Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

5-18-2012

Common themes in narratives about seeking interpersonal forgiveness

Kathryn Harter

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

Common Themes in Narratives about Seeking Interpersonal Forgiveness

Graduate Thesis/Project

Submitted to the Faculty

Of the School Psychology Department

College of Liberal Arts

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

By

Kathryn E. Harter

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Science and

Advanced Graduate Certificate

Rochester, New York   May 18, 2012

Approved: __Nicholas DiFonzo_____
                                                        (Thesis Advisor)

___Scott Merydith_____
                                                        (Second Reader)

Abstract

        This study investigated common themes in the motivations for and obstacles to seeking forgiveness in participant narratives relating to seeking forgiveness in a sample of 156 narratives written by 78 students with a mean age of 21 years at a technical university in the Northeastern United States. Readers used a coding rubric to assess the motivations for and the obstacles to seeking forgiveness as written in the narratives. These motivations and obstacles were explored in the context of a three-stage forgiveness model. The main research question of the study was to explore common reasons that people did or did not seek forgiveness and the methods that they used to do so. Data from the study indicated that participant narratives describing seeking forgiveness did follow the proposed three-stage model and that the main motivation for seeking forgiveness was to reduce feelings of sadness or guilt on the part of the transgressor. A significant number also sought forgiveness for the benefit of the victim. Narratives about obstacles to seeking forgiveness indicated that the majority of people did not seek forgiveness because they felt that the victim deserved it. A smaller percentage did not seek forgiveness because they did not acknowledge their error or responsibility for any harm that was caused. Correlational analysis showed that individuals who sought forgiveness for the benefit of the victim were more likely to experience a positive effect on the relationship. The results of the study had several implications for theory and practice related to seeking forgiveness.

CHAPTER ONE

Overview of the Study

It has been stated that, "The beliefs that you hold about forgiveness open or close possibilities for you, determine your willingness to forgive, and, as a result, profoundly influence the emotional tone of your life." (Mullet, Girard & Bakhshi, 2004). If we choose to understand forgiveness in this way, then it is important to further understand how forgiveness works and the impact that choices about forgiveness have on our lives. In important relationships, situations occur where an individual transgresses against another individual. It is important to determine the factors that promote an individual to repair those relationships and factors that promote an individual to fail to repair relationships. When done correctly seeking forgiveness may actually make a relationship stronger than it was before the transgression (Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

The act of seeking forgiveness has a major impact on the maintenance of important relationships. The relationships that we develop over the course of a lifetime serve to provide us with a sense of belonging and support. Researchers have defined the motivation that people have to bond with others in relationships that provide ongoing positive interactions as *the need to belong* (Myers, 2005). People are social beings that need the relationships that we build with others to live full and happy lives. Forgiveness serves as an essential mechanism with which we seek to repair and maintain our essential relationships. Nearly everyone at some point in their lives has done something that has harmed someone or been harmed by someone with whom they are in a close relationship. These may be some of the most painful and difficult events in our lives. By providing

individuals with an understanding of why people do and do not seek forgiveness, we can help people to more effectively repair their relationships.

Seeking forgiveness, as defined by Sandage, Worthington, Hight and Berry (2000), is the motivation to accept moral responsibility and to attempt interpersonal reparation following relational injury. The two key parts of this definition are that the person has to accept responsibility for the wrong that he committed against another and perform an action to attempt to repair the damage that was done to the relationship. Although this may seem like a difficult task, this must occur because as the authors point out, in all relationships people hurt each other yet people maintain relationships that can last their entire lives. They also contend that the process of seeking forgiveness is multi-dimensional, with the person accepting responsibility and understanding the other person's perspective, feeling guilty and performing behaviors of reparative action, all parts happen to repair and maintain our relationships.

When a person feels a sense of guilt, they may then desire to remove that feeling by choosing to make a reparative action to improve the relationship (Tangney et. al., 2005). Seeking forgiveness is a pro-social behavior that can be either altruistic or egotistical. When someone seeks forgiveness in an altruistic way he understands the feelings that the other person is experiencing and seeks to help reduce or eliminate those feelings. He is seeking forgiveness for the benefit of the person that was harmed (Bassett et. al, 2006). When an individual seeks forgiveness in an egotistical way, the person understands how the other person is feeling and seeks to help, not for that person's benefit, but because the individual feels that by making the other person feel that way he looks like a bad person.

They seek forgiveness so that their reputation will not be tarnished. They are not seeking forgiveness to improve the other person's well being, but purely to protect their image.

Research has also shown that the way a person apologizes is important. Choosing to apologize to someone is a common reparative action that people make. Kelley and Waldron (2005) have identified one way of making reparative action that results in positive relational change for an individual. They concluded that explicitly acknowledging the harm that was caused and seeking forgiveness helps the process of forgiveness.   When an individual tries to perform an action that is implicit, with no direct acknowledgement of the harm caused, then the reaction is much less positive.

The act of forgiving and seeking forgiveness has many positive benefits for people. They have shown that there are positive outcomes for individuals that seek forgiveness and that there can be negative outcomes for those who choose not to seek forgiveness. The act of seeking forgiveness has impacts on both physical and mental health, social interactions and life-style choices (Sandage et al, 2000).

Further, research done with *children* has shown that the act of seeking forgiveness has a positive relationship with social and emotional development. Denham and colleagues (2005) found that forgiveness provides an individual with the opportunity to maintain nurturing and protective relationships. They also found that children who are more likely to seek forgiveness are better adjusted, more securely attached and unselfish. They also found that forgiveness is positively predictive of peer status and pro-social behaviors. Interestingly, the skills that make someone socially desirable to others, the ability to determine other's motives and making pro-social choices and behaviors, are the same skills

that children who are more willing to seek forgiveness and forgive possess.   Finally, by first grade, forgiveness is predictive of social competence (Denham et. al., 2005). This research shows that in a child's earliest relationships, the ability to forgive and seek forgiveness has a positive impact on social interactions. It has also been shown that the victims themselves see the individual (who seeks forgiveness) more positively than an individual who does not accept blame for the transgression (Sandage et. al, 2000).

People who choose not to seek forgiveness are more likely to experience negative social feedback from others. They are at risk for poor relationships because they may lack the skills to maintain and repair these relationships. These poor outcomes may include social isolation and negative interpersonal consequences. This cycle of poor relationships that may result from the inability to relate to others may lead to feelings of distress and low self-esteem (Sandage et. al, 2000).

Although there has been research conducted on the process that is involved when an individual chooses to seek forgiveness, more research is needed on the qualitative reasons why people do and do not seek forgiveness and the methods that they use to seek forgiveness. The actual reasons that an individual has when making the choice about seeking forgiveness have not been fully explored. Through the examination of the autobiographical narratives of individuals that have made the choice whether or not to seek forgiveness, this research may provide researchers and clinicians with new ideas and strategies to help foster increased forgiveness between individuals and more positive social interactions in general.

Based on the impact of seeking forgiveness on interpersonal relationships, and individuals' well-being, the purpose of this study is to assess common reasons that individuals seek forgiveness, their motivations; and reasons why they choose not to seek forgiveness in certain situations, the obstacles. Participants provided autobiographical narratives that were examined to determine common themes in seeking forgiveness. The research also examined the factors that resulted in a more positive outcome for the relationship. One way to identify the motivations and obstacles to seeking forgiveness is to examine the participants' narratives in the context of the Three-Stage Model proposed by Sandage et al (2000). This model not only provides a framework for understanding the motivations and obstacles, but it also has implications for theory and practice. Sandage's stages can be viewed as both motivations for and obstacles to seeking forgiveness.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Sandage, Worthington, Hight and Berry (2000) propose a three-stage model of seeking forgiveness to explain the thoughts and actions of individuals who are seeking forgiveness. The first part, cognitive social perspective taking, is when the person is able to feel empathy for the other person and understand the hurt he or she has caused. The second part, adaptive guilt, is the negative feeling the transgressor has regarding the hurt that was caused. These feelings may be necessary to motivate people to seek forgiveness of others and maintain relationships that are necessary for health and happiness. The third part, behaviors of reparative action, allows for the reduction or removal of the hurt that was caused and also lessens feelings of guilt (Sandage et. al., 2000).

The first stage is being able to think about how the other person is feeling. Bassett, Bassett, Lloyd and Johnson (2006) examined the role that moral emotions play in seeking forgiveness. They cited Baston's view that seeking forgiveness is a pro-social behavior that can be either altruistic or egotistical. When someone seeks forgiveness in an altruistic way, he or she understands the feelings that the other person is experiencing and seeks to help reduce or eliminate those feelings for the benefit of the person that was harmed (Bassett et. al, 2006).   When an individual seeks forgiveness in an egotistical way, the person understands how the victim is feeling and seeks to help, but not as much for the victim's benefit, but because the individual feels that by transgressing against the victim, he or she looks like a bad person. The primary motivation is the belief that helping the injured person might reduce or eliminate any bad feelings or impressions others might have toward the transgressor. The transgressor does not seek forgiveness for the benefit of the

other person, but to protect his own image (Bassett et. al, 2006).   These can both be

motivations to seeking forgiveness, though the transgressor who seeks to make the other

person feel better for the sake of the victim will more often experience a positive outcome

from his actions. The transgressor who seeks forgiveness for his own sake will not find the

same level of positive outcome. The absence of this ability to understand someone else's

feelings is an obstacle that can prevent relationships from being repaired or saved (Bassett

et.al, 2006).

The second stage involves feelings of adaptive guilt about one's actions. The feeling

of adaptive guilt involves feelings of remorse or tension about the damage that has been

done to the relationship (Tangney et. al., 2005). This type of guilt is more powerful if the

individuals involved share a close relationship. When the individuals are removed from

one another, or do not share a relationship, then the feeling of guilt is less powerful. When

a person feels a sense of guilt, he or she focuses on the behavior that caused harm to the

other person. Feelings of guilt encourage people to make the choice to make amends for

the hurt that was caused without feeling like they are bad people. When a person feels a

sense of guilt, this is often followed by the need to remove that feeling by choosing to make

a reparative action to improve the relationship (Tangney et. al., 2005). Researchers believe

that, for most people, the feelings that are caused by the guilt are so unpleasant that the

person feels a motivation to remove them by seeking forgiveness. In situations where the

individual does not feel a sense of guilt about his behavior, the process of forgiveness does

not often move past this step and no reparative actions are taken. This is an obstacle to

seeking forgiveness and does not result in repair or maintenance of the relationship.

Finally, the third stage involves the actions that people take to try and repair the damage to the interpersonal relationship. This may be the biggest obstacle for many people to overcome. Exline and Baumiester (2000) define the actions that people take after an incident as repentance. Some individuals choose to do this as an intrapsychic process where they feel badly for their actions and diminish their guilt by being motivated to never repeat their actions. For others, it involves interactions with the person that was harmed (Exline & Baumiester, 2000). The researchers state that these behaviors toward others can be done explicitly or implicitly. When an individual chooses to apologize explicitly, he or she directly admits his responsibility for the action and his or her wish to repair the relationship. When a person implicitly seeks forgiveness he or she does not directly admit responsibility for his or her actions but may perform tasks or offer physical items in an attempt to repair the relationship. The choice of how to seek forgiveness may be controlled by the type of relationship that the two people have or the seriousness of the offense (Exline & Baumiester, 2000).

Choosing to apologize to someone is a common reparative action that people take. Research has also shown that the way a person apologizes is important. Darby and Schlenker (1982) found that apologies can be very different depending on the offense and that even very young children have the ability to recognize if an apology is appropriate and if forgiveness should be granted. In the study, the children were presented with two stories where a character had done something wrong and apologized and those who had not (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Even at three-years of age the children preferred the stories where the character had apologized. As the children got older they began to take into account the seriousness of the offense, the persons' motives and responsibility for the

action and the level of sorrow that was conveyed in the apology. Children preferred elaborate apologies as compared to simpler ones, even in situations where an elaborate apology was not indicated by the minor offense. Most importantly, children of all ages indicated that they preferred the character that had given even a simple apology to the one who had given no apology (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). This research would indicate that, when used *correctly,* an apology could be an effective means of reparative action.

Kelley and Waldron (2005) have identified several ways of making reparative action that results in positive relational change for an individual. First, they concluded that explicitly acknowledging the harm that was caused and seeking forgiveness helps the process of forgiveness. They reported that explicitly seeking forgiveness can result in repair to relationships that have been severely damaged. Another finding was that, in some cases, the act of explicitly seeking forgiveness not only repairs the relationship, it may strengthen it.

Motivations for Seeking Forgiveness

In a 2002 study Zechmeister and Romero coded narratives from both offenders and victims. Participants were asked to describe a situation where they had either offended someone, or been the victim, and seeking forgiveness had taken place. They found specific patterns among the narratives of offenders that were significantly different from those of the victims. Individuals that were writing as the offender, or the individual that would be seeking forgiveness, were more likely to report that their actions were caused by outside forces, they were justified in their actions, they had been provoked by the victim or that the victim shared the blame (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). They also found that when

writing about the incident offenders were more likely to describe the victim as overreacting to the situation.

Although it may seem that offenders are attempting to remove blame from themselves and place it on the victim, they were also more likely to report positive outcomes as a result of their motivations to seek forgiveness. Offenders reported that they felt regret for the incident and that, in situations that they sought forgiveness, they mentioned the use of an apology. For offensives that were forgiven, the narratives were more likely to include information about the offender's apology, attempts to make amends, and positive consequences for both the offender and the victim, including a feeling of peace about the incident (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). In situations where forgiveness was not achieved, the participants were more likely to describe negative consequences, refer to present circumstances and report that their feelings of anger were justified. When describing the incident that led to the problem with the victim, offenders were just as likely to report that the incident was accidental as it was intentional (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002).

The researchers concluded that many of the most common factors found in the narratives of the participants are consistent with previous research about the process of forgiveness. First, for many of the offenders that sought forgiveness it was essential that they felt empathy for the individual. They found a strong relationship between the offender's level of empathy and their ability to seek forgiveness. They hypothesize that the offender needs to integrate these two pro-social behaviors resolve their conflicting feelings. Secondly, they discuss that the guilt that the offender feels can strengthen the relationship

if it leads to a change in behavior (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002).   Finally, they found that apology and restitution are a common form of behavior among individuals that are seeking forgiveness and allow the offender to be seen in a more positive light, regardless if they actually result in forgiveness on the part of the victim.

Obstacles to Seeking Forgiveness

Bassett et. al. (2000) found that there seemed to be several general reasons that an individual did not seek forgiveness. In their study, Bassett and colleagues asked college students to write a narrative about a situation where they had done something harmful to another person. They then coded the narratives for patterns in behavior. They found that when individuals did not feel a sense of guilt there were five main reasons. They were: the victim over reacted, the victim provoked the offense, the offender was angry with the victim, the relationship had improved on its own after the action, the victim shared blame for the offense (Bassett et. al., 2000). The main theme in these reasons appears to be that the victim in some way deserved the action and shared responsibility for it with the offender. This also seems to indicate that without a feeling of guilt about his or her actions, the offender does not feel motivated to seek forgiveness from the victim.

In some cases, however, the individual does not seek forgiveness and chooses to reduce his feelings of guilt in another way. Bassett et al. (2006) defines this as dissonance reduction, which occurs when an individual attempts to find a way to lessen or eliminate his conflicting emotions.   The researchers state that there are three main ways that an individual who chooses not to seek forgiveness does this-- (a) a tendency to justify one's own actions, (b) denigrate the victim, or (c) sever ties to the victim. By doing any one of

these, the offender attempts to lessen feelings of guilt by placing blame on the victim and choosing to see the relationship as over and therefore not needing to be repaired (Bassett et. al., 2006).   This indicates that in situations where the individual does not seek forgiveness, the reparative action that he or she takes is not toward the individual but toward reducing the cognitive dissonance that he or she feels over his actions.

Zechmeister and Romero concluded that personal (autobiographical) narratives offer the opportunity to gather large amounts information about the process of forgiveness and how people think about it in the context of their everyday interactions and relationships (2002). They state that future research should focus on the behaviors and the cognitions that are associated with forgiveness and how they coexist.   Based on the previous research the current study seeks to examine the motivations and obstacles to seeking forgiveness using the framework of Sandage's model.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students at Rochester Institute of Technology taking psychology courses and were awarded extra credit in their classes for participation in the study. The original sample was comprised of 82 participants; however four did not submit meaningful data and were removed. The final sample (N=78) included 46 females and 34 males with a mean age of 21 years (SD=3.1). The sample was from a wide range of academic majors (34 different majors were indicated) with the mean number of years in college of 2.62 (SD=1.2).

Description of Narrative

Each participant wrote two narratives for a total of 156 narratives. Participants indicated in a majority of the narratives that they were in a close, emotional relationship with the victim (75.6%). These included parents, siblings, and individuals with whom they were in a romantic relationship. Some individuals indicated that they did not feel that they had a relationship with the victims. In these narratives they described the victims as casual acquaintances or someone they had recently met (14.1%). A smaller portion of the narratives described having a working relationship with the victims, including co-workers, teammates and other members of school groups (6.4%). The majority of the narratives in which the individual sought forgiveness resulted in a positive outcome, e.g. the individual received forgiveness from the other person and the relationship was preserved or

improved (83.3%).   Fewer narratives (16.7%) had negative outcomes where the

relationship ended or became worse. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Type of Relationship

Type of Relationship	Description	% of Narrative
Emotional Relationship	-Strong emotional connection with other person -ex. BF/GF, Spouse, Parent, Sibling	75.6
Practical Relationship	-needed the other person for practical purposes -ex. Roommate needed for housing	3.8
Working Relationship	-had to make the relationship work to accomplish a task -ex. Coworker, fellow student in a group	6.4
Family Relationship	-had to continue to be involved with person because they were important to a family member I was close with -ex. Apologizing to sister-in-law because she is important to your brother	0
Not a close relationship	-Just met, casual friends, no strong connection or need to interact	14.1

** Percentages add to 100 because each narrative only received one code for the relationship between the individuals

Materials

Narrative instructions   Detailed instructions for each narrative were given to each

participant to describe one situation where he had offended someone and then sought

forgiveness and then to write a second narrative about a situation where he did not seek

forgiveness for an offense. Participants were asked to first describe the situation and their

actions and then to describe the outcome. Participants were encouraged to provide as

much detail as possible in their stories.   Specific statements related to the situation

followed each narrative description.

Specific Questions   Four statements followed the first narrative (where participants

did seek forgiveness) to judge participants' motivations for seeking forgiveness and

provide support to the narrative data. Participants were asked to rate the reason that they

sought forgiveness on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all the reason) to 5 (very much the reason). Statements posed included:

- I sought forgiveness because I didn't want other people to think I was a bad person.

- I sought forgiveness because I wanted to make myself feel better about the situation.

- I sought forgiveness because I wanted help the other person to feel better.

- I sought forgiveness because I was genuinely concerned about the other person.

Four more statements followed the first narrative to assess specific behaviors of reparation. Again, participants were asked to rate how much a description of a certain behavior described them on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). Statements included:

- I sought forgiveness by verbally apologizing.

- I sought forgiveness by telling the person I was accepting responsibility for my actions.

- I gave the person something (i.e. a gift) to show I was sorry.

- I tried to perform an action (i.e. doing someone a favor) to show that I was sorry.

No Likert scale (with corresponding statements) was used for the second narrative as the participants did not seek forgiveness in the situation; therefore no data was needed to support their decision to not seek forgiveness.

Positive or Negative Outcome   After completing both narratives participants were asked to rate whether or not the final effect of the incident on the relationship was positive or negative on a Likert scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). The data collected was used to perform Spearman correlations to determine if specific motivations for seeking forgiveness have a greater likelihood of resulting in a positive outcome and support the findings from the narrative data.

Procedure

Participants were directed to the study webpage where they were presented with informed consent procedures that explained the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Because the website where they signed up and the study questionnaire were not linked in any way, the study was anonymous. Participants were informed that continuing with the study served as their consent to be included in the study. They were then asked to write the first of two narratives and rate the specific statements described above about the situations that they were recalling in their narratives. The participants were asked to provide demographic information to be used to describe the sample. After submitting their responses, the participants were directed to a debriefing webpage and thanked for their participation.

The narratives provided regarding seeking forgiveness were coded for statements that would indicate the three main tenets of the Sandage's (2005) three-stage forgiveness process: understanding the others' perspective, motivational guilt and behaviors of reparative action. To account for the ability to understand the others' feelings, the presence of expressions of empathy or responsibility for the offense was coded.   For

example, statements like, "I knew that I had hurt their feelings," or "It was my fault that this happened to them." Factors that were coded for motivational guilt included expressions of feeling badly for their actions and wanting to repair the damage to the relationship. Examples of this include, "I felt really bad about what I had done," or "I wanted them to feel better so things could be the way they were." Behaviors of reparative action included apologies, offers of restitution, or helping behaviors to mitigate the damage to the relationship. Possible statements were, "I told them that I was sorry." or "I gave them money so that they could have it fixed." They were also coded for the degree of closeness in the relationship of the victim and offender and severity of the offense. (See Figures 1 and 2: Coding Instructions in Appendix) Frequencies were tallied for each narrative about seeking forgiveness and not seeking forgiveness.

A random selection of narratives was coded by a second reader to determine the level of reliability in the coding procedure. Using this data the Cohen's kappa statistics was calculated as a measure of agreement between the two coders (κ=.97; p<.01). This level of agreement is acceptable and indicates that both readers coded the narratives in much the same way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

A large percentage (44.9%) of narratives included statements indicating the aggressors'' motivation to seek forgiveness because they understood others' perspectives. This general category was broken into two codes: caring for well-being (16.7%) and understanding others' feelings (28.2%). A small percentage of the narratives indicated that the individual was motivated to seek forgiveness because he was more concerned for his own well-being and feelings. These reasons included peer pressure (3.8%), authority figure made me/ did it to avoid punishment (1.3%) and wanting to avoid revenge by victim (1.3%). (See Table 2 below.)

Table 2. Motivations for Seeking Forgiveness

Category	Sub Category	Description	%	% by Category
Making Oneself Feel better	Reduce bad/sad feelings	"I felt really bad/sad"	43.5	67.8%
	Reduce Guilt	"I felt really guilty"	20.5	
	Reduce shame	"I felt like I was a bad person"	3.8	
Making the other person feel better	Caring for well being	"I care about the person and want them to feel better"	16.7	44.9%
	Understood others feelings	"I understood how the other person felt and would not want to feel that way."	28.2	
Saving the Relationship	Emotional Relationship	-Strong emotional connection with other person -ex. BF/GF, Spouse, Parent, Sibling	32	39.7%
	Practical Relationship	-needed the other person for practical purposes -ex. Roommate needed for housing	2.6	
	Working Relationship	-had to make the relationship work to accomplish a task -ex. Coworker, fellow student in a group	1.3	
	Family Relationship	-had to continue to be involved with person because they were important to a family member I was close with -ex. Apologizing to sister-in-law because she is important to your brother	3.8	
Had to do it- outside influence	Someone in position of power made me	Teacher, parent employer said I had to do it	1.3	5.1%
	Peer Pressure	My friends made me do it so I could stay in the group	3.8	
Self-Serving Reasons	Maintain Image	" I didn't want others to think I was a bad person	0	1.3%
	Maintain material items	"If I didn't apologize I would lose…"	0	
	Worried about what others would do	"I didn't want them to do it to me"	1.3	

** Percentages do not add to 100 because many narratives had two reasons for seeking forgiveness and both were included in the frequency counts. These are the combined frequencies. The percentages result from the frequency of the reasons being tallied and then calculated over the total number of narratives. (Ex. F (Peer Pressure)/78= 3.8%)

Statements indicating feelings of guilt and shame as the motivation for seeking forgiveness occurred in the majority of the narratives (67.8%). This general category was broken down into three categories: feelings of sadness (43.5%), feelings of guilt (20.5%) and feelings of shame (3.8%).

In almost all of the provided narratives, the individual apologized with a verbal apology (97.4%). These apologies often included explicit methods where the individual accepted responsibility for their actions (38.4%), acknowledged that they made a mistake (30.8%), and explained to victim about why the harm was caused (48.7%). In some narratives the person attempted to make reparations by trying to fix the harm that was caused (10.3%) and in others, the individual promised that it would not happen again (9%). Some individuals used implicit methods where they provided the victim with something tangible to express their forgiveness (11.5%). A very small portion of the narratives (2.6%) did not include an apology as one of the reparative actions. (See Tables 3 and 4 below.)

Table 3: Behaviors of Reparative Action Used by Participants

Request Consisted of:	% of Narratives
Verbal Apology (talk or write)	(See below)
Accepting responsibility for actions/harmed that was caused	38.4%
Acknowledging error/admitting mistake	30.8%
Made reparations (tried to fix the harm that was caused)	10.3%
Gave them something tangible (i.e. gift)	11.5%
Explanation to person about why the harm was caused	48.7%
Promise never to repeat action	9%
Acknowledge other persons feelings but agree to disagree	1.3%

** Percentages do not add to 100 because many narratives had two ways of seeking forgiveness and both were included in the frequency counts. These are the combined frequencies. The percentages result from the frequency of the methods being tallied and then calculated over the total number of narratives. (Ex. F (made reparations)/78= 10.3%)

Table 4: Verbal Apology

Description	% of Narrative
No Verbal Apology (the person did not directly ask (orally or in written form) for forgiveness for the other person)	2.6%
Verbal Apology (person sought forgiveness through an oral or written method directly with the individual harmed)	97.4%

Spearman's rho correlations were calculated between the specific statements and the effect on the relationship. This type of correlation was chosen over other types of correlations based on the type of data that was collected and the assumption that the data was positively skewed. Seeking forgiveness so that the other person would feel better was significantly correlated with a positive outcome (r_s=.228, p=.047). Seeking forgiveness because the transgressor was concerned for the victim's well-being was also significantly correlated with a positive outcome (r_s=.255,p=.025). There were no significant correlations between more selfish reasons for seeking forgiveness and the final outcome.

The quantitative data was positively skewed, meaning that the majority of participants reported positive outcomes for seeking forgiveness. Very few participants indicated negative outcomes. As the data was so positively skewed, even using statistics that account for the positive skew, it was not possible to determine meaningful correlations for many of the constructs. (See Table 5 below.)

Table 5: Correlation Table

Correlations

			Final_Effect	Other_Feel_B etter	Preserve_Ima ge	Concerned_fo r_Other	Make_Self_Fe el_Better
Spearman's rho	Final_Effect	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.228*	-.070	.255*	-.081
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.047	.548	.025	.481
		N	77	77	77	77	77
	Other_Feel_Better	Correlation Coefficient	.228*	1.000	.292**	.487**	.070
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.047	.	.009	.000	.540
		N	77	78	78	78	78
	Preserve_Image	Correlation Coefficient	-.070	.292**	1.000	-.010	.341**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.548	.009	.	.933	.002
		N	77	78	78	78	78
	Concerned_for_Other	Correlation Coefficient	.255*	.487**	-.010	1.000	.081
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.000	.933	.	.481
		N	77	78	78	78	78
	Make_Self_Feel_Better	Correlation Coefficient	-.081	.070	.341**	.081	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.481	.540	.002	.481	.
		N	77	78	78	78	78

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Obstacles to Seeking Forgiveness

In the second narrative participants were asked to write about a time where they had offended another person and had not sought forgiveness. Participants had 12 main reasons for not seeking forgiveness. A large percentage of the participants wrote that they did not seek forgiveness because the victims deserved it (46.2%) or the victims would have done the same thing to them (5.1%). Many of the narratives (27%) indicated that the reason that they did not seek forgiveness was that they had not done anything wrong (24.4%) or the victims did not expect them to seek forgiveness (2.6%).

The severity of the offense was also a reason for not seeking forgiveness in some narratives (19.2%). Some participants wrote that the offense was only minor and did not require them to seek forgiveness (15.4%). Other participants felt that they did not need to seek forgiveness because the offense was too severe and their actions were unforgivable (3.8%). One example that was given by someone as an unforgivable offense was infidelity. In that situation the individual did not ask for forgiveness because he felt that the other person would never forgive him for his actions. A small percentage of participants did not seek forgiveness because they were too embarrassed by their actions to face the individual (5.1%) or they didn't want to deal with confrontations from the victims if they apologized (5.1%).

A small number of narratives indicated that the reason the individuals did not seek forgiveness from the victims was related to the need to maintain the relationship. The three types of relationships that led to the individual choosing to not seek forgiveness were: no relationship between the individual and victim (1.3%), relationship is unimportant to the

individual (9%), relationship is important but the individual does not wish to maintain that

relationship (10.3%).   This indicated that when there was no desire or need to maintain

the relationship, the transgressor did not use the act of seeking forgiveness as a method to

repair the damage done to the relationship. (See Table 6 below.)

Table 6: Obstacles to Seeking Forgiveness

Category	Subcategory	% Narrative	% Category
No Need to maintain Relationship	No relationship	1.3	
	Unimportant Relationship	9	20.6
	Important Relationship but don't want to save	10.3	
Revenge	Person Deserved it	46.2	51.3
	Person would have done the same to me	5.1	
Not my fault/responsibility	Person wouldn't expect me to seek forgiveness	2.6	27
	Person mad for no reason, I didn't do anything wrong	24.4	
Severity of the Offense	Not a big deal, no significant harm	15.4	19.2
	Unforgivable action, why bother seeking forgiveness	3.8	
No Chance	Never had opportunity to seek forgiveness	1.3	1.3
Embarrassed	Didn't want anyone to think badly of me if I accepted responsibility for my actions	5.1	5.1
Confrontation	Didn't want to deal with a confrontation if I asked for forgiveness	5.1	5.1
Teach a lesson	I wanted to teach the person a lesson so that they didn't do something to me in the future	0	0

** Percentages do not add to 100 because many narratives had two reasons for not seeking forgiveness and both were included in the frequency counts. These are the combined frequencies. The percentages result from the frequency of the reasons being tallied and then calculated over the total number of narratives. (Ex. F(Confrontation)/78= 5.1%)

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

This study investigated common themes in the motivations for and obstacles to seeking forgiveness in participant narratives relating to seeking forgiveness in a sample of 156 narratives written by 78 students with a mean age of 21 years at a technical university in the Northeastern United States. Readers used a coding rubric to assess the motivations for and the obstacles to seeking forgiveness as written in the narratives. These motivations and obstacles were explored in the context of a three-stage forgiveness model. The main research question of the study was to explore common reasons that people did or did not seek forgiveness and the methods that they used to do so. Data from the study indicated that participant narratives describing seeking forgiveness did follow the proposed three-stage model and that the main motivation for seeking forgiveness was to reduce feelings of sadness or guilt on the part of the transgressor. A significant number also sought forgiveness for the benefit of the victim. Narratives about obstacles to seeking forgiveness indicated that the majority of people did not seek forgiveness because they felt that the victim deserved it. A smaller percentage did not seek forgiveness because they did not acknowledge their error or responsibility for any harm that was caused. Correlational analysis showed that individuals who sought forgiveness for the benefit of the victim were more likely to experience a positive effect on the relationship. The results of the study had several implications for theory and practice related to seeking forgiveness.

Results from this study indicated that the narratives of the participants in this study follow patterns previously discussed in the research. Sandage, Worthington, Hight

and Berry (2000) three stage model of forgiveness is seen in all of the narratives. Many of the reasons that individuals don't seek forgiveness were similar to previous research results. Overall, the results from this study show that there is a three stage model of forgiveness and that the way that individuals seek forgiveness has an impact on the outcome.

It is important for people to seek forgiveness for their transgressions in order to maintain the important relationships in their lives. These might be emotional, practical, working or casual relationships that, for a variety of reasons, people wish to maintain after a transgression has occurred. In this sample, many participants indicated that they were in strong, emotional relationships with the victims. This is consistent with previous research that indicates people use forgiveness as a method to maintain these essential relationships.

Sandage et. al. (2000) proposed a three stage model for the process of seeking forgiveness. The main objective of this study was to examine the narratives for evidence that these stages were present. When examining the autobiographical narratives provided by participants, the results showed that the thoughts and actions described in Sandage et al's three stage models were present in the narratives.

Stage one of the Sandage model proposes that the transgressor must understand the victim's perspective in order to begin the process of seeking forgiveness. In this sample, a significant number of participants made reference to "understanding the other's perspective". Examples included statements to the effect that they "cared for the victim's well-being", or they "understood how the other would feel" because of their actions. These statements indicated that the individual transgressors were seeking forgiveness for

altruistic reasons; meaning that forgiveness was sought for the victim's benefit, as much as or more than for the transgressor's. Correlational data indicated that seeking forgiveness for altruistic reasons was more likely to result in a positive outcome. These correlations were small and because the measure used had only 2 questions, reliability is questionable. Future research in this area is needed to replicate the results with higher levels of reliability. A small percentage of narratives made reference to the fact that, while the transgressor did acknowledge the victim's perspective, the transgressor was seeking forgiveness for reasons of a more egotistical nature. For example, forgiveness was sought because the transgressor did not want to lose the respect of others (not just the victim); the transgressor was worried about the impact that the victim's negative feelings might have on him or her; and the possibility of harming other relationships or the transgressor's public image.   The narrative data indicates that forgiveness sought for purely egotistical reasons does not tend to have the same positive results as for altruistic or a mix or altruistic and egotistical reasons. Further, the data indicates that, in the majority of situations, the transgressors do understand the victims' perspectives and seek forgiveness for the benefit of the victims.

Understanding the victim's perspective involves utilizing the concept of theory of mind. This means that certain individuals, young children and individuals with certain developmental disabilities may not be developmentally able to utilize or understand this stage of forgiveness (Meyers, 2005). In practice it would be essential to identify individuals who are not able to adequately utilize these skills and specifically target this area for improvement or provide explicit teaching around the idea that a person's actions have consequences on others in our environment and others have feelings that can differ from

ours. Character education programs in schools often target this idea and provide training to school children. These programs can have an important impact on forgiveness by providing the basic skills that individuals must have to be able to seek forgiveness.

While in most cases participants felt it was important to seek forgiveness for the sake of the victim, participants also acknowledged the importance of seeking forgiveness in order to maintain the relationships for their own needs. For example, many narratives made reference to the fact that the transgressor was seeking forgiveness from an individual with whom they had a strong, emotional relationship. Researchers acknowledge that human beings require social interaction and relationships in order to function and thrive in society (Myers, 2005). When individuals use the mechanism of forgiveness as a way to maintain these relationships, they are fulfilling the basic human need of belonging. Research has also found that seeking forgiveness in order to maintain relationships provides many positive psychological benefits (Denham, 2005). The fact that participants indicate this is encouraging because this behavior indicates that they are able to maintain nurturing and protective relationships that result in positive social interactions.

Seeking forgiveness requires an individual to have a motivation for doing so. Researchers describe this second of the three stages of seeking forgiveness as motivational guilt (Sandage, et al 2005). Motivational guilt serves as the catalyst to begin the act of seeking forgiveness. The majority of participants described negative feelings related to their actions including sadness, guilt and shame. Participants reported feelings of sadness and guilt over their actions as the two main, negative feelings. Researchers have proposed that these feelings are essential to encouraging people to seek forgiveness. These feelings

can be considered adaptive because they enable individuals to maintain relationships that

are necessary to health and well-being. (Tangney et al, 2005). A very small percentage of

participants reported feelings of shame. This is positive because feelings of shame often

result in less positive outcomes because the person views *him/herself* as bad where those

who feel guilt report feeling that their *actions* were bad. The high percentage of narratives

indicating that participants felt some sort of motivational guilt supports the theory that

motivational guilt is an essential component of seeking forgiveness. This has implications

for practice because it is often the negative feelings that individuals have that prompt them

to seek assistance from professionals. Helping individuals to use these feelings as the

catalyst to seek forgiveness can help them to move on to the next stage of seeking

forgiveness.   In young children or those with cognitive disabilities, helping them to

understand what they are feeling and how to move forward, and reduce those feelings,

after a negative is also beneficial.

The third stage of Sandage's model describes what is known as reparative action.

Research has shown that choosing to apologize is a common way that people seek to repair

the harm caused by the negative action (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). In this sample, almost

all of the participants chose to verbally apologize for their actions. This more common

form of reparative action was performed in very explicit terms. That is, the transgressor

accepted responsibility for the action and sought the victim's forgiveness in a verbal

apology. This is positive because individuals who seek forgiveness in an explicit way most

often experience a more positive result. The narrative data from this study showed that

there was a high percentage of individuals seeking forgiveness explicitly, possibly resulting

in the high percentage of positive outcomes, thus preserving or even improving the

relationships.   In theory and practice, identifying the actual steps that individuals need to

take in order to seek forgiveness can be very helpful.

Not all of the negative actions reported by the participants resulted in their seeking

forgiveness. It appears that the transgressors who don't seek forgiveness don't experience

the three stages that those who do, experience.   Basset et.al. (2006) found that these

transgressors failed to experience a sense of motivational guilt. They often had conflicting

feelings about the actions that included justifying the actions, denigrating the victims and

ending the relationships.   In the narrative data some participants reported these same

feelings regarding their actions.   Almost half of the participants who did not seek

forgiveness reported feeling that the victim "deserved it." This is the participants' attempt

of placing the blame for the transgression on the victim and not taking responsibility for

the action.   This further justifies (for the transgressor) the lack of needing to seek

forgiveness. Other participants wrote that they did not seek forgiveness because they did

not feel that their actions had been negative. Not only do they justify their actions in this

way, but they fail to understand the other's perspective.   In situations like this the

individual never enters the process of seeking forgiveness because they do not understand

the other's perspective and therefore, feel no guilt about the negative actions.

Some participants indicated that the perceived severity of their offenses

determined whether or not they sought forgiveness. In some cases the participants felt

that the offense was only minor and did not warrant an apology or other reparative action.

Other participants felt that the offenses were too severe. They did not seek forgiveness

because they thought the victims were unlikely to grant them forgiveness.   This has

implications related to helping individuals understand the process of forgiveness. Research has shown that apologies for even minor offenses often result in the individual being perceived as a person with better social skills and a higher peer status (Denham, 2005). Research has also shown that even severely damaged relationships can be repaired or strengthened by the act of seeking forgiveness. In practice, helping individuals to understand that seeking forgiveness should not be dependent on the perceived severity of the offense can help them improve their own social skills and quality of relationships. It is important that individuals recognize that they can't truly know how severe an offense was to another person. It may be these assumptions about the severity of the offense that ultimately damages the relationship if the transgressor fails to seek forgiveness based on these assumptions.

Denigrating the victim is also a mechanism used by transgressors who fail to seek forgiveness. In these situations, the transgressor will report feelings like "He would have done that to me," or "She's done the same thing before." A small percentage of participants in this study used this as the reason for not seeking forgiveness. The participants created a picture of the victim as a "bad person anyway" in order to justify not only the original negative action, but their failure to act in seeking forgiveness.

Severing ties to the victim was a less common reason for not seeking forgiveness. A small percentage of the narratives indicated that the participants failed to seek forgiveness for several reasons including: there was no relationship between the victim and the transgressor; the relationship was unimportant to the transgressor; and/or the relationship was important but the transgressor no longer wished to maintain the

relationship. These results bear out the research that seeking forgiveness is related to the type of relationship shared by the victim and transgressor (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Factors that may influence this include the embarrassment of the transgressor and reluctance to cause a confrontation with the victim. Ending the relationship allows the transgressor to avoid both of these situations.

The sample was drawn from college students at a technical university in the Northeast. The majority of students were in late adolescence to early adulthood. These individuals have a different view of forgiveness than a sample of older individuals might have, due to fewer life experiences related to seeking forgiveness. These participants are at a different developmental level than a mixed sample drawn from the general population would be. Conducting this study with an older population or a larger sample comprised of varying age groups may result in information about how the process of seeking forgiveness works across the life span.

Another limitation of the data from this study was the small sample size.   Although the sample size was large enough to draw meaningful conclusions from the qualitative data, the quantitative data obtained was inconclusive. These narratives, autobiographical in nature, placed the choice of the type of experience and results at the discretion of the authors. Although the study was anonymous, individuals usually tell stories that present them in a positive way, resulting in more narratives with positive outcomes.   This could be resolved by the type and number of questions included in the participant questionnaire. In this study the participants were only asked to write one narrative about a situation where they sought forgiveness and one where they did not seek forgiveness. They were also

asked to provide the outcome, whether positive or negative. Had participants been asked to provide two narratives, one where they sought forgiveness resulting in a positive outcome and one resulting in a negative outcome, it may have been possible to draw correlations between methods and outcomes of seeking forgiveness quantitatively. Also increasing the number of questions related to each construct (i.e. Explicit and implicit forgiveness) may have resulted in a high reliability measure (Chronbach's alpha). Future research may explore this method.

The autobiographical narratives collected for this study provided the opportunity to examine the process of seeking forgiveness from the transgressors' perspective. Analysis of the data collected provided support for the theory that there are three unique stages in the process of seeking forgiveness. There was also support for the idea that seeking forgiveness for an altruistic reason is more likely to result in a positive outcome. Understanding the process that individuals use when seeking forgiveness can help clinicians working with children and adults to understand what skills the individual needs to be able to seek forgiveness and teaching strategies that will help them to master these skills. Researchers stated that the "beliefs that you hold about forgiveness open or close possibilities for you" (Mullet et al, 2004). Providing individuals with the necessary skills and an understanding of the steps of the forgiveness process to open possibilities and positively influence the course of their lives.

References

Bassett, R., Bassett, K., Lloyd, M., & Johnson, J. (2006). Seeking Forgiveness: Considering the role of moral emotions. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 34*(2), 111-124.

Bassett, R., Edgerton, M., Johnson, J., Lill, C., Russo, G., et al. (2008). Seeking forgiveness: The view from an experimental paradigm. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, *27*(2), 140-1490733-42.

Darby, B. & Schlenker, B. (1982). Children's Reactions to Apologies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43(4)*, 742-753.

Denham, S., Neal, K., Wilson, B., Pickering, S. & Boyatzis, C. (2005) Emotional Development and Forgiveness in Children: Emerging Evidence. In Worthington, E. (Ed.), Handbook of Forgiveness (pp. 127-142). New York: Routledge.

Exline, J. & Baumeister, R. (2001). Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers. In McCullough, M., Pargament, K., & Thoresen, C. (Eds.), Forgiveness: Theory, Research and Practice (pp. 133-155). New York: The Guildford Press.

Mullet, E., Girard, M., & Bakhshi, P. (2004). Conceptualizations of Forgiveness. *European Psychologist, 9(2),* 78-86.

Sandage, S. , Jr, E. , Hight, T. , & Berry, J. (2000). Seeking forgiveness: Theoretical context and an initial empirical study. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *28*(1), 21.

Tangney, J., Boone, A., & Daring, R. (2005). Forgiving the Self: Conceptual Issues and Empirical Findings. In Worthington, E. (Ed.), Handbook of Forgiveness (pp. 143-158). New York: Routledge.

Waldron,V. , & Kelley, D.(2005). Forgiving communication as a response to relational transgressions. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *22*(6), 723-742.

Worthington, E. (2005). Initial Questions About the Art and Science of Forgiving. In Worthington, E. (Ed.), Handbook of Forgiveness (pp. 1-13). New York: Routledge.

Zechmeister, J., & Romero, C. (2002). Victim and offender accounts of interpersonal conflict: Autobiographical narratives of forgiveness and unforgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*(4), 675-686

Appendix

Figure 1: Coding Instructions for Seeking Forgiveness Narratives

Main Idea	Category	Code	Sub Category	Description
Type of Relationship		TR1	Emotional Relationship	-Strong emotional connection with other person -ex. BF/GF, Spouse, Parent, Sibling
		TR2	Practical Relationship	-needed the other person for practical purposes -ex. Roommate needed for housing
		TR3	Working Relationship	-had to make the relationship work to accomplish a task (ex. Coworker, fellow student in a group)
		TR4	Family Relationship	-had to continue to be involved with person because they were important to a family member I was close with (ex. Apologizing to sister-in-law because she is important to your brother)
Seeking forgiveness as method of maintaining relationships	Saving the Relationship	SF1	Emotional Relationship	-Strong emotional connection with other person (ex. BF/GF, Spouse, Parent, Sibling)
		SF2	Practical Relationship	-needed the other person for practical purposes (ex. Roommate needed for housing)
		SF3	Working Relationship	-had to make the relationship work to accomplish a task (ex. Coworker, fellow student in a group)
		SF4	Family Relationship	-had to continue to be involved with person because they were important to a family member I was close with (ex. Apologizing to sister-in-law because she is important to your brother)
Motivational Guilt		SF5	Reduce bad/sad feelings	"I felt really bad/sad"
		SF6	Reduce Guilt	"I felt really guilty"
		SF7	Reduce shame	"I felt like I was a bad person"
Altruistic Forgiveness		SF8	Caring for well being	"I care about the person and want them to feel better"
Understanding others perspective		SF9	Understood others feelings	"I understood how the other person felt and would not want to feel that way."
Egotistical Forgiveness	Self-Serving Reasons	SF10	Maintain Image	" I didn't want others to think I was a bad person
		SF11	Maintain material items	"If I didn't apologize I would lose…"
		SF12	Worried about what others would do	"I didn't want them to do it to me"
	Had to do it- outside influence	SF13	Someone in position of power made me	Teacher, parent employer said I had to do it
		SF14	Peer Pressure	My friends made me do it so I could stay in the group
Behaviors of Reparative Action	Explicit Forgiveness	RA1	Verbal Apology (talk or write)	
		RA2	Accepting responsibility for actions/harmed that was caused	
		RA3	Acknowledging error/admitting mistake	
	Implicit Forgiveness	RA4	Made reparations (tried to fix the harm that was caused)	
		RA5	Gave them something tangible (i.e. gift)	
	Explicit Forgiveness	RA6	Explanation to person about why the harm was caused	
		RA7	Promise never to repeat action	
		RA8	Acknowledge other persons feelings but agree to disagree	

Figure 2: Coding Instructions for Not Seeking Forgiveness Narratives

Category	Code	Subcategory
No Need to maintain Relationship	**NSF1**	No relationship
	NSF2	Unimportant Relationship
	NSF3	Important Relationship but don't want to save
Revenge	**NSF4**	Person Deserved it
	NSF5	Person would have done the same to me
Not my fault/responsibility	**NSF6**	Person wouldn't expect me to seek forgiveness
	NSF7	Person mad for no reason, I didn't do anything wrong
Severity of the Offense	**NSF8**	Not a big deal, no significant harm
	NSF9	Unforgivable action, why bother seeking forgiveness
No Chance	**NSF10**	Never had opportunity to seek forgiveness
Embarrassed	**NSF11**	Didn't want anyone to think badly of me if I accepted responsibility for my actions
Confrontation	**NSF12**	Didn't want to deal with a confrontation if I asked for forgiveness
Teach a lesson	**NSF13**	I wanted to teach the person a lesson so that they didn't do something to me in the future