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Defining forgiveness: Christian clergy and general population perspectives.

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Defining Forgiveness: Christian Clergy and General Population Perspectives

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Abstract

The lack of any consensual definition of forgiveness is a serious weakness in the research literature (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000). As forgiveness is at the core of Christianity, this study returns to the Christian source of the concept to explore the meaning of forgiveness for practicing Christian clergy. Comparisons are made with a general population sample and social science definitions of forgiveness to ensure that a shared meaning of forgiveness is articulated. Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy (N = 209) and a general population sample (N = 159) completed a postal questionnaire about forgiveness. There is agreement on the existence of individual differences in forgiveness. Clergy and the general population perceive reconciliation as necessary for forgiveness while there is no consensus within psychology. The clergy suggests that forgiveness is limitless and that repentance is unnecessary while the general population suggests that there are limits and that repentance is necessary. Psychological definitions do not conceptualize repentance as necessary for forgiveness and the question of limits has not been addressed although within therapy the implicit assumption is that forgiveness is limitless.

Keywords: Forgiveness, definitions, Christian clergy perspective, general population, reconciliation, repentance, limits.

Defining Forgiveness: Christian Clergy and General Population Perspectives

As yet, there is no consensual definition of forgiveness despite the increase in research on the topic (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000). There is agreement that this lack of conceptual clarity is a serious weakness that needs to be addressed (Elder, 1998; Enright, & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Risqué, 1998; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). One way to do this is by empirical examination of the ways in which the major religions define forgiveness as they have promoted the virtues of forgiveness over thousands of years and in this way have helped to define it culturally. Religions have provided role models of individuals who were able to forgive great injustices and in this and other ways religion has influenced the psychological processes involved in our conceptions of forgiveness and the way in which we define forgiveness (Pargament & Rye, 1998).

This research is concerned specifically with Christian conceptions of forgiveness. Within the Christian tradition human forgiveness is considered to be fostered by the experience of Divine forgiveness. Forgiveness is thus considered to be at the center of the Christian faith (Pargament & Rye, 1998). Supporting evidence for this comes from McCullough and Worthington (1999) who report that within broadly Christian societies people who are religious value forgiveness more than those who are not religious. Whether valuing forgiveness influences their behavior is still uncertain. The present research contributes to the search for conceptual clarity by exploring the definitions and parameters of forgiveness employed by Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy in England and then comparing these to data collected from a general population sample. Clergy provide moral and spiritual leadership within their communities and deal with issues of both Divine and human forgiveness on a regular basis, so a logical starting point is to explore the conceptions

of forgiveness that they themselves hold. Historically clergy conceptualizations are likely to have influenced the general population's understanding of forgiveness. If social scientists' conceptualizations of forgiveness are markedly different, this is potentially problematic and needs to be addressed. For example, health care practitioners need to be made aware that their clients understanding of forgiveness may be different from those in the psychological literature. To explore this, clergy definitions will be compared with definitions from a general population sample and with definitions from the social science research literature. There is also a lack of empirical investigations addressing the parameters of forgiveness. The Hope College Conference in 1997 was sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation to stimulate research on forgiveness. The advantages of a consensual definition of forgiveness were debated and the hope was that one would emerge soon to facilitate research on forgiveness (Worthington, 1998). Six years later research on forgiveness is growing but still no agreed definition has emerged.

Some consensus has emerged about what does not constitute forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000). Enright and Cole (1998) referencing North (1987) have distinguished forgiveness from similar activities such as pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denying, and the distinctions inherent in their definitions are generally accepted (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). However, there is still a range of definitions of forgiveness, which vary in scope and complexity. Enright and Coyle (1998) and Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998) have defined forgiveness as, "a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him or her" (p. 140). Worthington (1998) defines forgiveness as follows:

a motivation to reduce avoidance of and withdrawal from a person who has hurt us, as well as the anger, desire for revenge, and urge to retaliate against that person.

Forgiveness also increases the pursuit of conciliation toward that person if moral norms can be re-established that are as good as, or even better than, they were before the hurt. (p. 108)

McCullough (2000) defines forgiveness as, "a prosocial change in the motivations to avoid or to seek revenge against a transgressor" (p. 44). These three definitions are utilized most frequently in the literature but there are many others. The notion of letting go of negative emotions or giving up revenge is part of all three definitions and is incorporated in most other definitions, although the details of what is foregone and how this occurs varies amongst definitions. Preconditions are mentioned in some definitions but not in others. There is some disagreement about the role of reconciliation in the forgiveness process with Worthington (1998) and Hargreave and Sells (1997) including it in their definitions while most others make a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; McCullough, 2000). Forgiveness is purely a gift without conditions in some definitions, while in others it depends on conditions being fulfilled by the guilty party. In some definitions from the therapy literature such as Hargreave and Sells (1997), forgiveness simply presents opportunities for trust building and reconciliation. There is a detailed review of current definitions included in Sells and Hargreave (1998). McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000) cover similar ground and re-emphasize that the lack of a consensual definition is still a major problem.

One of the aims of this research is to return to the Christian source of theorizing about human forgiveness by exploring the views of Christian clergy about the definition and parameters of human forgiveness. It is suggested that clergy views will have influenced the lay public's understanding of forgiveness historically when religious observance was more widespread and also currently for religious individuals. The results from the clergy sample will be compared with definitions obtained from a general population sample. Comparisons

will be made with the main definitions of forgiveness in the social science literature to try to ensure that any consensual definition that might emerge will truly reflect forgiveness as understood within the general population. This will then inform the discussion on the difficulty defining forgiveness currently being experienced within social science.

Method

Pilot Studies

Different formats of written questions were piloted with a convenience sample of six Anglican clergy known to the author, to try to find an effective way of getting participants to engage with the topic of forgiveness in a focused, deeply reflective manner. This was followed up with a group discussion with five participants shortly after they had completed the questionnaires. The initial aim was to get participants to produce their own definitions of forgiveness and then to ask them to clarify the issues that have been identified as contentious in the psychological literature. However, the feedback received indicated that individuals have difficulty producing their own definitions without prompts, and it was felt that providing a definition as an initial focal point allowed participants to reflect more deeply about what constituted forgiveness for them. Two Anglican bishops and a Catholic bishop were also given copies of the draft questionnaire and feedback was invited. As this is a study looking at the Christian roots of forgiveness, the definition of Christian forgiveness produced by a respected religious scholar Williams, reported by Rye et al. (2000), was adopted. The Rye et al. (2000) definition suggests that,

Forgiveness is understood as an act of pardon or release from an injury, offence or debt. On the part of the forgiving subject, it entails having compassion, releasing someone from an act or attitude that would impede the relationship of those involved. On the part of the forgiven subject, it usually entails showing signs of repentance for

the wrong done and acts of contrition and love, in keeping with the graciousness shown by the forgiver. (p. 20)

When compared with the definitions in the psychological literature on forgiveness, this is a comprehensive definition acknowledging both the prosocial interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of the process, the elements of letting go of injured feelings, the sense of releasing the wrongdoer with an acknowledgment of the graciousness involved in this process. It is slightly unusual and more in line with therapeutic definitions in delineating conditions for the forgiven party, repentance, and acts of contrition and love. Although more comprehensive, it does include the same elements as the Enright and Coyle (1998); Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998); Worthington (1998); and McCullough (2000) definitions to allow comparisons to be made.

For the general population sample a convenience sample of six respondents from domestic and administrative staff in a university were asked to complete the questionnaire and to comment on any particular difficulties experienced. Feedback from three respondents suggested that the letter introducing the study needed to stress that it is human interpersonal forgiveness and not forgiveness by God that is the focus of the study. This was then emphasized in both the clergy and the general population cover letter.

Measures

A questionnaire was developed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data plus demographic data. There were two versions of the questionnaire differing only in terms of the demographic data collected. For the clergy sample the demographic data covered age, gender, race and the number of years since ordination. The population sample version requested details of gender, age, race, marital status, educational qualifications, religious affiliation and whether they attended a church. Separate questions were asked about religious affiliation and church attendance as many more individuals claim a religious affiliation than actually attend

church within the United Kingdom. The question on church attendance asked specifically if respondents attended church at least once a month. This was to exclude positive responses from the large numbers of individuals in the United Kingdom who attend only at Christmas and Easter. Space for comments was included after each question as the pilot studies conducted with clergy showed that participants found it difficult to rate the absence or presence of particular constituents of the forgiveness process in isolation. Respondents wished to be allowed to add qualitative comments for each question, often to explain their decision or to give examples. This could also provide insights into their cognitions about forgiveness. It was made very clear that human forgiveness was the focus.

The questionnaire began with the Rye et al. (2000) definition of forgiveness and respondents had to indicate their agreement/ disagreement with this statement and the reasons for their view. This was followed by questions exploring the parameters of forgiveness. These were selected to cover the areas in the psychological literature where there is currently disagreement. There were three questions asking about the necessity of repentance, whether there are other preconditions to forgiveness, and whether forgiveness can occur without reconciliation. The psychological literature is silent about the limitations of forgiveness, although implicit in the therapy and intervention literature is an assumption that forgiveness is limitless regardless of the nature of the wrong experienced. A question was therefore included to explore whether there are limits to human forgiveness and another to explore whether there are individual differences in terms of how forgiving people are by nature. This latter question relates to the Positive Psychology conception of forgiveness as a human virtue and therefore attainable by all (Seligman, 2000). Space for additional qualitative comments was included and participants were finally asked whether they would be willing to participate in a discussion forum on forgiveness. This last question was included to gauge of the level of interest in the topic.

Procedure

Questionnaires were mailed to the clergy sample with an introductory covering letter and a pre-paid envelope for replies. For the general population sample questionnaires were delivered to participants and they mailed it back upon completion. Residential areas were targeted to include subsidized housing and a range of privately owned housing from small apartments to large detached houses in a small town in South Yorkshire, England, to try to ensure that economically and educationally diverse participants were recruited. Ten days after the questionnaires had been delivered letters were delivered to the same addresses that thanked participants who had already returned their questionnaires and reminded others to do so. No payment for participation was offered to either sample.

Participants

Clergy The initial aim was to include a wide range of Christian denominations and although a range of denominations were approached, the response overall was poor. The Anglican and Catholic Bishops in the Dioceses covering the South Yorkshire region of the United Kingdom did agree to participate and supplied lists of addresses for their clergy in the region. The Anglican sample are all ordained priests, as are the males in the Roman Catholic sample while the women are all nuns involved in the administration of parishes. With one exception (a black African) the sample is all white British. In total 237 questionnaires (193 to Anglican clergy and 44 to Roman Catholic clergy) were sent. No follow up reminders were sent.

Although the questionnaire asked respondents to supply their gender, age, denomination, and number of years since ordination, the only categories that were consistently completed were gender and denomination. This may have been due to deficiencies in the layout of the questionnaire. For the fifth of the sample that completed

details of age and years since ordination, the mean age was 42.26 ($SD = 10.99$) with a range from 29 to 72 years and the mean number of years since ordination was 15.29 ($SD = 11.51$), with a range from 2 to 44 years.

General population Two hundred and ten questionnaires were circulated. The mean age of participants was 43.38 years, $SD = 17.82$ with a range from 18 to 85 years. Three respondents did not indicate racial origins but the rest of the sample is white. Marital status, education and church attendance and affiliation are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Qualitative Data Analysis

The aim of the qualitative data was to conceptualize the responses given to the questionnaire and to illustrate the complexity of the ways in which individuals think about forgiveness. Ethnograph data analysis software (QUALIS Research, 2000) was used to assist in the analysis. All the qualitative comments to each question were collated according to how the respondents had completed each question. This gave, for example, a group of comments from those agreeing with the definition in Question 1 and a second group for those disagreeing and thus provided a manageable structure to the data. There were high degrees of similarity in the responses given to each question and the material was generally very clearly expressed, which made coding relatively unproblematic. Cross-sectional, categorical indexing was employed with a high level of literal coding initially, followed by some additional interpretive coding (Cooligan, 1999; Mason, 1996). Categories included confirmatory statements, clarifications, justifications, references to God, biblical references, examples from their own experience, personal uncertainties, emotional expressions and self reflections. Examples are included of the most frequently occurring comments from both those agreeing and those disagreeing with each question plus any markedly different views that were expressed.

Results and Discussion

Clergy sample One hundred and eighty-one Anglican clergy (170 male and 11 female) and 28 Roman Catholic clergy and sisters (25 males and 3 females) returned usable questionnaires, giving a total sample size of 209. The completion rate for the return of the questionnaires was 88.19% overall (Anglican 93.78%; Roman Catholic 63.64%). This difference in response rate was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 209) = 31.25, p < .001$. The response rate is particularly high for Anglican clergy. Comments ranged from three brief sentences to four sides of typed commentary, with the majority of respondents including qualitative comments in response to at least four of the five questions. Twenty per cent of respondents included examples of forgiveness issues from their own lives. Two booklets referring to aspects of Christian forgiveness were also returned. Ninety percent of participants (189) were willing to participate in a discussion forum on forgiveness. This level and detail of response confirmed the importance of the topic for Christian clergy such as this group, as well as providing a rich data source for analysis.

If there were significant differences in the responses given by Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy this would prevent the data from the two groups being combined in subsequent analyses. Chi-square tests of independence were computed for the quantifiable responses to test for denominational differences given to questions one to six. No significant differences were found between the responses of Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Therefore the sample is treated as a single group of Christian clergy and sisters. The number of females was too small to test for gender differences in responses.

General population sample This sample returned 159 completed questionnaires (44 male and 115 female), giving a response rate of 75.72%. The sample obtained is broadly representative of the United Kingdom in terms of church attendance and marital status, and a reasonable age range was obtained. In terms of educational qualifications, the proportion of respondents with degrees or higher qualifications is slightly higher than the general population level, as is the number of female respondents. Almost 25% of the sample included qualitative comments. In this group, 47% said that they would be willing to participate in a discussion on forgiveness. Without exception the qualitative comments were brief consisting of one sentence or short lists of relevant issues. Qualitative comments were summed for each question and subjected to the same analysis as the clergy sample.

As there were sufficient numbers of males and females in this sample, chi-squared tests of independence were computed to test for sex differences in responses to each of the questions. As there were no significant sex differences males and females were analyzed together. Part of the rationale for this study is the suggestion that the church may have influenced our cultural understanding of forgiveness. To explore whether the responses of those attending church were different from non-attendees, perhaps due to being more involved in practicing their faith, chi-squared tests of independence were computed. The only significant difference was that a higher proportion of non-attendees believed that there were limits to forgiveness (75.2%) compared with church attendees (50%), $\chi^2(1, N = 159) = 7.76$, $p < .01$. As there were no other significant differences the two groups were combined for subsequent analysis of all the other questions.

Comparison of samples The differences in response rate between the two samples was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 447) = 11.9$, $p < .001$. A higher percentage of the clergy responded than the general population. Although the questionnaires included the same space for qualitative comments, significantly fewer of the general population returned qualitative comments, $\chi^2(1,$

$\chi^2 (1, N = 368) = 93.28, p < .001$. Significantly more of the clergy than the general population were willing to participate in a discussion on forgiveness, $\chi^2 (1, N = 368) = 93.28, p < .001$. The differences in ages between the clergy and population samples was not significant, $t (366) = .698$. As expected, the gender balance of the two samples was significantly different, $\chi^2 (1, N = 368) = 170.84, p < .001$. The clergy sample was 93% male whereas the population sample was 28% male.

Chi-square tests of independence were computed to test for differences in responses to the six questions between the clergy and the general population. There were significant differences in patterns of response to the question of whether there are limits to human forgiveness and the necessity of repentance for forgiveness that will be discussed below. There were no significant differences for the other questions.

Question 1: Definition of Forgiveness

Clergy sample Levels of agreement with the Rye et al. (2000) definition were high at 78.9%. Within this definition, the forgiver is seen to pardon the other, release them from injury, and demonstrate compassion and grace in doing so. The forgiven is required to display repentance, acts of contrition, and love. Of those agreeing with this definition, the most frequent qualifying statement, given by over one-third of the sample, referred to the absence of forgiveness by God as part of the definition. One respondent summarized this view well:

Christian forgiveness includes the aspect of being forgiven by God not referred to here. The ability to forgive another person would be strongly related to his or her own sense of being forgiven by God, in a wider and deeper way. Someone can know they are forgiven by God and be released from the guilt, even if the offended party cannot forgive them.

All the other comments simply confirmed aspects of the definition and the participants' agreement with it, including examples of how forgiveness issues had personally applied to

them in several cases. Four respondents stated that signs of repentance are not a requirement for forgiveness to occur, although they agreed that repentance can facilitate forgiveness.

From the 21.1% of clergy who do not agree with the Rye et al. (2000) definition there was a clear consensus about how they perceived forgiveness. This was clearly summarized by one respondent:

I strongly believe that true Christian forgiveness has no sense of being conditional upon the forgiving subject feeling compassion or on the forgiven subject showing acts of contrition and love (although presumably one cannot be forgiven without repentance because one would not require it). Christian forgiveness takes place whether or not the forgiver feels compassion and whether or not the forgiven responds, otherwise it is not true forgiveness but a kind of probation. It is about grace.

Almost half of this group mentioned the concept of forgiveness as an unconditional gift.

General population sample Levels of agreement with the Rye et al. (2000) definition were high at 84.2%. Almost half of the qualitative comments referred to having never considered exactly what they understood by forgiveness and finding it quite a difficult process.

When I got this form I thought what a daft thing to be looking at. Everyone knows what forgiveness is but once I started I saw that it is difficult. I have never really thought about it before and about exactly what it means.

The remaining qualitative comments either confirmed aspects of the definition or gave examples of forgiveness. Unlike the clergy sample there were no references to forgiveness by God.

Comparison of samples Although the general population levels of agreement with the Rye et al. (2000) definition were higher than the clergy sample (84.2% vs. 98.9%), these differences were not statistically significant. Thinking about the concept of forgiveness was

obviously a more familiar occupation for the clergy sample as evidenced by the detailed qualitative comments that were returned. The difficulties experienced defining forgiveness by the general population almost seem to parallel the social science literature. The concept is familiar to all but specifying exactly what it means is more difficult.

Question 2: Limits to Human Forgiveness

Clergy The predominant view (65.9%) was that forgiveness is limitless, although it is acknowledged that it is very difficult to achieve:

Forgiveness is unconditional, irrespective of the other person's deed or response.

It is about grace and therefore limitless. Sometimes I think forgiveness requires a "miracle" but I believe in miracles.

There was also an acknowledgement that the magnitude of the offence affects the ease with which forgiveness can be granted. This is something not included in most definitions of forgiveness. The sentiment expressed was overwhelmingly that Divine forgiveness is limitless and that human beings should aspire to this. Nine clergy mentioned the role of the media in militating against forgiveness especially in high profile situations. The 34.1% who agreed that there are limits to human forgiveness were all sorry that this is the case:

There are conditions in reality but this should not be so for Christians. Contrition seems to be necessary but even then it does not always happen.

The main reason for there being limits was related to the severity of the offence experienced. The sample was similar in acknowledging that the severity of the offence is influential, being regarded as a difficulty by those who agreed that forgiveness is limitless and as a barrier by the remainder. Fifteen clergy participants provided responses linking the ability of humans to forgive to them having experienced Divine forgiveness.

Forgiveness is never easy for human beings as sometimes the injury caused can cut very deeply and the temptation is to keep re-visiting the incident - especially if the

person who caused the injury is unrepentant. It may also be argued that in order to forgive completely, the injured person needs to know what it is to be unconditionally forgiven, i.e. by God, who then gives them the grace to forgive.

The Rye et al. (2000) definition does not specifically mention limits to forgiveness but for all the respondents there appeared to be a tension between what they would like to believe and the reality of human behavior as they experienced it. It was felt that forgiveness should be limitless for human beings but that for most people it is extremely difficult and sometimes impossible, depending on the damage done to them. Eighteen participants mentioned whether some behavior could ever be really forgiven.

There are some people who seem able to forgive anything, but I think most people have a threshold beyond which they find it impossible to forgive appalling acts. I try to see the goodness in people and overlook the negativity, but it is a daunting task.

General population This result is complicated by the significant difference between church attendees and non-attendees that was reported earlier. The proportion of church attendees considering forgiveness to be limitless was 50% compared with 30.8% of the non-church attendees. As a result the church attendees were removed from the general population sample comparison with clergy for this question. This gave a reduced sample size of 117 for the general population. From this sample of non-church attendees, 69.2% agreed that there are limits to forgiveness. The predominant view was that the magnitude of the offence and the resultant degree of hurt are the most influential factors. Several respondents referred to the dangers of forgiveness:

There are some dreadful people about who commit awful crimes and they do not deserve to be forgiven no matter what. It wouldn't be safe to forgive them anyway as they could do it again. Lock them up and never let them loose.

Other examples of behavior that was considered unforgivable include the murder of children and other loved ones, rape, and other sexual abuse.

Comparison of samples The difference in responses between the clergy and the non-church attending general population on whether there are limits to human forgiveness was statistically significant $\chi^2 (1, N = 326) = 37.47, p < .001$. Only 34.1 % of the clergy believed that there are limits compared with over 69.2% of the general population. The responses of the clergy sample and the church attendees were tested and found to be non-significant, ($\chi^2 (1, N = 251) = 2.68$). Both samples agreed that the magnitude of the offence and the degree of hurt experienced are very influential, but for the general public these factors can be a barrier to forgiveness whereas for clergy and church attendees it is an added difficulty that can be overcome. The views of church attendees and clergy were very similar apart from more explicit references to forgiveness as a duty for Christians amongst the church attendees.

Q3: Necessity of Repentance

Clergy The majority view (67.9%) was that repentance is unnecessary. Within those agreeing that repentance is unnecessary for forgiveness, the emphasis was on being compassionate towards the penitent if they admitted their guilt.

Many people feel compassion for a guilt-stricken offender. I can forgive the man who murdered my friend because he pleaded guilty and I believe he is suffering.

Repentance makes it easier to forgive.

There was an implicit understanding in this and in the other comments given in response to this question that the wrongdoer was experiencing some form of punishment for their wrongdoing even if it was only remorse.

While asserting that repentance is unnecessary for forgiveness, 75% of this group made comments to the effect that it does make it more likely to happen. There was also a strong feeling that forgiveness can lead to repentance in their experience. This is something

not previously considered. Being forgiven may create cognitive dissonance within the wrongdoer, creating feelings of guilt about how they have treated the injured party and this may provide the motivation to repent and make restitution. This is worthy of further investigation, as it could help to make victims of injustice feel that they can take back some control and influence the offender. This could provide the motivation to work towards forgiveness on the part of the victim. Several respondents, while saying that repentance was unnecessary, commented that true forgiveness requires reconciliation; this issue will be discussed below.

General population The majority view in the general population (69.2%) was that repentance is necessary for forgiveness. The qualitative comments were all to the effect that the necessity of repentance is a given for forgiveness to occur:

Of course it is necessary. People need some sign of remorse, guilt or something. There may be some saints about who can forgive anyway but I have never met any.

While disagreeing that repentance was necessary several respondents did qualify their responses.

You can forgive some people even though they show no signs of being sorry or trying to make it up to you but you do it because it makes you feel better. I also believe that they will pay for it sometime.

There were 15 instances where the only qualitative comment to this question was, "of course".

Comparison of samples

The difference between the views of the clergy and the general population were significant $\chi^2 (1, N = 368) = 20.02, p < .001$. The majority of the general population (69.2%) felt that repentance was necessary, whereas only a minority of the clergy (32.1%) held this view. The qualitative comments from both samples referred obliquely to a sense of natural justice occurring, so that offenders will suffer in some way either through their own suffering

for what they have done or on some future occasion. The clergy did acknowledge that repentance did make forgiveness more likely to happen, even although they saw it as unnecessary. The general population came across as being more certain in their views on this question than the clergy. The clergy responses were very thoughtful and many clergy respondents seemed to find this question quite difficult to answer.

Q4: Presence of Other Preconditions

Clergy Although the majority felt that repentance is unnecessary for forgiveness, 71.8% suggested that there are other preconditions. The most common responses included the necessity to understand why it has happened, the willingness to compromise, the presence of an apology and some signs of remorse, and a desire for reconciliation on the part of the offender. Many respondents also talked of Divine forgiveness as being influential.

As human beings, we tend to want some sort of revenge, or at least that the person causing injury shows repentance and apologizes for what they have done. Without knowledge of God's unconditional forgiveness of us as human beings, this sort of forgiveness is extremely difficult.

The 28.2% who believed that preconditions are unnecessary all refer to God's limitless forgiveness.

The idea of preconditions is purely a human conception. God has already forgiven us.

General population The majority (66.7%) suggested that there were preconditions for forgiveness to occur. This question produced the largest amount of qualitative data among the general population sample. Lists of preconditions were supplied. The responses included the need to understand why it had happened, the willingness to compromise, and the presence of an apology or some signs of remorse, and a desire for reconciliation on the part of the offender. There were very few additional comments and they tended to be very brief, simply confirming the response or occasionally supplying an example.

I forgave my best friend but only once I really understood why she had done it and she showed she was really sorry.

Comparison of samples There were no statistically significant differences between the general population and the clergy samples. Both groups felt that there were other preconditions that could facilitate forgiveness. The preconditions identified were the same for both groups. The number of qualitative comments produced by both groups suggested that both samples were knowledgeable about the conditions necessary for forgiveness to happen, although they found it more difficult to define exactly what forgiveness is. While the role of apologies, remorse, and the desire for reconciliation are widely discussed in the forgiveness literature, the necessity to understand why the event has happened before forgiveness can occur, and the willingness to compromise, have received less attention and are worthy of further research.

Q5: Individual Differences in the Predisposition to Forgive

Clergy There was a high level of agreement (93.8%) that individuals differ in terms of their predisposition to be forgiving. The small number who disagreed made comments to the effect that they were uncertain. They felt that everyone can potentially forgive but it depended upon their motivation and about asking God to help them forgive.

General population There was a high level of agreement in the general population (97.5%) that there are individual differences in the predisposition to be forgiving. There were few qualitative comments relating to individual differences and these were to the effect that this was very obviously true.

Comparison of samples There were no significant differences between the clergy and general population responses. This question produced the highest level of agreement both within and between groups. Individual differences in forgivingness appear to be very obvious to both groups. A more pertinent question for the future might be, is it in everyone's nature to be able

to forgive? The general population has already suggested that the nature of the offence might prevent forgiveness, but it would be interesting to explore in more detail the way they conceptualize the parameters of forgivingness.

Q6: Is Reconciliation Necessary for Forgiveness?

Clergy Although the Rye definition does not mention reconciliation, 88.5% felt that forgiveness was not truly complete without reconciliation. One respondent talked about reconciliation with a dead parent even being possible. He had begun by becoming more understanding of the pressures his parent had been under, leading him to a re-interpretation of some of his memories more positively. He now feels at peace. Others mentioned that the ideal is reconciliation but that it is not always possible.

Sometimes we want to forgive but find it difficult to forget and this makes forgiveness only partial.

The commonest response from those suggesting that forgiveness can occur without reconciliation related to the problems caused by people no longer being in contact with each other or separated by death. Two respondents raised particular cases where strangers had injured individuals. In this latter situation, reconciliation with the stranger was impossible, but the individuals had become reconciled to what had happened and were able to forgive.

Many of the concluding comments related to how complex the issue of forgiveness is when you really thought about it. Several participants said that completing the questionnaire has made them aware of inconsistencies in their own thinking. Two respondents had revisited the Rye et al. definition and while finding nothing in the definition to disagree with, concluded that:

It doesn't feel that straightforward.

There was some reflection on the benefits of forgiveness.

Forgiveness liberates the offended as much as if not more than it does the offender.

Forgiveness can be a way of consigning an episode/ relationship/ whatever to the past. The difficulty of forgiving was also revisited by many respondents often in very humbling ways:

Forgiveness starts as a matter of will, then prayer has to proceed and it has to be worked at. On Thursdays, I pray for those who have burgled me, wronged me, slighted me - who else is going to pray for burglars? In my ministerial work, I find that most people find forgiving themselves harder than forgiving others.

This was the only comment that related to forgiveness of the self. Forgiveness seems to be conceptualized most readily as interpersonal forgiveness, although lack of self- forgiveness can be just as harmful. Self-forgiveness has also received little attention in the research literature.

The various costs of forgiveness in terms of making oneself vulnerable to being hurt and exploited were raised, but were accompanied by a strong feeling that it is still worth pursuing. Several respondents made a distinction between expressed interpersonal forgiveness, perhaps instigated by social pressures and 'real' forgiveness. Within the Christian religious literature, Bonhoeffer (1948) also distinguished between the mechanical offering of forgiveness as a result of social pressure, or from a wish to be superior or from a wish for martyrdom. Within the psychological literature, this has become labeled pseudo forgiveness (Snyder & Yamhure, 1998).

Authentic forgiveness is a powerless foolish action and so it perhaps reflects on otherness i.e. Divine presence. It seems that there are two forms of forgiveness: Forgiveness expressed to a person and forgiveness felt in the human heart. The second is the essential one for health and the well-being of society. The former is meaningless really.

There was an implicit recognition by five respondents of the protective factor of not forgiving. In all cases this was expressed in terms of power relationships.

General population The predominant view in the general population (82.4%) was that reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness. There were comments to the effect that even if physical reconciliation is not possible people because of death or distance, the individual could become “reconciled in their heart.” The comments were similar in content to the clergy views apart from omitting any references to God’s role in the process.

The whole point of forgiveness is so that you can get together again. You get rid of the bad feelings too, but being able to be together is what it is about.

Several respondents commented that if you did not want to be reconciled with the person you would not forgive them.

If someone I knew murdered a child. I would not want to know them any more. I would never ever forgive them either. The two go together.

Comparison of samples There were no significant differences between the clergy and general population with both groups feeling that reconciliation was a necessary part of forgiveness. This emphasis on reconciliation as an integral part of the process of forgiveness does not fit within current psychological conceptions of forgiveness, where reconciliation tends to be treated as a separate process. One clergy participant raised the issue of self-forgiveness in response to this question, but there was no mention in the general population of self-forgiveness.

Further Statistical Comparison of Samples

To examine which questions best predict agreement with the Rye et al. (2000) definition of forgiveness, logistic regression analyses were performed as all the data are dichotomous. Agreement with the definition was the outcome and responses to questions two to six were the predictor variables. Analyses were conducted for the clergy sample, the

general population sample, and finally the combined samples to explore possible interactions between groups. The first analyses produced inflated standard error terms, indicative of multicollinearity between the measures of dispositional forgiveness and on the necessity of reconciliation (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). There was almost total consensus across both samples that there were individual differences in dispositional forgiveness (Clergy 93.8%; General Population 97.5%). Levels of agreement on the necessity of reconciliation were also high (Clergy 88.5%; General Population 82.4%). Consequently, these measures were omitted from the subsequent logistic regression analyses to remove the collinearity problem. For the clergy sample using the Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic, there was a good model fit, $\chi^2 (5, N = 209) = 2.21, p = .82$, indicating that the responses to questions two to four reliably distinguished between those agreeing and disagreeing with the definition. For clergy the best predictor of agreement with the definition was believing that repentance was necessary for forgiveness, $B = 1.35, p < .001, Odds Ratio = .99 (95\% CI = .1 - .65)$. Agreeing that there are preconditions was also a positive but less powerful predictor of clergy agreement with the definition, $B = 1.25, p < .05, Odds Ratio = 1.28 (95\% CI = .59 - 2.79)$. The question concerning whether there are limits to forgiveness was not a significant predictor of agreement with the definition for clergy.

Using the Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic, there was also a good model fit, $\chi^2 (5, N = 209) = 2.21, p = .82$, for the general population sample. Agreeing that there are limits to forgiveness was the only significant positive predictor of agreement with the definition, $B = .09, p < .05, Odds Ratio = 1.09 (95\% CI = .42 - 2.91)$ for the general population. Although analysis of the data from the combined sample suggested a good model fit, $\chi^2 (7, N = 2.54) = 3.00, p = .92$, the analyses produced inflated standard error terms indicative of multicollinearity for all the interactions by sample (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Inspection of the data indicated that limits to forgiveness shared a high negative correlation with the

variable representing sample ($r = -.8$) as did repentance ($r = -.71$), indicating that there are differences in responses by sample to the question concerning limits and repentance. From the cross tabulation of responses, 56.6% of the general population who agreed with the definition also agreed that there are limits to forgiveness, whereas only 26.8% of the clergy both agreed with the definition and agreed that there are limits to forgiveness. In the general population 63.5% agreed with the definition and also agreed that repentance is necessary, whereas the corresponding figure for clergy was 29.2%.

In summary, there was almost total consensus in both samples amongst individuals agreeing with the definition that there are individual differences in the disposition to forgive, a high level of agreement on the necessity of reconciliation, and agreement on preconditions for forgiveness to occur. The groups differed with regard to whether there are limits to forgiveness and the need for repentance, with the general public believing that both are necessary for forgiveness. The predictors of agreement with the definition also differed by sample.

Concluding Discussion

Very high proportions of both groups agreed with the Rye et al. (2000) definition and for both groups there was a strong consensus that there are dispositional differences in forgiveness, that reconciliation is part of forgiveness, and that there are other preconditions for forgiveness to occur. There were differences within each group in the variables that predict agreement with the Rye et al (2000) definition. The clergy qualitative responses to the definition differ from those of the general population by including frequent references to Divine forgiveness. Compassion for the wrongdoer is also apparent in the clergy responses, with forgiveness by God being possible even when the offended party cannot forgive. Overall, the clergy sample provided large amounts of qualitative data for every question, perhaps reflecting their professional interest and concern with the topic. Comments were much rarer

from the general population, and tended to be shorter and less detailed. Further support for the different levels of interest in forgiveness among the two groups is reflected by the higher response rate of the clergy in contrast to the general population.

The majority view across both samples is that some individuals are more predisposed to forgive than others, that reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness to occur, and that there are other preconditions, such as understanding why the incident occurred, a willingness to compromise, the presence of an apology, some signs of remorse, or a desire for reconciliation, that make forgiveness more likely. The high level of agreement in both samples on the existence of individual differences in the propensity to forgive is reflected in the literature (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Hargreave & Sells, 1997; Holbrook, White, & Hutt 1995; Macaskill & Maltby, 2002; Maltby, Macaskill & Day, 2000; Mauger & Perry, 1992; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992; Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, Gassin, Freedman, Olson, & Sarinopoulos 1995). The inclusion of reconciliation as part of forgiveness is in line with Worthington (1998), and Hargreave and Sells (1997) but not with others (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; McCullough, 2000). Within both samples, several participants suggested an additional explanation of the reconciliation that was necessary if factors prevented physical reconciliation with the perpetrator. They suggested that under these circumstances the victim needed to become reconciled to the event that had occurred in order to re-frame their memories in a more positive light. This indicated a broader definition of reconciliation involving not simply reconciliation with the other but rather reconciliation within the self to the situation that had occurred. These distinctions in meaning need to be explored carefully, as they could potentially cause difficulties between therapists and clients if, for example, shared meanings are simply assumed.

The general population sample differs from the clergy in believing that repentance is necessary for forgiveness. For the clergy, repentance can facilitate forgiveness but is not a

requirement. The main social science definitions of forgiveness omit this factor (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Risqué, 1998; McCullough, 2000; Worthington, 1998), and repentance is generally seen as a facilitating factor in the literature. The only other differences in agreement between the clergy and the general population concerns whether there are limits to forgiveness. Here there is a difference between church attendees and non-attendees in the population sample about whether there are limits to forgiveness. Church attendees agree with the clergy that forgiveness is limitless, whereas non-attendees believe that there are limits. Many of the clergy sample distinguish between the potentially limitlessness of forgiveness and the human reality where forgiveness is often very hard to achieve. The clergy also mention the current litigious culture as a barrier to forgiveness. The social science literature is silent about limitations on forgiveness, although limitlessness is implicit in much of the counseling and psychotherapy literature. This is potentially an important distinction, highlighting an area where there could be a lack of shared meaning between clients and therapists. It challenges the conceptualization of forgiveness as a human virtue within Positive Psychology that is attainable by all (Seligman, 2000). The clergy suggest that forgiveness is potentially limitless but that the reality is often very different as forgiveness can be very hard to achieve for some offences.

The Rye et al. (2000) definition utilized in this study, in common with many other definitions includes elements that are relevant to both the forgiver and the forgiven, perhaps reflecting that forgiveness most commonly occurs in an interpersonal context. Despite this context, the qualitative data in this study focused almost exclusively on the forgiver. The only references that focused on the forgiven were couched from the perspective of the forgiver. These related to how forgiving could be empowering for the forgiver by creating cognitive dissonance in the forgiven which could result in apology and reparation being made. The second reference was a warning about the potential dangers of reconciliation with the forgiven

in abusive situations. This suggests that forgiving and being forgiven are being conceptualized separately. Forgiving can occur without any interaction with the forgiven, and the forgiven may never be aware that they have been forgiven or indeed have ever felt that forgiveness was necessary. Definitions, if they are to be useful, must acknowledge that the dynamics of forgiving and being forgiven are separate. Where there is an acknowledged and mutually agreed offence, the forgiveness will have truly interactional components but these are not essential in all cases. While there are interactive elements, even these will impact differently on the forgiver and the forgiven.

Two of the preconditions for the occurrence of forgiveness identified in this study, the wish to understand why the offence had happened and a willingness to compromise, are intraindividual factors and may help to explain how forgiveness can occur without any contact with the offender. The other preconditions identified in this study are the presence of an apology, some signs of remorse, and/or a desire for reconciliation on the part of the offender. All of these have been found to facilitate forgiveness by other researchers (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; O'Malley & Greenberg, 1983; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidnas, 1991). These factors need to be conceptualized separately as possible facilitative intervening variables in the definition of forgiveness.

There are other social and cultural factors that have not been addressed systematically and that require investigating. The increasing trend for Western cultures to be litigious makes it less likely that offenders will apologize to their victims at an early stage of the process, and this will impact on the process. Some cultures place more emphasis on justice and retribution as do different religions; this requires further empirical examination.

From the questions included in this study for both samples, agreement on individual differences in forgiveness, and the necessity of reconciliation are the best predictors of

agreement with the Rye et al. (2000) definition. For clergy the necessity of repentance is the next most important negative predictor of agreement with the definition, followed by the presence of preconditions. For the general public the only other predictor of agreement with the definition is believing that there are limits to forgiveness.

The conclusion from this study is that for the general population forgiveness has limits, in that some events are described as being so shocking and awful that they cannot be forgiven. The clergy differ from this view, seeing forgiveness as limitless although there is a general acknowledgment that the more severe the offence the more difficult forgiveness is likely to be. A majority of the general population sees repentance as being necessary; it was frequently described as providing the impetus for forgiveness. On the other hand, clergy view repentance as unnecessary although it can facilitate forgiveness. New preconditions are identified, such as understanding why the offence has happened and a willingness to compromise. These intraindividual factors may facilitate forgiveness even without any contact with the offender or without signs of apology or remorse from the offender. The other preconditions emanating from the offender, such as an apology, signs of remorse, and a wish for reconciliation, are additional powerful facilitators of forgiveness already identified in the forgiveness literature.

Apparent throughout the clergy commentaries is a tension between the ideal of limitless unconditional forgiveness and the 'normal' levels of forgiveness achieved by humans, with preconditions and partial reconciliation. This is often raised by both samples in the context of individuals forgiving but not forgetting. It may well be that an additional source of confusion in the literature stems from a failure to distinguish between optimal and 'normal' levels of forgiveness in particular contexts. This would relate both to the enormity of the offence, which most definitions currently ignore, and individual differences in forgivingness. This is an issue that needs to be investigated further.

Several potentially important differences between social science conceptualizations of forgiveness and those of the clergy and general population samples are apparent. Both the clergy and the general population agree that reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness, whereas there is no consensus within the social sciences. While it is acknowledged by both groups that interpersonal reconciliation may not always be possible to achieve, it is suggested that an individual can become reconciled to the event and no longer dwell on it or be upset by it. This suggests a broadening of the definition of reconciliation, suggesting that a more pragmatic definition of forgiveness from the perspective of the forgiver may be in terms of closure. The suggestion is that an individual will have achieved a state of forgivingness when they are no longer preoccupied with the wrong done to them, they are no longer upset by the offense, and are moving on with their lives. Ideally, this would involve reconciliation with the offender, however if this is impossible they will at least have become reconciled to the situation. The clergy appear to hold the most idealistic conceptualizations of forgiveness, defining it as limitless and not requiring repentance by the offender. The general population suggests that repentance is necessary and that there are limits to forgiveness. Social science definitions do not see repentance as necessary for forgiveness, at most conceptualizing forgiveness as a facilitating factor while the question of limits has not been addressed.

Study Limitations

Given the diversity of views within Christianity it is unclear how far the views of the Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy in this sample are representative of the broader Christian faith. Replication with other Christian denominations is necessary. While efforts were made to obtain a representative population sample these were only partially successful, in that females and the better educated were somewhat over represented in the final sample. This is a difficult issue with surveys that are reliant on the voluntary return of questionnaires. The distinction between individuals who attend church and those who claim membership in a religious

denomination is an interesting one that needs to be examined more systematically in the future with a larger separate sample of church attendees. This factor is particularly relevant in the United Kingdom, where the Anglican Church is the official state church and many people who do not attend church will still refer to their religious denomination as 'Church of England'. Church attendance was defined as attendance at least once a month in order to exclude attendance only at Christmas and Easter. However, on reflection more detail on attendance patterns could usefully have been collected. The views of other faiths and within other cultures also need to be explored to allow global comparisons of our understanding of forgiveness.

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Table 1

Marital Status, Education Level, and Religious Affiliation of the Population Sample

<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Educational Level</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Religious Affiliation</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Single	41	25.7	No formal qualifications	24	15.1	Church attendees	42	26.4
Cohabiting	23	14.5	School level qualifications	54	34.0	(28 Anglican, 6 Catholic, 8 Methodists)		
Married	64	40.3	Degree/ professional	70	44.0	Non church attendees	109	68.6
Divorced	16	10.1	qualifications			(72 Anglican, 12 Catholic, 14 Methodist,		
Widowed	7	4.4	Missing data	11	6.9	11 none)		
Missing data	8	5.0	Total	159	100	Missing data	8	95
Total	159	100				Total	159	100