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# An investigation of the general population's understanding of forgiveness

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# An investigation of the general population's understanding of forgiveness

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the general population's understanding and views of forgiveness and to examine if gender was a factor related to one's understanding of forgiveness and motivation to forgive. In this study, structured interviews were administered which allowed a focus on the personal views and experiences of forgiveness and descriptive statistics were used to explain the common patterns in responses among the participants. Forty-nine participants, ranging in ages from 15 to 54, were selected to be interviewed on their views and practice of forgiveness. Of the 49 participants, 15 were males and 34 were females.

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE GENERAL POPULATION'S  
UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

Wen-Chuan Rita Chang  
University of Northern Iowa

December 2006

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the general population's understanding and views of forgiveness and to examine if gender was a factor related to one's understanding of forgiveness and motivation to forgive. In this study, structured interviews were administered which allowed a focus on the personal views and experiences of forgiveness and descriptive statistics were used to explain the common patterns in responses among the participants. Forty-nine participants, ranging in ages from 15 to 54, were selected to be interviewed on their views and practice of forgiveness. Of the 49 participants, 15 were males and 34 were females. Four main findings were discovered through this study.

1. Findings showed that a majority of the participants had accurate knowledge regarding the meaning of forgiveness. Most of the participants gave definitions of forgiveness in line with the definitions commonly given by researchers. Nevertheless, more than half of the participants provided negative or ambiguous responses when asked if they had forgiven someone who had hurt them. Furthermore, even though some participants claimed that they had forgiven their offenders, their forgiving attitudes were based on reconciling with their offenders or forgetting about the hurts.

2. Findings showed that a majority of the participants could distinguish forgiveness from other related concepts such as reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning. However, it was also true that some participants' responses to the differences were not consistent with their definitions of forgiveness.

3. Findings showed that a majority of the participants thought forgiveness was important and that their motive for forgiveness was related to the importance of personal well-being, relationships, and social harmony.

4. Findings showed that there were gender similarities and differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness. No significant differences in gender were found regarding the knowledge of forgiveness and the willingness to forgive. Specific results illustrated that for males, although they believed forgiveness was important due to its healing effects on relationships and social harmony, they were more likely to forgive for personal well-being. In contrast, females believed forgiveness was important for personal well-being but they were more likely to forgive due to the importance of relationships and social harmony.

In sum, although this study illustrates that this sample of the general population has some accurate ideas regarding what forgiveness is and is not and believes that forgiveness is important, their understanding of forgiveness is still incomplete. Thus, the general population may benefit from receiving education or interventions on forgiveness to help them cope with deep, personal, and unfair hurts.

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A Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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Wen-Chuan Rita Chang

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Entitled: An Investigation of the General Population's Understanding of Forgiveness

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where people interact with each other frequently. Social interaction, such as parent-child relationships, romantic relationships or friendships, among people is so common that people are inevitably exposed to the risk of being deeply and unjustly hurt or offended. Such painful incidents prompt people to seek coping strategies for dealing with the real or perceived hurts. For the general population, common, natural, and quick responses are avoidance or revenge; that is to say, injured people would choose to keep their offenders at a distance or seek opportunities to get even with them (McCullough, 2001; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). In addition, individuals often respond to injustices with anger (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Davenport, 1991). These typical responses, however, can trap the injured parties in negative consequences (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; McCullough, 2001; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander-Laan, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Tracing back to the 1980s, the concept of forgiveness has begun to gain much more attention and interest in the psychological research field. Formerly, forgiveness had been popularly advocated within religions and discussed in philosophy (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Consequently, “forgiveness” is not an unfamiliar concept for the general population when thinking about religion or philosophy. More recently, as a result of the increased examination of forgiveness, as it relates to psychology, researchers have discovered that forgiveness has potential advantages related

to positive psychological and physical health (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995; Berry & Worthington, 2001; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Lawler, Younger, Piferi, Jobe, Edmondson, & Jones, 2005; Maltby et al., 2001; Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001; Witvliet et al., 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). These studies have suggested that forgiveness is one healthy choice to overcome suffering and negative feelings as a response to being deeply and unjustly hurt.

Since forgiveness has been found to be a healthy option for healing the pain caused by offenders, educators and other professionals in the helping fields have made extensive efforts to promote forgiveness as one option of healing for the general population. For example, many books on the topic of forgiving others and self-forgiveness have been written (e.g., Enright, 2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & North, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Most persons in the general population, however, still do not take this coping strategy into consideration because of their lack of understanding or knowledge of forgiveness. For instance, if an abused woman believes that forgiveness is a decision to reconcile with her husband, then she may not be willing to give it a try. She may also believe that because she stays in an abusive relationship that she has forgiven. This is not true.

How much the general population really knows about forgiveness is a key question that needs to be answered before we can most effectively encourage the general population to choose forgiveness as a coping strategy to deal with injustices and to heal their pain. Also, it is important to know what clients mean when they claim that they

have forgiven their offenders and how to help clients deepen their understanding of forgiveness to use it effectively. If the knowledge of forgiveness is weak or lacking for educators or professionals in the helping fields, it may be dangerous and harmful to conduct a forgiveness intervention. Forgiveness can be practiced more easily when the general population understands it well. If the general population does not have an accurate understanding of forgiveness, they may either refuse to consider forgiveness as a coping strategy to deal with serious injustices, engage in pseudo-forgiveness, or forgive their offenders reluctantly. Because various views about forgiveness exist among the general population, assessing exactly how much they know about forgiveness is a critical step when attempting to design successful forgiveness interventions.

#### Purpose of the Study

This study does not attempt to define forgiveness or discuss misconceptions about forgiveness; instead, the focuses of this study address the general population's understanding and views of forgiveness and the relationship between gender and forgiveness. In particular, this study uses structured interviews to explore a sample of the general population's views regarding their definitions of forgiveness, other concepts related to forgiveness, and their thoughts about the values of forgiveness. Furthermore, this study uses descriptive statistics to display and explain the common patterns in responses among the general population and the relationship between forgiveness and gender.

Although forgiveness is one of the reactions when an individual confronts a personal, deep, and unjust hurt, it is a concept that is easily confused by other related

concepts, such as reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). The conceptions of forgiveness among the general population may be distorted or incomplete. Researchers have illustrated that failure to forgive has been linked to negative outcomes (Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Maltby et al., 2001). The lack of understanding of forgiveness may lead to more pain and keep the injured from healing (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Hence, the general population's understanding of forgiveness may have a significant effect on one's willingness to consider forgiveness as an option and to commit to practicing forgiveness.

The definitions of forgiveness not only differ among the general population but also vary among researchers. Based on the study of different forgiveness interventions, Wade and Worthington (2005) concluded that describing forgiveness accurately and explicitly to clients is one of the important steps in helping clients forgive. For this reason, it is important to clarify the meaning of genuine forgiveness to the general population. Furthermore, understanding the general population's knowledge of forgiveness may also play a critical role in measuring forgiveness. In order to create reliability and validity in forgiveness measurement, it is necessary to understand lay conceptions of forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004). Hence, the main purpose of this study is to describe the general population's views about forgiveness, including their understanding of forgiveness and its value.

A review of previous research suggests that gender differences appear to be a significant factor in different domains regarding cognition, affect, and behavior (Smith, 2005). Furthermore, the potential benefits of forgiveness for both males and females

have been studied (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993). As previous research has illustrated, there is a weak relationship between gender and forgiveness. For example, some studies of gender differences and forgiveness have demonstrated that females are more in favor of forgiveness than males (Gilligan, 1982; Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, Gassin, Freedman, Olson, & Sarinopoulos, 1995). Other researchers, however, have found no gender differences in the understanding and the use of forgiveness (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Middleton, 1995). Consequently, the role gender plays in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness is important to examine further.

Males and females may have different understanding of forgiveness and willingness to forgive one's offenders. Hence, researching the relationship between gender and forgiveness is important and may provide some insights into men's and women's similarities and differences regarding knowledge and practice of forgiveness. Understanding gender differences in forgiveness as well as the general population's knowledge, views, and practice of forgiveness will better enable educators and other professionals in the helping fields to tailor education and therapy to specific populations. Because of this, the second purpose of this study is to explore gender similarities and differences in the understanding of forgiveness, experiences with forgiving and views about forgiveness. More information on gender differences will be discussed in the literature review.

In a review of previous studies, focusing on participants' knowledge of forgiveness, it is found that these specific studies were based on introducing dilemmas or



fictitious vignettes to participants and then rating their willingness to forgive the offenders in such imaginary or limited situations (Cornock 2002; Gilligan, 1982; Girard & Mullet, 1997). These situational factors, however, may bias the outcomes and influence the reliability of the general population's understanding and practicing of forgiveness. Because of this, this study employed interview procedures to provide more specific personal experiences in understanding how individuals of both sexes deal with unjust offenses. The research interview is based on the individuals' personal experiences and is a professional conversation, because it involves a specific approach and skill of questioning.

A structured interview is a more potent approach designed to capture the diversity of the participant's views of forgiveness (Kvale, 1996). Interviews can assist researchers in understanding how the general population defines forgiveness, practices forgiveness, and learns about forgiveness, as well as in unfolding the meaning of the general population's experiences with forgiveness (Kvale, 1996). To determine this, a structured research interview is conducted as part of this study. Furthermore, to address information that is missing from the current literature on forgiveness, descriptive statistics are used to provide a more detailed analysis of the general population's understanding of forgiveness and experiences with forgiving.

### Research Questions

Based on the studies done in the field of forgiveness, more empirical and explicit information is required for understanding what the general population knows about forgiveness. Furthermore, whether the understanding and practicing of forgiveness are

related to gender is examined in this study. For this reason, a list of research questions focusing on the following themes were posed:

1. What is the general population's knowledge of forgiveness? (How do they define forgiveness? What are their experiences with forgiveness?)
2. Are there other concepts the general population equates with forgiveness?
3. What are the general population's views about the importance and significance of forgiveness?
4. What role does gender play in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness?

In the current study, first, it is hypothesized that a majority of the participants may lack accurate knowledge regarding the meaning of forgiveness. They would define forgiveness using concepts other than letting go of hurts and negative feelings. Also, when asked if they have forgiven the person for the hurt, most of them would give ambiguous responses, such as "do not know," instead of saying "yes." The second hypothesis is that most of the participants in this study would equate forgiveness with going back to the relationship or forgetting about the hurts. Third, according to the participants' views about forgiveness, it is predicted that a majority of participants would claim that forgiveness is important and the injured would be more likely to forgive because of the importance of personal health, relationships, and social harmony. The last hypothesis of this study is that there are both gender similarities and differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness. It is thought that females would more often than males equate forgiveness with reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning. In addition, females would be more likely than males to say they would choose to forgive because

forgiveness may bring the relationship back to normal or for the restoration of social harmony.

In order to provide detailed information regarding forgiveness, examine related concepts involved in forgiveness, discover how people view forgiveness, and illustrate the effect of gender on forgiveness, Chapter 2 will review the literature in these four areas that relate to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In order to provide further insights into the research questions of this study, this chapter reviews the literature of four specific areas. The first area of review examines the common definitions of forgiveness as defined by researchers. Furthermore, the misconceptions related to forgiveness are discussed in this area in order to distinguish them from genuine forgiveness. In the second area of review, the effects of forgiveness interventions are presented. This area of review deals with several empirical studies of forgiveness interventions based on two common forgiveness intervention models. In addition, the positive effects associated with practicing forgiveness and the negative consequences associated with not forgiving are reviewed in this area.

The third area of review focuses on the general population's views about forgiveness. Examining the general population's views about forgiveness is important, because it explains how easy or difficult it is for the general population to engage in forgiveness. Also, understanding the general population's knowledge of forgiveness is necessary for educators and professionals in the helping fields to conduct the most productive forgiveness interventions. The fourth area of review examines the role gender plays in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness.

#### Interpersonal Forgiveness

“Forgiveness” is not an unfamiliar concept. Tracing back before the 1980s, forgiveness was rooted in the religious and philosophic fields. In Richardson's (1957) theological word study, he gave an explanation of forgiveness and stated that “Human

wrong is removed as a barrier between God and humanity, and wrong action between people is forgiven to erase the anger and resentment of the wounded party” (as cited in Ferch, 1998, p.6). Among the diverse religions, the concept of forgiveness had been viewed as a productive response to injustices (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Several researchers have suggested that “religion might contribute to health and well-being by providing a brief matrix in which people can both (a) seek and receive forgiveness by God and other people, and (b) develop the will to forgive other people who have damaged them in the past” (McCullough & Worthington, 1999, p.1160). Although religious faith may be a determinant to facilitate forgiveness, forgiveness is feasible for all of the general population despite whether they have religious beliefs or not.

Besides the religious understandings, philosophers’ viewpoints of forgiveness also led researchers to develop basic knowledge of forgiveness (Enright & North, 1998; Yandell, 1998). For instance, Piaget (1932) and Behn (1932) maintained that the capacity to forgive resulted from the development of moral judgment (as cited in McCullough et al., 2000). As a result of the philosophical groundwork, forgiveness has begun to gain much more attention and interest in the psychological research field, especially from developmental and clinical perspectives (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1989; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Girard & Mullet, 1997; Hope, 1987; McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a, 1994b). Based on the idea of religion, forgiveness is expected from God, whereas from the psychological viewpoint, the emphasis of forgiveness is between people (Ferch, 1998).

Interpersonal forgiveness has occurred when one person forgives another, rather than the deity-human relationship (Enright et al., 1992).

Giving an exact definition of forgiveness is difficult, because several diverse definitions of forgiveness exist among researchers. North (1987) provided a complete and clear explanation of the idea of forgiveness. According to North, she viewed forgiveness as “if we are to forgive, our resentment is to be overcome not by denying ourselves the right to that resentment, but by endeavoring to view the wrongdoer with compassion, benevolence and love while recognizing that he has willfully abandoned his right to them” (p. 502). More recently, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) redefined forgiveness as the following:

People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right) and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right) (p.29).

Another definition of forgiveness presented by McCullough and his colleagues (1997) is that “the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender’s hurtful actions” (pp.321-322). In addition, Rye and Pargament (2002) gave a definition of forgiveness and viewed it as “letting go of negative affect (e.g., hostility), negative cognitions (e.g., thoughts of revenge), and negative behavior (e.g., verbal aggression) in response to considerable

injustice, and also may involve responding positively toward the offender (e.g., compassion)” (pp. 419-420).

Examination of the definitions presented by researchers indicated that these definitions of forgiveness were built on a number of essential points. For example, forgiveness is a way to deal with negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Genuine forgiveness, in other words, is composed of these essential points so that it can bring about the positive changes for the injured party’s psychological and physical well-being and the potential for restoring a broken relationship.

Forgiveness can only work effectively when there is something that needs to be forgiven. Most researchers have emphasized that before considering forgiveness as a coping strategy, the injured must have suffered a deep, personal and unjust hurt from the offender (Enright et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989; Freedman & Enright, 1996; North, 1987; Smedes, 1984). Also, the injured must have an understanding of justice (Enright et al., 1992) to know that what was done to them was wrong and recognize the hurt they suffered and their negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward the offender, such as resentment (Enright, 2001; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Freedman & Enright, 1996; North, 1987). Forgiving is not a requirement but one option for the injured to involve oneself in a series of cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes toward the perceived offender (Enright & Zell, 1989; Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopoulos, & Freedman, 1992; Enright et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998).

The meaning of forgiveness, according to Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000), was a “developmental variable that changes perspectives, feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and

interactions” (p.24). When engaging in the forgiving process, the injured overcomes the resentment even though he or she has the moral right to the resentment, and substitutes his or her negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors willingly with positive ones toward the offender who has no moral right to deserve those (North, 1987; Enright et al., 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989). The injured has a shift in the understanding of the offender, feels empathetic and compassionately toward the offender, and develops constructive behaviors toward the offender (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). According to North (1987), the most significant concept of forgiveness was that it is viewed as a gift given to the offender. Forgiveness is a moral and unconditional act toward the offender (Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al., 1992). For example, an apology is not a requirement for forgiveness (Enright et al., 1992; North, 1987) although there are a lot of misconceptions associated with the concepts of apology and forgiveness (Freedman, 1999; McCullough et al., 1997).

As illustrated, a variety of definitions of forgiveness exist among researchers. The different or indistinct accounts of forgiveness may be one of the reasons which obstruct the feasibility of forgiveness (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Enright & Zell, 1989). Only if the concepts of forgiveness are clearly defined can the general population’s understanding of forgiveness be enhanced.

In order to deepen the understanding of forgiveness, it is necessary to distinguish forgiveness from other concepts. Focusing on what forgiveness is not and clarifying the general population’s misconceptions about forgiveness is a way to facilitate forgiveness (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998). Although most researchers viewed forgiveness as a powerful coping strategy for the injured in dealing with a deep, personal,



and unjust hurt and healing the pain, a few researchers had doubted its worth and believed that it could bring about dangerous consequences for the injured (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992). For instance, some researchers viewed forgiveness as destructive in the context of sexual abuse. (See Freedman and Enright, 1996, for more details.) However, much of the disagreement results from the misunderstanding of forgiveness (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Lamb & Murphy, 2002).

“Pseudo-forgiveness basically is a ploy to maintain or gain power over others,” claimed by Enright et al. (1998). If the injured forgives the offender but then continually reminds the offender of his or her offense, the injured does not process genuine forgiveness (Enright et al.). More skeptical views of forgiving were discussed by Enright and his colleagues (1998, 2000). For example, forgiveness is a gift given unconditionally. If the injured is trapped in pseudo-forgiveness, he or she believes that forgiving the offender leads him or her to feel good or to be able to take a superior attitude toward the offender (Enright et al.). Furthermore, if the injured requests compensation for the hurt from the offender, he or she may experience pseudo-forgiveness. Another argument against forgiving is that forgiveness may be a way to deny justice or to perpetuate injustice. Enright and his colleagues (1992, 1998), however, have reported that this way of seeing forgiveness does not qualify as genuine forgiveness.

Referring to the research of interpersonal forgiveness presented by Enright and his colleagues (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992), they argued against several researchers' perspectives on forgiveness. For example, Nietzsche (1887) claimed that only cowards choose to forgive. The offender is so powerful that the injured has no other choice but to

choose reluctantly to forgive. This is a form of pseudo-forgiveness, argued by Enright and his colleagues (Enright et al., 1998), and genuine forgiveness, in contrast, is a valiant action toward the offender (North, 1987). Forward (1989) confused forgiveness with “overlooking injustices,” “reconciliation,” and “legal pardon,” and considered forgiveness as a detrimental decision for the injured. The injured abandons his or her right to seek justice or depends on the offender’s reaction to decide whether or not to forgive. Bass and Davis (1988) also claimed that forgiveness is the same as “legal pardon” and “excusing.” From their views of forgiveness, it means that the injured forgoes his or her right to ask for compensation, apology, or respect. Kahrhoff (1988) also equated forgiveness with “pardoning” and “excusing.” He further suggested that the injured should make every effort to control his or her perceptions of the offender and to control his or her emotional responses to the offender. Although Simon and Simon had clarified the misconceptions of forgiveness, their definition of forgiveness did not encompass the addition of positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward the offender. These above examples illustrated the misconceptions that many authors and researchers have about forgiveness. Thus, it is not surprising that the public would hold misconceptions about forgiveness and the benefits associated with forgiving.

To date, many researchers have agreed with Enright and his colleagues (1992) that forgiveness should be distinguished from “condoning,” “excusing,” “pardoning,” “forgetting,” and “reconciliation.” Also, forgiveness is not the same as “accepting” or “tolerating” (Enright et al., 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989). Accepting or tolerating injustices cannot be viewed as genuine forgiveness (Enright et al., 1998). When the

injured forgives, he or she recognizes the hurt and his or her resentment rather than just ignoring the injustices or putting the past behind him or her (Enright et al., 1998). “You do not have to tolerate what people do when you forgive them for doing it; you may forgive people, but still refuse to tolerate what they have done” (Smedes, 1984, p. 49). Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting (Enright et al., 1992; Smedes, 1984). An injured can forgive and heal from the hurt, but he or she cannot expect to forget the most painful experiences of his or her life; experiencing forgiveness cannot wipe away what had been done (Enright et al., 1992) and “forgetting, in fact, may be a dangerous way to escape the inner surgery of the heart that we call forgiving” (Smedes, 1984, p.60). When the injured chooses to forgive, he or she remembers the deep and unjust hurt but in more constructive and healthier ways (Enright et al., 1998).

Forgiveness is not condoning the offender’s offenses by excusing it (Enright, Eastin et al., 1992). To condone is to put up with the offences by suffering in silence, yet the injured is still smoldering with resentment (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992). North (1987) and Smedes (1984) believed that the injured does not give excuses for the injustices by forgiving the offender. When the injured excuses, he or she just pretends that the offender does not offend him or her purposely. Forgiveness only works effectively when the injured recognizes the deep and unjust hurt (Fitzgibbons, 1986; North, 1987). Furthermore, forgiveness is not legal pardon. According to Twambly (1989, as cited in Enright et al., 1992), “pardoning involves the world of jurisprudence, not interpersonal relations.” Forgiveness is the injured party’s personal response to the offenses and to the

offender. When the injured forgives, he or she can still bring legal justice to the offender. However, pardoning releases the offenders from punishment (Enright et al., 1992).

The most confusing identified concept related to forgiveness is reconciliation (Freedman, 1998). Reconciliation is not a requirement for forgiving the offender although it is an ideal result of forgiveness (Freedman, 1998). Freedman (1998) has stated that “forgiveness may not involve reconciliation, and reconciliation is dependent on a behavioral change in the injurer and trust on the injured person’s part” (p. 203). Forgiveness is an injured party’s individual response to the offender. Reconciliation, however, is the act of two people coming together again in mutual trust (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Freedman, 1998). In some cases, however, an injured can choose to forgive but end the relationship with the offender. If the offender’s destructive behaviors and intentions change, then the relationship might be restored (Enright, Eastin et al., 1992). Furthermore, forgiveness is not contingent on the offender’s willingness to reconcile. Otherwise, the injured person is trapped in unforgiveness until the offender decides to seek forgiveness.

#### Efficacy of Forgiveness

This area of the literature review addresses several empirical studies on forgiveness interventions and examines the effects associated with these interventions. This background is especially necessary because it demonstrates the feasibility of forgiveness interventions and explains the importance of introducing the concepts of forgiveness to the general population.

### Forgiveness Intervention Models

Several empirical studies on forgiveness have demonstrated the effects of the use of forgiveness education based on different forgiveness intervention models (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Freedman & Knupp, 2003; Hebl & Enright, 1993; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington, Kurusu, Collins, Berry, Ripley, & Baier, 2000). These models, utilized in various forgiveness education programs, were developed by Enright and his colleagues (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991) and McCullough and his colleagues (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997). A well-designed forgiveness intervention model based on a clear definition of forgiveness is helpful for educating educators and professionals in the helping fields on how to conduct effective forgiveness interventions and for guiding the general population in forgiving (McCullough & Worthington, 1994b).

Enright and his colleagues (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991) have developed a four-phase, 20-unit forgiveness model that incorporates cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects to promote forgiveness. This model has proven effective in several studies focusing on forgiveness interventions. During the first phase, the Uncovering phase, the injured is encouraged to confront the deep and unjust hurt and deal with the negative emotions, such as anger (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Simon & Simon, 1990). Once the injured is able to admit that he or she was hurt by the offender and gives vent to the negative emotions in a healthy way, he or she is ready to move on to the next phase, the Decision phase. During this phase, the injured realizes that some changes

must be made to get rid of the pain which resulted from the deep and unjust hurt. For this reason, the injured examines the cognitive and emotional struggles that are involved in forgiving and decides to make a commitment to forgive the offender.

The third phase, the Work phase, leads the injured to engage in reframing activities. Through the reframing activities, the injured views the offender in a larger and different perspective and tries to understand the reasons for the injury (Enright et al., 1992). Also, this process helps the injured develop empathy which makes way for feelings of compassion toward the offender (McCullough et al., 1997). Once the injured makes cognitive and emotional changes, he or she moves on to the final phase of the forgiveness process. During the Deepening phase, the injured comes to find meaning in his or her suffering and realizes that it is necessary to absorb the pain of the injustice in order to avoid passing the pain on to either the offender or innocent others (Enright et al., 1992). The injured experiences an emotional release and is therefore more willing to forgive the offender (Enright, 2001).

Another forgiveness intervention model, developed by McCullough and his colleagues (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997), focused more on assisting the injured in developing cognitive and affective empathy in the forgiveness education program and had proven effective with college students with different hurts (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2000). Further, this model, utilized in McCullough et al.'s (1995, 1997) studies, was refined into the Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness by Worthington (2001, as cited in Wade & Worthington, 2005). At the first step of this

model, the injured is asked to recall (R) the offense and to explore what his or her responses are to the hurt. The second step is to encourage the injured to understand and develop empathy (E), through practicing cognitive reframing, for the offender. For example, the injured is directed to see the reasons for the hurt or to develop new perspectives to the offender. Giving an altruistic (A) gift of forgiveness is emphasized in the third step. The injured is led to consider the offender's need to be forgiven. In the fourth step, the injured is encouraged to publicly commit (C) to forgiveness. Finally, the injured is taught to maintain the changes and to hold (H) on to forgiveness (Wade & Worthington, 2005).

#### Empirical Studies on Forgiveness Intervention Programs

Based on forgiveness intervention models, forgiveness interventions are designed to provide the injured with education on the essence of forgiveness and with several strategies to promote forgiveness. Several empirical studies have shown that forgiveness education can be a helpful intervention with a wide range of populations, including parentally love-deprived college students (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995), men whose partners had abortions (Coyle & Enright, 1997), female incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996), adolescents who have experienced parental divorce (Freedman & Knupp, 2003), elderly females with miscellaneous hurts (Hebl & Enright, 1993), and college students who have experienced different types of injury (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2000) and so forth.

Forgiveness interventions have been utilized in different modalities, including individual and group settings, but only a few forgiveness interventions were conducted in

individual psychotherapy (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Furthermore, the duration of the interventions vary among these studies and researchers have determined that effective forgiveness interventions indeed require time to process (Freedman, 1999; Freedman & Knupp, 2003; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Worthington et al., 2000).

The first group forgiveness intervention program, based on Enright et al.'s (1991) model, was put into practice by Hebl and Enright (1993). They devised an eight week, 1-hour per week intervention program in which forgiveness was the therapeutic goal for elderly females struggling to deal with miscellaneous hurts. Compared to the control group, Hebl and Enright discovered that the participants in the experimental group showed decreases in negative affect, such as depression and anxiety, less negative thoughts and anger toward the offenders, and more positive affect and behaviors toward those who hurt them. In addition, the participants demonstrated higher scores in their willingness to forgive after participating in the forgiveness intervention program. (See Hebl & Enright, 1993, for more details.)

Al-Mabuk and his colleagues (1995) administered two randomized, experimental and control group designs, following Enright et al.'s (1991) model, to examine the effectiveness of a forgiveness education program focused on parentally love-deprived late adolescents. In study 1, four 1-hour group sessions, only the units up to 9 and 10 of forgiveness education, were used in the workshop; whereas in study 2, in six 1-hour group sessions, all units of forgiveness education were introduced. The results of study 1 showed that this forgiveness education program could assist adolescents with gaining more in hope and in willingness to forgive others, but this willingness was not targeted at



parent(s). The results of study 2, however, indicated a more complete influence on adolescents' psychological health, such as a decrease in the feelings of anxiety and depression and an increase in self-esteem. Also, the participants showed more positive attitudes toward parent(s). (See Al-Mabuk et al., 1995, for more details.)

In order to promote forgiveness with college students who had experienced different types of hurts, McCullough and Worthington (1995) developed two hour-long psychoeducational group interventions based on two different rationales for why forgiveness is a beneficial goal. The rationale of the interpersonal intervention was that forgiveness could be viewed as a way to restore interpersonal relationship with the offender; while for the self-enhancement intervention, forgiveness was viewed as a way to gain physical and psychological benefits for the forgiver. Compared to the control group, both interventions reduced negative feelings, such as revenge, and increased positive feelings toward the offender. The self-enhancement intervention, however, resulted with more affirming thoughts and feelings toward the offender. Although the results shown in these two studies were positive, because of the short duration of interventions, the results were not significant. (See McCullough & Worthington, 1995, for more details.)

Another experimental and control group study on forgiveness intervention program was initiated by Freedman and Enright (1996). Based on Enright et al.'s (1991) model, they conducted 60-minute weekly individual sessions with female incest survivors. Because of the different pace of the forgiveness process depending on participants' personal issues, this forgiveness intervention program was continued until all the

participants met the criteria and completed the intervention. In their long-term investigation, the researchers found that participants showed stronger forgiveness after exposure to the forgiveness intervention program. In addition, the participants demonstrated significant decreases in anxiety and depression and increases in self-esteem and feelings of hope. (See Freedman & Enright, 1996, for more details.)

Coyle and Enright (1997) assessed the effectiveness of a forgiveness intervention program for the men who were hurt by their partners' choice to have an abortion. In line with other studies, the forgiveness intervention used in this study was based on Enright et al.'s (1991) model. This intervention program was individual and consisted of twelve, 90 minute weekly sessions. The results were consistent with other studies which demonstrated more positive changes in psychological well-being, such as reduced anxiety, depression and grief and increased self-esteem and hope for the experimental group compared to the control group. Results demonstrated that forgiveness interventions could assist the general population in understanding and assimilating the conceptions of forgiveness more thoroughly so that they might be more willing to consider forgiveness as an option to deal with injustices and hurts. (See Coyle & Enright, 1997, for more details.)

Following McCullough and Worthington's (1995) study on forgiveness interventions, McCullough and his colleagues (McCullough et al., 1997) attempted to investigate the relationship between forgiveness and empathy. Two brief intervention programs, including empathy-based and advocacy-based, were conducted with college students who had experienced different injuries (as cited in Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

Each intervention consisted of eight, hour-long empathy seminars in which forgiving by means of affective and cognitive empathy was emphasized. The results showed, compared to an active control group, both forgiveness interventions could promote forgiveness; nevertheless, more changes in their forgiving attitude resulted from affective empathy and less so from cognitive empathy. (See McCullough et al., 1997, for more details.)

Although empathy-based forgiveness intervention is successful in promoting forgiveness, it takes time to develop empathy for an offender. For this reason, Worthington and his colleagues (2000) administered three brief forgiveness interventions with different periods of time and examined whether these interventions would generate immediate effects for college students with diverse hurts. In study 1, McCullough and Worthington's (1995) 1-hour psychoeducational group intervention was utilized. A 2-hour forgiveness workshop and a 10-minute pre-intervention videotape, focusing more on empathy, were included in study 2. In study 3, only a 2-hour forgiveness workshop was conducted. The results illustrated that studies 2 and 3 were more effective in promoting forgiveness than study 1, because more time helped participants to cognitively and emotionally experience their forgiveness and promote forgiveness more effectively. (See Worthington et al., 2000, for more details.)

On the basis of Worthington's (2001) model, Rye and Pargament (2002) conducted a group forgiveness intervention program with college women who had been hurt in a romantic relationship. The six, 90-minute weekly sessions, focusing on enhancing knowledge of forgiveness, were administered in two different groups, secular

and religious. Although no differential treatment effects were found in these two groups, this forgiveness intervention program helped the participants enhance their knowledge of forgiveness, overcome anger, and forgive their offenders. Furthermore, an increase in hope and a decrease in depression were detected. Nevertheless, the results failed to show a significant effect on participants' willingness to forgive or a decrease in hostility and anxiety. The limitations of this study may result from the short duration of intervention. (See Rye & Pargament, 2002, for more details.)

More recently, Freedman and Knupp (2003) conducted a forgiveness education program with adolescents who had experienced parental divorce, based on Enright et al.'s (1991) model. In this study, researchers used a pretest-posttest control group design to examine the effects that an 8-week forgiveness education intervention program might have. Although there was no statistically significant effect on their forgiving attitude, in either group, the experimental participants reported a more forgiving attitude toward their parent(s) relative to control group. Although the lack of significance on the forgiveness measure was most likely due to the short duration of intervention, the participants might still benefit from the forgiveness education program. (See Freedman & Knupp, 2003, for more details.)

In spite of the various types of forgiveness intervention programs administered by different researchers, the goals of these interventions were to help participants learn about and practice forgiveness and hopefully to gain improvement in physical and psychological health. According to the empirical research on forgiveness intervention programs, the short duration of interventions may not provide enough time to form a

complete understanding of forgiveness and to experience forgiveness (Freedman & Knupp, 2003; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2000). For this reason, longer forgiveness interventions should be designed for developing sound understanding of forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

### Health Outcomes of Practicing Forgiveness

According to Worthington and his colleagues, they defined unforgiveness as “a complex combination of delayed negative emotions, such as resentment, hatred, anger, or fear, toward a person who has transgressed personal boundaries” (Worthington & Scherer, 2004, p.386). Belief in pseudo-forgiveness, the injured is easily trapped in unforgiveness and rarely sets him or herself free from the resentment. Several researchers have investigated the relationship between anger and health, and found that the expression of destructive anger can result in negative consequences related to psychological and physical health (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Also, Worthington and Scherer outlined several results suggesting that unforgiveness is stressful and arouses corresponding negative emotions. Furthermore, a failure to forgive the offender is followed by a higher level of depression (Maltby et al., 2001).

Several findings, however, have discovered that forgiveness interventions are beneficial for the injured. Forgiveness can be set as an effective goal in the psychotherapeutic process that helps the injured deal with a deep, personal, and unjust hurt and facilitate physical and psychological well-being (Fitzgibbon, 1986; Hope, 1987). Fitzgibbons (1986), observing his clients in clinical settings, found that “forgiveness is a powerful therapeutic intervention which frees people from their anger and from the guilt

which is often a result of unconscious anger” (p.630). When the injured forgives, he or she can express anger in more appropriate ways and make healing possible (Fitzgibbons, 1986). In line with Fitzgibbons’ observations, Hope (1987) also found that his clients could benefit from the process of forgiveness therapy, such as the reduction of negative emotions and physical symptoms. Furthermore, Davenport (1991) has reported that forgiving or the letting go of anger could produce improved psychological health and the effect of healing. Several empirical studies also have investigated the positive results of forgiveness associated with physical and psychological well-being (McCullough et al., 1997; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Worthington et al., 2000). Researchers have discovered that forgiveness can result in decreases in anxiety, depression (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993), and grief (Coyle & Enright, 1997) and increases in self-esteem, hope (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993), and the willingness to forgive (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995).

Likewise, some researchers have discovered improved physical health for the injured tied to genuine forgiveness (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Lawler et al., 2005; Toussaint et al., 2001; Witvliet et al., 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Cited from Toussaint et al. (2001), Kaplan (1992) argued that “forgiveness may have an effect on coronary heart disease” (p.250). Also, Pingleton (1989) suggested that forgiveness may help the patients recover from cancer. Furthermore, Witvliet et al. (2001) discovered that forgiveness was accompanied by lower heart rate, blood pressure, facial electromyogram (EMG), and skin conductance. As a result of the positive outcomes from forgiveness

interventions, researchers have reported that more educators or professionals in the helping fields have made an attempt to use forgiveness as a therapeutic goal in clinical settings (Al-Mabuk, Dedrick, & Vanderah, 1998; DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993).

### The Views of the General Population in Forgiveness

The general population responds to injustices with various coping strategies (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Davenport, 1991; McCullough, 2001; McCullough et al., 1997). Forgiveness is one of the strategies the general population could choose. Nevertheless, they may feel less comfortable with considering forgiveness because of the lack of complete understanding and knowledge of forgiveness (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1992). For example, the injured may be reluctant to forgive the offender because of the fear of putting themselves at an increased risk for future hurts. Enright et al. (1998) challenged Patton's (1985) belief that the general population can comprehend the ideas of forgiveness on their own. Instead, Enright et al. argued that the general population needs to be taught about genuine forgiveness to begin practicing forgiveness.

The understanding of forgiveness among the general population appears to be diverse or deficient (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Middleton, 1995; Younger et al., 2004). In addition, the use of forgiveness to deal with injustices is still not practiced among the general population. In Al-Mabuk et al.'s (1995) study, they reported that not all the injured knew how to forgive. The injured may make a commitment to forgive but he or she still may not know how to forgive with a proper attitude. The lack of clear understanding of forgiveness may heavily influence the consequences of forgiveness; that is to say, misconceptions about forgiveness could lead to pseudo-forgiveness

(Enright & Zell, 1989). With the misconceptions about forgiveness or the external motives to forgive, the injured may report high levels of forgiveness but still lack the beneficial outcomes of forgiveness (Enright & Zell, 1989). In addition to stressing the importance of genuine forgiveness, researchers have also emphasized that forgiveness is the injured party's choice and should not be forced (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The injured can be educated about forgiveness, but then he or she should choose whether to forgive on his or her own. If the injured is forced into forgiving, pseudo-forgiveness rather than genuine forgiveness may come into existence (Enright et al., 1998).

Many studies have shown that clarifying the understanding of the concepts of forgiveness may encourage forgiveness (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Enright et al., 1989). Enright et al. (1989) and Kearns and Fincham (2004) have claimed that the injured party's will to forgive may be a factor in the effectiveness of forgiveness interventions. A well-defined concept of forgiveness can reduce misconceptions and increase the injured party's will to forgive. Forgiveness interventions are more productive when the general population believes that the consequences of forgiveness may prevent the sufferings from continuing to damage their health, provide an opportunity to restore the broken relationships, and heal emotionally even if reconciliation is not possible. For instance, if the injured believes that he or she must reconcile with the offender and resume their relationship, he or she may refuse to forgive or only forgive reluctantly. On the contrary, if the injured knows that reconciliation is not a requirement of forgiveness, he or she may have an easier time of forgiving.



Referring to the review of several types of forgiveness interventions, Wade and Worthington (2005) have claimed that giving a clear-cut definition of forgiveness or describing explicitly what forgiveness is, is an important part of forgiveness education. As a result of the incomplete understanding of forgiveness, the ambiguous responses of “I do not know if I have forgiven him or her” or “yes, I have forgiven but am still full of anger, hatred, and resentment” are common among clients when the educators or other professionals in the helping fields ask the question, “Have you forgiven the person for the hurt?” (Boon & Sulsky, 1997). Additionally, these ambiguous responses have a great influence on the measurement of forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). If educators or professionals in the helping fields do not know precisely what the general population means when they say that “they have forgiven their offenders,” the consequences of forgiveness interventions could lead to pseudo-forgiveness and could be negative and detrimental (Enright & Zell, 1989; Maltby, et al., 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Because of this, it is important that educators and other professionals in the helping fields have an accurate understanding of what it means to forgive and what is involved in the process of forgiveness.

Also, it is necessary for educators and professionals in the helping fields to make sure they know what people mean when they say they “forgive” or “do not forgive” the offenders (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). For example, a therapist, who counsels his or her clients to forgive a parent who was abusive but does not make a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, may be doing a disservice to his or her client. Therapists may also advise their clients against forgiving because they assume that to forgive

means to excuse, forget, pardon, and/or deny one's anger. Some people mistakenly believe that anger is not part of the forgiveness process and thus advise against forgiving (Freedman & Enright, 1996). It is also thought that if an individual is still angry, depressed, resentful, he or she most likely has not completed the forgiveness process. He or she may be in the midst of forgiving but genuine forgiveness may not have been reached yet.

A few studies have investigated the various conceptions of forgiveness as they exist among the experienced clinicians or psychologists (Denton & Martin, 1998) and found that clinicians or psychologists also have different views on forgiveness. Hence, whether or not to encourage forgiveness may depend on one's views about forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1994a). Although forgiveness is generally used in religious counseling settings, in light of the potential benefits related to forgiving, secular clinicians or psychologists are encouraged to consider forgiveness as a therapeutic goal in aiding clients to deal with injustices and heal the pain (Diblasio & Proctor, 1993; McCullough & Worthington, 1994a). For this reason, it is also important for educators and professionals in the helping fields to have a sound understanding of what it means to forgive and what is involved in the process of forgiveness in order to educate clients and conduct forgiveness interventions productively, accurately, and with the potential for the most promising results.

The general population's understanding of forgiveness may heavily influence their motives of why forgiveness is offered (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Younger et al., 2004). However, there have been a few studies that put emphasis on the consequences

when offering forgiveness based upon the general population's views (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). The general population's understanding of forgiveness may condition their attitudes toward forgiving. Further, the use of forgiveness is limited if the general population lacks desire to forgive or knowledge about forgiveness as one way to cope with deep hurts (McCullough & Worthington, 1994a). To this end, educators and professionals in the helping fields must provide accurate knowledge of forgiveness and how to forgive to their clients. With an in-depth understanding of forgiveness, the general population may be more willing to consider forgiveness as a coping strategy when dealing with injustices and healing their pain.

#### Gender and Forgiveness

To date, gender differences are still a controversial topic related to a variety of issues; therefore, many researchers have become more aware of the issues related to gender. A review of previous research studies have suggested that gender differences appear to be a significant factor in different domains regarding cognitive, affective, and behavior (Smith, 2005), and it has been shown to relate to several psychological factors. For instance, several researchers have investigated the relationship between gender and emotion and indicated that gender differences are demonstrated in the types, intensity, and expression of emotions (Brody, 1997; Heesacker et al., 1999; Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). In addition, gender differences are related to moral reasoning (Ford & Lowery, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Wark & Krebs, 1996), and these findings have suggested that males and females show different types of moral reasoning. For this reason, gender may also have a relationship to the understanding of forgiveness

and the willingness to forgive. Gender differences may have significant influence on facilitating forgiveness interventions.

Some researchers have investigated the area of gender and forgiveness (Enright et al., 1989; Girard & Mullet, 1997; Subkoviak et al., 1995; Toussaint & Webb, 2005) and considered gender as a research variable. According to Gilligan (1982), females have a preference for using the caring orientation of moral reasoning, while most males prefer to use the justice orientation. In addition, females favor the maintenance and the harmony of relationships with other people. For this reason, Gilligan has argued that gender differences may influence the likelihood to forgive and suggested that females give more weight to forgiveness than males because of their desire to maintain relationships and not to hurt others. Furthermore, in line with Gilligan's study, Girard and Mullet (1997) and Subkoviak et al. (1995) have discovered that when confronting the injustices, females were more apt to consider forgiveness as a coping strategy. Other studies, however, failed to find significant gender differences in the understanding and the use of forgiveness (Enright et al., 1989; Middleton, 1995). Accordingly, there are still many issues related to gender and forgiveness that need to be explored.

Gender may be a variable that impacts the general population's understanding of forgiveness and the willingness to regard forgiveness as an option for dealing with a deep hurt and pain. If educators or professionals in the helping fields intend to develop forgiveness interventions for their clients, they may need to take gender differences into account. Understanding the relationship between gender and forgiveness could help

clarify the general population's misunderstanding of forgiveness and make forgiveness interventions more productive and successful.

The next chapter will describe the design of a study that investigated the general population's understanding of forgiveness.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The current study seeks to gain insight into the general population's knowledge and understanding of forgiveness. In addition, the relationship between gender and forgiveness is examined in this study. The design presented in this chapter is developed to answer the research questions. Structured interviews and descriptive statistics are considered the appropriate methods to investigate the research questions. A structured interview method is used to interview the participants to gather their personal views and experiences of forgiveness and to examine if gender is a factor related to their understanding of forgiveness. In order to develop a clear explanation of the general population's understanding of forgiveness, a method of descriptive statistics is used to provide a more detailed analysis.

#### Interviewers

A small, Midwestern university was targeted for the study. The interviews analyzed in this study were conducted as part of a class project. For this project, 16 students were told to select three people to interview. By allowing the interviewers to freely choose their interviewees, it was thought that it would help build rapport, elicit the participant's personal experiences in forgiveness, facilitate a more in-depth interview, as well as include a broad range of participants. Fifteen students conducted interviews with three people each, while one student interviewed four.

All the students doing the interviews were students in an Introduction to Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness class. In order to ensure the interview quality

and credibility, the interviewers received group instruction regarding how to conduct the interviews and understood well the conceptions of forgiveness. The students and professor worked together to develop the interview protocol focusing on the participants' understanding of forgiveness.

### Participants

A sample of the general population was considered the participants in this study. Because of this, the participants in the study were a convenient sample of people selected by students in the class. The participants did not need to be qualified by any criteria to be asked to participate in this study. In total, 49 subjects participated in the study. Of this sample, 15 were males and 34 were females.

The participants involved in this study ranged in ages from 15 to 54. Average participant age was 34.5 with 69% females and 31% males participating. The majority of participants were college students, but two were high school students. Of the others, one participant was a priest, one was a college professor, one was a self-employed carpenter and landlord, and one was a self-employed beautician. A few participants, however, did not mention their profession.

### Data Collection

There were 49 participants total. The location for the interview was at the discretion of each participant. Being able to select the setting may have mitigated any discomfort or apprehension the participants might have experienced and insured that they felt their privacy was secure. Since the topic of the interview was sensitive and personal, it was necessary that interviewees felt comfortable during the interviews. All

interviewees were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained, and also that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) had retroactively approved this study.

### Selection of Participants

In order to analyze and understand the general population's viewpoints about forgiveness and their experiences with forgiveness, convenient sampling was assumed to ensure that no specific group would become the focus. Students asked people they knew to participate and no specifics were given for subject selection other than age. This convenient sampling would help generate multiple perspectives on forgiveness to meet the purpose of this study. No names were turned in with the interview responses and only sex, age, and sometimes occupation were included in each interview protocol.

In sum, all interview participants verbally agreed to the following conditions before they were interviewed. They agreed to be interviewed about their understanding of forgiveness and personal experiences related to forgiving. All participants understood that their responses would be turned into transcription for examination. They also agreed that their responses could be anonymously reported using averages and used for research and publication purposes.

### Interviews

A structured interview method was administered in order to assess the participants' understandings of forgiveness. Kvale (1996) has defined a structured research interview as "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p.1). Its significance is that the participants are asked to



describe as richly as possible how they feel and respond to their real experiences (Kvale, 1996). Also, structured research interviews allow the researcher to collect details, to provide a credible description of the complexities of the general population's thoughts, and to illustrate to other educators or professionals in the helping fields a sample of the general population's understanding of forgiveness and the impact forgiveness has on people's lives.

Prior to data collection, the professor of the Introduction to Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness course, along with the students, developed a list of questions to include in the protocol. After analysis, the protocol for the interviews consisted of 31 questions designed to gather data about the general population's understanding of and experiences with forgiveness. Although a list of interview questions were generated, adaptations were made with each interview as needed. Interviewers did not let the interview protocol dictate the direction of the interview; instead, interviewers might have included questions not on the protocol to follow up specific responses given by their participants as well as not asking certain questions based on participants' responses.

Before each interview started, interviewers recorded each participant's age and sex. Additionally, the relationship to the interviewer and occupation at the time of the interview were obtained for some of the participants. Furthermore, the oral consent to participate form was used. Each interviewer explained to his or her participants about the intent of the interview and how the data would be used. Specifically, in order to maintain confidentiality, each participant was told that no name would be used when reporting data and that all data would be reported anonymously. Interviewers took written notes during

the interviews. The participants were interviewed concerning their personal knowledge, views, and experiences with forgiveness. Thus, no pre-set definition of forgiveness was introduced in the interviews nor did the interviewers share their knowledge about forgiveness with their interviewees. "Forgiveness" was defined and described by the participants interviewed for the study.

It was important that the participants felt comfortable doing the interviews. Because of this, a general, non-threatening question was asked first: "How would you define forgiveness?" Following this question, additional questions were asked to obtain information focusing on participants' experiences with forgiveness and views about forgiveness. For instance, "Have you ever experienced a really bad hurt?" "Did you forgive the person for that hurt?" "What are the reasons someone would forgive?" and "Do you believe forgiveness is important?" were all asked. In addition, the questions, "Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?" and "How does forgiveness differ from condoning or forgetting?" were asked to obtain as complete a picture as possible about the general population's understanding and knowledge of forgiveness.

While the interviews were composed of a series of questions related to the general population's knowledge and understanding of forgiveness, this study focused on the four research questions listed at the end of Chapter 1, which were only a part of the interview protocol. The analysis was framed by seven interview questions concerning key terms and issues that were pertinent to the purpose of this study.

### Data Analysis

Data were compiled and analyzed as a whole at the end of data collection. The interviews were transcribed by each interviewer to better ensure confidentiality. Also, as the researcher read through transcripts, the researcher identified significant responses related to the research questions of the study. For accuracy and agreement, the researcher and a graduate assistant categorized the repeating or similar ideas into larger groups that expressed a common pattern in responses. Participants were allowed to indicate multiple definitions of and views about forgiveness. Hence, total percentages can exceed 100%.

As patterns in responses were observed, the researcher began to develop a list during the coding process for later analysis. Questions were coded in the following order. First, the participant's knowledge of forgiveness was coded (Question 1, How would you define forgiveness?). Second, whether or not the participant said he or she forgave the person who hurt him or her was coded (Question 4, Have you ever experienced a really bad hurt? and Question 5, Did you forgive the person for that hurt?). For question four, if the participants fell into the category of "yes," their relationships with the offenders were examined.

Third, questions pertaining to other concepts related to forgiveness, such as reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning, were coded (Question 2, Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? and Question 8, How does forgiveness differ from condoning or forgetting?). If the participants responded "yes," subthemes for questions two and eight were further examined. Finally, the participants' views about

forgiveness were coded (Question 20, What are the reasons someone would forgive? and Question 30, Do you believe forgiveness is important?).

Additionally, the responses in the interviews pertaining to the research questions were analyzed by gender in order to compare and highlight the gender similarities and differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness. Categories were then organized by related research questions and descriptive statistics were used to tabulate the participants' responses. The results will be described in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter presents the results and analyses of the study. The intent of the present study is to gain and illustrate a more complete picture of the general population's knowledge and understanding of forgiveness. In order to investigate and identify patterns which emerged in individual interviews, the responses were coded according to the specific research questions are presented in this section. One part of the examination involves a discussion of the participants' definitions of forgiveness and use of forgiveness in their lives. Other concepts related to forgiveness, which were mentioned by the participants, are also addressed. The participants' views about the importance and significance of forgiveness and the relationship between gender and forgiveness are examined.

For purposes of convenience, the interview data are organized and categorized according to the topics of interest in this study. Each research question is listed, and the responses from the participants that pertained to each related question were analyzed.

#### Responses to the Interviews

Tables 1-7 presented the common patterns which emerged in the interviews regarding the research questions. Responses to the following interview questions were presented in matrix format in order to show common patterns in responses for each question, as well as the comparison between males and females.

1. How would you define forgiveness?
4. Have you ever experienced a really bad hurt?

5. Did you forgive the person for that hurt?
2. Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?
8. How does forgiveness differ from condoning and forgetting?
20. What are the reasons someone would forgive?
30. Do you believe forgiveness is important?

### The General Population's Knowledge of Forgiveness

In order to better understand the background about the general population's knowledge of forgiveness, the question one, "How would you define forgiveness?" was asked (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 1 "How would you define forgiveness?" by Gender.*

Q1	Males (%), n=15	Females (%), n=34	Total (%), n=49
Letting go of hurts, negative feelings, and grudges	12 (80%)	26(76%)	38 (78%)
Acknowledging the hurts, dealing with them, and moving on with life; seeing the offender as human	4 (27%)	15 (44%)	19 (39%)
Preserving the relationships; giving the offender a second chance	3 (20%)	10 (29%)	13 (27%)
Forgetting about the hurts	1 (7%)	6 (18%)	7 (14%)
Forgiveness does not mean forgetting	1 (7%)	6 (18%)	7 (14%)
Other	2 (13%)	8 (24%)	10 (20%)

Note.

Individuals were able to give more than one response, thus totals may be greater than number of subjects for each sex.

Results from this question indicated that the most commonly mentioned definition of forgiveness was that forgiveness was a way to let go of hurts, negative feelings, and grudges (78%). For example, one middle-age male priest reported that forgiveness was "the ability to let go of the affects of a deep hurt from another which arises from a decision"; one male college student, age 19, reported that "it means to let go of the things

that hurt you”; one 45-year-old female subject defined forgiveness as “letting go of a bad feeling or angry feeling toward someone for something they did to you.” The second most frequent response to question one was that forgiveness was a way to acknowledge the hurts, to deal with them, and to move on with life or a way to see the offender as human (39%). For example, one middle-age male professor mentioned that forgiveness could be defined as “one realizes their injurer as a fellow human and as an equal; we aren’t perfect and neither are they; we all make mistakes”; one female college student mentioned that forgiveness meant that “you move on with life; life is too short to dwell on it”; another female college student defined forgiveness as “realizing problem, then dealing with it.”

Furthermore, when defining forgiveness, some of the participants described it in terms of preserving the relationships or giving the offender a second chance (27%). For instance, one male college student, age 20, defined forgiveness as “the act of giving somebody a second chance; it’s not just saying it; you have to mean it in your heart as well”; one female college student, age 19, defined forgiveness as “accepting what the person did that made you mad and getting along with them again”; another female college student, age 19, defined forgiveness as “two people working it out.” The same number of participants indicated that forgiveness meant forgetting about the hurts (14%) as did those who defined it as not forgetting. For instance, one male college student stated that forgiveness was “the ability to let past grievances or conflicts be forgotten,” or one 24-year-old female subject stated that “forgiveness is the ability to forget the bad that has been done to you.” In contrast with the above definitions, one 23-year-old female



subject stated that “forgiveness is when you remember something and it doesn’t make you angry anymore.” Another 20-year-old female subject stated that “it’s not forgetting because you can’t do that; you will always remember but not hold a grudge against them.” Additional definitions, mentioned by a few participants, included: the offender seeks forgiveness, helping the offender feel better, and giving excuses. Some specific quotes were mentioned, such as one 20-year-old female subject reported that “it is something someone asks of you when something bad has happened”; another female college student, age 19, reported that forgiveness was “to not place fault on a person who has done harm or insult”; one middle-age female subject reported that it was “excusing hurt someone else did.”

Question four asked, “Have you ever experienced a really bad hurt?” to which 47 out of the 49 participants (96%) answered this question with a “yes” (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 4 “Have you ever experienced a really bad hurt?” by Gender.*

Q4	Males (%), n=15	Females (%), n=34	Total (%), n=49
Yes	15 (100%)	32 (94%)	47 (96%)
No	0 (0%)	2 (6%)	2 (4%)

Most of the participants who had experienced a really bad hurt reported that their offenders were friends (see Table 2-1). Other offenders included relatives and strangers.

Table 2-1

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 4 "When you had forgiven, who was the offender?" by Gender.*

Types of offenders ...	Males, n=8	Females, n=20	*Total, n=28
Boy/girlfriends, friends	6 (75%)	10 (50%)	16 (57%)
Relatives	2 (25%)	9 (45%)	11 (39%)
Strangers	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	1 (4%)

Note.

\*Some participants did not provide information regarding their offenders.

If the participants answered "yes" to question four, they were then asked question five, "Did you forgive the person for that hurt?" Responses from this question indicated that 49% of these respondents said "yes" and 36% of them said "no." A few respondents, however, answered "somewhat" (11%) or "I do not know" (4%) to this question (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 5 “Did you forgive the person for that hurt?” by Gender.*

Q5	Males (%), n=15	Females (%), n=32	Total (%), n=47
Yes	8 (53%)	15 (47%)	23 (49%)
No	5 (33%)	12 (37.5%)	17 (36%)
Somewhat	1 (7%)	4 (12.5%)	5 (11%)
Don't know	1 (7%)	1 (3%)	2 (4%)

Note.

Two participants had not experienced a really bad hurt at the time the interview was conducted so they did not respond to this question.

Other Concepts the General Population Equates with Forgiveness

This section addresses the second research question that was examined which pertained to other concepts related to forgiveness. When asked question two, “Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?” 86% of the 49 participants answered this question with “yes,” while 14% of the participants did not see any difference between forgiveness and reconciliation (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 2 "Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?" by Gender.*

Q2	Males (%), n=15	Females (%), n=34	Total (%), n=49
Yes	13 (87%)	29 (85%)	42 (86%)
No	2 (13%)	5 (15%)	7 (14%)

Specifically, Table 4-1 showed that a majority of the participants felt that the injured could choose to forgive the offenders without getting back together (38%) or that reconciliation was an ideal state following forgiveness (38%).

Table 4-1

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 2 "What are the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation?" by Gender.*

Differences ...	Males, n=13	Females, n=29	Total, n=42
Can forgive without getting back together	7 (54%)	9 (31%)	16 (38%)
Reconciliation is an ideal state following forgiveness	5 (38%)	11 (38%)	16 (38%)
Forgiveness is one-sided; reconciliation is two-sided	5 (38%)	7 (24%)	12 (29%)
Can reconcile the relationship without having forgiven	2 (15%)	7 (24%)	9 (21%)
Reconciliation is more spiritual than forgiveness	1 (8%)	2 (7%)	3 (7%)
Other	4 (31%)	5 (17%)	9 (21%)

Note.

Individuals were be able to give more than one response, thus totals may be greater than number of subjects for each sex.

For example, one 19-year-old male subject stated that "if someone forgives a person, that does not mean that they need to reconcile with the person who hurt them, especially if you realize the person might hurt you again," or one 20-year-old female subject stated that "you can forgive without wanting them to be a part of your life."

These examples pertained to the first pattern which the injured can forgive the offender without getting back together. In addition, one male college student, age 20, stated that

“reconciliation is the ideal, ultimate outcome of true forgiveness,” or one female college student, age 18, stated that “they are contingent upon one another because forgiveness is the beginning of reconciliation,” which pertained to the second pattern that reconciliation is an ideal state following forgiveness.

Other differences between forgiveness and reconciliation which were mentioned included that forgiveness was internal or one-sided while reconciliation was interactive or two-sided (29%) and that the injured could reconcile the relationship without having to forgive (21%). For instance, one male college student, age 20, viewed that “reconciliation is an interactive process while forgiveness can occur in the mind and/or the heart,” or one female college student, age 21, viewed “forgiveness is a gift one to another and reconciliation is a joint effort.” Other direct quotes included one from a 19-year-old male subject who stated that “one can end their negative actions and reconcile their relationship without having forgiven the person” and one from a 54-year-old female subject who stated that “even though you may still interact with a person, like in the work place, you really only reconcile with them and may still bring the hurtful issue up.” A few participants distinguished forgiveness from reconciliation by stating that reconciliation was more spiritual than forgiveness (7%). Their statements included one from a middle-age priest who reported that “reconciliation calls for spiritual healing” and one from a 19-year-old female subject who reported that “reconciliation takes on a religious aspect; reconciliation is forgiveness by God.” Furthermore, a few participants made a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation according to other descriptions that were the least mentioned in the interviews. For instance, one male college student,

age 20, stated that “one could reconcile without truly being hurt, whereas forgiveness requires that a person suffers a deep wrong”; one male college student, age 21, stated that “forgiveness is harder to do than reconciliation; it requires more thought and energy”; one female college student, age 19, stated that “reconciliation is more serious because it requires that you make major changes.” In addition, one female college student, age 19, stated that “you can still feel hurt but forgive although it may not be a complete forgiveness; reconciliation is two-sided; they both work it out so no hard feelings are left,” or one female subject stated that “when you forgive you can still be angry, but when you reconcile you put it behind and move on.” These two participants pointed out the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation by stating that when forgiving, one may still feel hurt or angry, while when reconciling, there are no negative feelings left.

In contrast to the above views, a few participants considered forgiveness and reconciliation as one and the same (14%). Some direct quotes included one from a middle-age male subject who thought that “they are so interrelated; when you forgive, you reconcile but they don’t always happen at the same time,” one from a female college student, age 20, who thought that “reconciliation is an immediate; if I really value a relationship, it’s an automatic that comes with forgiveness,” and one from a different female college student, age 19, who thought that “the two things are one and the same; the outcome of forgiveness should be reconciliation between the two parties; for yourself forgiveness brings a feeling of comfort because you know it’s not a problem between you anymore; for the other person it’s a comfort to know that everything is going to be okay and that everything they’ve done has been forgiven.”

Question eight asked, “How does forgiveness differ from forgetting or condoning?” Only two out of 42 participants (5%) considered forgiveness as being the same concept as forgetting or condoning. The responses included, one male college student, age 20, stated that “you’re still saying it’s wrong, but you’re willing to see the other person’s side and give them a second chance; you get over the hurt by forgetting it; if it’s really serious, though, you might not be able to forgive or forget,” or one female college student, age 22, stated that “condoning is saying something is okay, automatic reaction; forgiving is agreeing to make peace.” Although seven participants did not respond to this question, most of the sample believed that forgiveness was different from forgetting or condoning (95%; see Table 5).

Table 5

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 8 “Is there a difference between forgiveness and forgetting or condoning?” by Gender.*

Q8	Males (%), n=12	Females (%), n=30	Total (%), n=42
Same as forgetting or condoning	1 (8%)	1 (3%)	2 (5%)
Different from forgetting or condoning	11 (92%)	29 (97%)	40 (95%)

Note.

Three male participants and four female participants did not respond to this question.



A majority of the participants claimed that in forgiveness, the injured acknowledged the hurts and dealt with them, while in forgetting or condoning, the injured denied the hurts and never resolved them (65%; see Table 5-1).

Table 5-1

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 8 "How does forgiveness differ from condoning or forgetting?" by Gender.*

Differences ...	Males (%), n=11	Females (%), n=29	Total (%), n=40
In forgiveness, one acknowledges the hurts and deals with them; while in forgetting or condoning, one denies the hurts and never resolves them	6 (55%)	20 (69%)	26 (65%)
In forgiveness, one must suffer a deep hurt; while in forgetting or condoning, one suffers a minor hurt and say the hurt is okay	8 (73%)	16 (55%)	24 (60%)
In forgiveness, one can move on with life and have no negative feelings left; while in forgetting or condoning, one would still feel hurt and harbors negative feelings	5 (45%)	6 (21%)	11 (28%)
Other	3 (27%)	4 (14%)	7 (18%)

Note.

Individuals were be able to give more than one response, thus totals may be greater than number of subjects for each sex.

The specific quotes included, one male college student, age 20, reported that “condoning doesn’t see anything wrong with what has happened, whereas forgiveness puts the mistake aside and puts it to rest”; one male college student, age 19, reported that “forgiving means understanding and letting go; forgetting means never thinking or talking about it”; one female high school student, age 17, reported that “forgiveness is overcoming the problem and dealing with it head-on while condoning and forgetting are just putting the problem aside and pretending as though it never happened.” The second most common response about differences between forgiveness and forgetting or condoning was that 60% of the sample believed that in forgiveness, the injured must suffer a deep hurt, while in forgetting or condoning, the injured suffered a minor hurt and said the hurt is okay. The direct quotes included one from a middle-age male subject who stated that “you forgive and hope that it doesn’t happen again; condoning is saying that it is okay; if you forget you just don’t care; it doesn’t matter if it happens again”; one female subject stated that “if you forgive, you don’t condone, you accept the mistake for what it was”; another female college student, age 19, stated that “you always remember the bigger things.”

Furthermore, 28% of the sample stated that in forgiveness, the injured could move on with life and had no negative feelings left, while in forgetting or condoning, the injured still felt hurt and would harbor negative feelings. For example, one male college student, age 21, reported that “if you just forget about it, the matter can still bother you and come up later” or one female college student, age 19, reported that “in forgetting or condoning, one still holds a tiny grudge and can still be angry; forgiveness shouldn’t have

such a strong remaining hurt or anger.” Nevertheless, although a few participants distinguished forgiveness from forgetting or condoning, their descriptions of the differences were the least mentioned. For instance, one male high school student, age 15, stated that “forgiving and condoning are the same thing, but only if they apologize”; one male college student stated that “maybe forgetting is a deeper level of forgiveness, because if you have to dwell on it, you haven’t given it up completely”; one 19-year-old female subject stated that “forgiveness is more of an emotional and personal challenge.”

#### The General Population’s Views about Forgiveness

This section addresses the general population’s views about the importance of forgiveness and the reasons why people would choose to forgive. Results from question 20, “What are the reasons someone would forgive?” showed that 65% of the sample claimed that the importance of relationships and the restoration of social harmony were the most common motivations for the injured to choose to forgive (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 20 "What are the reasons someone would forgive?" by Gender.*

Q20	Males (%), n=9	Females (%), n=25	Total (%), n=34
Importance of relationships and the restoration of social harmony	3 (33%)	19 (76%)	22 (65%)
For personal physical or emotional health, to deal with the hurts, and let go of negative feelings	8 (89%)	13 (52%)	21 (62%)
Learning and growing from the hurts; seeing the offender as human; moving on with life	3 (33%)	11 (44%)	14 (41%)
Doing the right thing; religious beliefs; helping the offender feel better	5 (56%)	9 (36%)	14 (41%)
Actions of the offender, such as showing remorse	1 (11%)	4 (16%)	5 (15%)
Other	2 (22%)	4 (16%)	6 (18%)

Note.

Six male participants and nine female participants did not respond to this question and several respondents responded with more than one reason.

The specific quotes included one from a male college student who stated that the reason was "to reestablish the friendship"; one middle-age female subject stated that "there is a peace that comes from it"; one female college student, age 19, stated that "they

want to continue the relationship; the other person means enough to them.” The next most common motivations were for personal physical or emotional health, to deal with the hurts, and to let go of negative feelings (62%). For example, the reasons included one from a male college student who reported his reasons as “physical benefits for yourself; lower blood pressure and lower stress” or one from a 54-year-old female subject who reported that “someone could forgive for his or her own personal welfare; it can put them at peace; she can stop putting so much energy into being angry and get on with her life.”

Other motivations for the injured to forgive were based on learning and growing from the hurts, seeing the offender as human, and moving on with life (41%). The specific reasons provided by the participants were such as, one male college student stated that “you do it for yourself, so you aren’t tied up in the wrong”; another male college student, age 20, stated that “everybody has at least a little bit of good in them”; one 18-year-old female subject stated that “they can move on with their life from that situation that may be holding them back from experiencing their full potential”; one female college student stated that “eyes on something better instead of being stuck in the rut.” Furthermore, 41% of the participants claimed that the injured would forgive due to their religious beliefs or their inclination to do the right thing, to be moral, or to help the offender feel better. For instance, one male college student thought someone would forgive in order to “help the other person become better and feel worthwhile”; one 19-year-old male subject reported that “they may feel wrong for having not forgiven and feel that they should forgive the person that hurt them”; one 52-year-old female subject reported that “most people want to do the right thing and forgiveness has an inner feeling

of doing the right thing.” A few participants believed that the injured would be motivated to forgive because of the actions of the offender (15%), such as showing remorse. Some direct quotes included one from a middle-age male priest who reported that “they feel the person has earned their forgiveness or deserves to be forgiven” or one from a 20-year-old female subject who reported that “they express sincerity.” In addition, the reasons that were the least mentioned by the sample included one 45-year-old female subject who thought that “family reasons” were the reasons someone would choose to forgive. Also, a few participants reported that only if the injured was hurt on purpose, he or she would forgive. For example, one female college student, age 21, stated that “another person hurt you or someone close to you, like feelings, beliefs, or physical pain,” or another female college student, age 19, stated that “one that occurred on purpose; when they do something that they know is going to hurt you; if something happened upon accident, it doesn’t need to be forgiven.” A few participants claimed that forgiveness could make the injured feel better than their offenders, such as the middle-age male priest who stated that “they may forgive to feel superior or better than the person who has injured them.”

Question 30 asked, “Do you believe forgiveness is important?” (see Table 7). Over half the participants stated that they believed forgiveness was important (80%). Other participants, however, did not provide answers to this question (20%).

Table 7

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 30 "Do you believe forgiveness is important?" by Gender.*

Q30	Males (%), n=15	Females (%), n=34	Total (%), n=49
Yes	14 (93%)	25 (74%)	39 (80%)
No answer	1 (7%)	9 (26%)	10 (20%)

A number of patterns that were mentioned by the participants who believed forgiveness was important included (see Table 7-1): for personal mental or physical well-being or getting rid of negative feelings (46%); a healing of relationships or social harmony (46%); learning and growing from the hurts or seeing the offender as human (26%); religious commandments or helping the offender feel better (21%).



Table 7-1

*Frequency (%) of Responses to Question 30 "What are the reasons you believe forgiveness is important?" by Gender.*

Reasons ...	Males (%), n=14	Females (%), n=25	Total (%), n=39
For personal well-being; getting rid of negative feelings	6 (43%)	12 (48%)	18 (46%)
Healing the relationships and social harmony	7 (50%)	11 (44%)	18 (46%)
learning and growing from the hurts; seeing the offender as human	1 (7%)	9 (36%)	10 (26%)
Religious commandments; helping the offender feel better	3 (21%)	5 (20%)	8 (21%)

Note.

Individuals gave more than one response, thus totals may be greater than number of subjects for each sex.

Direct quotes included one from a male college student who reported that "for the person holding the grudge, it's important"; one 23-year-old female subject reported that "because it reduces anger, which is otherwise destructive"; one male college student, age 20, reported that "you could never have people close to you without it"; one female graduate student, age 48, reported that "if nobody ever forgave there would be more violence and negativity"; one male college student, age 19, reported that "it helps the injured understand other people"; one 18-year-old female subject reported that "you learn

and grow from it; it makes you stronger and learn about people; everybody's different"; one male college student reported that "because of religious significance"; one female college student, age 18, reported that "because Jesus commands us to; if our sins are to be forgiven, we need to forgive others of their sin."

### The Role Gender Plays in the Understanding and Practicing of Forgiveness

Information about the effects of gender on the understanding and practicing of forgiveness is addressed in this section; see the results presented and compared in Tables 1-7.

According to the participants' definitions of forgiveness, only one pattern that male participants expressed had a higher percentage (80%) than females (76%). Males more often defined forgiveness as letting go of hurts, negative feelings, and grudges; whereas, females more often than males defined forgiveness using concepts such as preserving the relationships, giving the offender a second chance, or forgetting about the hurts. Although a few males defined forgiveness as preserving the relationships, giving the offender a second chance (20%), or forgetting about the hurts (7%), the percentage was lower than for females. Female participants were more likely to define forgiveness as preserving the relationships, giving the offender a second chance (29%), or forgetting about the hurts (18%). For instance, one female college student, age 19, reported that "forgiveness is when you overlook something bad and still be friends with someone and love them"; one female college student, age 18, reported that "when giving, it is accepting the expression of remorse and disallowing the hurt to enter your thoughts

again”; another female college student, age 19, reported that “when you forgive, you forget about it.”

Furthermore, males and females showed no significant differences in personal experiences with forgiveness. Most of the participants were offended by their friends or relatives (see Table 2-1) and reported that they had chosen to forgive their offenders for the hurts (see Table 3). Although males (53%) seemed more likely than females (47%) to say they had forgiven their offenders, a few participants responded with “somewhat” or “do not know” when asked if they had forgiven. For example, one male college student reported that “I don’t know if I forgave him or not; I can’t really come to terms with it because he’s such a jerk about it; I deal with it by trying to put it out of my mind and let the time pass”; one 19-year-old female subject reported that “yes, I forgave somewhat but not completely; it’s still bothering me; it’s still there”; one 20-year-old female subject reported that “I don’t know; yes and no; I haven’t forgiven him for what I missed out on; I see what other kids have with their dad; I don’t have a really heavy grudge toward him; no, it’s still ongoing; I can respect that he’s my father, but I don’t know if I ever will; it’s part of what happened.” Hence, based on this sample, no significant effects of gender were found on the practicing of forgiveness.

Furthermore, the results, as presented in Table 4, indicated that most of the participants, both males and females, considered forgiveness different from reconciliation. Females (15%), however, made up a slightly higher percentage of those who viewed forgiveness as reconciliation than did males (13%). For example, one female college student, age 19, claimed that “the two things are one and the same; the outcome of

forgiveness should be reconciliation between the two parties; for yourself forgiveness brings a feeling of comfort because you know it's not a problem between you anymore; for the other person it's a comfort to know that everything is going to be okay and that everything they've done has been forgiven"; another 20-year-old female subject claimed that "you're getting over the situation and getting on with your life with all of them; you don't have to forget when you forgive." As illustrated in these quotes, a few female subjects thought forgiveness and reconciliation were one and the same. If the injured forgave, he or she would also reconcile or reconciliation would occur as a result of forgiveness.

Additional results (see Table 5) showed that a majority of participants would distinguish forgiveness from forgetting or condoning. Although males (8%) made up a slightly higher percentage of those who viewed forgiveness as forgetting or condoning than did females (3%), there were no significant differences in responses. For instance, one male college student, age 20, stated that "you're still saying it's wrong, but you're willing to see the other person's side and give them a second chance; you get over the hurt by forgetting it; if it's really serious, though, you might not be able to forgive or forget," or one female college student, age 22, stated that "condoning is saying something is okay, automatic reaction; forgiving is agreeing to make peace." No significant effects of gender on equating forgiveness as forgetting or condoning were found.

The relationships between gender and views about the importance of forgiveness and the reasons why someone would forgive were also examined (see Tables 6 and 7). As illustrated in Table 6, a higher percentage of female participants considered the

importance of the relationships and social harmony as the main reasons the injured would forgive (76%); while for males, these were the third most often given reasons (33%).

Female participants were more likely to claim, as did one female high school student, age 17, that “realizing a relationship is too important to let go of,” or one 20-year-old female subject reported that “to get the relationship/friendship back to normal or where you want it to be.” Male participants, however, thought the injured would choose to forgive mostly due to their personal physical or emotional health or dealing with the hurt and letting go of negative feelings (89%), a reason mentioned with the second highest frequency in the female sample (52%). Reasons more likely to be given by male participants were such as, one middle-age male priest stated that “they want to be free from the effects of the hurt” or one male college student stated that “there’s not enough time to hold grudges.”

Results also demonstrated that males (56%) were more likely to forgive for moral reasons, the second most often given reason; whereas, this was the fourth most frequent reason mentioned by the female sample (36%). Most male participants thought that the injured would choose to forgive in order to do the right things and to help the offender feel better. For example, one male college student stated that “to let the wrongdoer not feel guilty anymore,” or one middle-age male professor stated that “obligation” would be the reason the injured would choose to forgive. Females (44%) more often than males (33%) were motivated to forgive for personal development because they were able to recognize the humanity of the offender or because they viewed forgiveness as a way to learn and grow from the hurts or a way to move on with life. The reasons given by female participants included one from a female graduate student, age 48, who stated that it was needed “to

move on with their life” or one from a 52-year-old female subject who stated that “forgiveness is a learned process, in some instances; if we understand human behavior, we can see how their actions affected us; those that can’t forgive can’t begin to see why the criminal acted the way he did.” In addition, females (16%) showed a slightly greater willingness to accept an apology if the offender seeks forgiveness than males (11%). For example, one female high school student, age 17, mentioned that “realizing the other person is sorry and deserves forgiveness”; another female college student, age 18, mentioned that “anytime someone seeks forgiveness, you should forgive.”

Additional results, presented in Table 7, indicated that all the participants believed forgiveness was important. There were no gender differences in responses to the question about the importance of forgiveness. Males and females, however, had different views about why forgiveness was important (see Table 7-1). A majority of male participants thought that forgiveness was important mostly due to the healing effects on relationships or social harmony (50%), an explanation mentioned with the second highest frequency in the female sample (44%). For example, one male high school student, age 15, reported that “because if nobody forgave anybody, nobody in the world would ever get along”; another male college student, age 20, reported that “both parties will be in better shape once forgiveness is given and communication is done.” While on the contrary, a majority of female participants thought that forgiveness was important for personal well-being or getting rid of negative feelings (48%), which was the second most frequently given reason for the males (43%). For example, one female college student, age 19, reported that “because life is too short to live on in hate,” or one 19-year-old

female subject reported that “for your own psychological, physical, emotional, and mental well-being.” Also, males claimed that forgiveness was important due to the religious commandments or helping the offender feel better (21%), the third most frequently mentioned by the males, while they were the least mentioned by the females (20%). The direct quotes included one from a male college student who mentioned that “because of religious significance” or one from a male college student who mentioned that “the most important part is telling the person they are forgiven.” Although females put emphasis on personal development as a reason to forgive (36%), the third most frequently mentioned by the females, this was less frequently mentioned by male participants (7%). For instance, one 20-year-old female subject stated that forgiveness “makes you learn more about yourself and others”; another female college student, age 20, stated that “it’s important for those who are hurt and those who do the hurting; everyone has hurt another person in some way by word or action.”

These results are important because they provide insight into how much the general population knows about forgiveness, including their understanding of and views about forgiveness. The main patterns of the general population’s knowledge and understanding of forgiveness will be further discussed in Chapter 5. In addition, the limitations and implications of this study will be addressed.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gather interview data to interpret a sample of the general population's knowledge and understanding of forgiveness and to explore whether gender plays a role in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness. Patterns in responses were categorized based on statements reflecting similar ideas. In this chapter, a discussion of the results reported in Chapter 4 is provided. In addition, results from the study are compared with the literature review in Chapter 2 to show the relationship between the researchers' and the general population's views about forgiveness. Limitations and implications of this study are also discussed.

This study has the potential to help others better understand what the general population knows about forgiveness and how to best help them learn about forgiveness. It could also be a starting point for further research regarding the general population's understanding of forgiveness.

#### Research Questions and Discussion

The structured interviews used to answer the four research questions were carefully analyzed and the participants' responses were examined to discover the common patterns. A brief discussion to each question follows.

#### Research Question 1: What Is the General Population's Knowledge of Forgiveness?

The first analysis presented a sample of participants' definitions of forgiveness and their experiences with forgiveness. Results of this study, however, could not strongly support the hypothesis that a majority of the participants lack accurate knowledge



regarding the meaning of forgiveness. Findings indicated that the participants' definitions of forgiveness did include letting go of hurts, negative feelings, and grudges. This was the most frequently mentioned definition in the sample. In addition, in line with most researchers' definitions of forgiveness (Enright et al., 1992; North, 1987), the next most frequently mentioned definition was acknowledging the hurts, dealing with them, and moving on with life or seeing the offender as human. Researchers have reported that during the process of forgiveness, it is important that the injured parties realize that what was done to them was wrong and recognize the hurt they suffered and their negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward the offenders. Forgiveness is a way to deal with negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors so as to gradually bring about positive changes (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

Researchers also have described how forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation or forgetting. Nevertheless, as illustrated here (see Table 1), some participants confused forgiveness with other related concepts and equated forgiving with preserving the relationships, giving the offender a second chance, and forgetting about the hurts. A few of them defined forgiveness as "giving excuses" which is also not supported by most researchers. Based on the findings, it is shown that most of the participants in the sample had accurate knowledge of forgiveness and what it involves, but that a few participants' definitions are different from those described in most literature (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al, 1992; Freedman, 1998; Smedes, 1984).

Furthermore, regarding the participants' personal experiences with forgiveness, when asked if they had forgiven the person for the hurt, more than half of the

interviewees answered “no,” “somewhat,” or “do not know” to the question. For example, one middle-age female subject reported that “No, I haven’t. I have a long way to go and I know that. I won’t be able to forgive my husband until there comes a point when I feel like he isn’t going to hurt me anymore.” Another middle-age female subject reported that “Continued process; buries it; don’t want to remember.” One 19-year-old female subject reported that “No. I have considered forgiving but that person has not changed and it is still affecting me. I am not able to forgive my father for his actions towards me when I was growing up.” For some participants who said they had forgiven their offenders, their forgiving attitudes were based on reconciling with their offenders or forgetting about the hurts. For example, one 24-year-old female subject stated that “Yes, it was hard, but I forgave my mother. It improves our relationship.” Another 20-year-old female subject stated that “Yes. I didn’t want to be mad at him anymore and I didn’t want to feel uncomfortable around him anymore; I wanted to get back to being friends.” One female college student, age 22, stated that “You betcha, but the anger comes back once in a while.”

These responses illustrated that even if most of the participants gave accurate definitions of forgiveness, some of them had not engaged in forgiving, or did so and confused it with reconciliation. The participants’ personal experiences with forgiveness were still associated with the concepts of reconciliation or forgetting. The results, to some extent, explain why the sample of participants would provide ambiguous responses to question five, “Did you forgive the person for that hurt?” Because of the incomplete understanding of forgiveness, ambiguous responses are common among the participants.

Al-Mabuk and his colleagues (1995) have suggested that not all injured parties know how to forgive. The injured may make a commitment to forgive but he or she may not know how to forgive. Enright and Zell (1989) have discussed how the misconceptions about forgiveness or the external motives to forgive may lead the injured to report high levels of forgiveness when there are no significant positive outcomes associated with forgiveness. Hence, it can be said that the participants in the sample may learn about forgiveness from other resources but may not comprehend it well, and therefore, they may not be able to practice it and thereby gain the benefits from forgiving. It is possible to say that the participants in the sample may more or less lack an in-depth understanding regarding the meaning and practicing of forgiveness although they may provide accurate definitions of forgiveness. For this reason, the participants could possibly benefit from receiving education on forgiveness about what it is, what it is not, and how to go about forgiving. Also, it is necessary for educators and other professionals in the helping fields to make sure they know what people mean when they say they “forgive” or “do not forgive” their offenders (Kearns & Fincham, 2004).

Research Question 2: Are There Other Concepts the General Population Equates with Forgiveness?

The second area examines other related concepts the general population equates with forgiveness. Several researchers have emphasized that forgiveness is a concept that is easily confused with other related concepts, such as reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning (Enright et al., 1992). Reconciliation is not a requirement for forgiving the offender although it is an ideal result of forgiveness (Freedman, 1998). Freedman has

stated that “forgiveness may not involve reconciliation, and reconciliation is dependent on a behavioral change in the injurer and trust on the injured person’s part” (p. 203). Forgiveness can be under the injured party’s control, while reconciliation requires both parties to come together again in mutual trust (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Freedman, 1998). In addition, the injured can forgive and heal from the hurt but he or she cannot expect to forget the most painful experiences of his or her life; experiencing forgiveness cannot wipe away what had been done (Enright et al., 1992). Forgiveness is not condoning the offender’s offenses by excusing it (Enright, Eastin et al., 1992). To condone is to put up with the offences by suffering in silence with smoldering resentment while to excuse is to pretend that the offender did not offend one purposely (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; North, 1987; Smedes, 1984).

Results of this study could not support the hypothesis that most participants in this sample would equate forgiveness with going back to the relationship or forgetting about the hurts. In contrast, a majority of participants in the sample claimed that there were differences between forgiveness and reconciliation (86%) or between forgiveness and forgetting or condoning (95%). There were only a few participants in the sample who considered forgiveness and reconciliation, or forgiveness, forgetting and condoning as one and the same.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that some of the participants’ responses to the differences between forgiveness and other related concepts seem to be inconsistent with their definitions of forgiveness which were previously mentioned. While most of the participants in the sample claimed that forgiveness was not the same as reconciliation, a

few of them defined forgiveness as preserving the relationships or giving the offender a second chance. For instance, one male college student defined forgiveness as "... You let go of your anger, allow the person to become your friend again" but distinguished forgiveness from reconciliation with the statement of "... You don't necessarily have to reestablish the relationship after forgiveness." Likewise, while most of the participants in the sample stated that forgiveness was not the same as forgetting or condoning, a few of them defined forgiveness as forgetting about the hurts. For instance, one middle-age female subject gave the definition of forgiveness as "Forgiveness is ... and a willingness to forget or not dwell on a hurtful experience" but distinguished forgiveness from forgetting with the statement of "In this case, I forgave but did not justify what they did. I also still carry the memory of what they did in the back of my mind" to question eight. This kind of contradiction could also be identified in the participants' statements about their experiences with forgiveness. In conclusion, a few participants' attitudes about forgiving were based on reconciling with their offenders or forgetting about the hurts even though they indicated the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning in theory.

One possible explanation for the findings is that the direction of participants' responses is influenced by leading questions. For instance, the wording, syntax, or intonation of the question could confine the participants' responses (Seidman, 1998). Therefore, the interview questions used in this study to examine other related concepts the general population equates with forgiveness could be ascribed to leading questions. These interview questions, such as "Is there a difference between forgiveness and

reconciliation?” and “How does forgiveness differ from condoning or forgetting?”, underscore “difference” or “differ” in the statements, and therefore lead the participants to provide their responses in a limited direction. Hence, there may be embedded reasons for why a majority of participants could say that forgiveness is different from reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning when asked but also link the concepts together in their mind.

### Research Question 3: What Are the General Population’s Views about the Importance and Significance of Forgiveness?

This research question was designed to investigate the general population’s views about the importance and significance of forgiveness. It was predicted that a majority of participants would choose to forgive and believe forgiveness was important because of the importance of relationships and the healing effects on personal well-being. In fact, results of this study did support these hypotheses. The findings of this study indicated that the most commonly mentioned reasons for forgiveness were that the interpersonal relationships and social harmony were so important that forgiveness was an automatic choice. The second most frequently mentioned reasons for forgiving were the importance of personal health, to deal with the hurts, and to let go of negative feelings. Similarly, these two reasons also could explain why most of the participants believed forgiveness was important. Based on previous forgiveness intervention studies (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993), several researchers have demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with forgiveness and negative consequences associated with not forgiving. For this reason, it

is understandable why a majority of participants would choose to forgive for personal health reasons.

Nevertheless, the reasons mentioned by most of the participants, the importance of relationships and social harmony hint at reconciliation. This view of forgiveness as automatically leading to reconciliation is not supported by most researchers and would be claimed by them to be “pseudo-forgiveness” (Enright et al., 1998). For example, one 19-year-old male subject reported that in order to “regain the way things were,” the injured would choose to forgive. This statement demonstrated that the injured party’s motive for forgiving suggests reconciliation. Forgiveness, however, may help renew the relationship but it does not always lead to reconciliation (Freedman, 1998). Forgiveness and reconciliation can occur but forgiveness usually precedes reconciliation. Several researchers have suggested that forgiveness is a psychological process in which the injured releases negative feelings toward the offender; while reconciliation may result if the injured receives an apology from the offender and can trust him or her (Enright, Eastin, et al., 1992; Enright et al., 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Freedman & Enright, 1996; North, 1987).

Other reasons to forgive, as stated by a few participants, included “the attitudes of the offender” and “feeling superior to the offender,” are also not supported by most research. Forgiveness is a moral and unconditional act toward the offender, and therefore, an apology is not a requirement for forgiveness. If the injured requests compensation for the hurt from the offender, or believes that forgiving the offender leads him or her to feel good or to be able to take a superior attitude toward the offender, he or she may

experience pseudo-forgiveness (Enright et al., 1998; Enright et al., 1992; North, 1987). Consequently, the results of this study demonstrated that although a majority of participants had a sense of forgiveness, their views about forgiveness might be incomplete or lack accuracy as defined by most research.

#### Research Question 4: What Role Does Gender Play in the Understanding and Practicing of Forgiveness?

The hypothesis of this study was that there were both gender similarities and differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness. In fact, the findings demonstrated minimal evidence of gender differences in forgiveness. From this sample, the participants' knowledge and views of forgiveness appears to be similarly understood by both males and females. As shown in this study, both genders illustrated their ability to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning. Both genders not only commonly reported "letting go of hurts, negative feelings and grudges" for the definition of forgiveness but defined forgiveness using concepts such as reconciliation and forgetting as well. Additionally, based on the participants' personal experiences with forgiveness, both genders showed no significant differences in the willingness to forgive their offenders. The forgiving attitudes of both genders were highly influenced by the importance of relationships, social harmony, and personal well-being.

While significant gender differences were not found in participants' understanding of forgiveness in this study, findings slightly supported the fact that females more often than males equated forgiveness with reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning and were more likely than males to say they would forgive due to the



importance of relationships and social harmony. Results of this study indicated that males and females tended to forgive based on different reasons. As shown in Table 6, females had a higher percentage than males in considering the importance of relationships and social harmony as the main motives for forgiving their offenders, while males were highly motivated to forgive due to the importance of personal health. Also, females were more inclined to offer forgiveness due to the attitude of the offenders. If the offender apologized or felt sorry, females were more likely than males to forgive. These results are in line with Gilligan's research (1982), where she found that females favor the maintenance and the harmony of relationships with other people. Additionally, although both genders believed that forgiveness was important, their views about the importance were different. As presented in Table 7, females believed forgiveness was important because of its significance to personal well-being, while males believed the healing effects on relationships and social harmony make forgiveness important. These responses are contradictory when compared to the results shown in Table 6. For males, although they believed forgiveness was important due to its healing effects on relationships and social harmony, in reality, they were more likely to forgive for personal health. For females, their views about forgiveness were opposite of the males' views. They believed forgiveness was important for personal well-being but, in reality, they were more likely to say they would forgive to get the relationship back to normal. Although both genders are likely to take forgiveness into consideration based on moral reasoning, according to Gilligan (1982), females more often think in terms of caring and relationships while males more often think in terms of rules and justice. Therefore, it

also can be suggested that females may have a slightly higher tendency than males to equate forgiveness with reconciliation and to forgive to save the relationship.

As examined in this study, it should be noted that males made up a slightly higher percentage of those who were motivated to forgive by moral reasons than did females, and this was the second highest reason mentioned by males. For example, one 19-year-old male subject stated that "They may feel wrong for having not forgiven and feel that they should forgive the person that hurt them," or another male college student stated that "to help the other person become better and feel worthwhile." This study, however, could not provide sufficient data to support the different orientation of moral reasoning between males and females. In sum, for this sample, the knowledge and understanding of forgiveness are not as strongly influenced by gender as previous researchers have suggested. Nevertheless, although there are no significant gender differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness, males and females differ slightly in the motives for forgiving and the views about the importance of forgiveness. There may be some reasons why differences in understanding of forgiveness and forgiving attitudes between males and females are not supported. It is possible that gender is simply one of many variables which impacts the knowledge and understanding of forgiveness. Several other variables may play a role, such as personal experiences, social teachings, culture, and age. Further study is needed to examine the relationship between forgiveness and moral reasoning of both genders.

The following is a discussion of major findings with limitations and implications of the present study.

### Limitations of the Study

A primary limitation of this study is that the participants were limited to a small, Midwestern town and might not be representative of the larger society. The general population's understanding of forgiveness is likely to differ from region to region. Results must be generalized with caution because of the relative small sample size and the homogeneity of the sample according to their age and geographic location. There is limited opportunity to generalize results of this study to other populations in different settings. Furthermore, in this study, efforts were not made to equate the numbers of males and females so more than twice as many females participated in the interviews than males. For this reason, there may be a possibility that significant differences between males and females in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness were not detected. An effort to equate the numbers of both genders may result in different findings. Additionally, some interviewers of this study may not have always encouraged participants to disclose their views about forgiveness completely and fully as possible. Hence, to some extent, the limited sample and the way data was collected impedes a thorough examination of some research questions.

A second limitation is the limited viewpoints examined. This study intended to gather as much information as possible to better understand the participants' understanding of forgiveness, but it overlooked the influence of social teachings. It is possible that participants conceptualize their knowledge and understanding of forgiveness through social teachings, such as their parents or churches. Because of this, further

studies involving participants and their socialization agents may result in different findings.

The last limitation is related to the interviewer and researcher biases in gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data. Each interviewer conducts an interview with biases as does the researcher when analyzing and interpreting data. Their perceptions and interpretations may impact the course of interviews and analysis. Although possessing much knowledge of forgiveness could assist the interviewers and researcher to gain insight into the general population's understanding of forgiveness, their subjective opinions and judgments may have subtle and unintentional influence on gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data in this study. These biases may be particularly evident when attempting to explore the participants' misconceptions about forgiveness. In addition, structured interviews can be hard to analyze and compare due to one's biases. The interviewer can bias interviewee's responses and the researcher can bias the results of analysis and interpretation. For example, the interviewer may change his or her tone to stress the "difference" between forgiveness and reconciliation, or forgetting, or condoning.

### Implications

This study which investigated the general population's understanding of forgiveness has significant implications for educators and helping professionals which can help facilitate forgiveness education and enhance the effective use of forgiveness as one way to deal with injustices. The general population's attitudes regarding forgiveness can be influenced by varied aspects. For example, their negative attitudes regarding

forgiveness may be the result of a lack of accurate knowledge of forgiveness as well as societal and/or familial influence. Researching the general population's understanding of forgiveness can provide valuable insights into what people in the general population really know about forgiveness, how much they practice forgiveness, whether they think forgiveness is important or not, and their motivation in forgiving.

If forgiveness interventions are introduced as a way of coping with deep, unjust, and personal hurts, it is essential that educators and professionals in the helping fields explore how forgiveness is understood by the general population. Because of this, when designing effective forgiveness interventions for educational or therapeutic practices, educators or professionals in the helping fields will better understand who is more likely to forgive, what misconceptions and obstacles might be getting in the way of someone forgiving, and how past experiences could influence one's understanding of forgiveness. Results of this study demonstrated that a contradiction existed between a sample of participants' definitions of forgiveness and their experiences with forgiveness, so it is also necessary for educators and other professionals in the helping fields to know precisely what their clients mean when they claim that they have forgiven their offenders.

Additionally, although no significant gender differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness were found in this study, males and females did differ in their views about the reasons to forgive and the significance of forgiveness. Hence, if educators or professionals in the helping fields intend to develop forgiveness interventions for their clients, they may need to take gender into consideration. What role gender plays in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness can provide those in the

position of educating others about forgiveness with some therapeutic insights. It is important for educators and professionals in the helping fields to promote an accurate idea of forgiveness because this understanding can make forgiveness interventions more effective, productive, and popular.

### Conclusion

This study was designed to discover how much the general population knows about forgiveness and their experiences with forgiveness. Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate some positive outcomes associated with the general population's understanding of forgiveness. A majority of the participants in the sample provided accurate definitions of forgiveness and could distinguish forgiveness from other related concepts, such as reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning. In addition, most of them believed forgiveness was important for personal well-being, the restoration of relationships, and social harmony. For these reasons, it can be suggested that the general population, to some extent, may possess a basic understanding of forgiveness.

Nevertheless, a sample of participants not only defined forgiveness as letting go of hurts, negative feelings and grudges, but also defined it as preserving the relationships, giving the offender a second chance, or forgetting about the hurts. Although most of the participants could distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning, there was a contradiction between their definitions of forgiveness and personal experiences. In addition, a sample of participants considered forgiveness important and were motivated to forgive based on the reasons of the importance of the relationships, social harmony, or personal health. Based on these factors, the findings of this study also

suggest that the general population still lacks accurate knowledge of forgiveness and could benefit greatly by receiving forgiveness education or interventions to deepen their understanding of forgiveness. Additionally, although there are no significant gender differences in the understanding and practicing of forgiveness, to a certain degree, both genders differ from each other in the views about the importance of forgiveness and the reasons to forgive. Results of this study suggested that females more often than males equated forgiveness with reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning and were more likely than males to say they would forgive due to the importance of relationships and social harmony. Therefore, this study provides important information regarding what females may need in forgiveness education compared to males.

The findings of this study provide educators and professionals in the helping fields with a snapshot of the general population's understanding of forgiveness and contribute to existing literature on forgiveness. The general population is an important group to study concerning the understanding of forgiveness. The more knowledge we have about the general population's understanding and practicing of forgiveness, the more we can tailor education and interventions to individuals' level and need. The participants' responses to each interview question and the patterns generated should be valuable to educators and professionals in the helping fields when considering how education or therapy may become improved by listening to the voice of the general population. Focusing on the general population's understanding of forgiveness will help bring attention to an area that is often neglected as a way to heal or viewed negatively, because of misconceptions. The injured need to go beyond saying they have committed

to forgiving based on inaccurate understanding of what it means to forgive. Instead, they need to conceptualize forgiveness and work through it completely. McCullough and Worthington (1994a) claimed that although many interventions have been proposed to promote forgiveness, the most important determinant of enhancing forgiveness is the “rationale that clients are given for the importance of forgiveness.” That is, in order to consider forgiveness as a psychotherapeutic goal and to promote forgiveness, a comprehensive and clear definition has to be developed and introduced to the general population.

In conclusion, research examining forgiveness has increased rapidly over the last several years. It is a worthwhile area of research due to its application to different facets of life, from individual to global interactions, such as parent-child relationships, romantic relationships, friendships, or conflicts between two countries. Further research may be needed to explore “what are the consequences of understanding forgiveness as reconciliation, forgetting, or condoning?” Such a question may help the general population reflect deeply over the differences among forgiveness and other related concepts. It is possible that the general population confuses forgiveness with reconciliation due to the belief that letting go of negative feelings is impossible unless the two people overcome the hurts and come together again. For instance, one female college student, age 19, stated that “You can still feel hurt but forgive although it may not be a complete forgiveness; forgiveness is one sided; it is left up to the injured person; reconciliation is two-sided; they both work it out so no hard feelings are left.” Another



female subject stated that “When you forgive you can still be angry, but when you reconcile you put it behind and move on.”

The general population’s lack of accurate knowledge and understanding of forgiveness may lead to unforgiveness, including cycles of hurt and revenge. For this reason, it is necessary that forgiveness should be taught accurately and be considered as one option to cope with deep, unjust and personal hurts. The first step in helping individuals learn more about forgiveness and practice forgiveness when faced with deep hurts is having knowledge about the general population’s understanding of forgiveness, views about forgiveness, and how both affect their practice of forgiveness. Although this study illustrates that the general population may have accurate ideas regarding what forgiveness is and believes that forgiveness is important, their understanding of forgiveness is still incomplete. Results also show that the general population may benefit from learning more about how to go about forgiving and how forgiveness differs from similar concepts.

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