Prospectus

The Forgiveness Process as Experienced by Adults with Different Sacred Belief Systems

{Student Name}

General Research Psychology

Walden University
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Problem Statement

Forgiveness is advocated by the world’s major religions (Smith, 1991) and has been empirically linked to psychological well-being and prosocial behavior (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012). Social scientists have joined theologians and philosophers in the past several decades in the study of the forgiveness process (Watts, Dutton, & Gulliford, 2006). Therapeutic forgiveness involves the ability to cognitively reframe a perceived transgression so that responses are transformed from negative to neutral or positive (Thompson et al. 2005), and does not mean pardoning, excusing, or condoning, which could lead to negative consequences such as exploitation and unhealthy power differentials (Bast & Barnes-Homes, 2014; Menahem & Love, 2013). The problem is that the literature is still unclear as to what inspires people to forgive and how they are able to forgive in a way that leads to better health and enhanced relationships (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, Gartner, & Worthington, 2012). Religion and spirituality (R/S) have been linked to forgiveness, but inconsistently, primarily because of differences in definitions of terms and lack of clarity in specifying and operationalizing components of R/S (Hill & Pargament, 2008; Galen, 2012). Sandage and Crabtree (2012) found large differences in the ability to actually forgive among highly religious people.

Cross-sectional quantitative studies have not captured the developmental, multi-faceted nature of forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012). Forgiveness is a dynamic process that involves reappraising an event in a way that can lead to personal and spiritual growth and transformation (Mihalache, 2012). More in-depth, contextual data are needed to clarify and understand the dynamics of forgiveness (Carr & Wang, 2012), especially as it applies to diverse cultures and
religious traditions (Davis et al., 2014). Collectivist cultures are more likely than individualistic cultures to value both giving and receiving forgiveness as well as reconciling with a perceived transgressor to maintain social harmony (Sandage & Wiens, 2001). Individuals may struggle with forgiveness of an offender, forgiveness of self, and/or forgiveness of a situation out of one’s control, such as a natural disaster or disease. Thompson et al. (2005) found that forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situations were more positively related to psychological well-being than forgiveness of others, and they noted the need for considering all forms of forgiveness.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how people from diverse sacred belief systems experience forgiveness. Holistic, in-depth information that describes experiences contextually and developmentally will contribute to a better understanding of the forgiveness process. Common elements of forgiveness that transcend any particular religious tradition will be identified.

**Significance of Study**

The topic of forgiveness touches everyone, as the experience of being hurt or causing hurt is universal. The inability to forgive others or a situation can result in anger and resentment, and unforgiveness of self can cause debilitating guilt and shame (Bash, 2015). Regulating the negative emotions and behaviors that can result from hurt and regret provides a release from unnecessary stress and pain (Rusk, Tamir, & Rothbaum, 2011). In addition to improved well-being, therapeutic forgiveness can contribute to personal growth and productive problem solving as understanding and feelings of security develop (Mihalache, 2012). Identifying, describing, and explaining the elements of forgiveness that transcend specific religious beliefs can assist counselors and leaders who are guiding a diversity of people in the forgiveness process.
(McLaughlin, 2004). This study will examine narratives and contextual data that can aid individuals in better understanding the meaning of forgiveness, plus goal orientations, beliefs, and cognitive reappraisal strategies that facilitate the process.

**Background**

I have selected articles that pertain to the process of forgiveness and its relationship to religious and spiritual (R/S) factors. Davis et al. (2012), Galen (2012), Sandage and Crabtree (2012), and Schultz, Tallman, and Altmaier (2010) provided literature reviews that noted the need for researchers to move beyond simple statements that link R/S positively or negatively to forgiveness toward a discussion of specific R/S components that deliver incentives to forgive and regulate negative emotions. Davis et al. (2012), and Sandage and Crabtree (2012) found that religion predicted a greater valuing or viewing of oneself as forgiving, but not forgiveness of actual offenses, pointing to the importance of studying real-life examples of forgiveness. The ability to understand an offender, or empathy, was noted as an important factor in the forgiveness process by Davis et al. (2012), Kidwell et al. (2012), Riek and Mania (2012), and Mihalache (2012).

Hill and Pargament (2008), Menahem and Love (2013), and Watts et al. (2006) stressed the importance of providing a clear definition of forgiveness to individuals who are deciding whether to forgive. Kidwell et al. (2012), Menahem and Love (2013), Mihalache (2012), Riek and Mania (2012), and Schultz et al. (2010) provided information on forgiveness as a developmental process that is influenced by age and takes time to process both cognitively and affectively. Sandage and Wiens (2001) and Watts et al. (2006) examined collectivist and individualistic cultural perspectives on forgiveness, plus giving and receiving forgiveness.
Thompson et al. (2005) added research on forgiveness of self and situations to that of forgiveness of others.

**Framework**

Goal-orientation theory may provide a framework for explaining why individuals would embark on a path of forgiveness, and cognitive-reappraisal theory may help explain how persons regulate thoughts and interpretations of an event so they are able to complete the forgiveness process.

**Goal-orientation theory.** Goals may be extrinsically based, focusing on a desire to please or impress others. Extrinsic goals are performance based and satisfy needs for belonging and recognition (Rusk et al., 2011). Intrinsic goals are based on the desire to obtain personal or spiritual growth, learning, and mastery (Rusk et al., 2011). Intrinsic learning goals are generally more freely chosen, which adds to their motivational strength (Spinath & Steinmayr, 2012). The belief that hurtful experiences can produce spiritual and personal growth may help facilitate the forgiveness process (Kidwell, Wade, & Blaedel, 2012). Interview questions and probes will explore the learning and performance goals of participants as they relate to forgiveness.

**Cognitive-reappraisal theory.** Persons may wish to improve their psychological well-being and relationships through forgiveness, but find they are unable to actually do so. Cognitive-reappraisal theory explains how changing thoughts and interpretations of an event can regulate our emotions and physiological reactions (Burnette, O-Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013). Forgiveness involves the reframing of a perceived transgression in such a way that one’s responses change from negative to neutral or positive (Thompson et al., 2005). The ability to cognitively reappraise a painful event in a way that will lead to personal growth and improved
relationships facilitates forgiveness (Howe, 2009; Menahem & Love, 2013). Participants will be asked to describe how their thinking evolved during actual forgiveness experiences.

**Research Questions**

1. **Primary RQ:** How do adults with different sacred belief systems experience the process of forgiveness?
   a. Subquestion 1: What are the common experiences (contextual and developmental) that give purpose and meaning to forgiveness?
   b. Subquestion 2: What common set of beliefs give purpose and meaning to forgiveness?
   c. Subquestion 3: How does goal orientation affect the experience of forgiveness?
   d. Subquestion 4: What is the role of cognitive reappraisal in the process of forgiveness?

**Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study will be phenomenological. I propose using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which examines the meaning individuals make of their life experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The focus of this study is to better understand the meaning of forgiveness and how the experience of forgiveness can facilitate psychological well-being and enhanced relationships. Riek and Mania’s (2012) meta-analytic review found that situational and contextual variables were more influential in predicting the ability to forgive than dispositional factors. IPA is concerned with how individuals construct meaning within both the personal and social domains (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Participants will be asked to share their actual experiences with forgiveness and the meaning forgiveness has for them. Data will be collected regarding the role of goal orientation and cognitive reappraisal in the forgiveness
process. This study will contribute to the literature by providing in-depth, holistic data regarding the dynamic process of forgiveness and by discovering common themes and patterns that persist across different sacred belief systems. The qualitative nature of the study will allow participants to describe developments and turning points in the process of forgiveness and contribute to the need for a multifaceted picture of the forgiveness process (Carr & Wang, 2012). IPA recognizes connections between the cognitive, linguistic, affective, and physical sectors of being (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Data will be collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with adults from diverse sacred belief systems through purposeful heterogeneity sampling. This strategy looks for common patterns across varied cases which Patton (2002) described as a theme song amid scattered noise. Interviews will be face to face whenever possible, but data may be collected via phone or video conferencing if deemed beneficial to the quality and trustworthiness of the study. Phenomenological studies generally include 8 – 12 participants and Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation occurred within 6 to 12 interviews for research seeking big-picture metathemes. Respondents’ participation in the study may provide them with insights that develop over the course of the study (Groenewald, 2004), so participants will be able to review their transcripts to ensure that they are satisfied with their responses. Participants will also be able to review my interpretations for trustworthiness.

Possible Analytic Strategies

Qualitative analysis of data requires not just delineating units of meaning but also providing a holistic description of the essence of the experience (Groenewald, 2004). I will therefore code data looking for themes and patterns and also read transcripts holistically seeking
insights and the core of the experiences. Developing a system for categorizing data will be an important first step as I look for emergent themes and relationships first in each individual’s interview and then in the overall data provided by participants (Patton, 2002). Summarizing interviews and then presenting transcripts and my interpretations to participants for validation and possible modification will be followed by an overall composite summary and interpretation of data (Groenewald, 2004). Themes will be illustrated through extracts from interviews and related to results and conclusions found in the existing literature (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

References


