A REVIEW OF FORGIVENESS PROCESS MODELS AND A COPING FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE FUTURE RESEARCH

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Despite substantial advances in other areas of forgiveness research, empirical evaluation of a fundamental aspect of forgiveness, the process itself, has been virtually nonexistent. This article reviews the existing literature and concludes that although numerous process models have been proposed, many lack a coherent theoretical grounding, and few have been empirically validated. Importantly, understanding of the forgiveness process is hindered by a lack of consensus on what forgiveness is, and consequently what constitutes the endpoint of the process. In response to the many shortcomings in the literature, salient issues for future research are identified. The stress and coping model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is proposed as a framework for guiding theorizing and research.

Empirical psychological research on forgiveness has increased dramatically over the past two decades. Having long been considered the domain of theology and philosophy, the psychological antecedents, properties, and consequences of forgiveness now have been studied in a variety of settings—e.g., counseling, social, justice, organizational, and cultural—with adolescents and adults, couples, families, and groups, and as a response to a wide range of hurts and injustices. Forgiveness research has been extended beyond its traditional focus on forgiveness of others to include forgiveness of self (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001), God (Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999), situations (Thompson et al., 2005), and

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groups (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005), and within the broader theoretical framework of retributive justice (e.g., Enright, Santos, & Al–Mabuk, 1989; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Karremans & Van Lange, 2005).

Psychological research now indicates that for many people much of the time, forgiveness provides psychological and mental health benefits. Forgiveness has been found to be related to better mental health, increased hope, and self-esteem (Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001). Many models and guidelines have been proposed to help clinicians, counselors and therapists use forgiveness interventions (e.g., Ferch, 1998; Freedman, 2000). The different interventions have been shown to be successful in reducing such negative psychological outcomes as anger, bitterness, depression (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade & Worthington, 2005), dysfunction, distress, physiological stress, and coronary heart disease (Witvliet, 2001). Forgiveness has also played a role in healing hurts at a group level (e.g., Allan & Allan, 2000).

Much is now also known about social–cognitive influences on forgiveness, specifically, relationship commitment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003), apology, remorse, offense severity (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004), rumination (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough et al., 1998), empathy (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Wade & Worthington, 2003) and responsibility attributions (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003).

In the arena of individual differences, research suggests that people with a forgiving disposition are more likely to experience increased hope, improved self-esteem (McCullough, 2001), greater life satisfaction, and reduced likelihood of depression (Brown & Phillips, 2005). Dispositional forgiving has also been consistently related to individual difference variables such as vengeance-seeking (Brown, 2004; McCullough et al., 2001), agreeableness, and neuroticism (Sastre, Vinsonneau, Chabrol, & Mullet, 2005).

Finally, numerous measures of different aspects of forgiveness now exist. At least six different measures of state forgiveness of others have been developed (Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Mauger et al., 1992; McCullough et al., 1998, 2003; Pollard, Anderson, Anderson, & Jennings, 1998; Rye et al., 2001; Subkoviak et al., 1995). There are at least six different measures of dispositional forgiving (Berry, Worthington, Parrott III, O’Connor, & Wade, 2001; Brown, 2003; DeShea, 2003; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Rye et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2005). A number of scales also exist to measure attitudes towards forgiveness (Brown, 2003; Kanz,
2000; Mullet, Girard, & Bakhshi, 2004; Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998).

Clearly, the breadth and depth of scientific enquiry into many aspects of forgiveness, and consequently our knowledge, has increased remarkably. Equally remarkable, however, is the fact that an aspect fundamental to our understanding of forgiveness remains unclear. McCullough and Worthington's (1994) review indicated an abundance of process models of forgiveness in the literature, also referred to as "task-stage" models, but a complete absence of empirical support for any of these models. More than a decade later, little has changed. The number of process models has increased further, yet there still remains little consensus as to what constitutes the process. Furthermore, whatever the process, relatively few attempts have been made to validate it.

In short, although great strides have been made to model and measure state and trait forgiveness, the process of forgiveness itself remains empirically neglected. It is not clear how forgiveness occurs—yet this would appear to be an essential prerequisite towards a more complete understanding of forgiveness. Thus, the aim of this article is to review existing process models of forgiveness and, on the basis of this review, to present recommendations for future researchers.

DEFINITIONS OF FORGIVENESS

Virtually every psychological article published on forgiveness begins by acknowledging the debate over a definition of forgiveness. Indeed, it appears easier to agree on what forgiveness is not (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). There is a general consensus that forgiveness should be distinguished from related constructs such as pardoning, excusing, condoning, and forgetting (Rye et al., 2001). Although most researchers agree that forgiveness should not be confused with another related construct, reconciliation, some authors propose that reconciliation is a desired endpoint of the forgiveness process (e.g., Fitzgibbons, 1986; Hargrave, 1994; Pettitt, 1987; Pollard et al., 1998).

Researchers do tend to agree that forgiveness is a complex of cognitive, affective, and possibly, but not necessarily, behavioral responses to a transgression (e.g., Enright et al., 1996; Gordon & Baucom, 1998); that it is at least an intrapersonal process and usually, but not necessarily, an interpersonal process (e.g., Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). It involves two fundamental dimensions, a "negative" dimension (e.g., the reduction or giving up of resentment and anger) and a subsequent "positive" dimension (e.g., compassionate responses to a transgressor) (e.g., Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 1997).
However, an important question remains unresolved: What is the endpoint of forgiveness? Some researchers propose that forgiveness occurs when a person who has been hurt no longer experiences negative cognitions, affect, and behavior (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Thompson et al., 2005). Others posit that forgiveness is a loving and compassionate gift (Enright et al., 1998), voluntarily given to release an offender from obligation (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Yet, even among researchers who concur that positive responses towards a transgressor are fundamental for forgiveness, there is conjecture as to the nature of such responding. For example, McCullough et al. (1997) conceptualize the endpoint of forgiveness as the function of a changed motivational state, whereby the hurt individual moves from being motivated to avoid or retaliate, to being positively motivated towards the offender. This is a fairly benign outcome compared to Enright et al.'s (1998) argument that expressions of love and compassion are prerequisites for forgiving. Others argue that interpersonal interaction and/or reconciliation is essential in order to say that forgiveness has occurred (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Hargrave, 1994; Pettitt, 1987; Pollard et al., 1998).

The lack of agreement over the endpoint of forgiveness has important implications for how process models of forgiveness are developed and utilized. First, process model development reflects the conceptualization of forgiveness embraced by their authors. For example, theorists of the view that forgiveness is signified by a cessation of negative responses will describe the endpoint of forgiveness from the perspective of the hurt person, whereas those who subscribe to the view that forgiveness means reconciliation will approach the endpoint in terms of its implications for the relationship.

Second, model utilization will be influenced by the extent to which a practitioner embraces the conceptualization underlying a particular process model. Specifically, clinicians will encourage clients to strive for a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that are consistent with the endpoint in the process model that they have applied (e.g., the cessation of negative responses versus loving and compassionate responses). Definitional clarity is also important in this regard to the extent that laypersons conflate forgiveness with related constructs such as pardoning, excusing, and reconciliation (Mullet et al., 2004). Thus, practitioners need to be aware of clients' own beliefs about what constitutes the endpoint of forgiveness before employing a particular approach (Butler, Dahlin, & Fife, 2002). Differing lay beliefs will also influence how forgiveness might be promoted in nonclinical settings such as the workplace, the justice system, and between groups (Exline et al., 2003).

The following sections summarize some of the important aspects of the process models chosen for review.
REVIEW OF FORGIVENESS PROCESS MODELS

CRITERIA FOR MODEL SELECTION

Twenty-five models were selected for review. Some of their characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The models were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: (1) the model explicitly refers to the process of forgiveness; and (2) the model has been published in a peer-reviewed psychology journal that is listed on the PsycINFO® database (using the search term "forgiveness" in all years). To ensure comprehensiveness, models from books, chapters, and dissertations referenced in the psychology journal articles were also included.

The first criterion speaks to the definition of what constitutes a process model of forgiveness. In the psychological context, the forgiveness process refers to an individual's progression through a series of interdependent (though not necessarily linear) phases, each consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses or intentions (e.g., Enright et al., 1998). Thus, a number of studies were excluded, specifically those modeling social-cognitive predictors of state-level forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, 1998), the combined influence of personality and contextual factors (Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, & Zungu-Dirwayi, 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999), and a stage-like developmental basis to forgiveness (Enright et al., 1989). Although such models explain why and when forgiveness might occur, they do not explicate the process of forgiveness as defined above. Similarly, typographic models (e.g., Trainer, 1981), which describe categories of forgiving responses rather than a process, were excluded, as were models that propose guidelines for therapists to assist clients to forgive rather than describe the process per se (e.g., Ferch, 1998; Freedman, 2000; Gordon & Baucom, 1999).

WHAT OCCURS DURING THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS?
COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Forgiveness process models tend to assume that forgiveness proceeds in a generally sequential, stage-like manner, during which individuals must adequately perform particular cognitive, affective, and behavioral tasks before they are able to move onto the next stage (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Hargrave, 1994). Although the models may differ substantially in the labels and descriptions they use to define components of the forgiveness process, there is some agreement among theorists that the following stages occur during the process of forgiving: (a) initial feelings of anger and hurt (Enright et al., 1996; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Hargrave, 1994; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; Pollard et al., 1998); (b) negative affective and cognitive consequences (Enright et
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Psychological Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Empirical Validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Augsberger, 1981</td>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Religious</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Religious</td>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donnelly, 1982</td>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enright et al., 1996</td>
<td>Therapeutic</td>
<td>Moral and cognitive development</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Therapeutic</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Therapeutic</td>
<td>Model of psychological trauma</td>
<td>Gordon &amp; Baucom, 2003; Gordon et al., 2004</td>
</tr>
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<td>Therapeutic</td>
<td>Contextual family therapy</td>
<td>Hargrave &amp; Sells, 1997</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Therapeutic</td>
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<td>Synthesis of previous models</td>
<td>Pollard et al., 1998</td>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson, 1983</td>
<td>Religious</td>
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al., 1996; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; Pollard et al., 1998); (c) an acknowledgement that previous strategies of dealing with the hurt are not working (Enright et al., 1996; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Hargrave, 1994); (d) a decision to either forgive, or consider forgiving (Enright et al., 1996; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Worthington, 1998, 2001); and (e) understanding of, or empathy for, the offender (Enright et al., 1996; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Gordon & Baucom,
1998; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; Worthington, 1998, 2001). The latter may arise from the recognition that the forgiver may have also required forgiveness in the past, or may do so in the future (Cunningham, 1985; Donnelly, 1982; Pingleton, 1997).

Five fundamental differences are also evident. First, the models with a religious orientation emphasize the role of God’s forgiveness in the forgiveness process (e.g., Augsberger, 1981; Benson, 1992; Brandsma, 1982; Cunningham, 1985; Donnelly, 1982). However, God’s forgiveness is not included at all in non-religious models. Apart from this component, religious and non-religious models are fairly indistinguishable.

Second, theorists seem to agree about the likely order of only some process components, specifically, that awareness and expressions of anger and hurt occur first, and that the second component involves negative affect and cognition. However, the ordering of the remaining components is not so clear. For example, Worthington (1998) suggests that empathy, humility and commitment to forgive occur in that order, whereas Enright et al. (1996) propose that a commitment to forgive occurs well before humility and empathy, and that empathy needs to occur before humility. Disentangling component order may be an issue for future researchers, particularly as order affects how clinicians use forgiveness interventions and therapies, and the extent to which a client responds. However, assigning importance to component order assumes that the forgiveness process does in fact consist of a series of contingent stages—a notion that is yet to be empirically supported.

Third, it is not clear the extent to which transition to each component within the process may be contingent on cognitive, affective and behavioral responses in the preceding component; which of the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of each component are most salient; and whether particular components are more salient than others (Kaminer et al., 2000; McCullough & Worthington, 1994). For example, to what extent is commitment to forgive (e.g., Worthington, 1998, 2001) contingent on the realization that previously efficacious coping strategies are not working (e.g., Enright et al., 1996)? To what extent is forgiveness contingent on achievement of primarily cognitive tasks in the early phases (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1998) and primarily affective and behavioral tasks in the later phases (e.g., Hargrave, 1994; Pollard et al., 1998)? Is the development of empathy and understanding, for example, the most important phase in the process? Much empirical research and theorizing suggest that it might (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Wade & Worthington, 2003), however, variables relevant to this phase have not been examined within the context of the forgiveness process per se.

Fourth, only a few models recognize the usually interpersonal nature of the forgiveness process (e.g., Hargrave, 1994; Pollard et al., 1998;
Worthington, 1998). Forgiveness, by definition, is at least dyadic, yet the psychological field of forgiveness finds itself in the curious position of being almost entirely concerned with the intrapersonal qualities and characteristics of the responses of the injured party. Beyond expressions of remorse or apology, little is known about the perspective of the wrongdoer (McCullough et al., 2000), and how relationship dynamics influence the forgiveness process for both the wrongdoer and the victim. Thus, the focus of analysis could be widened beyond the victim’s perspective to include the relationship itself (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999).

Fifth, the models differ over what constitutes the endpoint of the forgiveness process. Many models (e.g., Augsberger, 1981; Benson, 1992; Brandsma, 1982; Coleman, 1989; Cunningham, 1985; Donnelly, 1982; Enright et al., 1996) posit that loving, compassionate and benevolent responses characterize the endpoint of the process. Some models (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Hargrave, 1994; Pollard et al., 1998) propose that interpersonal interaction and reconciliation with the wrongdoer are essential to the endpoint. Others (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1998) imply that forgiveness occurs when one no longer experiences negative cognition, affect, and behavior (or behavioral intentions). Finally, some models offer circular articulations of the endpoint, for example, suggesting that the conclusion of forgiveness is "resolution by forgiveness" (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000); an "overt act of forgiving" (Hargrave, 1994); or when the offended party "offers and holds onto forgiveness" (Worthington, 2001). As suggested earlier, the lack of a consensus over a definition of forgiveness itself largely explains the lack of consensus on the endpoint of the forgiveness process.

THE THEORETICAL BASES OF FORGIVENESS PROCESS MODELS


These models, however, constitute only a small minority of the numerous process models that have been proposed. As Table 1 indicates, the remaining models are based predominantly on philosophical and
theological writings and/or the clinical and counseling experiences of the authors (Walker & Gorsuch, 2004). Clearly, there is a need for a more rigorous theory-driven approach to model development and building.

EMPIRICAL VALIDATION OF MODELS

It may be seen from Table 1 that only four of the 25 models have been empirically validated to some degree. Although studies have reported success using the models of Enright and colleagues and Worthington and colleagues as the basis for intervention (for a review, see Wade & Worthington, 2005), the phases and steps in the models have not been empirically validated, therefore we do not address them here. One of the four models is concerned with resolving unfinished business in a therapeutic setting (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000), another is specific to marital relationships (Gordon & Baucom, 1998), and two are specific to family contexts (Hargrave, 1994; Pollard et al., 1998). A few studies (Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2004; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Malcolm, 1999; Pollard et al., 1998) provide empirical support for the process components proposed by each of the four models.

One study (Walker & Gorsuch, 2004) derived 87 items from an aggregated 96 steps of forgiveness posited in 16 different psychological and Christian theological process models. Their factor analysis (N = 180 predominantly Christian undergraduates) revealed five factors: hurt/anger, receiving God’s forgiveness, emotional forgiveness (i.e., deciding to forgive), empathy, and reconciliation. As might be expected given the source of the items, the five factors are consistent with the models reviewed here.

In terms of the ordering of components within the process, some studies have been able to distinguish participants on the basis of their responses to different aspects of the process (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 2003; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Malcolm, 1999). For example, Walker and Gorsuch (2004) used a path analysis to show that hurt/anger and receiving God’s forgiveness each predicted emotional forgiveness (i.e., deciding to forgive), which predicted empathy, and in turn, reconciliation.

A number of qualifications should be noted about the efforts to empirically validate some of the process models. First, the application of those studies is limited to their respective populations (marital and family therapeutic settings; Christian participants). Second, only one study (Gordon & Baucom, 2003) explicitly measured each of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of forgiveness. Third, all the studies are cross-sectional, indicating that the various scales used measure aspects of what the forgiveness process might be, but not what the actual process is, nor the extent to which the process possesses sequential and
contingent qualities. Longitudinal studies are required to establish the transitional prerequisites of the phases in the process, and none have been reported as yet.

**IMPLICATIONS OF LACK OF EMPIRICAL VALIDATION FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE**

An important limitation of the relative lack of validation studies (and the exclusive use of cross-sectional designs in the few studies that have been conducted) is that process models tend to be prescriptive. That is, they suggest how forgiveness should or ought to proceed rather than how forgiveness does proceed. This is problematic for clinicians, in a number of ways.

First, prescriptions of forgiveness in the absence of empirical validation means it is not clear if a particular prescribed process works, or if it does appear to work, why, and if it works for all individuals. For example, a well-controlled experimental design may indicate the success of a forgiveness intervention. However, if the process model upon which the intervention is based has not been empirically validated—in other words, if we do not know how people forgive—then there is no way of knowing or predicting how individuals should respond when they undertake a forgiveness intervention. Consequently, we cannot ascertain what proportion of an outcome may be attributed to the forgiveness intervention and what proportion to other factors known to contribute to successful therapeutic outcomes, such as the quality of the therapist–client relationship (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000).

Second, prescribing how forgiveness should occur does not take into account the possibility that a particular prescribed process may, in fact, be inappropriate for some individuals. For example, some models propose that reconciliation is important to the forgiveness process. Although reconciliation may be a desired outcome for some individuals depending on the nature of the wrongdoing, it may not always be psychologically healthy, prudent, or even possible (e.g., when the offender is not willing to reconcile, or has passed away).

Third, therapeutic process models make assumptions about the endpoint of forgiveness, for example, that forgiveness occurs with the cessation of negative responding (e.g., Gordon & Baucom, 1998) or that compassionate and loving responses are necessary to say that forgiveness has occurred (e.g., Enright et al., 1998). However, because the process itself has not been validated, it is not certain that clients will embrace or be amenable to the endpoint of forgiveness as prescribed by the particular therapeutic model being used (Butler et al., 2002).
LIMITED APPLICATIONS OF EXISTING PROCESS MODELS

As Table 1 indicates, forgiveness process models tend to have either a Christian theological or therapeutic orientation. The specificity of the models is such that they tend not to be relevant to non-religious or nonclinical populations, or significant social contexts such as intimate relationships, the justice system, the workplace, and between cultural and social groups. For example, an integral component of Christian theological process models is God's forgiveness, yet God's forgiveness would be irrelevant to non-Christians and anyone who does not hold religious beliefs.

Extrapolating from therapeutic models, in particular, is problematic, in two related ways. First, individuals who present for therapy or counseling may perceive or interpret their hurts in more traumatic terms. Therefore their experiences may well be qualitatively different from the hurts experienced by individuals who do not present. It is also likely that individuals who enter the clinical setting have experienced an objectively more severe event (e.g., rape, incest) than those in nonclinical settings for example, who may be coping with the break-up of a short-term relationship (McCullough et al., 2000). Second, although interventions based on therapeutic process models are reportedly successful (Wade & Worthington, 2005), interventions follow a process prescribed by a clinician. In addition, many models propose that one of the components of the forgiveness process is a 'decision to forgive' (e.g., Enright et al., 1996; Fitzgibbons, 1986; Worthington, 1998). This presumes, however, that people deliberately set out to engage in the process of forgiveness. It is possible that unless individuals are prompted (usually by a professional), they rarely deliberately engage in such a process. If they do, it is not clear the extent to which therapeutic models reflect the "lay" process of forgiving. In other words, individuals outside the clinical setting may not attempt to deal with hurts in a deliberate, task-oriented manner, nor in a manner consistent with therapeutic models.

WHAT ABOUT PERSONALITY AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS?

A final limitation of current process models, specifically those which are intrapersonal in orientation, is that they tend to focus on an individual's cognitive and affective processes in response to a transgression, and neglect the role of personality and situational variables in the process (see Gordon & Baucom, 1998, for an exception). However, related studies in personality and social psychology have measured such variables but not within a forgiveness process model.

For example, a neurotic defense style (Maltby & Day, 2004) and unwillingness to emotionally disclose (Harber & Wenberg, 2005) have
been found to be barriers to forgiveness, consistent with Enright et al.’s (1996) theorizing that the first step in the forgiveness process is psychological defense. Some theorists (Brandsma, 1982; Enright et al., 1996; Fitzgibbon, 1986; Menninger, 1996; Worthington, 2001) posit that cognitive rehearsal of a hurtful event is a fundamental component of the forgiveness process, and studies have shown that rumination is negatively related to forgiveness (Brown & Phillips, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998, 2001). A common component in forgiveness process theorizing is empathy, and a number of studies have established the important role that empathy plays in individuals’ decisions to forgive (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Wade & Worthington, 2003).

Other studies indicate that situation-specific factors such as commitment (Finkel et al., 2002; Karremans et al., 2003), apology, remorse, offense severity (Zeichmeister et al., 2004), and responsibility attributions (Fincham et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 2003) are related to individuals’ willingness to forgive. These findings are particularly relevant in support of the models that emphasize the dyadic, interpersonal nature of forgiveness (e.g., Fitzgibbon, 1986; Hargrave, 1994; Pollard et al., 1998).

Taken together, the related empirical studies indicate the importance of studying the personality and situational factors that influence the forgiveness process, and the importance of conceptualizing forgiveness process models within a broader theoretical context that includes these factors. To that end, the models of Worthington and Wade (1999) and Kaminer et al. (2000) are salient. Although they do not specify a forgiveness process in terms of all of its specific cognitive, affective and behavioral components, they do provide broad, coherent theoretical frameworks within which to identify potentially the most important interactions between the process and personality and contextual factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In summary, our review of the literature on process models of forgiveness suggests that the following points need to be addressed in future research:

1. What is forgiveness? Theoretical and empirical progress on the process of forgiveness depends a great deal on how, and the extent to which, this key question is approached.
2. How do people know when they have forgiven? For theoretical, empirical, and applied reasons, it is imperative that the endpoint of the forgiveness process be resolved.
3. It is imperative that more studies are conducted to empirically validate process models of forgiveness. Without increased empiri-
cal validation we should not be confident about our understanding of how forgiveness occurs or its application in clinical and nonclinical settings.

4. Greater rigor needs to be applied to conceptualizing existing or new process models within established psychological theory, and taking greater account of personality and contextual factors.

5. Such models should be generalizable beyond specific populations, in order to be relevant to both clinical and general populations. Alternatively, research may consider if situation-specific or generic models are theoretically and empirically more sound.

6. In testing such models, researchers should endeavor to employ longitudinal designs in a bid to capture the transitional and contingent properties of the process. To date, no such studies have been conducted.

7. Attention should be paid to delineating which components of the existing models are most important in the process of forgiveness or in encouraging forgiveness; what the order of the components is, if indeed an order can be established; which of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of each component are most important; and how these dimensions interact within and between components. To date, no such research has been conducted.

In the following sections we provide direction for how a number of the points we have raised may be addressed in future research. It should be fairly self-evident, in a broad sense, as to what is required to deal with points 3 (need for empirical validation of models), 5 (generalizability of models), and 6 (need for longitudinal studies). Thus, we will focus on points 1, 2, 4, and 7. We will propose a theoretical framework designed to provide an alternative to the task-stage paradigm that currently dominates the literature (point 4). In doing so, we address the inter-related issues of definitional clarity and the endpoint of forgiveness (points 1 and 2) by suggesting an alternative approach to defining forgiveness. We also address the issue of component order and salience (point 7).

FORGIVENESS AS A COPING PROCESS:
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE FUTURE RESEARCH

We propose that Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) seminal stress and coping model provides an alternative theoretical framework for unifying the existing body of research and guiding future research into the forgiveness process. First, we briefly describe the model's fundamental principles and relevant research. Second, we explain how the forgiveness process is analogous to the coping process. Based on this reasoning,
we propose a new definition of forgiveness. Third, we explain how conceptualizing forgiveness as coping will advance theorizing and research on the forgiveness process.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as the thoughts and behaviors used by individuals to manage the internal and external demands of specific situations, which are appraised as being personally salient and stressful. The extent to which an individual perceives a situation to be stressful is determined by two separate, though interdependent, appraisals. Initially, the individual engages in a primary appraisal, in which an encounter or situation is assessed as being either irrelevant (both to one’s well-being and stake in the outcome), benign-positive (i.e., only a good outcome is apparent), or stressful. Stressful situations are categorized as threat (potential for harm or loss), challenge (potential for growth, mastery, or gain), or harm-loss (an injury that has already been done). Next, the person undertakes a secondary appraisal, which is an evaluation of one’s resources (psychological, physical, social, material) to deal with the potentially stressful situation, akin to asking, ‘What can I do?’ The coping process is then initiated. If an initially stressful situation is evaluated as being manageable, such an evaluation becomes, in itself, a form of coping. If resources are deemed inadequate, then one continues to perceive the situation as stressful. Once a situation has been appraised as stressful, individuals enact any number of coping strategies designed to remove, reduce, or tolerate stress.

Although many attempts have been made to conceptualize the numerous coping behaviors within uni-dimensional frameworks, the most well-known approach is Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984), who distinguish problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The former refers to strategies used to bring about a change or a resolution to a situation (e.g., seeking information, planning, taking action); the latter refers to strategies in which individuals attempt to regulate the emotions and cognitions associated with the situation (e.g., venting emotions, ruminating, avoidance, accepting the problem, reinterpretation) with, often, a subsequent assignation of new meaning to the event.

Specific situational, social, individual, and dispositional factors all influence what coping behaviors are chosen (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Individuals often use a combination of the two forms of coping, depending on the situation (Lazarus, 1999), sometimes one before the other and sometimes simultaneously (Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000). Problem-focused coping tends to be used in situations perceived as changeable, and emotion-focused coping in situations perceived as not amenable to change (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Typically, however, their effects are often difficult to delineate; emotion-focused
coping can facilitate problem–focused coping by regulating the distress that can mitigate problem–focused strategies, and problem–focused coping can reduce the perceived salience of a threat and consequently reduce stressful emotional responses (Carver & Scheier, 1994).

It is important to note that the coping process is distinct from its outcome. In other words, coping refers to efforts to manage demands, irrespective of how successful those efforts are in reducing stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, some coping behaviors tend to be adaptive, specifically, "approach" types of coping such as the seeking of social support or problem–focused coping. Others, however, may be maladaptive, for example, "avoidance" types of behaviors such as self–blame, wishful thinking, escapism, denial, and mental or behavioral disengagement that typically have negative implications for outcomes (Carver & Scheier, 1994). The reappraisal of the latter types of responses as ineffective will lead, in turn, to another round of primary and secondary appraisals and the implementation of alternative (or sometimes the same) coping strategies.

As the relationships between the primary and secondary appraisals and the categories of coping suggests, coping is a complex, dynamic, and multidirectional process. A fundamental principle of coping theory is that a stressful event is not static, rather it evolves and unfolds. Thus, coping is an ongoing transaction between the threat, primary and secondary appraisals, and the response. Therefore, as threat perceptions and appraisals interact and change over time coping behaviors will also change over time (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Consequently, the coping process is often characterized by apparently contradictory emotions and states of mind during any given stage of a stressful encounter (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). In short, the coping process generally is not linear. Rather, it is best characterized as an ongoing series of feed–back and feed–forward loops in which threats are constantly reappraised; coping strategies are reevaluated and often alternative strategies applied; and positive and negative emotions cooccur as individuals seek equilibrium.

HOW THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS IS ANALOGOUS TO THE COPING PROCESS

Others have already suggested and/or examined the conceptual link between forgiveness and coping (e.g., Berry et al., 2001; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Ours, however, is the first attempt to theoretically refocus the existing research and provide a broad theoretical framework, which is currently lacking, by explicating the potential relationship between the coping and forgiveness processes.
Below we outline six ways in which the forgiveness process is analogous to the coping process.

The Forgiveness Process is a Reaction to a Stressor. The negative cognitive, affective and behavioral reactions one may have in response to a transgression may be conceptualized as stress reactions (Berry et al., 2001). The process one goes through in order to forgive another may be viewed as a means of reducing the stress reaction (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Reactions to a Transgression Are Primary and Secondary Appraisals. More specifically, the reactions one has to a transgression at any point in the forgiveness process may be conceptualized as primary and secondary appraisals. For example, when a transgression has just occurred, a primary appraisal of the event will include asking questions like, “was this hurtful?” (harm–loss); “will this hurt me?” (threat); or “is this an opportunity for me/my relationship?” (challenge). If the transgression is appraised as harm–loss or threat, then a secondary appraisal (“what can I do?”) may include initial reactions of anger, retaliation or withdrawal. If the transgression is appraised as a challenge, the secondary appraisal may include empathic or conciliatory responses. Such primary and secondary appraisals will continue to be conducted throughout the process of coping with the transgression. For example, an individual may identify the source of their stress not as the initial transgression, but rather, the fact that they continue to ruminate about it. A secondary appraisal may involve recognizing the nonconstructive effects of rumination and, in turn, a decision to reframe the transgression. The same individual may eventually appraise what was initially a threat as an opportunity for mastery of a challenge (i.e., they now feel confident that they have gotten over the hurt) and consequently express benevolence and goodwill towards a transgressor.

Coping Strategies Describe How People Forgive. The two main coping strategies provide a framework with which to explain both what people do in the forgiveness process, and how they forgive. The forgiveness process may be conceptualized as emotion–focused coping when it is concerned primarily with the internalized responses to a transgression. For example, emotion–focused coping may be used when the perceived best way of coping with a transgression is to attempt to ameliorate the negative responses one is experiencing, such as anger and hostility. The forgiveness process may be conceptualized as a problem–focused coping strategy when it is concerned with the problem that caused the stress, for example, discussing with the offender what happened and/or seeking some form of redress; deciding to leave a relationship or a situation; or simply working out what to do next.

Coping processes are not inherently good or bad (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) but may be considered in terms of their effectiveness in a given sit-
uation. For example, an emotion–focused coping strategy would be effective as a regulatory response to a very recent, highly upsetting transgression, but over time focusing on one’s emotions could have negative consequences, for example, a tendency to ruminate over the transgression. Rumination has been shown to be an important barrier to forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 2001). Similarly, problem–focused coping operationalized as leaving a relationship may be effective in a situation where the hurt person was already emotionally prepared to leave, but such behavior may not be appropriate if the emotional contemplation has not taken place.

Forgiveness and Coping Can Also Be Future–Oriented. Coping has traditionally been understood as a survival strategy. However, recent theories of coping propose that coping can also be understood in future–oriented terms. Research indicates that coping has been viewed as an opportunity for growth, the acquisition of new coping skills, and spiritual transformation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). For example, one coping study found that caregivers reappraised potentially painful, exhaustive and stressful experiences as worthwhile (Folkman, Chesney, & Christopher–Richards, 1994). Such a reappraisal subsequently provides an individual with evidence of the ability to deal with difficult situations and to therefore draw on that ability in the future.

Schwarzer and Knoll (2003) propose three types of future–oriented coping: anticipatory coping (dealing with future events that one perceives are fairly certain to happen soon); preventive coping (dealing with an uncertain distant future threat); and proactive coping (dealing with upcoming challenges that are potentially self–enhancing). Anticipatory and preventive coping can be applied to the forgiveness process to the extent that individuals’ motivations to forgive may be quite instrumental, such as a hurt person taking into account the need to preserve a valued relationship. For example, a hurt person might predict that unless he or she forgives the transgression, the relationship may be irreparably damaged or weakened. Alternatively, individuals may realize that they themselves may be in a situation one day where they too will need forgiving. A person forgiving in either of these contexts would be engaging in anticipatory or preventive coping as a way of preserving valued relationships.

Proactive coping is a way in which individuals can improve, grow, and render life meaningful as a consequence of dealing with a forthcoming challenge (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003). In forgiveness terms, such a challenge may be conceptualized as moving beyond getting over a transgression to viewing the ultimate response to a transgression as an opportunity for one, or a relationship, to improve and grow. For example, an individual may come to the realization that a once–hurtful trans-
gression is now an opportunity to learn more about oneself; or, they may determine that a benevolent response to a transgressor is important for their own self-esteem or the good of a relationship. Thus, whereas traditional problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies might be analogous to the 'negative dimension' of forgiving (i.e., getting over a transgression), proactive coping is analogous to the way in which individuals within the forgiveness process may move from surviving a transgression to responding positively to it, that is, feeling better within oneself (Gordon & Baucom, 1998) and/or acting benevolently towards a transgressor (McCullough et al., 1997). Forgiveness conceptualized as a proactive coping strategy may subsequently help to alleviate concerns that forgiveness should not be reduced to merely being a survival mechanism (e.g., Enright et al., 1998).

Forgiveness is Both an Intra and an Interpersonal Process. Coping consists of both intrapersonal (i.e., appraisals and choice of coping strategies) and interpersonal (i.e., social and situation-specific factors) processes. Forgiveness is the same. The cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses that one has to a transgression are influenced by external social and situation-specific factors, and vice versa.

Forgiveness is a Dynamic, Unfolding Process. Analogous to the coping process, the forgiveness process is rarely linear. Anecdotal and clinical evidence (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) indicate that individuals move back and forwards within the forgiveness process until they reach a point of psychological equilibrium. Thus, both positive and negative responses cooccur during the process (e.g., one might feel empathy for an offender and yet still be angry with him or her), just as they have been shown to occur in coping research (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000); primary and secondary appraisals continue to be conducted, and influence the other; and different coping strategies will be enacted depending on the situation.

In this section we have proposed a number of ways in which the process of forgiveness is analogous to coping: It is a dynamic process occurring in response to a stress reaction, and consists of primary and secondary appraisals and subsequent strategies for dealing with the stressor. Next, we propose an alternative approach to defining forgiveness based on the coping model.

A NEW DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

We have argued that forgiveness is a process of coping with a stressful situation. Here we offer a definition of forgiveness that reflects such a conceptualization. It is this: “Forgiveness is the process of neutralizing a stressor that has resulted from a perception of an interpersonal hurt.”
There are three important points to note about this definition. First, the forgiveness process is initiated by perception of an interpersonal hurt. Second, forgiveness is first and foremost a process, as distinct from an outcome. Thus, no specific endpoint of forgiveness is prescribed. Rather—and this is the third point—consistent with the coping model, the endpoint of forgiveness is signified when the stressor that initiated the forgiveness process has been neutralized. “Neutralization” will mean different things to different individuals. Some will identify the cessation of negative responses as congruent with “neutralization” (e.g., Thompson et al., 2005); others will identify overt positive responses towards a transgressor as synonymous with “neutralization” (e.g., Enright et al., 1998). Either way, an essential aspect of the definition is that forgiveness as an outcome can be said to have occurred when the stress resulting from a transgression—that is, the conglomeration of negative cognitions, affect, and behaviors—no longer adversely affects the person who has been hurt.

How does this definition add value to forgiveness theorizing and research? We think it has two promising properties. First, it may help to resolve the problem of defining forgiveness in terms of an endpoint. Most conceptualizations of forgiveness state, or at least imply, that there is some objective endpoint to forgiveness, that is, forgiveness is prescribed as an either/or proposition. For example, forgiveness is or is not a cessation of negative responses; it is or is not a loving, compassionate response. Instead, our definition recognizes the subjective experience of forgiveness. Our definition also recognizes that the endpoint of the forgiveness process will vary depending on the individual. Indeed, for some individuals, there may not even be an endpoint so much as an eventual realization—and perhaps only in hindsight—that they no longer feel or think negatively, or they are now responding positively to a transgressor.

Second, the definition is consistent with the coping process. Next, we describe how framing forgiveness as coping will advance theory and research into the forgiveness process.

HOW COPING MODELS WILL ADVANCE THEORIZING AND RESEARCH ON THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS

Forgiveness as Coping Better Reflects the Process of Forgiveing. The coping model offers a more viable alternative to the dominant paradigm in forgiveness theorizing, the task–stage approach, which presumes that the forgiveness process is essentially linear and contingent on task achievement at various stages. However, clinical and anecdotal evidence (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) indicates that generally people do not in fact deal with
stressors in a sequential, linear manner. Thus, forgiveness is more appropriately conceptualized as a dynamic process, where one’s responses to a transgression constitute a series of reappraisals and feedback and feedforward loops (e.g., Enright et al., 1998; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000) rather than a rigid set of contingent tasks to be achieved.

Forgiveness as Coping Better Reflects the Interaction Between Internal and External Factors. A limitation of existing forgiveness process models is that the overwhelming majority disregard the influence of personality, social, and situation-specific factors on the forgiveness process. The coping model, however, places a great emphasis on the individual’s transaction with his or her environment, and this is reflected in a commensurately large research literature (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Coping is not just a process internal to the individual; it also reflects the fact that external influences can impact on the individual, and vice versa. Thus, the coping model provides a framework for understanding both intrapersonal cognitive and affective responses, and the influence of interpersonal interactions and situational factors. By conceptualizing forgiveness within the framework of coping, the nature of the person–environment interaction is more clearly realized and the forgiveness process is not viewed isolated from its context.

Forgiveness as Coping Better Describes How Forgiveness Occurs. Traditional stage models suggest what happens when people engage in the forgiveness process, but are less clear in specifying how forgiveness occurs. In contrast, the coping strategies introduced above provide a framework with which to explain both what people do in the forgiveness process and how they go about forgiving, while at the same time taking into account individual differences and social and situation-specific factors in responses to a transgression. Specifically, people go about forgiving by using a combination of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and future-oriented strategies.

Forgiveness as Coping Means Focusing on the Process Not an Endpoint. A fundamental concern in the literature is the lack of agreement over an endpoint of forgiveness. As we have noted, the debate has implications for how forgiveness process models are developed and utilized. Attempting to specify an endpoint is problematic not only for theorists and researchers, but also for clinicians, and—attempts to promote forgiveness within other—nonclinical contexts. The main issue is that prescribing an endpoint suggests there is some objective, definable point at which all individuals must arrive before they can say they have forgiven—yet not everyone will subscribe to the same endpoint, let alone agree that there is in fact an endpoint.

Forgiveness as coping, however, means that forgiveness is all about process, not outcome. Specifically, the process of forgiving produces dif-
ferent outcomes for different individuals, and not all appraisals and strategies used in the forgiveness process inevitably lead to a satisfactory or forgiving outcome. Some coping strategies are adaptive, such as taking the perspective of the offender or reframing the transgression, and some appraisals conclude that the transgression is not a threat but a challenge; other coping strategies are maladaptive, such as excessive rumination, and some appraisals continue to conclude that the stressor is a harm–loss or threat event. In most cases, adaptive strategies should lead to more positive responses whereas maladaptive strategies would be less likely to result in such responses. It is possible, however, that some apparently maladaptive strategies could also eventually lead to positive outcomes. For example, rumination may lead to greater insight into how one deals with transgressions.

In other words, when forgiveness is conceptualized as coping, the focus is on how one copes with a transgression, not on the outcome that one should reach. In our new definition, the only possible outcome—and one which is only implied—is that the stressor with which one is attempting to cope is neutralized. As we have argued, individuals’ interpretations of “neutralization” will differ: for some it will mean the cessation of negative cognitions and affect; for others it will mean expressing benevolently towards a transgressor. The main point here is that forgiveness as coping means avoiding getting bogged down with nebulous endpoints and outcomes—as appears to be the case at present in the literature—and instead focusing on what an individual actually does in order to produce a response that they interpret as “forgiving.”

Forgiveness as Coping Means Focusing on the Salience of Components, not on the Order. Forgiveness as coping suggests that identifying a component order for all individuals across all situations is less important than what the current task–stage approach implies. Because forgiveness as coping is a dynamic, interactive process, individuals may move back and forwards between components rather than in a linear fashion as task–stage models suggest. Thus, it may be more useful to think of the components simply as reflecting different ways of coping, which may occur and potentially reoccur at different points during the forgiveness process, and to address which components may be most salient as ways of coping, while taking into account personality, social, and situation–specific factors. For example, developing empathy for the transgressor has been found to be a key predictor of a forgiving response, whereas prolonged rumination has been found to be a barrier. Perhaps empathy and prolonged rumination are, respectively, salient adaptive and maladaptive coping responses within the forgiveness process?

Indeed, rather than attempting to specify component order, it may be more fruitful to investigate what people must at least experience or do
before they are able to forgive someone. For example, perhaps the minimum requirement for forgiveness is that the individual feels and expresses anger and hurt, that they realize that other strategies for dealing with the hurt are not working (e.g., rumination), and that they feel some empathy for the transgressor. In short, we argue that forgiveness as coping advances theorizing by focusing not on component order but on arguably the more important issue of component salience.

The Coping Literature Offers Improved Methodology for Studying the Forgiveness Process. Forgiveness research will benefit methodologically from the vast coping literature. As we have noted, one of the important limitations of existing empirical process work in forgiveness is the complete reliance on between-person cross-sectional measures to answer questions that essentially require within-person, longitudinal responses. Forgiveness research in general is also characterized by a reliance on questionnaires to gather information, an approach that is not optimal for capturing the nuances of the forgiveness process which, by definition, is dynamic and constantly evolving. Furthermore, those very measures tend to reflect prescribed conceptualizations of forgiveness.

The coping field has also had to address such shortcomings (Tennen et al., 2000) and consequently forgiveness researchers may learn much from how coping researchers have responded. For example, a highly promising strategy is known as the “daily process approach” (for a review, see Tennen et al., 2000). This strategy emphasizes the measurement of day-to-day changes that take place over time and conditions, allowing coping researchers to examine at a microanalytical level the roles and relationship of different coping strategies within a person, yet still drawing a sufficiently large enough N to allow generalization of findings. Innovative techniques such as computerized diaries (e.g., palm pilots) for participants to record and time- and date-stamp events facilitate data collection and avoid the constraints inherent in using questionnaires. Given how closely the forgiveness process mirrors the coping process, there are clear benefits to applying the daily process approach to the forgiveness process particularly its potential to capture how forgiveness proceeds.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of theoretical and empirical limitations associated with forgiveness process models. We have proposed that conceptualizing forgiveness as analogous to the process of coping will go a long way towards not only addressing the limitations but also significantly advancing forgiveness theorizing and research. We expect that conceptualizing forgiveness as coping will be seen by some as controversial. At
the very least, we hope that our effort will stimulate greater efforts to come to grips, both theoretically and empirically, with the forgiveness process.

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