



Three ways to forgive: A numerically aided phenomenological study

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The topic of forgiveness has received increased attention in the psychological literature; however, definitional and operational clarity remains a stumbling block. We propose that the study of first-person experiential accounts can enrich ongoing definitional and psychometric efforts. We systematically examined such accounts of forgiveness, identifying recurrent themes and then clustering these accounts according to similarities in theme profiles. People reported forgiveness through interpersonal confrontation with their transgressor (Cluster I), intra-personal evaluation of human fallibility and moral commitments (Cluster II), and attempts to resume a positive relationship without presuming that the transgression could be ignored or forgotten (Cluster III). The findings of the present research help to integrate recent studies of forgiveness, and the implications of a tripartite model of forgiveness are considered.

Within the flux of social life, some interactions cause great pain and hurt. From a searing stare to misinformed gossip, from a forgotten dinner date to betrayal by a significant other, everyone at one time or another has experienced the sting of another's transgression. Some victims of transgression cling to the negative emotions associated with their hurt, often prolonging their anger, bitterness and hostility (c.f. Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 1999; Williams & Williams, 1993). Other victims find a way to overcome their anger, neutralize bitterness and minimize retribution. In other words, they somehow find a way to forgive their transgressor.

There is growing empirical evidence that forgiving an interpersonal transgression decreases antisocial motivation (e.g. McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), allows relationship repair (e.g. Fincham, 2000), provides personal strength (e.g. Freedman & Enright, 1996) and increases psychological and physiological well-being (e.g. Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). However, forsaking the negative emotions that follow a transgression can be very difficult (Schimmel, 2002). The greater the wound and the greater the status differential between the victim and transgressor, the more difficult

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forgiveness will be. A pivotal question then becomes, how do people find a way to forgive? What are the paths to forgiveness?

To address these questions, social psychologists have recently studied forgiveness more intensively (e.g. Boon & Sulsky, 1997; McCullough *et al.*, 1998, 1997; Wohl & Branscombe, 2004, 2005; Wohl & Reeder, 2004; Worthington & Wade, 1999). As in many emerging areas of research, however, there is continuing debate about what forgiveness actually is (see McCullough, 2001). Most researchers (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; McCullough, 2001) agree that forgiveness is conceptually distinct from pardoning (which is a legal term), excusing (which implies that the wrongdoer had good reason to commit the offence) or forgetting (which implies cessation of concern about the offence). However, definitional and operational clarity about the activities that constitute forgiveness remains elusive.

We propose that concrete description of the activities that constitute forgiveness is an important and challenging empirical project. During the emergence of forgiveness research, it is especially important that this project be undertaken in a manner that: (1) allows empirical contradiction of definitional presuppositions; (2) enables concrete examination of the respondent's experience of how forgiveness occurs; and (3) facilitates articulation, when appropriate, of different types of forgiveness. Attempts to explore the conceptual boundaries of forgiveness have not uniformly met these objectives.

Challenging definitional presuppositions

Differences of opinion about the nature of forgiveness resonate in the instruments used in forgiveness research. In the self-report measures that are most commonly used, direct questions (e.g. asking whether a person is likely or willing to forgive) are often complemented by items representing a variety of activities potentially involved in forgiveness. However, item selection for these instruments is often guided as much by conceptual presuppositions as by empirical considerations. For example, a simple forgiveness scale reported by McCullough *et al.* (1997, Study 1) included a single self-reported forgiveness item ('I have forgiven the person') and four additional items consistent with their definition of forgiveness as a 'constructive disposition' (wishing well, thinking favourably) and the 'absence of a destructive disposition' (condemnation, disapproval) towards the transgressor. The single forgiveness item clearly does not help to articulate forgiveness related activities because of its dependence upon the respondent's implicit conception of forgiveness. In contrast, the other four items begin to describe thoughts and feelings indicative of the motivational changes by which these authors define forgiveness.

Despite evidence of internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity, and predictive efficacy within a model of apology, forgiveness and reconciliation, the scale described by McCullough *et al.* seems prematurely constrained by their conception of forgiveness as a *motivational* disposition (forgiveness is evidenced by the reduction in both the motivation to seek revenge and to avoid the transgressor). In contrast, Subkoviak *et al.* (1995), when developing the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI), defined forgiveness as the 'absence of negative affect, judgment and *behavior* toward an offender and the presence of positive affect, judgment and *behavior* toward this same offender' (*italics ours*, p. 642). Our present objective is not to decide whether overt behaviour should be included in descriptions of forgiveness. We point instead to the difference between stipulating conceptual boundaries of a construct (and, in this case, measurement criteria) and shaping those boundaries in a manner that is empirically motivated.

Empirical studies of the activities that comprise forgiveness require methods that enable contradiction and modification of the investigator's preconceptions of what forgiveness is. Although factor analysis of questionnaire items is one such procedure, its effectiveness for descriptive purposes is compromised when items are selected and analysed according to investigator presuppositions. The circumstances that potentially compromise an explicitly descriptive objective include (1) theoretical commitments (even carefully considered ones, as in McCullough *et al.*, 1997); (2) item selection according to what is professionally accepted in the area as definitive of forgiveness (e.g. Wade, 1989); and (3) the pursuit of functional indices (or markers) rather than full articulation of the conceptual boundaries of forgiveness. We suggest that, in descriptive studies of forgiveness, especially since it is a new area of study, analyses open to the contradiction of such presuppositions are most likely to contribute to a clearer articulation of what forgiveness means.

The experience of forgiveness

When articulation of conceptual boundaries is a research objective, it matters whether an investigative effort reflects a researcher's or a lay person's understanding of forgiveness – and there arguably is disparity between the two (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). When researchers evaluate whether certain elements (e.g. a transgressor's apology) are components of forgiveness (Denton & Martin, 1998), it is obvious that their theoretical presuppositions may lead them to disregard aspects of forgiveness that are salient to a lay person. Yet, it does not follow that the study of lay persons' judgments provides privileged access to what forgiveness 'really' is; such studies also may be constrained by investigator presuppositions. For example, Kantz (2000) examined the lay person's understanding of forgiveness by (1) identifying elements of forgiveness frequently mentioned in the literature (e.g. an apology); (2) creating a questionnaire based on those elements (e.g. 'Is an apology necessary before you would forgive someone?'); and (3) differentiating the elements that are commonly endorsed from those that are endorsed by particular groups. By relying on elements previously mentioned in the literature to construct his questionnaire, the research community's prevailing presuppositions indirectly – but almost certainly – constrained this attempt to identify components of forgiveness.

We propose that direct inductive assessment of open-ended experiential narratives can facilitate the articulation of concept boundaries in ways that *minimize* the constraining effects of researcher presuppositions.¹ Concrete experiential narratives may reflect respondents' implicit *in vivo* understanding of forgiveness – even when they cannot explicitly generate the criteria by which they distinguish forgiveness from related interpersonal events (e.g. forbearance). The key to this argument is not in experiential accounts *per se*; studies involving experiential narratives can be strongly constrained by investigator presuppositions. For example, Zeichmeister and Romero

¹ We acknowledge that, although we argue that an inductive approach to the study of forgiveness based on participants' own understanding of the concept is preferable, this method is not devoid of bias. Indeed, when participants' experiential narratives are analysed, this is done so through the lens of the researcher's own implicit assumptions about forgiveness. Nonetheless, this method does allow for the contradiction of the researchers presuppositions. For example, a commonly held presupposition in the forgiveness literature is that forgiveness is distinct from forgetting (see McCullough, Pragma, & Thorsen, 2000). Yet, in the present study, some participants explicitly stated that trying to forget the hurtful event was part of the forgiveness process. Current self-report measures could not capture this lay perception of forgiveness. Inductive approaches provide the opportunity to challenge the prevailing discourse within the research community.

(2002) had participants write narrative accounts of when they were either the victim or perpetrator of an interpersonal offence. Then, using categories derived from prior research, judges assessed the presence or absence of a variety of narrative elements. Despite these investigators' readiness to examine participants' open-ended experiential narratives, their content analysis of these narratives was powerfully constrained by concepts already prevalent among members of the investigative community. In contrast, we propose that experiential accounts would more effectively contribute to an understanding of forgiveness if they are thoroughly, concretely and inductively examined. By comparatively reviewing these narratives to identify recurrent themes, aspects of forgiveness unanticipated by the investigator might be uncovered.

Types of forgiveness

Concerns about 'the' definition of forgiveness seldom reflect the possibility that there is more than one qualitatively distinct type of forgiveness. Beyond the question of 'pseudo-forgiveness' (see Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991), there are empirical reasons for considering different types of forgiveness. For example, McCullough *et al.* (1998) developed the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory to assess reduced motivation to avoid the transgressor and to gain revenge. Not only are these two components of forgiveness factorially independent (Study 2), but structural modelling also indicates that each is involved in a separate causal path (Study 4). First, within already close relationships, transgressor apologies seem to precipitate empathy, which causes reduced avoidance and revenge (and restoration of closeness). Second, also within already close relationships, the attenuation of intrusive thoughts causes reduced revenge (independently of the restoration of closeness). This model suggests that reduced avoidance and reduced revenge are not simply dual components of forgiveness, but rather the separate outcomes of two types of forgiveness.

A classificatory (taxonomic) approach to the description of forgiveness might clarify and substantiate this possibility. Categories of experience as complex as forgiveness typically have the following similarity structure (c.f. Beckner, 1959): (1) each instance of a category has a large but unspecified number of attributes; (2) each attribute in that array is an attribute of many instances of the category; and (3) no attribute in that array is an attribute of every instance of the category. Categories defined in this way have been called polythetic classes (Sneath & Sokal, 1973), and techniques of numerical analysis exist for the identification of such classes and their more-or-less invariant attributes. Briefly, if members of a set of phenomena are examined for the presence or absence of an array of attributes, then functions such as a correlation or distance coefficient can be used to express the degree of similarity between any two members of the set. A number of cluster analytic algorithms can then be used to classify together members of the set so that within-class variation is minimized and between-class variation is maximized. These steps may be used to form classes whose more-or-less distinctive attributes can then be identified.

Applied to suitably rich experiential accounts, these classificatory procedures have been labelled numerically aided phenomenology (Kuiken & Miall, 2001; Kuiken, Schopflocher, & Wild, 1989). They enable the systematic examination of category boundaries within a context that (1) allows empirical contradiction of definitional presuppositions; (2) permits concrete examination of respondents' experience; and (3) facilitates articulation, when appropriate, of different types of experience. The goal of the present study was to pursue these descriptive objectives within the domain of forgiveness.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 26 male and female undergraduates enrolled in an introductory social psychology course in a Canadian university. Upon arrival in class, the experimenter explained that the study concerned people's experience of forgiveness. Participants were told that they would be asked to provide a written description of a time when they forgave another person, their emotional reactions to that act of forgiveness and the consequences of forgiving for their relationship's vitality. They were also informed that participation was voluntary, confidential, and not a course requirement. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 25 years ($M = 20.26$, $SD = 1.53$).

Materials

Lived experience questionnaire

In this questionnaire, participants were asked to recall a time in which they were hurt by someone, but were able to forgive that harm-doer. To facilitate the production of a written description of their experience of granting forgiveness, participants were asked to specifically describe: (1) 'the circumstances that led up to [their] experience of forgiveness'; (2) 'the particular experience that seemed to crystallize [their] ability to forgive'; and (3) 'in what ways the act of forgiveness changed [them] or [their] relationship'. As in Younger, Piferi, Jobe, and Lawler (2004), participants were also asked to describe their definition of forgiveness to assess the lay person's understanding of the construct under investigation. Specifically, participants were asked 'In general, when you use the word *forgiveness*, what do you mean?'

Reactions to forgiveness questionnaire

Participants were also provided a two-part questionnaire. The first part, adapted from the profile of mood states (POMS; McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971), presented mood descriptive adjectives, with three items each selected from scales that measure: anger, depression, anxiety, fatigue, and vigour (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*). Participants were asked to rate how they felt after they had forgiven the transgressor. The second part of the questionnaire included a series of 7-point scales, anchored at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*), designed to assess relationship improvement, transgression severity, the transgressor's reactions to forgiveness and the transgressor's efforts to correct their wrongdoing.

Analysis of the experiential narratives

The authors of the paper first read all narratives to become generally acquainted with the experiences that led participants in the current study to grant forgiveness. Of the transgressions reported, 39% reported an act of insensitivity (e.g. a friend stating that the participant had a big nose) and 32% reported an act of cheating by a dating partner (e.g. boyfriend cheating on the participant when she went away to university). Other transgressions involved a physical altercation (14%), being ignored (7%), stolen property (4%) and invasion of privacy (4%).

Participants' experiential narratives were then systematically compared by all three authors to identify similarly expressed meanings (see Kuiken & Miall, 2001, for a detailed description of these procedures). Discrepancies in the interpretation of statements in participants' narratives were reviewed by all judges and final classification was determined by consensus. When sentences with similar meaning occurred in three or

more narratives, they were paraphrased to reflect as much of their common meaning as possible. For example, the following three statements, each from a different narrative, were understood to express a common meaning: (1) 'The act of forgiveness was an act of personal strength'; (2) 'The experience helped me to realize that I'm capable of forgiveness despite how difficult it is to forgive someone who has hurt you'; and (3) 'Forgiveness has taught me how strong I can be'. The meaning that these statements had in common was paraphrased, as follows, to reflect as much of their shared meaning as possible: 'Forgiveness is an expression of *my* moral fortitude'. The wording of such paraphrases, called constituents, is constrained exclusively by the requirement that it emerges from the comparative effort through which are captured the similar meanings of recurrent expressions within the set of narratives. In short, careful comparison displaces theoretical expectations. This aspect of our approach, which is crucial to its descriptive objectives, can be contrasted with content analysis in which participant meanings are coded according to preconceived discourse categories.

When a constituent had been identified, each narrative within the available set was systematically reread to determine the presence or absence of that expressed meaning. Gradually, through repeated reading, an array of 20 such constituents was identified, each of which was neither rare (i.e. found in less than 10% of the narratives) nor ubiquitous (i.e. found in more than 90% of the narratives). The resulting 20×26 array was subjected to an increase in sum of squares (Ward's) hierarchical cluster analysis (using squared Euclidian distance coefficients), revealing three distinct clusters of experiential forgiveness narratives. Then a k-means cluster analysis, beginning with the three cluster centres identified using Ward's method, was used to optimize cluster compactness, resulting in clusters with 8, 8 and 10 members. To determine whether the structure displayed by this cluster solution was non-random, the input matrix was randomized and reanalysed across a series of 120 trials to provide mean fusion values and their confidence intervals (ClustanGraphics; Wishart, 2000). The null hypothesis for the obtained three cluster solution could confidently be rejected, $t = 3.156$, $p < .001$.

Results

The prevalence of each constituent across clusters was compared to identify the constituents that differentiated one cluster from the other two. A constituent was regarded as differentiating if (1) it occurred in at least three members of the cluster; (2) it occurred at least twice as often as in the other two clusters combined; and (3) the proportion of individuals expressing it within a cluster was greater than the proportion expressing it in the other two clusters combined, using the chi-square statistic ($p < .05$) as a criterion. It should be emphasized that, because clustering techniques maximize between cluster differences, the chi-square statistic was used descriptively here and not in its usual role for testing non-random departures from group equivalence (Everitt, Landau, & Leese, 2004, p. 180). The preceding are systematic criteria for describing the structure of a data set that was already demonstrably not random (see above). The characteristic attributes of each cluster, along with the non-differentiating characteristics, are summarized in Table 1. Excerpts from narratives whose profiles most nearly resembled the ideal type for each cluster are also presented in the summary descriptions that follow.

Table 1. Proportion of cluster members expressing each constituent in each of the three clusters

Constituent	Cluster		
	I	II	III
I let him/her know about my complaint/how I felt	0.875*	0.100	0.111
I was able to let go of negative feelings through forgiveness	0.750*	0.300	0.333
Our relationship was strengthened following forgiveness	0.875*	0.100	0.111
I directly brought the issue into the open with the transgressor	0.625*	0.100	0.000
Relationship returned to normal after forgiveness	0.000	0.600*	0.000
Forgiveness is an expression of my moral fortitude	0.000	0.400*	0.000
I believe that people in general are fallible	0.000	0.300*	0.000
Forgiving helped me discover both who I am and what my capabilities are	0.000	0.300*	0.000
I am concerned about whether forgiveness should occur without an apology	0.125	0.400*	0.000
Forgiveness is not holding a grudge/I refused to hold a grudge	0.375	0.500	0.000**
I forgave for my own emotional and/or psychological well-being	0.375	0.400	0.000**
I did not forget the transgression but I tried to develop a positive relationship anyway	0.125	0.100	0.556*
Relationship worsened or ended even though I forgave	0.000	0.000	0.556*
I needed to forget the transgression	0.250	0.100	0.111
Forgiveness followed an apology or acknowledgement of wrongdoing	0.375	0.300	0.111
Some people are fallible because of their character	0.125	0.200	0.111
Forgiveness is an expression of my spirituality or philosophy of life	0.250	0.000	0.111
I forgave for the sake of the other person's emotional and/or psychological well-being	0.250	0.100	0.222
To say I forgive is a means of preventing a reoccurrence of the hurtful act	0.125	0.100	0.222
I decided/managed to get past my negative emotions	0.000	0.200	0.111

Note. * More frequently present than in the other two clusters, $p > .05$; ** less frequently present than in the other two clusters, $p > .05$.

Cluster I

Participants in the first cluster indicated that their experience of forgiveness began when they brought the issue into the open with the transgressor (Constituent 4), seemingly in an atmosphere of confrontation (e.g. 'I was perfectly frank with him'; 'I confronted her about it'). Within this confrontation, there was an element of self-disclosure (Constituent 1), often of personal feelings (e.g. 'I told her exactly how I was feeling'; 'after months and months of . . . heated conversations'). Through forgiveness, however, these participants were able to let go of their negative feelings (Constituent 2), with signs of relief (e.g. 'I was able to forgive and move on . . . The anger just goes away'; 'people who can forgive others are doing themselves a favour by removing all of the negative energy'). Moreover, participants in this cluster indicated that their relationship was actually strengthened through this effort (Constituent 3), with intimations of

broader well-being (e.g. 'I think that it made our relationship stronger and healthier'; 'I believe that we became closer'). In sum, participants in this cluster reported a type of forgiveness within which they worked through the repercussions of the transgression and developed an even stronger relationship with the transgressor than before.

Cluster II

Participants in the second cluster described a more intra-personal process. They reported that forgiveness was an expression of their moral fortitude (Constituent 6) or an affirmation of their personal development (Constituent 8). In the former case, forgiveness affirmed their personal strength (e.g. 'The experience helped me to realize that I'm capable of forgiveness'; 'I found out that I have the strength to forgive'). In the latter, forgiveness implied self-development (e.g. 'The act of forgiveness was an act of self-improvement'; 'Forgiving [enabled] me to ask . . . Who do I want to be?'). These participants also commented on their general appreciation of human fallibility (Constituent 7), providing a principled context, possibly independent of an apology (Constituent 9), within which to forgive (e.g. '[Forgiveness is] acknowledging that everyone makes mistakes, lacks judgment, and everyone is human'; 'Because we are not perfect, we make or hurt ourselves as well as others in everyday life'). Finally, these participants reported that, following forgiveness, their relationship with the transgressor returned to normal (Constituent 5, e.g. 'It allowed me a returned relationship'). In sum, participants in this cluster reported a type of forgiveness within which they were able to act with integrity despite human fallibility and, by doing so, to resume their normal relationship with the transgressor.

Cluster III

Participants in the third cluster reported a desire to develop a positive relationship with the transgressor even though they were unable to forget the transgression (Constituent 12). Their comments emphasized that forgiveness does not mean blindness to the wrong that was done (e.g. 'I tried to maintain a positive relationship with that person despite the wrong, without ignoring it or repressing it'; 'Forgiveness doesn't always go hand in hand with forgetting; not forgetting is a way to prevent a repeat occurrence'). Moreover, in contrast to participants in Clusters I and II, they noticeably did *not* say that forgiveness means not holding a grudge (Constituent 10). In addition, unlike other participants, they did *not* acknowledge that forgiveness might have implications for their own well-being (Constituent 11). Unsurprisingly, these participants reported that their relationship with the transgressor deteriorated despite their forgiveness (Constituent 13, e.g. 'Our friendship was never really close after that'). In sum, participants in this cluster reported a type of forgiveness seemingly offered for the sake of a positive relationship, although they were reluctant to forget the transgression and found that their relationship with the transgressor deteriorated despite their act of forgiveness.

POMS mood ratings

To compare the three clusters further, a series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted on the five mood subscales of the POMS. Two of the five subscales (anxiety and depression) met the traditional level of significance, $p = .04$ and $p = .03$, respectively, and one of the five subscales (fatigue) was marginally significant, $p = .09$. Tukey's HSD *post hoc* test revealed that:

- (1) Participants in Cluster I ($M = 1.63$) scored significantly higher on the anxiety subscale than did participants in Cluster III ($M = 0.42$), $p = .04$, while Cluster II participants ($M = 1.00$) did not differ from either Cluster I or Cluster III participants on this dimension, $ps > .30$;
- (2) Participants in Cluster II ($M = 1.96$) reported more depression following their act of forgiveness than did participants in Cluster III ($M = 0.77$), $p = .03$, while Cluster I participants ($M = 1.00$) did not differ significantly from the participants in either Cluster II or Cluster III, $ps > .11$; and
- (3) Participants in Cluster I ($M = 2.46$) reported greater fatigue than did participants in Cluster III ($M = 1.10$), $p = .07$, while Cluster II participants ($M = 1.67$) did not differ from participants in either Cluster I or Cluster III, $ps > .41$.

Since omnibus ANOVAs were not significant for the other two subscales (anger-hostility and vigour), $ps > .20$, Tukey's HSD *post hoc* test was not performed on these measures.

Relationship and interaction ratings

All participants were asked to rate the severity of the original transgression. As indicated in Table 2, a one-way ANOVA indicated no differences between clusters on this rating. There also were no cluster differences in participants' ratings of whether the transgressor 'did as much as possible to correct their wrongdoing(s)', and whether the transgressor reacted positively or negatively to their act of forgiveness.

Table 2. Questionnaire items

	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		F	P
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Severity of transgression	5.63	1.30	5.25	2.12	5.00	1.41	0.33	.73
Transgressor attempted to correct the wrong	4.88	1.96	3.57	1.72	4.20	2.15	0.81	.46
Transgressor's reaction to attempts at reconciliation	5.50	1.51	4.86	1.46	5.10	2.02	0.27	.77
Relationship is better than before the transgression	5.75	1.16	3.88	1.36	2.30	0.67	22.98	<.001

However, there were differences between clusters on participant ratings of whether their relationship with the transgressor was 'better now than it was before the transgression'. Tukey's HSD *post hoc* test indicated that participants in Cluster I reported more improvement in their relationship with the transgressor than did participants in either Cluster II or Cluster III, $p = .006$ and $p < .001$, respectively. Participants in Cluster II reported more improvement in their post-forgiveness relationship than did participants in Cluster III, $p = .02$.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to identify respondents' implicit understanding of forgiveness. We attempted to describe and classify concrete experiential accounts of the activities that constitute forgiveness, allowing for the possibility that there is more than

one qualitatively distinct type of forgiveness. Results from our study help to articulate three different types of forgiveness. One way that people can begin to forgive is by confronting their transgressor (Cluster I). By bringing the issue into the open and revealing transgression-related issues and concerns, forgiveness enables letting go of negative feelings towards the transgressor. Mood ratings for this cluster indicate that such forgiveness occurs in an atmosphere of tension and anxiety, followed by fatigue. Working through the repercussions of the transgression, however, enables the development of a relationship with the transgressor that is reportedly even stronger than before the transgression.

A second type of forgiveness emerges from a largely covert evaluation of human fallibility and moral commitments (Cluster II). As an expression of moral fortitude, forgiveness in this context is an affirmation – and, for some, a realization – that they have the strength to forgive. These covert reflections, even without an apology, allow the resumption of a normal relationship, even though mood ratings for this cluster indicate that such normalcy is tinged with dejection and depression.

A third type of forgiveness emerges from the desire to resume a positive relationship with the transgressor but without the presumption that forgiveness will enable one to ignore or forget the transgression (Cluster III). These participants' comments suggest that, although their forgiveness expressed readiness to restore a positive relationship, they continued to be vigilant about the possibility of additional transgressions. This observation takes on additional significance in the context of what they do *not* say – they seldom report that forgiveness precludes holding a grudge. Although associated with relatively low levels of anxiety and depression, forgiveness in this form is associated with long-term deterioration of the relationship.

The fact that Cluster III was differentiable partly because of what cluster members do not say about forgiveness requires careful consideration. First, this possibility emerges in the use of cluster analytic algorithms applied to squared Euclidian distances, a proximity coefficient that gives equal weight to the shared presence and the shared absence of attributes. We might have chosen instead Jaccard's coefficient, which is based entirely upon the shared presence of attributes, but we chose squared Euclidian distances partly for statistical reasons (e.g. their fit with cluster algorithms, like Ward's method, that assess increases in sums of squares). Second, ascribing similarity to individuals on the basis of attributes that they jointly do not possess might seem to open the way to a potentially infinite array of attributes that are jointly not shared – and, consequently, to an artificially induced 'similarity'. However, within the context of a delimited array of attributes (20 in the present study), ascribing similarity to cluster members partly by virtue of attributes they jointly do not possess is appropriate (and commonplace) because these same attributes *are* possessed by the members of both of the other clusters. In other words, the failure to report that forgiveness precludes holding a grudge is important to the characterization of Cluster III precisely because such reports were common in the other two clusters.

Importantly, there were several constituents that did not differentiate among the three clusters (see Constituents 14 to 20). For example, there were no differences in the proportion of participants in each cluster who emphasized the need to forget the transgression (Constituent 14). In fact, the number of participants expressing this desire was rather low, suggesting that, regardless of cluster, participants were not merely trying to avoid thoughts of the transgression but instead remained keenly aware of the hurtful event as they sought a way to move past it. Similarly, the presence of an apology by the transgressor was uniformly distributed across clusters (Constituent 15), suggesting that,

in general (and as commonly understood), an apology tends to attenuate negative responses to harm (e.g. Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agaric, 1989). Given this pattern of results, it appears that, regardless of the way people approach forgiveness, an apology will facilitate this process (see also Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989). These examples indicate that, although there are fundamental differences between clusters, there are also common features each of which contributes to our understanding the three different types of forgiveness identified here.

Locating these types of forgiveness in prior research

There is a foreshadowing of this tripartite typology in prior research. Specifically, the structural model supported in research by McCullough *et al.* (1998) suggests two distinct causal paths towards forgiveness. The first path begins with an apology by the transgressor; this apology precipitates empathy, which, in turn, causes reduced motivation to avoid the transgressor and to seek revenge. We suggest that this sequence involves joint action between the transgressor and victim comparable to that reported by participants in Cluster I. First, the victim's direct revelation of feelings and concerns may create conditions that precipitate the transgressor's apology. Second, the victim's acknowledgement of the apology may be the first step towards empathically working through reactions to such a confrontation. Third, within this exchange, (1) the victim may experience a reduction in revenge motivation; (2) both the victim and transgressor may experience a reduction in avoidance motivation; and (3) an actual deepening of the interpersonal relationship may follow. This development may be analogous to, or even a direct manifestation of, the interpersonal component of personal growth that sometimes follows traumatic events (c.f. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001).

The second path to forgiveness identified by McCullough *et al.* (1998) involves the attenuation of intrusive thoughts regarding the transgression. Their findings indicate that such attenuation does not result from an apology or empathy, but that it nonetheless causes reduced revenge motivation. We suggest that this pattern is comparable to the covert activities by which participants in Cluster II were often able to stop holding a grudge. Perhaps the ruminations by which moral fortitude is covertly affirmed enable victims to inhibit revenge seeking. Such moral fortitude may be contrastively enhanced by the general belief that humans are fallible—that is, capable of moral accomplishment but susceptible to moral failing. While the realization of moral strength within the context of human fallibility may, as indicated by mood ratings, be depressing, it nonetheless enables the abandonment of vengeance and the resumption of normalcy in relations with the transgressor (c.f. Wohl & Reeder, 2004).

Our results indicate that there is a third path towards forgiveness not identified by McCullough *et al.* (1998) but discussed elsewhere. Participants in Cluster III reported that they forgave their transgressor for the sake of the relationship, as though preserving the relationship was more important than the transgression in question. Ironically, their attempt to restore a positive relationship was associated with reluctance to let go of their negative feelings and, perhaps not surprisingly, with eventual deterioration of the relationship. This type of forgiveness has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Augsburger, 1981; Cunningham, 1985) and labelled 'pseudo-forgiveness' (e.g. Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992). The reasoning is straightforward. If true forgiveness leads to the absence of negative and the presence of positive affect, judgment, and behaviour towards the transgressor (Subkoviak *et al.*, 1995), then participants in Cluster III seem, *by definition*, to have falsely reported forgiveness. However, caution in this context seems warranted. According to Enright (2001), pseudo-forgiveness is driven

primarily by the desire for relief from personal distress. However, participants in Cluster III did not once report that they forgave for the sake of their own emotional or psychological well-being (Constituent 11). Enright also suggests that pseudo-forgiveness does not effectively blend altruistic and selfish motivation. However, participants in Cluster III report that they tried to restore a positive relationship even while remaining vigilant about a possible recurrence of the offence (e.g. 'not forgetting is a way to prevent a repeat occurrence'). Given this balance in their stated aspirations, it may be appropriate to consider the type of forgiveness represented by Cluster III as *failed* forgiveness rather than *pseudo*-forgiveness. Doing so, however, reveals the difficulty of defining forgiveness primarily by reference to its consequences. Participants in our research apparently understand forgiveness as a profile of activities that can be differentiated from their separate or combined consequences. For them, this profile of activities constitutes forgiveness even though forgiveness – as they conceive it – has failed to achieve the desired consequences (including those that researchers might stipulate).

There is no need to privilege either activity choices or activity consequences in psychological definitions of forgiveness. However, it is crucial to understand that research participants may emphasize forgiveness activity choices rather than forgiveness activity consequences when answering questions that rely on their implicit understanding of forgiveness (e.g. 'to what extent are you willing to forgive. . .?'). Moreover, beyond this methodological issue, it is important to ask whether we should define forgiveness, or different types of forgiveness, according to the activities chosen and independently of the consequences of those choices.

By relying on direct experiential accounts of respondents' implicit understanding of forgiveness, we have taken some steps in that direction. In the accounts of forgiveness described here, our phenomenological methods highlight contrasting activity choices. The first type of forgiveness (Cluster I) entails joint action between the victim and transgressor; the second (Cluster II) involves covert moral reflection; and the third (Cluster III) balances vigilance and relationship maintenance. More extensive and properly focused phenomenological studies might reveal additional details about these overt and sometimes covert forgiveness activity choices.

Caveats and conclusions

Articulation of the different ways that people forgive is an enterprise with potentially important practical implications. Some limitations of the current research, however, should be noted. The types of transgression reported were restricted to those familiar to undergraduate students. The typical transgression involved a person being insensitive or a cheating dating partner. Thus, a more diverse sample would have provided a wider range of transgression and transgression severity. Recently McLernon, Cairns, and Hewstone (2002) analysed experiential accounts of forgiveness among residents of Northern Ireland. Although their objective was to compare groups (Protestants victims, Catholic victims, Loyalist paramilitaries and Republican paramilitaries) rather than to articulate types of forgiveness *per se*, the diversity of perspectives represented in that study exemplifies the manner in which the present research paradigm might be extended. It is quite conceivable that, with more diversity in the sample of transgressions, more types of forgiveness might be identified. Nonetheless, a more diverse sample should at least provide the three ways to forgive we have identified. That is, the fact that our sample is rather homogeneous does not diminish the importance of the three ways to forgive identified in the population studied here.

At first glance, our results suggest that forgiveness through the joint action of victim and transgressor is preferable because it fosters strengthened relationships. Worthington and Wade (1999) have emphasized, however, that initiating joint action entails a risk: the transgressor *may* respond negatively to the victim's overtures. Perhaps, then, the typology observed here should be used to develop a decision-making model of the various ways that a harmed person can come to forgive. Perhaps when the risks associated with joint action are substantial, forgiveness within the context of covert moral reflection is a viable alternative because it at least restores the *status quo*. In addition, when the risks of dialogue are especially great, the forgiveness that balances relationship harmony and vigilance at least preserves the integrity of the victim.

Our results suggest, however, that victims do not simply resort to intra-personal moral reflection or to balanced harmony and vigilance when the interpersonal risk is too great; there were no differences between clusters in the extent to which the transgressor was perceived to respond negatively or positively to the victim's attempts at reconciliation or in the extent to which the transgressor was perceived to attempt redress of his/her wrongdoing. This finding suggests that the choices facing the potentially forgiving victim should not be oversimplified. More complete articulation of the sequence of activities by which people grant forgiveness and of the consequences of the decision to forgive may contribute to our understanding of these dilemmas and their impact on the relationship. Research supporting such articulation would ideally involve a longitudinal study of the ways people forgive and their consequences.

The present results also suggest the importance of clarifying the sense of justice that is characteristic of each of these types of forgiveness. Our observations suggest that even the forgiveness 'failures' reported by participants in Cluster III are driven by the victim's concern about maintaining a relationship with the transgressor. In future studies, it may be important to clarify the sense of justice that motivates relationship maintenance – and how it contrasts with the sense of justice that motivates the apparent equity of dialogue (Cluster I) or covert tolerance of the transgressor's moral failure (Cluster II). Doing so will require much more extensive and detailed experiential narratives than those we gathered here, but the results may enrich our accounts of forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation.

The activities through which people forgive may differ for severe and minor transgressions, and, for the most part, the transgressions reported in the present study were not severe. In addition, the way people forgive may depend upon social context, and that aspect of forgiveness narratives was not explicitly queried in the present project. It would also be tempting to examine more closely the differences between relationship enhancement and reconciliation suggested by the contrast between those who forgive through joint action and those who forgive through covert moral reflection. That, too, was not explicitly queried. Nonetheless, our results suggest the utility of systematic qualitative studies, including the numerically aided phenomenological methods used here (Kuiken & Miall, 2001). Previous phenomenological work on forgiveness (Rowe & Halling, 1998) is arguably more vulnerable to investigator presuppositions, less systematically comparative and descriptive, and less amenable to the articulation of different types of experiential accounts. The rigorous and yet sensitive pursuit of conceptual boundaries in the study of forgiveness requires close consideration of these methodological issues.

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