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FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION: THE DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIAN

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Among psychologists, forgiveness and reconciliation are typically viewed as separate constructs. This distinction is often adaptive, making it possible for a person to forgive a deceased offender or to forgive without entering back into a dangerous relationship. But to what extent does this privatized and secularized view of forgiveness conflict with the religious construct of forgiveness that many clients and their religious leaders may hold? Two survey studies are reported here. The first assessed the opinions of academic psychologists and Christian theologians regarding the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. The second survey assessed the opinions of expert psychologists and Christian theologians who have published books on the topic of forgiveness. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that psychologists are more inclined to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation than Christian theologians. Implications are discussed.

*"... and forgive in such a way as if it hadn't happened,
hadn't happened at all"*

Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina

In the history of psychology, the topic of forgiveness is a relative newcomer, with the body of research growing rapidly over the last two decades. Searching PSYCInfo yields less than two dozen articles published prior to 1990, and over one thousand (1,083) articles published since. This proliferation is evident in both basic research, such as de Waal and his colleague's work on how primates make peace after experiencing conflict (de Waal & Pokorny, 2005), and applied research which has

given rise to clinical interventions where forgiveness principles are employed to help relieve clients of emotional turmoil. A recent meta-analysis demonstrated that forgiveness interventions are effective beyond the mere common curative factors implicit to the therapy process (Wade, Worthington, and Meyer, 2005), thereby helping to release clients from the negative health consequences of unforgiveness (Harris and Thoreson, 2005).

Implicit in many of these research activities and clinical procedures are views regarding the role of peacemaking and reconciliation in the process of forgiveness. In an early literature review, Sells and Hargrave (1998) noted differing opinions regarding the role of reconciliation in the process of forgiveness, but in the past decade or so many psychologists seem to have settled on the conclusion that the two are separate processes and that the one can occur without the other. For example, in a recent chapter on forgiveness, Worthington and his colleagues assert: "Among forgiveness researchers, forgiveness is usually thought to be distinct from reconciliation," and then go on to give the example of a client who may be trying to forgive a relative who is now dead (Worthington, Davis, Hook, Miller, Gartner, & Jenkins, in press). This has important clinical implications. If forgiveness and reconciliation were conflated then there would be no possibility of forgiving a deceased offender, and it might cause some victims of violent offenses to enter back into harm's way if they feel that reconciliation is required for forgiveness. But the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation may be more complex than these examples suggest.

Christian theologians sometimes disagree with psychologists, suggesting that true forgiveness reaches fruition when reconciliation occurs (Jones, 1995).

Curiosity regarding this debate among disciplines was the impetus for this study. By surveying members of both disciplines, we hope to provide data and initiate a discussion about this disparity among scholars.

Forgiveness in Psychology

From within the psychological community, forgiveness can be viewed as a unilateral act of mercy offered to the offender by the forgiver (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). In this, a person understands he or she has been wronged and willingly chooses to be merciful. Because forgiveness is a unilateral act of mercy by one individual independent of the offender's behavior, it is necessarily distinct from reconciliation, which requires bilateral actions such as repentance and restored relationship (Sells and Hargrave, 1998).

This psychological perspective on forgiveness enables one who has been offended to release negative painful feelings and thoughts and move forward without the hindrance of unforgiveness. Beyond simply releasing painful emotions and thought, recent definitions of forgiveness suggest it is a two stage process where a person first decreases negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward a person and then increases positive thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Wade, Johnson, and Meyer, 2008). For example, the offended party moves from anger and rumination about the offense, as well as avoidance of the offender, to compassion and understanding of the person's actions. Despite Wade et al.'s (2008) inclusion of behavioral change as a criterion of forgiveness, the authors primarily discuss change in cognitions and emotions. The notion of restoring or healing damaged relationships is not addressed in these models of forgiveness.

The separation between forgiveness and reconciliation has been implicit for many forgiveness authors; many authors merely neglect to mention reconciliation. Others will explicitly state that they are unrelated concepts. For instance, de Waal and Pokorny (2005) state that forgiveness and reconciliation are two different constructs; either one can occur without the other. Forgiveness is merely an internal process whereas reconciliation is an external, relational process.

Although the desire to separate forgiveness and reconciliation has a compelling rationale from a psychological perspective, it is important to keep in mind that forgiveness is also a religious construct for many clients (Worthington, 2005), and it is possible

that religious views of forgiveness differ from emerging psychological views. The fact that 42% of American's report regular attendance of church (Gallup, 2008), and 77% identify themselves as Christians (Gallup, 2009), suggests that understanding forgiveness from a Christian worldview has value as clinicians seek to serve their Christian clients.

Forgiveness in Christian Theology

Some have raised the question as to whether forgiveness morphs into a different construct when it becomes a therapeutic concept removed from its religious roots (e.g., Meek & McMinn, 1997). If so, then it is likely that a client and therapist who do not share the same religious tradition may use the word "forgive" while each holds a different understanding of what the word means. Indeed, when Christians are asked to describe their experiences with forgiveness, many refer to theological reasons for forgiveness (McMinn, Meek, Dominguez, Ryan, and Novotny, 1999) and Christians are inclined to employ spiritual processes such as prayer when forgiving an offender (McMinn et al., 2008).

Despite the relative infancy of forgiveness as a discipline in the psychological community, the study of forgiveness has deep roots in Christianity where forgiveness and reconciliation seem to be more of an integrated process. From a Christian theological vantage point, the reason that God forgives humanity is for the explicit purpose of reconciliation. Theologically speaking, this makes it difficult to envision an emotional form of forgiveness that can be separated from the goal of reconciliation.

Drawing on the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian theologian L. Gregory Jones (1995) criticized the model of forgiveness propounded by western therapies that has been accepted by American culture. Jones argued that the influences of therapeutic conceptions have encouraged a privatized forgiveness, in which forgiveness ceases to be an interpersonal discipline and has become an intrapersonal exercise. Jones used the term *privatized forgiveness* to describe this act of making one party's heart and mind feel better. He describes this as a cheapened form of forgiveness that ignores the relational context. Private forgiveness is an easy answer to the difficult work required by Christian forgiveness.

From a theological perspective (Jones 1995), true forgiveness culminates in a healing of what has been broken. It is a struggle where both culpability and

wrongdoing are examined and ultimately overcome by the restoration of community. The purpose of forgiveness is not to feel better, but to deepen and enrich community. It is a way of life; not an inner way of life, but a way of living with others.

Why Perspectives May Differ

Although we designed this research in order to detect differences between psychologists and Christian theologians on the topic of forgiveness, our intent is not to suggest that one discipline has it right and the other has it wrong. Rather, it seems important to identify differences in order to promote integrative scholarly dialog on the nature of forgiveness, and how forgiveness is experienced and expressed in relation to various contextual factors.

Where theologians and psychologists differ, it may reflect the relational focus of each discipline. Psychologists may often work with clients who are forgiving past offenders. Some of these offenders may not still be living, or may be a stranger to the person desiring to forgive. Reconciling with a stranger who violated a client many years earlier would certainly not be a reasonable goal for psychotherapy. In contrast, Christian theologians often begin their observations with God's relationship with humanity—a relationship that has been characterized by God repeatedly forgiving and reconciling with wayward humanity. In turn, Christian communities desire to be places where a similar sort of forgiving and reconciling occurs. But this context is quite different than what psychologists sometimes experience in a professional setting, making it reasonable that Christian theologians and psychologists may have disparate views on the topic of forgiveness.

Purpose of the Present Studies

It seems that in the process of defining forgiveness, social scientists have prescribed a form of forgiveness in which reconciliation is not a component. In contrast, Christian theologians may be reticent to distinguish between the two, believing that the one cannot occur without the other. The objective of these two studies is to examine whether forgiveness and reconciliation are viewed as related or distinct entities among scholars in psychology and Christian theology. To date, no research has been published that examines the conceptualization of forgiveness in these two parallel fields simultaneously, nor have any researchers worked to integrate the two. To this end,

two studies were conducted: The first investigated the opinions of academic psychologists and theologians, the professionals who are directly influencing the futures of their respective fields. The second study investigated the opinion of psychologists and theologians who are experts in the field of forgiveness.

STUDY 1

Academics are on the front lines of training and are progenitors of their respective fields. As such, the opinions of scholars are most likely to be transmitted to subsequent generations. The purpose of the first study was to survey the opinions of scholars in the fields of psychology and Christian theology regarding the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Method

Participants. Participants in the first study were psychologists and Christian religious scholars. In order to obtain a religiously diverse sample of psychologists, we identified 104 faculty from seven graduate departments of professional psychology and 81 faculty from seven graduate departments of professional psychology that endorse a Christian worldview. All of the traditional professional programs and Christian professional psychology programs selected were member schools of the National Council of Schools and Programs in Professional Psychology (NCSPP). In addition, we identified 100 religious scholars from 37 departments of theology, religion, or biblical studies at schools associated with the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU). In total, research invitations were sent by email to a total of 285 individuals and 5 were returned because of undeliverable addresses. Of the 280 persons surveyed, 83 responded (response rate of 30%). Among psychologists, 53 of 180 potential participants replied (29% response rate) and among religious scholars, 29 of 100 potential participants responded (29% response rate). One participant who replied was not used in the data analysis because he did not indicate whether he was a psychologist or a theologian. Participants' ages ranged from 25 – 86 years of age ($M = 52$, $SD = 11.15$), of which 71 were European American, 4 were Hispanic American, 1 was African American, 1 was Asian American, and 3 endorsed "other." The study included 31 females and 52 males.

Materials and Procedures. Each participant was sent a personally addressed email describing the

study and requesting participation. Scholars who elected to participate followed a hyperlink embedded within the email that directed them to a questionnaire designed by the authors. This survey collected simple demographic information: gender, ethnicity, age, and primary vocation (check all that apply – psychologist, theologian, academic, therapist/counselor, pastor, student, none of these). Participants were then asked to rate, on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), the level to which they agreed with four statements. Respondents rated whether true forgiveness meant that a person: releases negative feelings toward the offender, gives up a desire for revenge toward the offender, develops positive feelings of goodwill toward the offender, and is restored to an ongoing relationship with the offender. Respondents were then asked to rate the importance of religion in their lives, ranging from 1 (*Not at all important; I have no religion*) to 5 (*Highly important; it is the center of my life*). Finally, qualitative responses were collected by asking participants to state their views regarding whether reconciliation was necessary for forgiveness, or if it was a different construct.

Results

To separate the academic psychologists into two groups, “less religious psychologists” and “more religious psychologists,” the question regarding importance of religion was used. The more religious psychologist group ($n = 24$) was comprised of respondents who endorsed a 5 on that question, which constituted 45.3% of the sample of academic psychologists respondents. The remaining 54.7% of respondents who endorsed a score of less than five on that question formed the less religious psychologist group ($n = 29$).

For each of the four questions, one-way ANOVAs compared the responses of each of the three groups. There was no significant difference among the scores of the three groups (less religious psychologists, more religious psychologists, and theologians) for the first question regarding whether forgiveness entailed release of negative feelings (less religious psychologists $M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.09$; more religious psychologists $M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.31$; theologians $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.30$). Similarly, the three groups did not differ on the second question that asked whether forgiveness involves letting go of the desire for

revenge (less religious psychologists $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.15$; more religious psychologists $M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.46$; theologians $M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.85$).

The third question that respondents rated was, “True forgiveness involves developing positive feelings and goodwill toward the offender.” In this case the ANOVA achieved significance, $F(2, 79) = 7.51$, $p < .005$, indicating a difference among the three groups (less religious psychologists $M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.81$; more religious psychologists $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.07$; theologians $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.07$). Post hoc analyses using Bonferroni comparisons indicated no difference between the less religious psychologists and the more religious psychologists or between the more religious psychologists and the theologians, but the theologians’ endorsements were significantly higher than the less religious psychologists’ with a large effect size ($p < .005$, $d = 1.05$).

The fourth question that respondents rated was, “True forgiveness means that a person is restored to an ongoing relationship with the offender.” Here, too, the ANOVA indicated a significant difference among the groups, $F(2, 79) = 5.09$, $p < .01$, demonstrating that the opinions of the less religious psychologists ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.01$), more religious psychologists ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.01$), and theologians ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.21$) differed. Post hoc analyses using Bonferroni comparisons revealed that the more religious psychologists were significantly lower than both the less religious psychologists ($p < .05$, $d = 0.77$) and the theologians ($p < .05$, $d = 0.83$). Both differences exhibited large effect sizes.

STUDY 2

Whereas the first study surveyed scholars of each discipline, this second study examined the opinions of experts. These experts are individuals who have published in their respective fields on the topic of forgiveness.

Method

Participants. The participants of the second study consisted of scholars who had published specifically on the topic of forgiveness; 36 experts from the field of psychology, and 19 experts from the field of theology were selected. With a response of 33 experts, the response rate was 60%. Of the 33 participants, 25 were from psychology departments, 7 were from theology departments, and one a

philosopher specializing in both fields. Their ages ranged from 29 – 80 years of age ($M = 49.69$, $SD = 11.66$), of which 28 were European American, 1 was Asian American, and 4 endorsed “other”. The study included 9 females and 24 males.

Materials and Procedures. Each participant was sent a personally addressed email describing the study and requesting participation. Experts who elected to participate followed a hyperlink embedded within the email that directed the participant to a questionnaire designed by the authors. The survey questions were identical to those asked in Study 1.

Results

Independent samples *T*-Tests detected no significant differences between the expert psychologists and the expert theologians on the first three questions which addressed release of negative feelings (psychologists $M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.92$; theologians $M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.46$), release of desires for revenge (psychologists $M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.70$; theologians $M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.38$), and fostering feelings of goodwill toward the offender (psychologists $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.38$; theologians $M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.38$). For the fourth question regarding reconciling the relationship, an independent samples *T*-test indicated that the theologians ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.29$) endorsements were significantly higher than the psychologists ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.19$) with a very large effect size, $t(30) = -2.63$, $p < .05$, $d = 1.10$].

CROSS STUDY ANALYSES

To further investigate the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness in the communities of psychology and theology, the groups from each of the two studies were compared. Because of multiple hypothesis tests, a conservative alpha of .01 was used to prevent Type I error. In one set of analyses, the expert theologians from the second study were compared to theologians from the first study. Independent samples *T*-Tests were used to compare the two groups of theologians, and for each questions neither of the two groups differed significantly. No differences were observed.

The expert psychologists from the second study were then compared to the less religious psychologists and more religious psychologists from the first study. The expert psychologists and the more religious psychologists did not differ on any of the items. However, the expert psychologists and less

religious psychologists differed on three of the four questions. Expert psychologists ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.92$) were more likely to say that forgiveness involves the release of negative feelings than less religious psychologists from Study 1 ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(53) = 3.53$, $p < .005$, $d = .97$, with a large difference between means. Expert psychologists ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.38$) were also more likely to say forgiveness involves developing feelings of good will toward one’s offender than were less religious psychologists in Study 1 ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(53) = 3.96$, $p < .005$, $d = 1.04$, again with a large difference between means. Finally, expert psychologists ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.19$) were less likely than the less religious psychologists ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.10$) in Study 1 to say that forgiveness involves a restored relationship with one’s offender, $t(53) = 2.71$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.72$, with a large difference between means.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSES

Participants in both studies were also asked an open-ended question about whether reconciliation is an essential part of forgiveness. Responses from the two studies were combined, resulting in a total of 78 psychologists and 39 theologians who provided a written response. Most participants responded by describing forgiveness and reconciliation as separate constructs, though this distinction was more prevalent among psychologists (85%) than among theologians (44%). Still, even with these differences it is striking to note that almost all psychologists and nearly half of the theologians distinguished between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Using a grounded theory approach to the qualitative data, we detected categories of meaning, or themes, among the responses. In addition to the separateness of forgiveness and reconciliation, three prominent themes were noted among psychologist respondents. First, they emphasized the intrapersonal nature of forgiveness and the interpersonal nature of reconciliation (21% of respondents). That is, one can forgive another without any sort of communication with the offender. But to reconcile requires that the offender apologize and that both parties move toward renewed relationship. For example, one respondent wrote, “you can forgive without reconciling; forgiving is an individual response while reconciliation requires something from both parties.”

Second, psychologists emphasized the relational dangers for a person who views reconciliation as

part of forgiveness (12% of respondents). For example, one psychologist wrote, "I think that in some cases (e.g., in cases of severe abuse or victimization), reconciliation might even be dangerous." It is interesting that not a single theologian mentioned the dangers of reconciliation.

Third, many psychologists (29% of respondents) identified some points of connection between forgiveness and reconciliation even while noting that they are separate constructs. Often this occurred by pointing out that forgiveness is a necessary step toward reconciliation, but reconciliation is not required for true forgiveness. A few respondents saw reconciliation as the ultimate goal of forgiveness while recognizing that it does not always occur. Paradoxically, other psychologist respondents saw this the other way—that reconciliation is a step along the path to true forgiveness. It appears that most psychologists see forgiveness and reconciliation as quite separate, and when they are seen as related there are diverse perspectives about how the two fit together.

The theologians tended to see more complexity in the question, though similar themes were seen in their replies. Whereas psychologists tended to have a parsimonious answer that forgiveness and reconciliation are separate, theologians were more likely to see nuances and differing circumstances (46% of respondents). For example, respondents noted that reconciling with an offending stranger is less important than reconciling with an offending family member. A number of these nuanced replies suggested points of connection between forgiveness and reconciliation. One respondent wrote, "Reconciliation is the telos of forgiveness, but maybe not fully in this life." Another wrote, "Ideally the two go together, forgiveness being the means of reconciliation. But there can be forgiveness without a realized reconciliation."

Whereas psychologists tended to mention that forgiveness is intrapersonal and reconciliation interpersonal, theologians made a similar point with different words. Theologians preferred to describe forgiveness as unilateral and reconciliation as bilateral (19% of respondents) or similar language that relied less on intrapsychic language than what psychologists tended to use.

Finally, theologians were inclined to emphasize that forgiveness is a long and complex process (15%), making it difficult to answer simple questions in a questionnaire such as the one they were being asked to complete. For example, "Forgiveness—or forgivingness—is more of a process than an act;

whether reconciliation is coincident with it, is its aim or is impossible or too dangerous to achieve will depend on the circumstances."

DISCUSSION

Among the different professionals surveyed in this study, some common ground did exist: Regardless of field or level of expertise, all participants agreed that true forgiveness involves letting go of negative feelings and the desire for revenge. Here, however, is the end of clear consensus. Consistent with literature on forgiveness, experts in psychology and theology agreed that forgiveness involves developing positive feelings as well as feelings of goodwill toward an offender. From the non-expert sample, theologians and more religious psychologists also agreed on this point. Differing from all other groups, the less religious psychologists were less inclined to see the development of positive affect as necessary for forgiveness.

The area where thinkers showed the least agreement was regarding the relationship of forgiveness and restoring a relationship with an offender. Here, the expert theologians endorsed the highest level of agreement relative to other groups of respondents. The groups that most disagreed with this statement were the more-religious non-expert psychologists as well as the expert psychologists. This is a finding consistent with the psychological literature: psychologists' responses indicated that reconciliation is not a necessary part of true forgiveness. Likewise, the theologians' indication that forgiveness and reconciliation are related is consistent with the Christian theology literature.

Integrating the Two Schools of Thought: The Continuum of Forgiveness

Looking at these concepts of forgiveness we see the psychological community emphasizing the intrapersonal level and the theological community emphasizing the relational level. There is value in integrating these constructs as the views of both groups of scholars describe a fundamental process and activity that occur in human life. One solution we propose is to allow for and embrace these two distinct different processes by conceptualizing forgiveness as an act that occurs on a continuum. At one pole of the continuum is *subjective* forgiveness and at the other pole, *relational* forgiveness; by moving along this continuum forgiveness is seen as

an act that occurs from the inside out. Both levels of forgiveness have implicit value. Subjective forgiveness is emphasized in the research and therapies of psychology and is related to the process of inner healing. Relational forgiveness is emphasized in theological works, and involves a restoration of the offender and a reconciliation of relationship.

Those who espouse the form of forgiveness emphasized in the psychological literature may raise the point that subjective forgiveness is sufficient in cases such as when the offender is a stranger, and we would agree that in such cases there is no relationship to reconcile. However, wrestling with these two forms of forgiveness is important, as the majority of offenses one suffers does not come from strangers but from a person with whom there existed some sort of amiable relationship. But perhaps reconciliation is relevant to the situation of the stranger: many spiritually oriented people believe in a benevolent God, and unspiritual people at the least have a schema regarding the safety of the world. And may not a reconciliation of that trust lead to increased wellness?

Regardless, our opinion stands that subjective forgiveness may be a precursor to relational forgiveness, or may be an end in and of itself in cases where a restored relationship is not possible (for instance, due to death), or deemed unwise and dangerous (such as in the case of an unrepentant abuser). When a person chooses to more fully embrace forgiveness and move deeper therein, relational forgiveness entails healing for both parties where grace is offered and received; it is a way for an offended person to learn trust and an offender to learn humility. This level of forgiveness may be palpable to the forgiver, the offender, and the larger community. Relational forgiveness is often necessary for individuals, communities, and nations to egress and repair the damage of broken relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was empirical and positivistic in nature. Judging by some of the responses from several members of the theological community, such an approach to this subject matter was perceived as, at best, problematic, and at worst, patronizing. Several theologians commented that the questions themselves were not adequate, and that taking a survey (democratic) approach may not be an appropriate manner for determining philosophical matters.

Based on such responses, it is reasonable to question whether the opinions of theologians were accurately assessed in this study.

In addition, the poor response rate of Study 1 introduces the possibility of selection bias. Perhaps those responding to the questionnaire differed in some systematic way from those who did not respond. However, it is worth noting that the response rate in Study 2 was much stronger, and the results are generally consistent with the results of Study 1.

Examining the opinions of scholars may not be generalizable to lay persons. Though it is entirely relevant to know the thoughts of our foremost thinkers, it would be interesting to compare these results to data derived from a sample representative of the lay public. Doing so may produce a more praxis-oriented paper that examines the common implementation of forgiveness and reconciliation in daily life. It is important to remember that forgiveness occurs in a variety of natural settings, and not only in psychotherapy. Understanding naturally occurring forgiveness processes, and how people perceive forgiveness in relation to reconciliation, is worthy of more study.

One expert psychologist wrote this in response to our questionnaire: "By the way, the answers here are not open to democratic consensus. There is a truth to the answers regardless of how people answer your questions." Still, it is important to consider that the nature of this truth seems to be at least somewhat contingent on one's field of study and the context in which forgiveness is being considered. Our hope is that by considering psychological and theological perspectives on forgiveness an integrative dialog will emerge that will sharpen both disciplines and ultimately help those who seek to forgive an interpersonal offense.

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