Forgiveness explored: An empirical investigation

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FORGIVENESS EXPLORED: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Given that the current body of psychological literature on forgiveness is exclusively theoretical in nature, the present investigation sought to initiate a study of forgiveness which was empirical in nature.

In attempts to rectify the lack of psychological information on forgiveness and the difficulty in defining it, the current study sought to begin to define the concept and build a body of data on forgiveness by exploring the answers to five questions: 1) Are people more forgiving of themselves as compared to others? 2) Are people more forgiving of a situation that they deem to be less offensive as compared to a situation that they consider to be more offensive? 3) Are men or women more forgiving? 4) Is the strength of a person's religious beliefs related to whether or not they are a forgiving or unforgiving person? and 5) Is the concept of forgiveness relevant to the issues in people's lives?

Significant results were discussed in terms of their contribution to gaining a better understanding of forgiveness, its' relevance to psychology and the therapeutic process. It was proposed that research such as this is imperative for future construct and scale development.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Michael G. Weiss, I wish to extend my appreciation for his avid interest in the topic of forgiveness and his patience with me throughout the thesis process.

My friend and colleague David Kennedy is also due much of my gratitude for his constant encouragement and assistance with the statistical and technical aspects of the project.

Most of all, I'd like to thank my husband Bob and my daughter Audrey for their continual sacrifice and, most of all, for their inspiration. They are the reason why I refused to give up during those many trying times when I felt that I had taken on too great a task. I hope that I have made them proud.
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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

 Forgiveness is a concept which, on the surface, appears to be self explanatory. However, when searching for a definition which captures the fullness of its' meaning, one may discover that it is not so easily found. This is true, particularly when one begins to look beneath the surface of forgiveness and begins to explore the underlying processes and dynamics of this concept.

Those who have attempted to conceptualize this term have proposed definitions that are unlike one another in that they appear to focus on different aspects of the same phenomenon. Weiss (1986) focused on the feelings involved in the process of forgiveness and described forgiveness as the act of ceasing to blame or feel resentment against another or oneself. However, Stanley (1990) focused on the action of forgiveness and described it as "the act of setting someone free from an obligation that is the result of a wrong done against you" (p.16). Looking at forgiveness as an act of volition, Stoop and Masteller (1991) stated that "the process of forgiveness always begins with a decision. It is an act of the will, something we choose to do because we know it is healthy and right, even though we may not feel like it at the moment" (p.166).
Contributing to the difficulty of finding an adequate definition for the term forgiveness, is the lack of information concerning this topic. When searching for information on forgiveness, one immediately discovers that the largest body of literature addressing this topic is approached from a theological, particularly Christian, perspective. Within this context, forgiveness has been widely discussed and written about. However, within a psychological context, very little is known about the concept of forgiveness. In fact, the term is hardly mentioned within the psychological literature. Hope (1987) reports that neither forgiveness nor its synonyms and antonyms are referenced in the psychological abstracts.

It is the present study's contention that, although forgiveness is not a term often discussed within a psychological context, it is one that is extremely relevant to psychology, particularly counseling psychology. Research which attempts to psychologically conceptualize and empirically explore forgiveness is, thus, of great import.

Literature Review

Perhaps the obvious relationship between forgiveness and religion has caused psychology to overlook or, possibly, even to avoid this concept. In fact, Fitzgibbons (1986) suggested that mental health practitioners are reluctant to utilize forgiveness within the therapeutic setting because it has been identified as solely a religious concept.
Furthermore, Ragan, Malony & Beit-Hallahmi (1980) suggested that psychologists, as a whole, tend to be less religious in comparison with the overall population. This finding, in conjunction with the apparent connection between forgiveness and religion, may be contributing to the reluctance of psychologists to investigate this construct within a psychological context.

However, the concept of forgiveness has been deemed relevant within the context of the medical sciences, where it has been studied in connection with certain aspects of physical health. Utilizing a study by Freidman and Rosenman (1974) on the Type A and Type B personality styles, Donnelley (1984) hypothesized two correlations: 1) A correlation between unforgiveness and stress; and 2) A correlation between unforgiveness and physical illness. Based on Freidman and Rosenmans' finding that people classified as Type A (stress-filled) personalities were more prone to heart-attacks, Donnelley hypothesized that, if people experience stress in their lives as a result of being unable or unwilling to forgive, then they too may be more prone to heart-attacks.

Although Donnelley's hypothesis has not been directly investigated, a study done by Simonton and Simonton (1975) found evidence that could possibly support her assumptions. Simonton and Simonton found that stress-filled emotional states are related to a person's proneness to cancer. Among
those susceptible to cancer, they found four common characteristics; one of them being "a tendency to hold resentment which involves a sustained inability to forgive" (Donnelley, 1984, p.46). Furthermore, in an article dealing with the treatment of cancer patients, Phillips and Osborne (1989) advocated a group program called Forgiveness Therapy, in which patients were challenged to deal with issues such as guilt, blame and revenge.

If the possibility of a link between forgiveness and physical health exists, then one might deem it logical to suggest that the possibility of a link between forgiveness and psychological health might also exist. Various articles utilize the term forgiveness as being involved in the therapeutic process with a wide array of clinical issues: Cancer patients (Phillips & Osborne, 1989), fractured relationships (Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990), post-affair marriages (Jagers, 1986), sexual assault victims (Sharma & Cheatham, 1986), battered women, (Whipple, 1986), post-abortion trauma (Joy, 1985), guilt and remorse (Parsons, 1988), Bible-belt Christians as patients (Young, 1984), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Tiller, 1989), anger (Fitzgibbons, 1986) and borderline personality disorder (Fisher, 1985; Wolberg, 1973).

In dealing with anger, Fitzgibbons (1986) advocated the cognitive-emotive uses of forgiveness in therapy. He postulated that people possess three mechanisms for dealing
with anger - denial, expression and forgiveness - forgiveness is suggested to be the least harmful and most restorative.

Hope (1987) proposed the concept of forgiveness as the core of psychological healing. He described forgiveness as a paradox, in that, it appears to go against one's own self-interest to let go of wrongs that have been done and to not seek revenge or repayment. To the contrary, Hope proposed that forgiveness is beneficial to oneself because it is a powerful act that results in freedom. It is an act which frees a person's energy from the bondage of unforgiveness, blame and the seeking of revenge and enables it to be expressed and funneled into more constructive areas such as work, recreation and relationships. Additionally, Hope suggested that, because people often judge themselves by similar or even harsher standards than those by which they judge others, forgiveness, when directed at oneself, most importantly liberates a person from their own condemnation and guilt.

If, as Hope proposed, forgiveness is the core of psychological healing, what then could be the core of some psychological illnesses? Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), stated that blame is the core of most psychological disturbances (Cory, 1986). Furthermore, RET suggests that "if people are to get well psychologically, they need to stop blaming themselves and others" (Cory, 1986, p. 212). RET has been recommended when dealing with
bible-belt Christians in that the RET concept of acceptance can be utilized along side the biblical principle of forgiveness (Young, 1984).

Similarly, Perls (1969), the author of Gestalt Therapy, reported that resentment is the most pervasive form of unfinished business. He also suggested that when resentment is not dealt with, it is often turned inward and expressed in the form of guilt. Pingleton (1989) addressed both these issues of resentment and guilt and advocated forgiveness in dealing with them in the therapeutic process. He submitted that the goal of therapists should be to help clients let go of anger (resentment) and punitive guilt and that forgiveness is a vital element of that process.

In light of the literature reviewed which suggests both physical and psychological implications of forgiveness and points to its' relevance in the therapeutic process in dealing with a whole range of psychological issues, the current researchers are of the opinion that forgiveness, despite the fact that some have regarded it as solely a religious topic, is relevant to psychology and that research which explores the dynamics, processes and applications of this concept is long overdue. Furthermore, although forgiveness has been somewhat discussed in psychological research which is theoretical in nature, research connecting forgiveness and psychology which is empirical in nature has yet to surface.
With this in mind, the current investigators, in a previous study (Weiss & Morgan, 19), attempted to begin to empirically study forgiveness by investigating the possibility of a relationship between forgiveness and mental health. The finding of such a relationship would be fundamental in establishing the relevance of forgiveness to psychology. In doing so, these researchers administered a forgiveness attitude questionnaire and the Bell Adjustment Inventory to a group of student volunteers with the hypothesis that subjects' reports of higher levels of forgiveness on the forgiveness attitude questionnaire would be related to better adjustment scores on the Bell Adjustment Inventory, as compared to subjects reports of lower levels of forgiveness. A correlational analysis was performed on the data and significant results were found. At the time of the previous study, speculation was that if such a relationship did exist, then further discussion and investigation concerning forgiveness and its relevance to psychology and, particularly, the therapeutic process would be imperative.

In light of the significant results of the previous investigation, the current study deems forgiveness to be pertinent to psychology in that it has been found to be related to psychological well-being. Therefore, it is postulated that forgiveness may be essential for emotional health and healing and that, in order to better utilize this
concept in the therapeutic setting, psychologists need to better understand the dynamics of forgiveness and the processes involved.

Research Questions

In attempting to explore the concept of forgiveness, the current study began by attempting to answer five questions: 1) Are people more forgiving of themselves as compared to others? 2) Are people more forgiving of a situation that they deem to be less offensive as compared to a situation that they deem to be more offensive? 3) Are men or women more forgiving? 4) Is the strength of a persons religious beliefs related to whether or not they are a forgiving or unforgiving person? and 5) Is forgiveness relevant to people and do they experience issues of unforgiveness in their lives?

In light of the existing body of literature which has utilized the term forgiveness when referring to the process of recovery from devastating issues such as sexual assault, extra-marital affairs and post abortion trauma, the current study postulated that certain types of offenses, particularly ones that are deemed to be severe (extra-marital affair), would be more difficult to forgive in comparison to ones that are deemed less severe (gossiping). Therefore, it was hypothesized that subjects, when responding to a series of forgiveness vignettes (Appendix B), would be less prone to forgive an offense which they
deemed to be more offensive in comparison to an offense which they deemed to be less offensive. Also, it was hypothesized that a lack of forgiveness (unforgiveness) may sometimes result in a form of revenge or punishment, and an offense which is considered to be severe in nature may be more likely to result in this type of unforgiving behavior.

Related to Hope's (1987) suggestion that people judge themselves by a similar or even harsher standard than they do others, the current study investigated whether there were differences between subjects' attitudes toward forgiving others and their attitudes toward forgiving themselves. Hope stated that a double standard often exists in that people are often more forgiving of others than they are of themselves, thus, the present investigation hypothesized that subjects' answers to the forgiveness vignettes would indicate that they were, indeed, more forgiving of others than they were of themselves and would tend to be harsher and more punitive towards themselves.

The literature does not specifically address the question of whether or not men or women are more forgiving. However, based on the assumption that women may be more understanding and empathetic than men, along with the assumption that understanding and empathy are involved in the process of being able to forgive, the present study has hypothesized that female subjects would respond to the forgiveness vignettes in a more forgiving manner in
comparison to male subjects.

Exploring the relevance of forgiveness in peoples lives, the present investigation presented subjects with a short forgiveness and religion questionnaire (Appendix D) and asked subjects to respond to two questions directed at finding out if there are issues of unforgiveness in their lives. One of the questions (#2) addressed unforgiveness of others and the other question (#3) addressed unforgiveness of oneself. The current study hypothesized that a significant percentage of subjects would report issues of unforgiveness in their lives. If this was the case, it would aid these researchers in attempting to establish forgiveness' relevance to psychology.

Based on the abundance of religious literature which deals with the concept of forgiveness, the current investigation suggested that a relationship would be found between subject's strength of religious belief as indicated by their responses to question #1 of the forgiveness and religion questionnaire and their responses to question #6 of the forgiveness vignettes. It was hypothesized that the stronger a subject reports his/her religious beliefs to be, the more likely they would be to respond to the offenses presented in the forgiveness vignettes in a forgiving manner.

Additionally, subjects strength of religious belief was also looked at in terms of its relationship with subjects
responses to statements # 2 and #3 of the forgiveness and religion questionnaire addressing issues of unforgiveness in subjects lives. Specifically, It was hypothesized that subjects who reported stronger religious beliefs would indicate less issues of unforgiveness in their lives as measured by their disagreement with the two statements.
METHOD

Subjects

A total of 116 subjects ranging in age from 16 to 49 were solicited from an undergraduate psychology course at California State University, San Bernardino. The subjects were 92 females, 23 males and one who chose not to indicate his/her sex. The majority of the sample (83%) were freshman. The rest of the sample was composed of 6% sophomores, 4% juniors and 7% seniors. The racial make-up of the sample was 45% Caucasian, 28% Hispanic, 10% Afro-American, 5% Asian-Indian, 5% Pacific Islander, 2% Chinese, 2% Korean, 1% American Indian and the remaining 2% chose not to indicate their race. 94% of the sample indicated that they were single and had never been married, 3% divorced and single, 1% divorced and remarried, 1% married and never been divorced and 1% declined to respond. In answer to a question about to religious affiliation, 53% of the sample indicated Catholicism, 32% Protestantism, 4% Buddhism, 2% Islam, 2% Mormonism, 2% Atheism, 1% Jehovah-Witness, 1% Judaism. Two percent of the sample indicated that they had no religious affiliation and 3% left the question blank and were therefore reported as missing data.

Participation in this study was voluntary and resulted in extra-credit. Subjects were briefed as to their rights
and were treated according to the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (see Appendix A).

Materials

A questionnaire consisting of four forgiveness vignettes and corresponding questions was developed for the present study (Appendix B). Based on the body of literature on forgiveness, the current researchers developed several vignettes and then narrowed them down to the four that were utilized. This process involved determining which vignettes would be the most relevant to a general population and determining which vignette presented an offense that would most commonly be considered a mild offense and which vignette presented one that, in comparison to the mild offense, would be considered more severe. The offense which was selected as the mild or low offense was "gossiping" and the offense that was chosen as the severe or high offense was an "extra-marital affair". In order to test the accuracy of the high and low classifications of the offenses, the two offenses that were utilized were included in a list of ten offenses that subjects rated from least (1) to worst (10) (Appendix C). The mean rating for the offense of having an extra-marital affair was 4.25 and the mean rating for the offense of gossiping was 6.9 (offenses were rated on a scale of 1 to 10; 1 being the worst, 10 being the least) The scores assigned by the raters were consistent with the
classifications of gossiping representing the low or mild offense condition and having an extra-marital affair representing the high or severe offense condition.

Each vignette represented a condition where two independent variables were manipulated: 1) The degree of the offense (high or low); and 2) the role of the subject in regards to the offense (victim or perpetrator). Therefore, 4 vignettes were utilized. Two of the vignettes involved the offense of gossiping; one where the subject was the perpetrator of the gossip and one were the subject was the victim of the gossip. The other two vignettes involved the offense of having an extra-marital affair; one were the subject was the perpetrator of the affair and one were the subject was the victim of the affair.

Following each vignette were a series of questions directed at finding out if the subject would, in the given situation, respond in a forgiving or unforgiving manner. For the purposes of this study, only the responses given to questions #3 and #6 were utilized, because they specifically addressed how the subject would actually respond in the situation. Where as the rest of the questions following the forgiveness vignettes were more abstract and subjective, using terms like feel, desire, and should. They were utilized to help the subject deepen his/her understanding of the situation and help them put some thought into how they would think, feel and respond if faced
with the same situation in real life.

The two questions (#3 and #6) that were chosen for analysis utilized the word *would*, because the present investigation was interested in finding out how the subject *would* actually respond if presented with the given circumstance. For example, question #3 asked the subject to agree or disagree with a statement suggesting that the subject *would punish* themselves or another person for the offense that was committed and question #6 asked the subject to respond in agreement or disagreement with a statement that the subject *would forgive* themselves or another person for the offense that was committed. Subjects responses were recorded on a scale from 1 to 7; 1 indicating strong agreement and 7 indicating strong disagreement.

The order of the vignettes were incompletely counterbalanced so as to guard against any order effects.

In addition to the forgiveness vignettes, a short forgiveness and religion questionnaire consisting of one question addressing the strength of the subject's religious beliefs and two questions referring to issues of unforgiveness in the subject's life was also administered (Appendix D). Question #1 asked subjects to indicate the strength of their religious beliefs on a scale of 0 to 7; 0 being no religious beliefs and 1 to 7 being a continuum from mild to strong. Questions #2 and #3 instructed subjects to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 7 whether they strongly
agreed or strongly disagreed with two statements: #2) "There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them." and #3) There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself."

In addition, a personal data questionnaire asking for demographic information was administered so as to obtain information concerning the sample (Appendix E).

Procedure

Volunteer subjects were given a package of materials consisting of and in order of the personal data questionnaire, the four forgiveness vignettes, the short religion and forgiveness questionnaire and the list of ten offenses. The materials were accompanied by a cover-letter (Appendix A) explaining who the researchers were, the purpose of their investigation and indicating the rights of subjects. Subjects were briefed verbally and via a cover-letter as to the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses and who to contact for further information concerning the study.

Subjects were instructed to read each vignette carefully, to attempt to imagine how they would feel and react if they were truly in the given situation and to respond to the questions accordingly. Subject were also asked to fill-out the personal data questionnaire, the short
forgiveness and religion questionnaire and to rate the list of ten offenses.

The materials were filled out by the subjects at their leisure and were returned in class to the experimenter two days later. Upon returning the materials, the subjects were given an extra-credit slip and a written debriefing statement (Appendix F) informing them of the exact nature of the study and who to contact for information and group results.
RESULTS

A 2x2 within subjects factorial design was utilized and ANOVA's were performed between subjects responses to questions #3 and #6 of the forgiveness vignettes as the dependent variables and the degree of the offense and the role of the subject as the independent variables. Analysis were performed using SPSS MANOVA.

Figure 1. displays the significant main effects on question #3 (punish) for both degree of offense, $F(1,459)=4.93, p<.05$ and role of subject, $F(1,459)=49.72, p<.001$, showing that subjects were more likely to punish a severe offense as opposed to a mild offense and were more likely to punish themselves as opposed to others regardless of the degree of offense. A significant interaction was not found.

In the analysis on question #6 (forgive), significance was found for degree of offense, $F(1,459)= 4.68, p<.05$, but not for role of subject. However, a significant interaction between degree of offense and role of subject, $F(1,459)=4.05, p<.05$ was found to indicate that subjects were more likely to forgive themselves when the offense was mild and were more likely to forgive others when the offense was severe. The results are displayed in Figure 2.

The relationship between gender and forgiveness was
Figure 1. Main effects for role of subject and degree of offense for question #3 (punish) on the forgiveness vignettes.
Figure 2. Two-way interaction between role of subject and degree of offense for question #6 (forgive) on the forgiveness vignettes.
investigated by using subjects responses to question #6 (forgive) as the dependent variable and the gender (male or female) of the subject as the independent variable. ANOVA's were performed using SPSS ONEWAY and significant results were not found; this indicated there were no differences between men and women and their tendencies to forgive.

Pearson correlations were utilized on the data from the forgiveness and religion questionnaire. Specifically, a significant correlation of -.25, p<.01 was found between question # 1 (strength of religious belief) and subjects level of agreement or disagreement with statement #3 ("There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself."). This finding indicated that person's with stronger religious beliefs reported more issues of self unforgiveness. Although a specific hypothesis was not originally stated, a significant correlation was also found between subjects level of agreement or disagreement with statement #3 ("There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself.") and statement #2 ("There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them.") of .31, p<.001. This serendipitous finding indicates that if persons have issues of unforgiveness of others in their lives then they are also likely to have issues of unforgiveness towards themselves.

Significant correlations between question #1 (strength
of religious belief) on the forgiveness and religion questionnaire and subjects responses to question #3 (punish) and question #6 (forgive) of the forgiveness vignettes were not found. Significant Pearson correlations are displayed in Table 1.

SPSS FREQUENCIES were used to analyze the demographic data obtained from the personal data questionnaire. Also, they were used to obtain the percentage of subjects who indicated some level of agreement with statement #2 (There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them."), and #3 (There are thing that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself."), of the forgiveness and religion questionnaire in order to address the question of the relevance of forgiveness in subjects lives. On a scale of 1 to 7 (1 indicating strong agreement and 7 indicating strong disagreement), responses of 1 to 4 were analyzed as indicating some degree of agreement with the statements. In response to statement #2 ("There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them."), 46.6% of subjects reported some level of agreement. Statement #3 ("There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself."), resulted in 63.8% of subjects indicating some level of agreement.

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Table 1.
Pearson correlations for the forgiveness and religion questionnaire.

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<th>question #2</th>
<th>question #3</th>
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<td>issues of unforgiveness of others</td>
<td>issues of unforgiveness of self</td>
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<tr>
<td>question #1</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>strength of belief</td>
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<td>question #2</td>
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<td>unforgiveness of others</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>question #3</td>
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<td>unforgiveness of self</td>
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1-tailed significance  * -.01  ** -.001
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to empirically explore the concept of forgiveness from a psychological perspective. In doing so, these researchers hoped to obtain information and insights into the concept of forgiveness and the factors that contribute to it.

The analysis performed on the forgiveness vignettes yielded two significant main effects were for question #3 (punish). The main effect for degree of offense indicated that subjects were more likely to punish an offense which was deemed to be a more severe offense (extra-marital affair) in comparison to one which was deemed to be a less severe offense (gossiping). This finding supports the present study's hypothesis that certain types of offenses, specifically ones that are considered to be severe, would be more difficult to forgive and result in some form of retribution or punishment of oneself or another person.

Related to Fitzgibbons (1986) statement that there are three ways to deal with anger - denial, expression and forgiveness - this finding suggests that when a terrible wrong has been committed, people may be more prone to use expression (retribution or punishment) as opposed to forgiveness as a way of dealing with the situation and their anger.
However, Fitzgibbons stated that forgiveness, unlike expression (punishment), promotes healing, restoration and usually results in the least amount of harm when dealing with anger and the wrongful situations which are the cause of that anger. Supporting this idea, the literature has utilized the term "forgiveness" when discussing the therapeutic process of recovery from such traumatic issues as sexual assault (Sharma & Cheatham, 1986), post-abortion trauma (Joy, 1985), domestic violence (Whipple, 1986) and marital infidelity (Jagers, 1986). Perhaps, the reason why forgiveness has been suggested in treating clients who face these issues is because, as the significant results point out, in these types of extreme situations, more so than in less severe situations, people tend to want to punish themselves or others as a way of responding to the wrong that has been done. Along with Fitzgibbons (1986), the current study proposes that because punishment and revenge often lead to violence, injury and the destruction of relationships, forgiveness may be the least harmful and most restorative therapeutic approach when dealing with these severe offenses.

In addition, the present investigation suggests that retribution and punishment seldom fully satisfy or make up for wrongs that have been done. Therefore, a person is still left with hurt, anger and a lack of resolution. Forgiveness on the other hand, frees a person from the need and desire
for punishment or seeking revenge.

However, the findings of this study suggest that forgiveness may be a very difficult task to accomplish in situations where a terrible wrong has been committed. Powerful tendencies or impulses for revenge, punishment or retribution may war against attempts to forgive. If forgiveness is to be utilized within counseling, it may be important for both the therapist and the client to understand the difficulty in achieving forgiveness and that it may be a long and difficult process. Nevertheless, the experimenters in the present study believe that it may be well worth the effort, in that, it may provide the only long term solution to the pains, resentments and guilts that result from the wrongs and injustices of life.

Often times people tend to think of forgiveness as unidirectional, in that they commonly think of it in terms of one person forgiving another. However, forgiveness not only involves forgiving other people but it also involves forgiving oneself. The same could be said for unforgiveness. People are not only unforgiving of others but they are also unforgiving of themselves. The current study investigated these two aspects of unforgiveness by examining punishment of others and punishment of oneself. The main effect found for role of subject (victim or perpetrator) indicated that subjects were more prone to punish an offense which they were the perpetrator of, as opposed to one which they were
the victim of. In other words, they were more likely to punish themselves as opposed to punishing another person. This finding supports the current study's hypothesis that subjects would be harsher and more punitive (unforgiving) towards themselves as compared to others.

Hope's (1987) belief in a double standard where people often forgive others much more easily than they forgive themselves could also be confirmed by this finding, because punishment could be considered a form or aspect of unforgiveness. Unforgiveness and punishment of oneself is not only encountered in therapy when a client has committed things in their life that they are ashamed and guilty of, but also in cases where the client has been the victim of such things. It is not uncommon to find a victim of rape, battery by a spouse, or abuse as a child blaming themselves for mistreatments they have suffered. Perls (1969) stated that resentment and blame, when not dealt with, are often turned inward and are manifested in the form of guilt. Maybe, it is because blame and resentment take a tremendous amount of energy to maintain and that, for some individuals, it may be easier and less taxing to blame and punish one's self than it is to continue to blame and punish another person? The current study's findings do not answer this question. Perhaps, this could be a question for future research.

The current research's unexpected finding of a
significant correlation between level of agreement or
disagreement with statement #2 ("There are people in my
life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive
them.") and statement #3 ("There are things that I have
done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive
myself.") of the forgiveness and religion questionnaire
seems to indicate that people who report issues of
unforgiveness concerning others in their lives tend, also,
to indicate issues of unforgiveness concerning themselves.
This finding suggests that forgiveness may be generalized,
in that, people who are unforgiving of others may also tend
to be unforgiving of themselves. The current study's finding
supports Hope's (1987) suggestion that people often judge
themselves and others by a similar standard and that
learning to be a forgiving person would not only free a
person from the demands of blaming and punishing others but
it would most importantly liberate a person from their own
self condemnation and punitive guilt.

Looking at the converse side of punishment or
unforgiveness, question #6 of the forgiveness vignettes
addresses forgiveness and was directed at finding out if the
subjects would, according to the forgiveness vignettes,
forgive in the various situations. Significant results were
found for degree of offense but not for role of subject.
However a significant interaction was found and therefore,
the significant main effect for degree of offense can only
be interpreted in relation to its interaction with role of subject.

The results indicated that subjects were more likely to forgive themselves as compared to others when the offense was deemed to be a low or less severe offense and were more likely to forgive another person as compared to themselves when the offense was deemed to be high or more severe in comparison to one that was deemed to be less severe. This finding supports the literature which implicates forgiveness as an integral part of the healing process when dealing with serious issues such as extra-marital affairs (Jagers, 1986), sexual assault (Sharma & Cheatham, 1986), post-abortion trauma (Joy, 1985), domestic violence (Whipple, 1986) and cancer (Phillips & Osborne, 1989). This finding suggests that self-forgiveness may be extremely relevant in the therapeutic setting when dealing with traumatic issues such as these, perhaps even more so than forgiveness of the perpetrator. This is not to say that the client may not have issues of unforgiveness towards the one who has victimized them. However, it does seem to suggest that self forgiveness may be the more difficult act in these sorts of situations.

In light of the finding which suggests that in situations where an offense is deemed to be mild or less severe, people tend to be more forgiving of themselves and tend to be less forgiving of others, it could be suggested that maybe it is the smaller, every-day issues of life which
are more likely to build up and to cause one to develop and harbor resentment and unforgiveness towards others. If this is the case, learning to forgive others and working through all the unfinished business of resentment may be extremely relevant in marriage and family therapy where one deals with the every day issues and difficulties of life and functioning in relationships with others.

In regards to the question of whether men or women are more forgiving, the current study attempted to answer it by examining subjects gender in relation to their responses to question #6 (forgiveness) on the forgiveness vignettes. It was hypothesized that women would respond in a more forgiving manner, as compared to men. However, a significant difference was not found. The present investigation recognizes that this result could have been influenced by the small number of male subjects (23), in comparison to female subjects (92), within the sample. Perhaps a sample containing more males and a more even distribution of males and females might have yielded different results.

Lack of significance was also found between subjects responses to the forgiveness vignettes and their strength of religious beliefs as reported in the forgiveness and religion questionnaire. This was contrary to the hypothesis that forgiveness and strength of religious belief would be related. It was hypothesized that subjects with stronger religious belief would indicate more forgiving attitudes as
measured by their responses to the forgiveness vignettes. The current investigators speculated that the lack of significance may be due to two factors; one of them being that, not all religions adhere to the principle of forgiveness. In fact, some religions, Islam for example, emphasizes justice and punishment more than forgiveness. Therefore, strength of religious belief in general would not be related to forgiveness. However, perhaps a study of only those religions which teach the concept of forgiveness would possess quite a different result.

The other factor that may have contributed to the absence of significance is that forgiveness may be very difficult to accomplish regardless of whether or not one is highly religious. In addition to that difficulty, perhaps highly religious people tend to possess very strict moral codes and standards which may cause them to judge others and themselves more severely when those codes and standards are broken and not upheld. Therefore, they may experience even greater difficulty with the forgiving process.

Subjects strength of religious belief was also correlated with subjects level of agreement or disagreement with statement #2 ("There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them.") of the forgiveness and religion questionnaire and significance was not found. This lack of significance was counter to what the current study had hypothesized as it was postulated that
subjects with stronger religious beliefs would indicate less agreement with the statement.

This finding of a lack of significance appears odd. However, as was stated earlier, it may be that forgiving other people for wrongs and hurts done to oneself may be a very difficult and complicated task, despite a person's strength of religious belief. This finding may prove helpful in therapy when working with religious clients particularly Christians, who believe in the concept and practice of forgiveness. Perhaps a therapist who understands the difficulty of accomplishing this task of forgiveness and is sensitive to a client's religious beliefs, can help their client work through the process of forgiveness and help them fulfill a tenant of their faith.

The significant negative correlation between subjects' strength of religious belief and subject's agreement with statement #3 ("There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself.") indicated that the stronger subjects reported their religious beliefs to be, the more likely they were to indicate agreement with the statement. In other words, subjects with stronger religious beliefs tended to have more issues of self unforgiveness in their lives.

This finding is inconsistent with the present study's hypothesis and with the literature on forgiveness which points to its importance among religious persons. However,
this finding lends support to the relevance of utilizing the concept of forgiveness when working with religious, particularly Christian, clinical populations. Through utilizing the familiar concept of forgiveness within the therapeutic setting, perhaps, therapists can help religious clients be more forgiving of themselves and help them understand the psychological as well as the spiritual benefits of forgiving one's self.

Forgiveness was postulated to be relevant, not only to strongly religious individuals, but to people in general. In the current investigation 47% of subjects reported issues of unforgiveness of others in their lives and 64% of subjects reported issues of unforgiveness of themselves, as measured by their responses to statement #2 ("There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them.") and statement #3 ("There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself."). The current study posed these questions to subjects in order to determine the relevancy of forgiveness in people's lives by examining if they have issues of unforgiveness and if they have experienced difficulty forgiving themselves and others. If, indeed, subjects did report such issues as being relevant to their lives, then one might extrapolate that forgiveness would be relevant in the therapeutic setting.

This finding supports the present studies contention
that the concept of forgiveness and the process of learning to forgive may be a useful therapeutic tool or method by which therapist's may aid clients in the working through and the resolution of the wrongs and hurts in their lives that they can not forgive. Furthermore, the current study suggests that, although it may not be recognized as forgiveness, successful psychotherapy and counseling presently employs some aspects of forgiveness within the therapeutic process. However, Hope (1987) indicated that these aspects of therapy are extremely vague and not well articulated in the psychological literature. They are characterized by very passive terms such as "let go" and "accept".

Indicative of this fact is the usage of such terminology within Gestalt and Rational Emotive Therapies. Perls (1969), suggested that when people are resentful, they become stuck because they can not "let go". In RET, it has been said that "if we are to cure our neurosis or psychosis, we had better stop blaming ourselves and others and we had better learn to accept ourselves inspite of our imperfections" (Cory, 1986, p.212). However, the literature does not clearly define what is meant by these terms nor does it indicate how one may go about "letting go" or "accepting".

The current research proposes that what they are really asking their clients to do is to forgive and that
forgiveness, unlike the passive existing terms, is a very active term and is a process whose dynamics can be studied and defined.

Through utilizing information gained from this study and others, these researchers intend to do just that, study and define forgiveness from a psychological perspective. The current study facilitates this goal in two ways. The first and most immediate way is that it will contribute to a deeper and more empirical understanding of forgiveness as it relates to psychology. The second and more distant way is that, through the body of data and knowledge generated from this and other studies, the current researchers would, in turn, utilize this information in pursuing the possibility of statistically establishing a construct of forgiveness and developing a psychological scale or measure of forgiveness that could be used as a tool within the therapeutic setting.
Dear Participant:

My name is Colleen Morgan and I would like to thank you for participating in this study. The following questionnaire is part of a masters thesis exploring different coping styles within various interpersonal life situations. The questionnaire takes approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Your responses to the questions will be completely confidential and your participation is solely voluntary. If at any time, while you are filling out this questionnaire, you decide you no longer want to continue, please feel free to stop. Also, your participation may earn you extra-credit in some psychology classes. When turning in your questionnaires, please request an extra-credit slip from the investigator. If you are interested in the results of this study, you may contact either Colleen Morgan or Dr. Michael Weiss via the psychology dept at CSUSB. Group results should be available by January 1994. No individual results can be distributed. Again, thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this very important study.

sincerely,

Colleen J. Morgan
Masters Student

Michael G. Weiss, Ph. D.
Associate Professor of Psychology

_________________________________________________________

INFORMED CONSENT FORM   (Please tear here)

Having read the above letter, I understand the nature of the study, the voluntary nature of my participation and that I can discontinue my participation at any time.

Student Signature ______________________________________

(Please return this form to investigator separate from your questionnaire)
APPENDIX B

forgiveness vignettes

DIRECTIONS: Read each of the following situations and think about how you would actually feel and respond if it were a real life situation. After each situation is a set of corresponding questions. Respond to each question as thoughtfully and honestly as possible.
SITUATION Y

Your spouse has recently confessed to you that he/she had been having an affair, but that the affair was over and it would not happen again.

1. Describe, in one word, how you would feel in this situation. ____________________.

DIRECTIONS: PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING THE NUMBER THAT MOST ACCURATELY REFLECTS YOUR RESPONSE.

2. In regards to the emotion that you reported in question #1, indicate how intensely you would be experiencing it if you were in this situation. (circle)

   very weak      very strong
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7

3. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement "I would get revenge and pay my spouse back for what he/she did to me." (circle)

   strongly agree     strongly disagree
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7

4. If you would feel the desire to get revenge or pay your spouse back for what he/she did, indicate how intense you think that desire would be. (circle)

   very weak      very strong
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
5. If you would feel the desire to forgive your spouse, indicate how intense you think that desire would be.

(circle)

very weak very strong

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I could forgive my spouse for what he/she did to me." (circle)

strongly agree strongly disagree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I should forgive my spouse." (circle)

strongly agree strongly disagree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. Please explain why you answered the way you did to question #7.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
SITUATION Z
You had an extra-marital affair. The affair is now over but your spouse has recently found out.

1. Describe, in one word, how you would feel in this situation. ________________________.

DIRECTIONS: PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING THE NUMBER THAT MOST ACCURATELY REFLECTS YOUR RESPONSE.

2. In regards to the emotion that you reported in question #1, indicate how intensely you would be experiencing it if you were in this situation. (circle)

   very weak       very strong
   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I would punish myself for what I did to my spouse." (circle)

   strongly agree           strongly disagree
   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4. If you would feel the desire to punish yourself for what you did to your spouse, indicate how intense you think that desire would be. (circle)

   very weak       very strong
   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

40
5. If you would feel the desire to forgive yourself, indicate how intense you think that desire would be. (circle)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>very weak</th>
<th>very strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>6 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I could forgive myself for what I did to my spouse." (circle)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I should forgive myself." (circle)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. Please explain why you answered the way you did to question #7.

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

41
SITUATION X

You had just come back from your lunch break at work, only to overhear one of your co-workers talking negatively about you. You were shocked at what you heard, especially because you had considered this co-worker to be a very close friend.

1. Describe, in one word, how you would feel in this situation. ____________________.

DIRECTIONS: PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING THE NUMBER THAT MOST ACCURATELY REFLECTS YOUR RESPONSE.

2. In regards to the emotion that you reported in question #1, indicate how intensely you would be experiencing it if you were in this situation. (circle)

   very weak  1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   very strong

3. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I would get revenge and pay my friend back for what he/she did to me." (circle)

   strongly agree  1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   strongly disagree
4. If you would feel the desire to get revenge or pay your friend back for what he/she did to you, indicate how intense you think that desire would be. (circle)

very weak
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
very strong
5. If you would feel the desire to forgive your friend, indicate how intense that desire would be. (circle)

very weak
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
very strong
6. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I could forgive my friend for what he/she did to me." (circle)

strongly agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly disagree

7. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I should forgive my friend." (circle)

strongly agree
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly disagree

8. Please explain why you answered the way you did to question #7.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

43
**SITUATION W**

Your close friend and co-worker had arrived back from his/her lunch break early, only to overhear you gossiping and talking negatively about him/her.

1. Describe, in one word, how you would feel in this situation. ________________.

**DIRECTIONS: PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING THE NUMBER THAT MOST ACCURATELY REFLECTS YOUR RESPONSE.**

2. In regards to the emotion that you reported in question #1, indicate how intensely you would be experiencing it if you were in this situation. (circle)

| very weak | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | very strong |

3. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I would punish myself for what I did to my friend." (circle)

| strongly agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | strongly disagree |
4. If you would feel the desire to punish yourself for what you did, indicate how intense you think that desire would be? (circle)

very weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
very strong

5. If you would feel the desire to forgive yourself, indicate how intense you think that desire would be. (circle)

very weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
very strong

6. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I could forgive myself for what I did to my friend." (circle)

strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly disagree

7. Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement - "I should forgive myself." (circle)

strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly disagree

8. Please explain why you answered the way you did to question #7.

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

list of ten offenses

DIRECTIONS: Please read each of the following offenses and then, according to your opinion, number them from 1 to 10; 1 being the worst offense and 10 being the least offense.

________ Being disrespectful to ones parents or authority figures.
________ Not returning a friends phone call.
________ Having an affair.
________ Stealing money or possessions.
________ Physically abusing a child
________ Not showing up to a lunch date with a friend.
________ Sexually molesting someone.
________ Murdering someone.
________ Gossiping about a friend.
________ Lying to a friend.
APPENDIX D

forgiveness and religion questionnaire

DIRECTIONS: PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING THE NUMBER THAT MOST ACCURATELY REFLECTS YOUR RESPONSE.

1. Indicate how strong you consider your religious beliefs to be. NOTE: 0 - indicating no religious beliefs. (circle)
   
   very weak 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   
   very strong

INDICATE HOW STRONGLY YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS (CIRCLE)

2) "There are people in my life who have hurt me and I have not been able to forgive them."

   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   strongly disagree

3) "There are things that I have done in my life for which I have not been able to forgive myself."

   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   strongly disagree
APPENDIX E

personal data questionnaire

Please do not put your name on this questionnaire. This study is completely anonymous and your answers will be completely confidential. Please answer the following questions as honestly and accurately as possible.

Age (fill in) _______. Sex (circle) male female

Race/Ethnicity (circle)

- American Indian/Native Alaskan
- Asian/Indian
- Black
- Caucasian
- Chinese
- Japanese
- Hispanic
- Pacific Islander
- Other (fill in) ________

Marital Status (circle)

- single/never been married
- single/divorced
- single/widowed
- married/never been divorced
- married/formerly divorced

Occupation (fill-in) ____________________

College Major (fill-in) ____________________

College Status (circle)

- Freshman
- Junior
- Graduate Student
- Sophomore
- Senior
- Other (fill-in) ________________

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Religious Affiliation (circle)

Buddhism
Christianity/Protestant
Hinduism
Judaism

Christianity/Catholic
Confucianism
Islam
Other (fill-in) __________.
APPENDIX F

debriefing statement

Thank you again for participating in our study. Your responses to the questionnaires are very important because they will be used to investigate how people respond to certain offenses and hurts in their lives and to specifically explore the concept of forgiveness.

We hope that participating in our study has been a positive and enriching experience. If for some reason this experience has surfaced some difficult emotional issues for you and you would like to talk with someone, please contact the Counseling Center here at CSUSB at 880-5040.

For group results or more information concerning the study, you may contact Colleen Morgan or Dr. Michael Weiss via the Psychology Dept. at 880-5570. The study should be completed by January 1994.
REFERENCES


Weiss, M. G. & Morgan, C. J. (1992, April). *Attitude of forgiveness as a determinant of mental health.* Presented at the meetings of the Western Psychological Association, Portland, OR.

