a cognitive restructuring process. It adds to the literature by providing information as to how R/S beliefs, practices, and support play a role in both the motivation to forgive and the ability to cognitively restructure a painful situation.

Forgiveness, religiosity, and spirituality are complex terms that are difficult to operationalize. Quantitative studies have linked certain variables such as agreeableness and empathy to forgiveness and have provided empirical research that links forgiveness to improved health and prosocial behavior. However, quantitative research has been unable to provide rich, in-depth information as to why and how the forgiveness process can lead to healing and transformation.

The role of R/S needs clarification so that it can be better understood and used to help people achieve beneficial results. This study analyzed forgiveness patterns and themes derived from persons who represented a variety of sacred belief systems, and contributes to a more wide-ranging, holistic understanding of the meaning of forgiveness

and the dynamic process it involves. Chapter 3 describes the rationale for using IPA as the research design for this study and describes the study's methodology in depth.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning and experience of forgiveness and to discover common elements of forgiveness across sacred beliefs. The qualitative approach of IPA, which examines the meaning that individuals make of their life experiences, was employed as the approach for this study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). First-person interviews with adults from different sacred belief systems who had forgiven a major transgression were conducted and examined with a focus on both the personal and social domains (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

In this chapter, I present the research questions and the rationale for using IPA. The researcher is the instrument in IPA and possible bias and ethical issues will be addressed. The selection of participants for the study will be discussed as will the procedures for collecting, recording, and analyzing data. Trustworthiness criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will be explained. Procedures for ensuring an ethical process of research will be detailed.

Research Design and Rationale

Rationale for IPA Design

The approach chosen for this study was IPA, which is based on three major areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenologists provide ideas about how to examine and understand the lived experience. Hermeneutics scholars focus on the interpretation of experiences and persons' attempts to make sense and meaning out of their experiences. In idiography,

researchers emphasize the importance of examining the perspective of particular people in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA was an appropriate choice for the research as the intent was to explore the lived experience of forgiveness and describe how participants made sense out of that experience. Further, the exploration of different contexts (sacred belief systems) in which the experience and meaning occurs (e.g., through music, scripture, poetry, art, historical and modern figures) can be incorporated into the interpretative phenomenological process.

Using IPA, I created a multifaceted approach to asking questions about the forgiveness experience that included descriptions of developments, turning points, and cultural and religious contexts. Essential common components of forgiveness were identified through a process of eidetic reduction, used to recognize essential components of the forgiveness process and to create a clear, vivid picture of the experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A strength of IPA is the ability to make links between the understandings of individuals and psychology's theoretical frameworks (Smith et al., 2009). Participant stories that described why and how they were able to forgive were interpreted through the lenses of goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories.

Other phenomenological approaches were considered for this study. Some, such as Giorgi's, are more descriptive than interpretive (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretation was important in this study because the meaning of forgiveness and the role of the sacred belief system in the forgiveness process were examined. The motivation to forgive was explored in the context of learning and performance goal orientation theories.

Grounded theory was considered, but it is a highly structured approach, and its purpose is the development of theory (Smith et al., 2009). There are already many theories of forgiveness, and this was not consistent with the intent of the study. A case study or ethnography was not appropriate because a heterogeneous sample was required, as opposed to one or two individuals or one culture (Patton, 2002).

Research Questions

In phenomenological research, the research questions should have both social meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). Forgiveness has been advocated by the world's major religions and is seen as a virtue because of its importance in relationship enhancement and a secure society (Freke, 1998; Smith, 1991). It provides an alternative to vengeance and retribution and enables productive resolution of hurtful situations as opposed to avoiding or denying a wrongdoing (Belluccia, 2015). In addition to its social role in facilitating prosocial behavior, forgiveness serves as a way to improve individuals' mental and physical health. The process can regulate negative emotions and reduce harmful stress (Korner et al., 2015; Scull, 2015; Sternthal et al., 2012).

The primary research question I addressed was the following: How is forgiveness experienced in persons with different sacred beliefs? The following subquestions were employed:

- What are the common experiences (contextual and developmental) that give purpose and meaning to forgiveness?
- What common set of beliefs give purpose and meaning to forgiveness?
- How does goal orientation affect the experience of forgiveness?

- What is the role of cognitive restructuring in the process of forgiveness?

The first two subquestions relate to the phenomenological inquiry of meaning and experience. The third and fourth subquestions were developed from the theoretical frameworks of goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories. Participants defined what forgiveness meant to them and described their motivation to forgive. I paid attention to their beliefs regarding growth, transformation, pleasing others, and avoiding conflict. Participants described their experience of forgiveness and explained how their cognitions changed from the beginning to the end of the forgiveness process.

Role of Researcher

The role of the researcher in IPA is to interpret participants' interpretations (double hermeneutics) of their experiences and present common themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The IPA researcher seeks to understand the perspectives of participants and the meaning they have made of their experience, while at the same time asking questions and encouraging participants to reflect, examine, and puzzle over their experience. The researcher helps the participant explore his or her experience in a way that leads to understanding and illumination (Smith et al., 2009).

During interviews, the researcher brackets, or puts aside, personal assumptions and biases and focuses on the participants' perceptions of their experience. All persons have experience with forgiveness, and I have not had exceptionally hurtful, painful experiences nor were the participants in the study required to provide extraordinary examples of forgiveness. I sought to find common elements of forgiveness that could be of benefit to everyone. My own personal experience of forgiveness of a major

transgression provided me with an understanding from which I examined the research on forgiveness and empathized with others. I have experienced interpersonal forgiveness issues with family, friends, and coworkers and can identify with self-forgiveness issues related to failure and regret. I examined my own issues with forgiveness and remained open to the new insights I acquired as I continued researching the literature and analyzing data.

As the sole researcher, I selected and interviewed participants, as well as organized, described, analyzed, and interpreted data. In an effort to acquire unbiased information, the participants in the study were neither friends nor anyone with whom I had a previous supervisory, instructor, or power relationship. All participants had the opportunity to check a summary of their interview and my interpretations for accuracy and trustworthiness, and 11 of the 12 participants did so. I also reviewed my analysis process with my supervisor.

I explained to participants the purpose of the study and advised them of the risks and benefits related to their participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection and analysis process. I clarified how the participant's confidentiality would be protected during and after the study and acquired informed consent from each participant.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Population. The target population was adults who were connected to a sacred belief system and who had experienced forgiveness.

Sampling strategy. A snowball, or chain referral, sampling approach was used to create a heterogeneous sample of persons with forgiveness experience who had diverse sacred beliefs. A heterogeneous sample allowed me to explore common patterns that emerged from variations in religious and spiritual beliefs. Snowball sampling was used to locate information-rich cases by asking well-situated people for individuals who met criteria and were willing to participate in the study (Patton, 2002).

Snowball sampling is an informative procedure that uses and activates social networks (Noy, 2008). It has the capacity to enhance validity as referral sources can verify the eligibility of potential respondents and facilitate the willingness of respondents to participate in the research and speak openly (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008). The referral chain slows as interviewees are chosen and becomes more selective as time goes on in order to meet the needs of the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). For example, once I found sufficient eligible participants who represented a certain R/S perspective, I focused on finding persons with other sacred beliefs to meet my need for a heterogeneous sample.

Criteria for selection. IPA researchers select people on the basis of whether they can offer insights on the phenomena under study (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) stated, "Participants represent a perspective, rather than a population" (p. 49). Researchers have found that the degree of a perceived offense's hurtfulness can affect the capacity to forgive, as it is easier to forgive minor transgressions than major ones (Davis et al., 2012; Exline et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2010). Therefore, persons selected from diverse sacred belief systems were able and willing to describe experience with

forgiveness of at least one major, but not necessarily extraordinary, transgression or event. Major was defined as a painful transgression or event involving self or a significant relationship.

A diversity of sacred belief systems was required, and I invited persons from the major world religions as well as other smaller groups. I sought participants from the following faith categories: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American indigenous, and other (such as atheist, Wiccan, Baha'i, etc.).

Participant recruitment. Potential participants were contacted through referrals from various gatekeepers who, because of their occupations or social connections, had relatively easy access to persons who met the study's criteria (Smith et al., 2009; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I also used opportunities for referrals through my own contacts as well as snowballing that occurs when participants identify other possible respondents they know who may meet the criteria (Smith et al., 2009).

The number of cases selected and the direction of the referral chain was guided by the representativeness of the sample and the repetition of data (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I monitored my need for diverse sacred beliefs and saturation of data; accelerating, slowing, or stopping the pace as needed (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Referrals produced a wide diversity of adult ages, but I did work to ensure my sample was represented by at least a 1/3 to 2/3 gender ratio.

Sample size. IPA researchers focus on high quality, detailed analysis of a small number of cases (Smith et al., 2009). The qualitative researcher seeks a sample size that reaches the point of saturation, meaning it provides enough adequate and quality data to

support a study. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that the point of saturation is dependent on whether the researcher is seeking big picture metathemes or more detailed differences and subtle themes. Guest et al. indicated that saturation was reached within the first 12 interviews, fewer if the researcher was looking for more fundamental or meta-themes. Therefore, I proposed a sample of eight to 12 persons, but as I proceeded with data analysis, I monitored my numbers in order to reach a satisfactory saturation point and diversity of sacred beliefs. I reached saturation as codes became repetitive after approximately six interviews. However, I continued interviewing so that my sample was adequately heterogeneous. I felt my sample was sufficiently diverse after interviewing 12 persons from 10 different sacred belief systems, with ages ranging from 25 to 76, median age 43. Eight participants were female and four were male.

Procedures for Data Collection and Follow-up

I began initial inquiries through informal oral presentations and sharing my research project with like-minded individuals in my personal and professional social networks. An example of my presentation is provided in Appendix A. A list of candidates was generated from these initial efforts. I invited candidates to participate through the following means: face-to-face conversation, telephone, and mailing the invitation provided in Appendix B that explains my introductory request for respondents.

Once an interested, eligible candidate was located, I provided him or her with further details regarding my research intent and procedures and provided an informed consent document. If the candidate was still interested in participating, I asked that they e-mail to me the signed informed consent. Once that was received, I set up an interview

with the participant that lasted approximately 1 hour. I interviewed each participant using a semistructured interview guide. All interviews were audio recorded, and notes were taken during the interview. Interviews were conducted face to face whenever possible, but data were collected via phone when needed to facilitate a sample that represented diverse sacred beliefs.

Participants were able to review a summary of their interview to ensure that they were satisfied with their responses, and so they could review my interpretations and conclusions for trustworthiness. The above information was included as a part of informed consent and debriefing protocol. Data storage and usage procedures were also reviewed during debriefing as well as confidentiality and anonymity concerns.

Instrumentation

IPA generally includes semistructured, one-to-one interviews to obtain stories, thoughts, and feelings from participants (Smith et al., 2009). I used that method to elicit participants' experiences with forgiveness, the meaning forgiveness had to them, and the role of their sacred belief system in the process. I probed for insights into the roles goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories had on their forgiveness experiences. The participant is the experiential expert on forgiveness in this study, so questions were designed to be open and expansive (Smith et al., 2009). The questioning guide was flexible, and the participants were able to express concerns and insights I had not anticipated that related to the forgiveness experience. Experts on content and methodology reviewed my research question, subquestions, and interview questions for feedback on language, tone, and wording.

An interview schedule was developed to guide respondents in providing information related to the research purpose. Research questions were designed to obtain data regarding

- the meaning of forgiveness
- the role of a sacred belief system in forgiveness
- the relationship between self and other forgiveness
- what motivates individuals to forgive
- strategies that facilitate forgiveness

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your experience with forgiveness? Can you describe a specific experience in which you were able to forgive? What happened?
2. What does that forgiveness experience mean to you now?
3. Was there a turning point in your life that motivated you to become more forgiving? If so, can you describe it? How has your concept of forgiveness changed over time? What motivates you to forgive now (probe for intrapersonal and interpersonal influences)? Can you give an example?
4. What changes in you when you forgive someone? Can you give an example? (Probe for intrapersonal changes in thoughts, feelings, health, and behaviors and interpersonal changes in relationships).
5. What role did/does your religion or spirituality play in your forgiveness experience? Can you give me an example?

6. Are there any particular symbols or signposts from your belief system that have inspired you to forgive, such as visual images, scripture, quotes, songs, poems, historical or contemporary role models, etc.? How have they motivated you?
7. What is your greatest impediment to forgiveness? Can you describe a time when you had difficulty forgiving or were unable to forgive? What did/does that mean to you? How have you attempted to overcome impediments?
8. What is your experience of the relationship between forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self? Can you give me an example?
9. What would you say to someone who had experienced a painful transgression or event and was considering forgiveness?
10. How do you define forgiveness? Is there anything else you would like to add at this time?

Data Analysis Plan

Individual interviews were audio-recorded and consent to do so was obtained from participants. IPA requires a transcript showing all words spoken and notes describing nonverbal utterances such as laughter, significant pauses, and hesitations (Smith et al., 2009). Numerical coding of names was applied to the interview coding and all data-related files to protect participant confidentiality.

Qualitative analysis of data requires not just delineating units of meaning but also providing a holistic description of the essence of the experience (Groenewald, 2004). I coded data looking for themes and patterns and also read transcripts holistically seeking insights and the core of the experiences. I listened to the audio recording while reading

the transcript and re-read as often as necessary to fully comprehend and interpret the data. Notes were taken in the areas of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Descriptive notes focused on the content of the interview, whereas linguistic comments analyzed how the participant specifically used language. Conceptual notes were more interpretive and included questioning of the data and more critical, abstract thinking (Smith et al., 2009).

I first discovered emergent themes in individual participant cases and then identified patterns or 'superordinate' themes that linked emergent themes together (Smith et al., 2009). The frequency with which an emergent theme appeared in transcripts was noted as an indication of its relative importance to the participant (Smith et al., 2009).The context and function of the emergent themes were analyzed for temporal, cultural, and narrative elements (Smith et al., 2009). Oppositional relationships between emergent themes were also explored. For example, peer support served to facilitate forgiveness in some situations, but impeded forgiveness in others.

Once individual cases were analyzed, the emphasis shifted to assessing group similarities and recurrent themes that applied to the majority of participants. Group themes were discovered and validated by noting their frequency across cases and were illustrated through examples taken from individuals. Discrepant cases and responses were examined for their unique value in expanding the understanding of the forgiveness process. Contextual and situational identifiers were part of the rich and thick descriptions provided to clarify divergent responses.

NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program, was utilized to help organize data and aid in the process of coding, memo writing, and data retrieval. It was used to package and store all data in one bundle.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the amount of confidence a qualitative study inspires and can be compared to the quantitative terminology of reliability, validity, and objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Both qualitative and quantitative data employ empirical, rigorous methods designed to ensure results are trustworthy (Patton, 2002). Qualitative studies can measure trustworthiness according to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

Credibility is a measurement of the accuracy of findings as reflected by participants and can be compared to internal validity in quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). It depends on the use of rigorous methods, the training and experience of the researcher, and belief in the value of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). This study used the following methods that aided in establishing credibility: triangulation, member checks, negative case analysis, reflexive journaling, and referential adequacy (Shelton, 2004).

Theory/perspective triangulation occurred as findings were compared to those of other studies, and data was interpreted according to both goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories (Patton, 2002). Member checking was used to determine credibility as participants reviewed and provided input as to the veracity of the data, interpretations, and conclusions. General patterns and similarities in data were explored,

but any disconfirming cases were noted and accounted for so that findings reflected the range of variation. My thinking throughout the research process was documented and interview transcripts were archived for subsequent analysis and verification of findings and conclusions.

I have researched the forgiveness beliefs of the world's major religions and have studied and taught world history, world religions/wisdom traditions, sociology, and psychology at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Travel experiences include different countries in South America, Europe, Asia, and North America as well as extensive travel in the United States. I have taught and worked with people from diverse areas of the world.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied to other situations and can be compared to external validity in quantitative research (Shelton, 2004). A focus of IPA is sensitivity to context, and my journal and interview questions reflect that (Smith et al., 2009). I provided thick, rich descriptions of the social and cultural milieu, and verbatim extracts were used to support all findings. My analysis included comparisons of findings to existing literature and the contributions of my research to the literature. Inconsistencies in the data were noted and an analysis was offered of the reasons behind differences and variations. Study boundaries were discussed and caution was taken in making generalizations.

Dependability

Dependability is similar to reliability in quantitative studies and refers to issues of stability and change in the data collected (Shenton, 2004). A study is seen to be dependable if the work could be repeated and produce similar results (Shenton, 2004). In order to increase the reliability of research and interview questions, two content experts reviewed the questions and provided feedback that was utilized in making revisions. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcript summaries and interpretations for trustworthiness and provide corrections, clarifications, and any new insights they gained throughout the data collection and analysis process. Operational details have been provided that allow replication of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is similar to objectivity in quantitative studies and refers to the extent that findings emerge from the experiences and perspectives of the participants, not the characteristics and preferences of the researcher (Shelton, 2004). Confirmability can be established by providing a clear audit trail that includes raw data, documentation of process and analysis, and methodological and reflexive (personal) notes (Smith et al., 2009). I filed data in such a way that it allows others to follow my research process. My audit trail includes initial notes on research questions, the proposal, the sampling selection procedure and interview schedule, audio tapes, verbatim transcripts, summaries, memos, tables of themes and patterns, draft reports, and the final report.

It is essential that researchers undergo the process of epoche, which means becoming aware of their prejudices, assumptions, and viewpoints (Patton, 2002). Epoche

is an ongoing analytical process that keeps the researcher open to new insights and interpretations (Patton, 2002). I engaged in the process of epoche and worked to bracket out standard meanings and presuppositions so that the data could be interpreted, as much as possible, on its own terms.

Confirmability is enhanced by providing supportive materials that allow others to check research arguments and interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). A considerable number of verbatim quotes from all participants, not just a few, were provided to support interpretations and conclusions. Conclusions and interpretations were related to the literature review. IPA allows for the possibility of a number of legitimate accounts, so that concern was addressed by producing a systematic and transparent account of the research data (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical Procedures

This study complied with guidelines set forth by federal regulations and IRB requirements. Walden University's approval number for this study was 10-06-16-0378858. Participants for this study were adults who had experienced forgiveness and did not include individuals from vulnerable populations. Forgiveness stories could involve confidential narrative that a participant would be unwilling to share in the public domain. Therefore participants were asked to specify any information they would not want shared or that needed to be modified in such a way that participants would be confident individuals or groups could not be identified. Although sampling criteria for this study did not include persons still struggling through the process of healing from a hurtful transgression, talking about forgiveness could inadvertently bring to the surface painful

memories that would create psychological discomfort. Therefore I provided information regarding referral to a trained professional in case problems arose during the interview.

Study participants were provided verbally and in writing informed consent information that adhered to IRB protocol prior to their participation in the interview. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the information they provided, their right to withdraw from the data collection and analysis process at any time, plus the risks and benefits of involvement. Participants were given numbers that were used in place of names for both the storage of data and the reporting of results. Data was kept in a locked physical file and/or a password protected electronic file. Documents will be destroyed five years from the study completion date. Participants agreed both in writing and verbally to the informed consent document before the interview began.

Summary

An IPA study was conducted to explore the forgiveness process as experienced by adults with different sacred belief systems. IPA was chosen because its emphasis on understanding and interpreting experiences in context fit the study's purpose of exploring the meaning of forgiveness and why and how people are able to forgive. A purposeful, heterogeneous sample of 12 was selected to participate in semistructured interviews through a snowballing, or chain referral, approach. The focus of the study was to identify themes and patterns of motivation and cognitive restructuring that transcend any particular sacred belief system. However, divergent data was included and analyzed for trustworthiness purposes. Chapter 4 describes the results of the study in detail as well as

demographics, data collection and data analysis procedures, and trustworthiness evidence.

Chapter 4: Results

I researched the experience and meaning of forgiveness from the perspectives of 12 persons representing 10 different sacred belief systems. Common themes and patterns were found across belief systems, and divergent elements were explained contextually. Both the personal and social domains were studied as participants described changes in their individual well-being as well as their relationships. The relationship between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others was examined.

IPA was used to explore each participant's lived major forgiveness experience and the meaning that experience had for them. Changes in their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors were examined as well as impediments, turning points, and the role their sacred belief system played in their experiences. Participants varied in age, gender, and sacred belief system. The context in which they forgave was described in depth. Participants' perspectives were interpreted through the lenses of goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theories. In this chapter, I detail the results of the study and provide information regarding setting, demographics, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness.

Pilot Interview

A pilot interview was conducted with a counselor friend who had experienced forgiveness and worked with clients on forgiveness. The test interview supported the appropriateness of the interview guide questions and the length of time the interview would take (approximately 1 hour). The need for guiding and focusing the participant on his or her own actual personal experiences versus opinions about forgiveness or the

stories of others was noted and useful in subsequent interviews. I supplied perspective participants with my interview guide and stressed that I required a description of their own personal experience. A summary of the pilot interview was sent to the participant who validated my interpretations. The pilot participant also said the tone of the interview was comfortable and conversational.

Setting

Interviews were conducted at times and places selected by and convenient to the participants. Four interviews were by phone, three in offices, two in churches, two in participants' homes, and one in my home. No substantive variations from the original planned procedures were experienced.

Demographics

Eight participants were female and four were male. Ages ranged as follows: 25, 29, 31, 38, 39, 40, 46, 66, 66, 70, 72, and 76 with a median age of 43. All but one participant had a college degree. All participants were living in the United States at the time of the interview and spoke fluent English. Sacred belief systems as described by participants follow in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Gender, Age, and Self-Described Sacred Belief System

Participant	Gender	Age	Sacred Belief System
P1	F	72	Ancestral; Christian; sensitivity to Sufism, Buddhism, and Lakota spirituality
P2	F	29	Spiritual; raised Buddhist and now follows as philosophy more than religion
P3	M	70	Christian; born and raised on Pine Ridge Indian reservation
P4	M	38	Muslim; born and raised in Iraq
P6	F	39	Devotee of Indian spiritual master Shirdi Sai Baba (Hindu/Muslim); born and raised Catholic in Croatia
P7	F	40	Tibetan Buddhist; born and raised Christian in China
P8	F	66	Baha'i
P9	F	25	Agnostic; born and raised in Norway
P10	M	31	Muslim; born and raised in Egypt
P11	M	46	Jewish; born and raised in South Africa
P12	F	66	Traditional Lakota belief in Sacred Pipe and Red Road

Each participant described a major forgiveness experience. Transgressors included three mothers, two fathers, a boyfriend, a close friend, a coworker, an employer, an interrogator who tortured the participant, a murderer of a participant's mother and pregnant sister, and the situation of racism. The relationship between self and other forgiveness was described by all participants.

Data Collection

Snowball sampling was used to collect data from the 12 participants. Referrals came from the following sources: counselors, pastors, community service workers, teachers, administrators, and a family member who studied and worked with persons from diverse cultural backgrounds. Data collection was conducted over a period of approximately 5 months, from November 11, 2016, to April 18, 2017. Participants were selected based on their personal experience with forgiveness and, in order to secure a representative sample as the study progressed, their sacred belief system. Persons from the major religions were sought out as well as those from less well-known belief systems such as the Baha'i faith, agnosticism, and Native American spirituality. All participants had experienced forgiveness of a major transgression, and saturation was reached regarding the process of forgiveness. Participants processed forgiveness in a similar manner, but with variations based on their sacred beliefs, culture, and situation.

Twelve participants were interviewed either over the phone or face-to-face. All interviews lasted approximately an hour, with a range of from 52 to 92 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded either by iPhone voice memo for face-to-face interviews or through NoNotes call recording. All were then transcribed through NoNotes transcription service. Transcriptions were edited for accuracy while listening to the audio recording. The transcription was then coded in NVivo. Notes were taken during the interview, and summaries of the interview were sent to all participants for their voluntary review. They were urged to inform me of any inaccuracies or misinterpretations as well as any additional information they wished to share. Eleven of the participants reviewed

their summaries and validated the summary's accuracy and trustworthiness. Three corrected minor discrepancies in descriptive data. One provided an additional article and suggested book titles regarding forgiveness.

Data Analysis

Notes were taken during each interview. The audio recording of each case was listened to while checking its interview transcription for accuracy. One to 3 days after the interview a written summary was sent to the participant for member checking.

Coding Process

The transcription was coded through the use of NVivo, and memos were written while reflecting on the data. Seventy-three codes were used throughout the 12 interviews. As interviews continued and saturation was reached, fewer new codes were needed. The 73 codes, organized according to their associated categories, are listed in Appendix D.

Categories

Codes were combined into 10 categories. For example, empathy was combined with understanding of transgressor and transgressor defense mechanism and later became categorized under compassion. Spirituality's role, spiritual support, religious beliefs, and social support were combined into a support/connections category. The categories included the following: descriptions/context, motivation, support/connections, courage to confront, acceptance, compassion, learning and growth, cognitive restructuring, relationship self and other, and meaning of forgiveness.

Descriptive information was obtained when participants shared their personal experiences with forgiveness, providing the thick, rich data needed to understand context.

Referred persons were informed they would need to relate a major forgiveness experience they had processed through beneficially, and they were sent the 10 guiding interview questions. This helped in sorting referrals as some persons were unable to provide the descriptive data needed and, therefore, were unable to participate. The first interview question asked the participant to describe their major forgiveness experience. In the course of the interview, other forgiveness stories supplying descriptive data were also collected, but the focus of the interview was the participants' chosen major forgiveness experience. Stories providing context were first coded as types of description and then combined into the larger description/context category.

Continued questioning and probing provided conceptual and linguistic data. After the first two interviews, data began being conceptually summarized into categories that ultimately became three of the five primary themes: (a) what is forgiveness, (b) why forgive, and (c) how to forgive. Summarizing what, why, and how helped provide conceptual clarification as the interviews progressed. The synopsis of what, why, and how was part of the summary sent to participants for member checking.

The category *what is forgiveness* represented the participants' personal meaning of forgiveness that was interpreted in different ways. At the end of the interview, each participant was asked to give her or his definition of forgiveness, but the meaning of forgiveness was explained by participants at various times throughout the interview. The *why forgive* category elucidated motivational factors and the decision to forgive. Decisional forgiveness does not necessarily lead to emotional forgiveness, as the process of letting go at an affective level is challenging. Therefore, the *how to forgive* category

represented how the participants moved from decisional to more in-depth, emotional forgiveness. Many participants used colorful, imaginative linguistics to describe their experiences and those comments were noted.

Themes

Themes and subthemes were developed from the categories. The conceptual what, why, and how categories listed above were used as themes that explained the participants' experiences. Why forgive was separated into the subthemes of (a) personal and social forgiveness benefits, and (b) a learning mindset that motivated growth and transformation. The learning mindset subtheme explored the theoretical framework of learning goal orientation.

Analyzing the data regarding how to forgive resulted in four subthemes. The participants all had spiritual and/or social connections integral to the process. They described the process as being challenging and requiring courage to confront difficult issues. Processing the transgression in a forgiving manner required compassion. Growth and transformation were facilitated by the creative restructuring of thoughts, which encompassed the second theoretical framework of cognitive restructuring. Participants described the relationship between self and other forgiveness, which illuminated understanding of their experience, but did not fit neatly under the what, why, and how themes. Therefore, a fourth theme was created that focused on self-forgiveness and its relationship to other forgiveness. In addition, participants related the personal growth and transformation they experienced through forgiveness, so a fifth theme was added to examine the development of a forgiveness disposition.

A brief summary of the meaning of each theme is presented here; details and examples from the interview transcripts are presented in the Results section below.

What is forgiveness? Participants described forgiveness as letting go of destructive thoughts and emotions that impede growth through an effortful, compassionate, transformative process.

Why forgive? Participants were motivated to forgive based on benefits to personal well-being and relationships, and a belief that learning and growth were possible and desirable. This theme had two subthemes:

Benefits to forgiveness. Forgiveness benefits included improved psychological well-being, feelings of liberation and freedom, enhanced communication, better relationships, ability to move on, and rewards in the after-life.

Learning mindset. Forgiveness was facilitated through a learning mindset that accepted human weaknesses and failures while valuing and believing in the possibility of personal and/or spiritual growth.

How to forgive. Participants forgave through making supportive connections, finding the courage to confront transgressions, and resolving issues with compassion and creativity. This theme had four subthemes:

Connections. The forgiveness process was difficult and often fear-provoking so connections to R/S and/or social support were essential.

Courage. Forgiveness involved confronting destructive emotions and overcoming fear so a forgiveness issue could be resolved calmly, without anger, avoidance, excuses, or denial.

Compassion. In order to proceed from decisional forgiveness to emotional forgiveness, time and effort were needed to process the transgression with empathy, understanding, humility, and gratitude, and without vengeance or resentment.

Creativity. Forgiveness involved cognitively restructuring a forgiveness issue in a way that led to peace of mind, improved relationships, and transformation.

The relationship between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. In the majority of cases, self-forgiveness created humility and empathy that opened participants' minds and enhanced their ability to forgive others.

Developing a forgiveness disposition. Forgiveness was not a one and done experience; it transformed participants' thinking and created the motivation and ability to continue forgiving.

Discrepancies in Meanings/Cases

Variations in data sometimes occurred because of differences in terminology that needed to be clarified. For example, the majority of participants stated that self-forgiveness was important and paved the way to forgiveness of others. However, P4 stated that he did not forgive himself. With further probing, P4 explained that not forgiving himself reminded him he was not better than others and, therefore, facilitated forgiveness of others as well as motivated him to improve himself. Other participants also stated humility helped them be more forgiving of others, but interpreted self-forgiveness as accepting weaknesses and failures and using that awareness as a way to move forward without the inertia and the negative ruminations unforgiveness can create. P3 stated that he forgave himself but could not accept his weaknesses. He interpreted acceptance as

excusing his failures and preventing growth. When other participants talked about acceptance, they did not see it as excusing but instead as removing blinders, confronting painful realities, and taking responsibility.

All participants stipulated that forgiveness did not mean excusing a transgression, but P10 said people should find excuses for why people commit offenses. Probing for the meaning of *excuses* led to clarification that it did not mean rationalizing or condoning wrong-doing, but instead finding reasons for a behavior and working to understand transgressors. P10 had come to the United States relatively recently so was not yet aware of all the nuances of the English language.

Similar messages as to the importance and benefits of forgiveness were found in all 12 interviews, but there were variations as different scriptures and beliefs guided the decision to forgive. For example, the majority of participants mentioned benefits of forgiveness in the hereafter, but there were differences as to whether the participant felt the soul lived on through reincarnation, heaven, or a new dimension. Participants had different role models and scriptures that guided them, but all stressed the benefits of forgiveness in terms of morality, personal well-being, and relationships.

The importance of connections and support was emphasized by participants, but the type of support varied. For example, P9, who was agnostic, highlighted the social support she received from her mother and stepfather as being essential to the forgiveness process. Other participants stressed the spiritual support they received from a higher power. Some participants, such as P11 and P12, underscored the importance of their identity in a religious community and the support it provided.

Forgiving a major transgression was challenging as participants had to overcome emotional obstacles and face conflict. The source of the impediments encountered varied. Some participants lacked confidence and had to confront their fears and become more assertive so they could courageously face a transgressor or situation. Others were overconfident and self-righteous and had to overcome pride and feelings of superiority so they could approach an issue without blaming or denying responsibility.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Theory triangulation was used to establish the credibility of the study. Participants' forgiveness experiences followed a process similar to that described by Enright and Fitzgibbon (2015c). Factors related to forgiveness, such as empathy (Exline et al., 2008; Riek & Mania, 2012), attachment (Sandage & Crabtree, 2012), and humility (Lavelock et al., 2014) were identified in participants' experiences. All participants went through a process of cognitive restructuring in order to forgive and displayed a learning goal orientation that aided them in the process of forgiveness.

Member checking contributed to credibility as participants were given the opportunity to review the summary of their interviews for accuracy and trustworthiness. Eleven participants took the time to do so. They provided validation as to the trustworthiness of the data, and three corrected minor inaccuracies in descriptive data.

There were variations in the forgiveness experiences of participants based on their sacred belief system and other contextual factors. For example, different belief systems

each have their own role models and scriptures that provided motivation and guidance in forgiveness.

Notes were taken during the interview, and summaries were prepared in the next 1 to 3 days following the interview and sent to participants for member checking. Summaries included a synopsis of the answers to each of the interview guide questions; a brief summation of what forgiveness is, why forgiveness is beneficial, and how to forgive; plus a paragraph summary of the entire interview. Memos containing reflections and interpretations were written during the process of checking transcripts for accuracy and coding.

My own forgiveness experiences, as well as my education in the basic premises of world religions and cultures, were helpful to me in understanding and interpreting participants' experiences. Participants did sometimes refer to religious and spiritual concepts I was unfamiliar with and when they did so, I researched their references to create a better understanding of their meaning. For example, one of my participants was a devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba and I was unacquainted with that particular Indian spiritual leader, so I did more research that allowed a better comprehension of that spiritual belief system. Participants sometimes referred to scripture or stories that motivated them, but they were unable to remember exact details. In those cases, I looked up the references after the interview so I could more fully comprehend the data.

Transferability

This study provided variations in demographics related to sacred beliefs, gender, and age, but all participants described an experience of forgiving a major transgression.

The transgressors and transgressions varied, but all met the criteria of involving a significant relationship and a painful experience. Forgiveness themes and patterns were supported by contextual information, numeration, and verbatim extracts from participants. General forgiveness concepts were presented through the lenses of different sacred beliefs.

Inconsistencies in the data were explained by providing social and cultural information and clarifying differences in terminology used by participants. For example, differences in participants' interpretations of the relationship between self and other forgiveness were explained by variations in the meaning of self-forgiveness as well as differences in the personal experiences and personalities of participants.

Participants' experiences corresponded with the forgiveness literature review which was mirrored in the codes and categories. For example, the importance of empathy, humility, attachment, and gratitude were reflected in both an analysis of the literature and coding participant descriptions of their forgiveness experience.

Dependability

All participants were asked the same questions as presented in the interview guide, though not necessarily in the same order. Responses to all 10 interview guide questions were summarized and then member checked. Data, including transcripts, summaries, notes, and audio recordings were stored so the study could be replicated.

Participants in this study were referred by "gatekeepers" who were familiar with the history and experience of the participants chosen. This helped increase the dependability of the research as referral sources were able to verify the eligibility of

potential participants and facilitate their willingness to speak candidly. Participants' experiences with forgiveness shared common elements and paralleled research included in the literature review.

Confirmability

A clear audit trail was provided that included: verbatim transcripts and audio recordings of interviews; summaries of interviews that were member checked by participants; e-mail correspondence with participants, referral sources, and academic personnel; drafts of work in progress; journal entries, notes, and memos; plus codes, categories, and themes. Participants have been identified only by a number to protect confidentiality. Names and identifying information were deleted from the transcripts.

The interview guide was used flexibly but consistently with all participants. Questioning was used to clarify participant answers or to probe for deeper understanding.

Coding and categorizing were conducted using NVivo software. Recurrence across cases was numerated, and verbatim quotes were used to provide confirmability. Interpretations and conclusions were related to information in the literature review and the theoretical framework.

Results

All participants described a major forgiveness experience and responded to questions regarding the meaning of forgiveness, the motivation to forgive, the process of forgiveness, and the relationship between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. Participant responses were coded and categorized. Five major themes and six subthemes were developed and supported as follows.

Theme 1: What is Forgiveness?

Participants described forgiveness as letting go of destructive thoughts and emotions that impede growth through an effortful, compassionate, transformative process.

"Letting go" was used by all participants at some point in the interview to describe forgiveness, and all participants experienced growth and learning that contributed to better psychological well-being and improved relationships. Time, effort, and challenge were part of each participant's story and all participants felt the struggle was necessary and worth the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits that resulted from forgiveness work. P4 defined forgiveness as "Just let things go. Do not hold the grudge towards others. And be a better person." P6 described forgiveness as, "Like freeing yourself. Letting go. Allowing yourself to breathe with a full heart and lungs." She felt forgiveness was an "underestimated word" and the "basis for happiness." "The ability to be able to let go of the sadness or the hatred or the anger or the negative feelings associated with a person, a situation, or a tragic event," was P12's definition of forgiveness.

Forgiveness can be misunderstood and, therefore, participants specified that forgiveness was *not* excusing or condoning transgressions. P1 warned, "Don't confuse forgiveness with making the wrong okay, because it's not." None of the participants described forgiveness as pardoning or overlooking a transgression.

It was important to all participants that the transgression was identified and that action was taken to improve the situation or protect oneself. Participants needed to feel

safe in order to forgive. P9's comment regarding individuals who forgave someone but still did not trust them was, "Why did you forgive them if you think they are just gonna go and do it again, or do it with someone else?" P2 emphasized the importance of protecting oneself while acting fairly.

> Forgiveness is being able to accept what someone has done to hurt you and then not hold that against them and be able to actually like act fairly towards that person. It means being aware of what the other person can do to still hurt you and protecting yourself, but without trying to be malicious and hurt them back, and also like being able to let go and not holding on to this thought and letting it affect you. (P2)

The difference between forgetting and forgiving was described by participants, and they agreed they were different concepts. Forgetting may be because the transgression is no longer significant or was effectively denied or avoided, whereas forgiving required confronting and dealing with the transgression. P4 clarified that "Forgiving is when you still remember the incident, but you forgive that person with full image." P12 stated, "I was able to forgive, and I will never forget, never." P3 explained that initially he believed forgiveness meant the transgression "would be erased from his mind and thoughts," but he found that "Gee, big surprise, it didn't happen that way." He explained:

> Right now as we're sitting, my concept is that in order to forgive a human being I've got to be able to let go of all of my weaknesses, my anger, my vindictiveness, my resentment, and then see the good in the other human being. The qualities that they have that I want to have, that I want to possess. (P3)

Participants used their forgiveness experience to grow and learn, versus trying to block it from their memory.

Separating the transgression from the transgressor was included in forgiveness descriptions, as forgiveness did not mean abandoning efforts to seek justice or hold persons accountable. P10 was tortured and wanted to do what he could to be sure others did not suffer, but he also wanted to remain true to his beliefs and principles.

> I will never ever forget what happened because that's me, that's my history, that's my experience and I will keep it in my mind so keep working to stop this from happening to anyone else, but I absolutely forgive you and I have nothing against you and I love you as a person and wish you the best. You have done a mistake and you will be held accountable. (P10)

The importance of accepting that all human beings make mistakes and need forgiveness was mentioned by all participants. P8 commented, "It's the act that you don't have to accept in life, but you have to accept and forgive and love the person because they're still human beings, they're on their path."

Forgiveness was compared to unconditional love by P5 who explained that once she was able to separate the transgression from the transgressor she could love her family unconditionally. She described a scene with her granddaughter.

> I just want to let you know that I love you unconditionally. I may not like the things you do and they may bother me, but it's never going to take away the way I feel about you as a person. I will always love you. (P5)

P5 went on to stipulate that, "I'm not making excuses, okay. She did it. Don't like that, but I still love the person." Before P5's major forgiveness experience she felt she was holding back love and "unconditional love is everything about not holding back."

Theme 2: Why Forgive?

Participants were motivated to forgive based on benefits to personal well-being and relationships and a belief that learning and growth were possible and desirable.

All participants experienced emotional and physical pain that motivated their decisions to embark on the forgiveness process. They described sleep problems, high blood pressure, loneliness, being stuck in the past, and feeling burdened as ways they suffered with unforgiveness. P11 noted "I wasn't able to be at peace. There was always something there, whether it was a headache or my stomach hurt or – anything like that." P3 compared unforgiveness to "scurrying around in the dark like vermin." After forgiveness he was "not afraid to be in the light."

Subtheme: Benefits to forgiveness. Forgiveness benefits included improved psychological well-being, feelings of liberation and freedom, enhanced communication, better relationships, ability to move on, and rewards in the after-life.

All participants reported they felt happier and healthier when they forgave. P1 described her forgiveness experience as "a great release of joy and exhilaration" and "a spiritual explosion." P5 stated, "I just feel so free, so whole. I feel complete. I feel content." P7 explained, "Forgiveness is the one thing that can get rid of the pain."

A majority of the participants referred to forgiveness as enabling them to feel lighter, less burdened, and more peaceful. "A burden just being lifted" was how P8 described forgiveness. P6 noted it gave her freedom and a better way of life.

> It gives you like freedom. It gives you the wings to fly. You just feel you don't have any luggage on your back regarding many issues and you can be more free for your children. You become lighter and happier and more detached, and the more you learn how to live that way you will see that you are better off in the future, much better off. I just don't feel this hurt inside of my body. (P6)

P10 contrasted forgiveness with unforgiveness.

> I've been on both sides of the aisle and I can tell you every time I feel negative energy, I have a headache, my hands were shaking, my face gets red and hot. Every time I forgive, I feel so peaceful and comfortable and just a smile pops out of my face with no reason, so it makes me high. (P10)

Forgiveness opened up communication channels for participants and allowed them to escape what P2 referred to as "your own little prison." P4 noted that forgiveness allowed him to see his offender more clearly.

> There's something that kind of block me from seeing him directly, seeing him clearly. But after forgiving, uh, it's some kind of cloud goes away and I can see that person and maybe I can communicate better with that person. Maybe I understand him or her better. (P4)

Improved relationships and less loneliness were benefits of forgiveness for all participants. P5 noted, "I don't feel the loneliness." P7 explained she became less critical of others and increased the number of friends she had.

> Just in the past, I think my personality is kind of very picky. Especially for my friend, when I talk with people, I meet people and I can see there are bad things immediately. Now I feel more free, comfortable with my friend. And when I see some friend, I always say there are good things. Now I understand, I have more compassion. I think I have more friends than before. (P7)

Revenge was rejected and forgiveness was chosen as an ethical, productive way to solve a transgression issue. P9 described revenge as behavior that could be as offensive as that of the action that needs forgiveness.

> If I was going the revenge route I wouldn't have respected me . . . If that's the way you are willing to forgive I think that's almost as disrespectful as what he did. . . . I mean you are two players in this game and if one of them plays bad and then the other one plays bad, it's just a bad game overall, and then it's just not gonna go anywhere. (P9)

P10 did not want to waste his energy on negativity.

> I don't waste my energy on anger or madness on someone who hurt me, no. I use this power and I use this time and thinking to go do good for me, For Him [God], for our community, and create a better environment that both of us will stop hurting each other. (P10)

Forgiving a major transgression enabled participants to move forward with their lives in a healthy manner. P9 said, "I don't like being stuck in the past." P12 acknowledged that harboring hatred does not affect the offender, but it does cause personal harm.

> I think that you're more healthy. In other words -- okay, let's put it this way. If you harbor hatred or anger or ah negative feelings towards someone or something or some event or whatever it is, then it only eats at your heart because oftentimes, that other person or that other event, they don't care. You know, they've gone on their way or that event has happened two years ago and it's over. And so, if you haven't dealt with whatever the situation is, then it only hurts you as a person because they don't care. (P12)

Forgiveness was deemed especially important if time was a factor and family members were involved. P11 was concerned that his father may die before forgiveness occurred and explained, "There's something about telling somebody how you feel before the eulogy that's important. And I just needed to know that it was heard. And so that was my main motivation. Why am I going to wait until he dies?" P6 also believed a parent, her mother, would die in the next few years and was motivated to forgive. She told her mother,

> You and I may be arguing in this life like this, and we might be on each other's throats the whole time, and we may not have any connections, but on the soul level I have to help you . . . Because I think that a mother is like the main focus in your life. She's the one who brings you into this world. (P6)

Religious beliefs inspired 10 of the participants to forgive, and all of the participants were motivated by beliefs they held sacred. A belief in karma motived P7, a

Tibetan Buddhist, who felt that if she was unable to forgive her father, suffering would continue in this life and into the next.

> Because if I say bad thing to my dad or even I hit my dad or if I kill my dad because I'm angry, then next life, I got the bad result again. So, it's never end. So . . . even though my dad is bad to me, I still forgive him or even though I do better things for him. I'd be good to him. And actually, maybe next life, we are going to be good. And it's good for everybody. So there's no reason to fight. (P7)

P4, a Muslim, stated, "God will forgive us if we forgive each other." He received encouragement from his cleric to forgive. P6, a devotee of Indian spiritual leader Shirdi Sai Baba, talked about awareness of a next life and explained, "I believe the soul goes somewhere and the more you forgive the less burden and luggage you'll have on your back . . . because with hatred you're creating this lower energy inside of you." P8, a Baha'i, expressed her belief that "God wants us to forgive; probably because it's good for us . . . I believe all of God's laws are for our benefit."

Subtheme: Learning mindset. Forgiveness was facilitated through a learning mindset that accepted human weaknesses and failures while valuing and believing in the possibility of personal and/or spiritual growth.

Participants expressed their need to accept human frailty, versus denying it or becoming discouraged or angry about it. Viewing human beings as imperfect, but capable of learning and growth provided the motivation participants needed to embark upon the forgiveness process.

P2 expressed her appreciation for the "learning mindset" in motivating forgiveness.

> I think it's so important to try to forgive yourself. . . It's an instinctual thing to be like "Oh my God, I'm so stupid. Why would I do that?" and be haunted by memories of stupid things you did in the past, but I think like with yourself it's important to know like over time you evolve, and that you are improving and as long as you know that you are trying your best what more can you really ask for. (P2)

Participants viewed transgressions as inevitable, but recognized that how they dealt with them was a matter of choice. Learning from mistakes was viewed as what counts in forgiveness. P8 reflected, "And it's not making mistakes that's really important I have found, it's how once you realize you've made a mistake, how you deal with it and how you change things. So, that's the important part." P9 noted, "I wanna feel that if, if it's like another person they both learn from what happened . . . Like I wanna know that everyone involved in what happened has a learning experience with it to be able to forgive or be forgiven." P12 explained her "belief system is that we know that we are only human, but because we are human, we will make mistakes. But we should learn from them. We should not continue to repeat them."

Participants expressed the sense of accomplishment they felt when they were able to learn from a forgiveness situation.

> At the end of the day, I just kind of take a retrospect of what happened and see what I could have done better or not. And then if I see that I'm doing better, then I feel so happy about myself and say, okay now you've learned. I'm so happy that you learned, you know? And then I feel proud of myself and then I got like really, oh wow okay. (P6)

That gladness in being able to forgive could be for this life or the next, as P8 stated, "We really need to develop our spiritual attributes because those are the things we're going to need for the next world."

A learning mindset motivated participants to open their minds to new perspectives and ways of thinking about a transgression. P1 described her stimulus to forgive as, “A whole other pattern opens up really. An expanding of space. An expanding of heart. You’re able to be yourself and literally have more space to work it out.” P11 described what he called “that fundamental misperception of ‘just let’s keep things going as we know them,’ and that’s not growth. That’s just habits.”

In summary, participants were hurting from a major transgression and were motivated to start the forgiveness process because they wanted to improve their well-being and relationships and hold true to their sacred beliefs. A learning mindset set them on their forgiveness path, as they were willing to put in the time and effort necessary for growth and transformation to occur.

Theme 3: How to forgive

Participants forgave through making supportive connections, finding the courage to confront transgressions, and resolving issues with compassion and creativity.

Subtheme: Connections. The forgiveness process was difficult and often painful and fear-provoking, so connections to spiritual and/or social support were essential.

Each participant described social and/or spiritual connections that gave them the courage to confront challenging issues involving self and relationships with others. Sacred beliefs, spirituality, role models, family and faith communities, clergy, and therapists provided guidance, support, and attachments that facilitated the forgiveness process. Staying connected and true to what participants deemed a positive identity aided forgiveness.

Spirituality and faith connections facilitated forgiveness in 11 of the 12 participants. P1 described her spirituality as playing a part in forgiveness "all the time." "I always speak to my God," stated P10. P2 was aided by cognitive-behavioral therapy, but felt spirituality strengthened her and enabled her to break free of her pain.

> It was like the only thing that could get me out of this pain was spirituality, and so I just started like really anytime I started feeling weak I would be like reading things, writing down mantras. In my room I put up all these pictures that were Zen-like and healing. . . . The spirituality it just makes me think of the larger, the bigger picture of things and that brings me to a point where I'd rather focus on the things that matter more.
> (P2)

P4 said his faith played "a major role" in forgiveness, and P6 said spirituality was "number one, it's at the top" in helping her forgive. P8 described the role of R/S as, "The ultimate. It's paramount I guess is a better word." Therapy, spiritual group experience, and her "strong connection" to God guided P5 to forgiveness.

> I feel that God is within me. I don't totally trust myself to be able to figure it out on my own which is fine. I mean, I'd just as soon rely on Him. It takes a lot of burden off . . . God's always there inside me, outside me, around me sending me messages. (P5)

Support from a faith community was important in guiding and supporting P11, who described himself as very culturally Jewish. He noted, "What I always had felt about forgiveness and grief is that it's communal. That we have a sense of not being solo and isolated, but being in a group." His rabbi guided him in the forgiveness process and encouraged his "proactive involvement in the process of forgiveness," which helped him move forward.

> It [the forgiveness process] would not guarantee that I would be forgiven. That's not – that wasn't the religious aspect. It was allowing my forgiveness to move out

> into the universe. And that entirely removed the anger I felt towards my dad, the hurt that I felt towards my dad. (P11)

P12's Lakota spiritual community and identity guided her to forgiveness. Before P12's mother's murder, her mother had reminded her, "Now, always remember the [traditional] values that you were taught when you were young. You know, always be truthful to people. Be compassionate. Be respectful." She credited her parents, who were "important role models," for strengthening her and explained, "How they conducted themselves and how they spoke and how they – in situations, different things, they taught me a lot."

Connections with role models were important to a majority of the participants. Role models provided participants with a vision during the forgiveness process. For example, P3 met Black pastors who had experienced more horrible racial trauma than he had as an American Indian. He remembered talking to one of the pastors whose younger sister had been burned to death while he could only watch. P3 asked how he could forgive, and the pastor said, "First of all there's two things you can do about any problem in the world. First you pray about it, and second you talk about it." At first it didn't make sense to P3, but through further dialogue he decided, "If this black person who went through all that pain and suffering can still love white people, you know, what the heck's wrong with me."

The Prophet Mohamed was a role model of forgiveness for P10, and he received spiritual guidance from the Quran.

> Many phrases in the Quran tell me how to be good to my people, good to my community, and have to forgive whoever hurt you. You need to be forgiving and

> the Quran teaches me that if you will respond to the hurt, the hateful, to the hate by hate, hate will never stop. Hate will keep going. (P10)

Studying Buddhism with a good teacher helped P7 forgive her father.

> My khenpo, my teacher, gave me lots of instruction, lots of teachings about – including forgiveness. I think for my understanding, what is Buddhism, in just two things. One is compassion. One is wisdom. We say in the one word, is to do all the good things to all sentient beings. That means to love all your – all the sentient beings, including your enemy. (P7)

Sacred scriptures from an organized religion helped a majority of the participants, but guidance also came from family and nonreligious cultural values. For example, P9 was agnostic, but spoke often during the interview about the importance of staying true to herself and her values. When asked what factors helped her through the forgiveness process she stated,

> Definitely the support from my mom and stepdad, um, being able to look at it from multiple viewpoints but still staying true to myself. And for her [mother] to be able to accept him if I accepted it, which I could never if she was like I can't. Like you can be with him but I just won't look at him the same way again, then I don't think I could have been with him. (P9)

P9 grew up in a supportive environment that accepted mistakes as part of a learning process. She stated, "I've always gotten the support regardless of what my choices have been. Even if they have been really bad choices, they've always like they've let me do my own mistakes."

P9's strong family support, guidance, and connections played a role in her life that was similar to that of the role religion and spirituality played in the lives of the other eleven participants. However, P6 questioned whether relying on a person would provide the stable source of connection necessary for forgiveness. She felt people needed to find a

connection "which is always alive and that is not a human being; that is something higher." She stated,

> Honestly I don't know if anything else other than religion helps in really letting go. We can go to a psychiatrist and maybe we can resolve some issue on a mental level, but spirituality resolves issues on a heart level. Mentally they [psychiatry] clear some things in their minds but with spirituality it can be so transformative, so life changing. You just feel that – somebody just takes your heart and cleans it. Cleans it, cleans it, cleans it and that's the only way that you can actually go forward or you can go to a psychiatrist plus have religion. I think a combination of both is great. (P6)

Participants 2 and 5 explained that therapy was helpful to them, but emphasized their spirituality was also very important. They both noted that not all therapists were helpful, but they had each found one that aided them in the forgiveness process. Participant 11 mentioned he had therapy, but focused on his Jewish faith community as facilitating his forgiveness experience.

Connecting with a higher power through prayer was mentioned as important by a majority of participants. For example, P3 stated the first step in forgiveness for him is prayer, and stated, "I pray for God to take these weaknesses from me." P8 also described prayer as a first step and said, "I go right to prayer. I don't waste any time on it anymore." P8 related a forgiveness experience that she believed haunted her because she had not initially comprehended its impact on her and, therefore, she had neglected praying about it. She stated the problems with her offender "probably impacted me more than the other things that were terrible. It just kind of went by me without thinking, and so I got into a kind of a vicious cycle of almost hatred."

P10 said that speaking to God, "helped me a lot. God changed a lot for me and he helped me a lot to change. He showed me different signs." P12 explained that if she hadn't gone into her prayer room and prayed really hard about the murder of her mother and pregnant sister "my heart would have been hard, and things would not have gone for me personally as well as they have since then because I was able to forgive."

In addition to prayer, talking to nonjudgmental persons was deemed important to participants because it allowed for processing of the transgression and healing. P1 stated wounded healers and others who are courageous enough to look at pain and suffering facilitate the process. She added that "building the house of sorrow" was necessary as people go from "blaming or shaming" to "understanding why, maybe, just maybe this has a little bit to do with me."

> Talking about it over and over, healing from it, is the most important thing. And you can't forgive, you can't actually get down to forgiving until you've healed. You don't forgive from your head. It's not a matter of thinking. (P1)

P3 noted that he needed to talk about his anger but it needed to be in a safe, nonjudgmental environment.

> Need to feel some kind of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You know, safety first as we go down, then the other stuff helped a lot, but I needed to feel secure - someplace to talk about this stuff. I had to keep my head . . . those are the decisions I had to make before I put them in my mouth, talk about these feelings. I had to evaluate the people I'm communicating to. If they were comfortable and could handle this stuff. People who wouldn't judge but also wouldn't be incited to go do something horrible. Attack a wagon train or something. (P3)

Participants' forgiveness turning points were tied to their connections. Participants' sacred value systems encouraged forgiveness, but a simple belief that forgiveness is a virtue is insufficient for in-depth, emotional processing. The participants'

painful experiences put their values to the test, and their support systems and attachments allowed them to process the transgression in a positive and transformative manner. The turning point for P3 was related to finding a role model in his faith community with whom he could actually identify. P4 described needing to be developmentally ready to respond to the forgiveness encouragement provided by his cleric and family. P6 and P7 converted to religions that transformed their thinking and provided the support needed to forgive. After P2 achieved independence from her abuser, she was sustained in the forgiveness process by an effective cognitive-behavioral therapist and spirituality.

Having positive connections with supportive persons helped provide the courage needed to confront painful situations and regulate fear and destructive emotions. Some participants referenced the need to overcome shame and lack of confidence, while others needed to conquer their pride and feelings that they were better than others. Both situations stemmed from fear of confronting difficult issues, and both were resolved with the help of supportive connections. Table 2 summarizes participants' guidance and support connections.

Table 2

Listing of Guidance and Support Connections Described by Participants

Guidance Connections	Support/Attachment Connections
Identification with sacred beliefs	Prayer
Role Models	Relationship with high power
Sacred scripture	Religious Communities
Stories from belief system	Nonjudgmental family and friends
Inspirational literature	Supportive listening groups
Clergy	Visual images and symbols
Therapists	Music

Subtheme: Courage. Forgiveness involved overcoming destructive emotions so a forgiveness issue could be courageously confronted calmly, without anger, avoidance, excuses, or denial.

The difficulty of controlling their emotions and processing a transgression productively was described as an impediment to forgiveness by all participants. P4 stated, "You have to go through that feeling emotion door to forgive people. Emotions and feelings is like a concrete door that you have to go through, because you have to step on your feelings and emotions." He described the difficulties he had with confrontation and "stepping on his emotions" and explained, "There was kind of a strange force trying to prevent me from not, you know, some psychological force, I cannot describe it what it is. Maybe my pride, my vanity, I don't know." Confronting persons he was angry with brought him much relief and he decided, "I have to be ruled by reason, not by passion. I cannot be mad at persons any time they say something."

When P5 could not genuinely grieve for her husband after his passing, she discovered with the help of a therapist that she had repressed anger at her deceased mother. She struggled to uncover her hidden emotions and finally wrote down her feelings in a letter to her mother. Facing her unresolved resentment allowed her to truly forgive and "transformed her life." Her advice to others who may be in a similar situation was:

> Don't be afraid of anything. As scared as you might be, just get on your hiking boots and run as fast as you can. Maybe forget that there might be a little pain attached to it but embrace it, embrace it. Embrace it because it's just so freeing. (P5)

P5 now prays, “Lord, if you have some unforgiveness for me that I don’t recognize or I have pushed down, I want you to make it clear to me when the time is right for me and the other person, whether they’re living or dead.”

P6 also described repressed anger at an abusive parent. She believed that when we do not forgive, another similar situation comes into our lives to challenge us again. She explained that, “If again you can’t forgive it becomes part of you, you’re repressing it.” When she surrendered herself to Shirdi Baba she felt strengthened and able to confront her fears and difficulties.

> Listen to all my problems, everything that’s happening like I just give to you and all the people that come to me they come for a reason. Those who have to stay let them stay. Those who have to go let them go – like just always protect me. Like be there for me. So that’s somehow, it’s like putting your baggage out. (P6)

Lakota mythology utilizes the character of Iktomi the Trickster to help people find the courage to face difficulties in life. P12 compared unforgiveness to being tricked into lying to yourself or others, and forgiveness as seeking truth and light.

> When those [Trickster] situations happen I think that if people continue to lie to themselves or to lie to people around them they only get worse and worse and worse. On the other hand if you tell the truth and seek the truth and seek the light . . . things seem to work a lot better out in your life versus getting caught up in the people that walk around with little clouds over their heads and live a negative life. (P12)

Fear of conflict stopped some participants from speaking up for themselves and led to avoidance. P11 described how fear used to stop him from saying things he would “feel in his gut” he should say and he related that, “I just covered it up.” When he learned to forgive he no longer felt threatened.

> Other people's thoughts when different from our own are not dangerous. We don't have to protect. We don't have to defend. It's just simply their thoughts, their actions, their words. It might reflect negatively on them, but it's not dangerous. The fight or flight is because we feel threatened. And that's been my growth – nobody can threaten me. (P11)

P1 described ridding herself of anger and feeling safe once she asserted herself and set boundaries with her transgressor.

> For some reason, that explosion or standing up to what was necessary for my point of view, really popped the bubble. It popped the bubble of my anger and I made a boundary. I was safe. I was protected. I was in control. (P1)

P2 stated, "I used to have this problem where I had relationships where I'd let people walk all over me and now I'm very firm." Asserting themselves protected some participants from being hurt and transgressed against. They then felt safe enough to proceed with forgiveness.

Participants agreed it was important to confront a problem, and forgiveness meant having the courage to do so without anger or vindictiveness. P10 developed the following phrase during years of revolutionary conflict that helped motivate him and his group to approach transgressions without vengeance, "Our peaceful movement, our peaceful way, is stronger than their bullets." He noted that, "Forgiveness is not a struggle with the other person; forgiveness is really struggle with yourself." The biggest struggle he had was the emotional conflict he faced within when he forgave his torturer. Part of him wanted to punish and hurt the interrogator instead of pursuing justice through legal means and staying true to his principles and beliefs. To achieve peace in his mind and heart he stated, "I forgave myself on that. I gave myself this forgiveness. So forgive myself for my forgiveness for someone else."

Courage allowed participants to conquer fear and accept things as they were instead of how they assumed things should be. It enabled them to strive for a deeper understanding of the transgression. The root of the word acceptance means "to receive or take hold of something, grasp or understand (Williams & Pennman, 2011, p. 165)." Accepting the situation, overcoming destructive emotions, and embracing the need for a deeper understanding allowed participants to think more clearly and process the transgression more productively.

Subtheme: Compassion. In order to proceed from decisional forgiveness to emotional forgiveness, time and effort were needed to process the transgression with empathy, understanding, humility, and gratitude, and without vengeance or resentment.

Compassion, empathy, and understanding were terms used by participants to describe how they were able to forgive. P4 explained, "The more you understand the person, the more you understand his cultural, social, also psychological perspective . . . the better you forgive the person because you are aware of the elements, you are aware of the facts." Empathizing helped P5 forgive her mother. She stated, "My mother must have been hurting so hard to do that to me. She didn't know unconditional love and how could she. She grew up in an orphanage." Forgiving her father was easier when P7 realized her father was suffering too. She noted, "I think he says bad things to everybody. So he has no friend. I'm sorry for my dad. . . I know it's not his fault, like he just be controlled by the angry." P10 was able to empathize with his interrogator and torturer.

> I feel like he is a poor guy. I look at him like he is really, really like needs help. He is, from my experience with him, he was always worried, always wondering, he always had the weird feeling he is not safe. (P10)

The torturer's actions were never excused or condoned by P10 but he was able to consider that "maybe you [the torturer] believed that was the good thing to do, the right thing to do, but that was wrong, and I will never hold this against you."

Transgressions are actions that do not meet expectations and assumptions and are therefore deemed incorrect (Thompson et al., 2005). P11 learned to adjust his expectations and forgive other people for not being like him, plus he worked to appreciate the positive traits of his transgressors. He stated, "Forgiveness really is a way that allows empathy to replace the guilt." P11 realized his dad was an "incredibly dogmatic individual and more than stubborn." He knew it would be unrealistic to believe his father could change so he had to accept that, and work to appreciate the good things his father had given him, as well as understand his father's hurt pride.

P2 also realized her mother would not be able to change into the kind of parent she would want, but she came to accept "that's just who she is." P2 questioned whether she really empathized with her mom, but she did feel she "logically understood why she is where she is."

> My mother didn't get to have the education and upbringing that I did and she didn't get to finish her schooling, like she was pulled out of school when she was 11 or 12 or something like that and just forced to start working in the factories and stuff. (P2)

Empathy and logically understanding were differentiated by P2.

> I have trouble like truly empathizing meaning I actually have absorbed their perspective and I understand. Like I understand things in sort of a very logical or detached way but not like truly feel it and actually relate to or even sympathize with it. And actually often times it's strange because in a big picture I'm very

> compassionate, but in the individual scale I can often be very cold and uncompassionate because I hold people to high standards. (P2)

The conflict between judgment and compassion was sometimes mitigated by humility. P2 stated she held people to high standards, but remembering her past failures and embarrassments helped her acknowledge that others are also developing and improving. She was working on becoming more empathetic.

> Sometimes like I will look at the fact that I have done some stupid shit and or I used to be a much worse person and maybe less sensitive and I was like kind of clumsy in my social skills and as a result there's a lot of stuff that I'd be very embarrassed of today and maybe even hurtful of others. And so because I know I did that and that I have evolved and become a better person I apply that to other people. And say, like if time has passed, is it possible that this person has also changed and improved? (P2)

P3 used humility to settle down his emotions and gain a more compassionate perspective.

> To remember that I had done more than anything anybody has ever done to me. And, when things happen to me, when that's negative, one of the things I finally come down to is that hey, that's you know, that's okay. These are my sins coming back to haunt me cuz I know I did a lot more worse than I've ever been held accountable for; worse and many, many times more. So I think about that and it's easier for me to start letting go. (P3)

P4 reminded himself he is "full of mistakes. So I'm not a better person than other people." That reminder served as his starting point for processing forgiveness. P5 stated her biggest impediment to forgiveness was feeling she was better than other people and explained, "I have to correct myself all the time." When she does, she is able to open her mind to understanding others better.

> Where did I get it? Probably because I was insecure and so to overcome that insecurity, I thought myself better. I'm not. I'm just another person who God created different from this other person. So, I have to correct myself a lot. I have a lot of faults. I mean – yeah, I was given a lot of gifts, you know, but I didn't make them. Those were given to me and so I have to remind myself that I was not the giver of the gifts that I have received. So, it's taking a second look and looking

> harder and to say, okay. You're creating your own stumbling block. Why – you know, give them some credit. Get to know them a little bit better and maybe you'll find out that they're a heck of a lot better than you think they are. (P5)

Hurtful experiences can be the stimuli that open the door to understanding and compassion and, therefore, can be looked at as a blessing. P1 admired a teacher who, when humiliated, "did not go into reaction; who would state his case and quietly walk away. And I really wanted to be like that." She was inspired by the Benedictine Spirituality which extols the benefits of humility, and stated, "Pray that every day you are humiliated."

Admitting weaknesses and failure was painful for participants, but the fruit of that pain was growth and transformation. Letting go of the idea that people should behave a certain way, and "taking more responsibility for other people's behavior and accepting it as part of my own problems," was a catalyst for P11's forgiveness. Humility allowed him to explore how his actions may have been misinterpreted, and it led to more empathy for his transgressor.

> It's not asking someone to, "Please, would you apologize to me" to make me feel better. It's actually the opposite. It's "I'm sorry for what I've done" and I didn't intend because you're not in their head; so they have misperceived what you've done as well. (P11)

Humility opened up minds to forgiveness, while gratitude allowed participants to keep their thoughts positive. The prayers of P12 during her difficulties included thanks to the Creator for "the blessings that you brought into my life." P7 described the importance of detaching from unfulfilled expectations, and "paying more attention to positive things like compassion." She looked to her teachers as role models and stated, "They are just

very busy and [have] compassion to help others. They don't have no time to hate somebody. Focus on the positive things."

In summary, taking the time to empathize and understand transgressors facilitated participants' ability to forgive. Awareness of personal shortcomings increased compassion for others and the ability to empathize. Gratitude helped participants keep a positive focus that allowed them to interact benevolently with others. Compassionate understanding opened the door to viewing a forgiveness issue in a new light that led to growth and transformation.

Subtheme: Creativity. Forgiveness involved cognitively restructuring a forgiveness issue in a way that led to peace of mind, improved relationships, growth and transformation.

Participants confronted transgressions with courage and compassion and made the decision to forgive, but emotionally letting go of a transgression took processing time in which offensive behavior could be viewed from a new perspective. Attachments to certain expectations and ways of thinking were released. Prior assumptions and the reality of the transgression were then synthesized and cognitions were transformed (Thompson et al., 2005).

P2 described a turning point in therapy when she realized that her emotions came from "underlying assumptions or beliefs," and she started "rewiring" her mind.

> It was like an aha moment. I remember where it's like okay then what leads you to feel angry like that, that you want to erupt. Then what leads you to think that thought that led you there, and then we just kept peeling it back one layer at a time, and then I just realized, Oh My God, you are right these emotions always come from underlying sort of thoughts or beliefs and assumptions. And so he

> made me really question my assumptions, and then I remember I just started rapidly improving. I went full in on trying to re-write my mental code. (P2)

P6 learned to be more patient and appreciate people and problems that come into her life because "they come for a reason." She was assaulted by a family member which was a painful experience, but she has now been able to reframe that experience.

> Somehow I'm like okay. It's maybe even now I will do the job which I will help people who were assaulted in this way or whatever because you know and you were there and you have the experience. So have the experience, have the thoughts but feeling okay about it because you let go. If you don't let go you can't help others because you're too much into it. Do something, there's a reason why it happened. I don't take it personally anymore. (P6)

Instead of viewing offensive people and situations as problems, she views them as opportunities for growth.

P5 also started "looking at people in a different way," and "being open to change." She asks herself, "Okay, this didn't work out. Okay, Lord, how can I do this differently?"

P3 had to change his thinking patterns, and "see things from somebody else's point of view, cause I couldn't trust mine anymore." He gave the following example to illustrate the change that needed to occur:

> I spent some time in jail, and one guy stole a cigarette from me. I went after him, and I hurt him you know. One cigarette. It never occurred to me to think about when I was on the outside I stole a car. You know the value of each of those wasn't even the same. My delusional and grandiose thinking in thought process made those equal. (P3)

Some participants described their change in thinking as letting go of attachments and expectations. P7 described the root of pain and suffering as attachment. She was able to give up expectations as to how her father should behave, but was still working at

relaxing expectations for her son and husband. To help lessen expectations regarding her son, P7 imagines he is someone else's child when his behavior disappoints her.

> We love our kids very much. But if the kid is bad, we are very suffering. And if we think the kid is like all the other kids, because the kid is not our kid - it's my friend's kid, or it's my enemy's kid. We are not suffering, right? (P7)

Learning to detach has lessened P7's anger and strengthened her forgiveness. In the past she would "be angry for several days." She explained she still gets very angry "but maybe about ten minutes after that I will be nice . . . I say sorry to him." Adjusting expectations of others and restructuring his thinking also lessened P11's anger.

> It's just the forgiveness has allowed me to release all anger. Anger about people who are just being themselves. My way of giving up the way people should behave is only for me. There's no contract that the rest of the world has signed with me about how they should act. . . So it's kind of pulled me back from being just a little bit narcissistic of everybody should behave a certain way. (P11)

All participants talked about the importance of taking the time to process a forgiveness issue so that new perspectives could be considered and cognitive restructuring could occur. P1 stated, "It takes mental work. Work and work and work and work never stops and work." P4 put time and effort into understanding different points of view and explained, "I'm more kind of calm, trying to process the way of the incident instead of just making quick judgment of that person. . . I'll think about it, dissect it or study it." Taking the time to look for reasons why offensive behavior occurred allowed P10 to look at a situation differently.

Praying for their transgressor was a method that some participants used to change their thoughts and feelings. P5 said prayer "helps transform the feeling or your reaction to what someone else says or does. It totally changes it." P12 prayed for the soul of the

person who murdered her family members, and received a response that they were not in their right minds when the horrible event happened. Prayer helped her refrain from judging because "everybody is different essentially . . . for where they are and what levels they are at in their lives." She prayed "that whoever did it, may they find peace. May they find their right path in life so they can make their own amends to their own creator."

P8 felt "the hardest thing is to process," and explained it was sometimes difficult to obtain the information and insights needed to fully process a forgiveness issue and emotionally forgive.

> You need to be really clear how you feel before you can really work on that. You could – you can kind of forgive them what – a kind of like the, you know, temporary, you know, what would you call it? In an acting sense like you haven't, you know, temporarily so that you can really process the information and really understand better because, uh, a lot of times forgiveness involves inner reaction and if you haven't processed very well, sometimes it's really difficult to figure out. (P8)

Processing can be difficult because people define words differently and do not always take the time to ensure understanding. P3 noted the importance of seeking clarity when forgiving.

> Voltaire the French philosopher in the 17th century said something that stuck with me. He said that before we sit down and converse, let us define our terms. See that was something I never did before. I just flew off the handle. I was thinking I understood what someone else was saying when I really didn't. I didn't get the meaning what they were. I didn't take the time to make an effort to understand. (P3)

P9 noticed "how much it means to me to kinda step back to like, with myself, and just reflect over all the thoughts I have." However, she realized too much processing time could be detrimental as the goal is to let go.

> I've taken the time I needed to figure out that this is something, but it was important for me to not go over that time limit either, just for my own mental health. Um, so I mean I've definitely learned to take my time but also set like phases for myself that where okay, if this hasn't been figured out within a month, something needs like a conversation needs to happen or something needs to be done with this particular case. (P9)

Creatively processing a forgiveness issue required expending the time and energy necessary to clearly comprehend different perspectives, increase understanding, and reframe the event in a positive light. Beneficially reconstructing cognitions led to emotional forgiveness, better relationships, growth, and transformation.

Theme 4: The relationship between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others

In the majority of cases, self-forgiveness created humility and empathy that opened participants' minds and enhanced their ability to forgive others.

Participants 1, 3, 5, 10, 11, and 12 postulated that self-forgiveness facilitated the forgiveness of others. They explained that when they could accept and understand themselves, they felt less threatened by others. Their identities were stronger and more secure, so they felt less like victims. Barriers came down, and they were more willing to take responsibility for any part they may have played in a misunderstanding. P11 stated "In order to forgive my dad, I actually had to forgive myself. . . I own everything now in my life. It's just – I have moved well beyond feeling as though anybody can make me feel like a victim." P12 stated a strong sense of self allowed her "to listen to others . . . and not judge."

P10 stated inner peace was needed before forgiveness of others could occur, and provided the example of his need to forgive himself for forgiving someone who had

wronged him. P5 also felt confronting and forgiving a person's own faults and transgressions was needed to prevent defensive behavior that stymied personal growth.

> I think you have to learn to forgive yourself first. That's the key. If you don't forgive yourself, you're always the bad guy. You try to cover it up but you're always the bad guy. If you forgive yourself you're no longer the bad guy and so that makes you more expansive. You can forgive others. . . At some point you have to stop saying, 'they did it to me' and you have to say, 'well, hey, what was my part in the equation.' You have to accept responsibility. (P5)

P1 felt that acceptance of human imperfection had to start with self, otherwise forgiveness of others wouldn't be genuine.

> You can say 'I forgive you' but it doesn't have any teeth; it doesn't have any meat until you know yourself, until you've worked. You've looked inside, you've seen who you are and you've forgiven, you forgive yourself for being human. . . You scrub yourself clean and it's only then that you can forgive anyone else. (P1)

P3 stated, "Until I could forgive myself, there was no way I could forgive anybody else." He had to identify the source of his negative feelings and "what was it that happened that I chose to feel anger or hurt or pain for." Self-forgiveness allowed him to take responsibility for his feelings and deal with them constructively. He illustrated with a time that he was very angry with a family member who said hurtful, dangerous things about him.

> She doesn't know any better. She's ill. She's got a disease and I've got to pray for her. . . So I told her I love her, and I'll be darned if she doesn't tell me she loves me now. But it could've gotten really bad had I not had enough patience or some idea of what to do. I mean I could've gone over there and just slapped the snot out of her. That's what I would've done you know 20 years ago. (P3)

In contrast, P7 felt that compassion for others should always be the focus of forgiveness and thoughts. She explained, "We [Buddhists] do not pay attention to ourselves because that's why this world is so problem – everybody have too much

attention to ourselves." P8 also emphasized focusing on forgiving others. She said, "The more you forgive other people, I think the more you come close to being able to forgive yourself." She felt forgiving herself was "the hardest thing because we're more critical of ourselves than we are of anybody else." When she was able to do nice things for others, she felt better about herself and so became more self-forgiving.

P4 felt it was important that he *not* forgive himself. He felt being aware of and taking responsibility for his mistakes helped him improve himself and be a better person.

> I do accept my mistakes, confront my mistakes. But I will not forgive myself of doing that mistake. It helps me to be more aware. I am responsible for my actions. So I hold full account for the – for the mistakes I do.
>
> I want to get the higher level of to be a person. I have to put every single thing in front of me. I – by not forgiving myself, it's actually – it's like a sort, or something that's pushing me to be better, and better, because if I forgive myself in this certain incident, I might be more adapted to forgive many things I will do. It's kind of exactly the opposite what I do with others.

In addition, awareness of his own frailties facilitated P4's ability to forgive others.

> It's good to be aware of who you are, and to know what you are doing, and it's – that will help me to communicate better, and forgive the people better, because I'm not better than them. Once I still remember these [my mistakes], I will be able to forgive the people. (P4)

P4's decision *not* to forgive himself produced results similar to that of those who did because his goals were the same, and he engaged in a similar process.

Some participants noted it was possible to separate or establish boundaries with others; however, separation from self is not possible.

> I think (pause) that like forgiving others there's much more of this ability to just detach from them, of like forgive and then completely let go, and just not let them be a part of your life and move on. Or forgive and still have them in your life, but with yourself there is not really the option there. (P2)

Confronting personal failures and frailties meant taking responsibility and welcoming the challenge of trying to grow and improve. This challenge was especially great for participants who had high expectations of themselves. P6 said, “I have a bigger problem with forgiving myself. I’m very hard on myself because I have very, very high expectations of myself.” Once she felt she had learned from her transgressions she could let them go and move on.

The majority of participants emphasized the difficulties of forgiving oneself over forgiving others. However, P9, who grew up in a supportive family that accepted mistakes and viewed them as learning experiences, felt that it was easier to forgive herself than to forgive others because she had learned how to deal with her own frailties.

> I think that I just taught myself to learn to accept what I did even if it’s wrong or right, and so I didn’t, don’t think that, don’t need that process to kinda think through if I’m doing the right or wrong thing when it comes to forgiveness. (P9)

She explained that forgiving others took more processing time for her. With others she needed more thinking time to determine how to improve a relationship or handle a transgression.

In summary, participants agreed that accepting one’s own weaknesses and transgressions could help overcome the forgiveness barriers of fear, shame, and pride. Having the courage, as well as the humility, necessary to confront one’s own faults and flaws lowered ego defenses and created the feelings of safety needed to cross the moral divide that prevented forgiveness of others. Self-forgiveness, as defined by participants, was not used to escape responsibility for a transgression or as a way to avoid learning and growing. It instead led to ownership of a situation, release from a victim identity, and an

open mind that could process forgiveness of others with compassion and creativity. Forgiving others sometimes facilitated self-forgiveness in that it boosted feelings of self-worth and confidence.

Theme 5: Developing a Forgiveness Disposition

Forgiveness was not a one and done experience; it transformed participants' thinking and created the motivation and ability to continue forgiving.

A forgiveness disposition describes persons' propensity and ability to reframe transgressions and cognitively restructure their thinking in an adaptive manner that allows them to let go of destructive thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors (Thompson et al., 2005). All participants described feelings of empowerment and an enhanced capacity to forgive that resulted from their major forgiveness experience. They developed and/or strengthened a forgiveness disposition which became part of their lifestyle.

Participants developed humility and empathy during their experiences with forgiveness. They learned to accept difficult truths and face them courageously, plus worked to understand the reasons for offensive behavior. Accepting transgressions by self and others as normal and part of the human condition and, as stated by P10, "just realizing that there are going to be painful things," allowed participants to feel a connectedness to others. P1 acknowledged the deficiencies of the human condition and the necessity of forgiveness.

> I, we, as human beings don't treat each other well. We're violent, we're unresponsive, we're selfish. I'm all a part of that mess. So, as a human being, I have to forgive myself all the time. And I can't tell you how happy it makes me! (P1)

P5 also noted the importance of recognizing all persons have struggles in life and make mistakes. She stated, “That’s part of the human condition. So, when you realize that and stop beating yourself up about it, then you can get the humor into it, and then everything is free. I mean, you can let it go.” P8 explained she had become much more tolerant of people, and was able to admit her personal judgments were not necessarily correct.

> A lot of judgments that I made when I was probably in my 20s and 30s really came back to bite me. Especially, you know, people’s beliefs . . . their beliefs was different than mine, and I thought, oh, this is just so ridiculous. They need to just change that. Or maybe I'm not right. So just - being willing to - admit. (P8)

P11 related the difficulties of “forgiving other people for not being like us.” He explained that he is now able to accept differences in perspectives, and he changed his expectation that people should think as he does. This has allowed him to become less fearful and more magnanimous toward others.

> It’s just if we think they should be with us – like us – or think like us which is nobody, then their actions are going to affect us because we feel as though they should respond or act in a certain way in accordance to our beliefs. And there’s seven billion people in the world and we all have different brains, we all have different hearts, and minds and everything. So that forgiveness has allowed me not to feel threatened. Give all the benefit of the doubt. (P11)

Releasing expectations for self, others, as well as situations, is difficult because expectations are like acquired norms and may represent aspirations and objectives. P2 explained she worked hard to keep hopeful and goal-oriented, yet still be able to adapt and let go when things were not working out as planned.

> Something that I feel like I have actually learned how to do very well today, like how do you have intention or hope and apply like your heart and actually work for something but without attachment, like without attachment to the result, like having to judge your success on that? How do you learn to let go of things once

> you know it's time? I think that's one of the things I worked on the hardest and have made a lot of progress on. (P2)

Being forgiving was an important part of participants' identities and a trait they wanted to pass on to others. This motivated them to maintain a forgiveness disposition. For example, P3 is caring for his grandchildren and said, "God's given me a second chance. I messed up a lot of other people's lives, while now I don't have to do that. I have a chance where I can try to teach my grandchildren a different way in life." P12 also wanted to be a good role model so her family would learn to forgive.

> I want to be a good example to my children, my sons, but also to my extended family. I want them to be proud of me and not to be, you know, tarnish the image of our *tiospaye*. You know I want them to think of us as being intelligent thinking people and not you know, crazy ones who you know don't give a darn and you know treat other people just any old way, because that's not who we are. That's not who we are as Lakota people. (P12)

The rewards of their major forgiveness experience created the motivation to continue forgiving in all participants. This was important because all participants noted that forgiveness is an effortful process and takes continual work, like playing a musical instrument, learning a new language, or becoming good at a sport. P3 explained the importance of continual learning in order to reap the benefits of forgiveness. "I've got to learn every day. It's a learning experience. I just can't learn about forgiveness one time and then it's done. It isn't one size fits all." P5 also spoke to the effort involved in genuine forgiveness, but had faith in her ability to complete the process.

> What I do recognize is maybe a sense of 'this will not happen overnight.' It's the knowing that this is not going to be an easy thing because it might take time and maybe I want it to go faster. But you realize, 'I did it before with God's help or with someone's help and if I did it one time, I can do it again.' (P5)

P6 set aside time each morning in order to maintain her forgiveness disposition. She also reminded herself that forgiveness takes time.

> So in the morning I always need like an hour and a half, but sometimes my husband is like, oh why do you need so much [time] . . . And I say if I don't do this I won't be a good wife. I won't be a good person. I just need time to reflect. . . . Whenever I had problems with my life, if I would open a book it said patience. Like be patient, it's going to pass. (P6)

Forgiveness became a developed skill and participants learned to take small transgressions less personally. They could easily dismiss minor offenses which, as P1 described, could blow through like the wind. P7 stated, "I have more forgiveness even though somebody just do bad things for me, hurt me intentionally or not intentionally. I still forgive them. I think there's no reason and not a big deal to hold that." P10, who forgave his torturer, and P12, who forgave the murderer of her mother and pregnant sister, explained that offensive events now seem minor in comparison with their major forgiveness experience. Their forgiveness dispositions had been strengthened.

In summary, all 12 participants demonstrated empathy and humility which allowed them to acquire a sense of common humanity versus feelings of isolation (Korner, 2015). This lessened their moral distance from others and judgmental behavior toward both themselves and others. They became more compassionate and forgiving, traits that became a part of their identity that they wished to display and pass on to others. Sacred beliefs and a desire to learn and grow motivated participants to continue putting forth the effort needed to maintain a forgiveness disposition. Figure 1 illustrates the forgiveness experience.

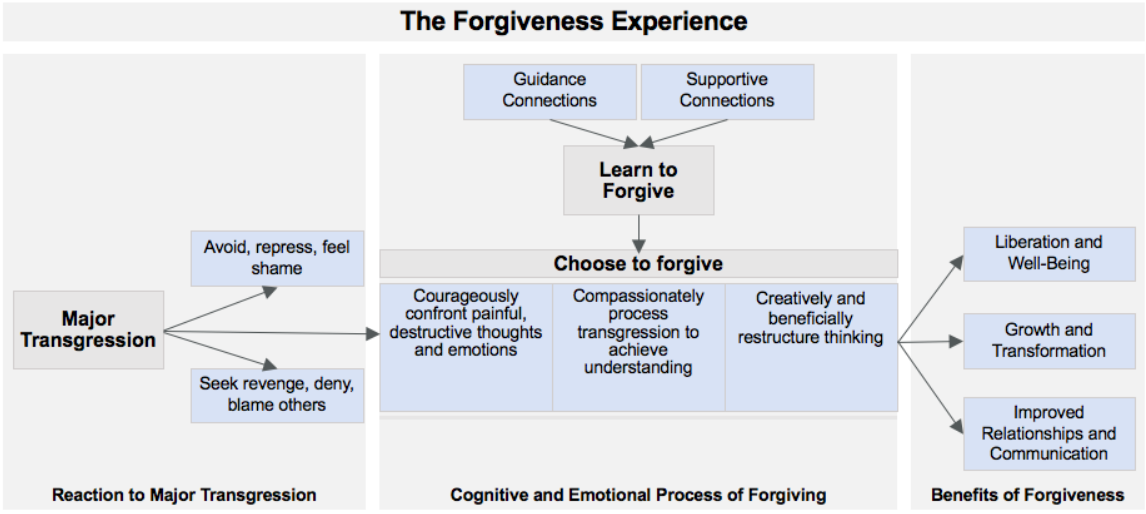

Figure 1. The forgiveness experience consisting of (a) the decision to forgive a major transgression, (b) processing the forgiveness issue cognitively and emotionally, and (c) producing the benefits of growth, well-being, and improved relationships.

Summary

The primary research question this study addressed was "How is forgiveness experienced in adults with different sacred beliefs?" Twelve participants, representing 10 different sacred belief systems (Agnosticism, Baha'ism, Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Lakota spirituality, Islam, Devotion to Shirdi Sai Baba, Spirituality with Buddhist philosophy, and Syncretism), described a major forgiveness experience in which they were able to let go of destructive thoughts and emotions. The following subquestions were addressed.

What were the common experiences (contextual and developmental) that gave purpose and meaning to forgiveness?

Through an effortful process participants improved their psychological well-being and relationships, and moved their lives forward in a moral, productive manner. In no cases did forgiveness mean condoning or disregarding a wrongdoing or abusive, oppressive behavior. It instead meant having the courage to confront difficult issues candidly and compassionately, without avoidance, denial, blame, or revenge. R/S and/or social connections were integral in providing guidance and support, as the forgiveness process was difficult and at times frightening. Faith communities, as well as family, friends, and therapists who were nonjudgmental and good listeners, aided participants throughout the process. Prayer and spiritual attachments gave strength and hope to the majority of participants.

Participants took responsibility for their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and engaged in a creative process of beneficially restructuring their cognitions. Self and other forgiveness were related in that humility and compassion for oneself broke down ego defenses and emotional barriers that had prevented forgiveness of others. Benefits of forgiveness included feelings of liberation and peace, improved relationships, better physical and mental health, plus personal and spiritual growth. Forgiveness benefits motivated participants to continue forgiving, and their forgiveness experiences facilitated the development of a forgiveness disposition.

What common set of beliefs gave purpose and meaning to forgiveness?

The sacred belief systems of all 12 participants valued forgiveness and recognized its benefits to both the individual and the community. Religious participants focused on aspects of their faith that esteemed forgiveness, and provided examples of scripture,

stories, and role models that inspired and guided them. All participants felt rewarded personally and socially by following and staying true to their sacred beliefs. Forgiveness was a moral and ethical choice, and being forgiving was an important part of participants' identities. Religious participants found meaning in spiritual growth, and believed forgiving in this life paved the way for benefits in the afterlife, which was conceptualized in different ways.

How did goal orientation affect the experience of forgiveness?

All participants demonstrated a goal orientation that motivated them to learn and allowed them to view painful events as opportunities for growth. They believed change was possible, and so were willing to put forth the effort needed to transform a major transgression event into a major learning experience. P2 explained, "You own your way of thinking and happiness. And yes, it's not going to be completely easy, but you can work toward it."

What was the role of cognitive restructuring in the process of forgiveness?

All participants creatively restructured their cognitions in a more positive, productive way during their major forgiveness experience, and that had continued to benefit their health and relationships. Although forgiveness was challenging and often painful, it paved the way to a new mode of thinking that was more accepting of human weaknesses and frailties and better able to regulate emotions and seek understanding. Participants let go of expectations and assumptions that were unproductive, unrealistic, and caused suffering and, as described by P2, were able to change their "mental code." P4 explained, "Most of us are ruled by our emotions and feelings. And forgiving, it's

actually a stepping on your feelings and emotions. . . . It makes a lot of things easier to understand and to see." P5 noted she could "look at people in a different way," and P1 stated "a whole other pattern opens up."

Chapter 5 will compare and contrast the results of the study with the literature review and interpret and analyze the findings. The theoretical foundations of goal orientation and cognitive restructuring theory will be related to the results of the study. Limitations of the study will be discussed as well as recommendations for further research. Implications for social change at the individual, as well as organizational level, will be presented with recommendations for mental health practitioners and clergy.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this IPA was to examine how forgiveness is experienced by adults with different sacred beliefs. This study helped fill in gaps in the literature regarding what aspects of R/S are beneficial in the forgiveness process. It extended knowledge regarding why people from diverse sacred belief systems are inspired to forgive and how they are able to effectively and beneficially do so. Twelve participants from 10 different R/S backgrounds and eight different cultural backgrounds who were all living in the United States described a major forgiveness experience and explained what forgiveness meant to them.

Participants agreed that forgiveness was letting go of destructive thoughts and emotions that impede growth through an effortful, compassionate, transformative process. Forgiveness meant releasing shame and excessive pride, taking responsibility, and alleviating ego defenses and emotional barriers that had prevented forgiveness of self and others. Participants were motivated to forgive based on a desire to learn and grow as well as personal, social, and spiritual benefits. The challenging and sometimes painful process of moving from decisional to emotional forgiveness was facilitated by R/S and/or social connections that provided participants with the courage to confront difficult issues and that advocated compassion in resolving those issues. Once participants better understood the transgression that occurred and its effect on them, they were able to creatively and effectively restructure their thinking with the guidance and support of their connections. Their experiences were transformative, and they developed a forgiveness disposition.

Interpretation of the Findings

R/S and/or Social Connections that Provide Guidance, Attachments, and Support

In this study, I explored what aspects of R/S were important to forgiveness, as a better understanding of the role of R/S was needed (Davis et al., 2012; Galen, 2012; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Scull, 2015; Seedall, Butler, & Elledge, 2014). R/S connections provided guidance and compassionate support that was essential to forgiveness of a major transgression for all of the participants except P9, who was agnostic. P9 stated she would not have been able to forgive without strong family support and the cultural values that guided her. Hill and Pargament (2008) and Day (2010) noted that spiritual norms are associated with cultural norms that promote healthy development and well-being. P9, who was led by personal values she had acquired from her family and culture, described forgiveness values that mirrored the R/S beliefs held by the other 11 participants. P2 did not identify with a religion, but was spiritually guided by Buddhist philosophy and contemporary forgiveness writers. She stated that spirituality was a vital part of her forgiveness experience.

Being true to a sacred identity that valued compassion and growth guided all participants to forgiveness. R/S role models provided participants with an example they could follow on their path forward to a forgiveness disposition. P3 was a Christian, but explained he could not identify with the forgiveness example of Jesus on the cross. His turning point was when he met and learned from Christian pastors who were Black and had forgiven more painful racism than he had experienced as an American Indian. Stories of how the prophet Mohammed had forgiven guided P4 and P10, and Jewish Atonement

rituals helped lead P11. P12 was guided by traditional Lakota values and the examples of elders; P8 by the Baha'i perfect example of Abdul Baha; and P7 was following the lead of her Buddhist khenpo, or teacher. All participants related stories of persons who inspired and guided them to forgiveness, plus helped shape their identity as a person who gives and receives forgiveness. The importance of remaining faithful to a sacred identity was described by P3.

> I've got another cap that I wear and I wear three crosses on it and another one right by it that says warrior for Christ that I like to wear. And then in my vehicle I've got the Ten Commandments on these metallic things on both sides. You know I'm not into proselytizing, but it's there to remind me of who I am. If there's any kind of relapse in what I can become - I know what I can become. I don't want that anymore. So I try to keep God in my upper most thoughts at all times every day. So every time I get in my vehicle and every time when I take my grandkids to school or wherever we're going, I see those Ten Commandments and I remember. (P3)

Religious persons have different concepts of their higher power. Some may perceive of a punishing God who plays favorites and judges harshly, while others conceptualize a merciful, inclusive, accepting deity (Tripathi & Mullett, 2010; Umbreit et al., 2015; Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015). Spiritual participants viewed their higher power as merciful and loving versus condemnatory and vindictive and believed forgiveness was a vital aspect of their faith. For some religious people, vengeance takes on sacred meaning, and a moral distance is established that discourages forgiveness (Sandage & Crabtree, 2012). Participants all rejected vengeance as a moral choice and valued compassion and humility. They expressed tolerance for persons from different faiths and believed there were multiple pathways to the Divine. They did not condone or disregard wrongful

situations, but pursued forgiveness and fairness at the same time, striving for restorative, rather than retributive justice.

Researchers have explored whether spiritual links with the sacred and humanity are essential in coping with painful events that disrupt a person's view of the way self, others, or the world should be (Brown, 2010; Krajca, 2015). In this study, spiritual and/or social support was essential to participants' genuine, emotional forgiveness of the major transgression because confronting painful issues took courage that was bolstered through caring connections. In addition to providing security during the forgiveness process, spiritual and social connections opened participants' minds to new perspectives and created alternative ways to conceptualize painful events. P2 did not identify as religious, but she stated, "the only thing that could get me out of this pain was spirituality" which gave her "mental strength and this self-owning thing." Realizing how vast and complex the world is helped her think of many of her worries as petty and she said,

> For me, when something is petty, I'd rather just move on and let it go because there's so much more. . . There are people who are suffering worse than you and you could be applying your energy and heart just helping them, and there are like greater issues that humanity is facing today. (P2)

P11 liked working with end-of-life situations in his synagogue because it helped him realize, "all these little problems which we make big. . . are really no problems." Opening mind and heart to a higher power or "out into the universe" as expressed by P11, helped free participants from what P2 referred to as their "own little prison," and created an "expanding of space" as described by P1. All participants' responses reflected the

wisdom of the world's religions that teach that anger and retaliation imprison an individual in self (Freke, 1998).

Secure spiritual and social attachments have been linked in the research to the ability to forgive, as persons feel more able to confront fear-provoking issues without worries of losing necessary support systems (Davis et al., 2012; Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010; Salmanian et al., 2015). P9 identified as agnostic, but was securely connected to a supportive family. Her relationship with her mother had been close, but the bond she had with her stepfather was strengthened during her major forgiveness experience. In describing that relationship, she stated, "And I'm more - I don't use the word spiritual but I'm going to, [laughter] closer in a spiritual way." P6 believed it was wiser to obtain support from a spiritual source rather than another fallible human being. She felt that, in surrendering herself to Shirdi Baba, she received support that could sustain her in a way that another human being never could.

> When I kind of connected to Shirdi Baba I felt that I had the grounds. Like there was nobody else that I have to lean on or get attached to except on him and it was growing stronger and stronger all the time. . . . When I was like in the dark always looking for somebody I just got everyday more disappointed and I'm going like, Oh my God no, why can't I – why don't they have time for me, oh my, why can't you listen – Yes, because I was looking for comfort in other people and that's wrong. You should always find comfort in yourself and once you find peace you can then help others. (P6)

P5 stated it was "very scary, very scary, to go through" her forgiveness experience, but she knew she was "not going to be alone." She explained, "I can just look at it in the face and say, okay, God's going to be with me. . . He's always there inside me, outside me,

around me sending me messages." P10 expressed appreciation for his spiritual connections and said, "I always speak to my God. . . . I was so supported by my religion."

The Course in Miracles, a program that has successfully facilitated forgiveness, recommends tolerantly observing a situation without judging or attempting to twist reality (Krajca, 2015). Participants R/S beliefs were not dogmatic and rigid. They guided rather than restricted them. The courage participants drew from compassionate spiritual and social support liberated them from unbending, unproductive expectations that they, others, and the world should or must work a certain way.

Simply believing in forgiveness was not sufficient for in-depth, emotional forgiveness, which was consistent with Riek and Mania's (2012) meta-analytic study that found a difference in research results when hypothetical versus actual forgiveness was measured. The actual experience of forgiving is much more demanding than most people realize (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015a; Milhalache, 2012; Zoughbi & Rainey, 2015). Participants followed a path that began with a phase similar to what Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) described as uncovering, in which they experienced healing that freed them from the pain of avoiding or burying negative emotions. They were able to move forward, confronting problems morally and compassionately. P1 talked about "building the house of sorrows," which referred to a space where people looked candidly at pain and shame and moved from blaming and victimization to understanding, healing, and strength. P5 expressed the relief she felt when she could finally confront her repressed feelings and release her pain.

> I could finally grieve which was a joy to be able to grieve. Not sitting for hours and days crying and crying, but being able to recollect those things and having my emotions, as real as they were, come out and not worrying about them. (P5)

Nonjudgmental, caring persons helped participants heal and process their pain, while others often inadvertently made forgiveness problematic. P9 noted she learned to forgive social connections who said things that made forgiveness more difficult. She learned to "stay true to herself" instead of making decisions based on what others wanted. P8 felt supported by her Baha'i community and explained, "It's really nice to have a group of people who accept you warts and all."

Solid attachments reduced the fear of being shamed or abandoned and led to self-forgiveness and more openness. When participants confronted their own fears of failure and accepted their frailties, they had the courage to lessen the moral distance they had established between themselves and their transgressors. P5 explained,

> In forgiving yourself then you are more open; that would be expansive, I guess. But more open to that for others. Well, if I was doing that maybe they're in the same position. Maybe they have other things going on. So, you look at people in a different way. (P5)

For P7, a belief in karma lessened the moral distance she had felt between her and her transgressor. She explained her supposition that she had not been good to her father in a previous life and stated, "Dad did bad things to me because I did bad things to him, so it's fair." This understanding helped her forgive her father, reduced her pain, and increased her compassion.

In summary, participants benefited from the guidance they received from spiritual and social connections that came in the form of scripture, stories, role models, prayer, and

caring clergy, family, therapists, and friends. Those connections also provided the support and security needed to confront and compassionately process painful events without fear and shame. Compassionate, nonjudgmental persons served as healers and aided the development of healthier ways of thinking.

Empathy and Humility

Research has consistently linked empathy with forgiveness as it helps persons better understand why and how a transgression occurred (Davis et al., 2012; Exline et al., 2008; Kidwell et al. 2012; Menahem & Love, 2013; Noor et al., 2008; Riek & Mania, 2012). Working to better understand both self and transgressor were part of the process of forgiveness for all participants.

Humility has been associated with forgiveness, but in a more complex manner (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015c; Exline et al., 2008; Lavelock et al., 2014; Sapmaz et al., 2015). Humility's role in the forgiveness process was seen in participants' willingness to accept difficult truths and more clearly see their weaknesses as well as strengths. Humility has been referred to as a master virtue because of its power to break down barriers, and open minds and hearts to more healthy and productive ways of thinking (Lavelock et al., 2014).

Sandage and Crabtree (2012) found a curvilinear effect of spiritual grandiosity on forgiveness, and Sandage and Wiens (2001) concluded that an overemphasis on humility could be counterproductive if persons had low self-esteem. This study supported those findings as participants described instances when their confidence was low and they were afraid to face a transgressor, as well as times when they had to remind themselves that

they were no better than others in order to forgive. In some instances, it took courage to release the concept of oneself as a helpless victim and summon the confidence needed to confront a challenging forgiveness issue instead of simmering with resentment. In other cases, it took courage to break down the superiority wall erected to protect egos and morally separate participants from their transgressors. I therefore propose viewing humility as a balance between feelings of inferiority and superiority. Both ends of the spectrum involved overcoming fear of change and embracing vulnerability. Persons may move back and forth on the continuum with balance creating the humility needed to forgive. Table 3 displays the effect of humility on forgiveness.

Table 3

Effect of Humility Continuum on Forgiveness

Effect of the Humility Continuum on Forgiveness		
Feelings of Inferiority ⟺	**Humility** ⟺	**Feelings of Superiority**
Fear of Confrontation	Courage to Confront	Fear of Losing Status/Power
Avoidance, Repression	Acceptance, Compassion	Revenge, Aggression
Self-Blame, Shame	Forgiveness	Blame Others, Arrogance

P1, who was on the low self-confidence end of the humility continuum during the major forgiveness experience she described, started healing when she was able to stand up to an abusive coworker. Understanding that she was as strong and powerful as the person who was offending her created the confidence and security she needed to confront

her transgressor. She established boundaries and felt safe, so the coworker's words and behaviors no longer had the power to hurt or offend her.

> Forgiveness is understanding that the people that you need to forgive aren't bigger, or stronger, or more powerful than you are. I mean the person that you need to forgive is not, is no longer on a pedestal. But there comes a moment when you see a person as an equal, and you know you can stand up for yourself and make the necessary boundaries. (P1)

P2 began her forgiveness journey when she left home and an abusive parent. Her independence from parental control allowed her to feel safe and able to create a new way of thinking and behaving.

> During this time it was first a release of [parental] control and then me starting to realize like I can be my own independent person. I can live my life, I can create the life I want. . . . I used to have this problem where I had relationships where I'd let people walk all over me, and now I'm very firm. (P2)

P3 and P4 described struggling with forgiveness because they fell on the upper end of the humility continuum, meaning they had to conquer excessive self-pride. P3 explained that when he is now confronted with racist behavior by someone who "may have a wrong concept of who I am" he reminds himself that, "That's okay, they can make the same bad judgments about me as I made about them." P4 felt he could conquer his arrogance when he did not self-forgive and remained aware of his own faults, as it helped him remain "humble," realizing he was "not a better person than other people."

Participants could fall at either end of the humility continuum, depending on the situation. If the offender was more powerful, confidence was needed to confront the situation; if the offender was less powerful, one was tempted to feel morally superior. P1 described "popping the bubble of her anger" when she had the courage to assert herself,

but she also named excessive pride as her greatest impediment to forgiveness. She explained that staying balanced involved "will, spiritual discipline, prayer, meditation, study, silence, and retreats."

P11's difficulties with his father occurred because he upset a family power norm, acquired through a strong patriarchal culture, in which fathers should never be contradicted or questioned. It took time, effort, and struggles in order to change the relationship with his father to a more balanced, adult-to-adult association in which respect, love, and concern replaced obedience. P11 forgave both himself and his dad for reactions to the disruption in the status of their relationship, overcoming both shame and pride.

> But in order to forgive my dad, I actually had to forgive myself, because my response well, not perfect, was not beyond the pale. I didn't physically assault him or kill the dog or something that's like - Wow! I got angry. Anger is a perfectly normal emotion. But in my world, it wasn't allowed. . . . I didn't have to shout at him. I didn't have to do that, but I owned it. And I own everything now in my life. It's just – I have moved well beyond feeling as though anybody can make me feel like a victim. (P11)

Participants came to a midpoint on the humility continuum when they had the self-assurance needed to confront transgressions with compassion, and could resolve issues without hurting others, denying responsibility, or repressing pain. P12 pronounced her determination to handle offensive behavior in a balanced, healthy manner.

> You either get consumed by hatred or you deal with it you know, in a positive way, and I'll be darned if anybody is going to make me hate myself or hate anybody else. I knew right away that that's not how I was going to live my life. (P12)

P10 described the confidence and courage needed to reject revenge and unforgiveness when confronted with a violent, oppressive situation. He was tempted to fight violence with violence, but he and his revolutionary group developed the following phrase that guided them, “Our peaceful movement is stronger than their bullets.” P10’s experience illustrates how forgiveness and justice can be complementary and pursued in parallel (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2015; Ilbay & Saricam, 2015).

In summary, low self-confidence led to shame, avoidance, and an unwillingness to confront transgressions, whereas overconfidence resulted in self-righteous acts of aggression and revenge against those blamed for the transgression. Power differentials affected placement on the humility continuum because, depending on the situation, persons felt more or less confident. A balanced view of self allowed participants to accept unpleasant truths, take responsibility for their feelings, and resolve problems with compassion, recognizing their own and others’ strengths and weaknesses.

The Effect of Goal-Orientation on Forgiveness

Participants all described a learning goal orientation, versus a performance goal orientation, that motivated them to grow and laid the foundation for forgiveness work. Goal orientation is an especially important motivator when undertaking tasks that require persistence, effort, and creative strategizing (Dweck & Leggett, 1998). Participants had embraced the core belief that we are born to learn, not perform, and that people are capable of change.

A performance mindset is extrinsically based and focuses on pleasing others and self-validation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Rusk et al., 2011). A need to please others may

cause avoidance of an issue or repression of pain. Self-validation goals may create ego defenses that result in blaming others and seeking vengeance. Participants described overcoming fear, pride, and vindictiveness on their forgiveness journey. They talked about overcoming shame and pride, remaining true to their own beliefs, and resisting pressure to hate or seek vengeance.

Persons may make an extrinsically based decision to forgive because they feel it will please others or raise their status in some way. However, it may be impossible to process through to emotional, in-depth forgiveness of a major transgression without the intrinsic motivation to learn and obtain personal growth. A learning goal orientation allowed participants to look at mistakes and failures as normal, not offensive, and as opportunities for development. P4 stated that "forgiving people makes a lot of things easier to understand and to see." P9 stated she was "definitely not afraid to make mistakes and afraid to learn." P8 noted the importance of remembering people are at different developmental levels and need time to realize mistakes and resolve them. She stated, "You have to allow them the time to figure it out too. . . They may not be aware. That has to be accepted too that, you know, well, he's just not at that level yet." P1 and P12 described mistakes as part of the human condition. P12 stated "We will make mistakes, but we should learn from them."

Cognitive Restructuring Theory

Cognitive restructuring theory, which links tolerating actions or events that go against one's expectations and desires with healing and growth, was a framework for this study (Ellis, 1998). Interpreting events from a different perspective, and questioning the

veracity of assumptions and moral judgments, are key parts of the forgiveness process (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Menahem & Love, 2013; Mihalache, 2012). Healing and growth occurred when participants were able to let go of old ways of thinking and creatively restructure their cognitions in a healthier manner. Participants were transformed by what P2 described as "reprogramming themselves."

Participants agreed that in-depth, emotional forgiveness involved taking the time to fully process and then reframe an event that went against expectations and desires. Changing concepts of how the self, others, and the world should be can be threatening as well as counterintuitive, which explains why supportive connections, effort, and time were essential to the forgiveness process. P11 stated, "It's easy to say it [I forgive] in words, it's harder to make it in feelings. And that's what really took a long time. But I prayed every week." He worked to eliminate unproductive negative ruminations, which he referred to as "letting people rent space in my head for free." P11 recognized that emotions can flood us when significant transgressions occur, and he has learned to step back and take the time to respond thoughtfully and calmly. He noted life is often fast paced so he has learned "to actually stop, consider, and respond versus react." P4 explained he is calmer now, "trying to process the way of the incident instead of just making quick judgment of that person." P9 described her need to "step back from everything" and handle things in a "less aggressive way and also in a more rational way." However, P9 realized it was important for her not to go over a time limit she set for her "own mental health." Too much time spent meant new perspectives or more creative thinking was necessary in order to move forward.

Anger, whether repressed or expressed, is ultimately about unmet expectations and emotions such as fear, hurt, disappointment, embarrassment, and shame. If anger is not understood and lingers, it endangers health and relationships. Participants realized they needed to confront the reasons for their anger and work to resolve the issues triggering it. Once participants' anger and fear were understood and they reached a position of safety, more productive ways of conceptualizing a transgression were possible. Participants felt sad and determined to correct an injustice or resolve an offensive situation, but not mad and in pain. P6 explained that her whole attitude about transgressions was changed to the point where she felt protected and safe.

> There's some kind of a shield or something around me which I don't allow for the hurt to happen. Like I'm telling you like with all these things that I'm doing like the mindfulness and the techniques and the surrendering and the reminder that I'm not alone; I don't get internally destroyed anymore. I don't allow the problem to enter. . . I just don't feel this hurt inside of my body. (P6)

The forgiveness process described by participants was similar to the four phases of uncovering, decision, work, and deepening defined by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c). The uncovering and decision phases correspond to the courage subtheme, as participants confronted difficult issues, and made the decision to put forth the time and effort needed to forgive. The work phase encompasses the compassion and creativity subthemes that describe first understanding the transgression, and then reframing it in a way that leads to a more healthy and productive life. The last phase, deepening, is similar to theme five which describes the development and strengthening of a forgiveness disposition. The results of this study illuminated the importance of spiritual and social

connections throughout the forgiveness process, and sacred beliefs and role models were guiding, supportive lights.

Gratitude. Gratitude is a dimension that has been linked to forgiveness (Ilbay & Saricam, 2015; Narula, 2015; Sapmaz et al., 2015). The results revealed that gratitude played a part in cognitive restructuring as participants were able to escape destructive cognitions by redirecting their thoughts to: appreciation for their transgressors' positive characteristics; thankfulness for the good things in their lives; and to the support and guidance received from their R/S and social connections. Breaking free from negative ruminations through gratitude allowed participants to expand their thinking and create new, healthier cognitions. P11 worked to process his situation and stated, "The pain has now moved to gratitude." He explained he was able to appreciate and focus on the good things his father provided him such as an education and exposure to new experiences. In addition, he felt "blessed that I had this experience." He explained it transformed his thinking and his relationship.

> It changed the relationship with my father from parent-child to adult-adult. And that wasn't anything that ever could have happened naturally with us because it's such a strong patriarchal society culture. . . This helped me get over that fundamental misperception of just let's keep things going as we know them, and that's not growth, that's just habits. . . Before I didn't have a catalyst that haunted this kind of introspection, and that's what happened. And I might not have had that introspection and due consideration of what respect really means, the love and the concern versus the obedience. (P11)

P8 learned to appreciate the good versus the bad in people by practicing what is called the "sin-covering eye" in Baha'i writings. She explained it as follows.

> It's like if a person has nine good qualities and one bad, look at the 10 but ignore the one bad one. If it's the other way around, nine bad qualities, one good, focus on the one good one and set aside the other nine. (P8)

A spirit of thankfulness helped participants maintain their forgiveness disposition. For example, when P12 had a tough day she prayed to her higher power and purified herself.

> I thank you for the blessings that you brought into my life. And I thank you for the gifts you have given me. And I ask that you help me to use these gifts in a good way. So that I will live and so my people will live. . . . We [the Lakota people] don't just pray for ourselves and our immediate family. . . That's not just the Lakota people. But that's the black, yellow, red, and white people. Everybody's a part of that medicine wheel. (P12)

P6 felt it was important to pray and be thankful during both good and bad times, as it strengthened her spiritual connections. She had created an altar that contained photos of Sai Baba and Shirdi Baba, as well as Jesus Christ because her sacred belief system encouraged her to honor her childhood religion. She explained the altar created a "nice energy that is around me."

> I want all my protectors to be there with me . . . not just when I'm mourning. When I'm happy, when I'm going out. I want all of them to be with me to feeling the happiness when I'm doing something, and then you really become connected. Just involving them when you don't feel good then you won't feel that as much as when you have them in your life all the times. (P6)

Reconciliation. The role that reconciliation plays in forgiveness has been debated. Reconciliation is generally deemed important when there is a need for social harmony (Freedman & Zanifkav, 2015; Hook et al., 2012; Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Seedall et al., 2014). Reconciliation was part of the forgiveness experience for those participants whose transgressor was a family member or close friend

with whom the participant wished or needed to continue a relationship. Participants who wished to repair relationships created new, healthier ways of conceptualizing and interacting with their transgressor. For example, P11 explained his belief in preserving family relationships and said, “You have a responsibility to other generations behind you to not close the door. No matter what pain has occurred.”

P4 noted that forgiveness “can save lives, can save families from falling apart. . . Forgiving can make our life way easier than not forgiving people.” He explained that before he learned to forgive he assumed someone who offended him should always come ask him for forgiveness. Now he is willing to reach out to friends and family and both ask for and receive forgiveness. He realized he does not have to like what someone does and stated, “Each one has his own mind to think about things and I have to respect that.” He preserved a relationship with his close friend by viewing forgiveness as a moral and personal good as well as a reciprocal process.

> I felt that he is my friend. If I'm not going to forgive him, who I'm going to forgive? I mean, he’s my best friend. I'm now going to forgive him. So I better to forgive him and we talked to each other. It’s just – it makes me – it makes me a better person. I feel – I feel much relief to – to talk to these people. And again I went to them, and I talk to them and asked them for forgiveness. (P4)

P7’s Buddhist beliefs motivated her to establish better relations with her father. She worked to appreciate that her abusive father was a good financial provider and was kind to his parents, even though he was not to her and her mother. She did not have to live with her father and was now safe from abuse, so she made the effort to transform her thoughts and behavior with the help of R/S connections.

> Now I'm doing, practicing Buddhism and teachings of my master. I realize that I should care for my dad, or I should know my dad. So, I tried to talk to him more . . . Last year he feel very not happy. And sometimes he say bad things to me too. But I what I do, I think it's just do not hit back, just keep silence and avoid conflict and also, in this year, I sometimes I do good things to him. (P7)

Forgiveness did not mean feelings towards a transgressor necessarily became positive; for example P2 said, "I can't get close." But understanding, modifying unrealistic expectations, and feeling safe from harm allowed participants to let go of negative feelings and view their family member or friend from a new perspective. P2 explained, "When I think back I'm not necessarily angry or even like hateful. I see that actually my mom has tried to improve." P5's mother had passed away before she was able to truly forgive her. When P5 did forgive, thoughts about her mother changed.

> I'm softer towards my mom. I think I earlier said I couldn't say nice things about my mother. Now, I find myself saying she was a very beautiful woman. She really loved to cook. She was really good at it, and I can cook now. I don't have to avoid that. I can say, I just love to cook . . . I can be the same as she is. (P5)

Forgiveness is intrapersonal whereas reconciliation is interpersonal, but the two processes overlapped when participants felt a need to sustain or improve a close relationship. A burden was lifted when participants discovered a healthier way of conceptualizing and interacting with a significant other with whom they had been hurt.

Transformation. Researchers have found that learning to forgive can be life changing (Cioni, 2007; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015a; Goman & Kelley, 2016; Milhache, 2012; Umbreit & Blevins, 2015). Participants felt transformed by their major forgiveness experience, but all realized they would have to continue learning and developing in order to remain forgiving. Human nature instinctively tends to be judgmental and critical

(Haidt, 2013), so controlling emotions, adapting to change, behaving compassionately, and practicing gratitude are effortful processes. The participants' experiences solidified their belief in the power and benefits of forgiveness, and gave them the motivation and skills needed to continue forgiving.

Participants all grew from their forgiveness experiences and felt stronger and better equipped to handle adversity. They were less sensitive to minor transgressions and took offensive slights less personally. P1 stated she better understood her own and others' pain so she could think, "This isn't their problem, and it's not my problem if this is the human condition. There's a softening that takes place." She learned to let minor offenses go "through like the wind." P7 noted she is less critical of her friends and spends much less time being angry when people don't act as she thinks they should. P8 stated that a lot of the judgments she made when she was younger "really came back to bite me."

> I have probably become much more tolerant of people because we all are on our own path to something better in life, and we all have freewill, and if we want people to respect our right to freewill we have to respect their right to freewill. (P8)

P6 commented that she rarely needed to forgive anymore because she is no longer hurt by cruel comments or actions. She viewed disagreeable words and behaviors as "opportunities" that "come for a reason," and no longer conceptualized them as offenses that needed forgiveness. P11 was able to accept things as they are and stated, "No thinking that it's not the way it should be, it is." P12 perceived cruel remarks as indications of ignorance, which reduced her feelings of anger. She worked to resolve situations in positive ways because she knows that some people "have not reached a point

of self-worth or self-actualization." P10 explained it still hurt when he was offended by rude or racist remarks, but compared to the challenge of forgiving his torturer and the murderer of his friend, insults seemed insignificant.

> Most of my power now is absolutely directed in forgiveness and not hurting anyone. . . . With everyone that now treats me with racism or condescending or rudeness, I feel I have that power of forgiveness inside me that's like, come on now, he just calls you a bad word. That's not a big deal. Like how does this compare to your being tortured. . . I feel like I have this amount of power in me for forgiveness that I've started in that moment when I forgave that exact person, and that makes me so calm and quiet, dealing with every single thing. (P10)

Participants had a learning goal orientation and so could look forward to meeting new forgiveness challenges without fear. They welcomed growth, had come to accept that mistakes and failures were natural parts of life, believed forgiveness was a moral, ethical approach for dealing with transgressions, and could creatively and beneficially restructure their thinking. Their ability to forgive became deeper, which corresponds with Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015c) final stage in the forgiveness process. P11 summarized the meaning of forgiveness that has continued to direct his life's journey.

> With each growth phase, you think you've moved forward which we have. But there is no such thing as perfect. And so the forgiveness component that continues with me is that when I lose it, break down, and don't listen to my own advice; what I'm saying now is not that I've ruined everything. It's just, we're normal. We're human. It's going back and apologizing and asking for forgiveness again. So yes, I think it has to be a constant work in progress. Which then can lead to love and thoughtfulness, rather than isolation and protection, because we're not under threat. (P11)

Limitations of the Study

As a sole researcher with time constraints, it was necessary to limit my sample size to 12 persons representing 10 different sacred belief systems. Persons came from

eight different cultural backgrounds, but all were living in the United States and spoke English. Therefore, transferability is limited and it is possible that saturation was not reached. Interviews were approximately 1 hour which did not provide enough time for persons to share all their experiences with forgiveness. Results may have varied if I had had the opportunity to interview a wider diversity and number of participants for a longer amount of time.

My sample was limited to participants who had successfully processed through a major forgiveness experience. Interviewing persons who chose not to forgive or were unable to forgive could have produced a deeper understanding of impediments and disadvantages to forgiveness. However, this was not the focus of the study. I attempted to provide detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis process in order to make the research and results transferable. In addition, the links to prior studies and suggestions for future research point out how the results of the study could be applicable to other contexts, situations, times, and populations.

Recommendations

This study highlighted the importance of R/S and social connections in the process of forgiving a major transgression, and suggested how role models and guides influence the forgiveness process. I recommend further research exploring the influence of esteemed, guiding role models, as well as R/S and social attachments that provide an expanded perspective and secure base in which to process forgiveness. Finding appropriate support and guidance may be essential in processing forgiveness of a major transgression.

The benefit of a learning versus a performance goal orientation in motivating forgiveness was illustrated by this study. Further research that explores how adopting a learning mindset can lay the foundation for forgiveness would contribute to the literature.

Humility has been linked to forgiveness in the research and this study underscored the importance of distinguishing between too little self-esteem and excessive self-esteem. Research that recognizes the complex nature of humility, and clarifies the difference between feelings of inferiority and superiority, could help guide mental health providers working with clients on forgiveness issues.

This study only included four men and eight women, but the women were more likely to describe repressed anger as an impediment to forgiveness while the men related more problems overcoming pride and narcissism. It may be that women, who have generally been more conditioned to be submissive than men, need added encouragement to confront a transgressor and uncover their anger. Further research may shed light on the effect of gender anger norms on forgiveness.

Additional study regarding the importance of gratitude on forgiveness is advised. Gratitude may be essential in cognitively restructuring a difficult forgiveness situation in a positive manner.

When recruiting my sample, some persons who initially thought they would participate changed their minds when I sent them the interview questions and explained they would need to describe their own personal experience of forgiveness of a major transgression. Some said that after reading the interview questions they realized they had not truly forgiven, and others could only give opinions, not share experience. Therefore I

recommend that researchers clearly distinguish between hypothetical and actual forgiveness experience, as this study and the literature review emphasized the two concepts may provide different data.

This study focused on the experiences of persons with different sacred beliefs who successfully forgave. Researching the experiences of persons with different sacred beliefs who could not forgive would create a fuller understanding of impediments to forgiveness, as would studying the experiences of persons who believed vengeance or avoidance were better solutions to offenses than forgiveness.

Implications

This study has the potential to help individuals, mental health providers and leaders, clergy, and organizations that are seeking more contextual, in-depth information regarding the meaning of forgiveness and the process of forgiving. It provides a broad understanding of why and how people forgive, how self and other forgiveness are related, and what experiences and beliefs are involved in creating a forgiveness disposition.

Participants stressed the essential need for R/S or social connections in the forgiveness process. This study demonstrated many different sacred belief systems can lead persons to forgiveness; the basic requirement is that the religion or culture endorse forgiveness as a virtue and include compassion, mercy, and forbearance as values. Counselors have questioned whether religious and spiritual concerns should be addressed in therapy. The results of this study suggest that sacred belief systems are fundamental in the forgiveness process and would be worthwhile to incorporate into the therapeutic discussion. Finding esteemed role models with whom persons can identify is important in

supplying the guidance needed to journey through the difficult process of forgiving a major transgression. Compassionate, nonjudgmental faith, family, or social communities provide security and new perspectives. Thus, practitioners are advised to help clients find connections that will aid them in the forgiveness process and that are an appropriate fit with the person's identity needs.

For mental health providers and clergy, this study as well as the literature review (Legaree et al., 2007; Sandage & Wiens, 2001) point to the importance of taking the time to understand persons' beliefs about forgiveness. For example, P7 was uncomfortable with a focus on self because of her cultural and R/S value system. In regard to reconciliation, safety is first priority, but insights can be gained by examining persons' beliefs about the importance of maintaining social harmony and adhering to R/S and cultural moralities.

The significance of correctly interpreting words was illustrated in this study, as participants varied in how they conceptualized the terms acceptance, self-forgiveness, excuses, and the afterlife. P3 referenced a quote from Voltaire that helped him avoid misunderstandings which states, "Before we sit down and converse, let us define our terms." Forgiveness is a complex concept that can be misinterpreted; therefore it's worthwhile to take the time to explore individual meanings.

Relationships and mental health issues are important to organizations as they affect the well-being and productivity of a workplace. Establishing a forgiving culture in a workplace can lead to more openness, better communication, and enthusiasm for learning and growing. Organizations can flourish when they understand forgiveness not

as a weak response that condones or ignores wrong-doing, but a strong response that confronts offenses with a spirit of learning, responsibility, and kindness.

Conclusion

Forgiveness has the power to positively transform lives, benefiting individual well-being, relationships, and societies. Ten different sacred belief systems provided the study's 12 participants with the guidance and supportive connections needed to (a) courageously confront major transgressions; (b) compassionately work to better understand oneself, the transgressor, and the situation; and (c) creatively restructure damaging cognitions into healthier, more productive understandings. All participants realized forgiveness required continual time and effort to maintain, much like other skills. The benefits in terms of peace of mind, relationships, productivity, plus spiritual and personal growth were deemed well worth the energy expended. Participants felt liberated, freer, more genuine, lighter, less burdened, healthier, happier, more responsible, and better prepared to move forward with their lives. Their ability to communicate with and offer support to others improved. Humility, empathy, gratitude, and self-forgiveness broke down ego defenses and opened the door to forgiving others. Forgiving allowed participants to remain faithful to their sacred beliefs and identities as persons of integrity.

Patty Jenkins, director of the fantasy superhero film *Wonder Woman*, stated, "Our fantasy of a hero is that he's the good guy who is going to shut down the bad guy." However, she warned, "There is no bad guy. We are all to blame." She felt "new kinds of heroics need to be celebrated, like love, thoughtfulness, forgiveness, diplomacy. . . No one is coming to save us (Jenkins, 2017, p 56). " For participants in this study, heroes

came in the form of forgiveness role models and spiritual/social connections who inspired them to struggle with painful emotions; take responsibility for their thoughts and behaviors; let go of judgments and desires that comforted in the past; pursue justice and accountability without vengeance; and adapt to unpleasant realities in a compassionate, creative manner. It would have been much easier if a "hero" could simply have come and changed things to comply with their personal beliefs about the way their transgressor and the world should be. However, the wisdom of the world religions and the sacred beliefs of the participants in the study recognized the futility of always expecting others and the world to conform to individual wishes. Instead, participants transformed their thinking and adapted to painful situations in a manner that led to more freedom, expanded insights, peace of mind, and compassionate, respectful behavior toward self and others. The twelve participants in this study are my heroes.

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Appendix A: Forgiveness Presentation

What is Forgiveness?

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale describes forgiveness as rethinking a perceived transgression in such a way that responses change from negative to neutral or positive. A transgression is defined as an action that goes against expectations or assumptions.

Historic Buddhist tradition has combined two words to describe forgiveness: fortitude and compassion. Fortitude refers to the strength to bear pain and renounce anger and resentment, while compassion means being able to empathize with an offender or be gentle with self.

Why Forgive?

Peace of mind; personal growth and transformation

Social harmony; enhanced relationships

Learning Goal Orientation – A focus on personal growth and a belief in the malleability of human capability. Mistakes and failures are normal and to be expected. They help us grow. The ancient Greeks used the word *syngnome* or understanding to refer to forgiveness. Aristotle said *syngnome* is needed because human nature is often ignorant of wrongdoing (unaware) or affected by extremely stressful conditions (reptilian part of our brain goes crazy).

Performance Goal Orientation – A focus on pleasing others or avoiding punishment and a belief that human capabilities are basically fixed. The tendency then is to see self and others as either good or bad, without growth possibilities. If this is so, it decreases the motivation to forgive as why embark on a process that is doomed to fail.

How Do I Forgive?

Enright and Fitzgibbons describe the forgiveness process as having the power not only to heal, but to transform individuals through personal and spiritual understanding and growth. They conceptualize four phases.

Uncover your pain – Confront your anger, shame, embarrassment, and hurt. Acknowledge and explore your feelings and thoughts without judgment. Don't let them fester in your subconscious because they will erupt at some point.

1) **Understand what forgiveness means** – Forgiveness requires strength and does not allow for exploitation of an individual or condoning, excusing or forgetting a transgression. It does mean choosing to abandon resentment, even though you have a right to it, and working towards attitudes of compassion and responsibility. You do not become an avenger or a doormat, but a strong person who seeks justice and growth in a positive manner.
2) **Cognitive Reconstruction (Write a New Story!)** – This is the toughest phase. Empathize with an offender and work to understand her or his story. Show self-compassion and adopt learning goals. Accept failures and suffering as part of life and be grateful for whatever blessings you have. Identify as a survivor, not a victim. Be courageous and don't displace anger onto others or deny responsibility. Regulate negative emotions by examining rigid expectations and assumptions and letting them go. Eliminate as many "shoulds" as possible. Draw on your

relationships with positive others and a higher power. Write your story with yourself as the hero or heroine who perseveres and overcomes.

3) **Deepen your ability to give and receive forgiveness** – Develop a sense of universality that realizes all persons experience injustice, make mistakes, and are capable of good and evil. This realization allows for an adjustment in rigid expectations and a feeling of connectedness with others that leads to greater peace of mind. Cultivate humility and empathy. Help others forgive.

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in Forgiveness Study

Greetings,

My name is Christy Heacock and I am a general research psychology Ph.D. candidate at Walden University. I am conducting a qualitative study on the topic of forgiveness as experienced by persons with diverse sacred beliefs. I am seeking participants who will be able and willing to describe experience with forgiveness of at least one major, but not necessarily extraordinary, transgression or event. Major will be defined as a painful transgression or event involving self or a significant relationship.

Interested persons are invited to participate in an approximately 60-minute, semi-structured, face-to-face or telephone interview in which they share their experience with forgiveness and the role their sacred belief system has played in motivating and empowering forgiveness. Information received will be recorded, but will be kept confidential. The participant may withdraw from the interview at any time if they so desire and will have the opportunity to check my transcript summary and interpretations for accuracy.

If you or someone you know would like to be a participant in this research project, please contact me by email at XXX or by phone at XXX. Thank you for your interest and assistance.

Sincerely,

Christy Heacock

Appendix C: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in transcribing data for this research: "The Forgiveness Process as Experienced by Adults with Different Sacred Belief Systems," I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature: Date:

Appendix D: Codes and Categories

Categories are in bold, followed by codes.

Descriptions/Context - description of attempt to stop offender; description of forgiveness journey: description of problems with relationships before forgiveness; description of situation in which unable to forgive; description of transgression; developmental factors; cultural factors affecting forgiveness; feelings toward transgression; personal characteristics affecting forgiveness; thoughts before forgiveness.

Motivation – changes in health when forgive; changes in feelings toward transgressor; behavioral changes when forgive; awareness of harm when do not forgive; feelings when forgive; motivation; linguistic why; identity; relationship benefits; reconciliation; turning point.

Support/Connections – forgiveness role model; inspiration collection; religious teachings; prayer; therapy benefits; talk about problems and transgressions; spirituality's role; spiritual support; social support; butterfly effect.

Courage to confront – asserting and respecting self; approaching transgressor and confronting problem; boundaries; negative social pressure; impediments to forgiveness; safety; overcoming emotions; humility.

Acceptance – acceptance; greater self, taking on family's pain; expectations; recovering racist; unconditional love.

Compassion – empathy; listening to other; other-oriented perspective; open-mindedness; understanding of transgressor; transgressor defense mechanism; third-person compassionate perspective of self; gratitude; humor.

Learning and Growth – forgiveness disposition; learning versus performance mindset; learning about forgiveness; transformation and growth; time required.

Cognitive Restructuring – coping mechanism; logical; linguistic how; restructuring thoughts; process.

Relationship self and other forgiveness - difference self and other forgiveness; self-forgiveness; self-compassion; relationship self and other forgiveness; self-forgiveness responsibility; self-forgiveness difficulties; self-forgiveness benefits of NOT;

Meaning of forgiveness – definition and meaning of forgiveness; linguistic what; harmful beliefs and assumptions.