Personal Narratives of Forgiveness: A Journaling Study

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study of forgiveness as a dynamically unfolding process, using online journals kept by three volunteers. Narrative themes are explored, making note of the diversity of ways in which forgiveness is described by participants. The aim of the study is not to make definitive statements about the nature of forgiveness, but to point out its complexity and draw attention to subtleties that may be overlooked in much of the currently booming field of forgiveness research.

Keywords: forgiveness, narrative, self-regulation, rumination, journaling, religious coping

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Opening Considerations: Conceptualizing and Measuring Forgiveness

Forgiveness has become a major topic in the psychological literature, both therapeutic and academic, in the past several years. Definitions of forgiveness vary widely: Macaskill (2005) conducted a survey of a small British sample examining differences in religious and secular conceptualizations of forgiveness among the general population. Particularly significant in the differences studied by Macaskill was the question of whether forgiveness can occur entirely intrapersonally, or whether it requires interpersonal reconciliation as well. A not insignificant philosophical literature has been devoted to issues of defining forgiveness, with this literature often emphasizing more interpersonal constructs, such as refusal to exact punishment, as compared with the intrapersonal, affective focus of many psychological studies (see e.g., Derrida, 2001; Zaibert, 2009; Ahn, 2010; Lotz, 2006). McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, and Hight's (1998) transgression-related interpersonal motivation (TRIM) scale, with subscales for avoidance and revenge (sometimes with an additional benevolence subscale; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006) is used in a number of studies to assess attitudes toward a transgressor, with decreased motivation for avoidance and revenge and increased benevolence motivation being taken to reflect forgiveness. Other scales have been developed, and many studies have used less formalized self-report measures. Besides measures of forgiveness relating to particular transgressions, measures of dispositional forgiveness have been used in a number of studies as well. Rowe, Halling, Davies, Powers, and Von Bronkhorst (1989), in a phenomenological study of

forgiveness, has questioned whether common psychological conceptions of forgiveness match people's fundamental experience of forgiving, noting particularly that it seems at times to occur independent of a decision to forgive. This issue of how forgiveness is actually experienced will be significant for the current study.

A great deal remains to be done in the areas of conceptualizing forgiveness and of developing ways to measure it. In the current study, however, attention will be given primarily to furthering the qualitative understanding of how forgiveness is experienced in interpersonal relationships. While several ways of conceptualizing forgiveness have been discussed above, in the current study the focus was on descriptions of the phenomena labeled as forgiveness by lay-persons. This addresses both the complexity of the phenomena themselves and the complex issues involved in determining which phenomena are to be labeled "forgiveness." Rather than attempting to give a conclusive definition, I chose to examine the different experiences that the participants would describe as forgiveness, looking at common themes and significant differences. An established self-report measure was used to connect the processes observed with existing measures, and a journal consisting primarily of open-ended questions was used to examine people's own descriptions of their experiences of forgiveness or unforgiveness. More will be said later about the value of journals in this type of research, but first it is necessary to address some other concepts which may be important in formulating a psychological understanding of the phenomenon of forgiveness.

Role of Rumination: Suggested Self-Regulatory Components

Rumination has been identified as a significant factor in continued negative interpersonal motivations following a transgression (e.g. McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeck, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010). Pronk and colleagues (2010) looked specifically at executive function as a predictor of forgiveness. They found it to be a significant predictor, mediated by decreased rumination, and theorized that this was due to increased ability to shift attention away from ruminative thoughts. This is particularly significant, in their view, because it helps to account for the potentially frustrating gap between the decision to forgive and an actual experience of forgiveness. As mentioned previously, a failure to account for difficulty in forgiving when one intends to is a significant point of Rowe, Halling, Davies, Liefer, Powers, and Von Bronkhorst's (1989) critique of mainstream psychological models of forgiveness. If forgiving is not a simple matter of rationally choosing to forgive (and in many cases it seems not to be), then it is important to further explore factors involved in the process of forgiving.

Pronk and colleagues' (2010) promising findings on the role of executive function in forgiveness, along with Sandage and Jankowski's (2010) findings regarding the association of forgiveness with differentiation of self (a construct related to self-regulating ability), suggest that it could be helpful to examine the role of self-regulation in the process of forgiving another for a transgression.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation has been conceptualized as a limited supply of energy, which, like a muscle, can be exhausted with use but also made stronger by repeated exercise

(Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). Baumeister and Vohs (2003) cited significant evidence for such a model. This trait/resource model of self-regulation, however, is primarily applied to fairly short-term acts of decision making, such as refusing a candy bar when one is on a diet or delaying gratification in order to receive something more enjoyable in a few hours. Thus, it may have less applicability to longer-term, dynamic processes such as forgiveness.

Self-regulation has also been conceptualized as a process, a view that has arisen primarily from Paul Karoly's studies of self-regulation in coping with chronic illness (e.g., Karoly, 1993; Maes & Karoly, 2005). Since forgiveness is, at least in many cases, a fairly long-term process, it might be better incorporated into a process model of self-regulation. Additionally, as Maes and Karoly (2005) have stated, a process/skill model is more helpful than a trait/energy model in developing interventions to improve self-regulation. Thus, interventions for promoting forgiveness might be better aligned with Meas and Karoly's model than with that of Baumeister and Vohs (2003). Maes and Karoly also emphasized the potential value in increased sharing across subdisciplines of psychology, and an application of self-regulation models rooted in health psychology to an affective/social construct such as forgiveness could be a valuable step in this direction.

Maes and Karoly (2005), in their review of process-based self-regulation models, referenced several models that consider the effects of competing goals. Since the process of forgiveness itself frequently involves overriding competing goals (such as getting even, avoiding contact with the transgressor, etc.; see McCullough et al, 1998), this may be a useful area to study in detail. Relinquishing hostile and/or avoidant goals may even

be a useful way to conceptualize forgiveness. Viewed this way, forgiveness would involve a process of goal disengagement, which Maes and Karoly described as an important but under-studied aspect of self-regulation.

Journaling as Qualitative Method

As mentioned previously, some qualitative work has been done on forgiveness and has suggested interesting ideas about the nature of this phenomenon (e.g. Rowe et al, 1988). This work, however, has been primarily retrospective in nature. In the present study, I attempted to pursue a qualitative understanding of the process of forgiveness (or lack of forgiveness) by following it through journals. Journaling has recently been used for both qualitative and quantitative understanding of a number of important phenomena. Especially with the aid of electronic media, which allow for accurate tracking of when entries are made, this methodology shows significant promise as a way of obtaining self-reports of people's experience *in situ*, allowing for more effective tracking of phenomena which occur as processes over time (Massey, Garnefski, Gebhardt, & van der Leeden, 2009; Suveg, Payne, Thomassin, & Jacob, 2010). The current study used a web-based journal to track people's experiences of responding to a transgression, hoping to explore the narratives of forgiveness as a personal experience.

Goals of the Present Study

This study aimed at a deeper qualitative understanding of the phenomenon of forgiveness. It was built on analyzing personal narratives of situations selected by the participants, which they designated as situations where forgiveness might be involved. These narratives were constructed using journal entries written while the participants

were involved in forgiveness situations, rather than using retrospective descriptions of past situations.

In part, this approach was selected in order to examine whether people's descriptions of their own experiences of forgiveness are adequately captured by the current literature. But while concerns over the adequacy of current constructs for capturing real experience have been raised by qualitative studies before (e.g. Rowe et al, 1989), in the present study I was also interested in how different people's narratives of their experiences of forgiveness differed from one another. Forgiveness can be a difficult to define and intensely personal phenomenon, and may include a much wider range of experiences than have been adequately explored in current psychological conceptualizations. While a unified concept of forgiveness that could be easily measured would have a great deal of usefulness (cf. McCullough et al, 1998; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006), it is important not simply lump together several discrete phenomena into one.

The current study is not an attempt to say definitively what forgiveness is. In fact, part of the point is that the phenomenon that we call forgiveness is a complex and often deeply personal one. Rather than seeking a clear-cut definition, we examine the narratives that emerge when people reflect on life situations that they see as involving forgiveness, whatever that may mean to them. This is also not an attempt to say what forgiveness ought to be, nor to say when, where, whom, why, or whether one should forgive. These are important questions for psychologists, theologians, ethicists, and humanity in general, but they are not the questions being addressed here. Our question is simply what it looks

like (and what variety of things it might look like) when people reflect on a situation where they may be making an effort to forgive, and what that might mean for our understanding of forgiveness.

The participants also took the TRIM-18 (McCullough et al, 2006), a widely-used test designed to measure forgiveness, in order to look at how people's descriptions of their experience of forgiveness might coincide with or differ from standard, widely-used measures. The test gives three subscales, designed to evaluate a respondent's attitude and motivations regarding a perceived transgressor. The scales are revenge (sample question: "I wish that something bad would happen to him/her"), avoidance (sample question: I am trying to keep as much distance between us as possible), and benevolence (sample question: "even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him/her"). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. This test was administered at the beginning and the end of the study.

Method

Participants

Participants were three undergraduate students at a small Christian university in Northeast Ohio, who responded to flyers posted around campus or to emails sent out by the psychology department faculty. All three participants were female; two male students also expressed interest, but withdrew during the initial meeting. All participants identified themselves as Christian. (One identified as American Baptist; the other two did not indicate a denominational affiliation.) All participants were Caucasian, with ages ranging from 19 to 21. Participants were each given a $15 gift card for a local store in return for

staying in the study for at least two weeks, and entered in a drawing for a $50 gift card to the same store if they finished the study. All three participants who began the journaling process finished it, although one omitted two entries.

Procedure

Participants met with me (JB) at the beginning of the study. They read and signed a detailed consent form describing the study (Appendix A), along with a form asking for some basic demographic information. They then filled out a set of forms asking them to describe and reflect on the transgression about which they would be writing for the remainder of the study (Appendix B). Finally, they filled out the TRIM-18 (McCullough et al, 2006) and selected two days of the week when they would be completing their journal entries. When participants asked about what might be an appropriate transgression about which to write, they were told to pick one that they felt they could gain the most by reflecting and writing on. Rather than focusing on a particular type of transgression, the goal was to look at transgressions that would produce significant personal narratives.

Participants filled out journals twice per week for four weeks, for a total of eight entries. The journal consisted of responding to a set of questions contained in an online document (Hosted on Google Docs), with access restricted using the participants' school email accounts. The journal opened with a general assessment of mood, and assessed a variety of factors in the process of forgiveness—since rumination is considered an important factor in forgiving (McCullough et al, 2007; Pronk et al, 2010), participants were asked about the frequency with which they ruminate on the transgression (rated on a

7-point Likert-type scale), and about their habitual responses to ruminative thoughts (a qualitative, open-response question). To explore the process-based model of self-regulation in relation to responses to a transgression, the journal also assessed goal setting in relation to the transgression; specifically, reconciliation, as well as the revenge and avoidance motivations described by McCullough and colleagues (1998), may be conceptualized as goals, and their changes may be seen as processes of goal setting, pursuit, and disengagement. Thus, the initial entry asked about where participants would like the relationship with the transgressor to go, and subsequent entries asked whether there had been any change in this attitude. Perception of how the relationship is likely to develop, independent of the participants' desires, was also assessed. With the journal, we also hoped to assess framing of the transgression over time; Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, and Witvliet (2008) described the ability to see oneself as capable of transgressing as an important facet of trait forgiveness, and Rowe and colleagues (1989) described a realization of common humanity with the transgressor as a key element in the momentary event of forgiveness. Based on this, I hypothesized that, over time, an increased ability to see oneself as similarly fallible would predict more positive attitudes toward the transgressor.

At each entry, participants were asked to describe major events, either within or outside of the relationship with the transgressor, which might influence attitude, perception, and/or motivation regarding the transgression. Since such events may have an impact on forgiveness quite independent of goal-setting and pursuit, it is important to account for these factors as well. At the midpoint and again at the end of the study,

participants were asked to reflect on how the practice of journal-writing had influenced their thinking about the transgression.

Confidentiality was essential to our study, particularly since it was conducted at a small institution a with fairly close-knit student community. The attached consent form outlined confidentiality procedures for the participants. Besides the participants themselves, only I (JB) knew their identities, and they were asked to use only initials or pseudonyms to refer to others in their journal entries. In the report of data below, pseudonyms are used, and personally-identifying details are omitted. Also for this reason, direct quotations have been kept to an absolute minimum.

Analyzing Data

The faculty advisor (Rater 2) and I (the author, Rater 1) independently conducted thematic analysis on the journal entries. To preserve confidentiality, personally-identifying information was removed from Rater 2's copy. Following this analysis, the two raters met to discuss their analyses and any discrepancies. There was general agreement over most of the thematic content, but some disagreement in perspective in a few places. One narrative involved several people, and the two raters discussed different possible interpretations of the roles and relevance of some of these others. (More about this situation will be discussed later.) There was also inter-rater disagreement about whether a comment about reduced rumination and increased task-focused orientation ought to be taken as active suppression (Rater 2) or increased ability to focus on present tasks due to decreased rumination and "letting go" of resentment (Rater 1). In a subsequent discussion, raters disagreed over the proper interpretation of participant's

description of her hopes for a future relationship. Raters agreed that the diversity of interpretations illustrated some of the difficulty of working with personal narratives. Not only are the issues themselves complex, but there may be lack of self-awareness on the part of the participants regarding their own motivations and attitudes. Every effort will be made in the following analysis to be sensitive to these potential complications, but it should be noted at the outset that reliance on self-report limits our ability to consider the role of unconscious, unarticulated dimensions of the experience.

Setting Up the Narratives

The sample was small and relatively uniform in terms of demographics. Still, they described a variety of situations involving forgiveness: Anette described a professional relationship perceived as inequitable, Gwendolyn a strained family relationship, and Rosemary an ended relationship with a former roommate. None of these relationships involved a single, point-in-time transgression; forgiveness seemed to be seen by the participants more as a response to general relationship issues than to one specific action. This is interesting to note, since forgiveness research tends to focus on forgiving specific, relatively isolated transgressions. The present narratives suggest the importance of forgiveness in more long-term conflicts as well, even where the exact thing to forgive may be somewhat more difficult to define.

Turning Inward: A Common Intrapersonal Focus

All of our participants focused on the intrapersonal dimensions of forgiveness; in fact, none of them described directly addressing the issue with the other person. Rosemary had no contact with the other person (and gave no indication of wanting such

contact) throughout the study, and focused her reflections on letting go of hurt feelings, accepting the current state of affairs, and “moving on.” The other two participants described a conscious decision that it would be better for the relationship to focus on their own attitudes, stating that it might only make things worse to confront the other person with their perceived hurt. This last observation may or may not be true, but it points out an interesting aspect of how forgiveness may be perceived by some people (i.e., as strictly a change in oneself, which may have positive consequences for the interpersonal relationship but does not directly involve the other person or persons). The participants in the present study did not seem to see forgiveness as identical with reconciliation, although it was suggested that the former might be conducive to the latter. In fact, forgiveness without reconciliation was fairly explicitly made a goal by Rosemary, and strongly suggested by Anette, as well.

As the study progressed, participants were more likely to acknowledge the other's perspective, mentioning in more than one case that they realized the other might not see anything wrong in his/her own actions. In the cases of Anette and Gwendolyn, where this idea was stated fairly explicitly, it was accompanied by a decision not to make the other person aware of the hurt he or she had caused. It is possible that a greater awareness of multiple perspectives encouraged participants to reconsider their own perspectives, thus prompting a more inward focus, although none of the participants suggested that they saw their own hurt as any less justified in light of this perspective-taking. Interestingly, none of the participants’ perspective-taking seemed to involve reflections on their own culpability. They continued to see themselves as the ones wronged in the situations, and

not to reflect much on whether they might also have wronged the person whom they perceived as wronging them. Of course, this may simply be an effect of the situations involved in the particular study; it may be that the participants were in fact the ones wronged by the others in their situations and did not carry much blame themselves. But this is still a theme that one might expect to see in narratives of forgiveness, and it would be interesting to see whether it would appear more in a larger sample.

Reflection and Rumination

I was particularly interested in the role of rumination in these situations. Participants described changes in patterns of rumination differently throughout the study. Rosemary, whose narrative focused on forgiveness as a process of "letting go" and "moving on" from a relationship that she saw as over, wrote about reducing rumination and directing energy that might have gone towards it to other, more present concerns. As mentioned above, there was inter-rater disagreement as to whether this should be interpreted as an act of suppression through distraction with work (rater 2), or whether it reflected an increased ability to concentrate on tasks at hand due to reduced rumination and success in "letting go" (rater 1). Anette wrote that the process of reflecting and writing about the situation in terms of forgiveness had helped her to organize her thoughts and avoid ruminating on them outside of reflection times. In this narrative especially, the labeling of the situation as one potentially involving forgiveness appears to have been very helpful.

Gwendolyn, who stated that the family relationship about which she was writing had been a troubled one for years, described reframing thoughts about the situation by

actively focusing on how to improve the relationship. This account gives the most task-focused picture of forgiveness, with a strong theme of figuring out how to forgive and "tear down the walls" in the problematic relationship. The language is most active here: forgiveness appears in this account as a deliberate change (albeit entirely intrapersonal). This account was connected with the most "forgiving" TRIM post-test scores, and with the only significant (more than one point) increase in benevolence score among the three subjects. We should not be too hasty, however, to interpret this as showing that this approach to forgiveness is the most effective. For one thing, it may simply be that this is closest to the conception of forgiveness employed by the creators of the TRIM, leaving open the question of whether that is actually the best way of approaching it. Also, a strong intentional effort to forgive might lead a respondent to give particularly forgiving answers to a survey, while a respondent focused more on understanding her own feelings might be more inclined to indicate lingering feelings related to unforgiveness. Still, the apparent power of the very deliberate, task-focused approach to forgiveness does lend some support to the self-regulative process understanding of forgiveness suggested in the introduction. This seems to be at least one way that people approach forgiveness, and at least in Gwendolyn's case, it seems to have been an effective way.

Relationships and Roles

While Rosemary's account featured a fairly straightforward dyadic relationship, the other two contained interesting observations about relationships and roles. Toward the end of Anette's narrative, she described a breakthrough in which she began to differentiate between her personal and professional relationships with the other. This is

particularly significant since much of the narrative focuses on looking forward to the end of the professional relationship, and so this may increase the potential for a positive personal relationship. Understanding transgressions as tied to certain particular roles of the transgressor may be significant in maintaining positive relationships outside of those roles, but it may also be simply a way of suppressing feelings related to conflict. The account available to us in this study gives no indication of the long-term effectiveness of this approach, but it would certainly be an interesting topic for future studies.

Gwendolyn's narrative involved a complex system of relationships, which produced a certain amount of inter-rater disagreement and discussion. The central tension was between Gwendolyn and her grandmother, but with her sister and other grandmother involved peripherally. Early in the study, Gwendolyn expressed jealousy over her grandmother's perceived favoring of her sister. Perhaps related to this, at several points, she attributed the grandmother's perceived distance and coldness to jealousy of time spent with her other grandmother. Raters differed on their interpretations of the other relationships. Rater 1 focused on the overall theme of jealousy in the family relationships, with the grandmother's jealously being construed in a manner that mirrored the participant's jealousy of her sister. Rater 2 described the narrative more in terms of triangulation involving Gwendolyn, her grandmother, and her sister, and of Gwendolyn's own progress as involving an acknowledgement of the roles played by different members of the triad. (Rater 2 gave little attention to the role of the other grandmother, although she acknowledged it when it was commented on by Rater 1.) Of course, these interpretations are not entirely mutually exclusive, but they illustrate the importance of

inter-rater dialogue in generating a balanced interpretation of the narrative under study. Raters did agree, however, on the major theme of Gwendolyn's acknowledging the hurt she experienced from her grandmother and reframing of this hurt through a focus on improving the relationship.

Role of Religious Themes

As might be expected from a study of forgiveness conducted with students at a Christian university, there were significant religious themes in the narratives. Anette's account was devoid of religious language, but both Rosemary and Gwendolyn employed significant religious themes, in significantly different ways. Gwendolyn, with her more task-focused approach to forgiveness, described religion as a motivator to forgive, with devotions and a sermon on the topic marking important points in the narrative. She also seemed to view her spirituality as a source of the ability to forgive. At an important juncture, she wrote: "God has…flooded me with the ingredients I needed for forgiveness."

Rosemary, through the course of her journal, fairly frequently expressed thankfulness to God for one thing or another in her life. As she moved more in the direction of acceptance and "moving on" from the ended relationship, she mentioned thankfulness for the whole situation; while this was partly in reference to a new and more pleasant living situation, she seemed to extend her gratitude to also include the ended relationship as a part of how God had brought her to her present situation.

The two religiously-themed narratives, in addition to showing different approaches to the idea of forgiveness, suggest different roles that religion/spirituality

might play in the process. These may relate to Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez' (1998) model of religious coping. Religious forgiving, described as "looking to religion for help in letting go of anger, hurt, and fear associated with an offense" (Pargament et al, 1998, p. 711), seems relevant to both accounts, although it more clearly corresponds to themes explicitly articulated by Gwendolyn. But the differences are perhaps better captured in terms of other aspects of religious coping. Rosemary's more acceptance-based approach is perhaps better understood as a variety of "benevolent religious reappraisal" (Pargament et al, 1998, p. 711), reframing the whole situation as something for which to thank God. Gwendolyn, by contrast, shows something more like "collaborative religious coping" (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998, p. 711), a sense of working in partnership with God to resolve a situation. This again underscores the prevailing theme of this study: forgiveness, even religious forgiveness (among American Protestants, no less) can manifest very differently, and that a great deal of subtlety may be lost in simple constructs of forgiveness based on a few survey scales. The workings of different religious approaches to forgiveness and responding to transgressions would be an interesting topic for future research, important for our understanding of both forgiveness and religious coping.

TRIM Scores

The participants' TRIM scores from the pretest and post-test are shown in the table below:

Participant	**Avoidance (Pre/post)**	**Revenge (Pre/post)**	**Benevolence (Pre/Post)**
Gwendolyn	19/10	5/5	22/30
Anette	24/14	7/9	20/19
Rosemary	31/23	11/8	19/18

These scores are interesting in light of the narratives described above. While Gwendolyn began with the most "forgiving" scores, she also shows the greatest increase in measured benevolence, which actually declined slightly in the other two. (Her revenge score is the lowest possible at both points; her benevolence post-test score is also the highest possible.) This is likely due to Gwendolyn being focused most strongly on improving the current relationship, in contrast to Rosemary's approach of trying to accept and move beyond the end of the relationship, or Anette's (slight) hope for an amiable personal relationship once the professional relationship was ended.

Rosemary's decreased avoidance score is interesting. One might expect reduced avoidance to reflect increased openness to renewing a relationship with the other person, but if that is the case here, then this openness was not clearly expressed in the journals. It may be that a more accepting attitude and reduced feelings of anger are reflected in this measure even when the respondent in question has no desire for reconciliation. If so, this is a distinction that ought to be explored—if such survey measures are to be used, it is important to understand the range of experiences that may be reflected in responses to them.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Concluding Remarks

Obviously, this study is very limited. We had only three participants who volunteered, and they were demographically a relatively homogeneous group (all female Christian college students). Comparing these narratives to those found in a larger and more diverse sample could be interesting in the future. With that being said, there is significant variation in the narratives even within this very limited sample, which further emphasizes that forgiveness can be a complex, personal experience that manifests in many different situations.

The journaling approach necessarily looks at forgiveness being reflected upon very deliberately, and this may be quite different from how forgiveness goes on in everyday life without this sort of conscious reflection. The phenomenon of forgiveness is thus probably even more diverse than what has been studied here. But it is difficult to see how one might begin to examine the experience of a phenomenon that happens without conscious reflection. The moment one begins to tease it out and analyze it, conscious reflection enters in. A limitation of self-report-based qualitative research in general is that it is restricted to working with experience at a conscious level.

This kind of longitudinal qualitative approach could be useful for understanding a variety of processes in human experience. Psychological research often suffers from the weakness of relying either on retrospection or on contrived laboratory scenarios. The present approach not only allows us to study dynamically unfolding processes such as forgiveness in real life situations, but it allows us to see the unfolding of the process over a period of time.

It would be interesting in the future to look at different ways of having participants reflect on their experience over a period of time: more or less open-ended writing, audio self-recording, or even repeated interviews are all possibilities. If reflection on an experience over time is to be used as a method, it would be helpful to study and become more aware of the effects of the method itself. In future explorations of this methodological approach, it would also be helpful to use exit interviews, not only to explore the effects of the study itself, but to help resolve inter-rater disagreements and ambiguities encountered in the data analysis.

This report has not drawn any very strong conclusions about what forgiveness is, and this is by design. This study has deliberately been broad, in order to examine the diverse elements that may be involved in people's experiences of forgiveness. I hope that this broad perspective will give a better sense of specific elements that should be studied in more detail. In particular, this study has illustrated that situations involving forgiveness are often not the sort of clear-cut ones where one person has committed some particular transgression at some particular point in time. While these single-offensive are important and obviously easier to study, people often feel the need to forgive others for complex, long-term situations that exist in complex relationships involving different roles of the people involved. People, even people who see themselves as trying to forgive, approach these situations in diverse ways, and future research on forgiveness should be careful not to disregard its complexity for the sake of convenience.

When we say that we should forgive, or that we have forgiven, or when we encourage another to forgive, we should remain aware of the complexity involved in

forgiving. This is essential not just for psychologists, or for those of us whose religious beliefs demand the forgiveness of others, but for all of us who are involved in human relationships. I hope that this small exploration of the experience of forgiveness will encourage a deeper exploration of this phenomenon, within and beyond the field of psychology. I hope that it will be a reminder that, however attractive a concise, "scientific" account of forgiveness, built on a simple lab test or survey, might look, we would do a valuable service by further exploring its depth and breadth as a deeply personal experience. I hope that this study has given a suggestion of how such a study might proceed.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Statement of Informed Consent to Participate

My name is Joel Brady, and I am an Honors Student at Malone University. As part of my completion of the B.A. in Psychology, I am conducting an Honors Thesis Project that involves research about people's experiences of forgiveness. You are being asked to take part in this study, because you have expressed an interest in it and because you have identified some event in your own life in which forgiveness might be appropriate. Perhaps, you have transgressed or have been transgressed against. Perhaps, you have asked for forgiveness or have given forgiveness. Or, maybe, you are still contemplating the issue of forgiveness as it relates to this personal situation.

In this study, you will be asked to spend time during four weeks, journaling on Google Docs about your reflections and experiences regarding forgiveness. I will ask you to reflect and write about your experiences twice per week for four weeks. And each journal entry might take from 10-35 minutes (estimated)—depending on how much time you spend reflecting and writing.

I am offering a small token of thanks for your participation. If you contribute at least two weeks to your Google Docs journal on forgiveness, you'll receive a $15.00 gift card to Giant Eagle. And all participants who take part for all four weeks of the study will be entered into a drawing for an opportunity to receive a $50.00 gift card! (Keep in mind that these can be used to purchase gift cards for a variety of other stores.) Of course, these are just small thank-yous. It is my hope that your interest in the study and your journey in this journaling experience will sustain you during the four weeks of the project.

There are no anticipated risks of this project. However, if at any time during your journaling experience, you feel a desire to speak with a counselor about your reflections, please, feel free to call the Malone University Counseling Center—which is available free of charge to Malone students—at 330-471-8439.

Potential benefits of your participation might include having a deeper understanding of your own experiences of transgression and forgiveness.

My research supervisor is Professor Lauren S. Seifert. If you have questions or concerns about this project, please, feel free to call her at 330-471-8558 or email her at LSEIFERT@malone.edu .

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Human Research Committee at Malone University. If you have any questions about ethics in human research, please, feel free to contact Professor Maria Lam at MLAM@malone.edu

ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY: Throughout this journaling study, you will be using Google Docs file, which will only be accessible to you and to me (Joel Brady). You will use your email

address to log into this document. No one else will be informed of your identity. I will keep your personal information and your identity confidential. My Honors Thesis and report of data will use pseudonyms (false names) to refer to participants, and I will practice caution in reporting information, so that your identity will be protected.

PARTICIPANT'S STATEMENT:
I HAVE READ THIS PAGE AND CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY:
_____ _____ DATED: _____
Print name, then, sign name
RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT:
I AGREE TO CONDUCT THIS STUDY IN THE WAYS THAT ARE DESCRIBED ON THIS PAGE.
_____ DATED: _____

Appendix B: Additional Introductory Materials

Before continuing with the study, we would like to collect some information about you. This will help us to organize our data. All personal information will be kept confidential.

Please tell us:

YOUR NAME:

AGE:

SEX (circle): M or F

YEAR IN SCHOOL:

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION:

In this study, we will be asking you to reflect over a period of time on a recent situation in your life where forgiveness became an issue[1]. Please describe a situation or event, preferably one within the past month, which has had an effect on your relationship with another person, and which has not yet been resolved. How recently the situation occurred is not especially significant; the important thing is that its effects on your relationship with or perception of the other person have not been fully resolved. Please do NOT use the person's real name; you may use an initial or invent a pseudonym, whichever you prefer; if you choose a pseudonym, please keep it consistent in the future. Please describe what your relationship was with the other person before this event occurred, what happened, and how it has affected your relationship with the other person, along with any other observations about the event or its effects. Use as much space as you need to answer these items. Then respond to the questions on the next page.

[1] This prompt was modeled on the prompt used in Rowe et al's (1989) study.

Right at this moment, how would you rate your relationship with the person you wrote about in the previous section? “7” is best, “1” is worst, “0” is non-existent (i.e. you no longer have any contact with the person).

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Have there been any recent events, including things that you or the other person have done, that have altered that relationship?

In the future, where do you see your relationship with the other person going?

Where would you like it to go?

What, if any, actions might you take to lead it in that direction?

Do you often find yourself thinking about the situation you described in the previous section? Please indicate how much, with “7” being a lot (long stretches of time every day) and “1” being “not at all.”

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How do you find yourself responding to these thoughts?

Thank you for participating in this study. You will receive a reminder for the next time that you are expected to write for us. Please remember that your continued participation is very important to the study. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Dr. Seifert using the contact information given to you. We'll be happy to address them.

Appendix C: Journal Template

Please answer the following questions honestly, using as much or as little space as you need.

In General…

How are you feeling today? Rate your mood today, with "7" being the best, and "1" being the worst.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Describe how you're feeling today in a few words: Happy, sad, angry, etc.

Is there anything particularly stressful in your life right now? Anything especially encouraging or uplifting?

Regarding the situation or event you mentioned for this study:

Right at this moment, how would you rate your relationship with the person you wrote about at the beginning of this study? "7" is best, "1" is worst, "0" is non-existent (i.e. you no longer have any contact with the person).

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Have there been any recent events, including things that you or the other person have done, that have altered that relationship?

Do you often find yourself thinking about the situation or event? Please indicate how much, with "7" being a lot (long stretches of time every day) and "1" being "not at all."

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How do you find yourself responding to these thoughts?

Do you see the situation any differently now than you did at the beginning of this study? Think especially about changes in where you see the relationship going, what hopes you might have, and how any recent events may have affected your thinking.

Appendix D: Additional Questions

Asked at the midpoint of the journaling period, along with the normal journal questions:

Please describe how, if at all, keeping this journal has affected your thinking about the situation you have been writing about. Think especially about whether it has made it easier or harder to deal with thoughts about the situation, or whether it has led you to see the other person any differently.

Asked at the end:

Please describe how, if at all, keeping this journal has affected your thinking about the situation you have been writing about. Think especially about whether it has made it easier or harder to deal with thoughts about the situation, or whether it has led you to see the other person any differently. Has it affected your perspective on how you approach the situation? Was it difficult or unusual thinking about where the relationship was going and where you would like it to go? Was it something you would do normally without the regular journal prompts? Was it helpful?

Appendix E: Final Debriefing Letter

Thank you for participating in this study. We hope that the information you have given us will help psychologists and the community gain a better understanding of forgiveness. We hope that participating in this study has also helped you to understand these issues better. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact us by email.

Remember that your identity and personal information will be kept confidential. You can refer back to the consent form that you signed at the beginning of this study, and contact us with any questions not addressed in this form.

Thank you once again,

Joel Brady

JNBRADY1@malone.edu

Dr. Lauren Seifert

LSEIFERT@malone.edu