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The Effects of a Prayer Intervention on the Process of Forgiveness

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A vast amount of research examining forgiveness has now been reported, as has a sizable amount of research on prayer, but these two constructs have rarely been examined together. This experimental intervention study investigated potential benefits of prayer among Christians seeking to forgive an interpersonal offense. Participants consisted of 411 undergraduate students from private Christian colleges across the United States, randomly assigned to a prayer group, a devotional attention group, or a no-contact control group. The prayer group participated in a 16-day devotional reading and prayer intervention focused on forgiveness, whereas those in the devotional attention group meditated on devotional readings not related to forgiveness. Those in the prayer and devotional attention groups showed significant changes in state forgiveness. Also, participants in the prayer intervention group showed significant changes in empathy toward their offender. Implications are considered.

Keywords: forgiveness, prayer, empathy, religion, faith

A time-honored adage reminds us that to err is human and to forgive divine. Apparently the realm of forgiveness has moved beyond the sacred and into the psychological, as forgiveness has been given much attention by psychological researchers and clinicians over the last 20 years. An abundance of empirical studies have examined the benefits of forgiveness on physical health and emotional well-being (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Lawler et al., 2005; McCullough, 2000; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998; Witvliet, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). In addition, a wide variety of forgiveness definitions have been formulated within the psychological community and from these definitions has come the development of many forgiveness models, both religious and secular (Augsberger, 1988; Brandsma, 1982; Cunningham, 1985; Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Menninger, 1996; Pettitt, 1987; Pingleton, 1997; Smedes, 1996; Worthington, 1998).

Moreover, numerous empirical forgiveness intervention studies have been reported, including those with college students (Lampton, Oliver, Worthington, & Berry, 2005; Luskin, Ginzberg, & Thoresen, 2005; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Rye & Pargament, 2002), postabortion men (Coyle & Enright, 1997), female incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996), adolescents (Freedman & Knupp, 2003), substance abusers (Lin, Mack, Enright,

Krahn, & Baskin, 2004), married couples (DiBlasio & Benda, 2002; Ripley & Worthington, 2002), elderly adults (Hebl & Enright, 1993), emotionally abused women (Reed & Enright, 2006), and divorced adults (Rye et al., 2005). These studies show various benefits for those who experience a forgiveness intervention including a decrease in anxiety, depression, and anger as well as an increase in forgiveness, hope, self-esteem, and spiritual well-being.

Religion and Forgiveness

This assortment of research has led to a greater psychological understanding of forgiveness as an intrapersonal construct. Internal negative thoughts, behaviors, and feelings have been found to decrease, while positive thoughts, behaviors, and feelings increase as one forgives another (Lawler-Row, Scott, Raines, Edlis-Matityahou, & Moore, 2007). Yet, several have pointed out that while in the process of researching the psychological aspects of forgiveness, the religious foundations of the forgiveness construct have been neglected (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; McMinn et al., 2008). Forgiveness has been a construct that for centuries has had deep roots in major world religions. Some would argue forgiveness, at its very core, is a pervasively religious concept (Frise & McMinn, 2010; Meek & McMinn, 1997). For many religiously committed individuals, forgiveness is tied tightly with their faith perspectives; it is a moral value that many of those of devout faith attempt to internalize and carry out in their lives and relationships (Rye et al., 2000). (Although we focus on religion and forgiveness in this study, it seems likely that a religious spirituality may also be closely related to forgiveness. Future research in this area is warranted.)

In a Gallup poll of a nationally representative sample (Winseman, 2002), 84% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, "because of my faith, I have forgiven people who have hurt me deeply." Multiple studies have examined the relationship between forgiveness and religion (Edwards et al., 2002; Enright, Santos, &

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Al-Mabuk, 1989; Gorsuch & Hao, 1993). Hui, Watkins, Wong, and Sun (2006) suggest that religion can promote a meaningful internalization of forgiveness. Because of forgiveness's close tie with religion, when a religious context is taken away, there is the danger that important and deep aspects of forgiveness and its effects on people are lost. At its most extreme, divorcing forgiveness from its religious context might even change the nature of forgiveness (McMinn et al., 2008). McCullough and Worthington (1999) suggest that refocusing on the religious roots of forgiveness will lead to a greater and refreshed understanding of the forgiveness construct.

However, the relationship between religious faith and forgiveness becomes more complicated when considering empirical data on trait and state forgiveness among religious individuals. Trait forgiveness refers to an individual's general personality disposition toward forgiveness. In contrast, state forgiveness refers to the extent an individual would forgive a specific offense or transgression. Given forgiveness' close connection to religion and religious belief, it was thought that religious individuals would rate higher on scales measuring state forgiveness compared to nonreligious individuals. However, McCullough and Worthington (1999) conclude that there is little difference between religious individuals and nonreligious individuals in state forgiveness. Simply put, religious individuals do not actually forgive more than nonreligious individuals. Though it was found that religious individuals value forgiveness and feel compelled to forgive due to their religious involvement, as well as demonstrating higher levels of self-reported trait forgiveness, there is little difference between religious and nonreligious individuals and their actual act of forgiving. Tsang, McCullough, and Hoyt (2005) describe this discrepancy as the religious-forgiveness discrepancy. Explanations given for this discrepancy include psychometric weaknesses and abstract religious systems that leave room for moral rationalization.

However, McCullough and Worthington (1999) further examine this discrepancy and offer four explanations for this inconsistency: social desirability, aggregation and specificity in measurement, the distal location of religion in the causal chain leading to forgiveness, and recall bias. First, one possibility is that religious individuals are really no more forgiving than nonreligious individuals; however, they desire to be more forgiving and feel they should be more forgiving given their religious convictions. This leads religious individuals to rate themselves as more forgiving than they actually are. A second possibility is that the general measures that rate *general* religiousness in these studies do not correlate appropriately with measures that examine more *specific* religious behavior. The discrepancy therefore may be due in part to conceptual and semantic problems in the scales that are being used together.

Third, another possibility is that there are other social and social-cognitive factors that influence the nature of an individual's disposition to forgive more than religious commitment. Religious commitment may not influence an individual's act of forgiveness as closely and significantly as was originally thought. The last explanation concerns recall bias. The current measures used in examining state forgiveness may lead individuals to recall certain biases that lead the connection between religiosity and forgiveness to remain unclear. In conclusion, as is seen, though there is a plethora of research examining the relationship between forgiveness and religion, there is little research examining how forgive-

ness relates to more specific religious constructs rather than religiosity in general. This is one reason we have undertaken the current study, to examine the connection between forgiveness and prayer.

Prayer

In an attempt to understand forgiveness as a religious construct, the authors initially undertook a study taking an exploratory approach to understand forgiveness within its religious context (McMinn et al., 2008). Using a narrative-based inquiry, it was found that just over half the participants spontaneously mentioned prayer in describing their forgiving process. For many of the participants, prayer was observed to be an important part of their process of forgiveness. This study unexpectedly revealed a connection between these two religious constructs. After a review of the literature, the nature of this connection remained unclear. It has only been within the last 5 years that the relationship between prayer and forgiveness has been researched, and the recent studies have been limited both in scope and methodological rigor.

Still, prayer is not a new topic. As has been seen with forgiveness, prayer too has received attention from psychologists. The psychological community has recognized the influence and use of prayer as people process their emotions (Ai, Bolling, & Peterson, 2000) and deal with their physical health (Harris et al., 1999; McCaffrey, Eisenberg, Legedza, Davis, & Phillips, 2004). More specifically, a series of studies that had mixed results on the health benefits of intercessory prayer culminated in a well-designed study showing that intercessory prayer did not lessen the occurrence of complications in cardiac bypass patients (Benson et al., 2006). However, in a study done by Hodge (2007), a systematic review of 17 studies on intercessory prayer was undertaken. The review controlled for sample size differences and averaged the effects of prayer across all 17 studies. Prayer was found to be effective, and a positive effect for the prayer group was observed. Ultimately, it was concluded that more research surrounding the effectiveness of prayer as a therapeutic intervention is needed.

Still, prayer carries religious meaning far beyond its physical and psychological implications as reviewed above. Like forgiveness, prayer has always been an important religious concept. It has been an integral part of experiencing God and having relationship with God. Prayer has been divided into a number of categories: petition, adoration, sacrifice, confession, intercession, contemplation, thanksgiving, and so on, thus showing that prayer has multiple forms and aims (Zaleski & Zaleski, 2005). Prayer is at the root of all the believer does; it is the way in which people engage with the Divine (Murray, 1981). To the believer, prayer offers an experience of strength and peace with God. It is the channel of communication used to experience connection with God and thus directly relates to many other religious constructs, and yet the relationship between prayer and forgiveness has not been examined within the psychological research. It is for this reason we have sought to understand the connection between forgiveness and prayer.

The Relationship Between Forgiveness and Prayer

Therefore, though the psychological community has seen substantial research surrounding both forgiveness and prayer

independently, only recently has their relationship been examined, and the results have been limited. To begin to understand the relationship between these two constructs, turning to the Christian tradition proves helpful. Within Christianity, prayer—communication with God—facilitates forgiveness. One of the clearest examples of the connection between prayer and forgiveness within Christian scriptures is seen in the Lord's Prayer, as found in the New Testament (Matthew 6:5–15, Today's New International Version, italics added):

Our Father in Heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Though there appears to be an inherent theological connection between forgiveness and prayer; to what extent do people's ability to forgive correlate with their prayer practices? The answer to this question remained unclear. Wuthnow (2000) reported that praying within a group setting helped facilitate the participants' abilities to forgive others and heal their relationships. Those who were involved in small, religiously focused groups found group activity involving prayer and the reading of the Bible strongly assisted in their process of forgiving. In a qualitative study among Roman Catholics, Batson and Marks (2008) found a relationship between prayer and forgiveness where prayer facilitated a couple's process of forgiving one another. However, neither of the above studies looked at forgiveness or prayer in a controlled, measurable way. In one of the first quantitative studies on the topic, Sandage and Williamson (2010) combined meditative and colloquial prayer into a single measure, reporting a relationship between prayer and dispositional forgiveness among Protestant seminarians—a relationship that was mediated by gratitude. Also, Jankowski and Sandage (2010) found meditative prayer and dispositional forgiveness to be mediated by hope and attachment among masters-degree students at a religiously affiliated university. Although helpful, none of these studies use an experimental methodology to study the relationship between prayer and forgiveness.

Because of this lack of experimental methodology, the current study is part of a series of studies that has been undertaken to investigate possible connections between prayer and forgiveness among Christians. As was previously stated, the first study took an exploratory approach to understand prayer and forgiveness (McMinn et al., 2008). A narrative-based inquiry was used revealing that just over half the participants spontaneously mentioned prayer in describing their forgiving process. A second study (McMinn, Vasiliauskas, Honeycutt, & Dickey, 2009) was conducted to assess how prayer is specifically used in forgiveness among Christian young adults. Eighty-three prayer-related statements were gener-

ated based on the narratives from the first study and were given to a group of Christian undergraduate students. Factor analysis was conducted, with nine themes emerging, ranging from petitionary pleas toward God for help, to intimate relational prayers to expressing to God emotions about an offense. The four most prominently identified themes were prayer for guidance, asking God for help in forgiving, revealing pain to God, and letting go of the burden.

Flowing from these first two studies, the current study was developed with two goals in mind. First, it was important to develop a study that used stronger methodologies than the studies described above. Second, an experimental intervention study based on the results of McMinn et al. (2008, 2009) was thought to be needed, where Christian participants were guided to pray in particular ways with the goal of promoting forgiveness. The goal was to have an intervention study that would help ease the transition from the research lab to the professional psychologists' office, where clients experiencing the aftermath of deep interpersonal wounds confront the challenge and hope of forgiveness. Our hope was that this research would continue to broaden the understanding of prayer and other spiritual approaches to facilitate forgiveness among religious individuals.

The current intervention study utilized the four prominent themes (prayer for guidance, asking God for help in forgiving, revealing pain to God, and letting go of the burden) found in the research of McMinn et al. (2009) that examined how prayer is specifically used in forgiveness among Christian young adult. These four themes were used to establish the devotional readings for the experimental group. Quite simply, we hypothesized that prayer would facilitate a person's process toward forgiveness. More specifically, we expected that those participating in a time-limited prayer intervention would demonstrate higher state forgiveness toward their offenders than those in the devotional group and control group. In efforts to ensure the three conditions were similar in prayer practices and religious commitment, we had all participants complete the Structure of Prayer Scale and the Religious Commitment Inventory. We expected no significant repeated measures or between-group effects for trait forgiveness, intrapersonal religious commitment, or prayer practices. Finally, we expected those who participated in the time-limited prayer intervention would show greater empathy toward their offender than those in the devotional attention and control groups.

Methods

Participants

Participants consisted of 411 undergraduate students from 12 private Christian colleges across the United States. The number of participants from each of the 12 schools was as follows: 20, 12, 9, 66, 112, 8, 9, 9, 10, 29, 13, 19, and 37. Participants were both male and female students; the average age of students was 21.0 ($SD = 4.3$). Ethnicity of the participants included African American (4.4%), European American (81%), Asian American (3.6%), Latino or Hispanic (6.3%), Native American (2.2%), International (3.2%), and Other (5.1%). They were enrolled in an undergraduate class in psychology. Additionally, participants were able to identify a significant interpersonal offense they wanted to forgive. They were given the opportunity to sign up through an announce-

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participants in the prayer intervention condition. Neither prayer nor forgiveness was highlighted in any of the devotional meditations sent to the attention group.

The prayer intervention group also received 16 daily devotions via e-mail. In contrast to the attention group, participants in the prayer intervention condition received forgiveness meditations that had been specifically written for this group. These meditations were focused on forgiveness and highlighted four particular themes throughout: prayer for guidance, asking God for help in forgiving, revealing pain to God, and letting go of the burden. These four themes were taken from the top four ways individuals used prayer, as seen in McMinn et al. (2009). These prayer interventions were written by the first author in collaboration with a professional writer. Each theme was the focus of four meditations, thus producing 16 days for the intervention. At the end of the forgiveness meditations was a request for the participant to spend 10 min in prayer each day. An example of one of the forgiveness meditations can be found in the Appendix.

Results

A compliance check indicated a relatively high rate of compliance, with 84% of those in the prayer intervention group and 86% in the attention group reporting that they had read most or all the daily meditations. Almost all (98%) of those in the prayer group reported that they had spent at least some time praying each day.

Means and standard deviations on the various scales collected before and after the intervention are reported in Table 1. Internal consistency of the various scales is reported in Table 2.

To look for differences over time and between groups, we computed a series of mixed model analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs), using an alpha level of .05. The repeated measures variables in these analyses were the pre- and posttest scores on the various measures and the between-groups variable distinguished between the prayer, devotional attention, and control groups, and the covariate was the self-reported magnitude of the offense.

Some dependent variables were not expected to change as a result of the intervention. Accordingly, no significant repeated measures or between-group effects were noted for trait forgiveness or intrapersonal religious commitment. Similarly, no changes were observed in the Structure of Prayer scales.

On the measure of state unforgiveness (TRIM), a significant time by condition interaction was observed, $F(2, 359) = 5.12, p =$

Table 2
Internal Consistency for Scales Used

Measure	Preintervention	Postintervention
TRIM revenge	.86	.89
TRIM avoidance	.94	.94
RCI (intra)	.86	.88
RCI (inter)	.77	.77
TFS	.82	.83
REST	.76	.76
BEA	.91	.92
SPS petition	.76	.79
SPS ritual	.73	.80
SPS meditation	.73	.80
SPS habit	.71	.75
SPS compassion	.84	.87

Note. Values are the Cronbach's α coefficient. TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Religious Commitment Inventory; TFS = Trait Forgiveness Scale; REST = Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression Scale; BEA = Batson Empathy Adjectives; SPS = Structure of Prayer Scales.

.006, with those in the prayer and devotional attention groups showing greater reductions in unforgiveness than those in the control group. The pretest Cohen's d effect size was .40 and .32 for the prayer intervention group and devotional attention group, respectively. The magnitude of offense was related to state unforgiveness across all groups, $F(1, 359) = 54.25, p < .001$, and the time by magnitude covariate was also significant, $F(1, 359) = 4.55, p = .034$. See Figure 1.

As expected, a significant interaction effect was observed on empathy toward one's offender, $F(2, 358) = 3.682, p = .026$, with those in the prayer group showing the greatest change on empathy toward their offender (Cohen's d effect size of .52). No covariate effects were observed.

Although no significant effects were found for intrapersonal religious commitment, and none were expected, interpersonal religious commitment showed a time by condition interaction, $F(2, 359) = 3.68, p = .026$, with those in the prayer group showing a modest increase in interpersonal religious commitment (Cohen's d effect size of .14). See Figure 1. No covariate effects were observed.

Table 1
Pre- and Postintervention Scores

Measure	Preintervention			Postintervention		
	Prayer ($N = 128$)	Attention ($N = 128$)	Control ($N = 107$)	Prayer ($N = 128$)	Attention ($N = 128$)	Control ($N = 107$)
TRIM	2.49 (.86)	2.58 (.92)	2.36 (.90)	2.25 (.83)	2.30 (.80)	2.34 (.90)
RCI (intra)	3.81 (.82)	3.82 (.82)	3.68 (.84)	3.79 (.84)	3.77 (.79)	3.75 (.86)
RCI (inter)	3.31 (.88)	3.32 (.89)	3.20 (.89)	3.43 (.88)	3.27 (.87)	3.24 (.90)
TFS	3.71 (.62)	3.66 (.64)	3.78 (.72)	3.70 (.62)	3.68 (.67)	3.79 (.68)
REST	3.67 (.96)	3.71 (.93)	3.57 (.96)	3.90 (.91)	3.76 (.77)	3.75 (.81)
BEA	2.72 (.91)	2.67 (.93)	2.76 (.95)	3.19 (.89)	2.98 (.90)	2.96 (.97)

Note. Scores are reported as means with standard deviations in parentheses. TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Religious Commitment Inventory; TFS = Trait Forgiveness Scale; REST = Relational Engagement of the Sacred for a Transgression Scale; BEA = Batson Empathy Adjectives.

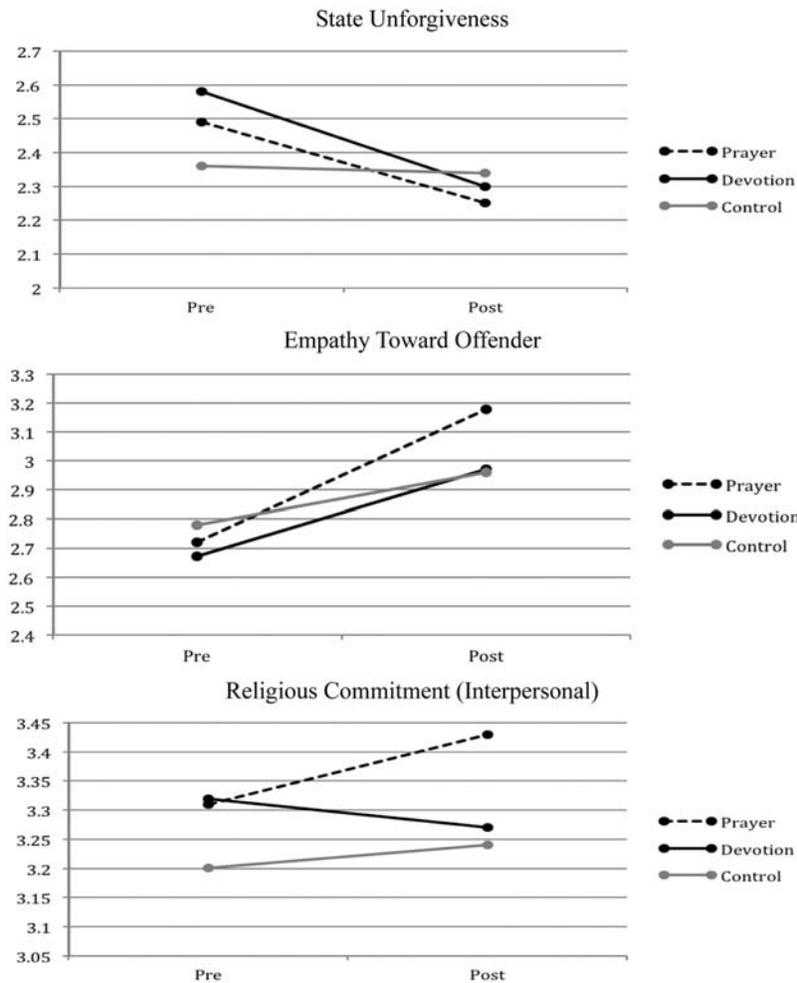


Figure 1. Pre- and posttest scores on dependent variables. Unforgiveness, measured with the TRIM, showed an interaction effect, $F(2,359) = 5.12, p = .006$. Empathy, measured with the BEA, showed interaction effect, $F(2,358) = 3.682, p = .026$. Religious commitment, measured with the RCI, showed an interaction effect, $F(2, 359) = 3.68, p = .026$.

Discussion

On the basis of this study of prayer and forgiveness among Christian participants, we offer several tentative conclusions, each needing to be confirmed in subsequent research. We also offer reflections on clinical implications and future directions.

Devotional Meditation Enhances Forgiveness

We expected that those who received a prayer intervention would rate higher on a state forgiveness scale at posttest than those in a control group. It was somewhat surprising that those in the attention group also rated higher in state forgiveness compared to the control group, with no significant differences between the devotional attention and prayer groups. Three possible interpretations are offered.

First, it is possible that the mere suggestion of religious reflection, repeated through daily meditations, provided impetus for participants to report being more forgiving. Prayer itself may or may not have been related to these changes.

Second, it may be that devotional practices—whether specifically prayer and forgiveness focused or simply meditational in nature—provides an environment that guides people toward forgiveness of an offense. People's capacity and propensity for mending their relationships and pursuing healthy relational qualities may tend to increase when they are spending time in religious and/or spiritual practices. This could help explain the change in state forgiveness, though further intervention studies with other religious groups are needed.

Third, the increase in state forgiveness following both the attention and prayer interventions may be an example of the participant's movement toward healthy relational attunement to the other, particularly mentalization and reflective capacities (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). Devotional time, an experience of seeing self in relation to the divine, pulls the believer to an other-focused perspective which may, in turn, draw the believer to sense that there is another reality, another perspective on life, essentially God's perspective. This is a decentering experience, moving from a personal perspective and inward thinking (Stark,

1999) to increased reflection on the offender and the offender's humanity, as well as on the believer's own humanity.

Prayer-Based Meditation Enhances Empathy Toward the Offender

As expected, those in the prayer condition experienced greater empathy toward the offender when compared to participants in the other two conditions. Empathy is often seen as a predictor of forgiveness and included alongside forgiveness in the research (Welton, Hill, & Seybold, 2008). In particular, Worthington's (2003) REACH model includes empathizing with the offender as one of its core steps toward forgiveness. The nature of these prayer devotional themes led the participant toward thinking about the offender, thus increasing the participant's perspective taking ability in his or her process of forgiving and other-centeredness that promoted empathy. Welton et al. (2008) write, "The common thread between empathy and forgiveness is the other-centered focus rather than the self-centered focus" (p. 169). Perhaps because of the nature of the prayer intervention, those in the prayer intervention had a greater empathic identification with the offender.

Clinical Implications

It is fascinating to see how many research articles from the past two decades pertain to forgiveness and how few consider religious interventions in the forgiveness process. This study brings forgiveness together with one of its close spiritual siblings (prayer) and illustrates that there is much to be gained in exploring forgiveness as a faith-related construct. As an initial study with a sample of limited diversity, it fails to provide definitive answers for how prayer and forgiveness may be related. Still, it suggests this can be a promising venue for ongoing research, both for the sake of understanding the mechanisms of forgiveness among religious individuals and to help identify clinical implications for those who see forgiveness as a proper goal of psychotherapeutic interventions. That devotional meditation increases a person's reported state of forgiveness introduces the possibility of a religious understanding for what helps promote the state of forgiveness.

One implication of this is for clinical psychologists to remember the importance of religious resources when a religious client has been hurt and desires to forgive. In addition to forgiveness intervention models offered in psychology (e.g., Worthington, 2003), it is important to remember that certain religious or spiritual practices may also help promote forgiveness. Referring a client to a clergy person to discuss past wounds and the need to forgive may be a useful step, even when the psychologist remains involved in treatment. Depending on client, therapist, and clergy factors, the clergy person and psychologist might find it most useful to work separately or in tandem in providing services to the client (McMinn, Aikins, & Lish, 2003).

Some clinicians, especially those trained in religious and spiritual issues, may find it useful to explore faith-congruent spiritual interventions in psychotherapy (Aten, McMinn, & Worthington, 2011). For example, a psychologist may work with Christian clients where devotional time and forgiveness-focused prayer inside or outside of sessions could benefit the client. It is important that discussions surrounding forgiveness be client-directed and not

imposed by the therapist. Also, timing is critical. Clients may feel pressured or obligated to forgive prematurely, especially if they feel it is their religious obligation to do so. Time and time again we experience with our clients how difficult the forgiveness process can be. Being with them in the sludge of the pain and process is central.

This research also highlights the role of religious and spiritual issues in clinical training (Hathaway, 2011). Current survey research suggests that religious and spiritual diversity issues are rarely covered in training psychologists, whereas several other forms of diversity training are covered admirably (Vogel, McMinn, Peterson, & Gathercoal, 2012). Although we would stop short of suggesting that all forms of diversity are equally important or should be covered equally in training, it nonetheless seems important for psychologists to understand enough about religious and spiritual experiences to consider the religious or spiritual mechanisms that may promote meaningful change. This study highlights the potential role of prayer for Christian clients who desire to forgive a past offense. This could be viewed in relational terms where religious client experience a relationship with the sacred, just as they experience relationships with their psychotherapists. This relationship with the sacred may benefit clients on their personal journey toward health.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the psychological state of Christian clients' unforgiveness and forgiveness is entwined in their faith experience. When we dichotomize these states, we ignore the complexity of forgiveness and its roots as both a religious and psychological construct.

Limitations and Future Directions

One challenge of any intervention study is determining if the control group spontaneously engages in the activities assigned to the intervention group. Given that this study involved Christian college students, it is quite likely that those in the attention and control conditions engaged in prayer as part of their regular life routines. Prayer is a common practice within the Christian life, and though we did not specifically ask the devotional attention group to pray, we certainly did not ask them not to pray. Thus, it is very likely the attention group had prayerful experiences throughout their participation given that they were doing daily devotionals also throughout the study. This may also account for the lack of significance in state forgiveness scores between the prayer and the attention groups. Finding ways of increasing the contrast, or at least carefully monitoring the contrast, between experimental and control conditions will be important in future studies.

It will be important to study the effects of prayer on forgiveness with more diverse populations. The Christian college population used in this study may not fully represent deep, lasting wounds in need of forgiveness. We attempted to control for this by analyzing the data from only those who perceived their offense as significant, but an older population would possibly yield different results. Also, not only rating the magnitude of the offense but also categorizing the type of offenses participants wanted to forgive, as well as the relationship of the offender to the participant, would provide a clearer idea of the characteristics of the sample and the complexity of the offenses. Both these additions would give a better perspective on the scope, depth, and relational quality of offenses that were being forgiven.

Studying the effects of prayer and meditation among other religious traditions is also needed. Our results can only be generalized to a Christian population. Not only was there little religious diversity, but there was little ethnic diversity as well. Surveying a more diverse population would be a helpful follow-up to this study.

Covariate effects from this study support the intuitive notion that forgiveness is more difficult when the offense has been severe, though it is difficult to interpret this finding considering that participants were excluded from analyses if they did not rate the magnitude of the offense against them as a 5 or greater on a 7-point scale. The adage “time heals all wounds” may be more or less accurate, depending on the nature of the wound. Is prayer for forgiveness more effective with relatively minor offenses than it is for life-altering offenses? This would be a fitting topic for additional research.

More intensive and extensive interventions could be developed and studied. The length of the intervention in this study was modest and therefore may have lacked power for the statistical analyses. The intervention lasted for 16 days and only involved a few minutes per day. Perhaps a longer intervention, lasting 4 or 5 weeks would more accurately reflect real life devotional practices and perhaps yield greater differences between the attention and prayer groups. Also, there was no way to control for each person’s own decisions to spend time in prayer and devotional material. Though each group was different in terms of what was asked of them through the study, each participant’s personal practices may have also influenced the changes or lack of changes seen in the scales. Adding questions to survey the participants’ current prayer and devotional practices would help give a conceptual idea of how much prayer and devotional time each participant was spending in addition to the prayer and devotional requests of the intervention study. Conducting an analysis of prayer and religious practices of the participants during the span of the study and determining whether there is significant differences between the groups is suggested. It would be hypothesized that the prayer practices of the participants in the prayer and attention groups were significantly greater than the prayer practices of the control group.

Other forms of religious and spiritual practice should also be studied in relation to forgiveness. Parsing out the influence of different practices, such as prayer, structured devotional, music, meditation, and silence could help identify the nuances of the influences of these devotional times, not only on forgiveness but also on other relational qualities, such as empathy, anger, patience, and intimacy. It might also be useful to include a group that is given an intervention but not asked to forgive an offender, thus seeing if changes in other relational qualities only exist when there are changes in state forgiveness or if they change also when the focus on forgiveness is not present.

Conclusion

Psychological research has produced a plethora of findings regarding forgiveness, both in efforts to understand the nature of the construct as well as the nature of its impact on people. Though there have been many forgiveness intervention studies, few have looked at the connection between forgiveness and prayer. This forgiveness and prayer study leaves many questions unanswered, particularly whether there is something unique about prayer that

facilitates forgiveness or if it is simply time with God that leads toward forgiveness. Our hope is that this will spark interest in examining the complexity of forgiveness within its religious and spiritual context. As the acknowledgment of spiritual and religious issues in psychotherapy becomes more prevalent in professional psychology, integrating our clients’ journeys toward forgiveness with their spiritual practices becomes starkly relevant.

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Appendix

Example of a Forgiveness Meditation

An important part of working through forgiveness is seeking a direction forward. We often know that forgiveness needs to take place but possess few ideas on how to move in the right direction. As a result, we turn to God and ask, “How can I begin to forgive this person, Lord?” In doing this, we recognize that God possesses infinite wisdom and that we need this wisdom as we seek to forgive.

However, the error we often make is that there is only one path, the “right” path toward forgiveness. We come to God asking that he show us the way to move forward without considering that there might be several ways or paths. In Psalm 25, the psalmist requests, “Let me know Your paths, O Lord; teach me Your ways” (Ps. 25:4, JPS). Here is a recognition that the “path” or “way” of God is not singular, but multiple. This is a tremendous relief! Instead of seeking the one way, we are to seek a range of possible ways in which to move forward. We can rest assured that God’s is continually revealing to us a way forward.

Seek God’s guidance in moving toward forgiveness; meditate on the possible paths before you. Instead of focusing in on one

possible future, imagine several courses of action and how they might ultimately turn out for you and the person you are forgiving. Ask God to provide wisdom on what words or actions you might use. Seek multiple visions of what God might have for you.

If you can’t find the words to begin this process, feel free to use the following prayer to assist you. If you begin this prayer and new words begin to come to your mind, feel free to deviate in the way the Spirit leads.

Lord, I’ve come to you because I don’t know how to begin forgiving. Yet, you are the creator and sustainer of wisdom. I ask you to show me your paths and ways in my situation. Help me to visualize what forgiveness will look like and feel like. Continue to guide me in those paths and give me the strength to pursue them.

—Amen