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# THE EFFECTS OF FORGIVENESS ON SUSTAINING SOBRIETY IN 12 STEP GROUP ATTENDEES

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THE EFFECTS OF FORGIVENESS ON SUSTAINING  
SOBRIETY IN 12 STEP GROUP ATTENDEES

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Rebecca Ann Cornelius

June 2016

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## ABSTRACT

There has been an increase of research in the area of forgiveness, particularly since the early 1980's; however, there has been far less research done in the field of addiction and how forgiveness or the lack of forgiveness impacts a person's recovery. The profession of social work has a wide array of fields and services, and it can be common for a social worker to work with a person abusing substances at some point in his or her career. While there are many aspects of treating and assisting clients in their recovery, one topic that may not be discussed with clients is the subject of forgiveness. However, forgiveness renders itself as pertinent in a person maintaining sobriety and thus it is imperative while conducting treatment for social workers to not shy away from this subject with their clients.

This study utilized a qualitative analysis consisting of interviews with ten participants who share their experiences of forgiveness in their own recovery.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of forgiveness on 12 step group attendees in order to gain an awareness of how forgiveness or the lack of forgiveness affects one's ability to maintain sobriety. The findings of this research will be used to increase social workers' understanding of utilizing forgiveness as a treatment modality, impact future social work policy, practice and research.

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## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the ten participants in this study who welcomed me into your lives, if even for a brief few minutes. Your stories inspired and captivated me, and my hope is that this small research will be used to increase an awareness of the need to forgive in order to maintain sobriety. Your giving back by being a part of this research is appreciated.

This research is also dedicated to the person who has experienced the chains of addiction. No words can adequately express your experience but hopefully one day, if you haven't already, you will find hope to do life in a new way. Never give up.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

### Introduction

The issue of forgiveness is one that creates different thoughts and reactions. People have different opinions regarding whether or not forgiveness is actually necessary to live an emotionally, healthy lifestyle. Particularly, in the area of substance abuse, the question is can a person who struggles with addiction live an emotionally healthy lifestyle free from their drug of choice without experiencing forgiveness? This chapter will state the problem of substance use in our country with a focus on how this affects the social work profession. It also will explore the purpose of this study and why it is important to look at this issue in substance treatment.

### Statement of the Problem

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, in 2012, there were 23.1 million Americans (8.9 percent) who needed treatment for a problem related to drugs or alcohol but only 2.5 million (1 percent) received treatment at a specialty facility (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014, para. 17). This statistic reveals a large amount of people who use mind-altering substances other than for recreational use. In addition, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found in more than half of all adults consume alcohol; however, the point of concern is 6.6 percent of those drinking

adults meet the criteria for an alcohol use disorder. SAMHSA goes onto say that illicit drug use is actually on the increase from 8.3 percent of those 12 and older using drugs in 2002 to 9.4 percent or 24.6 million people having used illicit drugs in 2013 (SAMHSA, 2014, para. 2).

These statistics show that there is a large number of people in the United States who use alcohol or illicit drugs. For some persons, they may decide to seek inpatient or outpatient treatment for their substance use. For others, they may decide to seek help in a 12 step group, such as Alcoholic Anonymous or Narcotic Anonymous. Regardless of venue of treatment or help that is needed, a large majority of these treatments utilize the 12 step program in their programming. Alcoholics Anonymous originated in 1935 when two men, Bill W. and Dr. Bob, each alcoholics, began to work with each other and another unknown person to maintain sobriety. Out of each man's desire to be free from the addiction of alcohol, this group of men formed the first fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous and from that starting point, fellowships including groups of other addicted persons began to appear across the United States. In 1939, Alcoholics Anonymous printed its textbook, Alcoholics Anonymous, and later the text, "12 steps and 12 traditions" was printed in 1953, which includes Bill W.'s 12 steps of recovery ("Twelve Steps", 1981). "Alcoholics Anonymous is a group support program for people suffering from alcoholism" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2016, para. 1). The Alcoholic Anonymous groups and literature

would eventually expand to meet the recovery needs of persons' who struggle with any type of addiction.

The ninth step in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions book of Alcoholics Anonymous states, "make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so when hurt them or others" ("Twelve Steps", 1981, p. 83). The issue of forgiveness emerges in this step. By seeking out another person whom the addicted person has hurt, the person making amends is essentially saying, "I'm sorry" and perhaps looking for forgiveness from the person who was offended.

A recovering alcoholic is encouraged to forgive himself or herself and to forgive the person on the list for any actions done in retaliation. It can also help to remove the guilt and shame of past actions that can act as a stumbling block to full recovery. ("Step 9", 2016, para. 7)

Social work is a profession which meets all kinds of needs for individuals, groups and families. One of the issues that arises while working with people is substance addiction. One model the social work field relies upon in working with addictions is the medical model of addiction. According to the Society of Addiction Medicine, addiction is a

Primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations, reflected in

an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors. (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2015, p. 1)

While this model is beneficial for social workers to work with substance users from a physical standpoint, there are other areas of the client's addiction that the social worker needs to help the client focus on. It is important as clinicians to help the client work through all issues affecting the client, not only the medical aspect of addiction.

Another practice approach for social workers is the systems theory model or person-in-environment. The social work profession does very well in addressing the aspect of helping the client address the systems in his environment so as to help the client identify areas in his life that can be triggers or problems for him and his use of substances. Identifying these key issues are vital for the addicted person so he can avoid or build upon his coping skills in order to maintain sobriety. In alignment with system theory is a value and strength of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is that sobriety is better achieved through social interaction and relationships.

So, the question remains, can a person in recovery relapse on his drug of choice if forgiveness is not addressed as a part of his recovery? If so, than it would seem that among other areas addressed in session with the client, that it would be advantageous to the client for the clinician to address this issue in a timely manner.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of forgiveness on 12 step group attendees. There are many issues that may affect an addicted person's sobriety. The purpose of this study is to look at one specific issue that many persons in 12 step programs address, the issue of forgiveness. One aspect of forgiveness the addicted person works through is in step 9 when he makes amends with a person he has hurt. In doing so, the addicted person is in essence saying, "I am sorry and I apologize for any wrong that I did towards you". In doing so, there is a hope that the person who was offended offers forgiveness. However, what if that doesn't happen? Does it affect a person's sobriety?

Another issue of forgiveness that the addicted person eventually works through in a 12 step format is the issue of forgiving others who have hurt the person working on his recovery. Often, people with addictions use substances in order to not have to feel emotional pain. Examples of pain could be abuse endured as a child, a broken relationship with a significant other, trauma experienced in an accident or war. Experiences such as these can cause emotional pain for the addicted person and at some point during his recovery, the person will look at where he may need to forgive. Along with this is the idea that often people who have been wounded emotionally never receive an "I'm sorry. Please forgive me" from the person who hurt them. According to the Twelve Step and Twelve Tradition book, it is in the 5<sup>th</sup> step of the 12 step

program that addicted persons are able to feel like they could be forgiven. The reading goes on to say that it is in this step that addicted persons felt as if they could forgive others (“Twelve Steps”, 1981, p. 58). Does the inability to forgive hinder an addicted person’s sobriety? Is a person able to maintain sobriety if he has not received an apology from someone who hurt them?

Another issue of forgiveness that often comes up when dealing with clients working through substance abuse issues is their willingness or ability to be able to forgive themselves. Often people who have lived a lifestyle filled with addiction have hurt their bodies physically, experienced financial ruin, damaged relationships or experienced legal problems, along with jail or prison time. As a result, substance abuse clients often struggle with the idea of forgiving themselves for their behaviors while in their addiction. If a person is unable to forgive themselves, are they able to maintain sobriety?

Last, one problem that often comes to into play with addiction is a person’s ability to receive forgiveness from God. Because the 12 steps’ foundation of steps one, two and three begin with a God of that person’s understanding, it is would be fair to the ask the questions, does a person need to experience or feel forgiven from God in order to maintain sobriety?

Since it appears that forgiveness is a major theme which every person wanting to gain sobriety needs to work through, it would be fair to assess the importance of looking at this issue with clients. Dr. Robert Enright has conducted research on forgiveness and forgiveness education since 1985

("International Forgiveness", n.d., para. 1). In his many scientific studies, Dr. Enright has looked at groups of people, including substance users and addiction, to study the effects of forgiveness. His research has led to Forgiveness Therapy, including books written on this subject.

The rationale behind this particular study on the effects of forgiveness on 12 step attendees is to ascertain whether or not forgiveness is needed and if so, then the social work field should become more aware of this type of therapy in order to help our clients work through addiction issues in order for clients to become sober and maintain sobriety. The method in which this study will be conducted will be a through a qualitative instrument. A group of participants from 12 step group meetings will be asked and offered the opportunity to take part in this research. Individual interviews will be conducted.

#### Impact on Social Work as a Profession

In working with clients who are struggling with addiction, it would benefit the profession of social work to become more aware of the forgiveness modality of therapy. However, this writer believes that forgiveness therapy would be beneficial to any client who is struggling in any area of their lives. As a profession, social workers are constantly researching to find or improve methods of treatment. While there are many theories or therapies that are beneficial, there isn't any one that ties directly in with the 12 step program. Also, there are not many evidence based practices that relate specifically to

the 12 step program. While bringing the idea of forgiveness into session with a client can be difficult and needs to be time appropriate, it could be beneficial to the client.

The idea of forgiveness in a client's therapy extends to most of the phases of the generalist model. The topic of forgiveness would start at the beginning of engagement and assessment with the client. This is where the clinician is able to evaluate the client and client's primary issues and concerns. Further, in planning goals and writing a care plan, goals for forgiveness could be made as the client desires. The important aspect of goal planning is to remember that it is the client who decides if forgiveness is an issue and that the client wants to engage in. Of course, implementing the goal and helping the client accomplish this goal would be a necessary phase for the clinician to assist the client in. Finally, in reviewing with the client how he feels the role of forgiveness is working in his treatment would be appropriate in the evaluation phase of the generalist model.

### Summary

This research will show that forgiveness does have an impact on a person's sobriety. The question being asked in this study is, "Does the absence or presence of forgiveness in treatment contribute to sustained sobriety"? In doing so, the hope is that light will be shed on this important topic in the 12 step program and thus, more empirically based research will be

completed in regards to the issue of forgiveness in the area of addiction and substance abuse.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter will focus on recent research that has been conducted in regards to forgiveness and substance abuse treatment centers and clients. The topic of forgiveness in substance abuse treatment in research is relatively new; however, the topic of forgiveness, in general, has enumerated much research for the past thirty years. This chapter will review the history of forgiveness and whether it is only a spiritual value or if it is a value used in other roles of life during the course of history. In regards to substance use treatment and the role of forgiveness, this chapter will review key studies that have measured the role of forgiveness in treatment for substance users.

#### Review of Literature

##### The History of Forgiveness

Forgiveness has been a well-established practice throughout the course of history. Hope writes “forgiveness is a concept deeply embedded in our Judeo-Christian culture...” (Hope, 1987, p. 240). DiBlasio and Proctor write that “for centuries the healing nature of forgiveness has been lauded as a primary curative factor in relationships between people, and between people and God” (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993, p. 175). Meek and McMinn also expressed the view that “forgiveness is historically coupled with religion, most notably the Christian religion in which it is the most crucial concept” (Meek &

McMinn, 1997, p. 51). In the biblical accounts of forgiveness, while Christianity and Judaism view divine and social forgiveness as an essential part of their belief systems, other religions express similar views. According to El-Droubie, forgiveness plays a crucial role in Islam, especially in marriage and death. For example, Islamic marriages are normally regarded by adherence to the principles of love and mercy; when marital disharmony becomes a concern, reconciliation, the result of forgiveness, is favored and pursued as a solution rather than divorce (El-Droubie, 1996, pp. 262-265).

Forgiveness is also alluded to in Eastern traditions. In Buddhism, for example, loving kindness and compassion are vital for enlightened living (Conze, 1982). Goonewardene noted that certain Buddhist teachings endorse the practice of inner peace. Patience (Kshanti) is one of six “paramitas” that focus on “overcoming anger, ill-will, hatred, maintaining an inner peace, tranquility, and not retaliating” (Goonewardene, 1996, p. 109). “Samma sankappa” (Right Thoughts) teaches “eliminating unwholesome thoughts and developing wholesome thoughts, overcoming greed, hatred and ignorance, developing unselfishness, loving kindness, generosity and compassion” (Goonewardne, 1996, p. 146). In summary, the practice of forgiveness appears to be ubiquitous in almost all major world religions whether it is expressed explicitly or not.

## A Brief History of the Psychology of Forgiveness

McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen write regarding the history of forgiveness that in 1932, both Piaget and Behn had discussed how out of the increase of moral judgment, people appeared to develop an ability to forgive (McCullough, Pargament, & Thorsen, 2000, p. 4). They go onto write that Litwinski, in 1945, had made rigorous attempts to describe the structure of affect surrounding interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2000, p. 4). Emerson (1964) examined the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being, and in spite of its statistical simplicity when compared to modern standards, McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen maintained that Emerson's study was most likely the first scientific inquiry that correlated forgiveness with mental health and well-being due to Emerson's use of the Q-sort method. They also wrote that forgiveness received sparse attention from other psychologists in the mental health and research field (McCullough et al., 2000, p. 4).

Research and theorists have neglected looking at forgiveness in lieu of other studies (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003, p. 540). Much of academia had neglected forgiveness, and that this neglect is not confined to the human and social sciences (Enright & North, 1998, p. 3). One of the issues has been that when people think of forgiveness, this is directly attributed as a religious theme. There are traditional links between forgiveness and religion, and for many years social science displayed an apparent disinclination to what

they perceived to be religious issues (Gorsuch, 1988, p. 201). For the past three centuries, social scientists and theorists failed to conduct methods of research on forgiveness, even as it appeared an important theme in religious traditions (McCullough & Witvliet, 2001, p. 447).

Freedman and Enright reported that “interpersonal forgiveness is slowly emerging in psychology despite its long history of exclusive exploration in theology and philosophy” (1996, p. 983). Several authors (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993; Hope, 1987; McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Rosenak & Harden, 1992) also observed that forgiveness as a psychotherapeutical concept had been largely ignored in psychological studies, however, they also felt optimistic that this would no longer be an occurring theme. If forgiveness is a powerful intervention in healing relationships, how has it eschewed the rigors of scientific investigations? Many (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993; Enright & Zell, 1989; Hope, 1987; McCullough & Worthington, 1994) have expressed the opinion that the concept of forgiveness may be too closely associated with spiritual beliefs. In addition, although the curative factors induced by forgiveness have been noted by clergy for centuries, attention to forgiveness in the literature as a therapeutic concern has been incremental and largely found in religious-oriented journals (DeBlasio & Benda, 1991, p. 167).

### Defining Forgiveness

While it may be surprising, forgiveness is a concept that brings about different definitions. Forgiveness is a term that is often difficult to define in its

fullness. Even after thirty years of research, there still remains the ability to agree on a consensual definition of forgiveness (Lawler-Row, Scott, Raines, Edlis-Matityahou, & Moore, 2006, p. 1). While there is not an agreed upon definition of forgiveness, Robert Orr et al. write that “while there is not an agreed upon definition of forgiveness, there is a consensus as to what it is not” (Orr, Sprague, Goertzen, Cornock, & Taylor, 2005, para. 1).

In recent years, researchers seem to have agreed with Enright and the Human Development Study Group that forgiveness should be differentiated from pardoning, which is a legal term; condoning, which implies that an offense is justified; excusing, which implies that the offender had a valid reason for committing the offense; forgetting, which implies that the offense has been ignored or blocked from conscious awareness; and reconciling, which restores a relationship of mutual trust (Lawler-Row et al., 2007). Other theorists believe that reconciliation is an important part of forgiveness (Hargrave, 1994) while others do not. Forgiveness can be defined as “a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her” (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998, p. 46-47). Regardless, all definitions of forgiveness share a core feature: When people forgive, their responses toward people who have injured them become more positive and less negative and that forgiveness ought to be defined as “intra-individual, prosocial change

toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context” (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000, p. 9).

### Forgiveness and Substance Treatment

Forgiveness can be read about and ascertained from many perspectives, however, the purpose of this literature review is to focus on forgiveness in the construct of addiction and the 12 step program, which is a newer concept in research with addicted individuals. There is not a large amount of literature which directly focuses on forgiveness in the 12 step program or in substance use treatment centers. The following studies will focus on measuring forgiveness in clients who are receiving treatment in a substance abuse treatment center. Sobriety, in relation to the use of alcohol, illicit drugs or any substance used to alter the mind or numb the emotions is, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), “continued abstinence from psychoactive drug use (“lexicon”, 2015, p. 1). While there are many definitions of forgiveness, another clear definition to forgive means “to stop feeling anger towards (someone who has done something wrong): to stop blaming (someone); to stop feeling anger about something: to forgive someone (for something wrong), or to stop requiring payment of (money that is owed)” (“forgive”, 2011).

Webb, Hirsch and Toussaint conclude in an empirical review of different forgiveness modalities in regards to substance abuse that while the study of forgiveness is in its infancy, studies show promising results and hold good

potential as forgiveness being a positive psychotherapy technique. In their review, the authors show how forgiveness can apply in positive ways for the psychotherapist or with twelve step facilitators. What the authors continued to find in looking at different modalities of implementing forgiveness into treatment was that incorporating forgiveness and spirituality into the otherwise traditional psychological practice(s) of psychotherapy may have a cumulative effect – greater than the effect of using traditional practices alone (Webb, Hirsch, & Toussaint, 2015, p. 56).

Webb, Robinson, Brower, and Zucker found there is a correlation between the effects of forgiveness and alcohol. (Webb, Robinson, Brower, & Zucker, 2006, p. 64). Their research was conducted as a longitudinal study exploring the relationship between religiousness and spiritually variables and alcohol use disorders. Their hypothesis was that there would be positive relationships with spirituality and negative relationships with alcohol use and consequences at both baseline and a six month follow up. During this course of this study, 157 adults with alcohol use disorders entering a substance abuse treatment center were studied. The treatment center was located in the American Midwest. Of the original 240 people who met criteria of the study, 157 were eligible for the study. The clients were paid to be a part of this study and all had an actual alcohol diagnosis from the DSM-IV.

The measures used were forgiveness, other religiousness, and spiritual variables along with alcohol-related variables were looked at with standardized

measures. Three single item measures were used from the 40 item Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (BMMRS), which encompasses for the forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness by God. Perceptions of God were measured by the Loving and Controlling God Scales. Spiritual experiences were also assessed with a 16 item Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale, which measures items such as connection with the transcendent, sense of love and comfort from that transcendent and love and comfort as well as other necessary items relating to the transcendent. Participants' religious and spiritual meaning, values and beliefs were measured by a 6-item scale from the BMMRS. Regarding religious practices, three dimensions of the participant's beliefs and practices were measured using the Religious Background and Behavior questionnaire, which also included positive and negative religious relationship with God. Last, one of the measures, purpose of life, was also used, which is a 20 item measure developed within Viktor Frankl's existential perspective. Alcohol problems use were also assessed using the Short Index of Problem and Timeline Follow-Back interview. The researchers found their hypothesis proved that forgiveness did have a beneficial effect on alcohol-related variables but those relationships were mostly cross-sectional and dependent on the type of forgiveness, with an emphasis on forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others. However, the researchers did point out that at both times of the

beginning of the study and six months later, it appeared that forgiveness of self may be the most difficult type of forgiveness (Webb et al., 2006, p. 63)

Limitations in this study were that the researchers used the Brief MMRS for the three items of forgiveness; however, they felt that this limited the outcome as there are more sophisticated measures for forgiveness that are available. The authors also felt using the term “forgive” could have connotations for the clients due to their own history with that term as well as familial and religious teachings on that concept. Another limitation is also geography; this study was done at one treatment center in the Midwest and is not representative of all alcoholics. Another limitation is the length of study and also that while the study concluded that increased levels of forgiveness related to decrease alcohol and use problems, this was shown only at a cross-sectional level and more study needs to be done to include additional measures of forgiveness and more diverse samples (Webb et al., 2006, p. 64).

In another longitudinal study conducted over a six-month period, aspects of spirituality and/or religiousness of each participant were studied. What the researchers looked at was whether those aspects were changed or associated with drinking outcomes (Robinson, Cranford, Webb, & Brower, 2007, p. 282). This study involved 123 participants with alcohol use disorders, 66% of them being male and 83% being white. Along with this, 10 measures of spirituality and/or religiousness (S/R) were used. Over a six-month period, these measures would be studied in order to determine if changes in S/R

dimensions would be associated with absence of heavy drinking. A pre-test and post-test were taken for each participant who was entering a six-month treatment center. The ten dimensions of S/R were measured, as well as drinking behavior, whether the participants was involved with AA and other relevant demographic and clinical variables, such as gender, age, education, marital status, ethnicity and employment status.

More specifically, regarding S/R measures, these measures were drawn from Project MATCH and the Brief Multi-Dimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality (BMMRS). Perceptions of God were assessed with the Loving and Controlling God Scales, which is a five item scale concerning attributes of God. Beliefs and religious/spiritual backgrounds were measured with two components of the Religious Background and Behaviors scale, which was used in Project MATCH. Again, this was a 5-point scale. Daily Spiritual Experience was also measured with a 6-point scale and including 16 items. Forgiveness was also measured with a three item Forgiveness scale from the BMMRS. Six items from the BMMRS also measured values and beliefs such as a sense of underlying meaning in one's life and beliefs in a personal God (Robinson et al., 2007, p. 283-287).

Another aspect that was measured was the use of positive and negative religious coping from Brief RCOPE, which assesses coping strategies that use spiritual and religious cognitive constructs. Also, existential meaning and purpose was measured with Crumbaugh and Maholick's

Purpose in Life scale, which assesses the degree that a person has a sense of meaning or significance in life. AA participation was assessed using the AA involvement Scale, which includes measuring attendance and involvement. Again, with all of these, there was a baseline assessment at the beginning of treatment and follow up assessment at six months after the baseline was taken (Robinson et al., 2007, p. 285-286). Results showed that dimensions of S/R changed in the first six months of treatment and these changes did correlate with less drinking and with increased recovery in these participants, with forgiveness being included in S/R measurements. (Robinson et al., 2007, p. 288).

Regarding the limitations of this study, the researchers state, like the other studies, that this research is only conducive to the participants at this particular treatment site, as well as to that area of the country. Another interesting limitation apart from the study discussed previously is that the participants had insurance and like the other study, some participants had experience with 12 step AA meetings prior to treatment (Robinson et al., 2007, p. 288).

The research in substance abuse and forgiveness is relatively new. Webb, Hirsch and Toussaint advocate that more research which is empirically based needs to be conducted on the issue of forgiveness and addiction. The researchers state much of any research that has been completed is from naturalistic studies (Webb, Hirsch, & Toussaint, 2011, p. 245).

## Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The first theory that guides the conceptualization of this study is the medical model of disease. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, addiction is

A primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations, which is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors. (“Definition of Addiction”, 2011, para. 1)

Another theory guiding this study is the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) model of recovery. AA utilizes the 12 steps in their program and are described as a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole (“Twelve Steps of AA”, 2016). Along with the A.A. model of recovery, a theory guiding this study is Jellinek’s Theory in which Jellinek describes at least five types of alcoholics using the Greek alphabet to describe each. With the Greek letters of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Epsilon, Jellinek describes varieties of alcoholics. This model was widely accepted in its inception in the 60’s but has not been as used as much in the last number of years (Breining Institute, 2008, p. 151).

## Summary

The research reviewed shows that forgiveness, while not having an all-inclusive definition, is a major theme, particularly for people who are working a program of sobriety. The research shows that forgiveness is important not only for the client to maintain sobriety but also for the client to be able to engage in healthier and positive relationships with others. Also, the writers agree that more research on the topic of forgiveness needs to be conducted along with more empirically based treatments surrounding this topic.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

In the past twenty to thirty years, there has been much focus in research on the issue of forgiveness. While this is important, little of that research ties directly to substance users. This research will focus on gaining the unique perspective of 12 step group members' experience with forgiveness. The goal is that this study will build a bridge between the availing literature on forgiveness and one of the unique issues that many, if not all, in 12 step groups programs will focus on, the issue of forgiveness.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of sustaining sobriety on 12 persons with alcohol or substance use addictions in a 12 step group setting. Interviewing participants in a qualitative study will allow for participants to share their own experiences of forgiveness in their struggle to gain or maintain sobriety. A qualitative research study was designed to provide the unique perspective of 12 step group attendees who have experienced some period of sobriety from their drug of choice. The researcher evaluated the themes of forgiveness that emerge from the experiences of these 12 step group attendees who have worked the steps of their own recovery.

This type of design was chosen in order to obtain the full richness and unique perspective of these group attendees and how their experiences of forgiveness may have influenced their sobriety and lives. The study attempts to discover whether the role of forgiveness has a positive or negative impact on their sobriety from their perspective. These findings will help give the field of social work a more clear perspective and importance of addressing the issue of forgiveness in working with clients with substance use issues and ultimately answer the question of whether a lack of forgiveness impacts the ability of a person with addiction to maintain sobriety.

An important aspect of this study will be that the answers from participants will be subjective and in their own words. While this allows for a depth of answers, participants will need to lean on their own recall of how forgiveness worked itself in their own sobriety. While this research focuses on participants in the twelve step program, the hope is that it can give strength to social work clinicians to focus the use of forgiveness in session with clients; however, whether the findings in this study can be cross-sectionalized to the therapy session with clients, while the hope is so, needs to continue to be researched.

### Sampling

The study sample included 10 people who have been involved in a 12 step group meeting and who have worked through all 12 steps of the 12 step program. Each person had at least one addiction to alcohol or an illegal

substance. Participants were offered an opportunity to be a part of this study and volunteered to do so. The data collection was gathered through the use of a purposive sampling method, having selected 10 participants as the sample size. The participants, both male and female, ranged in ages from 36 to 79 years old. The data was collected using face-to-face interviews. The questions were predetermined and intended to be open ended with the interviewer probing for clarification regarding answers given by the participants. After each participant was instructed as to what his or her information would be used for and why the information was being collected, each participant signed the informed consent. Following this process, the interviews were recorded. During the course of the interview, the researcher was careful to not direct or allude to any particular answer but encouraged each participant to answer freely from their own experiences.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

This study was built on but did not copy other studies conducted on forgiveness. The data collected consisted of the responses of members of 12 step group meetings who have gone through the steps of the 12 step program at least one time. The interviews were conducted through face to face interviews, which allowed for the participants to answer questions from their own experiences. The setting for the interviews took place in a private room at a local church or at the participant's home so as to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant's responses.

The interviewer used a semi-structured questionnaire (See Appendix A), asking closed and open ended questions, permitting the researcher to investigate supplementary areas as needed. The areas that were covered in the interviews directly related to the participants' experiences of forgiveness in relation to themselves and others. Interview questions were developed using questions from standardized tests and developing interview questions for the purpose of a qualitative study.

While independent variables and dependent variables are not usually used in qualitative studies, this researcher has noted in brief how the two types of variables have been used to think about the project concisely. For example, the dependent variable in this study is sobriety, and the main independent variable (I.V.) is forgiveness; however, other independent variables measured were age, sex, length of sobriety (in years or less than one year), and each participant's definition of forgiveness. Another I.V. is the participant's involvement in the 12 step program and whether the participant has worked on his or her own steps in the 12 step program. This would be an independent variable and it is important because it appears the idea of forgiveness does not come into play until steps 8 and 9, which is when a person lists the wrongs he or she has done and then makes amends.

### Procedures

The methods used in the course of the interview process by using a purposive sampling allowed this study to be attained. The sample will be

composed of adult participants who participate in 12 step meetings, ranging in ages from 36 to 79 and are from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The availability of participants was gained from public access to 12 step group meetings in the local area. The cooperation of the participants was evidenced by volunteering to take part in interviews. The participants were reached through people this researcher knows who already attend 12 step group meetings.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Each participants' name and any identifying markers were left unidentified. Instead of signing his or her name, each participant only signed an "X" on the informed consent. The researcher transcribed the recordings of each interview and the audio tapes were locked in a confidential lock box and stored in a safe location only known by the researcher. Each participant was identified as a number on the recordings and in the coding process. The purpose of the study and how his or her information would be used was explained to each participant. The study also underwent an extensive review by the Social Work Sub-committee of the Institutional Review Board process of the university.

#### Data Analysis

Each face-to-face interview was recorded on audio and then transcribed. Each transcription was then coded. Every respondent was

considered the expert in the interview, and there were things said by the respondents that this researcher did not expect or anticipate.

After each interview, the researcher coded for four domains, people, places, things and ideas mentioned by the respondents. Once the data was separated by these four domains, the data was further subdivided. Patterns were detected and seven core themes were developed. The researcher compared what the literature said with what the researcher heard.

### Summary

This study is important because while there is much research regarding the issue of forgiveness, little of that research lends itself in the area of substance use treatment. The process of using a qualitative research method allowed for gaining a firsthand perspective from 12 step group attendees who have experienced the 12 step program. This study will contribute the unique perspective of 12 step group members who have or are working through issues of forgiveness and lends firsthand knowledge to the literature for substance use treatments, clinicians and agencies.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the data collected in the form of a qualitative analysis. The data presented in the findings section of this chapter were collected and processed in response to the hypothesis posed in chapter one of this thesis. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of forgiveness on 12 step group attendees and in doing so to ascertain whether or not forgiveness is needed for a person to maintain sobriety. As presented in chapter one, the research hypothesis stated, “Does the absence or presence of forgiveness in treatment contribute to sustained sobriety”? It is the opinion of this researcher that the goals and objectives of this study were accomplished through the use of interviews, data dissemination, and qualitative data analysis.

#### Demographic Data

The data presented in this chapter are derived as a result of qualitative analysis of ten 12 step group attendees’ interviews. These attendees were selected on a volunteer basis. There were seven men and three female participants, ranging from the ages of 36 to 79 years old. Years of sobriety ranged from nine months to 25 years with each participant being in recovery

from alcohol and/or drugs. All participants participated in a 20-30-minute interview and were asked the same set of questions.

### Findings

After completing the interviews, the researcher transcribed the data and began to look for common themes of people, places, things and ideas in the participants' responses. After transcribing the data, the replies of the participants were reviewed and domains and sub-domains of common themes and concepts were developed. Keeping in mind the hypothesis, "Does the absence or presence of forgiveness in treatment contribute to sustained sobriety?", seven themes or domains were identified throughout the responses of the participants. These seven domains included forgiveness, sobriety, 12 steps or the program, shame and guilt, God, amends and relationships. Each of these seven domains were identified and expanded upon by the interviewees during the interview process; these seven domains and their respective sub domains are presented in the tables below.

Table 1. Forgiveness

Theme 1: Forgiveness
<p>Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Forgiveness is the foundation of my sobriety” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness has played a huge role. I think if you can’t look at yourself in the mirror and forgive yourself, you can’t stay sober. You can’t get better” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016)</li><li>• “Forgiveness softened my heart” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness is crucial” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “Forgiveness allows for a fresh start” (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “Forgiveness is really important. It has been the most important. It has freed me spiritually. It has given me peace” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness has been a process. There is no quick fix” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness has been the most important thing. When I was able to forgive, I was able to let go; to let go of the pain of being molested, the pain of being beat and losing my marriage. I was able to let all that go” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness has been essential. It has been necessary” (Participant 8, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness allows for more freedom from expectations from others and freedom to love and if people or I make a mistake, forgiveness allows me to be able to let it go” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “Forgiveness is a key factor in keeping me sober (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Forgiveness is number one. It’s absolutely number one” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li></ul>

Table 2. Sobriety

Theme 2: Sobriety
<p>Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “I understand that in order to be able to stay sober, I have to have to be able to forgive others” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “I think that through sobriety, you learn a lot about yourself (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “How has other people who haven’t forgiven me affected my sobriety? It hasn’t. It never has” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “In fact most addicts aren’t aware of all the pain and stuff they’ve caused because they would quit. They would do something if they knew. That is when sobriety comes; when you want to do something about it” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “I feel like every day I stay sober, I feel like it helps me to forgive myself because I am doing my part to make things right to people I have hurt” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “If I want to stay sober and be okay with myself then I have to forgive everything that has happened to me and also myself for things I have done” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li></ul>

Table 3. 12 Steps of Program

Theme 3: 12 Steps of Program
<p>Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “I was really well trained in that step of amends (ninth) (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “I think through the 12 steps, you learn a lot about yourself” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “That’s why I go to meetings. I don’t want to drink, but I go to meetings because I do want to drink” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “The program allowed softened my heart and helps me offer forgiveness more easily (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “If I look at sobriety when it comes to forgiveness, it is an offshoot of not only working the steps but in particular the 2<sup>nd</sup> step” (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “For me, forgiveness mostly is the after effects of the 9<sup>th</sup> step for me which is where I had wrong the other parties. I went back and did the 9<sup>th</sup> step to folks” (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “When it had to do with something that was done to me, it took some breaking down of going through the steps” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Every time it (forgiveness) would come back up, I would see the same names on my 4<sup>th</sup> step again and again and again” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “I may be doing the 9<sup>th</sup> step for the rest of my life. The steps are simple; working it isn’t” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Prior to my mom passing away, I was able to do my 9<sup>th</sup> step and make amends with her” (Participant 8, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “The Big Book says that resentment is something we cannot afford to have because it will eventually cause us to drink (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “When you do your steps, on step 9 is when you make your amends and when I did that to each person, there was not one person who didn’t forgive me (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li></ul>

Table 4. Shame and Guilt

Theme 4: Shame and Guilt
<p data-bbox="305 369 511 401">Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="354 426 1390 569">• “Shame, guilt and regret not have a positive impact on my sobriety because they have caused me to be more compassionate to others who are suffering with the shame and the guilt. I really don’t have same or guilt anymore (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 579 1390 722">• “When you’re an addict, you’re not sober and you need to get sober, you leave such a mass road of destruction that I think there are just some things that you never quite get over (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 732 1406 875">• “I still have trouble forgiving myself for the things I did in my addiction, for the things I did as a mother, not being the mother or wife I should have been and not handling things in my life like I should have” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 886 1369 957">• “I sometimes struggle with moving past not being the mother I should have been (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 968 1198 1039">• “I still have trouble forgiving myself over my daughter’s death” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 3 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1050 1406 1157">• “What I had the most difficulty with is knowing I hurt the ones that cared about me the most, and once I came to that realization, I had guilt with that” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1167 1300 1239">• “I experienced guilt over not being there for my wife, kids, parents, for everybody” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1249 1370 1356">• “I have trouble forgiving myself for wasting years of my life. I woke up at 40 years old, and I had to find enough hope to believe I could have a life” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1367 1406 1438">• “When I interact with my daughter, I feel guilty. I am trying to make up for hurt I caused her” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1449 1406 1556">• “The most difficult side of forgiveness is self-forgiveness because its knowing I dealt with that guilt and shame” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1566 1406 1638">• “There are just some residual things that I felt really bad about that still creep up every now and then” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li data-bbox="354 1648 1406 1711">• “It’s been hard to forgive myself because of what my kids had to go through because of my addiction” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> </ul>

Table 5. God

Theme 5: God
<p>Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Forgiveness for me began when I knew I was forgiven from God; when I knew I had Jesus” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li><li>• “God forgives me and who am I not to forgive myself? (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “The main person forgave me, God” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “It’s God. God got me through a lot of things” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “God. The hole that I used to have, God just filled it up and didn’t leave room for that stuff” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “When I look at forgiveness, it has to be how God has looked at forgiveness for me” (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “God has restored my family, all my family” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Relationship with God is important. Letting God be the center of my recovery because when I push things off to the side and try to handle it on my own it when it becomes difficult” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “Worshipping God is an important factor in my sobriety. When I realized that Christ forgave me, it became easier to forgive myself” (Participant 8, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “A spiritual connection with God has been important” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “If it was not for God and His grace, I would not be here. God/Jesus are important” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li></ul>

Table 6. Amends

Theme 6: Amends
<p>Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “I made amends with no expectation from the other person. It was purely to say to them, I am asking for your forgiveness of me and what I have done” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016)</li><li>• “I’ve made amends to people who told me they forgave me a long time ago. If I make amends, you don’t have to forgive me. It’s okay. I did my part and that’s all you can do is your part” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “Maybe I am not as bad as I thought I was and certainly indiscretions are a part of human nature but making amends set me free” (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “All the amends I have made to my family and friends have been pretty well received” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February,2016)</li><li>• “It’s not to my knowledge that I haven’t received forgiveness but I may be making amends for the rest of my life (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “I was able to make amends with my mom before her passing away” (Participant 8, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “I sent a text making amends to my old sponsor but I haven’t heard from her. I was just doing my part and making amends” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016)</li><li>• “I struggled with making amends with my old boss who was like a father figure by forgave me too. I was afraid of rejection” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li><li>• “My forgiveness comes in when I make amends with them and do what they ask me to do. If I held any secrets back, it would hurt me” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li></ul>

Table 7. Relationships

Theme 1: Relationships
<p>Direct Quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My relationships improved like night and day. I let people love now where before I didn’t” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li> <li>• “Relationships with my children have definitely gotten better. I have formed long lasting relationships. Definitely, my relationship with my husband now has gotten stronger” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016).</li> <li>• “People who used to probably want to see me dead live in my house. It’s like miraculous. It’s incredible. People who I thought I would never have a relationship with, those people call me on the phone or talk to me and confide in me” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li>• “Relationships are certainly one of the keys; relationships in the program and outside of the program are key” (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li>• “I was the black sheep. I was the nephew nobody wanted at family gatherings because of the things I had done. Now, it is the opposite. I get invited and it’s genuine. I don’t want to ever lose that. It is better than a high” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li>• “My relationships have improved. A lot of family members have come around, and I have asked for forgiveness and received it” (Participant 8, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li>• “My relationships have totally improved. I found out we just have deeper, richer and genuine conversations, and there is more fun and laughter. I seek out relationships now” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> <li>• “My relationships with my kids and husband have grown. Relationships with my friends and family have grown stronger” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).</li> </ul>

### Summary

This chapter discussed the seven themes or concepts that appeared the strongest in the participants’ responses. Those themes are forgiveness, sobriety, 12 steps or the program, shame and guilt, God, amends and relationships. Each of these domains or themes could be studied further in

order to understand the impact in the substance use and social work fields.

These themes will be discussed further in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will provide a more in depth discussion of the findings, conclusions regarding the outcome of the study as well as suggestions and recommendations for social work practice. Additionally, a discussion of the limitations of the study will be addressed. The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of the presence or absence of forgiveness on the sobriety of 12 step group attendees.

#### Discussion

##### Domain 1: Forgiveness

In completing the qualitative interviews, in the discovery of the seven highlighted domains presented in chapter four, it became apparent for each theme, there is a deeper level or meaning. Regarding the first theme, forgiveness, as discussed in chapter four of this research and outlined further in Table 1, the responses might indicate a certain level of peace or freedom. While identifying forgiveness as important, there was a sense that forgiveness brought a sense of serenity and tranquility. For example, one participant directly stated, "Forgiveness has given me peace" (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016). In identifying forgiveness as being essential to sobriety, it was apparent that forgiveness was more than just the act of

receiving forgiveness or making amends but that it was the catalyst to tangible experiences of liberty for the participants. One participant shared,

Forgiveness has been the most important thing. When I was able to forgive, I was able to let go; to let go of the pain of being molested, the pain of being beat and losing my marriage. I was able to let all that go. (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016)

In addition, the responses of the participants might also indicate that forgiveness is a platform to their sobriety, pointing to the weight which the participants placed on forgiveness. One participant stated, “Forgiveness is the foundation of my sobriety” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016). Another participant articulated, “Forgiveness is crucial” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016) while another is quoted as saying, “Forgiveness has been essential. It has been necessary” (Participant 8, Personal Interview, February 2016). These responses may lead to the idea that forgiveness, while not easy, is critical in maintaining sobriety. It would seem for these participants the act of forgiveness was not only a springboard to felt factors such as peace or freedom but a necessity to place into practice a pattern of forgiveness on a regular basis. In doing so, it seems that forgiveness, while not fail-safe in maintaining sobriety is, if instituted, an assurance of better things.

### Domain 2: Sobriety

The next domain that was discovered through the interviews was sobriety, which was outlined in chapter 4, table 2. The responses might

indicate sobriety is a door to change. Change is exemplified in this response, “In fact, most addicts aren’t aware of all the pain and stuff they’ve caused because they would quit. They would do something about it” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016). It seems that “doing something about it” is sobriety as it causes one to do something different than what he or she has done before, including the acts of making amends or forgiveness. It would also seem that the idea of sobriety offers transformation through revelation. This is illustrated in this comment, “I think that through sobriety, you learn a lot about yourself” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016). It seems that sobriety is not so much a state of mind for these participants but it is a voyage of which is not about keeping an eye on the destination but painstakingly looking inward, good and bad, giving and misgivings, pains and joys, all so that one may gain what theme one indicates, peace and freedom. This is probably better stated by this participant, “If I want to stay sober and be okay with myself, then I have to forgive everything that has happened to me and also forgive myself for things I have done” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).

### Domain 3: 12 Steps or Program

The third domain uncovered in this research is that of the 12 Steps or the program. It would seem that the 12 steps or the program might be a liminal experience, one in which when practiced is experienced as the “now but not yet”. The program involving the 12 steps allows the attendee to cross the

threshold into sobriety, yet a large consensus amongst the participants was that the work needs to continue once passing the entry of the programs' doors. This was beautifully exemplified by one participants who stated, "That's why I go to meetings; I don't want to drink, but I go to meetings because I do want to drink" (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016). There is a sense that in order to remain sober, one must continue to pursue themselves in the work of the program by attending meetings and giving themselves to the work of the 12 steps, but this is not an easy process as one participant stated, "The steps are simple; working it isn't" (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016). The 12 steps are not easy. It is what causes a person to be rigorously honest with themselves and put into practice something new, resulting in new behavior. As one participant stated, "The program softened my heart and helps me to offer forgiveness more easily" (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016).

The 12 steps might be like a crucible of sobriety, where tests of honesty take place in 7:00 AM meetings or trials occur in making a phone call because the desire to drink or use is so great; it appears it is in those times of reaching out, being honest and taking one more step forward where self-accomplishment occurs. In working the steps, it doesn't appear that one step is any more important the other. One participant stated regarding the 2<sup>nd</sup> step, "If I look at sobriety when it comes to forgiveness, it is an offshoot of not only working the steps but in particular the 2<sup>nd</sup> step" (Participant 5, Personal

Interview, February 2016). Considering another step, “Every time it (forgiveness) would come back up, I would see the same names on my 4<sup>th</sup> step again and again and again” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016). A part of the program is a book known as “The Big Book” and was deemed important by another participant, “The Big Book says that resentment is something we cannot afford to have because it will eventually cause us to drink” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016). It might seem that each step the program poses is another chance for a person to avail themselves to the test of sobriety but also the rewards.

#### Domain 4: Shame and Guilt

The fourth domain observed in this research is shame and guilt. If the 12 steps were seen as a crucible, shame and guilt might be seen as the witness to one’s addiction. A prominent theme which came up for most participants was this idea of guilt. Guilt felt over things done while in their addiction as indicated by this participant who said, “When you’re an addict, you’re not sober and you need to get sober. You leave such a mass road of destruction that I think there are just some things you never quite get over” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016). When speaking of her children, one participant stated, “It has been hard to forgive myself because of what my kids had to go through because of my addiction” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016) and another the same regarding his family, “What I had the most difficulty with is knowing I hurt the ones that care

about me the most, and once I came to that realization, I had guilt with that (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016). One participant, reflecting upon his own life and addiction, said, “I have trouble forgiving myself for wasting years of my life. I woke up at 40 years old, and I had to find enough hope to believe I could have a life” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).

While this theme appeared to be a predominate one amongst the participants, if left here, sobriety would seem quite bleak. In fact, it is while discussing these ideas of shame and guilt that the majority of the participants indicated it was forgiveness of self which was most difficult for them due to the residual effects of their addictions. If one had only to think about the guilt and shame experienced as a result of years of alcohol or drug use, it would almost bear the question of whether unearthing the reasons for drug dependence is worth it. However, one participant spoke to this in her answer regarding the shame and guilt she experienced, “Shame, guilt and regret have a positive impact on my sobriety because they have caused me to be more compassionate to others who are suffering with the same shame and guilt. I really don’t have shame or guilt anymore” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016). It would seem that while shame and guilt are often felt as a consequence to negative actions, it would also appear like this participant, other participants had also experienced a new witness of understanding into their addiction and healing as a result of working the steps.

### Domain 5: God

The fifth theme discovered was one that while not asked about in any questions by this researcher, came up for nine out of the ten participants, that theme being God. For each participant, they identified their forgiveness with something that was non-human and transcendent as being an important factor in their sobriety. While the Big Book does endorse a Higher Power, it is significant that in regards to the role of forgiveness in their lives, participants that their Higher Power, God or Jesus, was noteworthy. For example, “Forgiveness for me began when I knew I was forgiven from God; when I knew I had Jesus” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, February 2016) or “God forgives me and who am I not to forgive myself?” (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016). From this, it might seem that forgiveness has a spiritual familiarity for these participants, one in which seemed a reality of the transcendence being experienced in their own recovery.

The theme of God also seemed an underpinning of more than just the work of forgiveness in the participants. The impression was given that the reality of something supreme or supernatural was a necessity to their daily lives and thus, their sobriety. This is illustrated in this participant’s comment, “Relationship with God is important. Letting God be the center of my recovery because when I push things off to the side and try to handle it on my own is when it becomes difficult” (Participant 7, Personal Interview, February 2016). Another participant correlating the importance of God states, “A spiritual

connection with God has been important” (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016) when discussing factors other than forgiveness being an important part of recovery.

Yet, there were other comments encompassing a gratitude to God for what this divine transcendence has done in their lives. One participant wrote, “The hole I used to have, God just filled it up and didn’t leave room for that stuff” (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016). Another participant stated in his regard to his family, “God has restored my family, all my family” (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016). Yet, another participant stated, “If it was not for God and His grace, I would not be here. God/Jesus are important” (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016). It might seem for these participants that they each met somebody greater or outside of themselves in their recovery process and that the theme of God has been prominent for these participants, not only in their recovery but has also carried over to other, if not all, areas of their lives.

#### Domain Six: Amends

In this study, making amends might be a type of restitution or atonement. It is an idea of “making good” what has been done wrong by the person. In thinking of restitution, one often thinks of financial reward; however, it might seem that making amends has no financial gain or monetary emphasis for the participant but instead it seems is more of a verbal recognition of wrongs carried out during their addiction. While making restitution can often be

repaying money or items to the offended person, the responses from the participants carried more weight than financial. There was a sense that while making this atonement for one's wrong, the participants were taking responsibility for their actions from when they were in their addiction. One person stated, "I've made amends to people who told me they forgave me a long time ago. If I make amends, you don't have to forgive me. It's okay. I did my part and that's all you can do is your part" (Participant 3, Personal Interview, February 2016). Another participant stated the same words, "I was just doing my part and making amends" (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016). Along with this idea of recognizing the wrong done to another and taking responsibility is the idea that there are no expectations when making amends; that the atonement being made does not have an anticipation that the offended person will even forgive the one asking for forgiveness. This is exemplified when this participant stated, "I made amends with no expectation from the other person. It was purely to say to them, "I am asking for your forgiveness of me and what I have done" (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016). Yet, while it seems there is no recompense for making these amends but simply owning up to what negative actions were done, one participant did say the reward of making amends is this, "Maybe I am not as bad as I thought I was and certainly indiscretions are a part of human nature but making amends has set me free" (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016). In making amends, there is an idea that this

atonement is double-edged but in a positive way. While this idea of making restitution appears to help heal broken relationships, it also aids the person in recovery to releasing a boulder of guilt he or she has carried.

#### Domain 7: Supportive Relationships

The last domain discovered in this research is relationships. It might appear that relationships may be a type of unconditional acceptance or regard. This is exemplified in this statement, “My relationships improved like night and day. I let people love me now where before I didn’t” (Participant 1, Personal Interview, January 2016). Yet beyond the acceptance of a person whose addictive behavior was unacceptable is the idea that improved relationships, as indicated by many of the participants, is a type of reward or payment. The supportive and improved relationships as a result of working the 12 steps or being a part of the program may be one of the final outcomes and the end of a long series of working on one’s self. One participant shared,

People who used to want to see me dead live in my house. It’s like miraculous. It’s incredible. People who I thought I would never have a relationship with, those people call me on the phone or talk to me and confide in me (Participant 4, Personal Interview, February 2016).

Another participant stated,

I was the black sheep. I was the nephew nobody wanted at family gatherings because of the things I had done. Now, it is the opposite. I

get invited and it's genuine. I don't ever want to lose that. It is better than a high (Participant 6, Personal Interview, February 2016).

"Better than a high". What one participant once chased after, the high found while doing drugs, has now been rewarded with healed relationships in his family; something he never wants to lose. It seems that improved relationships may often be the outcome of gaining sobriety but also the manner in which these recovered relationships reveal themselves to be is significant. One participant said, "My relationships have totally improved. I found out we just have deeper, richer and genuine conversations, and there is more fun and laughter" (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016). Another participant shared, "My relationships with my husband and kids have grown. Relationship with my friends and family have grown stronger" (Participant 10, Personal Interview, February 2016).

While improved relationships are a type of reward, it also might seem that an awareness is fostered of the need for healthy relationships in one's own recovery. One participant stated, "Relationships are certainly one of the keys; relationships in the program and outside of the program are key" (Participant 5, Personal Interview, February 2016). While healthy relationships are recognized as being crucial, it also seems that where perhaps one drank or used drugs in isolation, now the participants seek relationships in light of sobriety. This is exemplified in this statement, "I seek out relationships now" (Participant 9, Personal Interview, February 2016) and another, "I have formed

long lasting relationships” (Participant 2, Personal Interview, January 2016). It might seem that where their addiction left ashes of destruction, the beauty of human relationship arose out of the ruins of alcohol or drug dependence and where now for the participants, the reward of relationships outweighs the dependency of alcohol or drugs.

### Conclusions

A greater understanding and insight was gained through the collection of data and qualitative analysis review conducted during this research. After studying the data, responses and seven domains, these findings were in fact supported by literature review outlined in chapter two of this research. The evidence found in this study correlates with what Webb, Hirsch and Toussaint (2015) write when they state in their review how forgiveness can apply in positive ways for the psychotherapist or with twelve step facilitators. In light of all of the interviews, there were not any negative statements made towards forgiveness or the effects of it upon one’s sobriety. Mentioning the positive impact which forgiveness had in the participants’ lives, this aligns with the suggestion that Webb, Hirsch and Toussaint (2015) offer when they state that incorporating the topic of forgiveness into different modalities of psychological treatment may have a cumulative effect, more so than when using traditional practices alone.

The issue of spirituality was also a strong theme in this study and one supported by the literature review. Nine out of the ten participants mentioned

God, Jesus or a Higher Power being an important factor in forgiveness and in the process of maintaining recovery. As presented in the previous literature review, Robinson et al. (2007) showed that aspects of spirituality and religiousness changed in the first six months of treatment with those changes and correlating with less drinking and with increased recovery in participants, with forgiveness being a measurement as well. While the issue of forgiveness and substance abuse is new, as the literature review points out, the findings in this study are plausible enough to warrant further research regarding the effects of forgiveness and substance use.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

As previously stated in the literature review, the research specifically related between forgiveness and addiction is limited; however, the findings of this research suggest that research should place increased emphasis on the role of forgiveness and sobriety. As the literature review suggests when Freedman and Enright (1996) write that “interpersonal forgiveness is slowly emerging in psychology despite its long history of exclusive exploration in theology and philosophy”, it would seem amiss to not also focus on how forgiveness effects the sobriety for addicted individuals. Increased research can lead to increased funding resources for treatment centers that use forgiveness therapy as an approach for treatment.

Regarding policy and the area of forgiveness, treatment centers often focus on the psychosocial theory to develop an understanding of clients and their situations. Often though, it seems that the spiritual aspect of the psychosocial assessment is left out. Yet, the evidence of this research showed that spirituality is an important component to the area of addiction and recovery. For treatment centers who focus on recovery, it would benefit them to include the component of forgiveness. This research showed that forgiveness is foundational for individuals who work this issue out in the 12 steps; hence, then incorporating policy in which the area of spirituality is included in assessments would be beneficial.

Lastly, in the area of social work practice, social workers look to improve the environments of their clients. Relationships are a significant part of that environment and so it behooves social workers to introduce the topic of forgiveness when working with individuals in recovery. It would be logical to bring into session the issues a client is already working through in the 12 steps and to allow for an environment in which the client can process thoughts and feelings as related to forgiveness and making amends in their own recovery. This only helps strengthen the working relationships between social worker and client and offers a more meaningful experience for both.

#### Limitations

While the sample size may not be representative of all people in recovery, this study might point out that the concept of forgiveness may

nonetheless hold for all people in recovery. With that said, this researcher is not aware of any instance where forgiveness has not played a part in any person's recovery and this study finds it hard that forgiveness does not play some part in the recovery process.

Along with that, this study also recognizes that the sample size of 10 participants from approximately three different 12 step meetings is small in number; however, the responses of the participants was also a treasure chest of meaningful and enriched replies. With that said, this researcher also recognizes that a quantitative study may have had more precision in understanding forgiveness rather than anecdotal stories.

APPENDIX A  
INSTRUMENT

## INSTRUMENT

### **The effects of forgiveness on sustaining sobriety amongst 12 step group attendees: Qualitative Study Instrument**

1. Male/ Female
2. Age
3. Ethnicity
4. Marital status
5. Drug of choice
6. How long have you been in a 12 step program?
7. How many years of sobriety do you have?
8. To what extent have you worked the 12 steps?
9. Do you regularly attend a 12 step meeting(s)?
10. How would you define forgiveness in relationship to your sobriety?
11. To what extent has forgiveness played a role in your sobriety?
12. Before becoming sober, to what extent (or not) did you find forgiving others difficult?
13. Since being involved with a 12 step program, to what extent did you or have you had difficulty forgiving others?
14. Since being involved with a 12 step program, to what extent have you had trouble forgiving yourself?
15. Since being involved with a 12 step program, to what extent have you been able to receive forgiveness from others?
16. To what extent are there things in your life of which you have had trouble forgiving yourself?
17. In making amends, is there any one that you have not received forgiveness from and has this had an impact on your sobriety?
18. To what extent have factors other than forgiveness played into your sobriety?
19. To what extent have relationships with others in your life improved (or not) because of the role of forgiveness?

Developed by Rebecca Ann Cornelius

APPENDIX B  
CLINICIAN INFORMED CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW

## **INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to examine effects of forgiveness on sustaining sobriety in 12 step group attendees. This study is being conducted by a graduate student, Rebecca Cornelius, under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Davis, Associate Professor of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the School of Social Work Subcommittee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in 20-30 minute interview which will be focused on your experience of forgiveness in a 12 step program. All of your responses will be kept confidential, and your name will not be connected with your responses in any way. Once the study is complete, all surveys will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to not answer any of the survey questions and are also free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no foreseen risks with participating in this study. Participation in this study will contribute to social work research, educate others about the effects of forgiveness on maintaining sobriety and create insight into possible interventions in working with those who struggle with addiction. The results of this study can be obtained after the completion of this study after December 2016. The results will be available at the Pfau Library, located on the California State University, San Bernardino campus.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Thomas Davis, Associate Professor of Social Work at (909) 537-3839, or [tomdavis@csusb.edu](mailto:tomdavis@csusb.edu).

APPENDIX C  
AUDIO USE INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## AUDIO USE INFORMED CONSENT FORM

As part of this research project, we will be making a photograph/videotape/audiotape recording of you during your participation in the experiment. Please indicate what uses of this photograph/videotape/audiotape you are willing to consent to by initialing below. You are free to initial any number of spaces from zero to all of the spaces, and your response will in no way affect your credit for participating. We will only use the photograph/videotape/audiotape in ways that you agree to. In any use of this photograph/videotape/audiotape, your name would *not* be identified. If you do not initial any of the spaces below, the photograph/videotape/audiotape will be destroyed.

Please indicate the type of informed consent

Photograph

Videotape

Audiotape

### **(AS APPLICABLE)**

- **The audiotape can be studied by the researcher for use in the research project.**

**Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_**

- **The audiotape can be used for academic publications.**

**Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_**

**I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the audiotape as indicated above.**

**The extra copy of this consent form is for your records.**

**SIGNATURE (X) \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_**

APPENDIX D  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

The study you have just completed was designed by Rebecca Cornelius to examine the effects of forgiveness on sustaining sobriety in a 12 step program. In this study, you were asked to participate in an interview, lasting approximately 20-30 minutes.

Thank you for your participation in this study. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Thomas Davis, Associate Professor of Social Work, at (909) 537-3839, or [tomdavis@csusb.edu](mailto:tomdavis@csusb.edu). If you would like to obtain a copy of the study, please refer to the California State University, San Bernardino, John M. Pfau Library after December 2016.

If you find that the study topic has caused some emotional discomfort that you had not anticipated, or for any reason would like to speak to someone further regarding the study topic, please contact either the San Bernardino County Crisis Center at (909) 421-9233, or Dr. Thomas Davis, Associate Professor of Social Work, at (909) 537-3839.

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