Experiences and Ideals of Forgiveness

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Abstract. *There has been a call to examine whether or not people forgive in the way that has been conceptualized in the literature (Rye et al., 2000). This issue was addressed using Q methodology to examine participants' perspectives on their experiences and their ideals of forgiveness. Thirty community members (20 women) ranging in age from 25 to 68 participated in this research, which involved sorting 66 statements about forgiveness according to the level of agreement with each statement. This process yielded three factors describing experiences of forgiveness, labelled Unresolved Forgiveness, Compassionate Forgiveness, and Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs, and two factors representing ideals of forgiveness, namely the Christian Model of Forgiveness and the Humanistic Model of Forgiveness. Our participants' experiences and ideals of forgiveness tended to differ from the definitions proposed in the literature.*

Introduction

Despite the recent upsurge in research on forgiveness, little is known about what people mean when they say they have forgiven. There has been a call in the literature for investigation into how people (i.e., non-academics) define and experience forgiveness and how this relates to the ways in which forgiveness has been defined by scholars. For example, Rye et al. (2000) wrote that "social scientists need to study whether most people practice forgiveness in accordance with the conceptualizations provided by social scientists, philosophers, and religious leaders" (p. 261). Thus there is a need to focus on how the process of forgiveness is carried out in everyday life.

The idea that forgiveness involves a transformation of thoughts, feelings, and actions toward the transgressor from negative to positive (e.g., Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; McCullough, 2001; North, 1987) or, at least, to neutral (Thompson et al., 2005), is common in most of the definitions of forgiveness proposed by researchers. Although the transformation idea has been endorsed by some participants in studies

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examining people's definitions of forgiveness (DeCourville, Belicki, & Green, 2008; Friesen & Fletcher, 2005; Kanz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Scobie & Scobie, 2002), the endorsement has not been unanimous, nor have all participants agreed that a transformation was essential to forgiveness. For example, a majority of participants in one study indicated that it was possible to be angry and forgiving at the same time (Kanz, 2000). In another study (Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004), 45 percent of respondents admitted that they continued to hold a grudge. Similarly, in a study by DeCourville et al. (2008), some participants stated that they either felt indifferent about, or continued to have hard feelings toward, their offender despite having stated explicitly that they had forgiven.

A second common theme in scholarly definitions is that forgiveness is an altruistic act, something that the injured party offers up to the offender (North, 1998) like a gift (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995), an act that ultimately restores benevolent motivations toward the offender (McCullough, 2001). Yet, studies investigating people's understanding of forgiveness do not support the notion that forgiveness occurs for altruistic reasons. Instead, evidence indicates that people are more likely to . generate, or place importance on, self-oriented reasons for forgiveness, such as maintaining a valued relationship, relieving guilt or other negative feelings, and feeling better mentally and or physically (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Scobie & Scobie, 2002; Younger et al., 2004). Thus, the definitions of forgiveness proposed in the literature seem to represent an ideal of forgiveness, whereas pragmatic descriptions are offered by people as reasons for forgiving.

While it is important to recognize the contribution that scholars have provided to the development of theoretical models and to the advancement of the field, researchers must be cautious not to assume that these represent their participants' understanding of forgiveness. Such an assumption is likely to impede communication about, and understanding of, forgiveness (DeCourville et al., 2008). For example, it is a common practice for researchers to ask participants, "have you forgiven?" Given that researchers' ideas about forgiveness likely differ from those of participants, and participants' ideas likely differ from each other, an answer of "yes, I have forgiven" is rife with the possibility of misinterpretation.

Knowledge about how people conceptualize forgiveness has the potential to assist researchers to develop better ways of measuring forgiveness and to predict more accurately when people are likely to forgive (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Neblett (1974) wrote that, although there are many desirable or ideal features of forgiveness, there are very few, if any, features that are unanimously reflected in experience. One of our goals was to examine which features of forgiveness described in the

literature were reflected in people's experiences. A second goal was to examine people's ideals of forgiveness, because we believe that people's notions of ideal forgiveness may resemble those proposed in the literature more closely when the constraints and limitations of reality are not imposed on them. We expected that scholars' definitions would resemble people's ideals of forgiveness and that, at least for some, actual experiences of forgiveness would be different from their ideals. With that in mind, a third goal of this study was to examine the discrepancies and commonalities between participants' experiences of forgiveness and their ideals.

Q methodology was employed because it was designed to investigate how people organize their ideas about any particular concept (Stephenson, 1953). In addition, Q methodology offered a way to examine people's viewpoints on forgiveness in detail, and allowed us to incorporate a wide range of ideas about forgiveness, some of which have been proposed in the literature and others that have originated in people's expressions of their beliefs about forgiveness (DeCourville et al., 2008).

Method

Q Sample

The authors began the process of compiling a set of statements by reviewing the extant literature on people's definitions of forgiveness (e.g., De Courville et al., 2008; Kanz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Scobie & Scobie, 2002). In addition, we chose to include ideas that have been proposed in the literature as *not* being part of forgiveness, such as forgetting (Enright et al., 1998; Jaeger, 1998), pardoning (Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992; McCullough, 2001), excusing (Enright et al., 1998; McCullough, 2001), and condoning (Baures, 1996; Enright et al., 1992; McCullough, 2001; North, 1998) because informal communications with others have suggested that these are actually viewed by some as relevant to forgiveness. We also included statements addressing reconciliation, although the consensus among researchers is that forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct processes (Enright et al., 1998; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; McCullough, 2001).

These statements were categorized into emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects, because it has been proposed that changes in each of these three areas are integral to forgiveness (Enright et al., 1998). Because religious beliefs would likely be very important to some participants' experiences of forgiveness, some statements reflected religious aspects of forgiveness. Although they were not strictly Christian in orientation (i.e., these statements mentioned "God" but not "Christ"), they were most likely to appeal to individuals of a Christian background.

Because the sorting process required considerable effort on the part of participants, it was critical to reduce the number of statements to a point where most of the ideas that had been prominent in the forgiveness literature were represented without overwhelming participants with the number of cards to sort. Through a process of discussion and elimination, the list was shortened to a set of 66 statements.

P Set

As mentioned above, one goal of the study was to investigate whether or not participants shared perspectives on forgiveness. It is unlikely that all potential experiences of forgiveness would be revealed in a single study. Rather, the goal was to obtain a P set of sufficient size to discover some, and to maximize the likelihood of obtaining a number of relatively stable factors, consisting of four or five people (Brown, 1980). A P set of 30 was chosen because it would be large enough to allow for stable factors and because P sets of 30 have commonly been used in successful Q-methodological research.

Participants were recruited from the community in an attempt to include people from a wide variety of ages and backgrounds. Recruitment was accomplished through ads in the university campus newspaper, an article in the local newspaper, contacting participants from a previous study who had expressed interest in future forgiveness research, and word of mouth. The requirements for participation were that the individual must have been over 18 years of age at the time of participation and must have been hurt "seriously and deeply by someone you know (not a stranger)" and have subsequently forgiven that person. The requirement that the participant must have known the offender was included to ensure that the items regarding the state of the relationship with the offender after the hurt would be applicable to all.

Other Materials

Participants completed a questionnaire asking about age, marital status, education level, ethnic background, and religious affiliation, as well as how often they attended church, and the importance of prayer or spiritual practice in their daily life.

Each participant was asked to write a short description of a hurtful incident that s/he had subsequently forgiven (i.e., "an experience of someone close to you who hurt you unfairly and deeply and whom you have forgiven"). Participants were asked to reflect on a hurtful event that they considered personally significant. This was done because the sort that followed was based on that event. They were asked a series of questions about the incident, including who had committed the act; whether the participant still had a relationship with this person; how close was the relationship (scored on a five-point Likert scale from

"distant" to "close"); how long ago the event had happened; how upsetting the event was when it occurred; and "how upsetting it is now" (scored on a six-point Likert scale from "not at all upsetting" to "devastating").

Procedure

Participants met with the researcher in individual sessions lasting approximately two to three hours. They were paid $25 plus the cost of parking. During the session, participants responded to the demographic items and then completed the questionnaire regarding the hurtful incident. They were told that the purpose of the research was to gain an idea of how people think about and experience forgiveness and that there were no right or wrong answers. They were instructed to sort the cards "in a way that reflects what you actually went through as you forgave the person who hurt you" and "to think about the situation you have written about when you are sorting the cards."

Participants initially sorted the cards into three piles: "like my experience of forgiveness"; "irrelevant to my experience of forgiveness"; "unlike my experience of forgiveness." They then sorted the cards using a scale, ranging from −5 ("Most unlike my experience of forgiveness") through 0 ("Irrelevant to my experience of forgiveness") to +5 ("Most like my experience of forgiveness"), that was placed on the table in front of them. When all 66 cards had been placed above the scale, participants were instructed to arrange their cards so that the number of cards in each pile matched the quasi-normal distribution provided (i.e., three cards at each of +/−5, four at +/−4, five at +/−3, seven at +/−2, nine at +/− 1, and 10 at 0). They were also invited "to look over the way you have sorted the cards and make any changes you would like to make" with the added reason that "the idea of this part of the sorting process is to arrive at a 'picture' that best reflects the way you experienced forgiveness." Participants were encouraged to follow the distribution that had been provided, but if they were unable to do so, they were told that it was acceptable to vary from it. Most were able to conform to the provided distribution. When the participants indicated that they were happy with the way they had sorted the cards, a brief interview about the sorting was conducted.

The participants then sorted the cards a second time to reflect their ideals of forgiveness. The process for sorting the cards was the same as described above except that the statements and instructions used for this sort were worded slightly differently from the first. For example, the item, "I made a conscious choice to forgive the person who hurt me" was reworded to read, "Ideally, I would make a conscious choice to forgive the person who hurts me". When participants completed the sorting process they were debriefed about the purpose of the study and thanked

for their participation.

Results

Demographic Information

The demographic data showed a wide range in age, occupation, education, religious affiliation, attendance at religious services and the importance of prayer in their lives. The 30 participants (10 men, 20 women) ranged in age from 25 to 68 (M = 40.03, SD = 12.35); three participants did not state their age. Occupations varied widely, including office cleaner, pastor, beekeeper, librarian, support counselor, professor, casino dealer, and probation officer. A majority of the participants were employed, (n = 16). Others listed their occupations as unemployed (n = 3), retired (n = 3), or student (n = 8). Approximately half of the participants were married (n = 14), ten were single, five were divorced/separated, and one was widowed.

Education ranged from "some high school" to Ph.D. Nine participants listed their education level as high school, three participants had some college education, eight participants had some undergraduate level university education, and seven participants had some graduate level education or at least one graduate degree. Three participants gave answers that were unclassifiable.

Twenty-two of the 30 participants reported a Christian religious background while eight reported no religious affiliation. Within those indicating they were Christian, 10 described themselves as Protestant, five as Roman Catholic, five as Christian, one as Brethren in Christ, and one as Pentecostal. With regard to how often they attended religious services, 14 participants said "never", two said "once a year", three said "a few times a year", one said "once a month", one said "a few times a month", five said "once a week", two said "a few times a week", and two said "pretty well every day". When asked, "how important are prayer or spiritual practice to you in your daily life," 18 participants responded "very important", three responded "important", none said "somewhat important", six said "slightly important", and six answered "not important."

Experiences of Forgiveness

Principal components analyses with varimax rotation were computed using "PQMethod" (Schmolk & Atkinson, 2002). Solutions for two through seven factors were computed for the sorts reflecting participants' experiences of forgiveness. The three- and four-factor solutions were most promising due to a reasonably high proportion of variance accounted for by each, as well as a satisfactory number of individuals defining each factor in both of the solutions. While Factor I was very similar in both of these solutions, the other two factors in the

three-factor solution appeared to represent comprehensible and discernible points of view, while the other three factors in the four-factor solution seemed less clearly defined. Therefore, the three-factor solution was determined to be the most meaningful. This decision was confirmed upon examination of the scree plot of eigenvalues. The three-factor solution accounted for 44 percent of the variance, with a total of 21 defining sorts. Participants were considered to be definers of the factor if their loading was .35 or greater on one and only one factor. Nine participants loaded significantly on more than one factor and, therefore, were not considered definers. No correlations between factors were significant.

Each perspective on forgiveness is illustrated by a composite sort that represents the sorts of the participants who defined this factor. The arrays of scores for the composites in both the *actual forgiveness* and *ideal forgiveness* belief domains are shown in Appendix 1.

Factor I: Unresolved Forgiveness. The first *actual forgiveness* factor represented the perspective shared by the largest group of participants, with 11 people defining this factor. Only four of the 11 participants reported still having a relationship with the offender they wrote about, which was particularly interesting considering that nine of the 10 participants who defined the other two *actual forgiveness* perspectives continued their relationships with the offenders. Information about the demographics of the participants defining each perspective, including age, sex, religious background and severity of the offense is shown in Appendix 2.

These participants ranked the statements in a manner that indicated that they continued to have negative feelings about their offender (statements 59, 58), had not forgotten what happened (26, 27), and did not feel as good about offender as they had before the offence (41). Even after these individuals had forgiven, trust for the offender was still an issue (33, 34). The type of forgiveness characterized by this factor did not include reconciliation (43). Forgiveness meant accepting what had happened (16) and seeing the whole person, not just the offence (28).

Paradoxically, the motivation for this type of forgiveness appeared to be the desire to feel better. This is indicated by agreement with statements that these individuals forgave because not forgiving would have hurt them more (62), that forgiving allowed them to move on from the past (31), and to get rid of feelings of anger and resentment (57).

This type of forgiveness seemed to be primarily intrapersonal and not dependent on the actions of the offender. This idea was illustrated by disagreement with items stating that before they forgave they had to talk with the person who hurt them about what s/he did (29), that they forgave only after the offender apologized (49), took responsibility (48),

or admitted what s/he did was wrong (47), and that forgiveness meant telling the offender outright "I forgive you" (46). These individuals also strongly disagreed with the items stating, "I forgave the person who hurt me because I knew that s/he had not meant to hurt me" (53) and "I forgave the person who hurt me because 'I had it coming to me'" (24). They forgave even though they did not believe that justice had been done (20). Taken together, these items suggest that these individuals forgave despite believing that the hurt inflicted upon them was undeserved and went unpunished. For the individuals defining this factor, forgiveness was a conscious choice (1), and a lengthy process (14, 15). These individuals had obstacles to overcome psychologically before they could forgive and their negative feelings toward the offender were not completely resolved by forgiving.

Factor II: Compassionate Forgiveness. This factor, which was defined by six individuals, was characterized by empathy and concern for the offender. This perspective reflected a strong concern for understanding the person and what had led to the offence. Empathy was reflected in the high level of agreement with the items addressing understanding what led to the offence (60), the need to talk with the offender before forgiving him or her (29), forgiving because the offender had had a tough life (65), and because the injured party was able to put him or herself in the offender's shoes (66). The high level of agreement with statements that they forgave out of love (3) and compassion (4) for the offender; that forgiveness meant seeing the whole person for what s/he is (28) and accepting his/her flaws (17); and that they forgave because "we're all human" and "all make mistakes" (25); showed concern and compassion for the offender. This appeared not to be a superficial type of forgiveness, as shown by the strong level of disagreement with the item indicating that forgiving meant just pretending that nothing had happened (61) and that forgiving meant "just forgetting" what happened (26).

Although forgiveness led to reconciliation (43) with the offender, the individuals defining this perspective did not forget what happened (27). Despite the fact that these individuals indicated that they saw the offence as undeserved (24) they did not feel the need for the offender to be punished before forgiving (18). Perhaps the lack of desire for punishment stemmed from the belief that the offender had not meant to hurt them (53).

There was some indication that forgiveness may have been carried out for the forgiver's own wellbeing, as there was agreement with the statement that forgiving enabled them to move on with their life (31), although this motivation did not appear to be as influential as was compassion toward the offender. For example, items about no longer dwelling on the event (32, -1) as well as forgiving the offender "because

I knew it would make me feel better" (56, 0) were sorted as irrelevant.

Religion did not appear to influence forgiveness for these individuals, because they disagreed with two of the items dealing with religious concepts (6, 7), and the others were sorted as irrelevant (5, −1; 8, −1). Strong disagreement with items stating that they forgave to feel powerful (37), to be the bigger person (52) or to give up a certain amount of power (36) indicated that they did not feel self-righteous.

Disagreement that forgiveness was contingent on knowing that the offender would never hurt him/her again (50) suggested that the people defining this factor recognized that forgiveness could lead to being re-victimized. This seemed consistent with their rating of the statement that they did not completely trust their offender (33, +2). These items suggest some acknowledgement of the need for self-protection. These individuals appeared to have a positive, yet realistic, outlook on forgiveness and on the future of their relationship with the offender.

Factor III: Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs. In this factor, which was defined by four individuals, religious or moral tenets seem to be the motivation for forgiveness. There was a strong emphasis on God and religion as motivation for forgiving, as shown by the mostly strong agreement with items 5, 6, 7, and 8. Forgiveness was seen as the morally right thing to do (9) and these participants held the belief that all things are forgivable (64). Taken together, these items suggested that these individuals had a personal belief system that oriented them toward forgiveness. At least to some extent, this belief system was taught to participants (10). Nevertheless, these individuals believed that the decision to forgive was still their own choice (1).

This type of forgiveness restored the relationship with the offender, shown by strong agreement with the items stating that they forgave out of love for their offender (3), that they felt just as good about the offender (41) and treated the offender just as well (42) as they had before the offence, and that forgiveness meant telling the offender outright "I forgive you" (46). This was also shown in the strong level of disagreement with the statements that they would not make up with their offender (43), and that they had negative feelings toward the offender (59).

Disagreement with items indicating that forgiveness was dependent upon the offender admitting that what he or she did was wrong (47), apologizing (49), or being punished (19) showed that this type of forgiveness was not conditional upon the offender's actions. It also did not appear to be contingent on the ability to empathize with the offender, as participants indicated that they did not need to understand what led the offender to do what s/he did in order to forgive (60).

Participants defining this factor also held the belief that forgiveness

should not be about gaining a position of advantage over the offender, or losing such a position. This was shown by the disagreement with the items indicating that forgiveness made them feel like a weak person (38), that they forgave to be the bigger person (52), that forgiveness meant giving up power (36), or made them feel powerful (37). Forgiveness was not seen as a means to solve a problem (35), and did not mean just pretending nothing had happened (61). Overall, personal motivations seemed to play a lesser role in this type of forgiveness than did higher principles, based on religious and moral belief systems.

Ideals of Forgiveness

Solutions that included from two through seven factors were computed for participants' sorts reflecting their ideals of forgiveness. Examination of the composition of the factors, the number of defining participants for each factor, and the scree plots indicated that the two factor solution was the most interpretable. This solution accounted for 39 percent of the variance. Eight participants loaded significantly on more than one factor and, therefore, were not considered definers. Correlation between the factors was not significant.

Factor I: The Christian Model of Forgiveness. This factor was defined by 10 individuals. These individuals' ideals of forgiveness appeared to be based on religious beliefs and teachings (5, 6, 7, 8). Consistent with this idea was the strong agreement with items indicating forgiveness should be done out of love and compassion for the offender (3, 4), that all things are forgivable (64), and that forgiveness should be a conscious choice (1). There was also agreement with the item indicating that people should forgive a person who hurts them because they were taught to forgive (10); that forgiving meant that they would no longer feel anger or resentment toward the offender (58); and disagreement that, after forgiving, they should still have negative feelings toward the offender (59). Ideally, forgiveness would not take a long time (15); would involve more than just pretending nothing had happened (61); and would involve giving up grudges (39), trusting the offender again (33), and making up with the offender (43). Forgiveness would, to some extent, involve forgetting the offence (27).

Power and/or moral superiority were unimportant to this perspective on ideal forgiveness. There was disagreement with items stating that forgiving would mean giving up a certain amount of power (36); that forgiving would make them feel powerful (37); that they would forgive to feel like the bigger person (52); or that forgiving would make them feel like a weak person (38). In addition, punishment was not a necessary condition for this ideal of forgiveness, shown by strong disagreement with the two items addressing the need for punishment for the offender (18, 19). All of the ideals characterizing this perspective

appeared to be consistent with Christian teachings about forgiveness.

Factor II: Humanistic Model of Forgiveness. This factor was defined by 12 individuals. These individuals' ideals of forgiveness appeared to be motivated by positive feelings and empathy toward the offender. Moreover, this ideal of forgiveness was based on feelings of compassion (4), love (3), and understanding (60) toward the offender, as well as seeing the whole person, not just the offence (28), and recognizing that we are all human and all make mistakes (25). This ideal of forgiveness also involved moving on from the hurtful event (31, 32), letting go of negative feelings (57, 58, 59), reconciling with the offender (43), and treating the offender just as well as well as before the offence (42). In this perspective, forgiveness was a conscious choice (1) and not a duty (11), made possible by understanding that the offender had not intended to hurt (53). Taken together, these items suggest an interpersonal ideal of forgiveness that involved concern for, and understanding of, the offender.

Although some items addressed participants' need to feel better and to move on from the situation (31, 32, 57, 58), there was clearly a strong altruistic aspect involved in this ideal of forgiveness as well. Of interest, however, was the strong disagreement with the item stating that "ideally, forgiving a person who hurts me means letting him/her off the hook" (22). Given that (like participants in Factor I) there was strong disagreement with items stating that punishment was a necessary condition for forgiveness (18, 19) it is unclear what aspect of the idea of letting offenders "off the hook" caused such a strong reaction from these participants.

In stark contrast to Factor I, these participants strongly disagreed with items addressing God as a motivation for forgiveness (5, 6, 7, 8). However, there were areas of agreement, such as the ideas that punishment was not a necessary condition for forgiveness (18, 19), and that they would not forgive to show they are the bigger person (52), nor would forgiveness make them feel like a weak person (38).

Forgiveness Across the Actual and Ideal Domains of Forgiveness

Some similarities emerged across the forgiveness domains. Specifically, Factor II within the *actual* domain of forgiveness and Factor II within the *ideal* domain of forgiveness appeared to be similar, with many items receiving similar rankings in both perspectives. Both placed a strong emphasis on love (3) and compassion (4) for the offender, as well as understanding the offender (60) and seeing the whole person, not just the offense (28). However, in Ideal Factor II there was more emphasis placed on forgiveness as allowing the individual to move past the hurtful incident and to let go of their feelings about it (32, 57, 58), whereas in the Actual Factor II there was more importance placed on

communicating with the offender (29) and forgiving for the benefit of the offender.

A second case of similarity across domains was between Actual Factor III and Ideal Factor I. In both of these perspectives, religious beliefs (5, 6, 7, 8) motivated the forgiveness process. In both perspectives, forgiving out of love for the offender (4) was important, as were the ideas that everything is forgivable (64), and that forgiveness is a conscious choice (1). In both perspectives there was disagreement that forgiveness would be done to show the forgiver is the bigger person (52), to feel powerful (37), and that forgiveness meant giving up a certain amount of power (36). For both perspectives, forgiveness meant moving past negative feelings toward the offender (39, 59), and reconciling the relationship (43). In both the *actual* and *ideal* perspectives, there was disagreement that they forgiveness would only take place after they saw the offender had been punished (19). The item stating "Even though I forgave the person who hurt me, this person still deserved to be punished" (18) was ranked as irrelevant (0) in the *ideal* perspective but was strongly disagreed with in the *actual*. Similarly, the *actual* perspective placed importance on the need for the offender to take responsibility (48) and apologize, whereas these items were ranked as irrelevant in the *ideal* perspective. In the *ideal* perspective, participants indicated that forgiving meant trusting the offender again (33), forgetting what had happened (27), and no longer dwelling on the incident (32). Participants may have had real-world constraints to forgiveness in mind when they sorted the cards while recollecting their own hurtful event; these constraints became irrelevant when they considered their ideals of forgiveness.

Factor I in the *actual* domain of forgiveness was unique to this domain. Considering that these participants still seemed to be suffering negative emotional consequences of the hurtful event, and that they did not seem to have met their own goals for forgiving (i.e., feeling better, moving on), it is not surprising that this perspective was not uncovered in the *ideal* perspectives on forgiveness.

A second way to examine the similarities and dissimilarities in perspectives on forgiveness across the *actual* and *ideal* domains was to look at how participants were distributed among the various perspectives. Fourteen participants failed to load on a factor for at least one domain of forgiveness and therefore their *actual* and *ideal* perspectives could not be compared. Of those who defined a factor in both perspectives (see Table 1), seven participants had ideals of forgiveness that were consistent with the actual experiences of forgiveness that they described (four participants who defined Actual Factor II and Ideal Factor II, both of which emphasized compassion for the offender, and three participants who defined Actual Factor III and

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of Numbers of Participants on Actual and Ideal Factors

Actual Factor / *Ideal Factor*	*I: Unresolved Forgiveness*	*II: Compassionate Forgiveness*	*III: Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs*
I: The Christian Model of Forgiveness	3	0	3
II: Humanistic Model of Forgiveness	6	4	0

Ideal Factor I, both of which were motivated by religious beliefs). Nine of our participants were not consistent between their *actual* and *ideal* forgiveness perspectives. They loaded on Actual Factor I, which was not replicated in the *ideal* domain, and one of the other *ideal* factors. Given that these participants seemed to have been motivated to forgive to feel better but, by their own descriptions, still had negative feelings about their offender, it is not surprising that their experiences of forgiveness were not consistent with their ideals. Therefore, more of our sample described their experiences of forgiveness as being distinctly different from their forgiveness ideals than described their experiences and ideals as being similar.

Discussion

One of our goals was to investigate how people's experiences of forgiveness related to the ideas about forgiveness presented in the literature. One idea common to most of the definitions presented in the literature is that forgiveness involves a transition from negative to positive feelings, thoughts, and actions toward the offender (e.g., Enright et al., 1998; McCullough, 2001; North, 1987). For the *Unresolved Forgiveness* perspective, there was no resolution of negative feelings. Both *Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs* and *Compassionate Forgiveness* involved the resolution of negative feelings and actions toward the offender. However, only in *Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs* did participants state that they treated the offender as well as they did before the offense (41), and felt just as good about the offender as before the offense (42). For *Compassionate Forgiveness*, there was weak agreement (+2) with the item stating that they treated their offender just as well as they did before the offense, and the item stating that they felt just as good about the offender as they had before the offense was sorted as irrelevant. Therefore only one of the perspectives on experienced forgiveness involved a clear transition from negative to

positive feelings toward the offender.

The second idea presented in the literature that was different from our participants' experiences was that forgiveness should be altruistic, a gift to the offender (Al-Mabuk, et al., 1995; North, 1998). In both *Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs* and *Compassionate Forgiveness* there was strong agreement that forgiveness was done out of out of love for the offender. The item, "Forgiving the person who hurt me helped him/her to get past the situation and move on" (12) was rated as irrelevant in both the *Unresolved Forgiveness* perspective and *Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs*. There was some agreement with this statement in the *Compassionate Forgiveness* perspective (+2). Even more telling, the item "Forgiving the person who hurt me was a gift from me to him/her" was ranked as -2 in the *Unresolved Forgiveness* perspective, -1 in the *Compassionate Forgiveness* perspective, and +2 in the *Religious Beliefs* perspective. The idea of giving forgiveness as a gift to the offender was not something that characterized our participants' experiences of forgiveness.

As shown, the *Compassionate Forgiveness* and *Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs* perspectives were somewhat discrepant from the definitions of forgiveness proposed in the literature. However, the experiences of the participants who defined the *Unresolved Forgiveness* perspective bore little, if any, resemblance to scholars' definitions of forgiveness. Unlike the other two perspectives, *Unresolved Forgiveness* did not involve a resolution of negative feelings toward the offender.

Some would question whether the experiences characterized by this perspective should even be characterized as forgiveness. Q methodology is ultimately about examining people's subjectivity. These people have identified their experiences as forgiveness and we do not dispute their judgment. It is possible that these participants experienced what Baumeister, Exline, and Sommner (1998) termed "hollow forgiveness." In hollow forgiveness the victim expresses to their offender that they have forgiven without having completed the emotional transformation from negative to positive feelings toward the offender.

However, our participants' experiences of *Unresolved Forgiveness* do not seem to fit with Baumeister et al.'s (1998) conception of hollow forgiveness. Baumeister et al. described how pressure from the offender to forgive and move on from the offense may lead to an expression of forgiveness before the victim is truly ready to put aside their negative feelings and resentments. This is inconsistent with the way our participants described their forgiveness experiences in this perspective. Instead they described their strong desire to feel better as the prime motivation for their decision to forgive. In the interviews which were carried out following the sorts, one participant characterized it this way,

"I forgave out of ease of mind to myself." Another said, "Forgiveness was really something I had to give myself." A third participant described her experience this way, "You learn just to accept: okay this person came into your life and ruined it; or you know, destroyed you, and you either let it take over your life or you learn just to forgive and move on. You're forgiving for yourself." Perhaps in their desire to feel better these people skimmed past psychological tasks that must be completed in order to truly resolve anger, release resentment and let go of grudges. Future research could address whether these people actually feel better in some way after having forgiven, and if so, how?

This perspective is an important contribution to the current body of knowledge on forgiveness definitions because it presents evidence that, for some individuals, the nature of forgiveness is such that it does not require a resolution of negative thoughts, emotions, and actions. Other studies examining people's definitions of forgiveness (Kanz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Younger et al., 2004) have shown that people believe that forgiveness does not always result in a complete transition in feelings, thoughts, and actions from negative to positive. Our findings add evidence that, for some people, negative feelings persist even after they have forgiven.

A second goal was to examine people's ideals of forgiveness, and investigate whether these ideals were more similar to scholars' definitions of forgiveness than were their experiences. The two perspectives on ideals of forgiveness (the *Christian Model of Forgiveness* and the *Humanistic Model of Forgiveness*) that emerged involved resolution of negative feelings toward the offender. In both of the factors representing ideals of forgiveness, participants indicated that feeling just as good about the offender as they did before the offense (41) was irrelevant to their ideals of forgiveness. Participants strongly agreed that they would treat the offender just as well as they did before the offense in the *Humanistic Model of Forgiveness* perspective, but in the *Christian Model of Forgiveness* perspective this statement was irrelevant. Therefore, the transition from negative to positive thoughts, feelings, and actions as presented in the literature was not universally shared as an ideal among the people we studied. This was consistent with McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang's (2003) findings that while offended parties typically reduced their avoidance of and revenge motivations toward the offender over time, they did not appear to become more benevolent.

The conceptualization of forgiveness as a "gift," which is common in the literature definitions, was not found to be important to our participants' ideals of forgiveness. The *Christian Model of Forgiveness* perspective weakly agreed that forgiveness was given "like a gift" to the offender, and participants in the *Humanistic Model of Forgiveness*

perspective weakly disagreed with this item. Both perspectives found the idea of forgiveness as helping the offender to move past the event (12) irrelevant to their ideals of forgiveness. Once again, elements comprising the literature definitions did not appear to be common in our sample.

One of the goals of the present study was to examine how the perspectives on forgiveness that emerged from participants' actual experiences compared to their ideals of forgiveness. Two perspectives were consistent across the *actual* and *ideal* domains of forgiveness beliefs: *Compassionate/Humanistic Forgiveness*, and *Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs/The Christian Model of Forgiveness*. While these perspectives were not identical, their underlying motivations for forgiveness were similar in the *actual* and *ideal* domains.

Forgiveness Motivated by Religious Beliefs strongly emphasized the teachings and tenets of religion as the motivation for forgiving, both in actual experience and in the ideal. It was not surprising that religious beliefs were found to be an important aspect of forgiveness for some participants because previous studies on people's definitions of forgiveness have revealed similar findings (Kanz, 2000; Scobie & Scobie, 2002). Twenty-two of our 30 participants described their religious background as being of various Judeo-Christian denominations (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, etc.). In Christianity, there is an emphasis on forgiveness as being a compassionate act of pardon or release from an injury or debt (Rye, et al., 2000). These ideas were prominent within this perspective on forgiveness.

For at least nine participants, and possibly more (it was difficult to determine for participants who failed to define any one factor in at least one domain), the experience of forgiveness was not consistent with the ideals of forgiveness. Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory states that discrepancies between different aspects of the self lead to negative psychological outcomes. In particular, discrepancies between the *actual* and *ideal* domains of the self lead to dejection-related outcomes, such as dissatisfaction, disappointment, and sadness. Although this theory has never been directly applied to forgiveness-related outcomes, it has been found to be empirically robust in a wide variety of situations, such as the transition to parenthood (Alexander & Higgins, 1993) and vulnerability to eating disorders (Straumann, Vookles, Berenstein, Chaiken, & Higgins, 1991). Future research should be directed at outcomes for individuals who fail to forgive a way that is consistent with their ideals.

Even for those whose experiences of forgiveness were consistent with their ideals, it is possible that some ways of forgiving would be more beneficial than others. For example, Huang and Enright (2000) found that individuals who forgave out a sense of love for the offender

had less elevation in blood pressure when recalling the transgression than individuals who forgave out of a sense of religious obligation. Exploration of the consequences of different forgiveness experiences would be an interesting and worthwhile contribution to our knowledge of how the experience of forgiving impacts upon people's lives.

Limitations of the Present Research

One of the primary limitations of this study is the lack of religious and ethnic diversity among our participants. We had hoped that by recruiting individuals from the community we would get a wide range of participants. This strategy resulted in some diversity in age, education, and occupation, but failed to result in the recruitment of people of various religions and ethnic backgrounds. It is unclear how our findings would have been different if the sample had included individuals of other religious backgrounds.

It is important to note that due to the religious homogeneity in our small sample, the generalizability of our findings is limited. However, the goal of Q methodology is to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of a group of individuals on a particular topic. Therefore, the goal of the study was to discover how our participants think about forgiveness, not to attempt to describe how all people understand it and to consider how participants' understandings related to researchers' definitions. If researchers' definitions strongly represented the full range of human reality, then our results would not have held the new insights they did. The insights gained into these individuals' ideas about forgiveness may broaden our understanding to include ideas that are typically seen as not being part of forgiveness. For example, if these individuals include such ideas as being forgiving and angry at the same time in their definitions of forgiveness, it is quite likely that others do.

In retrospect, the wording of some of the items for the ideal sort may have been problematic. The word "ideally" was added to each statement to remind participants they were supposed to be contemplating their ideals as opposed to their actual experiences, and some of the statements may have appeared to be contradictory. For example, one statement read, "Ideally, forgiving a person who hurts me would make me feel like a weak person." However, given that our aim was to uncover people's perspectives, not to dictate to them what their perspectives should include, it was important to present a wide range of ideas to participants. Moreover, providing people with the same items (with a slight change in wording) allowed us to compare their experiences and their ideals.

Contributions and Future Directions

We believe that this comparison between peoples' ideals of forgiveness and their experiences of it is an important contribution to the literature,

because most empirical studies of people's definitions of forgiveness have simply asked them about "forgiveness" and have not specified whether they mean forgiveness as an abstract concept or forgiveness as it has actually been experienced in their lives.

This study adds support to the proposition that there are many types of forgiveness, and that the definitions that have been proposed in the literature to date are too narrow to encompass many people's experiences of forgiveness, or even their ideals of it. Considering only those who have completed the transition from negative to positive thoughts, feelings, and actions as having forgiven excludes the experiences of a substantial proportion of people (over half the sample in our case). We believe that these findings will encourage researchers to broaden their notions of forgiveness, as well as to continue to examine the complex ways in which people forgive and think about forgiveness.

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Appendix 1: Factor Arrays

		Actual			*Ideal*	
		I	*II*	*III*	*I*	*II*
1	I made a conscious choice to forgive the person who hurt me.	4	2	4	4	3
2	Forgiving the person who hurt me was a gift from me to him/her.	-2	-1	2	2	-1
3	I forgave the person who hurt me out of love for him/her.	0	5	5	4	4
4	I forgave the person who hurt me out of compassion for him/her.	0	3	1	3	4
5	Just as God has forgiven me, I forgave the person who hurt me—not out of duty, but in humility.	1	-1	4	4	-3
6	I had to forgive the person who hurt me because if I did not, God would not forgive me my sins.	-1	-3	5	5	-4
7	I forgave the person who hurt me out of gratitude for God's love for me.	1	-3	3	5	-3
8	I forgave the person who hurt me because I know God loves him/her.	-1	-1	5	5	-3
9	I forgave the person who hurt me because forgiving is the morally right thing to do.	1	-2	3	2	-1
10	I forgave the person who hurt me because I was taught to forgive.	-1	-2	4	3	-2
11	I forgave the person who hurt me because it is my duty to forgive.	0	-2	1	1	-5
12	Forgiving the person who hurt me helped him/her to get past the situation and move on.	0	2	0	0	0
13	To me, forgiveness meant giving the person who hurt me a second chance.	0	1	2	1	0

		Actual			*Ideal*	
		I	*II*	*III*	*I*	*II*
14	I was able to forgive the person who hurt me very quickly.	-4	-3	-1	0	0
15	It took me a long time to forgive the person who hurt me.	3	2	-1	-5	-2
16	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant accepting what happened and just getting over it.	3	0	0	0	2
17	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant accepting their flaws.	0	3	1	0	2
18	Even though I forgave the person who hurt me, this person deserved to be punished.	1	-4	0	-4	-4
19	I forgave the person who hurt me, but only after I saw that s/he had been punished for what s/he had done.	-2	-2	-3	-4	-5
20	I forgave the person who hurt me even though I don't think justice was done.	3	-1	0	-1	0
21	I forgave the person who hurt me even though I don't think it was fair that I had to do anything for this person, much less forgive.	0	-1	1	0	0
22	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant letting him/her off the hook.	-1	-2	-2	-2	-4
23	I forgave the person who hurt me because s/he had good reason for doing what s/he did.	-2	1	-2	-1	2
24	I forgave the person who hurt me because "I had it coming to me."	-4	-5	-1	-2	-1
25	I forgave the person who hurt me because we're all human—we all make mistakes.	1	3	-1	1	3
26	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant just forgetting what happened.	-3	-4	-2	-1	-2
27	Even though I have forgiven the person who hurt me, I have not forgotten what happened.	5	4	-1	-3	2
28	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant seeing the whole person for what s/he is, not just the hurtful thing s/he did to me.	3	5	2	1	4
29	Before I could forgive, I had to talk with the person who hurt me about what s/he did.	-3	4	0	0	-1
30	I had to let the person who hurt me know how I felt about what s/he did before I could forgive him/her.	-1	2	1	0	1
31	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant being able to move on with my life—let the past be the past.	4	2	1	2	5
32	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant that I no longer dwelled on what happened.	2	-1	2	3	5
33	Although I forgave the person who hurt me, I still don't completely trust him/her.	5	2	-1	-3	1
34	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant trusting them again.	-5	1	1	1	0

		Actual			*Ideal*	
		I	*II*	*III*	*I*	*II*
35	I forgave the person who hurt me to solve the problem.	1	-1	-3	-1	-1
36	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant I had to give up a certain amount of power.	2	-3	-4	-3	-2
37	Forgiving the person who hurt me made me feel powerful.	1	-5	-3	-4	-2
38	Forgiving the person who hurt me made me feel like a weak person.	-2	-2	-3	-5	-3
39	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant that I would not hold a grudge against him/her.	1	1	1	3	2
40	Now that I have forgiven the person who hurt me, I no longer try to avoid him/her.	1	1	-1	1	1
41	Now that I have forgiven the person who hurt me, I feel good about him/her—just as good as I felt before s/he hurt me.	-5	0	3	0	1
42	Now that I have forgiven the person who hurt me, I treat him/her just as well as I did before s/he hurt me.	-1	2	3	1	4
43	I forgave the person who hurt me, but I did not make up with him/her.	4	-4	-5	-3	-3
44	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant that I could act in a civil manner toward him/her.	2	0	0	0	2
45	Now that I have forgiven the person who hurt me, I will never bring this up again—I have wiped the slate clean.	-2	0	2	2	2
46	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant telling him/her outright "I forgive you."	-3	0	3	2	-1
47	I was able to forgive the person who hurt me only after s/he admitted that what s/he did was wrong.	-5	-1	-3	-1	0
48	I forgave the person who hurt me only when s/he took responsibility for what s/he did.	-4	0	-1	-2	1
49	I was able to forgive the person who hurt me only after s/he apologized to me.	-3	-1	-4	-2	-1
50	I forgave the person who hurt me only when I knew s/he would never do this to me again.	-2	-3	-2	-2	-2
51	I forgave the person who hurt me even when I knew s/he might hurt me again.	2	2	-1	0	1
52	I forgave the person who hurt me to show that I was the bigger person..	0	-4	-4	-3	-4
53	I forgave the person who hurt me because I knew that s/he had not meant to hurt me.	-4	4	0	-1	3
54	I found it easier to forgive the person who hurt me because we had a close relationship.	-2	1	0	-2	1
55	I found it harder to forgive the person who hurt me because we had a close relationship.	2	1	-2	-1	-1

		Actual			*Ideal*	
		I	*II*	*III*	*I*	*II*
56	I forgave the person who hurt me because I knew it would make me feel better.	2	0	1	1	1
57	I forgave the person who hurt me to get rid of my feelings of anger and resentment for what s/he did.	3	1	-2	1	3
58	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant that I no longer felt anger or resentment.	-3	0	0	3	5
59	I forgave the person who hurt me, but I still have negative feelings about him/her.	5	0	-4	-4	-5
60	I forgave the person who hurt me when I understood what led him/her to do what s/he did.	0	5	-5	-1	3
61	Forgiving the person who hurt me meant, basically, just pretending nothing had happened.	0	-5	-5	-5	-2
62	I forgave the person who hurt me because not forgiving him/her would only have hurt me more.	4	1	2	2	1
63	I forgave the person who hurt me because I believe that forgiving makes the world a better place.	2	0	2	2	0
64	I forgave the person who hurt me, because I believe that everything is forgivable—nothing is unforgivable.	-1	-2	4	4	-1
65	I forgave the person who hurt me because s/he has had a tough life.	-1	4	-2	-1	0
66	I forgave the person who hurt me because I was able to put myself in his/her shoes.	-1	3	0	-2	0

Appendix 2: Demographic Information

	Actual I	*Actual II*	*Actual III*	*Ideal I*	*Ideal II*
Sex	7 women 4 men	5 women 1 man	2 women 2 men	6 women 4 men	8 women 4 men
Age (M)	44.40	32.50	48.33	48.38	41.91
Religious background	6 Christian 5 none	4 Christian 2 none	4 Christian 0 none	10 Christian 0 none	5 Christian 7 none
Attendance at religious services (M)*	1.09	1.00	6.00	4.60	0.17
Importance of prayer (M)*	3.82	2.67	5.00	5.00	3.25
Continued relationship?	4 yes 7 no	5 yes 1 no	4 yes 0 no	5 yes 5 no	7 yes 5 no
Years since offense (M)	5.89	2.88	6.00	6.56	4.16
Upsetting at* the time (M)	4.55	5.17	6.00	5.40	4.75
Upsetting* now (M)	2.35	2.83	2.00	1.90	2.14

**These items were scored on Likert scales as follows:*

***Attendance at religious services**: 1 = never; 2 = once a year; 3 = a few times a year; 4 = once a month; 5 = a few times a month; 6 = once a week; 7 = a few times a week; 8 = pretty well every day.*

***Importance of prayer and religious observance in daily life**: 1 = not important; 2 = slightly important; 3 = somewhat important; 4 = important; 5 = very important.*

***Upsetting at the time/now**: 1 = not at all upsetting; 2 = just a little upsetting; 3 = somewhat upsetting; 4 = very upsetting; 5 = traumatic; 6 = devastating.*