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2018

Individual Growth Through Forgiveness: A Multiple Case Study on the Process of Forgiveness

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

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By

Bianca Kazoun

MS, Walden University, 2014

MA, New Jersey City University, 2004

BA, King's College, 1997

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

June 21, 2018

Abstract

Psychology researchers have been gathering information regarding the positive effects of

forgiveness, demonstrating that they contribute to better overall physical and emotional

wellbeing. Individuals who have suffered a transgression can remain in a place of destructive

anger and resentment for years. Long-term, these negative states can have deleterious effects

emotionally, physically, and socially. Understanding how to help those who are suffering move

past their victimization can have a positive impact. It is therefore important to conduct research

to better understand forgiveness through the lived experience of individuals who have

experienced some form of victimization. Using evolutionary psychology as the theoretical

framework, the motivations for revenge and forgiveness become clearer. The goal of this

multiple case study was to examine an individual's process of forgiveness and how it was

achieved following the experience of a significant transgression. Nine participants agreed to

participate in an in-depth semi-structured interview; this purposeful sample of individuals who

had suffered either criminal victimization or interpersonal betrayal, and who had gone through

the forgiveness process were selected for this study. The data analysis plan followed Braun and

Clarke's six-step thematic analysis guide to classify, analyze, and report the themes that emerged

from the data collected. The findings highlighted the processes whereby forgiveness is achieved,

A total of six themes were identified: forgiveness perspectives, resentments and anger, safety,

motivations, mediators, and resilience/personal growth. The most notable mediators in the

process of forgiveness among participants were compassion/empathy and receiving an

acknowledgement or explanation/sincere apology from the offender. In conclusion, this research

attempts to bring about positive social change by supporting practitioners in helping the

populations they serve, as well as further other important research on forgiveness.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Tony and Joyce Kazoun, and to my husband Andrew McCourt.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my husband, Andrew McCourt for his unwavering support as I pursued this dream. We barely knew each other when I started this journey, and I am forever grateful for his love and encouragement during this long and challenging road. I would like to thank my parents, Tony and Joyce Kazoun for years of support and encouragement. They taught me the meaning of hard work, and that I could accomplish anything if I put my mind to it.

I would also like to thank my committee chair, Dr. John Astin. He jumped in as my chair at a crucial time and has supported me through this entire process. I am thankful for his knowledge and guidance.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends that supported me through this process. To Dominic Canova who tirelessly spread the word about this research and generating interest in this project. A special thank you to my friends Dr. Geri Harris and Dr. Megan Gramm who came through the program with me. Their encouragement and support helped keep me going during the most challenging parts of this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

The focus of this research is the concept of forgiveness and the process one goes through to achieve this state. The dearth of qualitative literature in the area of forgiveness provides new opportunities for researchers in the field of psychology to further explore this concept through a different lens other than a quantitative perspective. Phenomenological research seeks to understand the substance or core of a phenomenon or concept that is not readily identified (Creswell, 2013). The goal of this research is to understand an individual's path toward forgiveness. A multiple case study approach to this research has given depth to people's experiences with forgiveness.

McCullough (2000) looked at forgiveness as a character (or personality) trait and posited that hurt feelings and the perception of being attacked motivates people to avoid the offender and add to feelings of righteousness that motivate revenge seeking behavior. Forgiving is part of a set of other prosocial behaviors (e.g. accommodating, empathy motivated helping) that promotes harmony within relationships. Theorists differ in their view of personality traits. For example, entity theorists believe that character traits are fixed and stable through adulthood while incremental theorists see these traits as malleable (Ng & Tong, 2013). Personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness have consistently shown a positive relationship with forgiveness (Hill, Allemand, & Heffernan, 2013). Conscientious people are more adept at self-regulation, which tends to promote forgiveness (Hill et al., 2013). There are other variables that impact the process of forgiveness and an individual's willingness to forgive. Empathy and the ability to take another's perspective has been shown to mediate forgiveness (McCullough, 2000). Frequent rumination about a transgression seems to make it more difficult for people to forgive

the offender. Other variables include relationship closeness and overall satisfaction regarding

the relationship. Specifically, if there is satisfaction and closeness in the relationship, it can be a

determinant of forgiveness. Finally, apologies (if sincere) have an impact on the process of

forgiveness for the victim (McCullough, 2000).

Decisional forgiveness is centered on the idea of having to interact with that offender in

the future. It is a conscious change in one's thoughts and actions. Although it reduces hostility

and that individual's unforgiving stance, it does not seem to reduce the body's physiological

stress responses (Toussaint & Friedman, 2008; Worthington et al., 2007). Emotional forgiveness

is based within a subset of emotions such as resentment, revenge, hostility and many others.

According to Toussaint and Friedman (2008), "Forgiveness acts through the displacement of

unforgiveness or the 'contamination' of unforgiveness with forgiveness or positive, prosocial,

love-based emotions" (p. 636). Emotional forgiveness has been shown to have health benefits

such as reduction of stress reactions and coronary issues (Worthington, et al., 2007). However,

decisional forgiveness may be indirectly related to health benefits through improved

relationships and may also be a precursor to emotional forgiveness (Toussaint & Friedman,

2008; Worthington et al., 2007).

Chronic rumination, anger, hostility, and victimization are connected with stress

responses such as hyperarousal of the sympathetic nervous system and negative effects on blood

pressure. Emotional aspects of unforgiveness can lead to various social and legal issues and

potentially negative coping styles (e.g. substance abuse; Harris & Thoresen, 2005). Other health

risks are emotionally based and include fears of revictimization and social isolation; the

obsessive ruminations about the transgression can be exhausting to the individual's social

supports and may result in those supports withdrawing from the relationship. Social isolation is

particularly important since human beings are social animals and actively look to connect with others (Harris & Thoresen, 2005).

There is a clear lack of research regarding social supports and how they impact the process of forgiveness. Ho and Fung (2011) provided a comparison between eastern and western cultures and how they processed transgressions and forgiveness. Western individualistic cultures encouraged independent goals whereas collectivistic cultures are more interdependent and emphasized the importance of social norms, the greater good, and conflict reduction to preserve social harmony (Ho & Fung, 2011). From a forgiveness perspective, individualistic cultures view personal offenses as a breach of justice, while collectivistic cultures view transgressions as threatening to social wellbeing and harmony (Ho & Fung, 2011).

Problem Statement

Human beings have a natural inclination to avoid or retaliate against others after experiencing an actual or perceived transgression (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). These retaliatory and avoidant tactics are ingrained deeply in the human biological and psychological composition; one way to disrupt this cycle is through forgiveness (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2010; McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013). Forgiveness is associated with certain personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness; while other perspectives view it as a disposition, a response to a situation or relationship characteristic (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013). It is not uncommon for people to struggle with this concept; forgiveness should be differentiated from condoning, excusing, pardoning, forgetting, or denying certain transgressions (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Adopting a forgiving stance helps individuals become more positive, and has a positive

impact on a person's physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002).

Character strengths are psychological components that demonstrate human goodness (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths differ from personality in that personality is comprised of both neutral and negative qualities. Character strengths are an individual's positive features that function as a pathway toward a more positive life (Park et al., 2004). Forgiveness is also recognized as a coping strategy that helps to mediate the effects of depression (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). Often, vengeful acts are the product of ruminative thinking; the ruminations may support the emotional distress that revenge is anticipated to relieve (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). People who tend to be vengeance seeking tend to exhibit personality traits such as neuroticism and are low on traits such as agreeableness. Vengefulness is positively correlated with ruminating thoughts about the transgression, and negatively correlated with forgiveness and wellbeing. Ruminative thinking is associated with depression and anger and negatively impacts physical wellbeing (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; McCullough et al., 2001). Forgiveness and forgivingness, an individual's tendency to forgive, not only reduces negative destructive emotions such as anger and ruminating thoughts, but also promotes positive experiences (Worthington et al., 2007).

Much of the available research on forgiveness is quantitatively based and attempts to directly assess its links to wellbeing (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Hill et al., 2013; Ricciardi et al., 2013; Riek & Mania, 2012). Many quantitative studies rely on self-report measures, imagined (or recalled) scenarios and brain imaging to test various hypotheses, which have been valuable, but lack the depth of real life experiences that a qualitative study can bring to the concept of forgiveness. The lack of qualitative data on forgiveness calls for further research on how

forgiveness develops and is cultivated in specific contexts. Particularly under researched is the process by which an individual achieves forgiveness.

Collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize social norms, the greater good, and trying to reduce conflict to preserve social harmony. Additionally, collectivistic cultures view transgressions as threatening to social wellbeing and harmony (Ho & Fung, 2011). This qualitative study on forgiveness provides a comprehensive look into the essence of this phenomenon, and its meaning as experienced by the participants of this study. Understanding the lived experiences of those who have struggled toward achieving forgiveness can ultimately help psychological researchers and practitioners better understand the process of forgiveness and help the populations they serve.

Purpose of Present Study

The purpose of this qualitative research was to better understand the process of forgiveness. Specific features of and paths towards achieving forgiveness have, to date, been vaguely defined and misunderstood. Forgiveness as a concept has existed for centuries, often being closely associated with religion or spirituality (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). However, how an individual transitions from contempt, revenge, and rumination to a place of acceptance and peace is still unclear. Experiences of true forgiveness can help individuals feel more positive emotions, develop better coping skills, and achieve better physical and emotional wellbeing (Worthington et al., 2007). This qualitative research on forgiveness has allowed scholars to understand an individual's path toward forgiveness and how it is ultimately achieved.

Research Questions

Victims of transgressions and negative life events face many challenges in their attempts to return to normalcy and healthy functioning. How individuals make that transition will be the focus of this investigation.

RQ: How do people who have experienced a significant transgression or negative life event achieve and experience forgiveness?

Theoretical Framework

The evolutionary psychology perspective provides a worthwhile theoretical framework for this study on forgiveness. Theories associated with evolutionary psychology seek to understand human motivations through the evolution of cognitive mechanisms in the brain. This evolutionary perspective has aided psychology as a science and provided useful practical applications in dealing with a variety of social problems (Confer et al., 2010). In relation to forgiveness, evolutionary psychology theorists posit that cognitively based systems for revenge and forgiveness are common in both human and nonhuman animals. Additionally, these systems have evolved over time and contribute to overall wellbeing and reproductive fitness of human beings (McCullough et al., 2013).

Operational Definitions

Evolutionary Psychology: Evolutionary psychology aims to examine and assess human behavior as a product of evolved psychological mechanisms. These mechanisms rely on internal input, and input from the environment for development, activation, and the expression of distinct behaviors (Confer et al., 2010).

Forgiveness: Forgiveness is the reduction of negative thoughts, emotions, and beliefs about an offense or offender (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008) and will include the

awareness that forgiveness is for oneself and not the offender, with a primary purpose of regulating and reducing negative effects (; Hill et al., 2013; Luskin, 2006).

Reconciliation: Agreement between two parties who come together with mutual trust (Bakin & Enright, 2004).

Unforgiveness: A term commonly used by researchers in the field to distinguish the concept from vengeance that is defined as, "A combination of delayed emotions, including resentment, bitterness, hatred, hostility, anger, and fear, that develops after ruminating about a transgression and can motivate desires for retaliation against or avoidance of the offender" (Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005 p. 423).

Vengeance: An individual's attempt to rectify an interpersonal transgression or offense by intentionally committing an aggressive action against an offender (McCullough et al., 2001).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Two assumptions were made during this research study. The first assumption is that suitable participants who meet the criteria of suffering a transgression and working through the offense with forgiveness have been recruited for this study and were willing to be open about their experiences that led them to forgiveness. The second assumption is that the participants were able to provide accurate descriptions of the transgressions they suffered and thoroughly discuss the process by which they were able to forgive and move on from these negative life events.

Limitations

There are some limitations that exist within this qualitative study. Given the small sample size, it is not possible to determine whether the results can be generalized to the population of people who have experienced a transgression and come to a place of greater forgiveness. Additionally, it is possible that some participants were limited in their ability to accurately recall or convey in words, the events that led them be able to find greater forgiveness. Furthermore, because the focus of this multiple case study is on the process of forgiveness, it was important to capture significant and relevant case examples; however, it was equally as important to incorporate participants with less extreme but still applicable experiences. The inclusion of participants who have experienced less extreme examples of a transgression, such as interpersonal or familial betrayal has allowed this study to be more generalizable to the public.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompasses case studies of participants who have agreed to participate in the research and be interviewed regarding their processes of forgiveness after a negative life event. Individuals who have experienced a significant transgression, be it victimization of self or family or interpersonal betrayal from family or loved ones have been deemed appropriate for being included in this case study. To capture the process of forgiveness accurately, it was important that participants had worked through their issues surrounding these transgressions. This was important to identify and categorize the steps involved with achieving forgiveness.

One delimitation of this study is that it did not include individuals who are working on self-forgiveness after they had wronged someone. Self-forgiveness may rely on different processes than forgiving a transgressor (Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008). Another delimitation of this study is that the focus was primarily secular and did not include specific

religious or spiritual frameworks of forgiveness. Brief discussions on self-forgiveness and spirituality are included in the literature review.

Significance

Negativity and negative coping styles may adversely affect an individual's psychological and physical wellbeing (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; Hill, Allemand, & Heffernan, 2013; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2006). While the concept of forgiveness is often associated with spirituality and is exemplified in major religions of the world (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009), it also exists outside the context of religion. Meaningful understanding of the notion of forgiveness can help individuals move past negative and maladaptive coping styles (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). It is important for both researchers and practitioners to understand how an unforgiving stance contributes to anger, maladaptive coping styles, depressive episodes, and other negative emotional and physiological states.

This research on forgiveness assessed though multiple case studies will benefit both practitioners and researchers in the field of psychology. It aims to provide a better understanding of the concept of and progression toward forgiveness. Research using multiple case studies focuses on one issue and uses multiple participants to better illustrate that issue (Creswell, 2013). This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the area of forgiveness and contributes toward a greater understanding on how the current working models of forgiveness align with an individual's actual process of forgiveness. This research is advantageous to psychologists as they may use these findings to help the communities they serve.

Helping people who have been victimized or suffered a negative life event move toward forgiveness and peace in their daily lives will also help them move through feelings of

resentment and hurt. These individuals will have the ability to develop better judgment outside the context of their anger (Luskin, 2006). In this study, participants who have suffered a significant transgression have provided knowledge and insight into their real-life experiences as opposed to imagined scenarios used in many of the other studies on forgiveness. Intimate and personal information being shared about the transgression the participant suffered and their path to forgiveness can bring about a new understanding of their lived experiences with the hope that this study has contributed to new insights into the process and path toward realizing greater forgiveness.

Positive Social Change

Social change can be defined as changes in social structure and cultural patterns over time (Leicht, 2013). The rules, values, and behaviors of individuals in society change as there is an increased understanding of what impacts the human condition. The role of scholars and practitioners should extend beyond the individual and into the community to help promote social change within communities as well as system-wide changes. Global social changes and rapid progression of technology have granted us almost instant access to various cultures and ways of life. These technological advances have also exposed the vast suffering and disadvantages that many endure and should motivate scholars and practitioners to challenge societal norms. This notion of being an agent of social change seems to be underdeveloped in many individual psychologists who may not challenge social norms. It is the obligation of researchers and practitioners to be advocates for clients and to promote values that will contribute to positive social change.

This study on forgiveness promotes positive social change by contributing to a growing body of literature on this subject using an underused methodology and is potentially valuable to

both researchers and practitioners. There is a dearth of qualitative investigations on forgiveness and understanding the processes by which it takes place. Using the case study approach has provided insight into how individuals achieve forgiveness. The findings can be compared with previous theories and research to examine the extent to which they align with what is currently understood about the construct of forgiveness. This can be valuable information to researchers who continue to refine their theories on forgiveness. For psychological practitioners, understanding forgiveness as a process outside the context of religion allows them to help individuals and families work through their victimization or other negative life events. Helping individuals process transgressions and move toward forgiveness may help to correct the idea that forgiveness is mainly spiritually based and promote better overall happiness and wellbeing.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Research on forgiveness spanning the last 20 years is abundant. Psychological researchers have looked at many facets of this phenomenon such as attachment, personality traits, character traits, evolutionary influences, and the psychology behind forgiveness. Over the years, forgiveness researchers have developed theories regarding the processes and stages an individual goes through to achieve forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a prosocial response to interpersonal offenses (McCullough, 2000). Forgiveness is distinct from other behaviors such as condoning or reconciliation (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). This distinction is important because forgiveness is often associated with these other behaviors and failing to understand these distinctions may ultimately may hinder the process of forgiveness for people who have experienced a negative life event. Building on existing knowledge about the benefits of forgiveness, can advance psychological researchers' understanding of the process and how it unfolds post transgression.

Research Strategy

A focused literature search and review was conducted over the past 4 years using the resources provided through Walden University. EBSCOHost available at Walden University provided access to a variety of professional databases, including PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, SAGE Premier, and Academic Search Complete. Online access to other public libraries provided access to additional professional articles. Further web-based searches provided access to peer-reviewed articles and current research on forgiveness from the National Institute of Health (NIH) and Research Gate. Additional information was gathered from various universities

that provide access to their publications and research; this was found through web-based searches.

Keywords used in a Boolean search included *forgiveness*, *health*, *revenge*, *attachment*, *self-forgiveness*, *empathy*, *apology*, *spirituality*, *personality traits*, and *forgiveness models*. The literature review that follows provides a thorough examination of the major themes that emerged from current forgiveness literature. Themes examined include the psychology of forgiveness, types of forgiveness, apology, other mediators of forgiveness, attachment, gender, age, culture, vengeance, unforgiveness, self-forgiveness, seeking forgiveness, trait forgiveness, models of forgiveness, and forgiveness and wellbeing.

Review of Literature

Psychology of Forgiveness

Revenge is a basic and biologically ingrained response to a wrongdoing (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). As people navigate various social relationships, they make their best attempts to determine the fitness or suitability of the relationship (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012). Using revenge as a means of resolution after a transgression may create adaptive problems. There are costs to retaliatory behaviors such as loss of the social relationship and support from those who are retaliated against. As social creatures, human beings continually face adaptation problems such as dealing with transgressions. Forgiveness is considered an adaptive prosocial response to interpersonal conflict (Burnette et al., 2012; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002).

It is important to distinguish forgiveness from other behaviors. McCullough and Witvliet (2002) distinguished forgiveness from condoning (justifying the offense), excusing (implying that outside circumstances are responsible for the offense), denial and forgetting (involving an

unwillingness to acknowledge hurtful events), and reconciliation (implying that forgiveness should include restoring the damaged relationship). Distinguishing forgiveness from these other concepts is particularly important because there is a general tendency to associate forgiveness with these other concepts. Reconciliation requires two parties to come together with mutual trust, while forgiveness is an individual's choice to leave behind negative feelings and resentment in exchange for positive feelings in the face of an injustice (Bakin & Enright, 2004). Full forgiveness within the context of non-continuing relationships can be just a reduction in negative feelings and unforgiveness toward the offender, whereas forgiveness in an ongoing relationship (i.e. romantic partner, friend, or family) would involve a reduction in unforgiveness, as well as increasing positive feelings about the other individual (Worthington et al., 2007). Many researchers studying forgiveness have moved away from the notion that full forgiveness must include some type of reconciliation with the transgressor (see Bercez, 2001; Burnette et al., 2012; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002;; Riek & Mania, 2012; Worthington et al., 2007). Forgiveness without reconciliation is increasingly seen to be just as healing and genuine as forgiveness with reconciliation.

Forgiveness has been conceptualized as a prosocial and motivational construct (McCullough, 2000). In response to interpersonal offenses, there are a limited set of affective reactions, which include positive behavior that is constructive to the relationship, and perception of hurt or attack which is characterized by fear and concern. A feeling of hurt may be connected with an individual's motivation to avoid any contact with the offender. Finally, righteous indignation can occur in which one is consumed by feelings of contempt, anger, and revenge (McCullough, 2000). These feelings may connect with the individual's motivation for revenge toward the offender.

Types of Forgiveness

Forgiveness be separated into two types: Decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness (Green et al., 2012; Wade et al., 2005; Worthington et al., 2007). Decisional forgiveness is an individual's conscious decision to transform negative thoughts and behaviors (Worthington et al., 2007). The intention behind these actions is to reject the idea of revenge and avoid the offender. Decisional forgiveness reduces general hostility but does not seem to reduce the physical responses to stress. However, there is potential that decisional forgiveness can lead the victim to emotional changes (Worthington et al., 2007). The other more complicated form of forgiveness is emotional forgiveness and involves a cognitive, emotional, and motivational shift. Here, negative emotions and motivations for revenge are reduced. Additionally, emotional forgiveness is likely to be associated with positive health benefits (Wade et al., 2005; Worthington et al., 2007).

Berecz (2001) highlighted the importance of distinguishing between conjunctive and disjunctive forgiveness. With conjunctive forgiveness, victims begin to empathize and build rapport with the offender, which will allow the victim to reframe their experience and ultimately arrive at reconciliation. Disjunctive forgiveness also directs victims toward empathizing with the offender and reframes their experience. However, the final phase of the process works toward a release rather than a reconciliation in an effort to move past feelings of bitterness and resentment without having to reestablish contact with the offender (Berecz, 2001).

Apology

Offering a sincere apology in an attempt to make amends can facilitate forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; McCullough, 2000; Pansera & La Guardia, 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012). Sincere apologies are considered to be a powerful mediator of forgiveness. The attempts of an

offender to make amends through an apology is not as simple as being willing to offer an apology (versus none at all). Forgiveness is more likely to occur if the offender shows sincerity in their offer of apology. Additionally, the offender should express remorse and take accountability for the offense (Pansera & La Guardia, 2012). Sincere apologies serve to reduce motivations for revenge, aggression, and negative or hostile emotional reactions on the part of the offended party (Pansera & La Guardia, 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012). Lack of sincerity, invalidating responses, and manipulative behavior can serve to intensify the conflict and undermine resolutions (Pansera & La Guardia, 2012).

Understanding the power of an apology, why it works, and why it sometimes fails is crucial for understanding its impact on forgiveness. Previous research on apologies often took a dichotomous view (was an apology offered versus no apology) which can be problematic (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). One of the reasons this limited conceptualization of apologies can be problematic is that victims of crime or interpersonal disputes differ greatly in what they would want to hear and how they process the apology. Understanding the victims' self-construal plays a key role when examining the various components of an apology. Self-construal is how people perceive their relationships with others (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). Self-construals are conceptualized in a three-part model to include one's independent self, relational self, and collective selves. These self-construals influence how individuals process information, and their perceptions of and reactions to injustices. The apology offered by the offender should correspond to the self-construal of the victim. The types of apologies have been categorized as offers of compensation, empathy expression, and acknowledging the violation of social rules and norms. It is believed that these particular apologies are most effective when their specific components fit in line with the individual's self-construal (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010).

To understand how different apologies correspond to different self-construals, the various components should be examined. Apologies that offer compensation emphasize exchange as an effort to restore equality in the relationship (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). The balance of the relationship can be regained through some kind of action. These offers of compensation can impact how the victim views the offender, the conflict itself, and their emotional state (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). An example of this might be, if someone took my lunch and apologized for taking the food but did not replace it, nothing has happened to restore the equality to the relationship. A second component of an apology is the expression of empathy, which focuses on interpersonal issues. Of particular value here is the offender's acknowledgement of, and compassion toward the victim's suffering. Here the offender would show the victim that they understand the consequences of their actions, and how it has impacted the victim's wellbeing (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). The third and final component of an apology is acknowledgement of violated rules and norms. This type of apology tends to extend to the context of a group. Behavior, whether interpersonal or group based, tends to be bound to particular rules and norms. Restoration of the relationship would entail an acknowledgement of the violated rules or norms on a cognitive and socio-emotional level. Essentially, the offender must recognize how the violated rule had a negative emotional impact on the victim or group (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). Examples of this are commonplace in today's society. Celebrities, politicians, television personalities, and many others have issued public apologies after making what are considered to be offensive remarks toward a marginalized group.

People with independent self-construals view themselves as a unique and independent entity who are inclined to regard relationships as a give and take exchange and expect to benefit from the effort they put forth with others (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). With these individuals there is

a focus on competition and personal achievements as opposed to community, compromise and group agreement. As a result, individuals with independent self-construals tend to focus on individual loss, and what they are entitled to in the wake of an offense. Additionally, they would be concerned with how equality would be restored by the offender, and less focused on genuine expressions of empathy (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). For this population, offers of compensation would align with their individual values and would be effective in reestablishing equality in the relationship.

Individuals with relational self-construals differ from their independent counterparts in that they view themselves as deeply connected with others and are often defined by the relationships they maintain (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). People with relational self-construals value maintaining the quality of the relationship. For victims with relational self-construals, apologies that offer an expression of empathy would be especially effective in facilitating forgiveness. Expressions of empathy focus on the victim's emotional state and show understanding of their perspective and hurt (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010).

Collective self-construals are less personal and focus more on identification with a particular group (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). Individuals with collective self-construals focus on the "we" rather than "I" (e.g. the LGBT community) and focus on any offense that may negatively impact the group. Apologies for individuals with high collective self-construals need to go beyond empathy and compensation. These individuals would connect with an apology that acknowledges the violation of social rules and norms. Here the offender should show an understanding of the importance of these norms that characterize the offended group and show concern for how their actions may have negatively impacted the group (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010).

Other Mediators of Forgiveness

While sincere apologies and remorse are major mediators of forgiveness, there are several other factors that can facilitate the process of forgiveness. Factors such as empathy, personality traits, spirituality, social influences, relationship and offense specific influences play a key role in this process (Riek & Mania, 2012; Green et al., 2012; Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Empathy is a key construct in the forgiveness process. Empathy involves the ability to perceive the world, cognitively and affectively, from another person's perspective (Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Forgiveness, in part, requires one to reframe or restructure the transgression, and attempts to look at the incident from an alternative perspective. Since many interpersonal conflicts are rarely one-sided, empathy allows the offended party to understand the other's point of view, and potentially see themselves as capable of perpetrating the offense (Riek & Mania, 2012). Empathic individuals can allow themselves to experience what another may be feeling. They must have the ability to have care and concern for others without becoming emotionally distressed or defensive (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Whether empathy is assessed as a personality trait or situationally, findings among researchers have consistently correlated this construct with forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012).

Another mediator of forgiveness is religiosity. Many western religious traditions promote the virtues of forgiveness (Riek 2010; Sandage, et al., 2000; Riek & Mania, 2012). However, investigations looking at the relationship between spirituality and forgiveness have shown mixed findings. Some studies have found that religious individuals reported higher motivations to forgive, when compared to nonreligious counterparts. Other studies have found little to no correlation between religiosity and forgiveness. One study of particular interest looked at attitudes toward forgiveness versus a tendency to forgive and found strong correlations

between religiosity and forgiveness attitudes. These findings suggest that religiosity influences people's feelings about forgiveness rather than the willingness or ability to actually implement it (Riek & Mania, 2012).

Differences in personality is another factor that contributes to forgiveness (Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012). When looking at the big five personality traits, agreeableness and neuroticism are associated with the propensity to forgive as it influences how one construes events and the relationships in their lives. Higher levels of agreeableness have consistently been associated with a higher willingness to forgive (Hook, Worthington & Utsey, 2008; Riek & Mania, 2012; Zhu, Woo, Porter & Brzezinski, 2013). Agreeable people may be more inclined to overlook particular offenses. Individuals high on trait neuroticism show lower levels of forgiveness. A key factor related to neuroticism is rumination, in that individuals high in neurotic traits tend to be more ruminative. Increased ruminative thinking is negatively related to forgiveness. Some of the research indicates that when people focus on past offenses that forgiveness becomes increasingly difficult; it may also account for recalling the account as more severe (Riek & Mania, 2012). Other personality constructs such as narcissism, empathy, and trait anger also have a considerable impact on forgiveness and will be explored later in this review.

When looking at willingness to forgive, relationship closeness and offense specific characteristics are important mediators (Riek & Mania, 2012). Commitment level between a victim and an offender impacts one's willingness to forgive. Significant emotional investments tend to motivate people to overlook particular offenses or explain the behavior of the other individual in an effort to preserve the relationship. Positive attributions about a close other increase as commitment to the relationship increases, lessening an individual's motivation to

dissolve the relationship after a transgression. Low levels of commitment in a relationship or an interaction between strangers lessens the likelihood of forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012). Severity of an offense has a significant impact on forgiveness, with more severe offenses increasingly difficult to forgive. More severe transgressions make it difficult for a victim to make positive attributions about the offender, thereby making forgiveness more difficult. A close relationship can mediate the relationship between transgression severity and forgiveness, not because it lessens the severity, but because individuals may be motivated to preserve the relationship (Riek & Mania, 2012).

Finally, social cognitive factors are closely related to forgiveness because it represents the subjective experience of the victim (Riek & Mania, 2012). Differences in personality impact how people interpret a situation and how they react to a transgression. Ultimately, determinations of forgiveness stem from an individual's subjective understanding of another's behavior and of the transgression itself (Riek & Mania, 2012).

Attachment

John Bowlby's theories of attachment have made significant contributions to the field of psychology. In regard to forgiveness and interpersonal conflict, individuals may feel increased anxiety dealing with negative emotions when relationship security is threatened (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Bowlby's theories of attachment which gained recognition and support in the 1960s, explain the bond between parent and infant, and continue to maintain significance today (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby's model has been instrumental, and effective in explaining the attachment process as it relates to development and interpersonal relationships. A fundamental characteristic of Bowlby's attachment theory is centered on the belief that for children to feel safe and confident exploring their world, they must form a secure attachment to their mother (or

parent figure) (Bretherton, 1992). The attachment bond between infant and parent is not only

crucial for survival early in life, it also impacts social development through one's lifetime. The

three styles of attachment identified are secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant (Hill et al.,

2013).

Bowlby posited that the experience children have with their parent or caregiver lead them

to develop their working model of attachment in other relationships throughout their lifespan

(Hill et al., 2013; Lawler-Row, Hyatt-Edwards, Wuensch & Karremans, 2011). Working models

of attachment:

> Guide people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in attachment-relevant
>
> contexts…Working models are thought to be enduring, and thus any individual
>
> differences in attachment are proposed to be a result of the enduring nature of people's
>
> working models of attachment. (Hill et al., 2013 p. 278)

Securely attached people typically feel comfortable getting close to other people and have

minimal worries about abandonment. People with anxious-ambivalent attachment seek close

relationships with others but tend to want more than the other person is willing to give.

Additionally, with anxiously attached individuals, there is increased anxiety about abandonment.

Avoidant attachments styles are characterized by discomfort with getting close, trusting or

depending on others (Hill et al., 2013).

As noted by Sandage and Worthington (2010), perceived threats to the relationship can

activate a person's internal working models of attachment. Attachment style, and degree of

perceived closeness affects the quality of people's relationships and can play an important role in

forgiveness. Attachment styles have enduring effects on one's perceptual and cognitive

processes, which then has direct effects on one's interpersonal behavior (Lawler-Row et al., 2011).

Employing this theoretical lens to forgiveness, securely attached individuals tend to utilize mutual strategies for conflict resolution such as compromising, and they are better able to separate the individual from the offensive action (Lawler-Row et al., 2011). Since securely attached individuals have likely experienced more secure, supportive relationships, and healing after conflict, making them more adept at emotional regulation. Additionally, securely attached individuals tend not to idealize relationship partners, which gives them a more balanced perspective on negative situations, and more openness toward finding alternative solutions to conflict. Ultimately, securely attached individuals have more trust for partners, and are able to show more empathy and forgiveness after a transgression (Lawler-Row et al., 2011; Sandage & Worthington, 2010).

These findings do not suggest that insecurely attached adults are not capable of forgiving interpersonal offenses; however, interventions that promote empathy and compassionate understanding toward the offender can help reduce distress and promote forgiveness (Lawler-Row et al., 2011; Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Insecurely attached individuals have had less experiences with supportive relationships and successful restoration of relationships after a conflict. They are less likely than securely attached adults to show forgiveness, either situationally or as a trait (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Insecure attachments contribute to increased vulnerability to stress. This in turn impacts the individual's ability to effectively use their social supports, which ultimately affects how they view the conflict or stressor and the coping mechanisms they employ as a result of the offense (Lawler-Row et al., 2011).

Researchers in the area of attachment and forgiveness have also found a connection between attachment style and moral emotions such as guilt and shame (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Both of these negatively charged emotions require one to make internal attributions about behavior and conflict. A person more prone to feeling shame tends to be insecurely attached and make global attributions about themselves or the other party. Additionally, shame prone individuals show excessive concern and anxiety regarding how others perceive them. These threats to the security of the relationship after a conflict can lead the individual to become more defensive (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Alternatively, securely attached adults tend to be less defensive, and more prone to guilt. A guilt prone person avoids the negative global generalizations about themselves and the other party and focuses on the particular behaviors at hand. Overall, guilt proneness is less anxious and narcissistic (Sandage & Worthington, 2010). As it relates to forgiveness, shame and guilt prone working models are connected to how one processes interpersonal offenses and conflict. Insecurely attached, shame prone individuals tend to externalize blame, become more anxious, suspicious, and hostile in the face of conflict. These behaviors are negatively related to empathy, and forgiveness of self or others. Guilt prone individuals are motivated to repair the relationship and can admit to wrongdoing. Guilt proneness has been positively correlated with empathy, apologizing, and a willingness to seek forgiveness and forgive others (Sandage & Worthington, 2010).

Gender, Age, and Culture

Forgiveness is a subject that has received increased attention by psychology researchers in the past 20 years. Dissecting this concept has proved to be challenging as researchers attempt to uncover the many facets to forgiveness and what makes one person more or less likely to forgive. Some researchers have posited that factors such as gender, age and culture may impact

the process of forgiveness (Green, Decourville & Sadava, 2012; Hill et al., 2013; Ho & Fung, 2011; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Miller, Worthington & McDaniel, 2008).

A meta-analytic review done by Miller et al. (2008) examined 70 studies to assess gender differences in the likelihood to forgive. The way in which men and women process stress, experience a threat or transgression, and coping styles may potentially affect their ability to forgive (Miller et al., 2008). To support their assumptions, the authors used concepts put forth by Kohlberg, and his stages of moral reasoning; more specifically they noted that women are more driven toward relationship preservation, whereas men are assumed to be more justice seeking, and likely to carry out justice after a transgression (Miller et al., 2008). The meta-analysis looked at gender differences using nine moderators. All of these moderators showed a difference in gender forgiveness (with women being more forgiving), however the differences were determined to be not significant. The only significant difference was found in the measure of vengeance, which is defined as "An attempt to redress an interpersonal offense by voluntarily committing an aggressive action against the perceived offender" (McCullough et al., 2001 p.602). This moderator indicated that when responding to measures of vengeance, men were significantly less forgiving (Miller et al., 2008).

How forgiveness develops over an individual's lifespan has also been of interest to many researchers (Green et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2013; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). In looking at a sample of children, adolescents, adults and older adults, strong correlations have been found between chronological age and reasoning about forgiveness (Hill et al., 2013; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Findings support that as people age they become more likely to forgive (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Moreover, older adults who reported higher levels of forgiveness also reported better general mental health (Green et al., 2012).

Understanding the factors associated with this shift in perspective in adults and older adults is important to understanding forgiveness from a developmental perspective. With age, well-adjusted adults focus on goals that are of greatest importance versus generally pursuing goals (Hill et al., 2013). Some of these valued goals include maintaining good social relationships and emotional regulation (Hill et al., 2013). Advanced age ushers in many changes in an individual's cognitive and physical abilities (Hill et al., 2013). Some have proposed that an increased ability to regulate emotions may compensate for the diminishment of physical and cognitive resources (Hill et al., 2013). Additionally, as people age their social environments are likely to change (Hill et al., 2013). Older adults are more motivated to maintain important relationships as opposed to increasing the size of their social networks seen in adolescents and younger adults. Older adults who have supportive relationships with partners or friends value the emotional support these relationships provide, making it more likely that they would employ alternative strategies for conflict resolution (Hill et al., 2013).

Culture may also impact the process of forgiveness. Individuals from collectivistic and individualistic cultures vary in their motivations for forgiveness; collectivistic cultures (i.e. China, Japan, Korea), more than individualistic cultures, tend to value the needs of a community over individual needs, motivating people to forgive in an effort to maintain harmony within the group (Ho & Fung, 2011). Individualistic cultures such as the United States and some Western European countries view forgiveness as an intrapersonal construct, meaning that the goal of forgiveness is internal, and related primarily to one's own emotional peace (Miller et al., 2008; Ho & Fung, 2011). Additional variables associated with forgiveness seem to differ across these two types of cultures (Ho & Fung, 2011). Individualistic cultures seem to focus more on the

intentionality of the transgression, whereas collectivistic cultures were more concerned with the likelihood of reoffending and the relationship to the offender (Ho & Fung, 2011).

Ho and Fung (2011) contextualize forgiveness by looking at societal interactions. Sociocultural theory looks an individual's development by examining the person's interactions in their social world. Differences in emotional regulation can be seen across collectivistic and individualistic cultures (Ho & Fung, 2011). How an individual is socialized in their specific culture effects how they understand and manage their emotions. Cultures do this by endorsing or rejecting emotional reactions associated with their cultural values (Ho & Fung, 2011).

Vengeance and Unforgiveness

As we advance our understanding of forgiveness, vengeance and unforgiveness are important constructs to conceptualize because it will further our knowledge regarding how best to achieve forgiveness. Vengeance is defined as "an attempt to redress an interpersonal offense by voluntarily committing an aggressive action against the perceived offender" (McCullough et al., 2001 p.602). Unforgiveness, on the other hand, is distinguished from vengeance in that it is not an immediate emotional reaction to a perceived transgression (Harris & Thoresen, 2005). Unforgiveness is defined as, "A combination of delayed emotions, including resentment, bitterness, hatred, hostility, anger, and fear, that develops after ruminating about a transgression and can motivate desires for retaliation against or avoidance of the offender" (Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005 p. 423).

Vengeance is often noted as a reason to demonstrate aggressive and destructive behaviors (McCullough et al., 2001). The retaliatory behaviors of the victim tend to be more forceful and are not seen as equitable in relation to the original offense (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). In addition to compensating for harm, vengeance encompasses three secondary goals, including,

balancing the scales, which is understood as our wish to get even, moral instruction, which is intended to teach a lesson to the offender, and saving face where the victim attempts to change how he or she is perceived, and to garner respect (McCullough et al., 2001).

Some vengeful acts are impulsive, occurring moments after an offense. However, some revenge seeking motivations are the product of ruminative thoughts about the transgression (;Fehr et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2013; McCullough et al., 2001). Researchers looking at vengefulness, within the context of specific personality traits, note that individuals high on trait vengeance are likely to have more ruminating thoughts about the offense. Associated with vengeful behaviors is neuroticism. People high on trait neuroticism experience more sensitivity to negative events and may be more easily offended (Fehr et al., 2010; McCullough et al., 2001;). Additionally, people motivated toward vengeance are typically low on trait agreeableness. Agreeableness as a personality trait "reflects a prosocial orientation toward others that includes such qualities as altruism, kindness, and trust" (McCullough et al., 2001 p. 602). Agreeableness is an important factor when looking at forgiveness and vengefulness because it provides insight into how people approach and conduct themselves in various relationships.

Unforgiveness and its delayed emotional reactions are often viewed as a stress reaction to a negative event (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Worthington et al., 2007). These stress reactions are sometimes related to how we appraise negative events such as transgressions or betrayals. How we appraise the offense both initially, and in our delayed reactions can contribute to physical, emotional, and behavioral stress reactions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Unforgiveness involves not only ruminations about the offense but is directly related to what people perceive as an injustice gap. An injustice gap is the difference between

how a victim would desire the offense to be resolved and the way they understand the situation presently (Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Worthington et al., 2007).

Early researchers in forgiveness also looked at how negative emotions and an unforgiving stance impacted brain activity and physical reactions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Worthington et al., 2007). Existing evidence suggests that unforgiveness arouses the same neurochemical activity seen in other stressful reactions, including decreased prefrontal activity, and increased activity in the limbic system (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Unforgiving conditions also produced increased activation in the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which is often seen in reactions to stressful and negative events. Moreover, hormonal patterns, specifically glucocorticoid secretion, are similar to patterns seen with other stressful emotions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

The use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has been useful in assessing brain activity after presenting moral dilemmas (to determine forgivability) to participants. Researchers noted a decrease in activity in areas of the brain associated with rational thought, and an increase in activity in emotional areas of the brain (Worthington et al., 2007). The implication here is that negative emotions (such as sadness, fear, anger, and rumination) may act in opposition to rational thought. When participants were presented with imagery that was expected to be unforgiving, researchers noted increased negative emotional states, increased heart rate and skin conductance, as well as increased levels of tonic eye muscle tension, and systolic and diastolic blood pressure (Worthington et al., 2007).

Unforgiveness is also associated with a host of physical and emotional health risks, both short and long term (Harris & Thoresen, 2005). The links between health and unforgiveness may not be direct but may been viewed as the consequences to chronic stress and hyperaroused

states. Short term consequences of unforgiveness include strong negative emotions and the physiological responses noted earlier. Intense chronic experiences of anger, hostility, and feelings of betrayal can result in hyperarousal of the autonomic nervous system and produces wear and tear on these systems over time (Harris & Thoresen, 2005). The authors note that not all anger leads to negative health consequences. There is a distinction made between constructive anger, where thoughts and actions are directed toward problem solving and correcting the situation, and destructive anger, which focuses on revenge, hostility and negative ruminations. It is the destructive anger that may potentiate health risks (Harris & Thoresen, 2005).

In addition to the potential physiological impact on health, unforgiveness can impact the individual emotionally, and interpersonally. Engaging in retaliatory behaviors can lead to negative legal and social implications. Unforgiveness is often connected to social isolation, and the loss of social support. The unforgiving individual still harboring hostile and angry feelings may be attached to their identity as a victim, which often exhausts family and friends who try to help. Additionally, people who characteristically tend to be less forgiving lack trust in others, and often fear being victimized in other situations, may limit their social networks (Harris & Thoresen, 2005).

Ruminative thinking, as related to unforgiveness and vengeance, is seen as a maladaptive way of coping with an offense (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; McCullough et al., 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Chronic rumination has been associated with emotional and cognitive impairments (Lyubomirsky et. al., 2011). Individuals who experience general life dissatisfaction or clinical depression seem to experience particular life events in maladaptive ways that tend to support a negative view of the self. Previous investigations that have focused on such negative

thoughts and emotions as dwelling and rumination have found that such emotions are associated with a variety of adverse effects (Lyubomirsky et. al., 2011). Individuals who struggle with rumination demonstrate difficulty in the ability to move past prior failures and unattained goals (von Randenborgh et al., 2010). Repetitive and prolonged concentration on one specific goal can hinder the success of achieving appropriate and more positive goals (von Randenborgh et al., 2010). This can directly relate to the construct of vengeance and unforgiveness in that fixating on vengeance, or the offense, can hinder the process of forgiveness.

Frequent rumination may lead to depressive episodes and loss of confidence (Ciarocco et al., 2010). Additionally, these individuals may have a hypersensitivity to negative evaluations or constructive criticism. Individuals who ruminate often and are depressed or dysphoric tend to be cognitively inflexible and may lack flexibility in their problem solving abilities. (Ciarocco et al., 2010). Cognitive inflexibility in regards problem solving could potentially contribute to the cycle of vengeance and unforgiveness in that the victim may lack the insight to find alternate solutions to a conflict.

Self-Forgiveness

Examining the process of forgiving oneself for a wrongdoing is a completely different process than forgiving a transgressor (Wohl, DeShea & Wahkinney, 2008). Self-forgiveness is defined as, "The acceptance of those parts of oneself that have previously been thought of as unacceptable due to self-directed inappropriate thought or action." (Wohl et al., 2008 p. 2). When processing a transgression, an individual has the option to avoid the offender, or move toward forgiveness by reducing negative feelings. One of the more obvious differences in these processes is that individuals working toward self-forgiveness cannot avoid themselves as they might another offender. Aside from this, self-forgiveness is seen as a fully intrapersonal process

(Wohl et al., 2008). While some authors have described the forgiveness process as intrapersonal for some cultures (Ho & Fung, 2011), the process of successfully forgiving oneself wholly depends on individuals' perception of the transgression and how they view themselves. The process of self-forgiveness can however, be influenced by the reaction of the other person (Wohl et al., 2008).

Wohl et al. (2008) looked at the relationship between self-blame and depression, and also assessed the relationship between self-forgiveness and guilt. The authors note that guilt typically results from the belief that the self has behaved in a way that is immoral, and that the unjustifiable action could have been controlled. Essentially, guilt arises from deliberate behaviors perpetrated by the self that resulted in a negative consequence (Wohl et al., 2008). The authors posit that feelings of guilt after a wrongdoing can be decreased as self-forgiveness increases. Additionally, they argue that individuals with low self-esteem are exceptionally unlikely to forgive themselves. As an intervention toward self-forgiveness Wohl et al., (2008) looked to Enright and The Human Development Study Group's model of forgiveness. In Enright's model, to work toward self-forgiveness the individual must face and acknowledge their wrongs, while working toward leaving behind negative thoughts and beliefs about the self and embody more compassion and love for themselves. Enright distinguishes self-forgiveness from excusing the wrongdoing. Rather, individuals would accept responsibility for the wrongdoing, while processing feelings of pain and remorse (Wohl et al., 2008).

Seeking Forgiveness

In ongoing interpersonal relationships forgiveness is more complex than forgiving a single transgression (Sandage, Worthington & Hight, 2000). Seeking forgiveness requires both awareness and action. Seeking forgiveness is defined as, "A motivation to accept moral

responsibility and to attempt interpersonal reparation following relational injury in which one is morally culpable" (Sandage et al., 2000 p. 22). Some of the literature on seeking forgiveness describes several factors that may promote this process including, situational factors, religiosity, personality attributes, relationship closeness, and responsibility (Sandage et al., 2000; Riek, 2010).

Seeking forgiveness has strong ties to mainly Western religious values such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Eastern religions such as Buddhism do not advocate divine forgiveness, as they tend to adopt beliefs such as Karma to correct injustices (Sandage et al., 2000). From a religious perspective, feelings of guilt, although negative, can be a powerful motivator in seeking forgiveness in that the individual becomes aware of their sin, and seeks forgiveness from both God and others in the community (Riek, 2010). In the Jewish faith forgiveness is rooted in tesheva, or repentance. Here, the perpetrator must openly repent and show remorse about the transgression, making forgiveness more likely from the victim. If the individual does not show remorse, the victim is not obliged to forgive that individual. On the other hand, Christianity promotes unilateral forgiveness, regardless if the transgressor shows repentance (Sandage et al., 2000).

Relationship closeness appears to be a factor when assessing an individual's likelihood in seeking forgiveness (Riek, 2010). Offenders in close relationships show more empathic concern for the other and are more likely to seek forgiveness to preserve the relationship. Responsibility, whether or not the individual had control over their actions also seems to be a factor in seeking forgiveness. Generally, victims have more difficulty forgiving if the actions are perceived to be within the offender's control. As the offender recognizes their responsibility in the offense, guilt

tends to increase leading to an increased probability of the offender seeking forgiveness (Riek, 2010).

Many of the major researchers on forgiveness have noted that certain traits, such as empathy and agreeableness are associated with the likelihood to forgive (Carlisle & Tsang, 2013; Hill, Allemand, & Heffernan, 2013Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Sandage et al., (2000), hypothesized that individuals prone to guilt versus those who are prone to shame may impact willingness to seek forgiveness. The authors note the difference in these two emotions. Specifically, attributions connected with shame are more globally negative, and focus on the whole self, whereas guilt is based on remorse for a particular action or behavior. Narcissistic personality traits, and high self-monitoring have been negatively associated with both granting and seeking forgiveness.

Narcissistic individuals are extremely self-focused; their tendencies such as entitlement, lack of empathy, and self-absorption reduce the likelihood of granting or seeking forgiveness (Sandage et al., 2000). Some of the more maladaptive elements of a narcissistic personality have been linked to shame proneness. This proneness to shame may be construed as exceptionally threatening to a narcissistic individual's sense of self. As a result, the narcissistic person may rely on defense mechanisms such as projection or splitting that are likely to inhibit corrective approaches to repair a relationship such as seeking forgiveness (Sandage et al., 2000). Self-monitoring individuals have a tendency to monitor social situations and adjust their behavior to adapt to societal expectations. They tend to be concerned with appropriateness and are often self-conscious. For high self-monitors to seek forgiveness is unlikely. Seeking forgiveness may highlight their offense, and ultimately damage their social image (Sandage et al., 2000).

Trait Forgiveness

Along with learning when people are able to forgive, forgiveness researchers are also investigating forgiveness as a trait (Balliet, Li & Joireman, 2011; Fehr, Gelfand & Nag, 2010; Ng & Tong, 2013; Hill et al., 2013). Implicit theories of personality look at the extent to which certain characteristics such as personality or moral character are fixed or are able to be changed with effort, and how an individual perceives and reacts to others (Ng & Tong, 2013). Entity theorists are focused on traits and believe that traits are fixed and cannot be changed. From this perspective, these theorists believe that predictions about behavior can be made based on these traits. Alternatively, incremental theorists take a process focused approach, viewing personality traits as fluid, capable of being shaped, and changeable with effort (Ng & Tong, 2013). Trait forgiveness, often referred to in forgiveness literature as forgivingness, and is defined as "the tendency for an individual to forgive across situations and time" (Fehr et al., 2010 p. 899). Similar to other personality traits, forgivingness is considered to be stable. When compared with less forgiving peers, individuals high on in forgivingness recognize finding a resolution as a valuable strategy (Fehr, et al., 2010).

Forgivingness is correlated to an adaptive trait profile, meaning that more forgiving individuals tend to be higher on agreeableness, conscientiousness, perspective taking, empathic concern and self-control. It is negatively correlated with traits such as neuroticism, anger, narcissism and paranoid personality types (Hill et al., 2013; Fehr et al., 2010). Agreeableness is among the personality traits most often correlated to forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010). Agreeable individuals are inclined to get along with others; and if conflict arises, agreeable people are inclined to employ cooperative strategies to resolve the conflict. Additionally, agreeable people consider the point of view of another individual, are inclined to be more empathic with others' circumstances, more trusting and cooperative (Fehr et al., 2010).

Connected with these traits is the dispositional correlate of perspective taking.

Perspective taking "represents a cognitive capacity to consider the point of view of another

person…perspective taking suggests a trait ability to infer the intentions and goals of the other"

(Fehr et al., 2010 p. 899). As it relates to forgiveness, the ability to take the perspective of

another can improve a victims' understanding about the offense and the offender and may

mediate negative reactions or perceptions of the offender (Fehr et al., 2010). Empathy is an

emotional trait that is considered essential in facilitating forgiveness. Empathic individuals have

a strong ability to connect with others, and react strongly in the face of others' suffering, which

is associated with other prosocial behaviors such as altruism and cooperation (Fehr et al., 2010).

The strongest, and most consistently correlated personality trait to forgiveness appears to be

conscientiousness (Hill et al., 2013). The associations between conscientiousness and

forgiveness are not entirely clear but seems to be related to aspects such as diligence and

prudence. Conscientious individuals have shown to be better at self-regulation, which promotes

more forgiving attitudes (Hill et al., 2013).

Other dispositional correlates highlight social and moral expectations such as religiosity

and social desirability (Fehr et al., 2010). Religious constructs advocate for individuals to adopt

a socio-moral method of forgiveness. This religious perspective applies a form of social pressure

on the victim to behave desirably, such as through forgiving, in spite of the victims' cognitions

or affect surrounding the offense. The intent here is to offer individuals a moral code as well as a

way to self-regulate (Fehr et al., 2010). Social desirability is the need for acceptance and

approval, along with the belief that one can achieve this through behaving in a socially

acceptable manner. Social desirability is conceptualized as "an individual difference in the

tendency to present oneself as favorably to others, even if the presented self does not reflect the

actual self" (Fehr et al., 2010 p. 902). Victims who value social approval were shown to be more likely to forgive, although this correlation was small (Fehr et al., 2010).

Models of Forgiveness

To advance our understanding of the process of forgiveness, it is important to assess some of the models that have been put forth by researchers in the field. Enright and the Human Development Study group developed a process model of forgiveness that is utilized for both forgiveness of self and others and is comprised of four main phases and 20 units within those phases (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell & Worthington, 2014; Wohl et al., 2008). The first phase of this model, the uncovering phase, focuses on the affective reaction to a transgression, and includes eight subunits (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014; Wohl et al., 2008). The units in this initial phase focus mainly on the victim, examining their anger and defenses, becoming aware of how cognitive rehearsals of the offense have impacted them, and realizations that the event may potentially alter who they are and how they view the world (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The second phase of the model is the decision phase. Here the offended individual begins to develop a dialogue on what forgiveness would mean to them and commits to the process. The units associated with this phase include new insights into the offense, and an awareness that current strategies are ineffective, and openness to making forgiveness an option (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014; Wohl et al., 2008). The third phase of this model is the work phase, which is when the person moves into action to ease pain associated with the transgression. There are four units associated with this phase including reframing the incident, increased awareness, empathy and compassion and acceptance (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014; Wohl et al., 2008). The fourth and final phase is the outcome phase in which the individual shows a shift in their thoughts and beliefs. The five units

associated with this final phase include the realization that growth can occur from the transgression and finding meaning through the process (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014; Wohl et al., 2008).

Another model proposed by Worthington is, REACH, in which each letter characterizes major facets of the forgiveness process (Wade et al., 2014). In the first step, individuals (R) recall their negative experience, and process the emotions associated with the event. The second step (E), pushes individuals to empathize with the offending party, take a different perspective, and to possibly understand factors that may have influenced the offender and their actions. The third step (A), encourages the victim to see forgiveness as an altruistic act, and recollect times in their life when they needed forgiveness. In the next step (C), individuals are asked to commit to forgiving meaning that they will continue to work through the forgiveness process and build on their successes. Finally, (H) refers to hold or maintaining their forgiveness during difficult times, particularly if anger reemerges (Wade et al., 2014).

Ho and Fung (2011), developed the Dynamic Process Model of Forgiveness that takes a different approach to forgiveness that includes sociocultural factors that impact the process of forgiveness. This model is an extension of the emotional regulation model, which involves evaluating emotional cues after a person/situation interaction (Ho & Fung, 2011). In this model, the researchers note the important role that dialectical thinking plays in the process of forgiveness. Dialectical thinkers are able to consider problems from a variety of perspectives and bring together conflicting information. (Ho & Fung, 2011). According to Ho and Fung (2011), "A dialectical approach to forgiveness is possible through continuing transformation in the cognitions-the appraisal/reappraisal of transgression" (p. 80).

Dr. Fred Luskin has dedicated the past 20 years to researching forgiveness and its impact on individual wellbeing. He has authored several books and is the cofounder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project at Stanford University. Luskin's model of forgiveness, HEAL (Hope, Educate, Affirm, and Long-term), is designed as part of a two-part process for forgiveness (Luskin, 2002). HEAL is designed to alleviate the hurt from specific negative life experiences. Hope (H) refers to the personal hope statement that the individual creates and is the positive result one would have wanted in the negative situation. Essentially, this statement is a reminder that one had hopes for a different outcome, and that there are other goals beneath the hurt feelings. Educate (E) is how one educates themselves about the reality of their situation and begin to understand the realities of what is and is not within their control. When writing the Educate statement, individuals acknowledge the potential of not getting what they want from the situation, as well as accepting the reality of the events that happened. The first part of this statement recognizes that our hopes carry a potential of failure, while the second part shows an acceptance for the uncertainty that life can bring (Luskin, 2002). Affirm (A) affirms the individual's positive intention toward growth from the negative experience. Long-term (L) stresses the importance of continued practice of the HEAL method. Here the individual commits to practicing HEAL when they are re-experiencing the hurt or finding themselves dwelling on the negative event (Luskin, 2002).

Prior to working on forgiveness through HEAL, Luskin recommends individuals to have practiced his stress reduction technique, Positive Emotion Refocusing Technique (PERT). He developed this guided imagery mindfulness exercise to help reduce stress and prevent people from feeling overwhelmed by their anger (Luskin, 2002). PERT is not a technique intended to be

used independently; PERT works jointly with the HEAL method to successfully move people through the transgression and their grief (Luskin, 2002).

Finally, Rosen views the process of forgiveness as tied to the grief process. He sees the grief process as ending with forgiveness, and that forgiveness cannot begin without going through the grief process. Additionally, his process is closely aligned with Luskin's model with a few differences. Rosen outlines the metrics of grief in four steps; the individual understandings how they feel about what happened to them; what specifically hurt them and why they reacted as they did; the ability to describe the events, reactions and feelings to others; and, being open to feedback. After this is accomplished, forgiveness work can begin.

Falling in line with some of Luskin's processes, Rosen believes it is important to free the self of expectations. Self-defeating expectations are expectations that individuals place on themselves or others, or on a particular situation that they do not have the power to control Dropping demands, expectations and the belief that one is owed something helps the individual stop suffering. These expectations are best replaced with hopes and wishes (Luskin, 2002). Where Rosen departs from Luskin's views is that Rosen believes that working through revenge fantasies is a necessary step in the healing process of forgiveness. In developing the revenge fantasy, clients are encouraged to turn the tables on their offenders and feel powerful at a time where many of them feel powerless. Rosen believes that in the short-term revenge fantasies are instrumental in moving individuals out of their victimized perspective. However, holding on to revenge fantasies long term would be detrimental, and reinforce the person's connection to the offender and offense. Without working through the revenge fantasy, the client may experience what Rosen believes is false forgiveness.

Both Rosen and Luskin believe that changing the victim's complaint narrative is essential in moving past the transgression. People create their grievance or complaint narrative when they feel victimized or something in life turns out differently than expected (Luskin, 2002). These complaint narratives mostly contain self-defeating expectations. Rosen believes that to forgive, individuals must change their narrative to a "forgiveness narrative" with what he calls a Positive Action Plan. Therapeutic support can help the victim soften their complaint and develop more positive motives and aspects of themselves. In rewriting the complaint narrative, victims have learned to separate the objective from the subjective, take the offense less personally, and learn that the offense was not really about them.

Forgiveness and Physical and Emotional Wellbeing

Long term negative health impacts of unforgiveness have been well documented in psychological, physiological, social and behavioral domains (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Hill et al., 2013; Ricciardi et al., 2013; Riek & Mania, 2012;). As discussed earlier, unforgiveness is not the immediate reaction following an offense but, rather a delayed reaction that encompasses a variety of negative emotions such as anger, resentment, bitterness, rumination and hate (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Worthington et al., 2007). Unforgiveness is also characterized by several researchers as a stress reaction (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Riek & Mania, 2012; Worthingon & Scherer, 2004). Research has revealed that forgiveness and forgiving attitudes combat the negative effects of unforgiveness and are negatively associated with adverse emotional states such as anxiety and depression (Hill et al., 2013; Riek & Mania; 2012; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Worthingon & Scherer, 2004).

Maintaining a chronic unforgiving state promotes negative affect and prolonged stress responses (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Ricciardi et al., 2013; Worthington & Scherer, 2004;).

Persistent emotional distress and negative affect can impact cardiovascular reactivity, diminish quality of sleep, and increase the production of stress hormones (Ricciardi et al., 2013). The health-related effects of forgiveness, and the chronic stress related disorders related to unforgiveness often take years to manifest (Worthington et al., 2007). Understanding the risk unforgiving states may present to one's health is important for aiding clients who are struggling to move forward after experiencing a negative life event.

Theoretical Framework

In the last 15-20 years, the emerging perspectives of evolutionary psychology have put forth theories regarding human behaviors and adaptations that have contributed to our problem solving and survival (Confer et al., 2010). To understand its application in regard to this study on forgiveness, it is important to operationally define, and understand the goal of evolutionary psychology. According to Confer et al. (2010), "The goal of evolutionary psychology is to study human behavior as the product of evolved psychological mechanisms that depend on internal and environmental input for their development, activation, and expression in manifest behavior" (p. 110). The fundamentals of evolutionary psychology draw upon the work of Darwin and his theories of natural selection. In part, Darwin's theory states that traits that are beneficial, and assist with survival and reproduction, will be transferred to future generations, while other less useful traits will die out.

Many who are familiar with Darwin's theories know that it has mostly been applied to physical adaptations in humans and animals. However, theories of evolutionary psychology posit that these adaptations can be seen in psychological and behavioral domains (Confer et al., 2010). Much in the same way our physiological systems have evolved over time to guard against changes in our environment, psychological adaptations have evolved to help us with problem solving

connected to our survival. Psychological adaptations are defined as, "information-processing circuits that take in delimited units of information and transform that information into functional output designed to solve a particular adaptive problem" (Confer et al., 2010 p. 111). An example of this may be understanding the adaptations associated with stranger anxiety in infants. Additional adaptive problem-solving skills can be seen in community cooperation, appropriate socialization of children by parents, friendships, and many more. Evolutionary psychology has been successfully applied in several areas such as clinical psychology and the law.

The evolutionary psychology perspective seems to correspond well with some of the emerging literature looking at cognitive systems associated with revenge and forgiveness. Current research supports the notion that both revenge and forgiveness are adaptations in behavioral patterns that one uses to resolve particular adaptive problems (McCullough, Kurzban & Tabak, 2010; McCullough, Kurzban & Tabak, 2013). This theoretical perspective proposes that systems for revenge and forgiveness have become typical of the species (human and non-human) because of its ancestral value in resolving social problems. Furthermore, this evolutionary perspective argues that both revenge and forgiveness have biological functions in that revenge is intended to discourage harm from others, while forgiveness is intended to solve problems to preserve important relationships (McCullough et al., 2013).

Understanding revenge and forgiveness as biological systems that contribute to reproductive fitness is essential in the evolutionary psychology perspective. In both human and nonhuman animals, retaliation reduces the likelihood of that individual or animal being a target of harm in the future (McCullough et al., 2013; McCullough et al., 2010). From this perspective revenge, would be defined as:

behavior resulting from a mechanism designed to deter the imposition of costs (or the withholding of benefits from) oneself or one's allies by the imposition of costs following a target's imposition of costs (or withholding of benefits) where costs and benefits are defined in terms of their effects on lifetime reproductive fitness. (McCullough et al., 2010 p. 5)

Using this definition, the victim imposing costs (revenge) post transgression shows the offender and others that they will be subject to consequences for their harmful actions, thereby changing the motivation of others who may want to do harm. This type of direct deterrence signals to an aggressor that the cost of doing harm to the target may be too high. Some situations do not require retaliation to be direct. Some experiments have shown that just the fear of revenge discourages acts of aggression, particularly in the presence of a third party. Prior to public policies, laws and the court system, our ancestors lived in small groups; retaliation is likely to have been essential in deterring outside parties from harming the group, and ultimately beneficial toward survival (McCullough et al., 2013; McCullough et al., 2010).

Just as revenge is proposed to be a biological system related to our reproductive fitness, forgiveness may function similarly to promote adaptation. There are several reasons why an individual might employ forgiveness rather than revenge. If, for example, the price of retaliation is too high, one may choose to adjust their behavior and pursue forgiveness. Additionally, it would be important to employ forgiveness strategies when maintaining good relationships with important others (family members, community members, etc.) as this would benefit survival (McCullough et al., 2013; McCullough et al., 2010). According to McCullough et al., 2010, "the forgiveness system produces these motivational changes because of their efficacy during evolution in promoting restoration of beneficial relationships in the aftermath of personal harms" (p. 14). Not

forgiving, or employing revenge strategies, may lead to being excluded from important beneficial relationships, jeopardizing survival. This is especially true within the context of close relatives. Additionally, the choice to forgive helps stop the cycle of revenge, as well as having to reestablish new relationships with others who may or may not be trustworthy (McCullough et al., 2010).

The propensity for revenge and the capacity to forgive are human attributes designed to protect wellbeing and reproductive fitness. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, these cognitive mechanisms were designed to help us deter transgressors, assess the costs of retaliation and help maintain valuable relationships (McCullough et al., 2013). Researchers have proposed that the forgiveness system would be sensitive to the compromises related to forgoing retaliation and opting for the restorative benefits that forgiveness brings. Additionally, the forgiveness system should be able to identify factors that impact the usefulness of each option, such as the severity of the offense, transgressor motives, apology, and the likelihood of further attacks (McCullough et al., 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

An extensive literature review was conducted for this research study. The search did not yield any current studies on the process of forgiveness that qualitatively explored an individual's progression toward this state.

The major themes that appear throughout the literature review include the definitions of forgiveness, reconciliation, revenge and unforgiveness. One of the other significant themes found throughout the literature were mediators of forgiveness, with apologies being one of the more prominent mediators. Emerging from the literature on forgiveness mediators was how our different self-construals (independent, relational and collective) affect what may be needed in

order to move on from a transgression. Other mediators include personality traits, religiosity, attachment, age, gender and culture.

Understanding the particular personality traits associated with forgiveness or unforgiveness was another notable theme to emerge from the literature. Having an adaptive trait profile, such as those high on agreeableness show a higher willingness to forgive, as compared with those who tend to be high on neuroticism. Along with personality traits, attachment styles have also been associated with willingness to forgive. Securely attached individuals tend to have more trust in their partners and other close relationships and are likely to employ healthier, more constructive conflict resolution strategies than their insecurely attached counterparts. Insecurely attached individuals are less likely to appropriately use the social supports in their life, and have fewer successful experiences with conflict resolution, making it more difficult to forgive interpersonal offenses.

Other prominent themes included differences in willingness to forgive across gender, age, and culture. Although no significant differences were found across gender, increased age was associated with a greater likelihood to forgive. Additionally, differences in culture showed different motivations toward forgiveness. Specifically, collectivistic cultures appear to place a higher value on the needs of the community than individualistic cultures. People from collectivistic cultures are motivated to forgive to preserve social harmony, whereas individualistic cultures value forgiveness for the inner peace it brings to the individual.

The majority of the studies found on forgiveness were quantitatively based. Many of these quantitative studies assessed the negative impact of unforgiveness, as well as the impact of different personality traits, and other mediators on forgiveness. Even with the significant themes identified in this review there are still aspects to forgiveness that are not completely understood.

One area in particular that has been under researched is the process by which people experience and achieve forgiveness. Although several researchers in the area of forgiveness have put forth a variety of models on how forgiveness is reached, we still do not know if these theories accurately represent an individual's experience with forgiveness, as there is no empirical evaluation of this process.

This study endeavors to fill this literature gap by interviewing people who have experienced a significant transgression or negative life event and have achieved forgiveness. Interviews with the participants will reveal the process by which they have experienced this phenomenon and help guide future research on forgiveness.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

This multiple case study was designed to explore the process of forgiveness. Specifically, the study sought to understand a victim's path toward achieving forgiveness after experiencing a transgression or other negative life event. This often-misunderstood concept has existed for centuries and is frequently associated with religion or spirituality (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). However, how individuals transition from contempt, revenge, and rumination to a place of greater acceptance and peace is still unclear. The experience of true forgiveness can help individuals feel more positive emotions, develop better coping skills, and achieve better physical and emotional wellbeing (Worthington et al., 2007). The goal of this qualitative research on forgiveness was to clarify the process whereby some individuals who experience victimization are able to move past anger and resentment toward greater peace and forgiveness.

A multiple case study design was the most appropriate design for examining this phenomenon. A multiple case study design allowed this researcher to understand the victim's personal journey post-transgression, and how they were able to move forward and realize forgiveness. This researcher has examined not only the struggles of individuals after being victimized, but also has uncovered the process by which they came to find healing and forgiveness. Chapter 3 details the proposed methods and study design, participant selection procedures (including ethical considerations to protect the participants), and data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design

In contrast to quantitative approaches, qualitative inquiries and research designs reflect a more subjective form of investigation that focuses on the participants' experience rather than the

researcher's views and hypotheses (Creswell, 2013). The open-ended nature of qualitative designs allows for data and themes to be grouped and examined for meaning (Creswell, 2013). Collecting strong qualitative data starts in the initial stages of research planning. The researcher takes into consideration the type of qualitative study that will best illustrate the phenomenon. This decision then guides the type of data collection and sampling strategy that would best support the research questions and capture the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The central focus of this qualitative inquiry was the experience of individuals' process of forgiveness after a negative life event.

Qualitative strategies can be further reduced to five distinct approaches: Case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative, and ethnography (Creswell, 2013). In choosing a single or multiple case study, a researcher assesses individuals, programs, or groups and offers a detailed description and analysis. In addition to the multiple interviews conducted, other forms of information such as observations, journals, and recordings are often used. Emerging themes and patterns identified by the researcher provide a thorough picture of the individuals or programs (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenological research seeks to identify the meaning or essence of a particular concept or phenomenon that has not clearly been operationalized or identified (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). Researchers work toward identifying and operationalizing a phenomenon through interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being investigated. A key reason the phenomenological approach was not chosen for this research study is that psychological researchers over the past two decades have been able to conceptualize and operationally define forgiveness.

The purpose behind using a grounded theory approach is to develop a theory that offers an explanation for a concept that has yet to be formally defined or operationalized (Creswell, 2013; Creswell et al., 2007). However, since numerous theories related to the construct of forgiveness have been put forth and examined empirically, grounded theory seemed ill suited to the present study.

Narrative research focuses on the stories of individuals and conveys their lived experience. The researcher uses extensive interviews as well as documents and other personal effects to retell the story of individuals' lives. This data is analyzed and put into categories to look for themes that may emerge (Creswell, 2013; Creswell et al., 2007). Narrative research could have been an option for this research, but it still would not be the best fit for this study. In this research study, it is acknowledged that the phenomenon already exists.

Ethnographies seek to describe and interpret experiences from culture sharing groups. Here the researcher tends to immerse him or herself within the group to best understand their lives and patterns. The data collected and analyzed by the researcher helps describe the group's inner workings and contributes to a better understanding of that culture sharing group (Creswell, 2013). This was not a good fit for this research because the objective does not include how entire communities or cultures process forgiveness. A better use for ethnographies and the process of forgiveness would be if a researcher wanted to understand how a community heals after a tragedy (such as a terrorist attack or mass shooting). This study will be conducted by using a multiple case study methodology to determine the process by which individuals achieve forgiveness. A multiple case study was selected rather than a single case study in an effort to provide a more comprehensive picture of the individuals' forgiveness process. Using a case study approach facilitates the exploration of a particular phenomenon or group. The case study

format is appropriate for this study because it allows for the exploration of the phenomenon through open dialogues with the participant, and the use of other sources such as journals and other relevant documentation. Additionally, using the case study format will serve to illustrate the progression from victimization to forgiveness. The qualitative information for this study will be collected through interviews and other documents that would be relevant to the participants' forgiveness process.

Role of the Researcher

In developing this multiple case study, it is this researcher's responsibility to ensure that all data collected is done ethically and adheres to research guidelines. Data was collected using semi structured interviews with participants who have gone through the process of forgiveness after experiencing a negative life event.

The process of forgiveness disrupts the cycle of anger, vengeance, and resentment that individuals experience after experiencing a negative life event. Additionally, to achieve forgiveness, people experience various stages and use positive coping strategies when reexperiencing memories of victimization. These potential biases or preconceived notions were checked so as not to influence the emerging data. It is customary for qualitative researchers to use specialized measures to set aside any assumptions or potential biases. The ways in which researchers do this is through disclosure and bracketing (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing is the process researchers use to set aside any biases, assumptions, or preconceived notions they may have about the phenomenon being researched (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Here, personal connections, interests, and goals regarding the research are shared up front. In this qualitative research on forgiveness, bracketing was used as a means of controlling potential biases. Bracketing can be done in a number of ways; one of which is through bracketing interview.

Bracketing interviews is a dialogue with outside sources to help uncover any potential biases or preconceived notions about the research topic (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Additionally, understanding why the researcher chose this area of study could be useful in uncovering any hidden biases or agendas. For this qualitative study, I sought the support of a trusted mentor through several supervision meetings. These meetings helped me discover the reasons behind my interest for this research topic, as well as how the knowledge I had gained so far could be managed while conducting participant interviews.

Procedure

Individuals were invited to participate in this study through flyers (see Appendix C) posted in the common areas of public message boards at local universities and coffee shops. Additionally, I posted the recruitment flyer to my social media page and requested that friends and family repost it to their page to generate interest in the study. Individuals directly connected to me on social media (direct friends or family) were not eligible to participate in this study. Participation was voluntary, with participants contacting me directly by phone or email if they are interested, and a small compensation will be offered for their time. This compensation was provided to each participant regardless of whether or not they complete the study. The compensation was a $10 gift card.

Participants who contacted me voluntarily were screened via phone to determine if they meet the criteria for the study (See Appendix A for screening tool). In total, 11 individuals contacted me; one individual was excluded because he did not meet the criteria, the other met the criteria but could not find a time to meet that would work with her schedule and did not participate. I then discussed meeting places and times that were convenient for participants who were deemed to be appropriate for the study. Upon meeting, the participants signed consent

forms (that had been previously sent to them via email or US mail), and were informed verbally

of their rights, and how their anonymity will be maintained. The nature of the study was

explained to all participants, and at the conclusion participants were debriefed. There are no

anticipated risks or psychological distress to participants, as they will be discussing events that

they have forgiven.

Methodology

This research study sought to answer the question of how or by what process is an

individual able to forgive after a transgression by utilizing a multiple case study approach. This

qualitative inquiry acquired data through the use of semi-structured interviews with the

participants. The participants interviewed had all suffered a serious transgression or negative life

event in the past and have worked toward and achieved forgiveness for that event. The

information gathered from the participants has provided insight into their process of forgiveness.

Choosing the multiple case study approach allowed for researcher and participant to

collaborate and explore a phenomenon through their narrative. Additionally, a multiple case

study explores a variety of cases in an effort to uncover common themes and patterns among the

cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Multiple case studies provide more thorough and detailed

information on each participant. Utilizing this approach will also provide the opportunity to

replicate the study with multiple participants (Yin, 2013). Being able to replicate the study,

using carefully selected cases, has enabled me to explore the differences between the cases

(Baxter & Jack, 2008). Additionally, replication will help determine if the results between each

case are similar, as well as help strengthen the conclusions drawn from the study (Yin, 2013).

An effective way to begin analyzing the data is by examining the research questions in

the study. Using this as a starting point allows the researcher to uncover evidence that deals with

the research question, which then facilitates the process of formulating a conclusion (Yin, 2013).

This process should be replicated with each research question to provide a deeper understanding

of the research. To assist with the organization of qualitative data, Yin (2013) recommends the

use of computer software programs such as Atlas.ti, HyperRESEARCH and NVivo. Using

available technologies created for qualitative research will be a valuable resource for coding and

categorizing the data collected, and for establishing, if any, meaningful patterns have emerged

(Yin, 2013).

Choosing an effective way to analyze the evidence is an essential feature of qualitative

inquiry. For multiple case studies, using thematic analysis is considered an especially effective

analytic strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis uses the data collected from the

multiple case study allows the researcher to identify themes across the entire data set and

determine if the theories align with a particular framework and provides a rich description of the

data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this multiple case study, I utilized thematic analysis

to analyze the results.

Within this current study, I am pursued a clearer understanding of an individual's process

of forgiveness after a negative life event. This information, as noted earlier was gathered

through semi-structured interviews. When conducting a semi-structured interview, questions are

set, but the interviewer has the flexibility to modify the order, wording and provide explanations

based on the interaction with a particular interviewee. A qualitative research interview aims to

describe dominant themes in the in the participants' world (Steinar, 1996). The questions should

promote an in-depth understanding of the answers to the interview questions and allow for

additional conversation around the questions (Yin, 2013). For this qualitative study, I met with

participants at a location convenient to them. The time spent per interview is ranged between 25

to 90 minutes and was conducted face to face. If participants have difficulty meeting in person, I made myself available via FaceTime. All interviews were audio recorded to assist with transcriptions. Any follow-up contact to clarify, or supplement answers was done by phone.

Participant Selection

The population of interest for this study were individuals who have suffered a serious transgression or negative life event and have chosen to work through their victimization with forgiveness. Serious transgressions and negative life events would include instances of abuse, infidelity or other interpersonal betrayal, sexual assault, physical assault, loss or abandonment, domestic violence, and surviving loved ones of homicide victims. Participants may be seeking therapeutic support during the time of the interviews, but not for the transgressions being discussed for this study.

Sampling Strategies

A common approach in qualitative research is to use a purposeful sample; here the researcher considers what is being studied and carefully selects individuals that will be meaningful to the research (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013). For this qualitative research on forgiveness I conducted a multiple case study; this approach helped give shape to the process of achieving forgiveness. One method used by researchers is criterion sampling; this is where researchers try to ensure that the cases being used in the study meet certain criteria to be sure the researcher obtains the appropriate information. Another type of sampling similar to criterion sampling is known as intensity sampling. Intensity sampling "consists of information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely" (Patton, 2002 p. 234).

For the qualitative research I used criterion sampling. As a researcher, it is crucial to find participants who have experienced significant negative life events in order to capture and

understand the concept of forgiveness and the impact (if any) it has had on that individual's life. Criterion sampling ensured that the selected participants met certain predetermined criteria that was applicable to the study. Using criterion sampling helped ensure that certain criteria for the study that illustrated the phenomenon being studied, was met. Case study research typically utilizes a relatively small sample size (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2013). This multiple case study adhered with what is typically recommended for this type of design. The goal for this study was to find eight to 10 cases to include; nine participants were successfully recruited and interviewed. Recruitment flyers were posted to public message boards at coffee shops and local universities, as well as my social media page. It was important to use caution, and not infringe on the privacy of potential participants. To avoid any potential ethical issues, I asked family and friends to repost the flyers to their social media pages. No individuals directly associated with my social media were permitted to participate in this study.

Data Collection

For this qualitative research plan interviewing was the preferred choice as a means to collect data on the forgiveness process. As a researcher, I have gained valuable insights by interviewing participants who had experienced a significant transgression or some form of victimization and have moved through the process of forgiveness. The interview process has several stages and for some researchers can be a quite fluid process. In designing an interview, a researcher must determine what research questions will be asked (but remain open and flexible to change), obtain participants, decide what type of interview would be best (phone, in person, internet etc.), find an appropriate location and decide on how the interview should be recorded (Creswell, 2013). As with other facets of the research process interviewing comes with its own set of ethical considerations.

For this research on forgiveness, participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through recruitment flyers posted in public places. Potential participants were screened to determine their fitness for this study. For this particular study, it was important to find individuals who have experienced a transgression, interpersonal betrayal or other negative life event where they ultimately forgave the offender. It was also important to confirm that potential participants were not currently in therapy for this issue (See Appendix A for more detail). Participants eligible for this study were asked to meet for a face to face audio recorded interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews took place at a mutually agreed upon location, convenient to the participant. A small compensation was offered for their time. All participants were informed about the process, both in written form and explained verbally. A formal consent form was provided to participants and reviewed prior to the interview. Additionally, participants were explained their rights and how their information will be used not only in this particular study but if there is any possibility of their information being used in the future (Creswell, 2013). All interviews used the same questions to guide the interview, however, being this was a semi-structured interview, it left room for participants to share their personal experiences more openly. Other data collected for this study would include journals, worksheets, or other documents that may have been kept by the participant.

Data Analysis

An essential feature of a well-constructed qualitative study is a strong data analysis plan. Researchers who design qualitative studies look at themes, patterns by analyzing the content of the participants' statements. For this research study on forgiveness, I explored patterns and themes within the participants process toward forgiveness. How these processes aligned with other models and steps put forth by current researchers in the field is briefly discussed in Chapter

5. The data analysis plan for this research was inductive, given that the information provided to me by participants will be analyzed without conforming to an existing theory or model of forgiveness (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Within qualitative methodology there are many ways to analyze the data and themes that emerge from the research. Researchers use thematic analysis as a means to classify, analyze, and report themes that emerge from the data. This flexibility is useful in qualitative research and can provide a detailed and powerful description of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within this multiple case study, I was able to identify themes across the entire data set and offer a rich description of the complete data set. Here, it was important to reflect and detail the most important themes that emerge from the data set.

Braun and Clarke (2006), propose a six-step process to guide thematic analysis. In the first step of this analysis I familiarized myself with all the data collected. This included actively reading all the interviews and other data collected and began exploring for patterns and meaning in the data. The second step involved developing initial codes from the data collected. This was done by organizing all the data into meaningful groups. It was important to code as many potential themes as possible; codes were refined or discarded later as relevant themes began to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research was inductive, so codes were data driven. Next, after all the data had been coded and organized, the analysis shifted toward looking for broader themes. This was an important step because here the researcher considers how the data and codes coalesce into overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step four involved further refinement of the themes identified in step three. Here the researcher determines whether each theme forms a logical pattern. Additionally, the researcher determines if the emerging themes are valid in relation to the data set. The themes included

should tell general story of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, the themes that are presented here needed to be defined and describe the essence of the data that the theme captured. In this step, each theme underwent a thorough analysis, and the researcher then determined where and how this applied to the research question. At the conclusion of this phase, it was clear which themes were relevant and which were not. Finally, after all the themes had been fully identified and developed, the last stage involved a final analysis and report write up. The final report should be cohesive and representative of the story the data is telling (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

It is common in qualitative research to use inductive analysis methods, while deductive analysis tends to be more common in quantitative approaches. (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Inductive analysis is based on the researcher discovering themes and patterns and developing new theories from the data (Patton, 2002). Inductive data analysis entails taking the patterns and themes that emerge from the data and creating new categories, as opposed to deductive analysis which places the data collected into already established categories based on a specific theory or framework (Patton, 2002). Using inductive analysis methods would be the best fit for this research study on forgiveness. This approach allowed me to analyze the participants' process of forgiveness to see what emerged naturally without attempting to place the experiences into predetermined categories. Using an inductive approach, the researcher is not bound by a framework or the researcher's beliefs. The themes that emerge will be associated with the data provided by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Before the interview process begins, all participants were required to sign consent forms. The consent form informed participants about the purpose and procedures of the current

research, any potential risks and benefits, that participation was voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any point during the study, confidentiality, compensation, and contact information. I also explained to participants that the information provided to me will be kept for seven years, and then either destroyed or used in future research. Additionally, how each participants' identity and information will be kept private was also explained. The forms provided to the participants were explained verbally to ensure each of them understood their rights.

To maintain confidentiality of the participants, information gathered during the research did not utilize participants' names or any other identifying information. All materials and documentation related to the study will be kept locked in a safe with other confidential files in my private office. Documentation related to this research will be kept for the required seven years before being destroyed or used for other research.

Because I asked participants to recount negative, and possibly traumatic experiences it was important to be sensitive to the risks involved to the participant. It was anticipated that risks would be minimal (if any), as participants recruited for this research would have already forgiven the transgression they have experienced. Potential risks may include minor distressing thoughts about the transgression while recalling the event. However, participants may find it valuable and cathartic to share their experience of forgiveness with others. However, as a precautionary measure, I provided participants with information of counseling agencies that would be available to address any potential needs of the participants should they arise. All agencies provided to the participant accept insurance, have low cost and sliding scale options.

After the interview, participants were debriefed, and I allowed participants to ask any questions they may have at the conclusion of the interview. In the debriefing, participants understood the purpose of the study, were offered counseling resources, and a brief snapshot of

the findings when complete. Participants were also informed about how their interviews will be

used, and how their participation will help contribute to forgiveness research.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this multiple case study was to understand individuals' process of forgiveness after experiencing a negative life event. For this study, it was crucial to understand the progression from a state of anger, betrayal, and contempt to a state of peace and forgiveness. To achieve this, I interviewed nine individuals to learn about the transgressions they experienced and determined if their processes of forgiveness shared common elements. This research showed the importance of looking at forgiveness using a systematic approach, and confirmed the purpose of the study, which was to identify the dynamics of forgiveness from the victim's perspective.

To begin, I developed a research question to understand the phenomenon of forgiveness. The research question was: How do people who have experienced a transgression or negative life event achieve and experience forgiveness? This chapter provides an analysis of the study as well as the data that was collected. In addition, this chapter will provide the overarching results of the study.

Setting

The setting for this multiple case study was determined by the participants' preferences. Five of the interviews were conducted in person in my private office, and four interviews were conducted via FaceTime due to distance. Interviews conducted via FaceTime took place with me in my private office while the participants were in a private and comfortable location of their choice. All interviews were conducted in accordance with the privacy procedures outlined in the methods section. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that the interviews are audio recorded, as well as their rights to refuse information and to stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Demographics

Demographics measured in the data for this study included gender, age, and ethnicity, with a total of nine participants taking part in this study. Of the nine participants, five were male and four were female. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 63 years old, while the average age of the participants was 33. Five participants were White, three were Hispanic, and two were African American. Each participant had suffered a significant transgression and chose to work on their anger and resentment by working toward forgiveness for the offender. Table 1provides the demographics of the participants of the study. The table identifies participants as P1-P9 to maintain the privacy of participants, and also includes the ages and ethnicities of each participant.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Trauma Experienced
P1	63	White	Female	Interpersonal betrayal/Infidelity
P2	29	White	Female	Abuse by ex-husband
P3	26	White	Female	Sexual abuse biological father
P4	40	White	Female	Emotional abuse/neglect mother with Borderline Personality Disorder
P5	60	White	Male	Betrayal by friend/coworker
P6	19	African American	Male	Poor relationship with biological father
P7	20	African American	Male	Abandonment biological father
P8	20	Hispanic	Male	Abandonment biological father

| P9 | 20 | Hispanic | Male | Abandonment biological mother |

Data Collection

Throughout the course of this study, data was collected regarding the process of

forgiveness and its impact on the individual. Each participant had experienced a significant

transgression and chose to work through their resentments with forgiveness. Data for this

multiple case study was collected through audio recorded interviews with each participant. Prior

to the interview, participants were screened for fitness using the screening tool created by me

(see Appendix A). Approved participants were emailed a copy of the consent form to review

before the interview.

At the start of each interview, I reviewed the consent form to ensure that each participant

knew and understood their rights. After reviewing the consent form, I reminded each participant

of the audio recording and collected their demographics. After discussing their rights and the

procedure, I proceeded with the semi-structured interview using interview questions that I had

created. Interview lengths ranged from 25-70 minutes. At the end of each interview, I debriefed

the participant and provided them with information to mental health resources should they need

it. Finally, I thanked each participant by providing them with a $10 gift card to Starbucks. The

audio recorded interviews were sent to a transcriptionist to transcribe.

From here, I began to analyze each interview. To keep track of all the data from the

interviews, I created a color-coded word document. To begin the process of uncovering the

various themes and patterns within the interviews, I started by developing codes. I color coded

relevant passages in the interviews to keep track of the data and keep it organized. After this

process was complete, codes were developed into larger themes. Completion of the codes was determined after not being able to identify new codes in the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

As with all types of research, data analysis is an important step for qualitative research. Along with content analysis, exploration of patterns and themes is a key feature of qualitative research. For this study, I looked at the themes that emerged from each participant's forgiveness process. Themes identified from the data included perspective of forgiveness, safety, motivation, resentments/anger, mediators, and resilience/personal growth. The data analysis for this research study was inductive, in that the information collected from the participants was analyzed without adhering to an existing framework of forgiveness.

There are multiple ways for qualitative data to be analyzed. The analytic process used for this multiple case study was thematic analysis which is ideal for inductive research. After reviewing all interviews, I began identifying as many relevant codes as possible. After conducting nine interviews, I was able to identify 46 separate codes. These 46 codes were then reduced to six themes and two sub-themes.

For this study, I explored many themes related to the forgiveness process. At the start of each interview, I asked participants to define forgiveness. Additionally, I thought it was important to see if there was any consensus among the participants regarding how they viewed the concept of forgiveness.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To ensure the credibility of the current study, great care was taken in following the procedures outlined in Chapter 3. All participants who took part in the study were screened with

the approved screening tool, and met the criteria previously approved by the Institutional Review Board, approval number 09-06-17-0349948. Interviews were conducted both in person and via FaceTime due to distance. The nine cases collected for this study represented a wide range of transgressions and thoroughly exemplify the forgiveness process.

Transferability

To account for transferability, each interview was transcribed for accuracy, allowing for a thorough review and analysis of the material. Participants were carefully selected for appropriateness. Additionally, the participants were asked to share the transgressions they suffered, their experiences post transgression, and their forgiveness process. Selected portions of some interviews will be found later in this chapter to highlight important codes and themes.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to presenting the results of a study in an unbiassed manner, in that the findings from the research should be based on the interviews and data gathered and not the researcher's beliefs and perceptions. The participant narratives are crucial to shaping the data of the study (Cope, 2014). The data in this study was carefully audited to ensure confidence in confirmability. The data in this study was audited using a professional transcription service. The transcriptionist transcribed and reviewed the audio for accuracy. Additionally, I reviewed the audio while reading through the transcriptions. No identifying information was on the recordings, but to ensure confidentiality was maintained, a nondisclosure agreement was provided by the transcriptionist

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Participant Profiles

</div>

Below are the profiles of the participants for the present study. The profiles briefly outline the transgression they chose to discuss.

Participant 1 (P1) is a 63-year-old white female. She is divorced with two adult children. P1 chose to discuss the infidelity of her ex-husband, which ultimately led to their divorce. P1 and her husband were high school sweethearts, and she described their relationship as them having grown up together. The affair occurred after her ex-husband's heart attack when he was about 40 years old. When he left, P1 described feeling helpless, as she did not know how to live independently, and fell into a deep depression feeling complete despair and hopelessness. P1 notes that the depression and resentment not only affected her children, but her health as well, leading her to find a way to work on this transgression.

Participant 2 (P2) is a 29-year-old white female. She is currently in a committed relationship engaged to be married. P2 chose to discuss the verbal, emotional (and occasional physical) abuse she suffered from her ex-husband. P2 struggled with obesity her entire life. She was married to her high school boyfriend at the age of 20. Although she has been divorced from him for many years, P2 was still traumatized and easily triggered by many of her experiences with her ex-husband. She credits her recent commitment (approximately one year ago) to Overeaters Anonymous as the catalyst for working on forgiving these transgressions.

Participant 3 (P3) is a 26-year-old white female. She is currently single, but in a long term committed relationship. P3 chose to discuss the childhood sexual abuse she suffered from her biological father. P3 described the abuse as ongoing for over 10 years. P3 describes years of anxiety, fear, depression, and frequent panic attacks in the years after her father's incarceration before working through this transgression with forgiveness.

Participant 4 (P4) is a 40-year-old white female. She is currently single, and a pastor for her local church. P4 chose to discuss the complicated relationship she had with her mother. P4 described her mother as someone who struggled with Borderline Personality Disorder. P4

described years of physical and emotional neglect, as well as years of verbal and sometimes physical abuse by her mother. P4 reported that some of the issues she had to overcome was the result of her mother's mistreatment of her. These issues included depression, anxiety, eating disorder, and what she terms "abandonment issues". P4 believed that the relationship she had with her mother was toxic, and that she could not trust that her mother would not violate her boundaries while she was alive. She did significant therapeutic work while her mother was alive, but felt she was finally able to forgive her after her death.

Participant 5 (P5) is a 60-year-old white male who is a priest. P5 chose to discuss the transgression he had to work through by a coworker. Additionally, he discussed an earlier experience he had with an aunt, one of his first experiences with forgiveness. This coworker had nearly cost him his position in the church community that he had been a part of for many years.

Participant 6 (P6) is a 19-year-old African American male currently enrolled as a full-time college student. P6 chose to talk about the recent experience he had with forgiveness related to his father. P6 comes from an in-tact family but stated that for years he watched his father verbally abuse his mother. According to P6 this family dynamic impacted him significantly causing anger, resentment and depression.

Participant 7 (P7) is a 20-year-old African American male currently enrolled as a full-time college student. P7 chose to discuss the abandonment from his biological father. P7's father had been incarcerated for a number of years, but even in the years when he was not incarcerated he did not remain in contact with P7, provide support, or include him in his life. P7 reported feelings of deep rejection, anger and resentment. P7 believes that many of his negative behaviors, including sabotaging his own progress came from the deep feelings of hurt and rejection by his biological father.

Participant 8 (P8) is a 20-year-old Hispanic male currently enrolled as a full-time college student. P8 chose to discuss the abandonment and rejection he experienced by his biological father. P8 stated that throughout his childhood and adolescent years he desired a relationship with his biological father. His biological father often denied the family as he was already married with another family. At one point P8 noted that his biological father tried to reconcile with his mother, but it did not work out. P8 stated that he had to work through many of his father's manipulations to ultimately come to forgiveness.

Participant 9 (P9) is a 20-year-old Hispanic male currently enrolled as a full-time college student. P9 chose to discuss the abandonment and rejection experienced from his biological mother. After spending most of his childhood living with his mother, P9 was abruptly moved and given to his father full time, with no explanation. He stated that he spent many years feeling confused and "not good enough." These feelings led him to act out, almost causing him to get expelled from school. P9's work toward forgiveness began in high school, but he needed some distance from the situation before feeling he was able to fully understand and forgive her.

Results

The following research question guided this multiple case study:

RQ: How do people who have experienced a transgression, or negative life event, achieve and experience forgiveness?

This research question sought to uncover the various themes that emerge after an individual has suffered a significant transgression. Data was analyzed, and selective coding was used to evaluate the central research question. Codes and themes were obtained from the data and are supported by using relevant excerpts from the interviews.

The coding process revealed six dominant themes and two subthemes. All participants shared similar views on how forgiveness was defined. Through the themes that emerged, it became clear that a common experience among participants was negative and/or self-destructive behaviors after experiencing the transgression. Tables 2-7 below illustrates each of the codes associated with the themes as well as how many participants identified with the code.

Theme 1: Forgiveness Perspectives: Acceptance and Reconciliation

Table 2. Theme 1 codes and participants identifying with each code

Theme	Codes Associated	Number of Participants Identifying with Code
Forgiveness Perspectives: Acceptance and Reconciliation	Forgiveness/ acceptance/ letting go	8
	Forgiveness Reconciliation vs. None	4

As mentioned earlier, this theme was important for establishing a basic understanding regarding how participants conceptualized forgiveness and if there was any commonality among the definitions. Codes associated with this theme included: forgiveness as acceptance/letting go, and forgiveness with reconciliation versus none at all.

Within this theme the majority of the participants shared a similar view of what forgiveness was. Statements that illustrate this theme include the following:

"Forgiveness does require, that you - you have to let go of the feelings related to hurt, which are usually resentment, anger, maybe fear."

"Forgiveness for me would be letting go of resentment...Forgiveness is being at peace with the past, I would say."

As to whether forgiveness should include reconciliation or not:

The hope is that it (forgiveness) could heal relationships but sometimes forgiveness has to happen, you know, closure/ forgiveness, has to happen on your own without the other person and through whether they just aren't able to be a part of that conversation or, or they're dead or completely out of your life.

Theme 2: Resentments/Anger

Table 3. Theme 2 codes and participants identifying with each code

Theme	Codes Associated	Number of Participants Identifying with Code
Resentments and Anger	Negative Reaction toward self	9
	Unforgiving Attitude / Action Toward Offender	5
	Resistance to Process	4
	Resentments	8
	Unconscious Dimensions of Resentment	7
	Discovering Other Resentments	6
	Desires and Expectations	3
	Guilt and Self-Forgiveness	3
	Confusion / Conflicting Feelings Toward Offender	1

The codes that correspond to this theme are associated with the participants' negative feelings, beliefs, and actions after experiencing the transgression. The nine codes associated with this theme included negative reactions toward self, negative attitude/action toward the offender, resistance to the process, resentments, unconscious dimensions of resentment, discovering other resentments, desires/expectations, guilt/self-forgiveness, and confusion/conflicting feelings toward offender.

All of the participants experienced some type of negative reaction that impacted not only their quality of life, but also their relationships with others. Negative reactions such as fear, lowered self-esteem, shock, post-traumatic stress, withdrawing from friends/family, bottling up emotions, and misdirected anger and rage were commonly reported.

As with many of the participants, P8 experienced some self-destructive behaviors: "And then my anger just grew. And it wasn't just anger and resentment at that point. It was full out rage." For others like P3 negative behaviors came along with other emotional disturbances: "Because not only did I have anger, but I also had a lot of fear. I was scared of everything all the time… I would just cry just have panic attacks." For P1, she reported having significant difficulty maintaining daily functioning: "I had nightmares, waking up crying every night, yelling his name… couldn't get through church without crying… Depression, rage, denial, disbelief, hopelessness and despair, mostly I would say despair".

Additionally, resentment was a shared experience among all the participants. For example, some participants' experience with resentment was directly connected to the offender and the transgression while others discovered underlying resentments toward others in their lives, significantly impacting the quality of the relationship. To highlight an example from the latter, both P7 and P8 experienced extremely negative and rejecting relationships with their biological fathers. Each was fortunate enough to have a positive supportive male role model through a step-father and grandfather. However, both reported feeling resentment toward those positive figures. For them, they felt this support should be coming from their fathers, and before they achieved forgiveness, they acknowledged significant difficulty with appreciating and accepting that support.

Resentment by others like P4 were more direct, and more clearly associated with the transgression:

> You carry that (anger) even when you're a child but you don't really understand it… like the insecurities just feeling like you've been cheated off of something, but you don't know what. You know that feeling of like something's wrong... I mostly felt anger for the time, all the things he took away from me.

P1's resentment caused some initial resistance to the forgiveness process: "I almost wanted to stay in that hate and how could I forgive that."

Desires and expectations also played a part in maintaining anger and resentment. For many participants, holding on to expectations kept them in a cycle of feeling disappointed and at times re-victimized. P8 stated: "For a major part of my high school, I tried to force that relationship as a father/son. And it would only hurt me, because I had such high expectations."

Finally, dealing with guilt, and self-forgiveness and finding a way to move forward from these feelings was important for several participants. These feelings of guilt and self-forgiveness began to emerge for participants as they started to become more aware of the impact the transgression had on them. In some cases, participants that experienced this need for self-forgiveness had already started working on themselves and were becoming acutely aware of their negative behaviors. For example, P4 struggled with feelings of guilt for not only the negative dynamic that had developed between her and her mother, but also her approach toward other relationships, and how she treated herself physically (on and off struggles with eating disorders). She shared that, "(self) forgiveness has been a huge part of this (process) too, like how do I forgive myself, I didn't know."

Theme 3: Need for Safety

Table 4. Theme 3 codes and participants identifying with each code

Theme	Codes Associated	Number of Participants Identifying with Code
Safety	Looking for Continued Threat	1
	Need for Safety	5
	Need for Control	5
	Other Fears	4
	Discontinuing Relationship (Positive Forgiving)	2

The theme of safety illustrates the participants' need for safety before being able to move toward forgiveness. The five codes that corresponded with this theme included, looking for a continued threat, need for safety, need for control, other fears, and discontinuing relationship (positive/forgiving). P6 provided his perspective on the importance of feeling safe and sees this as a necessary step before being able to achieve forgiveness. He shared:

You have to--in order to really forgive, you have to first of all, feel like there's no more

danger. The danger's gone. If you still feel like there's danger, you feel you're still in

danger of being hurt by that person…I think forgiveness doesn't always make sense.

P4 talked about her need for safety before being able to fully forgive her mother:

To be honest it wasn't really until my mother died that I was really able to finally let go. I

think it took her dying for me to finally be able to forgive some of the things, because

living with it day to day it just kept coming up… she was no longer here to continue to

wound me.

Feeling safe came through in other participants in the form of anxiety. P5

expressed, "I think the lingering anxiety had more to do with fear that, you know, you're

not sure if it could happen again." Within this theme it was clear that many of the

participants were vigilant, trying to assess for continued threats from the offender. When

P8 was finally able to reconcile with his father, he found his father's efforts to be

suspicious at first and was leery of trusting him again. P7 noted that he felt apprehensive

about bringing up disappointments and frustrations to his father in therapy out of fear that

he may face rejection or abandonment again. Others like P3 felt that forgiving from a

safe distance by choosing to discontinue the relationship was more appropriate, "I was

like I forgive you guys I wish you guys the best and but unfortunately, I'm not ready to

start a relationship with you guys."

Theme 4: Motivation

Table 5. Theme 4 codes and participants identifying with each code

Theme	Codes Associated	Number of Participants Identifying with Code
Motivation	Use/Influence of Spirituality	2
	Need for Closure	2
	Continued Personal/Professional Relationship	1
	Understanding the Value of Forgiveness	6
	Therapy	8
	Acceptance	2
	Conscious Decision	5

Theme 4 exemplifies the factors that motivated the participants to forgive. The seven

codes that corresponded with this theme include, use/influence of spirituality, need for closure,

continued personal/professional relationship, understanding the value of forgiveness, therapy,

acceptance, conscious decision, and reconciliation/ relationship building, and reflection /

perception of self.

For many participants, motivation to forgive was prompted by the understanding that working on this process would benefit their wellbeing. Many participants started to become aware that holding onto the resentment and anger was impeding their lives. Some participants such as P7 referred to it as a burden, while others like P5 realized the potential impact to his health: "I dreaded the thought of carrying with me, you know, the kind of anger or resentment, you know, a grudge." P4 found value in forgiving to avoid struggling in other important relationships:

> When we are holding on to resentment toward someone not only is that causing a
>
> challenge in our relationship with them, but it can also can cause challenges in our
>
> relationship with others. And it also sits in us and it causes us to sort of carry a burden
>
> that affects our lives.

Other internal processes such as reflecting on themselves and finding acceptance for the current situation promoted some participants to start making changes. As noted by P5 during the interview, "I began to reflect on it and I said, that's not who I want to be. I don't want to be defined by that kind of anger and resentment." P4 shared that, "I had come to a place to realize like I don't want to be a victim anymore." For P7, being able to find acceptance with his father motivated many of his changes:

> It's like I can't change who you are, and you might be 40 years old, you've been doing it
>
> (lifestyle choices) for 39 plus years. There's nothing I can do… I can only put in effort on
>
> my part... But otherwise, I can only accept you for who you are.

For other participants like P9, therapeutic interventions brought new insights into the process of forgiveness, "It was my job to bring up the problem I had with myself. Because I can't fix (things with) her if I don't fix me." P2 stated, "I really didn't have to address the concept of

forgiving or really moving past any of this until I did join my twelve-step program, Over Eaters

Anonymous." It is important to note that P2 credits her success in this program to the group

therapy and committing to working through all the steps. She had been a member in years past

with minimal success. She admitted to never fully working through all the steps. For P7, the

corrective experience of therapy facilitated his process of forgiveness. In that space he was able

to address his feelings of disappointment and abandonment with his father successfully without

rejection. This was a memorable moment, one he reflected on and noted as a clear marker for

him where he realized change was possible.

These healing effects of therapeutic support were felt by many of the participants in this

study. P3 had several experiences with different therapists after suffering years of sexual abuse

by her biological father. It was not until she made the choice to go on her own that felt she

reached a turning point. During the interview she shared:

> In that moment we were together (P3 and the therapist) I was able to verbalize it, and by
>
> verbalizing it, it didn't feel like a burden to me anymore. It felt like it was released... I
>
> felt like our conversation was so fluid, so open. I just let all these feelings and emotions
>
> out that I've never even told my mom about.

With forgiveness being the ongoing process that it is, some participants made conscious

decisions to work toward forgiveness when faced with triggering events. These triggering events

could stem from the offender themselves, or from others the participant encountered who

triggered similar feelings. P4 discussed how she views these choices: "Another moment of

choosing, another moment of saying okay, so I can go down the rabbit hole and dive into all that

resentment, pain, anger or I can choose to walk in a new direction...when we talk about new life,

new life is experiencing different choices." Another way that conscious decision motivated

forgiveness was through the participant's growing awareness that something in them needed to change, although these realizations did not always come with the emotional relief of full forgiveness at first. P7 shared one such realization, "Forgiveness might actually be the answer instead of just holding this anger and all of this--all these emotions towards him and blaming him. Because I wasn't getting anywhere with it."

Theme 5: Mediators

Table 6. Theme 5 codes and participants identifying with each code

Theme	Codes Associated	Number of Participants Identifying with Code
Mediators Subtheme 1: Compassion / Empathy	Perspective Taking	1
	Understanding / Insight into Offender Behavior	5
	Compassion / Empathy	8
	Positive Feelings Toward Offender	3
	Meditation / Prayer	5
Subtheme 2: Justice / Balancing the Scales	Getting Justice	1
	Apology	3
	Getting Answers/Insight (into offense)	4
	Admission / Acknowledgment of Wrongdoing by Offender	3
	Confronting Offender	4

These factors appeared to mediate the process of forgiveness and fell into two subthemes. Codes associated with the first subtheme, compassion/empathy, included perspective taking, understanding / insight into offender's behavior, compassion / empathy, positive feelings toward offender, meditation / prayer. To facilitate the process of forgiveness, many participants felt the

need to understand the offender from an empathic perspective. From here, many were able to make sense of the offender, and the offense. As an example of this, when recounting his process P5 stated: "Mary is a wounded person herself, you know, and she was just acting out of her own woundedness." Similarly, P4 shared some of her mother's history:

In retrospect she (her mother) was horribly, horribly neglected by her own mother. Her mother was bipolar in and out of institutions most of her life. And when she was at home with her she was home alone she would like sleep all day. My mother will be left in the high chair all day and in a playpen all day with a dirty diaper. Her father both physically abused her, and we believed sexually abused her. He was a raging alcoholic, so like the way I came to forgiveness was to understand why my mother was who she was…I know my mother was who she was because she was horribly wounded, but if I can start with compassion that helps temper the anger.

P9 noticed a shift in his perspective when he became more aware of the reasons behind his mother's decisions. He shared that he needed to realize his mother had left him in his father's care, so he could benefit from a better life. When he was young the reasons for her perceived abandonment were not sufficiently explained to him. He had spent most of his childhood and all his teenage years believing that she did not want him, that he was not good enough. He later came to realize that she had valid reasons for giving up custody. This realization helped him approach forgiveness with a different understanding of her actions.

For some participants, meditating on the offense or praying for the offender proved to be a powerful approach to softening much of the anger and resentment. Through her 12-step program, P2 worked on this process. She stated:

Part of my forgiveness is changing my hopes for them. I wished him happiness, and all the things in life that I wished for myself. And kind of in doing that you realize…for them to kind of exude some of the (negative) traits that they have, it's because they don't have serenity, they don't have peace in their own life.

P3 talked about her journey with prayer and meditation as something she did even before beginning her forgiveness process. During the interview she shared:

I always prayed for him even when I was, in the beginning when he like completely destroyed everything, and I was, you know, going through hell. I always prayed for him to get better… I just started praying for him, and then once I started associating him not with something so negative but something positive I wanted him to turn his life around, truly get better, genuinely get better.

She went on to talk about her process of meditating, and sending out positive energy, and the value she found in it:

I just started like really focusing my energy on him, like before I would go to sleep I would thank him for my day and for everything around me, then I would just shoot a positive vibe to my dad like here you go, I hope you get this sometime, somewhere. So, I think giving him that, I felt like I was giving him a good place in my heart, like good thought. That kind of helped me a lot.

P5 shared his general process and steps of meditation and prayer that were helpful to him:

A mental exercise you do where a direct attention toward tension… you have the tension and the feelings, the anger. And in that meditation, you let it flow… The process of spiritual surrender, and daily meditation to let go of all those things, and to be aware of it and choose something different.

Some participants were able to achieve positive feelings toward their offender, realizing

that their continued resentment would not provide them with any relief or peace.

Regarding her father's release from prison, P3 stated:

> I just like felt this relief in my heart (after dad was released from prison). You know
>
> what I hope, I hope he has a good welcome, I hope he makes something out of this life
>
> you know. I hope he doesn't hurt anybody, but I don't wish him anything bad. I just
>
> want him to just try to live the most normal life possible.

> Codes associated with the second subtheme, Justice/Balancing the Scales, included,

getting justice, apology, getting answers / insight (into the offense), admission/acknowledgement

of wrongdoing by offender, and confronting offender. Subtheme 2 also mediated forgiveness, but

in a more tangible way than the first subtheme. Here, participants got some closure from the

offender. As discussed in Chapter 2, apologies and attempts by the offender to restore the

relationship appeared to be powerful mediators of forgiveness. An apology is only effective if it

is able to offer the appropriate component that could help restore balance to the relationship.

Individual needs regarding the components of an apology vary according to their self-construal.

Essentially, self-construals are how individuals perceive their relationships with others. An

individual's self-construal influences how they would process information and communication

with others, as well as their reactions to perceived injustices. Depending on the individual need,

a person may look to have equality restored within the relationship, see an expression of empathy

or compassion from the offender, or receive and acknowledgement that the offender violated

societal rules and norms. (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010).

> For P8, he got the answers and the apology he had been seeking after since childhood.

He shared: "It wasn't until I got those answers that I finally let go. I was able to look at him like,

okay, you finally gave me what I wanted, the respect, the eye-to-eye contact…I finally got the

apology I needed to hear." Similarly, a crucial part of P3's process was acknowledgement of the

offence, "I want to say, 2010 my dad actually wrote a letter to his sister and confessed what he

had done. And he said, after all these years Diana was right, I did do those things, I'm sorry."

Theme 6: Resilience/Personal growth

Table 7. Theme 6 codes and participants identifying with each code

Theme	Codes Associated	Number of Participants Identifying with Code
Resilience / Personal Growth	Need for Growth and Change	1
	Awareness of Own Negative Behavior	4
	Growth / Strength (Self)	3
	Perception Shift / Attitude Change	7
	Positive Attitudes / Actions	6
	Positive Relationships	3
	Helping Others	3
	Impact of Forgiveness	8
	Gratitude	5
	Process Complete	7
	Reflection / Perception of Self	5
	Accountability	1

This theme reflected the positive impact of forgiveness that participants experienced, as

well as how the experiences motivated personal growth. The 12 codes that corresponded to this

theme included, need for growth/change, awareness of own negative behavior, growth / strength,

shift in self-perception, attitude change, positive relationships, helping others, impact of

forgiveness, gratitude, self-accountability and process complete.

For many participants becoming aware that the behaviors they believed were protecting

them were actually impeding them, inspired personal growth. P7 shared one such realization,

"Anger was definitely a protection or a defense mechanism. So, the anger was there to show that I'm not weak and I'm not broken down, actually, (it was) the opposite." For P4 this strength and growth took the form of a transformed life: "So, for me that became a real theme… I could be the victim victorious, I can find new life in the midst of this life of deep pain and deep woundedness."

It appeared that for all participants, the far reaching positive effects of achieving forgiveness have outweighed any resentment they were holding on to, or injustice the may have felt. For P8, he realized a greater sense of gratitude and appreciation: "I started appreciating life a little bit more and it finally hit me that life is really a great gift and I took that for granted." For others, they were able to take these experiences and apply it to future experiences. For example, P7 shared that managing his expectations of his father was key to his moving forward. In the early stages of the process he held on to these beliefs regarding how his father should be as he tried to repair the relationship. These beliefs were disappointing because they did not align with the reality of what his father was capable of. Instead, he chose to be appreciative of what his father could give.

As noted, growth also came in the form of gratitude for many of the participants. P7 shared that he felt like, "there was so much around me to show me this is how not to be. But there was one example of how to be, and that was my step-dad." While P7's step-dad had been a stable and positive force in his life for much of his childhood through his adolescent years, he often rejected his step-father's efforts out of anger and resentment toward his biological dad. It was not until he was able to accept and forgive his biological father, that he was able to appreciate the efforts of his step-dad. For P4, she was able to develop a deeper appreciation for her mother, "Some of the ways I am today that are really amazing are because of her. So that

helps too, to like not to focus on the negative of the relationship all the time, like what are the blessings amidst the burdens."

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of nine semi-structured interviews focused on participants' experiences with a significant transgression and their eventual forgiveness process. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and themes were developed by using an open coding process to answer the research question. The central research question for this study was understanding the process by which forgiveness is achieved after experiencing a transgression.

Continued relationships with and attitude towards the transgressors varied among the participants. Continuing the relationship depended on how important the relationship was to the participant, safety, and continued professional relationship. None of the participants held on to negative attitudes toward the offender. Attitudes toward the transgressor were either positive or neutral. Research from the literature review as well as the data gathered here supports the view that reconciliation is not a necessary feature of the forgiveness process.

Chapter 5 will present the interpretation of the findings of this study. Additionally, the chapter will discuss the limitations of the current study as well as recommendations for future research on forgiveness.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Being exposed to and having to deal with negative life events is a common human experience. Going through life without having the experience of feeling hurt, betrayed, or victimized is likely impossible. Experiencing a transgression need not be large scale; any experience in which one feels victimized, hurt, or betrayed can potentially have a negative impact on that individual. For decades, researchers in the field of psychology have been looking at how the use of forgiveness disrupts the cycle of anger, resentment, and related negative emotions that are associated with feeling victimized. Working toward forgiveness and acceptance after experiencing a transgression allows for a multitude of benefits for the individual. The long-term repercussions of maintaining an unforgiving attitude has been well documented among forgiveness researchers. These maladaptive attitudes are often associated with having a negative impact on an individual's psychological, physical, and social well-being (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Ricciardi et al., 2013; Riek & Mania, 2012;;).

The purpose of this study was to understand the process of forgiveness and provide an analysis of each participant's forgiveness process after experiencing what they considered to be a significant transgression. Accordingly, this study examined how experiences of the reported transgressions impacted the participants, and how, through choosing forgiveness, they were able to make peace with what happened to them and reach a place of acceptance.

This study was qualitative in nature and used a multiple case study approach. The qualitative approach proved to be beneficial, as there were many subjective qualities to understanding the nature of the forgiveness process. Additionally, the qualitative approach will make a worthwhile contribution to the literature on forgiveness. Many of the current studies on

forgiveness take a quantitative approach which has limited their ability to probe more deeply into the subjective experiences of the individual.

This study revealed how a significant transgression had far reaching negative effects long after the event had passed. Within this study, all participants experienced a negative impact on their emotional, physical, and/or interpersonal functioning post transgression. It appeared that these negative effects were a driving force for the participants to work toward forgiveness. In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide a more in-depth discussion and interpretation of these findings, as well as the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and how this research can impact social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

Much of the available literature on forgiveness has focused on the links between forgiveness and overall wellbeing and investigating various theoretical models. These studies used imagined scenarios and self-report measures to evaluate the effectiveness of various forgiveness theories (McCullough and Witvliet, 2002). The findings discussed here used firsthand accounts of the participants' experiences with significant transgressions and the process of forgiveness.

Chapter 2 offered a comprehensive literature review on the current forgiveness literature detailing the types of forgiveness that have been identified, features, mediators, and overall impact of choosing forgiveness on an individual. Additionally, within the literature review, various models of forgiveness developed by researchers were outlined Through a thorough analysis of the data collected, six themes emerged, including two subthemes. Each theme will be discussed jointly in the context of previous literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings and direction for future research on forgiveness. Evolutionary

psychology, the theoretical perspective selected for this study, proved to be a useful framework for this research. While no direct links could be established between the participants' motivations for forgiveness or retaliatory behaviors, a case can be made for indirect support of the evolutionary perspective. Though the primary motivation to forgive verbalized by all nine participants was to end their own suffering, six of the nine participants were dealing with transgressions from a biological parent. Of the six, four participants expressed a desire for a better relationship with that parent. One participant, P5, discussed a transgression that involved a coworker. He directly stated that forgiveness was important to achieve because he had to maintain a professional relationship with this person. These attitudes correspond with some of the current literature on evolutionary psychology. Specifically, McCullough et al. (2013), propose that the biological systems for forgiveness are intended to preserve important relationships. Additionally, there were some subtle connections to retaliatory behaviors. Participant P7 discussed his negative feelings before being able to forgive his father, he stated, "I didn't want to show fear, so it came out in anger". He later went on to say, "The anger was there to show that I'm not weak, and I'm not broken down, actually (it was) the opposite". According to evolutionary perspective, retaliatory behaviors help reproductive fitness by preventing the individual (or animal) from being a target of future attacks (McCullough et al., 2013; McCullough et al., 2010).

Theme 1: Forgiveness Perspectives: Acceptance and Reconciliation

All nine participants seemed to conceptualize forgiveness in a similar manner, with participants believing forgiveness entailed letting go and leaving behind anger and resentment. This shared view is in line with how several researchers have defined the concept. Specifically, Bakin and Enright (2004) noted that with forgiveness, the victim chooses to leave behind

negative feelings and substitute positive or neutral feelings regarding the transgression. Additionally, participants in this study had come to understand through their process that forgiveness did not mean they were excusing the behavior or treatment they received. Finally, while many participants hoped that reconciliation was a possibility for them, they realized that it was not an essential element for achieving forgiveness. Forgiveness without reconciliation is equally as healing as forgiveness where the relationship is restored. This consistency in perspectives allowed for valid comparisons of the forgiveness process to be made.

Theme 2: Anger and Resentment

Regarding this theme, participants experienced a host of negative symptoms, whether it was having unrealistic expectations that ultimately disappointed them or symptoms that manifested physically or emotionally. While only four of the nine participants reported an unforgiving attitude directly toward the offender, all participants reported experiencing a negative reaction (emotional, behavioral, or physical) and some type of resentment. As reported by the participants, these resentments and negative impacts to the self were ongoing for years. Unforgiveness is a delayed emotional reaction in response to a negative event. Delayed emotions include but are not limited to resentment, anger, fear, hostility, and bitterness (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Wade et al., 2005; Worthington et al., 2007).

Destructive anger has been shown to have a negative impact on individuals physically, emotionally, and interpersonally (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Many of the participants who experienced these resentments and other negative reactions often reported shutting others out and limiting relationships out of fear and mistrust, disruptions to other relationships due to earlier negative experience, loneliness, loss of confidence, depression, and anxiety. Although these ruminative and unforgiving behaviors experienced by the participants

hindered their process of forgiveness, the desire to resolve these negative emotional reactions appeared to serve as a catalyst in the forgiveness process.

Theme 3: Need for Safety

The need for safety appeared to be a crucial element and precursor to achieving forgiveness. While not all participants cited specific fears, all nine noted needing some element of safety. Safety in many instances came in the form of trying to take control, discontinuing the relationship in a positive way, or feeling secure that the offender's words, attitudes, or actions would no longer negatively impact them. While there was nothing specific in the literature review regarding the need for safety as an element of forgiveness, fears associated with the transgression or fears of revictimization may be an impediment to moving toward forgiveness and limit an individual's ability to use other social supports in their lives (Harris & Thoresen, 2005).

Theme 4: Motivation

In an effort to improve their overall wellbeing, participants in this study were motivated to forgive their offenders. Significant relationships and emotional investments often motivate individuals to preserve the relationship (Riek & Mania, 2012). All participants in the study dealt with transgressions from a close other; however, only seven of the nine participants were motivated to make some effort to preserve the relationship. The majority of participants clearly understood and verbalized that working toward forgiveness was valuable and would ultimately benefit them. Therapeutic interventions proved to be a significant motivator with eight of the nine participants, who cited this type of support as an influential factor in their forgiveness work.

Just over half of participants stated that at some point in their forgiveness process, they made a conscious decision to forgive the transgressor. It was clear that among these participants,

they did not feel positive (or neutral) toward the offender, and at times were still easily triggered by the offender's behavior or memories of transgression. However, with this choice to forgive, the participants made a commitment toward accepting and feeling better about their circumstances. Decisional forgiveness is an individual's conscious choice to no longer avoid or seek revenge on the offender, and work toward transforming negative thoughts and behaviors (Green et al., 2012; Wade et al., 2005; Worthington et al., 2007). Although decisional forgiveness is not known to reduce the body's physical response to stress, it does reduce hostility and can potentially lead to emotional changes in the future (Worthington et al., 2007).

Theme 5: Mediators

   Subtheme 1: Compassion / Empathy. Within the theme of mediators, expressions of compassion and empathy proved to be a powerful facilitator in the process of forgiveness. In the present study, all nine participants conveyed that they were motivated to make sense of the transgression, and the offender in a compassionate way. The empathy expressed by the participants fits in line with much of the current literature on the forgiveness, highlighting it as an essential construct in the process (Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Worthington 2010). The ability to reframe the transgression, by taking an alternate perspective has been tremendously helpful with a victim's process of forgiveness. Empathic people are open to what others may be experiencing. Additionally, empathy and compassion allow the victim to not only understand the offender, but also be aware that they themselves are capable of hurting others (Riek & Mania, 2012; Sandage & Worthington 2010). Fitting in line with empathy, perspective taking was another approach taken by some of the participants. Being able to take another's perspective can help the victim understand the offense and offender, which in turn can help mitigate negative responses and feelings toward the offender (Fehr et al., 2010). Many participants were

motivated to shift their perspective because of how much they were suffering, highlighting the toll, both emotional and physical, that their anger and resentment had taken. To develop greater empathy and take a different perspective some participants chose to look at the offender's history and consider things they may have struggled with. One participant shared that learning about her mother's history of abuse and neglect helped her make sense of the emotional and physical abuse she suffered. Through this understanding she was able to experience greater compassion and understanding for her mother, who she now saw as someone who had dealt with tremendous suffering. For her, this insight helped temper the anger she felt toward her mother.

Other participants became more grateful for other supports in their lives and chose to focus on how those relationships could help heal their anger and resentment. In the process of therapy, several participants were able to recognize that they had positive support in their lives and that this had helped shaped them in positive ways. These supportive individuals fulfilled a role left open by a parent who had abandoned them. Once these participants were able to appreciate the role these supportive others filled, they found that they no longer held the absentee parent responsible for satisfying all their emotional needs. Holding the absentee parent to an unrealistic expectation created a lot of resentment and disappointment. Actually, one of these participants felt he had been able to develop empathy for his biological father as a result of the positive relationship he had with his stepfather. The appreciation he developed for his stepfather helped him to realize that he had opportunities that his biological father never had. He made the choice to look at this relationship with his stepfather as an advantage versus resisting the support.

Finally, five of the nine participants in this study cited the use of meditation and prayer as a helpful mediator in their forgiveness process. Research on the connection between spirituality and forgiveness have revealed mixed findings. One study done by Riek and Mania (2012)

looked at attitudes toward forgiveness versus the inclination to actually work toward forgiveness and found that religiosity only influenced the individual's attitude toward forgiveness, not their actual ability or motivation to forgive. Within the present study only a few of the participants who employed meditation and prayer as a strategy noted a specific religious affiliation; others either categorized themselves as simply spiritual or somewhat agnostic.

Subtheme 2 Justice / Balancing the Scales. Mediators in this subtheme were more tangible and required effort on the part of the offender. Participants found value in showing empathy and compassion for the offender, but still some shared that they needed more from the offender to help reconcile the offense. As noted in Chapter 4, sincere apologies and acknowledgement of wrongdoing by the offender were both powerful mediators. According to much of the literature on apology and forgiveness, apologies offered by the offender must be sincere, show remorse, and take accountability for the transgression. An extension of a sincere apology can reduce hostility and the motivation to seek revenge on the part of the victim. Superficial apologies that lack sincerity and invalidate the victim's experience often intensify conflict and undermine any desire for a resolution (Pansera & La Guardia, 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012).

Theme 6: Resilience and Personal Growth

This theme brought together all the insights and positive changes experienced by the participants after successfully forgiving the transgression they experienced. As part of this theme, participants came to realize that they did not have to be defined as victims or by the offenses they experienced. All the participants noted some form of personal growth, as well as being aware of their triggers and negative behaviors that could affect them in the future. They expressed pride and surprise at their ability to withstand and work through these difficult times.

Ultimately outside relationships improved, and participants believed that they had become better friends, sons/daughters, and partners as a result of their experiences. Enright and the Human Development Study Group developed a process model of forgiveness that included growth and an attitude shift as a final phase of their model. In this outcome phase the victim begins to show a noticeable shift in their attitudes and beliefs. Final units associated with this phase include the realization that one can find meaning in this process and grow from the transgression (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wohl et al., 2008; Wade et al., 2014).

Limitations of the Study

Chapter 1 included a discussion of concerns regarding appropriate participant recruitment, clear and accurate information regarding their forgiveness process, and participant withdrawal creating a need for additional recruitment. The intent here was to interview individuals who had experienced a significant transgression and chose to work through their struggles by devoting their time and energy to reframing their experiences, adjusting their perspectives, and ultimately achieving forgiveness. The challenge with this criterion was to try and include participants who represented a wide range of experiences, which would make the findings more applicable to the public. Additionally, it was important to ensure that participants were in a relatively resolved place with respect to their experiences, so they would not feel retraumatized by telling their story. The recruitment was successful in finding nine participants who had experienced a wide range of transgressions, from sexual abuse, to abandonment, and interpersonal betrayal. One particular limitation of the study was that all of the transgressions reported by the participants were perpetrated by an individual with whom they had a close relationship. None of the participants shared an instance where they used forgiveness strategies to work through a transgression perpetrated by a stranger.

Another limitation was that eight of the nine the transgressions shared by the participants were continuous for years. Only one of the offenses described was an isolated one-time event, which may make it difficult to discern if they would have had an easier time with forgiving, or if they would have been as negatively impacted by the event.

Additionally, this research was limited in the sense that it was only able to examine the perspective of those individuals who participated in the study and is limited by understanding only the insights they were able to articulate. No collateral contacts were provided for additional perspectives on that participant's process. Additional perspectives from others e.g. social supports that were instrumental in the forgiveness process may have provided additional insights, or a different perspective on the participant's experience with working through this process.

Finally, there was a limitation within the interview structure. It may have been advantageous to include some questions regarding the personality of the participants. As noted in Chapter 2, researchers have looked at the extent to which personality traits impact the propensity to forgive. A better understanding of the participants' personality may have provided valuable insights into their process of forgiveness.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that individuals who have chosen to work through a significant transgression are motivated to do so first and foremost, to improve their own emotional and physical wellbeing. In addition, the findings point to the importance of developing greater empathy and understanding for the transgressor and the factors that may have contributed to the choices they made at the time they did.

During the course of this study, some recommendations for future research were identified. One area would be to investigate the differences (if any) in the process of forgiveness

when the offense is perpetrated by an offender who is not known to the victim, likely to be a one-time offense. While the lack of inclusion of this element in the study did not detract from the overall value of the study, research on forgiveness where the stranger is the offender would provide a much needed prospective on the process. Additionally, other research in the area of forgiveness may want to include enlisting collateral contacts of the victim to obtain a multidimensional view of their process of forgiveness.

Another area for potential research could focus on the influence of social supports on the process of forgiveness. An important factor noted by several participants in this study were the positive relationships in their lives. These positive relationships can provide much needed support to the victim, as well as a different perspective that can be instrumental in helping the individual reframe the experience. In some cases, it is possible for social supports to be a negative influence on the individual. When family or close others share the anger and hurt of a loved one is it possible they could hinder the victim's forgiveness process? Further research on the influence of social supports could provide a richer understanding of this concept.

Implications for Social Change

This study was intended to inform both clinicians and researchers on how the process of forgiveness unfolds after one experiences a significant transgression. This research on forgiveness was evaluated through multiple case studies with the cooperation of nine participants. The use of multiple cases, an underused methodology within the available literature on forgiveness, helped to illustrate the progression of forgiveness after experiencing a negative life event.

The potential for positive social change with this research can be seen on multiple levels, practical, scholarly, and individual, each of which will be discussed in detail below. On a

practical level, psychologists and other mental health practitioners would benefit from this research when working with clients who have experienced any type of victimization or betrayal. Refining our skills as practitioners by understanding the process of forgiveness on a secular level will allow us to further assist clients in working through traumatic events more successfully. Part of the goal with working toward forgiveness is that it will help to reduce the negative impact destructive anger can have on an individual. Anger and resentment were emotions that were frequently expressed by all of the participants in this study. These residual negative emotions left many of the participants feeling burdened, depressed and anxious. Success with managing these negative reactions would improve the client's overall wellbeing. In addition to this, a better developed view on the process of forgiveness would allow clinicians to assist clients who are struggling with anger and resentment. Mediators such as perspective taking, empathy, and meditation can be used subtly to help soften and transform intensely negative emotions. It is not uncommon for clients to resist the idea of forgiveness; several participants in this study admitted to being quite resistant initially to the idea of letting go of resentment. When clinicians can help a client expand their view of the offender, and help them make sense of the offense, clients would be in a better position to be more open minded to letting go, as well as maintain a healthier view on reframing offenses for future incidents. Understanding their own negative reactions, the stressful impact the negativity had on their wellbeing and most importantly what is needed for them to forgive can be helpful for resolving future offenses. Several participants noted that they are less likely to be hurt in the future, and that when they experience an offense they make a conscious choice regarding how long and how deeply they are willing to internalize it.

On a scholarly level, this research can provide a springboard for other researchers who are seeking to understand this phenomenon. Researchers can extend these findings and investigate how current theories line up with actual experiences, or further refine the existing theories.

Finally, on an individual level the positive impact of achieving forgiveness was felt by all the participants in the study. One of the ways the participants noted this positive impact was experiencing a noticeable shift in their attitudes as well as their perception regarding the transgression. The experiences illustrated by the participants included distinct improvements in other relationships, a new-found awareness of their own strength and resilience, and a clear reduction in anger and discomfort not only in regard to the transgression, but in general. On a personal level, the journey of doing this research and writing this dissertation has had a significant and unexpected impact on my life. Beyond being able to bring this research in to help my clients, I was able to finally make sense of, and make peace with certain events and relationships from my past. I was completely overwhelmed and impressed by the strength and perseverance of each of these participants that it motivated me to do my own work. It was a rewarding experience.

Conclusion

This multiple case study was developed with a particular interest in learning more about the experience of forgiveness. The purpose of the current study was to provide a better understanding of the process of forgiveness after experiencing a significant transgression. Looking at transgressions or traumatic events through the lens of the victim, it is clear that the impact of the traumatic event extends beyond the just the victim, affecting many of the

relationships they hold dear. These far reaching effects of a transgression highlight the importance of understanding how some individuals approach and ultimately achieve forgiveness.

This study filled a gap in the literature by interviewing nine participants on their experience with and process of forgiveness. Specifically, this study looked at the overall impact of the transgression on the lives of the participants, and how the choice to forgive impacted their social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The information gleaned from the participants in this study highlights how the forgiveness process is not necessarily a designated series of steps. Rather, it can be understood as more of an ebb and flow with people cycling through wanting to be at peace and holding on to resentments. Several of the proposed models on forgiveness define specific phases and procedures for working on forgiveness, but do not really delineate how people approach this experience. Participants in this study struggled on and off with resentment and with other seemingly unrelated incidents that would seem to re-trigger their anger. They came to see that each of these reemerging negative feelings need to be attended to, and that their current reactions (e.g., anger) were likely connected to the original offense.

Models such as Worthington's REACH model and Enright and The Human Development Study Group's model both touch on key points found in this study such as empathy, uncovering the anger, conscious decision, and motivation toward personal growth. Through this study I learned that individuals who have experienced a trauma or negative life event are likely to get stuck in a cycle of anger and resentment until they become aware of the negative effect the behaviors had in almost all domains of their lives. Even with this realization there was resistance from almost all participants to work on forgiveness. From what I noticed in each interview, that the motivation to work toward forgiveness was motivated by the desire to end the suffering they were experiencing. With many of the participants, the work they did to achieve forgiveness

began as something else. For most participants, forgiveness was not the immediate goal, the immediate goal was to minimize anger, resentment and suffering. When their anger softened, they were able to open themselves up to the idea of having compassion toward the offender, thus facilitating full forgiveness. The choice to let go of the anger and resentment and choose forgiveness proved to be positive choice for the participants' overall wellbeing.

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Appendix A: Screening Tool

Name of individual: _____

Questions	Yes	No
1. Are you under 18 years old?		
2. Has there been someone in your life that you needed to forgive?		
3. Are you currently in therapy for this issue?		
4. Do you believe you have forgiven this transgression?		

Participation criteria

Candidates for this study must have answered YES to both questions 2 and 4, and NO to

questions 1 and 3.

Individuals meeting the criteria:

Based on your answers to these screening questions, you are qualified to participate in this

study. I will need to send you a consent form either through email or US Mail. Which way

would you like to receive this form?

Email address:

Home address:

Thank you for your interest in this study. The consent form will be sent directly to you. The interview for this research will last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location. When would be the best time for you to meet? What location would be best for you to meet?

Agreed upon location:

When we meet for the interview, I will verbally review the consent form with you. Please bring the consent form sent to you to our interview. Do you have any questions?

<u>Individuals who do not meet the criteria</u>

In order to participate in this study certain conditions need to be met. Unfortunately, based on the answers you provided in this screening, the conditions have not been met. Thank you for reaching out and for your interest in my study.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

SORRY WE ARE

ALL HUMAN

Have you ever had a challenging experience in life that motivated you to work toward

forgiveness? If you have successfully worked through this negative experience and achieved

forgiveness I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about your process and

experiences.

The researcher conducting this study is a doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology program at

Walden University. The purpose of this research is to better understand the process of

forgiveness from an individual's first-hand experiences. It is hoped that this study will benefit

other individuals who have been victimized or suffered a betrayal move past the negative

emotions that are affecting them, and toward a place of peace and acceptance.

Participation in this study will entail a 1 hour (approximate) confidential in person interview. An

additional follow up meeting may be necessary for clarification of certain questions which can be

done by phone. All information provided will be kept completely confidential; names and other

identifying information **will not** be included in the study.

Interviews will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location and will be audio recorded for

transcription purposes. Participants will receive a small compensation as a thank you for their

time and willingness to participate in this research.

If interested, please contact Bianca Kazoun: Bianca.kazoun@waldenu.edu / 973-865-7905

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What does forgiveness mean to you?

2. Please describe the situation or transgression that required you to work toward forgiveness.

3. After experiencing this transgression, can you describe your feelings, thoughts, attitudes and actions?

4. What motivated you to forgive?

5. Can you share more about your forgiveness process, and what that experience was like for you?

6. Did you follow a particular process or intervention to help you through the forgiveness process (e.g. individual therapy, self-help books/materials, group therapy, spiritual guidance)?

7. How did you know your forgiveness process was complete?

8. What (if any) impact did forgiveness have on your life?