

The Frontier of Forgiveness

Seven Directions for Psychological Study and Practice

Kenneth I. Pargament, Michael E. McCullough,
and Carl E. Thoresen

Forgiveness is an exciting new frontier for psychological research and practice. Before 1985, only a handful of empirical studies of forgiveness had been conducted (Worthington, 1998). Although scientific interest in this topic has increased sharply over the last 14 years, questions about forgiveness continue to outnumber answers. Thus, the frontier of forgiveness remains largely unexplored.

In this book we have assembled a set of chapters that advances the study of forgiveness. In this final chapter, we try to crystallize seven of the themes that run throughout these contributions (see Table 14.1). These themes, we believe, can provide guidance and direction to researchers and practitioners who would like to venture further into this new frontier.

FROM DISTANT TO CLOSE-UP: CONDUCTING PROXIMAL STUDIES OF FORGIVENESS

Advances in the study of many phenomena are marked by a progression from the general to the specific. For example, psychotherapy research initially focused on the general question of whether psychotherapy works.

TABLE 14.1. Seven Directions for the Psychological Study and Practice of Forgiveness

1. From distant to close-up: Conducting proximal studies of forgiveness
2. From one to many meanings: Exploring the variety of meanings of forgiveness
3. From isolation to integration: Weaving forgiveness into psychological theory
4. From single to multiple levels of analysis: Drawing on multiple perspectives of forgiveness
5. From the expected to the unexpected: Openness to the downside of forgiveness
6. From conceptualization to research: Expanding the empirical study of forgiveness
7. From intuition to information: Building an empirically informed approach to forgiveness in clinical practice

The form of the question itself suggested that psychotherapy is a uniform process that operates in the same way for different people. With further study, however, what looked to be a uniform process from a distance became sharply differentiated closer at hand (Kiesler, 1966). General questions were not sufficient to the task of understanding the psychotherapy process. "What kind of psychotherapy for what kind of problem works in what kind of way for what kind of person?" became the more refined and more answerable question that continues to drive research on psychotherapy today.

In the forgiveness arena, we are beginning to witness a similar shift from general questions about forgiveness, and its value in life to more specific questions. As we get closer to the process of forgiveness we see the limitations of our current conceptual and methodological tools. We are unlikely to find a simple neuropsychological basis for forgiveness, as Newberg, d'Aquili, Newburg, and deMarici note (Chapter 4, this volume). Single-item self-report measures of forgiveness, the standard in the field for 20 years, cannot capture the ways people experience and express forgiveness (McCullough, Rachal, & Hoyt, Chapter 4, this volume). Simplistic bromides (e.g., turn the other cheek, forgive and forget) can do little to help people struggling with the deeply disturbing feelings and profound questions raised by the encounter with mistreatment and injustice (Patton, Chapter 13, and Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, Chapter 12, this volume). Uniform forgiveness interventions are not likely to be sensitive or responsive to the needs of different populations that approach forgiveness in disparate ways (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, Chapter 11, this volume).

Forgiveness is more dimensional and more complex than we initially imagined. And the richness of the phenomena calls for more refined and more varied concepts, measures, methods, and programs. We are begin-

ning to see progress in this direction. McCullough et al. (Chapter 4, this volume), for example, present an elegant method for answering an important question: "What goes into a score on a measure of forgiveness?" Generalizability theory, they assert, can help us determine the degree to which this score is a reflection of characteristics of the victim of the offense, the offender, or the offense itself. Thoresen, Harris, and Luskin (Chapter 12, this volume) detail a number of methods for studying forgiveness that take us beyond our reliance on self-report surveys collected at one point in time, such as structured interviews, narrative analyses, intensive study of individual cases, daily monitoring, and assessments of nonverbal communication. Malcolm and Greenberg (Chapter 9, volume) challenge forgiveness researchers to go beyond the question, "Do forgiveness interventions work?" to the question, "What about forgiveness interventions works?" Their method of task analysis illustrates the value of an intensive "close-up" investigation of the critical ingredients of forgiveness interventions; the method is both clinically rich and empirically valuable.

Future studies are likely to continue in the direction of more proximal investigations of forgiveness that involve more refined questions, concepts, methods, and programs. Does it follow that this field of study will become hopelessly complex? Not necessarily. In some instances, empirical studies may reveal that simpler models do a better job of capturing forgiveness phenomena than more complex ones. In this vein, Mullet and Girard (Chapter 6, this volume) found that a complex interactive model was not needed to account for the propensity to forgive. Instead, the likelihood of forgiving could be best explained by a simple additive combination of several factors, including whether the offender apologized to the victim, the degree of intent behind the offense, the severity of the offense, and whether the victim is still being affected by the consequences of the offense. Nevertheless, we suspect that researchers and practitioners interested in forgiveness will continue to be challenged by the richness and intricacies of this process. Ultimately, we believe, the study of forgiveness will require a level of knowledge, experience, and expertise commensurate to that needed to study other key psychological constructs, such as intelligence, morality, psychopathology, and prejudice.

FROM ONE TO MANY MEANINGS: EXPLORING THE VARIETY OF MEANINGS OF FORGIVENESS

What is forgiveness and what is not forgiveness? "In order to discern any 'thing,' " Zerubavel (1991) writes, "we must distinguish that which we attend from that which we ignore" (p. 1). Entities that are not clearly differentiated from their surroundings, he goes on to note, become almost invisible. There is no shortage of opinions about the meaning of forgive-

ness. There is, however, a lack of consensus. Although theorists and researchers generally agree about those things forgiveness is not (it is not to be confused with pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denying) (Enright & Coyle, 1998), they do not agree about what forgiveness is. Currently, we can identify at least three points of disagreement about the meaning of forgiveness.

Intrapersonal or Interpersonal?

Theorists and researchers have, for the most part, defined forgiveness as an intrapersonal process, something that occurs within a person. That "something" involves a change in cognitions, behaviors, emotions, and/or motivations that can unfold even if the individual is no longer engaged in a relationship with the offender, even if the offender is no longer alive. Research based on this perspective has been largely "victim-centered," focusing on predictors of forgiveness, the process through which victims forgive, and the consequences of forgiveness for the victim.

In contrast, others conceptualize forgiveness as an interpersonal process (e.g., Exline & Baumeister, Chapter 7, and Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, Chapter 10, this volume). For example, Exline and Baumeister note that transgressions often involve people who are well-acquainted with each other (e.g., family, friends, coworkers, romantic partners). It is critical, they believe, to understand forgiveness in the context of ongoing relationships. "How do people *behave* toward one another after incidents of transgression," they ask, "and what are the sources and consequences of their choices" (p. 210)? From this perspective, the relationship rather than the victim is the appropriate unit of analysis for studies of forgiveness. How offenders affect victims, how victims affect offenders, and how each partner contributes to the character of their relationship (i.e., forgiveness transactions, Worthington et al., Chapter 11, this volume) are all important objects of study from an interpersonal point of view.

Letting Go of the Negative or Embracing the Positive?

Several writers define forgiveness as a process involving a decrease in negative thoughts, feelings, and actions toward the offender (Gordon et al., Chapter 10, Temoshok & Chandra, Chapter 3, and Thoresen et al., Chapter 12, this volume). For example, Gordon et al. conclude from their review that forgiveness involves "(1) regaining a more balanced view of the offender and the event, (2) decreasing negative affect toward the offender, and (3) giving up the right to punish the offender further" (p. 360). They make a sharp distinction between "letting go of bitterness and anger" and reconciliation with the individual who committed the offense (p. 376), noting that one can forgive without reconciliation.

Others, however, maintain that forgiveness involves more than the release of the negative; expressions of positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors to the offender are essential elements of forgiveness. North (1987), for example, writes that the forgiving individual can "view the wrongdoer with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he has willfully abandoned his right to them" (p. 502). Similarly, Enright and Coyle (1998) believe genuine forgiveness takes place when "one who has suffered an unjust injury chooses to abandon his or her right to resentment and retaliation, and instead offers mercy to the offender" (p. 140). The line between forgiveness and reconciliation can become less clear in these definitions. Worthington et al. (Chapter 11, this volume) explicitly incorporate reconciliation into their definition of forgiveness, with some caveats. "[Forgiveness is] a motivation to reduce avoidance of and retaliation (or revenge) against a person who has harmed or offended one, and to increase conciliation between the parties if conciliation is safe, prudent, or possible" (pp. 384-385). Those who define forgiveness in terms of expressions of positive thoughts, feelings, and actions toward the offender will likely measure forgiveness, teach forgiveness, and evaluate the efficacy of forgiveness interventions quite differently than those who define forgiveness as a "letting go" of the negative.

Ordinary or Extraordinary?

To what extent is forgiveness an extraordinary event, a less-than-commonplace process that involves a fundamental metamorphosis in living? Theorists have generally defined forgiveness as a profound life change. To put it another way, they describe a forgiveness with a capital "F." According to Pargament (1997), for example, forgiveness is a process of re-creation, a transformational method of coping, often religious in nature, that involves a basic shift in destinations and pathways in living. Through this process, the individual departs from a life centered around pain and injustice and begins to pursue a dream of peace. Toward this end, the person starts to think, feel, and act in very different ways about him- or herself, the offender, and the world more generally. Other writers also speak of forgiveness in terms of violations of basic beliefs, fundamental changes in assumptive worlds, large-scale changes in understandings and actions, motivational transformations, and part of a larger process of living (see Gordon et al., Chapter 10, Malcolm & Greenberg, Chapter 9, and Patton, Chapter 13, this volume; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997).

It is important to note that theorists who define forgiveness with a capital "F" have often focused on victims who have experienced especially powerful violation, mistreatment, and injustice at the hands of others (e.g., incest, rape, Holocaust, marital infidelity). To respond to such mas-

sive assaults with forgiveness may, in fact, require a profound change in living. However, interpersonal hurts vary in magnitude. The disappointments and transgressions that take place between friends, family, romantic partners, and coworkers are certainly more commonplace and may elicit a form of forgiveness that is less rare and less profound. This is forgiveness with a lowercase "f," the kind that may be captured by developmental and sociopsychological studies of people who transgress, apologize, confess, repent, and forgive in the course of daily experience (see Exline & Baumeister, Chapter 7, and Mullet & Girard, Chapter 6, this volume).

What is the relationship between forgiveness with a capital "F" and lowercase "f"? The two may be qualitatively different phenomena. In recent years, researchers have suggested that there may be fundamental differences between the kind of depression captured by self-report instruments of depressive mood (e.g., Beck Depression Inventory) and the kind of depression captured by a clinical assessment and diagnosis of major depressive disorder (e.g., Coyne, 1994). Thus, it might be inappropriate and empirically unjustifiable to think of negative mood as an analog of major depression. Similarly, there may be important structural and functional distinctions between extraordinary and ordinary forms of forgiveness. Considering one to be an analog for the other might be, simply put, incorrect. On the other hand, the two types of forgiveness may be closely related to each other. In fact, they may lead into each other. The individual who has experienced the extraordinary form of "Forgiveness" may be more likely to respond to more commonplace insults and injuries with forgiveness in its ordinary form (Pargament, 1997). Conversely, experience and practice with ordinary forms of forgiveness in response to minor insults and injuries may set the stage for the profoundly re-creative expressions of "Forgiveness" in response to major life traumas.

Whether forgiveness with a capital "F" and lowercase "f" are the same is an empirical question that requires further study. Nevertheless, these differences in the meanings of forgiveness are not necessarily problematic in this early stage of study. They may, in fact, contribute to a more fully dimensional picture of forgiveness. To avoid confusion, however, researchers, theorists, and practitioners will need to be quite explicit about the definitions that guide their work and the phenomena of interest that fall within and outside of the boundaries of the forgiveness construct. Ultimately, however, a more complete understanding of forgiveness will require better integration of these various perspectives under one definitional umbrella.

Towards this end, we defined forgiveness in the introductory chapter of this book as "intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within an interpersonal context" (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, Chapter 1, this volume, p. 12). In light of the

subsequent chapters, we (immodestly) believe that our definition held up well. It cuts to the core of the construct that attracts the attention and interest of a diverse group of researchers and practitioners, yet it retains the breadth and flexibility necessary to capture forgiveness in its varied forms. Our definition allows for the study of forgiveness as both an intraindividual and an interpersonal process, as a process of change that covers the full range of potential response to an offender (from letting go of the negative to expressions of the positive), and as a phenomenon that can be extraordinary for some and ordinary for others. Will other researchers find this definition useful? That remains to be seen. However, what we are interested in is definitional progress, so we welcome responses to our proposal.

FROM ISOLATION TO INTEGRATION: WEAVING FORGIVENESS INTO PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

The meaning of forgiveness and its implications for personal and social functioning can also be sharpened by integrating the construct into well-established theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The benefits of this theoretical integration are twofold. First, connecting forgiveness to other psychosocial phenomena that have already received theoretical attention and empirical validation may shed important new light on forgiveness, reducing the "fuzziness" of this construct (Gordon et al., Chapter 10, this volume). Second, forgiveness can, in turn, add richness and dimension to existing theories that have neglected this important process. These points have been illustrated by Robert Enright and his colleagues (e.g., Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991). Their integration of forgiveness within theories of moral and cognitive development has helped both to penetrate the process of forgiveness and to elaborate on the nature of morality. Elsewhere, we have suggested other potentially valuable theories and conceptual frameworks for the study of forgiveness, including social cognitive theory (Thoresen, Lusk, & Harris, 1998), theoretical work on altruism (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), and coping theory (Pargament, 1997). Unfortunately, this kind of work has been an exception to the rule. Prominent theorists have either ignored or made only brief mention of forgiveness, and much of the research on this topic has been atheoretical (McCullough et al., Chapter 1, this volume). In the future, researchers will need to extend existing theories to incorporate the process of forgiveness.

In this book, we have presented for the study of forgiveness a number of theoretical frameworks and perspectives drawn from virtually every major subdiscipline of psychology: developmental, social, health,

cognitive, cross-cultural, personality, pastoral, clinical, community, physiological, and evolutionary. We highlight just a few of these promising frameworks.

The Forgiving Personality

Emmons (Chapter 8, this volume) makes some exciting links between forgiveness and an extensive literature on other personality traits, including narcissism, empathy, and Type A behavior (see also Thoresen et al., Chapter 12, this volume). The sense of entitlement, grandiosity, self-admiration, hypersensitivity to criticism, and lack of empathy that define the narcissistic personality likely inhibit forgiveness. Forgiveness itself, Emmons suggests, may be a higher order personality construct defined by a number of special qualities: sensitivity to anger-mitigating circumstances, emotion-management skills, empathy, humility, gratitude, and the desire to be in harmonious relationships. The relationship of the forgiveness "trait" to other traits, such as the five-factor model, or forgiveness "stories" to other personality narratives (cf. McAdams, 1993), brings up important questions for personality research.

Confession and Forgiveness

Working from an interpersonal perspective, Exline and Baumeister (Chapter 7, this volume) point to the close link between repentance on the part of the offender and forgiveness by the victim. Empirical studies indicate that a lack of repentance discourages forgiveness and repentant acts promote it. Is the reverse true? Exline and Baumeister raise the critical and, as yet, unanswered, question: "Might expressions of forgiveness also promote repentance" (p. 214)? Their interpersonal orientation also brings with it several relevant theoretical and empirical literatures (e.g., guilt, confession, self-serving perceptions of events). For instance, recent studies on the physical and psychological benefits of emotional self-disclosure have important implications for our understanding of repentance and expressions of forgiveness.

Marriage and Forgiveness

Marriages are natural laboratories for studying the process of forgiveness within the context of intense, ongoing relationships. Gordon et al. (Chapter 10, this volume) bring two theoretical frameworks to bear on the topic of forgiveness within marriage. Drawing from cognitive-behavioral theory, they describe betrayal within marriage as a violation of one critical part of the victim's assumptive world, the "view that marriage is a place where one can feel safe, secure, and put total trust in another person" (p. 350).

The violation can elicit a traumatic response that bears many similarities to posttraumatic stress disorder, including flashbacks triggered by cues that remind the individual of the betrayal. Drawing from insight-oriented theory, Gordon et al. describe how betrayal may grow out of a long-term history of violations of trust in the family. The individual who feels he or she has been betrayed in a prior relationship develops a destructive sense of entitlement, one that serves as a justification for the mistreatment of others. The victim's history of trust and betrayal in earlier relationships is also likely to impact on his or her ability to forgive within marriage. These theoretical perspectives have important implications for conceptualizing and treating marital transgressions, as Gordon et al. illustrate in their three-stage model of forgiveness in marriage.

Forgiveness over the Life Span

Developmental theories of cognition, morality, and personality often focus much of their attention on the early years of life, starting with infancy and ending in late adolescence. Forgiveness, however, is a process that seems to call for higher levels of personal and social maturity; to understand this process more fully requires a life-span developmental perspective. In support of this point, Mullet and Girard (Chapter 6, this volume) cite data that showed the elderly to be more likely to forgive others for transgressions than adolescents, young, and middle-aged adults. Furthermore, the willingness of the elderly to forgive was less dependent on circumstances than was the case for adolescents and younger adults. Thus, the frequency of forgiveness and quality of forgiveness itself may change at different points in the life cycle. Mullet and Girard's work underscores the significance of theory and research that captures the ways forgiveness evolves over the entire course of life.

Forgiveness and Spirituality

In his chapter on forgiveness in pastoral care and counseling, Patton (Chapter 13, this volume) makes a critical point: Forgiveness is best understood as "a part of a larger process of living" (p. 496). In fact, pastoral care for people who have suffered injuries at the hands of others involves a broadening of the individuals' concerns from a narrow focus on the injury and the offender to an enlarged "frame of their life picture." Forgiveness, Patton feels, is one element in the greater process of dealing with "a shamed and estranged self" and an ability "to recognize the humanness of one's injurer as well as discovering one's own" (p. 478). And, it is important to add, the kind of forgiveness Patton describes is not a secular process; it is profoundly spiritual, "an illustration of a quality of life when it is lived in relation to God and one's fellow human beings" (p. 497). Thus,

Patton reminds us that forgiveness should be viewed not in isolation, but as part of the entire tapestry of an individual's life.

In the chapters of this book, we see a number of exciting opportunities to weave forgiveness into the cloth of other theories and perspectives. In the process of integration, we may elucidate the character of forgiveness and enrich theories that have, until recently, overlooked this dimension of life.

FROM SINGLE TO MULTIPLE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS: DRAWING ON MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES OF FORGIVENESS

As noted earlier, much of the study of forgiveness (like much of psychology as a field) has focused on the individual level of analysis (McCullough, Rachal, & Hoyt, Chapter 4, this volume). This body of work may leave the impression that forgiveness occurs within a self-contained individual operating in a social and cultural vacuum. Forgiveness, however, is a multilevel phenomenon, one that needs to be understood at biological, psychological, marital, familial, community, and cultural levels of analysis. Indeed, explanations that cross levels of analysis might be our best hope for rendering scientific facts about forgiveness "consilient" (see Wilson, 1998). It would be a mistake to assume that we can apply knowledge from one of these levels of analysis directly to another. Watzlawick (1988) describes the unfortunate consequences of this process, what he calls "errors of logical typing." For example, when the National Aeronautic and Space Agency needed to build a hangar to protect their larger space rockets from the weather, they simply magnified their old hangar design 10 times. They overlooked the fact that a hangar this size creates its own climate, complete with clouds, rain, and dangerous electricity (precisely the problem the larger hangar was designed to prevent)!

Similarly, we cannot assume that conceptualizations of forgiveness as a personality trait directly apply to the ways forgiveness unfolds in marital or familial relationship. Neither can we assume that our knowledge of forgiveness within marital and familiar relationships translates directly into the forgiveness that expresses itself in response to community or cultural conflicts. As McCullough et al. (Chapter 4, this volume) emphasize, researchers must be careful to select concepts, methods, and measures of forgiveness that are tailored to the appropriate level of specificity and analysis. Temoshok and Chandra (Chapter 3, this volume) note that there is a dearth of theory and research on the nature of forgiveness at the community and cultural levels. Unfortunately, however, there is no shortage of deep-seated social and political conflict, mistrust, and hatred that represent powerful naturalistic laboratories for the study of forgiveness.

Cross-level analyses represent another frontier for forgiveness research. Considerable work, for example, is needed to understand the social context and the way it shapes and is shaped by the experience of individual forgiveness. The social context may affect the very meaning of this construct. In the chapter by Rye et al. (Chapter 2, this volume), we learned that Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity offer different definitions of forgiveness to their members. The social context may also support or discourage the expression of forgiveness. Patton (Chapter 13, this volume) notes that forgiveness develops in a social and spiritual community that supports and encourages it. Along similar lines, Thoresen et al. (Chapter 12, this volume) suggest that the participation of the spouse of the client in forgiveness interventions may facilitate the treatment process. On the other hand, some social contexts may erect special challenges to forgiveness. This appears to be the case in India, where many women are doubly victimized: first, by HIV infection through a spouse or partner and, second, by culturally supported stigma, discrimination, and isolation in response to their infection (see Temoshok & Chandra, Chapter 3, this volume). The prevailing "culture of narcissism" in Western society may represent our own particular social barrier to forgiveness (Emmons, Chapter 8, this volume).

Finally, it is important to consider the impact of forgiveness by an individual on the social context. Most studies have considered the effect of forgiveness on the individual's own mental health. Far less is known about the ways forgiveness affects the individual's social system. And yet the effects of forgiveness might conceivably ripple out toward others, including not only the offender but family, friends, coworkers, and the larger community. For example, the ex-wife who succeeds in forgiving her former husband may achieve greater peace of mind and emotional well-being not only for herself but for her children and next spouse as well. Conversely, in their study of Indian men and women infected with HIV, Temoshok and Chandra (Chapter 3, this volume) found that unforgiving attitudes were tied to persistence in risky sexual behaviors that increase the risk of further transmission. In their chapter, Newberg et al. (Chapter 5, this volume) suggest that forgiveness reduces bellicosity and elicits empathy for the person by his or her social network. They go even further, noting that by breaking the cycle of aggression and revenge, forgiveness may hold distinctive evolutionary advantages for humankind.

In summary, multilevel analyses are necessary to develop a more complete appreciation of forgiveness. Forgiveness should be understood as a phenomenon that is expressed at biological, psychological, marital, familial, community, and cultural levels (see Temoshok & Chandra, Chapter 3, this volume). Cross-level studies are also needed to understand how forgiveness at one level is shaped by forces from other levels, and how forgiveness at one level, in turn, impacts on other levels of human

functioning. Toward these ends, forgiveness researchers should try to include a broader array of predictors and criteria in their studies. To reiterate an earlier theme, multiple measures are needed to assess the multilevel character of forgiveness and its correlates.

FROM THE EXPECTED TO THE UNEXPECTED OPENNESS TO THE DOWNSIDE OF FORGIVENESS

Researchers and therapists have, for the most part, viewed forgiveness as a constructive, healthy process. A number of studies have indeed shown forgiveness to be associated with decreases in emotional distress and increases in personal well-being. However, research in this area is still developing and it is premature to conclude at this point that forgiveness is invariably helpful. Like most psychological processes, forgiveness may have a downside.

A few researchers have suggested that forgiveness in its more superficial or less-than-genuine forms has detrimental consequences. For instance, Trainer (1981) articulated different motivations for forgiveness and found that each had a distinctive set of correlates. A forgiveness that was used as a weapon of vengeance against others or to make the forgiver feel morally superior to others was associated with more negative emotions and attitudes; in contrast, a forgiveness offered because of its intrinsic value was tied to more positive emotions and attitudes. Similarly, Patton (Chapter 13, this volume) warns against the destructive effects of a social system that pressures people (who have already suffered a loss of control through their victimization) to forgive. It is important to note that Patton includes mental health professionals as well as pastors, family, friends, and God in this potentially coercive social system.

Exline and Baumeister (Chapter 7, this volume) propose some potential costs to more genuine forms of forgiveness. Perhaps forgiveness results in feelings of weakness and vulnerability on the part of the forgiver. Perhaps the forgiver is left with feelings of unfairness and injustice. Perhaps the forgiver loses the benefits of "victim status" in relationships with others. And perhaps forgiveness places the forgiver at greater risk of future harm. Katz, Street, and Arias (1997) conducted a study that hinted at this latter danger. Undergraduate women responded to a series of hypothetical episodes of relationship violence by their dating partners. Intentions to forgive the partner, they found, mediated the relationship between self-attributions and intentions to end the relationship. Specifically, students who were more likely to attribute the cause of the violence to themselves were also more likely to forgive their partner. Forgiving the partner, in turn, was associated with less

likelihood of leaving the violent relationship. Of course, this study focused only on hypothetical scenarios. Yet it raises the disturbing possibility that forgiveness may increase the risk of remaining in potentially destructive relationships.

Unfortunately, there is very little research, experimental or naturalistic, on this and other potential costs to forgiveness. Further research is clearly needed. Studies of the impact of forgiveness on offenders are especially important and may help to answer some critical questions. Does forgiveness promote growth in the offender, constructive problem resolution and closer emotional connectedness between the forgiver and the offender? Or does it, in essence, "reward" the offender for his or her behavior, thereby perpetuating or exacerbating a destructive pattern of interrelationship?

Answers to questions such as these may not necessarily be simple. Forgiveness may be beneficial at certain times, in certain situations, for certain people, and irrelevant or even harmful in others. On this note, McCullough and Worthington (1994) caution against forgiveness when the perpetrator has not shown remorse, when the violation is too severe, or when the wounds from the offense are too fresh. Using a wider range of criterion measures, as Worthington et al. (Chapter 11, this volume) suggest, may reveal both costs and benefits of forgiveness. Perhaps forgiveness, in some situations, reduces psychological distress and increases the risk of future interpersonal violations. Conversely, forgiveness, at times, might reduce relational conflicts at the cost of psychological well-being.

Finally, researchers should be open to the potential benefits of the "flip-side" of forgiveness; namely, the experience of anger and pain. Several theorists, in fact, argue that without an appreciation for the nature of the offense and the pain it has caused, forgiveness can never be complete. As Patton (Chapter 13, this volume) puts it, the path to forgiveness and health is "through pain, not around it" (p. 495). Thoresen et al. (Chapter 12, this volume) add that it is important to distinguish constructive from destructive forms of anger expression. After all, some people are able to express their anger through constructive channels that rectify social injustices and provide meaning and purpose to their lives (Baures, 1996). The health risks of anger, Patton suggests, may lie not in the immediate physiological reactivity that accompanies the emotion, but rather in the failure to reach an emotional resolution in a reasonable period of time.

In summary, researchers and practitioners should maintain an openness to the unexpected, to the possibility that forgiveness may have some surprising consequences for the individual, the offender, and the larger social system. In particular, we should keep an eye open to the possibility

of costs as well as benefits to forgiveness. As important and potentially valuable as forgiveness may be, it is not likely to be a panacea to the complex problems that arise out of interpersonal violations.

FROM CONCEPTUALIZATION TO RESEARCH: EXPANDING THE EMPIRICAL STUDY OF FORGIVENESS

There is no shortage of ideas or opinions about forgiveness, its value, and its effects. Empirical studies, however, have been in short supply. Fortunately, the picture may be beginning to change. There are signs of an expanding scientific study of forgiveness. The authors of the chapters in this volume have pointed to a number of important future research directions. We have highlighted several of these questions in this chapter, and summarized many of them in Table 14.2.

Some of the questions are very basic. For instance, as yet, we do not know how commonplace forgiveness is. Augsberger (1981) has said that forgiveness is one of the hardest things in the world to do. Some initial findings suggest that many people do, in fact, have difficulty forgiving. Recall that in Temoshok and Chandra's (Chapter 3, this volume) study of Indian men and women infected with HIV, 67% of their family members blamed them for their condition, and 45% reported that they would never be able to forgive them. As one father whose son died of AIDS at age 26 said: "He should not have been born into our family, and I can never forgive him for what he did to us. We did not perform any funeral rites for him, and we feel he should suffer the way he has made us all suffer" (pp. 70-71). On the other hand, a few other studies suggest that forgiveness may not be unusual. For instance, in a study of people from three Lebanese religious communities (Catholic, Maronites, and Orthodox), higher than expected levels of forgiveness were reported in response to vignettes describing the shooting of a child during the Lebanese Civil War (Azar, Mullet, & Vinsonneau, 1999). Many people extended the willingness to forgive to members of other religious communities on opposing sides of the civil war. In short, basic data are needed that describe the frequency of forgiveness across time, place, and person.

Some of the important questions for future research are exploratory. For example, a number of authors in this volume suggested that the construct of shame may be central to any understanding of forgiveness. They argue that a sense of personal unworthiness, dirtiness, sinfulness, and even responsibility lie at the heart of the response to interpersonal violations. For instance, Malcolm and Greenberg (Chapter, this volume) describe one client who is particularly moved by a role play of his mother in which the mother says: "And I don't want you to feel guilty. You didn't cause it. . . . This is not about you. It's about my life. It's about me being

TABLE 14.2. Critical Questions for Research on Forgiveness

-
- How commonplace is forgiveness?
 - What roles does shame play in the forgiveness process?
 - To what extent do members of different cultural, religious, and ethnic groups define forgiveness in different ways?
 - What are the most powerful predictors of forgiveness?
 - How do early childhood experiences affect the development of forgiveness?
 - What is the relationship of forgiveness to physical health?
 - Can people be trained to forgive through brief therapy?
 - What impact does forgiveness have on the perpetrator and the likelihood of future offenses?
 - What impact does forgiveness have on the individual's larger social network?
 - How do various motivations for forgiveness affect the outcomes of forgiveness?
 - What makes forgiveness interventions work?
 - What impact does forgiveness have on the behavior of the forgiving person toward others?
 - What is the empirical relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation?
 - What is the relationship between forgiveness as a personality trait and other models of personality?
 - What is the relationship between an individual's history in prior relationships and forgiveness within marriage?
 - How does forgiveness evolve and change over the life span?
 - What are the potential personal and social costs of forgiveness?
 - What is the relationship between the values of forgiveness and social justice?
 - When should forgiveness not be encouraged in a clinical context?
 - How do we determine an individual's readiness to forgive?
 - What personal, social, and culture variables promote and impede forgiveness?
 - What factors are associated with forgiveness by larger social systems, such as nations, communities, and religious groups?
 - To what extent and in what ways should forgiveness interventions be tailored to particular groups?
-

out of control. I take responsibility for what I did. . . . I was out of control" (p. 317). Overwhelmed by the sense of shame, people may respond with a range of defenses, from rage to arrogance to the search for perfection. The central problem here, Patton (Chapter 13, this volume) notes, is the failure to see the offender as an independent person; the offender instead becomes "an offending part of the shamed person's self" (p. 486). Through empathy and participation in a community, the individual can experience a healing of the self and a new capacity to see the offender as a separate human being struggling with his or her own problems in living.

Ultimately, forgiveness may grow out of this process of personal healing. These are, we believe, potent but untested ideas that are well worth exploring through empirical study.

Some future research questions have both theoretical and practical implications. One such intriguing question has to do with differences in the ways members of different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups may define forgiveness. As noted earlier, theorists and researchers have defined forgiveness in a variety of ways. The same point is likely to apply to those we study. Forgiveness may mean different things to members of different groups. For example, although the world's major religions place a value on forgiveness, they do not define forgiveness identically. Rye and his coauthors (Chapter 2, this volume) find a number of distinctions in the ways Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars conceptualize forgiveness. Within Judaism, forgiveness is conceptualized as an interpersonal process, one that involves repentance on the part of the offender, followed by forgiveness on the part of the victim. Within Christianity, forgiveness is described as a more intrapersonal process, one less dependent on the attitudes and actions of the offender. While forgiveness is described as a "letting go" of the negative within Hinduism (Temoshok & Chandra, Chapter 3, this volume), Christianity describes forgiveness in terms of positive expressions of love, compassion, and mercy. Furthermore, the line between forgiveness and reconciliation appears to be more sharply drawn within Judaism and Islam than within Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. To the student of comparative religion, these differences are interesting in and of themselves. From a psychological perspective though, the key question is whether the differences in the belief systems of these traditions translate into differences among their adherents. Do Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, in fact, define forgiveness differently? To what extent do members of these traditions incorporate and adhere to the teachings of their religions with respect to forgiveness?

It is important to understand the meanings of forgiveness to those we study and work with, including members of diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural groups. Lens model studies have been useful in learning about differences in the meanings of other complex constructs, such as religion and spirituality (e.g., Pargament, Sullivan, Balzer, Van Haitsma, & Raymark, 1995; Zinnbauer, 1997). They may also be helpful in learning about the meanings people attribute to forgiveness (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997). On a more practical note, differences in meanings of forgiveness are also important to consider in efforts to promote forgiveness. Groups that define, experience, and express forgiveness in special ways may require different types of forgiveness interventions. In this vein, Worthington et al. (Chapter 11, this volume) solicit definitions of forgiveness in the early phases of their groups and use them as a starting point for intervention.

FROM INTUITION TO INFORMATION: BUILDING AN EMPIRICALLY INFORMED APPROACH TO FORGIVENESS IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Opportunities abound for practitioners interested in addressing forgiveness in their clinical work. It is not difficult to generate a variety of potential targets for a forgiveness-oriented psychotherapy: to name a few, victims of crime, persons facing major illnesses and disability (e.g., HIV/AIDS), adult children of alcoholics, abused spouses, couples struggling with marital infidelity, combat veterans, divorced individuals, survivors of suicide, prison inmates, and people at the end of their lives. Psychotherapy with a forgiveness focus can also be targeted to individuals, couples, families, or groups. For example, Thoresen et al. (1998) cite the potential of structured, small-group, forgiveness-oriented therapy for a variety of populations.

Forgiveness-related interventions need not be limited to psychotherapy. Education for forgiveness has the potential to prevent or mitigate some of the long-term pain that follows a trauma. Forgiveness could become a topic of discussion, if not training, in primary, secondary, and higher education within secular as well as religious institutional settings. More focused educational programs could target groups that are especially likely to benefit from information about forgiveness, such as "bullies" and violent teens, couples entering marriage, workers in job training, couples preparing to become foster parents, and human service professionals. And forgiveness can be conceptualized as a sociopolitical intervention that may be applied to larger scale conflicts between tribes (e.g., Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda), religious groups (e.g., Protestant and Roman Catholics in Ireland), racial groups (e.g., whites and blacks in South Africa), and nations (e.g., Bosnia, Serbia, and Albania).

In short, opportunities for forgiveness-related work are plentiful. Information to guide these efforts, however, is in shorter supply. Until recently, practitioners have had to work largely from intuition in their efforts to understand, evaluate, and intervene in this process in the context of clinical practice. Recently, several theorists have proposed promising theoretically based models to guide forgiveness interventions (e.g., Enright & Coyle, 1998; Gordon et al., Chapter 10, this volume; Worthington, 1998). An expanded scientific study of forgiveness, however, would advance the practice of forgiveness further by integrating models such as these with the knowledge gained by empirical evaluations.

Initial evaluations of forgiveness interventions have, in fact, yielded promising results (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Thoresen et al., 1998). As several authors in this volume have pointed out, though, we need to take the next step in the scientific study of forgiveness and identify the "active ingredients" of these interventions (Malcolm & Greenberg, Chapter 9,

Thoresen et al., Chapter 12, and Worthington et al., Chapter 11, this volume). Can forgiveness occur without full appreciation of the enormity of the offense? How critical is empathy to forgiveness? Are issues of shame central to the resolution of long-standing resentments? Is insight into early relational and developmental impediments to forgiveness necessary for forgiveness to unfold? Is education in the forgiveness process itself necessary for forgiveness to occur? What types of motivational appeals (e.g., egoistic, altruistic, spiritual) are most effective in promoting forgiveness? What role does the individual's social context, including ethnicity, play in encouraging or discouraging forgiveness? And do forgiveness-oriented interventions produce effects equal to or exceeding those of bona fide treatments?

Answers to questions such as these will not come from a single study, but rather from a program of research of the kind described by Thoresen et al. (Chapter 12, this volume) and Worthington et al. (Chapter 11, this volume). Malcolm and Greenberg's (Chapter 9, this volume) task-analytic approach to therapy dealing with unfinished business seems particularly appropriate in this regard, for it offers a compelling method for identifying the most critical elements of forgiveness interventions.

We hope this program of research and others as well (e.g., Thoresen et al., 1998) will lead to an empirically informed approach to forgiveness in clinical practice, one that will be theoretically eclectic, relatively efficient, and maximally effective in promoting change. Of course, it is unlikely that any one approach will be applicable to all groups. When it comes to efforts to promote forgiveness, one size may not fit all. As Worthington et al. (Chapter 11, this volume) notes, forgiveness interventions may require "tailoring" to different groups with different needs and different norms.

Finally, it will be important to compare the effects of forgiveness-oriented interventions with those of well-established psychological treatments. In a recent meta-analysis by Wampold et al. (1997), the efficacy of bona fide psychological therapies was found to be roughly equivalent across a spectrum of psychological difficulties. Perhaps forgiveness interventions can demonstrate added value above and beyond current approaches to treatment. Would, for example, forgiveness interventions add to the effectiveness of established treatment programs for clinical depression or marital distress? At the very least, advocates for forgiveness treatments will have to show that such treatments are at least as helpful as existing psychological interventions.

We should not conclude this section before underscoring Patton's (Chapter 13, this volume) caveat. He warns against treating forgiveness as a "technique." To define forgiveness as a "skill" that can be "taught" to "clients or patients" by educators, therapists, health professionals, or pastors, without appreciation for its larger spiritual character, he cautions,

may be, at best, ineffectual and, even worse, counterproductive. Forgiveness, he asserts, is more craft than science. In comments reminiscent of Viktor Frankl's (1984) seminal work on the search for meaning, Patton suggests that forgiveness is something that cannot be pursued directly but must be approached obliquely. It is part of an orientation to the world in which people see themselves as finite, limited beings, living in less-than-perfect relationships with other limited beings. In this sense, forgiveness is not a way to get healthy; it is a way of life.

How can researchers apply their scientific methods to this topic in ways that capture the richness and complexity of one of the most essentially human of all psychological processes? How can practitioners apply the knowledge gleaned from the scientific study of forgiveness in ways that reflect a respect for the essential humanity of those they try to touch? These are, perhaps, the greatest challenges of all for researchers and practitioners.

CONCLUSIONS

We would like to conclude with one final word of advice for individuals interested in studying forgiveness. Many people have deep-seated convictions about this topic. Very few people are neutral when it comes to forgiveness. This point applies as much to researchers and practitioners as it does to the people they study and serve. Those who enter this field of study would do well to assess their own attitudes and values toward this construct before they take it on. Forgiveness cannot be studied with dispassion and complete objectivity. It can, however, be studied fairly if we are willing to recognize our biases and our values, if we are willing to put them to test, and if we are willing to be surprised and learn from whatever the world has to teach us about this enigmatic yet utterly human process.

Our contributors have covered a lot of territory in this book. Nevertheless, as we noted earlier, the frontier of forgiveness remains largely unexplored. The frontier is also vast, spanning the physical, the psychological, the social, and the cultural world. The frontier is now drawing explorers from a variety of occupational "shores": social workers, psychologists, theologians, philosophers, clergy, physicians, nurses, and social scientists. This is an exceptionally challenging frontier, filled with thickets, swamps, pitfalls, and surprises. To negotiate this difficult terrain, the adventurer needs to come equipped with the full range of theoretical, methodological, and practical tools. And yet, despite the difficulties, the explorer who enters this frontier is likely to encounter some of the most striking vistas that can be found in the human landscape.

REFERENCES

- Augsberger, D. (1981). *Caring enough to forgive: Caring enough not to forgive*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Azar, F., Mullet, E., & Vinsonneau, G. (1999). The propensity to forgive: Findings from Lebanon. *Journal of Peace Research*, 36, 169-181.
- Baures, M. M. (1996). Letting go of bitterness and hate. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 36, 75-90.
- Boon, S. D., & Sulsky, L. M. (1997). Attributions of blame and forgiveness in romantic relationships: A policy-capturing study. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 12, 19-44.
- Coyle, C. T., & Enright, R. D. (1997). Forgiveness interventions with post-abortion men. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65, 1042-1045.
- Coyne, J. C. (1994). Self-reported distress: Analog or ersatz depression? *Psychological Bulletin*, 116, 29-45.
- Enright, R. D., & Coyle, C. T. (1998). Researching the process model of forgiveness within psychological interventions. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 139-161). Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Enright, R. D., & the Human Development Study Group. (1991). The moral development of forgiveness. In W. Kurtines & J. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 123-152). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Frankl, V. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Freedman, S. R., & Enright, R. D. (1996). Forgiveness as an intervention goal with incest survivors. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64, 983-992.
- Katz, J., Street, A., & Arias, I. (1997). Individual differences in self-appraisals and responses to dating violence scenarios. *Violence and Victims*, 12, 265-276.
- Kiesler, C. (1966). Some myths of psychotherapy research and the search for a paradigm. *Psychological Bulletin*, 65, 110-130.
- McAdams, D. (1993). *Stories we live by*. New York: Guilford Press.
- McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K. C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington, E. L. Jr., Brown, S. W., & Hight, T. L. (1998). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships: II. Theoretical elaboration and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 1586-1603.
- McCullough, M. E., Sandage, S. J., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1997). *To forgive is human: How to put your past in the past*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- McCullough, M. E., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1994). Encouraging clients to forgive people who have hurt them: Review, critique, and research prospectus. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 22, 3-20.
- McCullough, M. E., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1995). Promoting forgiveness: A comparison of two brief psychoeducational group interventions with a waiting-list control. *Counseling and Values*, 40, 55-68.
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., Jr., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 321-336.
- North, J. (1987). Wrongdoing and forgiveness. *Philosophy*, 62, 499-508.
- Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Pargament, K. I., Sullivan, M. S., Balzer, W. E., Van Haitsma, K. S., & Raymark, P. H. (1995). The many meanings of religiousness: A policy capturing approach. *Journal of Personality*, 63, 953-983.
- Thoresen, C. E., Luskin, F. M., & Harris, A. H. S. (1998). The science of forgiveness interventions: Reflections and suggestions. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 163-192). Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.

- Trainer, M. F. (1981). *Forgiveness: Intrinsic, role-expected, expedient, in the context of divorce*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University, Boston, MA.
- Wampold, B. E., Mondin, G. W., Moody, M., Stich, F., Benson, K., & Hyun-nie, A. (1997). A meta-analysis of outcome studies comparing bona fide psychotherapies: Empirically, "all must have prizes." *Psychological Bulletin*, 122, 203-215.
- Watzlawick, P. (1988). *Ultra-solutions or how to fail most successfully*. New York: Norton.
- Wilson, E. O. (1998). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York: Vintage.
- Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1998). Introduction. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 1-8). Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1998). The pyramid model of forgiveness. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 107-137). Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Zerubavel, E. (1991). *The fine line: Making distinctions in everyday life*. New York: Free Press.
- Zinnbauer, B. J. (1997). *Capturing the meanings of religiousness and spirituality: One way down from a definitional tower of Babel*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio.