Forgive, how?

by

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree
in

Mental Health Counseling

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

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May, 2006

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Chapter I: Introduction

There is no doubt the word "forgive" is used casually in daily conversations – "Forgive me for being late" or "Forgive me, I did not mean to...." Is forgiving just a quick reply? Does forgiving involve more than its common usage implies? When we say, "I forgive you" what do we mean? What is forgiveness and how do we forgive each other?

What is the phenomenon referred to as forgiveness? Is it a process made up of twenty units (Enright, 2001), a conscious decision based on feeling empathy for another (McCullough & Worthington,1995), or simply a choice (Luskin, 2002)? Is forgiving the same experience for all individuals, one that fits neatly into a well defined outline? Does forgiving involve an internal experience along with a permanent shift in thinking? What does it mean to a person when they have forgiven someone? These are questions that I wanted to pursue to deepen my understanding of forgiveness. I know what forgiveness means to me but I wanted to discover how others explained and experienced forgiving.

I conducted this study to seek answers to these questions. This body of work was not completed to fulfill an education requirement but to educate myself and try to answer questions that I felt were important. As a student who would soon begin practicing counseling, I believed this would be a subject that clients might bring up or even struggle with in therapy. My purpose was to have a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences of forgiving so I could improve my counseling skills around this topic.

Statement of the Problem

Although forgiveness has been a developing area of study in the last 15 years, there is little material provided on the experience of forgiveness from the viewpoint of individuals who experience forgiving. Clinical research has produced numerous theories of how forgiveness occurs based on clinical research. A hypothesis is formed and then data is collected. Collection of information on the forgiveness process tends to include undergraduate female college students completing surveys, or submitting written statements of their experiences to support or deny hypotheses dealing with forgiveness. Although this collection method is suitable to gather a large amount of data, college students may not have the same emotional development and life experiences as other adults.

There is a call in the literature for forgiveness research to move from the realm of clinical testing, forgiveness inventories, and survey questions to the personal realm of lived experience (Dayton, 2003; Enright &Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). The limitation of an inventory or survey may be that it does not capture the full experience of forgiveness. Other research methods may encourage the sharing of more detailed, personal information from a participant.

There are difficulties faced in gathering information on the subject of interpersonal forgiveness no matter which method is used. In order to study forgiveness, the phenomenon known as forgiveness needed to have occurred, which means it has already happened. Memories of events may differ from what actually occurred. Not all individuals have the same internal awareness of what

they are experiencing, the ability to describe the experience, or the ability to accurately recall the memory. Thoughts and feelings about experiences change over time. In addition, sharing personal information requires a level of trust between the individual and the listener and honesty on the part of the individual. This may be why it is easier for researchers to gather information about forgiveness from forced-choice responses or written statements. These typical research methods also help keep a clinical distance between the researcher and the individual's experience of forgiving.

Perhaps for a researcher to fully understand the individual experience, she needs to enter the world of the individual, which leads to a richer description and knowledge of the phenomenon. Using this method, perhaps the information gained could drive the understanding of forgiveness instead of the research being driven by hypotheses. There is a level of intimacy that can develop within the context of an interview that cannot be reached through paper and pencil inventories. Conceivably, forgiveness could be such a personal topic that it is difficult to put into words or share the experience with a interviewer. These difficulties, however, do not change the need to discover how individuals define, experience, and give meaning to forgiveness outside of a clinical environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the process and meaning of the subjective experience of interpersonal forgiveness for the participants. At this stage in the project, I will define forgiveness broadly

as a subjective intrapersonal process releasing energy, emotions, and thoughts held towards the offender.

Assumptions of the Study

There is an assumption that the process of forgiving ends with a positive benefit to the person forgiving. Any negative effects of forgiving have not been addressed in this project or in the literature review.

It is assumed that understanding forgiveness can occur through understanding the meaning or definition of the word. The goal is to understand and learn what forgiveness is through the words participants use to explain their experiences with forgiveness.

Definition of Terms

Injured person: The individual who perceives another person has injured him or her.

Offender: An individual who has caused an injury to another, intentionally or unintentionally.

Offense: Any perceived subjective or objective event that the injured person identifies as causing harm. Withdrawing funds from an account without permission would be an example of an action that would be described or labeled as an offense in this project. An offense could be physical, psychological, or emotional in nature.

Personhood: Sense of who one is, how one sees one's self, and one's place in the world.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Forgiveness has been an increasing area of scientific study within the last 15 years and is still considered a young field (Enright & Gassin, 1997; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000). Some researchers have attempted to remove forgiveness from being considered a religious concept, and have moved it into the laboratory as a psychological topic (Dayton, 2003; Flangian,1984; Luskin, 2002), while others define it within world religious texts (Enright & North, 1998). Researchers have broken forgiveness down into a concept that is measured by degrees or units through inventory scales (Enright & Fitzgibbon, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998). Unfortunately, or fortunately, researchers do not have an agreed upon definition of forgiveness or even a coherent framework accepted across the field. Of course, this is understandable when one reflects on how complex the meaning and process of forgiveness may be.

It is important to remember that researchers' studies on forgiveness reflect the position of the researcher (Flanigan, 1998). Interpretations made by researchers on the concept of forgiveness are done through six separate theoretical lenses: theological, psychological, philosophical, social science, quantitative, and qualitative studies, each of which describe a phenomena of forgiveness through a distinct theoretic landscape (Flanigan, 1998). This is an important framework to keep in mind when reviewing different definitions and theories of forgiveness in order to compare and contrast the meanings and processes developed to understand forgiveness.

Another important factor of current scholarly definitions is that they reflect an "American" perception of forgiveness, "...derived from Judeo-Christian culture; culture that historically has been socially stratified, homogenous, and largely lacking in gender equity, that is, patriarchal" (Flanigan, 1998, p. 97).

Definitions of Forgiveness

Although scientific studies of forgiveness begin in the mid 1980's, there is no scholarly agreement in the research field on a definition of forgiveness (Enright & North, 1998; McCullough et al., 2000). Definitional understanding of a term leads to the meaning of a word or maybe meaning leads to a definition; either way, one-way to understand a concept is to define it.

Enright and the Human Development Study Group are often credited with putting forth the first scholarly definition in the research literature of forgiveness (Enright & North, 1998). Before sharing Enright's definition, I think it is important to understand the context in which it was formed. Enright's (2001) original area of research was moral development however the area of moral development did not cause much public "excitement" (p. 7). Enright turned his research towards the study of forgiveness "as one aspect of moral development" (p. 7). He began his research through organizing a group of students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to discuss and research religious texts, traditions, philosophy, psychological and developmental principles within the topic of forgiveness. The research and discussion group, referred to as the Human Development Study Group, gathered information through readings, dialogue, and collections of forgiveness stories written by volunteers. The information gathered

led to scientific tests, the development of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory to measure degrees of forgiveness, and a published definition of forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & Gassin, 1992; Enright & North, 1998).

Enright and the Human Development Study Group defined forgiveness as "a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the underserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her" (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998, pp. 46-47).

The following definition that evolved through Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) work defined forgiving with slightly different and important distinctions and additions:

> People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right). (p. 24)

Notice the formality of both definitions and the theoretical position they take towards moral development. The older definition requires giving up negative judgment and indifferent behavior while fostering certain qualities towards the offender. The language of "rights" is also interesting. This is an American conceptualization, and reflects the Western views of a "separate" self. The latter definition requires a willful abandonment of resentment and related responses

with the endeavor to respond with moral principle of beneficence, unconditional worth, and moral love.

Using these definitions, individuals who feel they have forgiven can no longer hold an indifferent behavior or attitude towards the offender and then must work towards feelings of beneficence, generosity, and maybe, even love towards their offenders. Is it possible for an individual to experience what they consider forgiving without experiencing the conditions in the definitions? Is forgiveness such a unique intrapersonal experience that the experience and meaning of forgiveness varies by individuals or even culturally? Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) would answer "no" to that question, as I explain later in the *Ideal Definition* section.

Explanation of Terms used in Enright and Fitzgibbons' Definition

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) provide explanations for some of the terms used in their definition of forgiveness: rationally determining, willfully abandon, responses and respond, beneficence, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love.

By *rationally determining,* Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) mean a few different factors – that the injured person cognitively understands that a wrong was committed; that the offense was an objective offense; and that the decision to forgive is made, not hastily, but over a period of time. *Willingly abandon* is described as an activity conducted over time in which the injured person engages with his/her negative feelings towards the offender, with the end goal of having a different response to the offender. Willingly abandoning responses is a process

that can take time and also involves processing feelings. The terms *responses* and *respond* refer to "thoughts, feelings, and behavior" that can be experienced on a continuum from tolerating to wishing the offender dead (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 30).

The moral principle of beneficence is also on a continuum dealing with thoughts, behaviors, and emotions towards the offender (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Goudner's definition of beneficence is used to define the moral principle of beneficence as "aid [ing] others without thought of what they have done or can do for them" (as cited in Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 30). Webster's dictionary might offer a clear understanding of the meaning of beneficence as "... charity or generous gift" (Guralnik et al., 1984, p.131).

Compassion is the awareness of sympathetic feelings towards the offender because he/she is part of the human race, despite having caused injury to another (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Similarly, the injured person realizes his/her offender is entitled to *unconditional worth* due to his/her innate worth. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) say the offender is even "worthy of respect" simply because of being human (p. 31).

Generosity occurs when the injured person offers more to the offender than what his/her actions deserve (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Generosity is described as having "a sense of mercy" (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 31).

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) use Aristotle's model of *moral love* which requires concern and respect for another person because he/she is part of humanity, not necessary because he/she is deserving of this love through his/her

behaviors. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) explain that, "Moral love extends beyond generosity and beneficence by investing in the other person's well-being" (p. 31).

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) tie their definition and meaning of forgiveness as a moral virtue through linking forgiveness to moral, philosophical, and religious texts. Eight criteria points are used by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) to represent forgiveness as a virtue: virtue as goodness, virtue as inclination, a virtuous person understands their actions, a virtuous person practices the virtue, a virtuous person need not be prefect in the expression of the virtue, different people demonstrate different degrees of the virtue, a genuine expression of a virtue avoids extremes, and a virtuous person tries to be consistent (pp. 254-255). Enright and Fitzgibbons write that forgiveness can fit these eight criteria of a moral virtue; therefore, forgiveness is a virtue. Argument for their forgiveness definition is also linked to their study of Hebrew, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist texts along with nine modern philosophers' views about interpersonal forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & North, 1998). The following are some examples of the philosophers' statements that Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) include:

> The forgiver is required to prevent any barrier remaining permanently between him and the forgiven....and to renew trust in him.; The more virtuous I am the more disposed I am to forgive.; It [forgiveness] has important consequences for which it is highly valued – socially, in that the

> offender can hold up his head again, and inwardly, in the quietening of remorse. (p. 113)

Finding support for their definition from some philosophers and religious texts gives Enright and colleagues the sense that forgiveness is morally the correct action to take for the betterment of society and others (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & Gassin, 1992; Enright & North, 1998). In this complex definition, the authors identify love as the moral virtue that leads to forgiveness (Enright & Gassin, 1992). Forgiveness occurs for the benefit of the offender, so within the context of this framework, forgiveness is described as gift given to another, not an experience undertaken for the benefit of the injured person.

Ideal Definition?

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) write that the reason they explain the moral virtue of forgiveness in detail is because their definition expresses the "ideal" concept of forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, p. 263). Individuals rarely reach an ideal, yet the ideal understanding and experience of forgiveness should be the goal. There is acknowledgement that many individuals will not reach the ideal goal of forgiveness, nevertheless, it should be upheld. If Enright and Fitzgibbons' (2000) ideal meaning of forgiveness is not upheld, they warn that anyone, any individual, could give his/her own meaning to forgiveness, which would lead to the "degenerate" of forgiveness (p. 263). I believe this is a frightening concern for them since they write, "such relativism must be resisted, otherwise where reason may have prevailed, there is chaos" (Enright & Fitzgibbbons, 2000, p. 263).

Yet, who does forgiveness belong to? Does forgiveness belong to the philosophers, scholars, religious texts, researchers, and writers, or does it belong to the individual who experiences the phenomena of forgiving? Is a person's experience and meaning of forgiveness any less because they do not strive towards or even have awareness of the "ideal" of genuine forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 263)?

Other Definitions

Other researchers have come to different conclusions on a definition of forgiveness (Flanigan, 1994; Luskin, 2002; McCullough et al., 2000). One definition for forgiveness in close relationships (family, partners, and friends) suggested by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) is:

> The set of motivational changes whereby one becomes (a) decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, (b) decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and (c) increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions (pp. 321-322)

In this definition, McCullough and colleagues think the primary motivational change that leads to forgiveness is the emotional response of empathy on the part of the injured person towards the offender (McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Empathy is the understanding or awareness on a cognitive and affective level of the state of another person. In studies conducted to look at the hypothesis that empathy leads to forgiveness, the offender offered an apology before the injured person experienced empathy towards the offender.

The injured persons in the study indicated that they felt forgiveness towards offenders after the offenders apologized (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997). This study demonstrated that if an offender offers an apology it can lead to empathy that is then followed by feelings of forgiveness towards the offender. Given the physical and emotional distance in our current society, most injured individuals do not receive an apology, even within close relationships (Flanigan, 1994). How relevant is this definition, then, to the meaning or experience of forgiveness if the injured individual does not receive an apology or does not experience empathy towards the offender? In addition, can an injured person forgive without feeling or expressing conciliation and goodwill towards the offender?

Many researchers think, yes, forgiveness can occur without the involvement of the offender and while not experiencing goodwill, trust, generosity, or even compassion towards the offender (Flanigan, 1994; Luskin, 2002). The information from the Stanford Forgiveness Project tentatively supports this position although completed results are not yet available (Luskin, 2002). Luskin (2000) states it is possible to forgive an offender and "never speak to the person again" (p. 69). The injured person forgives in this context for intrapersonal reasons, not due to a sense of moral obligation or being moved emotionally by empathy towards their offender. Forgiveness is done for the sake of the injured person so he/she can move on with his/her life. Luskin (2000) defines forgiveness in simpler terms than other researchers do, "When we forgive, we take something less personally, blame the person who hurt us less,

and change our grievance story" (p. 64). Luskin's (2000) definition is based on how people reflect on what they consider a personal offense. Reflection is referred to in this definition as a grievance story. Because individuals perceive an offense as personal, this leads to emotional pain and the creation of a grievance story. Through changing what is perceived as the offense, also known as the grievance story, the emotional reaction changes, resulting in what Luskin referrers to as forgiveness.

McCullough et al. (2000) reviewed the multitude of forgiveness definitions and they proposed that current definitions could be analyzed down to a basic definition of forgiveness " ... as *intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context*" (p. 9). This definition might be, at the "very least," generic enough to describe forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2000, p. 9). Their definition may represent what most researchers would agree upon as the basics of forgiveness.

Flanigan's (1994) interviews of 70 individuals led to her definition of forgiveness: "Forgiveness is the accomplishment of mastery over a wound. It is the process through which an injured person first fights off, then embraces, then conquers a situation that has nearly destroyed him" (p. 71).

Motivation to Forgiveness

What is the reason, or the motivation, behind forgiving an offender? Information from the literature review on the motivation to forgive can be organized into two domains: social motivation or personal motivation.

Social Motivation

Researchers who support this motivation argue that forgiveness occurs for the stake of holding society together (Enright & North, 1998; Newberg, A., d'Aquili, Newberg, S. & deMarici, 2000). Injured individuals are likely to forgive because it is morally wrong not to forgive the offender. Forgiveness within this context occurs for the benefit of the offender (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). The injured person forgives due to benevolence towards the offender. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) describe it as a felt need to respond "morally towards the offender" (p. 33).

The injured person recognizes the offender as having individual worth because he/she sees beyond the offense to the essence of the person (; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & North, 1998). This view is not held just in close relationships where offenses occur, but across all interpersonal interactions.

In close relationships, such as family and partnerships, forgiving an offender can ease the tension between members through decreasing the desire for avoidance and retaliation (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). An injured person may therefore be motivated to forgive an offender if vested in the relationship and with a desire to preserve the relationship. Being connected and engaged in a relationship may increase the injured person's feelings of empathy towards the offender. Empathy often develops in relationships when people are emotionally or physically close. Research has shown that forgiveness that occurs in a close relationship can restore a sense of interpersonal closeness (McCullough et al., 2000).

The social motivation to forgive could be part of a relationship construct that occurs to preserve close relationships (McCullough et al., 1998). Due to the emotional intimacy that might be experienced in close relationships, empathy towards the offending person could be accessed easier than within a more emotionally distant relationship. Experiencing empathy towards an offender has been correlated to forgiving (McCullough et al., 1998). In addition, the neuropsychology study of forgiveness behavior theorizes that forgiveness has evolved in order to maintain social group cohesiveness through decreasing revenge behavior (Newberg et al., 2000).

Personal Motivation

Personal motivation is the other domain used to categorize the motivation toward forgiving. Forgiveness is considered for the benefit of the injured person not for the offender (Dayton, 2003). There is a realization that the feelings and thoughts related to the injury have cost too much in emotional and physical energy to maintain. The injured person has an emotional and cognitive desire to be released from the discomfort of the offense (Luskin, 2000).

Forgiveness therefore is considered an option because it offers a way to break free, both emotionally and mentally, from the offender (Flanigan, 1998). The offending experience is integrated into the personhood of the injured person, freeing him/her to move his/her energy from the past towards the future. Dayton (2003) describes this as "a way to gain emotional space"(p. 169). The injured person wants to forgive in order to become "psychologically and physically healthier," not for the sake of benefiting the offender (Luskin, 2002, p. 86).

Individuals might also be motivated to forgive due to personality traits. Current research is beginning to support a theory of a forgiving personality (Ashton & Lee, 2001; McCullough, 2001; Watkins & Regmi, 2004). Forgiveness has been correlated with two personality traits: agreeableness and emotional stability (McCullough, 2001; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002).

Individuals who rate high on the personality dimension of agreeableness tend to engage in caring, empathy, altruism, and generous behaviors towards others (McCullough, 2001). Highly agreeable individuals experience less disagreement in relationships due to the intrinsic value they place on others. This allows them to engage easier in a forgiveness method (Ashton & Lee, 2001).

Emotional stability is the other personality trait that is associated with forgiveness and refers to "low vulnerability to experiences of negative emotions" (McCullough, 2001, p. 195). Some adjectives used to describe an emotionally stable personality include patient, peaceful, and tolerant (Ashton & Lee, 2001). Individuals who exhibit this personality trait may express a stable mood and awareness of self.

Individuals who have high agreeableness and emotional stability personality traits tend not to seek retaliation to an offense and have been found more likely to forgive an offense (Ashton & Lee, 2001). However, researchers do not yet understand the interaction between personality traits and the psychological process of forgiving (McCullough, 2001). Individuals with high agreeableness and emotional stability traits may be more motivated to forgive an interpersonal offense due to the nature of their personality.

Theories of Forgiveness

Just as there are a variety of definitions and motivations for forgiveness, there are different theories proposed to explain how forgiveness occurs. Most researchers think forgiveness is a process, but they identify different concepts within the process (Enright & North, 1998; Flanigan, 1994; McCullough et al., 1997). The term process is used to represent forgiveness as a progression that individuals move through over time (Enright, 2001). Some researchers think forgiveness occurs based on a decision to forgive, therefore making forgiveness a specific action based on phenomena instead of a process (Luskin, 2002; McCullough et al., 1997). Others use the term "stages" to describe the experience of forgiveness (Dayton, 2003; Spring 2004).

Different models of forgiveness have developed from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Three different models of forgiveness will be reviewed: a qualitative model based on Flanigan's (1990) interviews, a clinical model derived from Dayton's (2003) experiences as a clinical psychologist, and a quantitative model developed by Enright (2000) and colleagues.

Qualitative Model

After interviewing 70 individuals, Flanigan (1994) identified six phases that an individual encounters during forgiving an offender: Naming the Injury, Claiming the Injury, Blaming the Injury, Balancing the Scales, Choosing to Forgive, and Emergence of a New Self. The objective during the Naming Phase is for the injured individual to interpret the meaning of the injury and the beliefs surrounding the injury. In this phase, there is a realization that occurs of the

breadth and depth of the injury, resulting in the emergence of acknowledging how the injury has altered basic or core beliefs of the injured person. This phase is complete when the injured person takes stock of the full extent of the injury, of what beliefs are no longer held to be true, and of how their perception of the world has changed due to the offense. The question, "What has happened?" is explored and answered during the Naming Phase of forgiving.

Once the injured person understands the magnitude of the injury and can name what he/she wants to forgive, he/she moves toward phase two, Claiming the Injury (Flanigan, 1994). Claiming the injuries requires sorting out which injuries belong to the individual to forgive and which belong to others involved in the offense. This occurs within a context of sorting out, realizing, and acknowledging his/her own injuries as different from those that belong to others. The Claiming Phase requires taking ownership of the injuries identified during the Naming Phase. Flanigan (1994) states the major goal of Claiming the Injury is "to stop fighting or running away from the injury" (p. 92). Individuals accomplish this through accepting that the injury has caused changes in their lives, their personhoods, and core beliefs. The injury is incorporated into the personhood – it becomes part of "who you are to become in the future" (Flanigan, 1994, p. 93). Claiming the Injury through separating which injuries belong to the individual and then incorporating the injury moves forgiving into Blaming the Injurer Phase.

In order for forgiveness to occur, there must be someone to forgive (Flanigan, 1994). In other words, someone must be to blame for the injury so forgiving can take place. As Flanigan (1994) identifies, "If no one is to blame for

an unforgivable injury, then there is no one to forgive for it" (p. 106). During the Blaming Phase, the injured person sorts out those involved in the injury from those who are responsible. A person could have played a part in the injury but may not necessarily be responsible. The responsible person needs to be named so that it is known who needs to be forgiven. Being able to identify the offender assists in moving the injured person away from self-blame and confusion towards holding someone accountable. The Blaming Phase is considered the first active phase in this model whereas the first two phases are reflective in nature. The active nature of Blaming the Injurer propels the injured person forward in the forgiveness process to the next phase.

Balancing the scales involves taking back the power of choices (Flanigan, 1994). An injury occurs because of a choice made by the offender. An offender's choice took away the power of the injured person to choose. Flanigan identifies three ways an offender takes the option of choice away: depriving of freedom, denying access to information, or lying. When the injured person becomes activity engaged in restoring his/her power of choice through identifying and using resources, his/her sense of balance is regained due to once having options available again. Balancing is described by Flanigan (1994) as "gain[ing] strength over the injury" and working towards empowerment (p. 129). This phase requires actively increasing personal resources and choices that lead to accomplishments. The injured person is no longer the object of the offender's choices but is making his/her own choices. Balancing is a process that an injured individual goes through to restore his/her personal power. It is realizing that what

was available before the injury might not be restored, but there is a way to become fully who one is within the context of the injury. Activities that people use to balance the scale might include seeking legal retribution, joining groups, entering relationships, and other activities that "reacquainted themselves with their own strengths" (Flanigan, 1994, p.136). Even if the injured person cannot find a way to balance the scale, eventually he/she needs to move on.

The fifth phase is choosing to forgive or not to forgive (Flanigan, 1994). It is a decision that the injured person has to make. If a person decides to forgive, the decision is for his/her well-being not that of the offender's. The injured person considers forgiveness so she/he is released from the past, the injury, and the offender; she/he moves forward in his/her life. Flanigan (1994) describes forgiveness as a move towards "self-preservation" (p. 144). Deciding to forgive frees individuals to choose what they will do with their lives and who they will be in spite of the injury.

The decision to forgive brings forth the final phase, the Emergence of a New Self (Flanigan, 1994). When an individual is successful in forgiving, there is a change in his/her core beliefs. The process of forgiving changes perceptions, behaviors, values, and expectations, so the person emerges with a different set of personal beliefs or core values. The individual integrates these new beliefs within the context of the injury. The experience of the injury caused a fundamental shift in the injured person's world paradigm. Once individuals integrate those experiences into their concepts of how the world operates, they are changed from who they were before the injury occurred.

Clinical Model

Dayton's (2003) clinical model considers forgiveness a process that is broken down into five stages: Waking Up; Anger and Resentment; Hurt and Sadness; Acceptance, Integration and Letting go; and Reorganization and Reinvestment. Forgiveness is considered part of an individual's daily life, not just a process that happens once or twice. In this model, the stages do not represent a linear development instead; they can overlap and occur simultaneously.

During the Wake Up Stage, there is awareness that the resentment towards the offender is having a high emotional cost (Dayton, 2003). What is considered "high" varies among individuals but there is an awareness that develops; the emotional, cognitive, and physical pain is not worth the cost of the offense. The emotional connection to the injury has blocked growth and forward movement in life. Beginning this stage of awareness brings fears of being re-injured. The injured person, however, wants to move forward even in the midst of fearing being hurt again.

When the injured person becomes aware of the price he/she has paid for the injury, he/she moves into the next stage of accepting anger and resentment toward the offender (Dayton, 2003). These feelings of anger and resentment can be powerful motivators to take action towards change. Eventually, in order to move forward towards growth, the anger needs to be recognized. Anger about the injury, and the feelings of being violated, need to be expressed as part of the process of accepting the emotion. Naming and expressing anger can assist in releasing. Anger can become part of the injured person's identity because he/she

develops a vested interest in the anger. Being angry is a way of protecting the self from other feelings/emotions. Recognizing and working through anger and resentment are seen as forward movements in the process of growth and forgiveness.

In addition to anger and resentment, hurt and sadness must be felt in order to grieve the losses that occurred from the injury. Feeling the pain allows grieving to occur and also frees the individual to be able to move towards healthy emotional connections with people. Based on the belief that the past recreates itself in the future, if not recognized and acknowledged, emotions not dealt with will surface in future relationships and have an effect. Grieving the cost of the injury "cleanses us and puts us back in touch with what's real, with our personal truth" (Dayton, 2003, p. 61).

When individuals are willing to deal with the emotional impact of the injury, insight develops. This is needed for the Acceptance, Integration, and Letting go stage of forgiving (Dayton, 2003). The injured person becomes clearer on how he/she has been affected by the injury. There is acceptance and integration of all that the injury involved. Personal understanding develops out of integrating the experience of the injury into their lives. Compassion and understanding of self and others may develop from sorting through the personal emotional experiences that transpired. Expectations of others are also changed as a result of integrating the past and the experience that occurred. There is awareness that people hurt each other, intentionally and unintentionally, and not everyone lives up to our hoped for standards. We become wiser, or more knowledgeable, about human

behavior. Remembering the injury no longer causes the same amount of pain. In its place, there is acceptance and what Dayton (2000) describes as wisdom. After the injury has been accepted and integrated, letting go begins to happen naturally as a part of acceptance; it is a releasing of the past. The injured person is free from the past and can make the choice to move forward. Dayton (2000) describes the injured person as "emotionally lighter and hav[ing] renewed stores of energy" (p. 63).

During the Reorganization and Reinvestment stage, the energy freed from integrating and letting go is used to engage in the present and future (Dayton, 2000). The energy can be used to get needs and desires met in a realistic and healthy manner. Dayton (2003) describes her model of forgiveness as follows: "So forgiveness is really a by-product rather than an act of will – a letting go or releasing of something we no longer wish to carry, rather than a moral decision made at a particular time and place" (p. 63).

Quantitative Model

In their quantitative model Enright and colleagues (2000, 2001) identify four sequence phases of the forgiveness process: Uncovering Anger, Deciding to Forgive, Working on Forgiveness, and Discovery and Release. Within these four phases there are 20 identified "units" that occur (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 68). Enright and colleagues (2000, 2001) consider the phases to be in a developmental order; one phase leads to the next. However, it is acknowledged that it is possible to move through the model in a different order and not all units may be experienced. Although the Deepening phase is considered the last

phase, this model of forgiveness is considered a cycle. After the Deepening phase, an individual may cycle through the process again with a new offense.

The first phase, Uncovering, has eight units to work through that involve both emotional and cognitive engagement (Enright, 2001). The first four of the eight units deal with developing awareness of how feelings have been avoided, acknowledging anger, recognizing any fear or shame that is part of the injury, and developing awareness of affect on health. The last four units of the Uncovering phase involve the injured person cognitively developing insight that there is an obsession with the injury or the offender. The injured person is comparing his/her current situation with an imagined state of the offender, coming to a realization that the experience may have permanently changed his/her views of self, and acknowledging the possibility of a changed worldview.

During the Deciding phase, the individual acknowledges current coping mechanisms are not working, begins to consider forgiveness as an option, and then decides to forgive (Enright& Fitzgibbons, 2000). The decision to forgive leads into the next phase of Working on Forgiving.

The first of the four units in the Working phase is reframing, which is to "rethink the situation or to see it with a fresh perspective" (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 79). The purpose of reframing is done to gain understanding of "who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context" (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 68). Understanding then leads to the units of empathy and compassion towards the offender, accepting the pain of the injury, and "culminates with giving a moral

gift" to the offender (Enight, 2001, p. 79). With the giving of a moral gift, the injured person moves into phase four: Discovery and Release.

This last phase is Discovery and Release (Enright, 2001) or also identified as the Deepening phase (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). The phase involves injured people finding meaning in their suffering, discovering they have needed others to forgive them in the past, realizing they are not alone in being injured, becoming aware of their purpose in life, and feelings of decreased negative reaction towards the offender.

Although this forgiveness process is built upon a scholarly definition of forgiveness, covers all the components in the definition, and has been empirically validated, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) acknowledge that information is needed from people "as they reflect and report on their own forgiveness process" (p. 325). Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) acknowledge, "To date, the forgiveness models developed have been generated by theorists and clinicians, not by patients themselves" (p. 326). Gathering this information from people may help reshape the process units in the model. As information is gathered from individuals who have engaged in forgiveness, it may be discovered that certain units in the process have more weight, or meaning, in forgiving. Researchers also do not yet know what differences might exist between types of individuals: male and female, child and adult, different cultures and religions, and people who see a therapist and those who do not.

Summary of Literature Review

Even in the early history of forgiveness research, there was a realization drawn from literature reviews that researchers needed to investigate how people experience forgiveness (Rowe et al., 1989). Information still lacking within the research field includes how individuals forgive, reflect on, and explain forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Spring, 2004). Spring (2004) calls for the need of "a concrete, down-to-earth vision of forgiveness – one that is human and attainable" not based on "academicians influenced by grand theological teachings to secular researchers trying to reduce abstruse concepts into manageable, bite-size units that can be studied in laboratory settings" (p. 8).

It is time to move the study of forgiveness away from self-report surveys and towards other methods of gathering richer, detailed information from those who experience the phenomenon of forgiveness. Researchers are calling for a move away from theoretical concepts about the meaning and process of forgiveness and towards a closer, personal examination of the subject through interviews, narrative analyses, intensive study of individual cases, daily monitoring, and assessments of nonverbal communication (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; Pargament, McCullough, & Thoresen, 2000; Thoreson, Harris, & Luskin, 2000). One method of gathering this type of information suggested in the literature is to conduct qualitative research on forgiveness.

The purpose of this project is to provide information gathered from open interviews of three individuals who share their personal definitions of forgiveness

and how forgiveness occurred for them. This method of gathering individuals' experiences encouraged a more personal sharing and understanding of forgiveness that is missing in current literature.

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to understand the process and meaning of the subjective experience of interpersonal forgiveness for the participants. Through a qualitative phenomenological lens there is no concept of neutrality when conducting research. I already had a vested interest in the project's topic of forgiveness by the fact that I wanted to study the subject. An investigator does not enter a project without preconceived notions. My presence in the study as the literature reviewer, interviewer, and writer had a direct influence on the study (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Dayton, 2003). Another student conducting the same study would have emphasized different aspects throughout the project. My theoretical perspectives and personality assisted in shaping this project, deciding what I focused on in the literature review, how I engaged participants during the interviews, and how I presented the information (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Since I am not a neutral factor in this project, I attempted to identify my position in the *Researcher Bias* section of the study.

As far as the best method or right way to approach the study, there could be a number of appropriate methods to study a subject (Becker, 1986). I chose to conduct a phenomenological qualitative study in order to understand individuals' experiences and meanings of forgiveness. I could have easily followed the majority in the forgiveness research field and conducted a quantitative study (Enright, 2001; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; Luskin, 2002; McCullough et al., 2000), however; that is not where my personal interest lays.

Qualitative Study

Qualitative studies produce descriptive information through gathering the language used by participants to express their inner and outer worlds and by observing their behavior (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Within a qualitative approach, a concept, such as forgiveness, is defined and experienced by participants in their everyday lives so the reader can understand the phenomena from the participants' worldview. Qualitative methods are a way to explore complex concepts so the reader can hear the spirit of the concept that may not be heard in traditional quantitative research.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) offer a working definition of qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand. (p. 2)

Characteristics of Phenomenological Qualitative Study

The goal of phenomenological study is to discover the meaning individuals give to their experiences (Creswell, 2003). In other words, to " capture this *process* of interpretation" from the participants (Bodgan & Taylor, 1975, p. 14). In this project I had to be willing to enter *Verstehen* , a state of "empathic understanding or an ability to reproduce in one's own mind the feelings, motives, and thoughts behind the actions of others" (p. 14). The objective of the investigator and purpose of a project is to seek understanding, or *Verstehen*, of the participants' experiences of the phenomena. *Verstehen* is having personal understanding of the thoughts and desires behind a person's behavior (Patton, 2002). The investigator has to make an attempt to understand and see the phenomena under study from the participant's view. This required that I "bracket" - identify and then put aside - my personal experience or ideas of the phenomena in order to be fully present to an individual's meaning and experience (Creswell, 1998).

Phenomenological research is viewed both as a qualitative method of research and a philosophy (Creswell, 1998). Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan (1996) list seven philosophical assumptions of a phenomenological investigator (pp. 85-87):

1. Knowledge is socially constructed and therefore inherently tentative and incomplete.
2. Investigators are not separate from the phenomena they study.
3. Knowledge can be gained from art as well as science.
4. Bias is inherent in all research regardless of method used.

5. Common, everyday knowledge about the world is epistemologically important.

6. Language and meaning of everyday life are significant.

7. Objects, events, or situations can mean a variety of things to a variety of people.

I held these assumptions throughout the project and they shaped my perception and filtered how I conducted the study, engaged with participants, interacted with participants, and expressed my emotional reactions. In addition, my view that meaning is subjective, varied, complex, and understood through individual experiences constructed within a social and historical context is important to share (Creswell, 2003).

Participants Selection and Description

Three females ranging in age from 24 to 40, identifying as Caucasian, bi-racial, and African-American, agreed to participate in the study. Participants heard about the study through word of mouth from friends or acquaintances of mine. No advisements or active recruitment was done on my part besides discussing the thesis project with colleagues and friends. Participants were given my phone number and made the first contact. During the initial phone conversation, participants were asked what they had heard about the study and why they wanted to participate. Individuals were sought who expressed having an experience of forgiving another person. Individuals also had to have a cogitative sense of their emotions and thoughts, along with the ability to express themselves. I turned down two interested individuals because they were friends

and I was concerned about them limiting the information they felt comfortable sharing within the context of our friendship.

Data Collection Procedures

Information was gathered through an interviewing process using a face to face, one-on-one, in-person interview. Interviewing allows for a cognitive flow of time - reflecting on the past, explaining the present, and predicting the future (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). According to Patton (2002), "The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experiences" (p. 348). This method of data collection is useful when a phenomenon, such as forgiveness, cannot be observed directly (Erlandson et al., 1993). One might be able to observe a behavioral change in a person after they experience forgiving but any of the internal emotional or cognitive experiences/decisions made by the individual cannot be observed. Only the individual who experienced the phenomena can provide the meaning behind his/her experience since I believe meaning is subjective and only the individual can make accurate meaning of his/her experience.

However, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of interviewing. First, individuals differ in their abilities to express and in awareness of their internal processes. In addition, individuals experience different comfort levels in sharing personal information. Individuals may be biased toward telling information they think others want to hear, or lean towards telling about

themselves in a positive manner. Speaking to a stranger about a personal experience can also be difficult and does not offer the anonymity that a survey, for example, would provide. Any information that the participant recalls and shares is also filtered through his/her current emotional state and ability to accurately reflect on memories in the moment of the interview. Additional limitations of interviewing focuses on the lack of depth in the interview that might occur due to anger, anxiety, politics, current emotional state of the interviewee, reaction to the interviewer, cautions speaking on audio tape or poor interviewing skills on the interviewer's part (Erlandson et at., 1993; Patton, 2002). This did not appear to be an issue in this project.

I was actually surprised by how open participants were in the information that they shared. I made a conscious effort to keep my questions to a minimum, which I think encouraged the participants to share more information. In addition, I think my non-verbal communication, nodding my head, and small vocalizations such as "yea," helped the participants relax and feel accepted. However, I cannot state for certain how participants felt it is just an observation from their body language and the amount of information shared.

Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and ranged in time from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. All interviews started with the same question, "Tell me about your experience of forgiving someone." Minimal additional questions were asked for clarification of meaning. An external microphone was used on the tape recorder to ensure the quality of the recording. The sound qualities of the audio-tapes were acceptable.

Verification

There are many opinions on what qualifies as validity in a qualitative study. Creswell (1998) presents the arguments made for using standard terminology from quantitative approaches and those for using alternative terms that recognize qualitative research as a separate valid approach. I used alternative terms that are accepted within a qualitative paradigm. They reflect the nature of qualitative inquiry and represent the voice I want the project to portray.

Instead of validity, the term verification is used to convey that qualitative research has different procedures to verify trustworthiness and authenticity. Creswell (1998) gives a working definition of verification as the "process that occurs throughout the data collection, analysis, and report writing of a study" (p. 194). Eight verification procedures are common in qualitative research: prolonged engagement or persistent observation of the participants, triangulation, peer review and debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, thick description, and external audits (Creswell, 1998; Erlandson, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Creswell (1998) suggests that at least two verification procedures be present to build trustworthiness into the project.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer alternative terms to demonstrate validity or trustworthiness for qualitative studies. In place of the standard quantitative terms of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity an investigator can use the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to represent a qualitative paradigm.

In this study I used a number of procedures to provide verification or trustworthiness: triangulation, peer review, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, and thick description. In addition, I explain the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and how they were also used in this study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to information reflecting the reality of the participants. Is the interpretation of participants' reality accurate and does the interpretation ring true from the participants' worldview (Erlandson et al., 1993)? The investigator builds credibility of findings and interpretations through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, peer debriefing represents an external check on the study's process and member checking allows for clarification of participant's meaning and investigator's interpretation. These methods work together to establish credibility in a qualitative study like internal validity does in a quantitative study.

I asked each participant to review her transcript for accuracy. I also asked if there was any additional information she would like added. Participants did not have additional information and felt the transcripts reflected the interviews.

Upon receiving the transcripts, two participants stated they were surprised at how much they shared. One participant said she felt stupid seeing the interview on paper. I discussed with her how speech is different from written language and the transcript reflects her search for words.

I feel sharing the transcripts with participants and actively seeking their feedback regarding the information shared during the interview helps add credibility to the project. In addition, a peer reviewer was used through out the project and will be discussed in more detail in the peer review selection.

Transferability

The qualitative investigator does not provide information that can be generalized because "every context shifts over time as the persons in that context, their constructions of reality, and the relationships among them, also shift (even if the individuals are the same)" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p.32). Instead, the investigator strives to provide rich, thick descriptive data of the participants' experiences so the reader can decide if transferability of shared characteristics fits another setting (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based on qualitative research assumptions, the investigator cannot establish transferability. The interaction of the investigator and participant cannot be recreated, revisited, or experienced by others. Specific interactions occur in the moment and neither the investigator nor participant can recreate the moment; however, it can be recorded. The responsibility of the investigator is to provide rich, thick descriptive data that allows the reader to decide if the information presented is transferable to his/her application.

In order to decide if transferability of this project is possible to another application, I provided the participant's direct words and descriptions to allow readers to decide if the information can be transferable to another application.

Chapter IV: Interviews relies heavily on the participants' words to explain how they define and experience forgiveness.

Dependability

Dependability and confirmability refer to the accuracy and reliability of the data and methods of collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this project, I transcribed the audio tapes. After the completion of the initial transcription, I listened to the audio tape again, correcting the original transcripts as needed. Each of the transcripts had corrections made so they accurately reflected the audio-tape interview. The transcriptions were again compared to the audio-tape for accurate reflection of the interview. All vocalization was left in the transcript so the reader receives a sense of the struggle for words to describe the phenomenon. In the transcripts, "..." represents a short pause/break in speech and is not used to reflect omission of sentences or end of a sentence. Each transcription was worked on separately until it reflected the interview. Two transcripts were e-mailed to the participants and one hard copy was given for any changes or additions they thought were needed. Participants did not make or suggestion any changes in the transcripts.

The primary collection tool in a qualitative study is the investigator (Erlandson et al., 1993; Patton, 2002). I was responsible for gathering as much information as I could from each participant in a way that did not feel invasive to her. This required that I showed an interest in her story and provide a short-term relationship within an environment that felt safe for her to share. I believe my skills as a counselor assisted me as an investigator in this project due to the

amount of information shared and observed comfortable physical appearance of the participants.

The investigator works from more than one method and/or theory to establish conclusions resulting in triangulation. In other words, the investigator approaches the subject from more than one angle. I used three distinct theories of forgiveness as a conceptual lens for analyzing participants' responses. I felt that three theories would provide an adequate overview of information on forgiveness. I researched how personal and social motivations as well as personality traits might affect willingness to forgive.

Documents such as interview notes and reflective journals assist in providing dependability. One tool for enhancing dependability is the reflective journal in which the investigator takes notes on methodological decisions, and reflects on values and interests, ideas, opinions, reactions, or insights.

In this study, a reflective journal was kept to write my emotional responses to the theories, interviews, and ideas that came up while working on the study. This allowed me to notice and vent my frustration with Enright's model of forgiveness and the belief that forgiveness is a moral obligation. My journal has not been shared because I felt that it became a personal document containing thoughts and feelings regarding not only this project but also my internship placement. The reflective journal was a useful tool to assist in identifying biases. I address the topic of biases in detail in the *Researcher Bias* section of the project.

Confirmability

In qualitative research the objectivity of quantitative research is replaced by the standard of confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The investigator strives to present data so that it can be traced to its source. Through representing a clear path to the interpretations, the investigator presents a logical pattern so an outsider can follow the investigator's conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations to the source (Eslandson et al., 1993).

I used a mental health graduate student in the role of peer reviewer to assist with confirmability. The goal was that a peer reviewer, acting as an outsider, could follow the project and provide feedback on areas that were not clear. Initially, three peer reviewers agreed to participate in this role. However in the end, only one was willing to commit the time and energy required to fulfill the role. I used the peer reviewer three times throughout the study to check for clarity of thoughts and interpretations. She reviewed the first three chapters for flow of ideas and presentation. Then she reviewed the Interview chapter when it was completed. Lastly, the whole study was reviewed again including the reference section. She received both hard copies and an electric file of the project. Feedback on the study was received on the hard copy and changes were made to reflect the feedback during each review. In addition, an undergraduate student reviewed the Interview chapter.

Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation include building trust with participants (Erlandson et al., 1993). In addition, the investigator must check

for any misinformation on his/her part or from the participants by allowing the participants to verify the information gathered. Throughout the duration of the project the investigator should continue to make consistent observations about the information gathered and how it relates to the participants.

Prolonged engagement was not an objective of this study. However, trust was established through actively listening to participants' experiences. In addition, I repeatedly checked the transcripts against the audio-tapes before presenting them to the participants. Seeking any additional comments or changes from the participants seemed to establish a feeling of trust towards me that I was trying to accurately reflect their information.

Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the verification process of using multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 1998). The goal of approaching the phenomenon from different reference points (methods, theories, interviews) is not to gather consistent information from these sources, but to yield different kinds of information that accurately reflects the complexity of the phenomenon leading to a deeper understanding (Patton, 2002).

In this project three interviews have been presented against the background knowledge of three different theoretical models and definitions of forgiveness. The three interviews allow for a scope of personal experiences dealing with the phenomenon and give the reader a sense of different and similar perspectives on the topic. Only I conducted the interviews but triangulation was

enhanced through researching and presenting different models and aspects of forgiveness, and interviewing three women with different ethnic backgrounds.

Peer Review/Debriefing

The investigator seeks peers' feedback and review of the project throughout the process to increase credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Peer debriefers have working knowledge of the study and review the process with a fresh lens offering feedback to the investigator. The peers act as "devil's advocate[s]" seeking out faults and questioning the investigator's process in order to find weaknesses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Through their inquiry the peer also provides the investigator with ideas or alternative possibilities.

One mental health counseling graduate student provided peer debriefing and review for the project at three points during the study. First, she checked and reviewed the first three chapters for content, flow, and understanding. The second check involved reviewing the Interview chapter of the study. An undergraduate student also filled the role of peer checking for the Interview chapter. In the final peer check, the graduate student reviewed the completed study and reference section. In addition, my advisor offered advice and suggestions.

Member Checking

Member checking involves participants of the study reviewing data and interpretations for accuracy to ensure that it reflects what the participants intended (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process allows for the participants to

clarify or give any additional information to the investigator. Member checking occurs at different stages of the project such as reviewing the transcript of the interview or giving input into themes or categories (Erlandson et al., 1993).

During this project, member checking occurred after the completion of each transcript. One member was phoned and two were e-mailed that the transcription was complete. Two members requested that their transcripts be e-mailed and one member received a hard copy of her transcript. I e-mailed two of the members and spoke to one in person asking if the transcript reflected what they wanted to say and if they had any additional information to add or if any change needed to be made. Each member expressed that the transcript reflected their experience and they had nothing to add or change.

Thick Description

A rich, thick description of the participant's experience provides "the foundation" of qualitative study in developing an understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 438). This type of descriptive language helps the reader experience the participants' reality of a phenomenon. Since thick descriptions are used throughout the *Interview* chapter of the study, readers can experience the phenomenon in the participants' language and make an informed decision regarding transferability (Erlandson et al, 1993).

Thick descriptions from the participants are used to keep descriptions as close as possible to the participants' experiences. Using the participants' words helps bridge the space between their worlds and the reader's.

In this project, language and descriptions from participants were used to reflect their definitions and meanings of their experience with forgiving. The reader must decide if the information shared by participants is transferable.

Confidentiality of Participants

Participants were assured that confidentiality would be maintained to the fullest extent. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study, and any demographic details or identifying information was omitted from the transcripts. I remained in possession of the transcripts and audio-tapes throughout the study and no one else had access to the raw data. Certain information, as identified on the consent form, could not be kept confidential. Any information regarding current child abuse, elder abuse, self-harm, or intent to harm others would have had to be reported to the proper authorities. This awareness may have limited how willing participants were to disclose their histories or current states for fear of being reported or misunderstood.

Given the amount of information that participants shared, I did not feel that the limits of confidentiality affected the interviews. For example, one participant discussed the guilt she felt when her child fell down a set of stairs while she was outside.

Limitations

Only three individuals participated in the study limiting the amount of information gathered. All participants were female as tends to be the trend in forgiveness studies. That was not a qualifier for the study, just the outcome due to those who volunteered. As the literature suggests, more information is needed

from men's experience in order to make gender comparisons. All three participants had a history of sexual violence which was not known until the interviews. This common experience may have affected how they felt about or dealt with forgiveness. In addition, all three participates had sought counseling at some point in their lives. Again, that common experience may have tainted or altered their personal experiences of forgiveness.

The interviewer is always a potential liability during an interview. There is a delicate dance between seeking information through questioning/prompting and staying out of the way so the experience can unfold at its own rhythm and pace. This was my first experience conducting interviews and my lack of experience may have resulted in missed information.

Because the literature review was completed before interviewing began, I found it difficult to stay focused during the first interview. Instead of listening, I found myself comparing the participant's experience to different theoretical models while conducting the interview. It was distracting to me and may have caused missed opportunities to gather more information. Since I was aware of this behavior after the first interview, it did not occur during the remaining two interviews.

Having only one graduate peer reviewer is a limitation to having a fresh lens in which to review the study. The peer reviewer was encouraging and helpful in correcting grammatical errors but did not offer much in terms of critical analysis. This may have been due to the reviewer's personality rather than being an indicator of the soundness of the study.

Researcher Bias

While conducting the literature review, I felt that the current formalization of forgiveness was not accurate to the actual experience of forgiveness since it did not feel true to my personal experience. This made me curious about the experience that others had with forgiving. I wanted to hear how individuals experienced forgiveness, what the word meant to them, and if it actually fit with research. I assumed that their personal experiences would not fit neatly into the theories of how forgiveness occurs.

I had a strong negative reaction to Enright's process and definitions of forgiveness. His process seemed too complicated and orderly to explain what I felt was an extremely personal experience. The idea that forgiving someone is a "moral" obligation done for the benefit of the offender felt like an extremist position that did not allow room for an individual's own forgiveness. I was aware of my strong negative reaction to the idea of "moral" obligation.

It had been my belief before the project that individuals forgive for their own sake and not for that of their offender. Over the course of this project, I began to believe that some acts that are committed are so hideous that the offenders do not deserve to be forgiven. Forgiveness to me is a personal choice, not a moral obligation.

I was frequently asked, "Do you think people have to forgive?" when the topic of my study was mentioned. Counselors who worked with victims of sexual assault frequently asked me this question. My answer has stayed the same throughout this project and my internships at the Sexual Violence Center and

Rape and Sexual Abuse Center; No, I don't think people "have" to forgive. Forgiveness is a personal choice and as with any choice, there are costs and benefits. I believed people do what feels like the right or safe thing for them to do at the time they are doing it.

Chapter IV: Interviews

This phenomenological study consisted of interviewing three women as they told how they defined forgiveness and how they were able to forgive another person. The purpose of the study is not to compare their experiences but to give witness to their experiences. This study allows the readers to briefly enter individuals' experiences to the fullest extent that their words and my abilities permitted.

Each of the participants' experience is told separately starting with background information of why or what she was trying to forgive. Then her definition of forgiveness is followed by how she experienced forgiveness.

Betty

Betty is a 24 year-old African American woman who's world was turned upside down in one evening, many years ago when she was date and acquaintance raped by two men. As Betty stated, "Looking at it, you know, not that I did anything different or that I did something that caused it to happened but that person interpreted me as somebody that it was o.k. for that to happen...." Betty had thought she had dealt with this "chapter of her life" years ago and had forgiven her assailants. However, the evening before the scheduled interview she received a phone call telling her that one of her assailants was back in the state. This bought up many unsettling feelings and thoughts that she felt had been settled. Receiving this news made Betty really question herself and her belief in forgiving her rapist:

> Well, you know, I ... I thought I was to that point of being like that [forgiving] but then something [the phone call] happen that I realize I'm not...cause I just found out, that,... uhm,... that the guy that raped me is back at the school where I use to go to school at, he is back there now and I was thinking to myself, wow, I'm never going back there now. That was the first thought that came to my mind, I'm never going back there now. I'm never going back at all. And I thought maybe things ...things... things hadn't...things haven't come up for me too think about as much, you know. So I don't know, maybe I had not forgiven him. So, I don't know. Maybe I haven't, because I wouldn't feel like that. I would really be o.k. with going back to my old school and visits, risking running into him but...and you know. I don't want to risk any,...you know...seeing him at all...so....so um...um...so I thought I was getting to that point by... you know....

Not only did hearing this news have Betty questioning herself, but also questioning if she had forgiven. Betty was surprised and shocked at her reaction to hearing her rapist was back in the state:

(B = Betty, I = Interviewer)

> B: Wow!...That is still a process for me as far as forgiving him. I don't know if I could say I forgave him. I can't really say that...by my reaction when I found out [he was in the state]. It left a bad taste.
>
> I: Yea, you were really surprised by that.

B: Yea, it took me....it really took me by...it really took me off guard. Cause, like I said, ...I hadn't had any contact with him. No one mentions his name to me...cause...it just kind of in the back of my mind...so I don't know. I guess I haven't forgiven him.

I: But at one point you thought you had.

B: Yea, at one point I thought I had because....because now I can picture in my head what happened and, you know, I'm so angry about it, something is gone, so lost, something is gone.

I: It's ironic that we scheduled this interview, what two or three weeks ahead of time?

B: Uh...huh...and that phone call happened last night. Weird, really weird. I was like already to be like, yes, I had forgiven him. Man, I would be denying it. I don't know, it really brought up some weird feelings. I was surprised. I was ... I was like, Oh my god, I thought I was over this, you know, one of those types of things.... I don't know... just...I don't know... one of those types of things....God, what are you doing with your life, that is what popped into my head...so I'm still struggling...I wonder if I'm just going to stay stagnate at this point in my life? Just stay at this point. I feel like I've forgiven him a thousand times. It just isn't right. I don't want to hear people talk in general terms about him.

Betty's fear of becoming "stagnate" with this event in her life was in direct conflict with her definition and her experience of forgiveness.

Betty's Definition

Betty considers forgiveness a process that allows her to stay socially polite to her offender:

> So, when I look at forgiveness I look at... it's a process. Its...its...its stages you go through of... looking at somebody and having them intimately relate them to you. Not forgotten but... you can still be cordial with that person and still have enough respect for that person to ...to...to move past that and to maybe have better communication with that person. My forgiveness... for me is being able to be cordial with that person again after they, you know... you know...back stab.... they have back stab you... you know.

One part of the "process" for Betty includes self-examination

But...yea...it's a process...like of how do you define yourself now that this has happen. How are you going to look at yourself? Are you going to look at yourself, you know, are you going to look at yourself as the glass half-full or half-empty? You know... so... I really have to...I really have to get a better grasp of myself...now that this happen....

Within Betty's definition of forgiveness as a process, there are stages and different "levels" of forgiving:

> " ... I guess you don't know what level of forgiveness you are until you encounter that person or something comes up... or somebody says something... so...after that happen, I just, started...you know, to contribute what happened to the other person and not to myself... and...

> just begin to forgive myself too, you know, for what happened cause I had a lot of blame, blaming myself, trying to figure out what did I do that he was looking at me in that way... so...I had self-blame, you know, its like two parts; forgiving yourself and the other person."

There is also an element within her process that encounters a movement within the stages that Betty described as "fluid." Betty described the fluid stages as:

> But there are these lingering feeling that are complicating things, they complicate people when we think about things, when I think about things. I don't know. But then, I think, see it's a fluid stages for me because, see... I went back last night...you know, I had those feelings...., I had that anger, like, like why go back?

Forgiveness to Betty is multidimensional, described as a fluid process with stages and different levels. Her definition of forgiveness involves not forgetting the injury, but being able to engage with the offender in a civilized or "cordial" manner, while also letting go of any self-blame. Betty also expressed, in her definition, an element of not needing to trust the offender. "...I could look at my hurt and say, O.K. this, it, is an isolated event from the future event. It doesn't mean I can't trust again. It doesn't mean I trust the next person again.'"

Betty's Experience

In order to begin forgiving, Betty first had to realize that she was not responsible for the offense. Betty shared:

> You know, what I implied on that situation, you know, taking that situation....you know, this happen to me and it was very distributing and it had nothing to do with me. It had to deal with that person and to basically, you know,....

In letting go of self-blame, she described placing the blame for the injury on the offender and not on her.

For Betty, there is a spiritual piece to her forgiveness. Her prayers were not for herself, but for her offender; that he may be able to forgive himself for the pain that he caused himself, and his family. In Betty's words,

> ...basically just pray for that person more than anything because of what happened... happened and everything and that was what I was doing...you know, praying that he realize he was wrong for what he has done and you know, he wasn't acting like what he was doing was wrong and that he could also forgive himself as well, you know....

When asked about the spiritual aspect of her forgiveness, she expresses internal conflict in what she is seeking from her prayers:

> I: It sounds as if there is a spiritual piece... involved for you... praying for him that is involved.
>
> B: Yea, um... yea, I don't know because I've always learned to keep your enemy even closer, you know...I feel bad... I don't have any type of sympathy for him...that is really disturbing, so...you know, I...I ..so...I hope that I do. I did pray a lot. I do pray a lot. You know, I think maybe he should go to hell, but I guess, when I think of all the people in his life, he

> has a little sister, he had a mom, like, do he think as an adult that it could never happen to them. I mean what would you do, how do you handle it, if you are a perpetrator yourself? Stuff like that... that is why I say, I pray for him because I hope that does not ever, ever happen to his sister or his mom cause... now you are on the other end of what happen...Now...what do you do? So...I guess that is where the spiritual stuff comes from.

Having outside assistance helped Betty with many aspects of forgiving. Seeking counseling for the rape helped her forgive herself, friends, and her offender or so she thought until she received that phone call. In addition, counseling allowed her to put a different perspective on the offense and deepen the spiritual part of her forgiveness. Betty attributes her sense of "wisdom to be stronger" in part to counseling. She explained:

> Seeing a counselor really helped to the point, I could look at my hurt and say, "O.K. this it is an isolated event from the future event. It doesn't mean I can't trust again. It doesn't mean I trust the next person again." Looking at it, you know, not that I did anything different or that I did something that caused it to happen but that person interpreted me as somebody that it was o.k. for that to happen....um...I guess counseling got me to the point...not...not...of no longer, where I'm not trying to blame myself....do I sit here wondering what I did. I guess that is how I got to the point of forgiveness..... That's why I went to counseling, not only could I not take myself not trusting other people, I couldn't take the rumors and other people judging... me wrongly because of this, they weren't there. He said,

she said always misses or adds information so...that was a big struggle. So my forgiveness process did not start out good at all... but then after everything calmed down and after I realize regardless ....regardless... of what people know or see, they are going to believe whatever they want to believe... regardless of what I feel and say what happened. Like I said, it was counseling that got me to that point of putting that aside. I can't let that be my deciding factor, if I'm going to feel good about myself, other people's views, there is no way... you know, so... as I was able to get on to that point of being happy and so happy...of knowing what happened...everything else is for the birds. That is where I could start...forgiving him because...other than that...it was always like...oh, it's all your fault, this is the only reason why all these rumors are going around because you this happen...what you do. So after I was able to get to that point, I was really able to start, to start really, really praying for him that he get some help, or so....man...praying for his family, you know, hoping that nothing bad happens to them. You know, rape is...it happens very often...more times than we know, you know.

In addition to counseling having helped Betty sort through the injury, time has been a major contributor to her forgiveness. Betty described it:

I: The first time you went through and thought you had forgiven him you had the angry...um... and those feelings, then what did you feel after that part? How did you go from the anger, hurt and that betrayal and that

innocence taken away from you to...um... to forgiving him? To being o.k. with it and not feeling that pain.

B: Um...I guess it was...it was... time had a big issue with me. I was grateful that at the time it happened he graduated, so I didn't have to see him anymore. Time heals... the wounds, cause at time I talk about it with people and with time I could talk a little more without expression of getting sad and you know, angry and all so...I guess like I could say time and how I looked at it. How I looked at the situation. The more and more I stopped trying to put blame... on...um... myself like on me... that kind of helped too, you know. I got more to the point of, you know, of I felt like I tried forgiving him.

Although Betty could not name the amount of time it took, she described it as "a long process." With time, however, also came a change in perception of the rape that allowed forgiveness to occur. Betty begin to see her offender as a human who made a mistake. In Betty's words:

And then look...at we all are just humans, not to condone, you know, being raped...its that power problem...I looked at it as a guy trying to have power over something or somebody, you know, I use to think it was about sex, its not about sex. I thought it had to do about me. But just putting it a framework of this is just somebody, a power struggle for him. It was a different perspective. I could just step way and just...just...pray for that person more then anything... that no matter what power issues they have it would never go to that point of harming somebody else like he did me.

> ....So...I guess...my thing, my forgiveness for him was more like....I just hope he gets well, you know, just I guess, I don't know if it makes any sense... I just hope this person, whatever his issue is with power, I hope, you know. I just hope that it changes. I hope this person doesn't grow up and stay that way.... You know...so, yea.

Dealing with the offense and going through what Betty described as a forgiveness process has made her stronger in her self-concept.

> But...yea...it's a process...like of how do you define yourself now that this has happen. How are you going to look at yourself? Are you going to look at yourself, you know, are you going to look at yourself as the glass half-full or half-empty? You know... so...I really have to...I really have to get a better grasp of myself...now that this happen.... Because there are people who are going to attack me...there are people who are going to say, no, that didn't really happen. I really have to have a strong hold on myself and that is a lot...that is a lot of what I got out of counseling... that piece... that piece was a stepping-stone for me to ....start forgiving that other person. I needed to have a better sense of myself since now that has happen and I look at that not as a weakness but as a strength, you know, that has given me a lot of wisdom to be stronger, you know, and not to be always play the victim role too.

She knows forgiveness has occurred for her when she can remember the injury without having an emotional connection to it and can think of the offender without ill intent. Betty described it as:

I could think about it and not feel that loss. I could think about it and I could talk about it without crying...um... yea.. I had heard about him and people would speak of him and I really wouldn't think with that angry, like...oh...is he really doing good in life because I hope not, you know, I didn't think like that, you know,.... I'm saying before all of that [hearing that he was in town] I didn't have to wonder that...about him being in the same state, he being far away and I could hear about him or what he is doing and not really feel so angry about the situation, and really just ...feel that loss. Losing....losing ....to have...to having that choice to say no, so that is how I felt I was forgiving him because I wasn't doing that any more.

I: There was no more blame.

B: Yea, right. Right. It was... now totally isolated incident that happened that got dealt with. I went to counseling. I was fine with it.

Forgiveness for Betty has become a changing process filled with feelings and doubts; wondering if forgiveness has actually occurred. She described it as,

Wow!... that is still a process for me as far as forgiving him. I don't know if I could say I forgave him. I can't really say that... by my reaction when I found out [that he was in the state]. It left a bad taste.....I guess I haven't forgiven him.

Forgiveness is important to Betty because it lets her move on with her life. When asked, "Why is forgiveness important to you? Why is it important to forgive him?" Betty replied:

> Because, now as long as I don't forgive him it's a chapter that is unfilled. I really want to close that chapter in my life, that is why I can always forgive him. There is always that gateway for stuff, you know, to come up again, you know....like I said, like last night....just out of like normal living... I don't want nothing to be opened up again, thinking about it cause....Because I did, right when I got off the phone I was still thinking about it. I was angry, you know, why couldn't he just stay away or you know, what I mean?.....I'm really ambivalent about those thoughts there is one side of me, I really don't want to encounter him. Then there is another part of me, curious part of me, like, I want to know, I would like to know....because you know, since we had this prior relationship, that is maybe that where it is coming from. We had a prior relationship, so part of me really wants to know, as a friend, what happened. (Pause) Or maybe to hear him say he's sorry. (Pause) I want to, even though I might not get the chance to ask those questions. But, I still want to be able to forgive him and like I said, it's something important for me just to close something, that chapter in my life.

When asked about what is next for Betty in her process now that it has been re-opened, she is unsure:

> I don't know. That is a good question. I don't know. I'm being really honest with myself. Maybe self-talking, I don't really want to go to counseling again. Maybe self-talking; where are these feelings coming from. You do have a strong sense of who you are, you are doing good in life. Right, so

> what is it still about this guy that you can't forgive him, you know.... I'll start asking myself that question. Maybe that is where I'll start to evaluate why I have these lingering feelings. I don't want to get to the point of not ever not forgiving him. I feel there is still time and room for that... I just want to explore why I haven't been able too. It was a eye-opener, I should be able to hear his name and not have, you know this....anger and pain about it.

Betty's process has not been easy. Realizing that forgiveness, by her definition, has not yet occurred, is puzzling for her. As she had said, for her it is a process with fluid levels and stages. Perhaps "explor[ing] why" there are lingering feelings is another level or stage in her process.

Zelda

Zelda, a 37 year-old bi-racial woman, is the oldest daughter in an alcoholic family. Her mother was physically and emotionally abusive towards her during her childhood and it continued into her adulthood. Her mother's alcoholism and mental illness interfered with basic caretaking of Zelda during childhood, such as food, shelter, and security. Zelda's father is also an alcoholic who dealt with his wife's behavior by not being present in the home. When he was home, he would try to protect Zelda from her mother's abuse. Zelda's parents eventually divorced, leaving Zelda to defend herself against her mother's attacks while taking care of her younger brother.

Zelda's Definition

Zelda believes there are different definitions of forgiveness. When asked what her definition is, Zelda explains forgiveness as varying with degrees of forgiveness that require effort:

(Z = Zelda, I = Interviewer)

Z: I think it depends on the definition of forgiveness.

I: What is your definition of forgiveness?

Z: I think it varies , I think that there are degrees of forgiveness. Um...like sometimes, um...like the situation with my mother...um. I think I still...um... certainly... probably... there is probably.. in fact, there still is some resentment there but... um... I have really let go of a lot of stuff,...um... just for my own sake... um...it... it just felt self-defeating and self- destructive ...umm... counter productive. Um... and um...so I made an effort...to let go of some stuff. Um...its not like I have absolved her of any responsibility for...the things that she did...so I guess that's....

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the injury but a letting go. Zelda forgave for her own well-being not her mother's:

I was never, ever...um ... let up or forget what happened and ..um.. you know, but it... it wasn't... by me doing that... I wasn't... it wasn't ...I was not...like my mother, for example, it was only hurting me. Um... and I haven't let her off the hook. I don't, like,... you know.. .. I've never said the stuff she did was o.k. It was never o.k. and is never going to be o.k. but I

don't carry it around with me on a daily basis and review how not o.k. it was and um.... I'm not as attached to... the stuff as I was (Pause).

Zelda's definition has an element of releasing herself from the injury for her own sake rather than for the offender, yet doing so in a manner that feels safe and protecting on a physical, emotional, and intellectual level. As Zelda shared:

Z: I think it goes back to what forgiveness is. If forgiveness is...um...forgetting and if it ...allowing yourself to be vulnerable and if it is...absolving that person of whatever it was that they did...um... that seems really unsafe to me and that seems really unwise to me...um.. and I don't ....think I would choose to do that and I don't think I have done that. I haven't done that. Um... if I define forgiveness as...um...becoming less attached to the action or the, the thing, whatever that thing it was that person did, and ...um... and keeping myself safe by staying away from that person...um but just...yea, I think it has to be for it has to be about detaching myself from the whatever it was, the action, the abuse, the what ever....um...

I: Is it an emotional detachment or intellectually detachment?

Z: I think both. It happened a long time ago and I am an adult and I can, you know... I mean... I'm not...I am an adult. I'm not in her [mother's] care. I'm not, she, you know, I am... I am able to take care of myself. I am able to protect myself in a way, in a way that I was not as a child. Um... Can you repeat that? What, what you just said?

I: I was just asking...you said.

Z: that was the detachment intellectually or emotional?

I: Yea

Z: Um, yea. I think it is both. Um, intellectually I distance myself by reminding myself it's not then. And emotionally, I try to detach myself by reminding myself that she is human and I, I try to be objective. I try and look at her ....I try to look at her like somebody who has never met her before. (Pause) I think that is how I do it... (Pause).

Zelda's definition requires that she detach from the injury and offender by distancing in proximity and by creating emotional and intellectual distance. She does not seek a reunion with the offender in order to rebuild trust or the relationship, but she does recognize the offender as a human being with a history.

Zelda's Experience

The act of forgiving began to occur for Zelda for her own mental relief from the anguish of her memories. She recognized her obsession with holding on to the injury and began to see the damage it was causing her:

I: How did you get to that process of some degree of forgiveness with her?

Z: Um...it...I... I...I really, really deeply hated her for most of my life and um...hum it ...I was...I was...It was...I was really just obsessed with just...how...you know... these things... you know, altered my life and the path of my life, and ruined my life and how then changed who I am in a negative way and um and really a lot of self-loathing. Really, really, just a lot of bad feelings... a lot of hate and it was really just corrosive and um...

extremely unpleasant and ... um... and so (pause)... so o.k., you wanted to know how I approached it?

I: Um...hum

Z: Um...Well, I mean, I remember, like, I've been through therapy and AA and they all are big on forgiveness and I was always really thoroughly annoyed with ...um... people who told me I needed to forgive for me. I thought that was weak. I thought they were letting... um... the perpetrator, whoever that person may be, get away with it, letting them off the hook and I was not about to do that . I was never, ever...um ... let up or forget what happened and ..um.. you know, but it... it wasn't... by me doing that. I wasn't... it wasn't ...I was not... like my mother, for example, it was only hurting me. Um... and I haven't let her off the hook. I don't, like,...you know...I've never said the stuff she did was o.k. It was never o.k. and is never going to be o.k. but I don't carry it around with me on a daily basis and review how not o.k. it was and um...I'm not as attached to... the stuff as I was. (Pause) I'm not sure if I'm answering what you want...I'm not sure I'm answering the right question.

I: You are. I would like you just to answer however it comes to you. I'm not really looking for an answer, I'm just looking how do you explain.

Z: O.K.

Zelda experienced a release of her feelings and thoughts that freed her from her ruminating memories. Although the memories are still part of her, they are not in the forefront of her personality. The realization that forgiving her mother did not

make her weak, but allowed her to let go of hating, came over a long period of time. As Zelda shared:

> O.K. Ok...um It was like... it was like... it took a long time and is some thing I still work on, um...it... you know, its not like just something I decided to do and did... it um....it like, kind of...I became aware of how...um... holding all that hate inside of me was affecting me...and ...um... decided that I didn't want that for my self... and um...decided that I would do what... what I could... to... what I could do to change that... so it's been a lot of stuff.

Over time, Zelda began to think of her mother differently. She detached herself from her role as a daughter and looked at her mother as a person suffering from mental illness and alcoholism. Looking at her mother as a person, rather than a mother figure, changed Zelda's perception:

> ...like um... and I ... um... its, I try to...and...I can't...I can't understand everything...um...but...I try to understand her, you know... where she was coming from, how she was raised, what she felt... like really ...trapped in a bad marriage...like and like she got pregnant accidentally and um...you know, she, she was, you know, she was frustrated and scared, and you know, she dealt with it in a bad way...um so I try like...to think of her not like as mother... um ... I try to think of her like... um... not like my mother... from the point of view, the point of view a stranger like... how you know... more objective and detached... if like I was reading a story about her ...um... how could I find ways to sympathize. Because it is a lot

> easier for [me] to fall back on she is just evil...um... that way it just explains a lot. She is just evil and she is a bad human being and she doesn't have any redeeming qualities and there is nothing good about her... and that is a lot easier ...um but I, I but I, do try to find sympathetic qualities in her... and I try to find things that aren't negative about her. Which is not easy. (laughs) (Pause) hum...um.

To Zelda, forgiveness has a component of personal safety. Just because Zelda has forgiven someone, does not mean she is willing to trust that person again. She has personal "boundaries" that keep her safe:

> If they intently come over and stomped on my foot...um (laughs) then I would definitely be angry and um... and I think as I think that, you know, I think that it is tricky. I think it is tricky because...um.. its hard to forgive because it is. I feel, I felt, I would be making myself vulnerable and by not forgiving...um... I was holding up these boundaries and I wasn't ...I was... you know. I was reminding myself of what happened so it wouldn't happen again. Um... and so, if someone was to like step on my foot, I would not want them to step on my foot again and I, you know... maybe I would not hate them and hold that hate in my heart and soul and let it eat away at my soul again but you know, I would probably...you know...I would probably not stand in front of them wearing open-toe shoes or something. I would avoid them. I would not hang around them...I. ..you know...I would avoid them so it didn't happen again. So I don't spend a lot of time with my mom...I now you know, I spend very little time with her...uhm..

> because...because she...she...she...because she strikes out at people and you know, I mean...if I choose to be around her, she is going to choose to strike out at me and I know that.

Although forgiveness does not mean letting others "off the hook" or "forgetting" the injury, Zelda finds personal relief in forgiving:

> I: Is there anything else you would like to add about forgiveness?
>
> Z: Um I feel safe... and I feel...I feel a lot healthier...I feel... and I feel like I don't have acid eating away from me on the inside. That is the best description I can think of. It was just corrosive. It was just eating away... at my soul...it...it just tainted everything. It tainted everything...in the way I perceived the world and people and relationships and myself and um...I think for my own sanity and my own safety, my own health and well-being it was absolutely necessary to let go...of this stuff. But...you know...I mean...yea...I mean...um...yea....I think that's the best I can say because I have explained I haven't forgotten and I haven't absolved her of her wrong doing because I won't do that, and I keep my self safe by, you know,...I am aware of what she is capable of and what she has done... and I don't put myself out there...for her.

Zelda's physical relief that she felt after forgiving her mother did not come from any religious or spiritual beliefs. I did not ask about religion or spirituality but Zelda touched on the subject during the interview. She is aware that religion or spirituality may have been helpful to others but she stated:

> I have a hard time with spirituality. I have been told that spirituality is helpful ... um... I, but, I ... I struggle with some stuff with main stream spirituality. I think I'm spiritual but I'm definitely not religious. Um... and ... so.. that has not been an avenue that...that... I have employed in trying to forgive and um... um.. yea, I just don't know.

So for Zelda, forgiveness occurs over a long period of time before she received relief from the injury. Forgiveness does not mean that the injury is forgotten or even that Zelda releases the offender from responsibility; it means looking at the offender through a different lens in order to keep herself healthy and sane. Keeping a physical, emotional, and intellectual distance from the offender is part of forgiving for Zelda and allows her to feel relief and safe.

Sandy

Sandy, a 40-year-old white female, experienced forgiveness after ending a 12-year-old friendship. Her friend thought she was in love with him. Sandy explained that she did not feel romantic love towards him, but he persisted in thinking that she did. Their friendship was feeling the strain of this conflict and he became verbally abusive towards her regarding their different religious beliefs. Sandy described the moment of ending the friendship,

> There is, you know, a moment....um... an unrelated moment were I just threw my hands up in the air and said "enough." You know...and...you got to go, good-bye and ended the relationship and was just furious after that, just felt so betrayed, you know.

Ending the friendship occurred in 2001. Sandy had recently quit her job and given herself three months off to explore who she is and what she wants from life. During this transition time, Sandy has read many books that have changed the way she sees situations, people, and life. During this time of learning and self-reflection a shift in her thoughts regarding forgiveness occurred.

Sandy's Definition

Sandy's definition of forgiveness has changed over time. At one point in her life, she felt forgiveness was not needed and "was just an easy way out" that allowed people to act poorly in relationships. If someone injured her, the relationship ended and there was no need to forgive; the injury would be forgotten. In 2001, when she ended a 12-year relationship with her best friend she describes her feelings then:

> There [were] just a million things about it and finally, I wrote, I have a web site, and I wrote a brief dispatch on forgiveness. And in that dispatch, I wrote 'I don't forgive you. I don't forgive anybody. Don't do me wrong and we won't have to worry about forgiveness,' you know...at that time I was writing, I believed that forgiveness was just a easy way out...for people to treat people how they wanted to treat them, and then ask forgiveness later and everything would be o.k. So, I just wrote it off completely. This was 2001. I'm not forgiving. Don't do me wrong and we won't have a problem. I'm not going to do you wrong. I'm not going to treat you like that, so you know, I'm not going to ask for forgiveness and if I do, do you wrong, you have every right to walk away from me as far as I'm concern.

As far as Sandy was concerned, forgiveness was a concept that allowed people to treat each other unfairly and then come back into relationships. However, as time passed, Sandy felt that by not forgiving it was having a negative impact on her health:

> But I, the time I wrote it, I didn't think not forgiving would eat you up. Because that is something people say, "If you don't forgive, you get eaten up by rage and anger and hostility." I just said, "No, I don't believe that." You know, I cannot forgive you and still not be mad at you.

However, through reading and self-reflection, Sandy's ideas surrounding forgiveness have changed. She now sees forgiveness as a way to move forward in life and allow love to occur. Sandy explained it as:

> I don't know what I think about that [dispatch] now. I think there may be some truth to that but what I think you can't have is love, you know. Maybe you can come to a middle ground but you can't cross over into loving someone if you don't forgive someone and I want to.... I want to love some. I want to love everyone, you know. I think it is best for me. I think it is best for them. I think it is what I'm here to do so I don't want to let myself get in the way. I really guess that is the reason why I really have embraced the whole concept here. Personally, I need to progress in my life and I...I don't want to...I don't want to embrace things that don't let me move forward.

Love and forgiveness are almost used as synonyms in Sandy's definition of forgiveness. For her, forgiveness means feeling love towards her offender, which allows for her personal growth.

Sandy's Experience

The journey of understanding what forgiveness means to Sandy began with a longing to experience a spiritual presence in her life. Sandy described her longing as:

> Well...umh...in these last three months...um...you know...picking up a million books and they are all about love and they are all about forgiveness and ...um...and ...in this....this...this desire to be close to God, I guess you would say or goddess or whatever it is...but just to have...um...something divine close to me. I guess I just started to feel like...hostility, and anger, and forgiveness, I mean not forgiving is in my way and I've always believed that where there is hatred there is no room for love, you know and I know that just from my experience when I'm angry, I totally forget that I love somebody, you know? There is not room for both of those things in me.

The emotions Sandy felt towards her offender were in direct conflict with her desire to experience a divine presence. Over time, the realization that her heart could not hold both love and hate began the slow process of experiencing forgiveness. Sandy expressed it as, "I guess it just kind of slowly came to light that I think I may need to do some forgiving."

The actual experience of forgiving was simple for Sandy. Forgiveness occurred by thinking of forgiveness while she changed her thoughts towards her offender. Sandy explained her experience as:

> For me, it was just saying it. Just thinking the words in my head that 'I forgive you' and 'I love you' and I guess for me, the way that I knew it was real was because I was really, really, able to sincerely to send love because I believe that I can't send love if I'm filled with this other stuff. For me to be able to do that, for me to think about him now and say, in my head or even out loud... whatever it is...to say that 'I love you and I hope your life is good and I...I hope that everything is good for now.' Not sending out vibes to kill you ...not anything like that...but just hope that everything is good.

Seeking forgiveness towards her offender was a new experience for Sandy. This behavior was in marked contrast to how she thought and felt about her offender before forgiving. It seemed that Sandy was also surprised by how she felt as illustrated by:

> I didn't have room for that [forgiving and sending love] before that...that...that is like the difference from before. I could not have done that, I couldn't have sent out anything positive to him. It was either just don't think about him or um...think hateful things...um...you know... think mean things.

For Sandy, realizing that forgiveness is a choice that she is in control of making in any moment freed her to realize the other choices in her life. Sandy

understands forgiveness as a choice she makes and also understands how that changes her experience of events in her life. She stated:

> Really, that was like another major transformation in my life. It was about choice. I always get to choose. I choose everything, I choose my life, I choose my friends, I choose my emotions, I choose if I believe in myself. I choose to forgive, I choose everything...and...and...now when I look back on it, I think a lot of stuff left back then. When I realized I was responsible for the way that I felt, you know, that I was responsible for anger, that no one else makes me angry. I choose to be anger or I can choose not to be angry. I choose to hold a grudge or not hold a grudge. When I wrote that dispatch about forgiveness in 2001, I knew I was holding a grudge. I was under no illusion that I was choosing it, but I was okay with it. I was that mad, that I was fine with it, you know?

Part of her power of choosing is choosing not to have to get to the point of forgiving someone. Sandy now works on bypassing forgiveness by focusing on why the injury is occurring or how the potential offender is feeling. She views most offenders as attacking or causing an injury, due to their fears. Since she can see that the offender is acting in a state of fear, she feels compassion for the offender, which allows her to bypass having to forgive. Sandy described a phone conversation in which her mother was non-supportive of Sandy's plans to participate in a breast cancer fund raising event. During the conversation, Sandy viewed her mother's response as coming from a place of fear. In addition, Sandy's reaction to her mother showed a change in her relationships:

> It was funny, because when I hung up the phone, I thought to myself, that would of just fried me a week ago, a month ago, a year ago. Any other time in my life, I would of been sitting there so livid. I would of ran downstairs. I would of complained and bitched about how mad I was. But throughout that whole conversation, I just kept reminding myself this isn't about me. It's not about me. This is about her. It's about her and her fears and her pain and her situation and it doesn't have anything to do with me and so I just feel bad for her, that...that she...that she can't see or that she can't support me when I'm doing something good or you know, that is sad. I mean that is a good thing to be able to do. It feels good to be able to support somebody, and um...so...in that case I feel like I never got mad enough to where I had to forgive. I just got, saw right past where I would normally see as forgiving into the heart of the person who is doing these things for other reasons, you know, for...I can't say why she does what she does, but I do know that when we attack it is usually from fear. It doesn't have anything to do with me. It's not about me, you know, so...I guess I would hope that in the future, instead of getting to the point, that someone did something to me that is, needs forgiveness, that I can see through it before I even get angry to, you know, people...these things don't come out of a vacuum or a void, they come from somewhere.

Through seeing the offender as a person who is experiencing some kind of pain, there is no need for forgiveness. Seeing people through a different lens allows her to feel compassion for the person and their pain. Sandy explains it:

> You know, most of the time I just think I'm so glad I'm not them. I'm so glad I don't have that kind of pain, that kind of rage and that kind of fear and whatever history they have. Whatever it is that possess someone to do someone else, you know what I mean and it makes me feel for them, you know, which is frustrating people around me because I'm always feeling. They think I'm feeling for the wrong people all the time, but it's a way for me to love. It's a way for me to never feel like I have to forgive you. If I can see you before I have to forgive maybe, we don't have to go there. Your behaviors are going to be your behaviors. It's not going to change what you did, maybe, but it might change, you know, how I perceive it.

Through changing how Sandy perceives an offender, her hope is to change her perception of the interaction or the person before forgiveness is necessary. Although that is her main goal, she realizes it is not always possible:

> When you think it is about you, when at that point, you are going to have to forgive someone, you know. But, if I don't ever go there then, yeah, I don't ever have to. "Ever" is a big word because that would assume I could always do it. I can't image that is true. I know that life comes and no matter what your intentions are you are going to get frustrated and take it personally, you know.

Forgiveness used to be a process for Sandy. She described it as a past learning experience. Now that she has learned how to forgive, the process is no longer a major component or fully used in order to forgive. Since she understands her

process and how to get to the place of forgiveness, she no longer needs to partake in the whole process. In Sandy's words:

(S = Sandy, I = Interviewer)

> S: But making that choice is hard so sometime maybe you have to go through a process to get to where you, you know, are able to realize. Like I had to definitely go through a process, a *huge* learning experience before I really got it, that it is choose, you know?
>
> I: Yeah, and now that you have that, you don't need...
>
> S: I don't need to go through a process every time. I can just say, 'I forgive you. I choose to forgive you.' And then it like dissolves, if I'm like for real and mean it. Maybe it is not that easy, you know, sometimes I might have to say it over and over or something but um.... I don't know, just admitting I have a choice like knowing I have a choice and I choose, really does make things much more easy for me, because then I'm bring it on myself and that is something I never wanted to do. It is one thing to be dysfunctional and have problems or have pain and be able to blame it on the rest of the world because then there is nothing you can do about it. It is all their fault. But, when I have pain and I believe it is of my own choice, that just is crazy, that is just insane, just to let myself suffer.

Gradually, Sandy has come to the point in her life where forgiveness is no longer a process but an action that occurs through her choices. Her decision to see individuals acting out of fear changes the way she thinks and feels about people.

It supports her to feel love towards others, which allows her to progress towards personal growth and understanding.

Summary

Three women shared their experiences of interpersonal forgiveness with the interviewer. Their definitions of forgiveness represent the variance of the word based on individual experiences. Each woman found her own path to forgiveness. Although the result is what they consider forgiveness, the journeys they took to experience forgiveness represent the diversity of individual experience as they find their own ways to forgiveness.

Chapter V: Discussion

Forgiveness is a commonly used word in our society. I wanted to focus on the meaning and experience of forgiveness for individuals using their words and hearing their processes of forgiving. The literature review presented forgiveness ideas from varying viewpoints: as a decision or a process, as a moral requirement, and forgiveness as not necessary. There are many definitions and theories on forgiveness but they were constructed within an academic setting.

Within this study, I heard the voices of three distinct individuals describe in their words what forgiveness means to them, why they forgave, and how it occurred. The purpose of this study was not to compare their experiences to each other or even to the current literature available, but to allow the reader and me to bear witness to their experience. The reader has to drawn her/his own conclusions from the participants' words.

My Thoughts

I found through this project that not even a basic academic definition could not begin to define forgiveness with the richness of the participants' stories. Perhaps the understanding on such an intrapersonal phenomenon is not possible through only one definition or theory.

The participants' experiences with forgiveness were undertaken for their own well-being not that of their offenders. Descriptive statements such as, "I didn't think not forgiving would eat you up," "it was just corrosive," "it was like acid in my stomach" assist in explaining why participants sought some type of

forgiveness. It seems that not forgiving was having a negative impact on their physical well-being.

Part of their experiences of forgiveness included realizing that the offenders are human, but this understanding was not the reason why forgiveness was sought. For these three participants, forgiveness was wanted for their own emotional and physical benefit. A spiritual benefit was also identified but seemed a secondary result of forgiveness and not necessarily the primary reason why forgiveness occurred. As the result of experiencing forgiving, the participants perceived the offenders differently than at the occurrence of the injury. The change of perception was a by-product of forgiving not the motivation.

All three individuals required outside assistance before they began forgiving. I wanted to study this topic because I thought it would he helpful to have a deeper understanding of the concept of forgiveness for my career as a counselor. Given that outside assistance maybe a frequent occurrence in forgiving there is a benefit to having some understanding of the phenomenon. Counseling, AA meetings, and books were mentioned as assisting in experiencing forgiveness. Do the majority of individuals seek some type of assistance outside of their personal emotional process that contributes to forgiveness occurring? I found no mention of this in the literature but outside assistance played a role in these participants' forgiveness.

It could be possible that we do not naturally seek forgiveness that forgiveness is a social construct and not necessary an internal conviction. Social inputs such as religion, counseling, and media may lay an imprint of forgiveness

as an individual desire, as suggested by Newberg et al. (2000). Neuropsychology is just beginning to understand the relationship between forgiveness and the areas of the brain involved in the process. More information needs to be collected, but all three of the participants sought outside assistance - what I would label as social input - before forgiveness occurred.

No matter the type of outside assistance used, time was mentioned as a major asset that encouraged forgiveness. Perhaps time serves the purpose of creating emotional or physiological distance from the offense.

Recommendations

As has been stated in the literature review male participants are lacking in forgiveness research and are needed to gain a balanced perspective between genders. There is also a need for more phenomenological inquires into forgiveness so a wider range of experiences can be heard.

Perhaps forgiveness is such a personal phenomenon that one definition cannot represent the experience for all individuals. One way to gain a different perspective for researchers is using personal creative expressions to represent experience with forgiveness that is lacking in interviews or surveys. Art is often use by individuals to express events or emotions that may not be accessible through daily language. Using art as a research media might lead to different conceptualizations of forgiveness than what is currently available through conversation.

The health benefits of forgiving is a newer area of study in the forgiveness field. Given that all three participants described a negative physical reaction

before they forgave, this aspect of forgiveness could be significant. There might be physical benefits to forgiving that could be measured through current medical procedures.

More research is needed in exploring if outside factors such as counseling and books are a major contribution for individuals as they forgive. This could be an interesting area of study given the amount of books available that encourage forgiveness. A quick search on Amazon.com bookstore resulted in 1,019 books with the word "forgiveness" in the title. Using a survey to find out how many people use outside help would be a reasonable way to gain valuable statistical information on the number of people who seek assistance with forgiveness. In addition, the question of why outside help is sought when dealing with forgiveness could be explored.

I believe this study assists in addressing the need for qualitative information on forgiveness and also demonstrates the amount of information that can be gathered from this method of study. As with most projects, I find this study leaves me with more thoughts and questions than answers. Although I feel the study supported my belief that individuals' definitions and experiences of forgiveness differ from current information, I find myself currently questioning why we forgive. I was surprised to learn that "social input" played a role in the process of those interviewed. Once researchers have an understanding of *how* individuals forgive, it would be a natural lead into *why* we forgive. It is my hope that this study raises interest in the concept of forgiveness as an individual decision versus an unconscious social expectation.

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