

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

College of Education Faculty Research and
Publications

Education, College of

2010

Forgiveness Education: Urban Youth's Perceptions and Collective Narratives

Sharon Chubbuck

Marquette University, sharon.chubbuck@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/edu_fac



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chubbuck, Sharon, "Forgiveness Education: Urban Youth's Perceptions and Collective Narratives" (2010).

College of Education Faculty Research and Publications. 143.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/edu_fac/143

Forgiveness Education: Urban Youth's Perceptions and Collective Narratives

Sharon M. Chubbuck*

Violence has been called the result of a "lack of imagination" (Jenkins 368), in particular, the inability to envision options that include nonviolent responses. While observing in an urban high school first year English classroom, I heard the following discussion that captured some young people's experience of that lack of imagination:

Teacher (White female): *"What would it take to imagine a world without violence?"*

Genevieve: (African American female): *I doubt we could have a world without violence. Anger doesn't just exist on its own. People talk about you and you get mad. I don't think we can even imagine it.*

Teacher: *You're telling me that you can't even imagine a world where there's no violence? Not even in your imagination, your farthest imagination? Is that true?*

Jacob (African American male): *Yeah, because I get frustrated all the time.*

Kevin (White male): *I think it is impossible because people have anger.*

Teacher: *Okay, but is the only choice to respond to anger with violence?*

Kevin: *It's the easiest. People don't think, "I'm going to resist."*

Though the reported incidences of violence in schools have decreased since 1993, the reported level of gang activity has increased in urban schools with approximately two times more urban students than suburban or rural expressing a fear of attack at school in 2005-6 (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, n.p.). This level of violence in central city communities and schools can produce debilitating effects on many young people. Rooted in both micro-level causes (personal injury, insult, abandonment, and abuse) and macro-level causes (unremitting poverty, institutionalized inequity, and exposure to violence), retaliatory responses of violence are the frequent expressions of anger. Providing peaceful, healthy options for responding to anger and injury, whether the result of individual injury or systemic acts of injustice, warrants the attention of scholars and advocates of peacemaking who hope to reduce violence. One option being explored in peace education is the possibility of teaching individuals to respond to anger and injury with forgiveness.

This qualitative research, the first stage of a larger study of the effects of an educational forgiveness intervention as a tool to help students respond peacefully to anger and injury, addresses these research questions:

* Sharon M. Chubbuck is an associate professor in the College of Education, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her background is in curriculum and instruction with a focus on language and literacy in multicultural/multilingual contexts. Her research interests are theoretically informed by critical pedagogy, critical literacy, whiteness, and the nature of socially just teaching, and have included empirical studies of the development of holistic, socially just teaching practices. This long-term interest in social justice in education has recently led her into a study of nonviolence and the related topic of forgiveness.

1. How do urban high school students of color conceptualize and describe their experiences of forgiveness?
2. How do the student's collective socio-cultural identities and narratives intersect with their understanding/experience of forgiveness?
3. How does forgiveness intersect with issues of injustice for these students?

Theoretical Framework

The study of forgiveness has a relatively short history, with the vast majority of empirical work done by counseling psychologists in counseling settings in the last 20 years. Formulating a coherent, agreed upon definition of forgiveness is even now in progress (Worthington, "Handbook" 2), yet, common core elements seem to exist. Frequently, the delineation of those elements is prefaced with a clear description of what forgiveness is not. While consensus is not universal among scholars, there is significant agreement that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, condoning, minimizing, excusing, legally pardoning, or automatic reconciliation or restoration of trust (Enright 28-31). Included in the most commonly accepted definition of forgiveness are a reduction of the components of unforgiveness, meaning less anger, bitterness, rumination on the offense, motivation for retaliation, isolation, etc. This reduction of negative elements is not sufficient, however. Rather, researchers in the field frequently claim that forgiveness also includes an increase in positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral components directed to the offender, including empathy, compassion, generosity, good will, and motivation for conciliation (Freedman, Enright, & Knutson; McCullough, Worthington & Rachal). Enright (31) and Worthington ("Path" 36) also include in their definition those actions done to in response to these changes including offering a gift, either physical or symbolic, to the offender who has been forgiven. For example, a victim of parental incest who chose to forgive might decide to sit with her dying father, her gift to the one who had harmed her. Another aspect included in some definitions of forgiveness is finding meaning or purpose in the offense that leads to either personal or societal improvement (Enright 172). For example, a rape victim who has chosen to forgive might then turn her energies to working to support other rape victims. Enright (25) makes particular mention that maintaining negative emotions/responses is the right of the offended person and that the offender has no right to expect or demand any positive emotional responses, much less a gift given by the one harmed. The decision to forgive, then, is a choice to let go of the right to negative responses and embrace positive attitudes and, perhaps actions, instead.

Empirical studies in the field of counseling psychology have explored the effects of leading individuals, in both group and one-on-one settings, through the steps of the forgiveness process in order to see if choosing to forgive has emotional/psychological effects. Though variation of thought exists on the order and the possible inclusion of additional components, Enright identifies the commonly agreed upon steps of the forgiveness process as following: 1.) uncovering/facing the pain of the injury; 2.) deciding that unforgiveness is an ineffectual response and deciding to choose to enter into the forgiveness process; 3.) doing the work of forgiving which includes exercises to reframe the event, to develop empathy, to gain compassion for the offender, etc.; and, in some cases, 4.) finding meaning in the injury,

sometimes seen in a gift to the offender or working to prevent further injury of others (Enright; Worthington "Path").

These studies of forgiveness interventions, with incest victims, youth of divorce, partners of women who have chosen abortion, among others, have produced quantitative data, based on pre- post-intervention psychometric measures of the participants' emotional state. Results of these studies have been promising (Enright & Fitzgibbons; Freedman & Knupp; Freedman, Enright, & Knutson), with strong indications that interventions that teach the process of forgiveness indeed do reduce the negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of unforgiveness, components that comprise many of the core components of psychologically damaging stress (rumination on offense, bitterness, motivation for retaliation, etc.) (Toussaint & Webb 350) and increase positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (compassion, empathy, conciliation, good will). These effects have then been associated with indicators of improved well being in other areas including decreased depression, reduced residual anger, greater self-reported hope, etc. (Enright & Fitzgibbons; Toussaint & Webb 350) and improved physical health, though suggested cautiously (Harris & Thoresen 330). The inclusion of forgiveness interventions in therapy, then, is experiencing growing support among proponents of positive psychology (Worthington, "Handbook" 2).

Study of forgiveness beyond the area of counseling is less extensive and even more recent. The majority of this work focuses on the use of a curricular intervention on the forgiveness process as a tool in educational settings in order to reduce violence and hostility. Gassin, Enright, and Knutson have incorporated a variation of Enright's forgiveness intervention in a forgiveness curriculum presented to elementary school children in Milwaukee, WI, in the last several years, teaching them alternative non-retaliatory responses to anger, with promising results. Similar work has also been applied in Belfast, Ireland, among school children from both sides of the intractable violence of their community, again with promising results of reduced unforgiveness and the accompanying retaliatory motivations, and increased forgiveness (Holter, Martin & Enright 316). In discussing these two projects, both of which relied primarily on quantitative data, Enright, Knutson Enright, and Holter described measuring a similar level of anger among the children of Belfast and the children of Milwaukee, suggesting that the stresses of poverty and racism, as well as a higher level of exposure to violence in urban contexts, produced a need for forgiveness interventions in urban populations similar to that found in contexts of intractable violence (Enright, E. D., Knutson Enright, J., & Holter n.p.). The implication is that teaching urban children the steps of forgiveness could reduce their level of anger, and as a corollary, reduce the level of violence and possibly increase the level of academic performance (Gassin, Enright, & Knutson 327).

In light of the promising research on the value of teaching the process of forgiveness, continued research in this area is clearly warranted. Yet, several gaps remain that require attention. First, in directing attention to urban contexts, the present level of research, particularly in the realm of counseling psychology, adopts a one-size-fits-all approach, with little empirical or theoretical work addressing the significance of cultural and contextual variables in relation to forgiveness (Sandage & Williams 41). Attending to these variables is critical; all interventions occur within cultural contexts and current understanding of possible multicultural meanings of forgiveness are poorly understood (Harris & Thoresen 330). Sandage and Williamson (46) theorize several elements of a heuristic of cultural differences related to

forgiveness, including how individualistic and collective cultural orientations would engage in forgiveness based on their particular interpretations of self, relationships, face, reconciliation, self-forgiveness, the goal of forgiveness, and cultural tools for achieving forgiveness. Study of how cultural realities can shape the nature and experience of a forgiveness intervention is clearly needed, and given the complexity of how we come to understand cultural knowledge, qualitative as well as quantitative data is needed to support this research.

One significant aspect of the role of cultural identity in research is the implicit distinction between individual and collective. The focus of empirical research related to forgiveness thus far has retained an individualistic lens, with emotional well-being, levels of forgiveness, degree of anger, etc. seen as residing in the interiority of each individual, and though perhaps reported in aggregate, they are measured individually with little regard for the presence of any collective influence. Clearly, the very nature of cultural identity implicates a collective aspect that can influence individual's perspectives; the deeper issue, however, is how the shared narratives and the emotion attached to them can become political forces that are themselves constitutive of relationships and hierarchies of power that operate beyond the individual. For example, Zembylas describes how victims of trauma (war, genocide, intractable violence, etc.) construct and repeatedly recount collective memories/narratives. Through that retelling and the attachment of rituals and symbols, these collective narratives become embedded in the nationalistic identity, each time reifying the emotional level of reaction to the trauma, the sense of nationalistic identity, and the continuation of dehumanizing the Other, the conditions that support a continuation of hostility and an absence of reconciliation. Studying the effects of a forgiveness intervention with attention to the socio-cultural identity of the participants, therefore, requires analyzing data with a collective theoretical lens to be able to identify how collective narratives shape and create the participants' understanding of and relationship to forgiveness.

A third important aspect to consider when introducing a forgiveness intervention to urban students of color concerns the relationship of justice and forgiveness. Social scientists' interest in justice as a complementary process of forgiveness is growing (Mahoney, Rye, & Pargament 65-67). Retributive or punitive justice is one commonly accepted way that individuals can deal with injury, using the legal system as the source of retribution rather than pursuing personal retaliation. Restorative justice, which combines compensation for damages (often through the legal system) with conciliatory behaviors (meetings between victims and offenders, where grievances are aired and direct apologies and remorse are expressed), has been mentioned as a venue for exploring the healing of forgiveness, though restorative justice does not explicitly promote forgiveness (Armour & Umbreit 490) and in fact, can be seen as putting an undue burden of responsibility on the victims who have already borne the brunt of pain and struggle in the offense. While forgiveness scholars tend to agree that seeking justice and offering forgiveness are not mutually exclusive (Mahoney, Rye, & Pargament 65-67), the connection between the two is not simple. Worthington ("Forgiving") hypothesized what he called the "justice gap"—that is, the gap between the level of justice desired by the injured and the actual level of justice they perceive has been meted out to the offender. According to Worthington, this gap may decrease the likelihood of forgiveness; that is, if the act of offering forgiveness seems to reduce the level of justice provided, i.e. the punishment for wrongdoing is lessened, then the choice to forgive may be less likely. Consequently, for members of a racial

group that has historically and into the present experienced injury and injustice simply because of their race, both at the hands of individuals and through institutional policies, the question of forgiveness cannot be separated from the concerns of justice.

Similarly, Murphy, drawing from a philosophical perspective, warns that “hasty forgiveness” (33), that is, forgiving too soon and forgoing the need for retaliation, can be harmful, leading to reconciliation that might invite further harm. Freedman, Enright, and Knutson agree that premature forgiveness can be counterproductive, but they hold that adhering to the process of forgiveness should preclude the dangers of premature forgiveness. Yet, Murphy (35) calls for a more critical analysis of the thought that forgiveness, especially when done in a thoughtful, timely manner, is an inherently good state. His analysis would pursue the question of how forgiveness and a need for justice actually intersect. For example, Murphy suggests that feelings of resentment and desire for revenge are signs of “self-respect, self-defense, and respect for moral order” and a lack of resentment over being wronged may indicate (or be perceived as) a lack of self-respect and “respect for the rights and status that attach to being a free and equal moral being” (35). Offering forgiveness may actually strip an individual of the self-esteem and power that seeking revenge might engender. Similarly, Sandage and Williamson suggest that even though forgiveness can be an attempt to balance power and control, the “dynamics of power and control are largely neglected in the psychological literature on forgiveness” (44.) This concern raises the question of how an exploration of urban students of color who participate in a forgiveness intervention might change their attitudes towards appropriate ways of responding to injury, whether through administering personal retaliation, seeking legal retribution, or engaging in personal activism to fight injustice. Would participating in a process of forgiveness empower them to fight the sort of injury/injustice they forgave? Or would forgiveness render them passive in face of efforts to reduce injustice?

Attending to these gaps in the field preceded conducting an actual forgiveness intervention with urban youth of color. Consequently, the present study attempts to uncover some of the complexity raised by these limitations, by listening to the voices of the urban youth of color themselves as they discuss their conceptualization/experience of forgiveness, with particular attention to socio-cultural identity and the possibility of collective narrative and the relationship of justice and forgiveness.

Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted with first year high school students at a Midwestern private urban Catholic high school, serving approximately 600 students of color (African American, Hispanic, and Asian American). This research site was chosen because of their openness to the topic of forgiveness, due to the religious focus of their curriculum. A verbal invitation to participate was extended to approximately 150 students enrolled in first year theology classes at the school. Of those 150, 37 students, ages 14-15, agreed and provided parental consent: 21 African American females and 10 African American males, 3 Hispanic females, 1 Hispanic male, 1 Asian American female, and 1 African female immigrant. All were 14-15 years of age; all resided in the city. No data was collected on the socio-economic status of the students, but the majority of the students attending the school qualified

for vouchers, limited to families with incomes up to 200% of poverty level, to cover tuition. Though no question explicitly evoked this information, approximately 30% of the 37 voluntarily described significant levels of violence/injury (parental abandonment, physical/sexual abuse, violent death of family member, or violence done by family member).

Data comprised a 45-minute individual interview with each student, audio-recorded and transcribed, where they discussed their understanding of forgiveness, its importance/lack of importance, reasons to forgive/not to forgive, what forgiveness is *not*, etc. In addition, the students were asked to describe their own experiences with forgiveness and their reactions to hypothetical scenarios that might require forgiveness. These questions were specifically designed to elicit culturally responses related to socio-cultural identity and justice. For example, questions like these were included in the interviews, with follow-up probes: "Who is more likely to be forgiving a person, males or females, or are they about the same?"—"Imagine a scene where a crowd of teenagers has gathered to watch two of their peers fight. One of the potential fighters says, 'Wait a minute. I'm not going to fight. I forgive you. The violence stops here,' and then walks away. How would the crowd react?"—"Imagine two women have been sexually assaulted. One decides to forgive her assailant, the other refuses to forgive. Which of the two will be more likely to work to end sexual violence or will they both be equally likely to do that work?"—"Some injury is done just because of a person's race, an insult, discrimination, or racial violence. Is there a place for forgiveness when that happens?" These interviews, conducted by the author, a white female teacher-educator at a local university, were held during students' lunch hour with food provided.

The transcriptions of the interview data were analyzed first through establishing general coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen 161), with every comment labeled. Data were then analyzed and coded using the definitions of forgiveness found in the literature to see the extent to which each students' perceptions aligned and what new ideas emerged. Finally, the data were analyzed in relation to issues related to cultural identity and justice. The codes derived from this process with each individual interview were then analyzed both within and across cases to identify common themes. The result was the formation of a schema of baseline understanding of the participants' perceptions that would inform a later forgiveness intervention with similar students.

Findings

Related to the first research question, students' conceptualization and described experience of forgiveness closely paralleled the literature. Students, male and female and of all races represented, uniformly described the cost of not forgiving as diminishment of mental, emotional, and physical well-being due to ongoing stress, describing it as "*getting stuck*," "*a ball of fire inside*," "*your heart gets cold*," "*grudge taking over my life*," or "*flipping out*." These responses may have then indicated that students at least indirectly recognized the potential mental, emotional, and physical value of offering forgiveness, which many described as "*relieving stress*," "*dropping a burden from your shoulders*," being able to "*put it in the past*" and "*move on with your life*," and being free to "*be happy with myself*," with one directly saying that "*holding on to anger isn't healthy*" (Harris & Thorreson; Toussaint & Webb). With very few exceptions, their answers also indicated that they agreed with the current understanding of

what forgiveness is *not* (not condoning, forgetting, minimizing, reconciling, trusting, or relinquishing legal punishment) (Enright 28-31; Freedman, Enright, & Knutson; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal).

Some answers given extended beyond the definitions provided in the literature. In particular, several students also articulated their sense of the moral implications of forgiveness/unforgiveness, suggesting that revenge multiplied the initial injury and reduced the one who had been hurt to the level of the wrongdoer. While a small number indicated that any offense was forgivable, most stated that murder was not forgivable since the loss of life could never be replaced. In addition, the students did not describe forgiveness as gaining feelings of empathy, compassion, or any level of beneficence towards the offender. As one student stated, *"Everyone may have dignity, but they don't all deserve my respect."* This raises questions concerning the sufficiency/accuracy of the currently theorized definition of forgiveness that includes developing positive emotions towards the offender.

Related to the second question, the effect of socio-cultural identity and collective narrative on the forgiveness process, the data revealed contradictory findings. As stated earlier, in terms of defining forgiveness and stating the cost of not forgiving and the benefits of forgiving, the answers were fairly consistent between male and female. In their answer to the question of which gender is more likely to forgive, about one third of the students said it depended on the personality and inclination of the individual person, while the rest, male and female students alike, almost equally identified either gender. When asked to explain their answers, nearly all implicated emotion as the basis for their thinking. Some said that girls would be more likely to forgive because of their emotional openness; others said that girls' emotional volatility and *"drama"* would produce more fighting than forgiveness. Among those who stated that boys would be more likely to forgive, emotion was also cited, both in type and in expression; that is, students described males as less emotional— *"tough"* and *"stoical"*—and less inclined to *"drama,"* stating that they would brush aside injury more easily and not engage in conflict. In their focus on avoiding conflict, however, these answers did not address whether or not males would be more forgiving, simply that they would be less likely to engage in conflict. Those who took the opposing view, that males would be less likely to forgive, also named the cause as an apparent lack of emotion in males, that is, they would not have access to the emotional work forgiveness requires, while others identified the emotions related to competition, being the winner, and saving face as the reason for males being less willing to forgive.

The socio-cultural identity of participants as part of a youth culture, in this case the multiple cultures of urban youth of color, also emerged in interviews. When asked if a person who regularly practices forgiveness is a weak or a strong person, participants all responded that a forgiving person is strong. Their reasons for this centered on an acknowledgement of how hard forgiveness is, indicated in comments such as *"that person is a bigger person," "forgiving takes courage," "forgiving takes strength"* and *"forgiveness takes a lot out of you."* Yet, while all stated that a person who is able to forgive is a strong person, every participant claimed that a group of peers would evaluate a teenager's decision to forgive and not engage in a public fight as *"weak," "afraid,"* or *"unable to fight,"* and some suggested that the youth who chose not to fight could then become a more likely target of violence from a wider range of peers. Several

stated that the negative evaluation of the forgiving youth would be accompanied by the crowd's disappointment over not seeing a fight.

Though they stated that this group response might not reflect the thinking of individuals in the group (including themselves), the power of the corporate response, which several identified with thinking common to *"being a teenager"* or *"part of society,"* would be difficult to overcome. When asked what it would take for someone (not necessarily the interviewee personally) to speak out in agreement with and support of the fictive youth who walked away from the fight, they all indicated a degree of personal courage—*"takes guts," "a lot of courage," "it's scary to be called 'scared' too,"* and a *"lot of bravery...it's like being person against society."* One student claimed that *"educated, smart people would support"* the youth choosing to walk away from the fight and that only *"ignorant, uneducated"* people would call her/him weak; however, this student stated that typically there wouldn't be very many of those *"educated"* people in the crowd. These responses seem to validate Sandage and Williamson's theory that cultural groups may bring collective norms and narratives to the task of forgiveness and its corollary of resisting retaliation and violence. The interesting aspect of the findings, however, is that the students almost universally positioned themselves in opposition to the collective narrative they attributed to the youth culture, even though most did not see themselves as standing up and offering a counter-narrative in the scenario.

In relation to the participants' socio-cultural identity as people of color, findings were equally intriguing. The question posed asked students if forgiveness *"has any place"* in response to injury motivated by racism, such as racial slurs, discrimination, or racial violence. One African American male stated emphatically that there was no place for forgiveness, that racial injury was *"unforgiveable"* because *"It's like you ain't giving the person a chance to tell you who they really are."* One other African American boy stated that he would forgive a person who committed a racially based injury if he believed the person acted in ignorance. If the person, however, was knowingly racist, the student said that forgiveness was not appropriate since there would be *"no hope"* for a person who was racist.

The rest of the students' responses to this question were strikingly similar. Several stated that the presence of racial injury was very real and prevalent in their experience; several stated that forgiveness of such offense would be hard. The overriding theme from both male and female participants, however, was that there was a place for forgiveness in the context of racially-based injury. The students then proceeded to minimize the culpability of the offender. For example, students made statements like *"You don't know how they were raised," "They probably didn't realize what they were saying,"* and *"They are just ignorant."* A few students then offered a second level of justification for forgiveness, indicating that their own well-being depended on it. One stated, *"I don't get too deep into that."* Another said, *"You have to let it go and move on."* Yet another, *"If I don't, then I'll be stereotyping them just like they did me."* And finally, one student stated *"I'm still going to be me. I'm still going to be myself, but I'm not going to let what they do, what they say, take away my confidence on how I feel about the world."* For some then, this minimization through reducing culpability seemed to be a way for them to cope with and move on from regularly experienced racially-based injury. The question that remains, however, is the possibility that these responses may also have indicated premature forgiveness (Murphy 33) with the possibility of internalized emotional pain and a reduced ability to resist injustice.

Data on the third question, the relation of forgiveness and justice, revealed interesting responses. Participants were given a scenario, two people injured because of their membership in a socio-cultural group—such as sexual violence or a racially-based hate crime—with one forgiving the offender and the other not. They were then asked which of the two would be more likely to engage in activism to reduce or prevent further violence of that sort—such as join a group to educate young people about sexual violence or to teach them greater racial tolerance. All but a few of the participants stated that the person who forgives acts of racial/gender violence would be more likely to work to end such injustice because they would be *“the stronger person”* and not *“trapped in their anger.”* In this group, some stated that the forgiving person would *“know they can survive and move beyond their pain”* and would *“have hope.”* The corollary comments indicated that the lack of forgiveness would be a hindrance to activism, with the unforgiving person more likely to be *“stuck”* and *“keeping it alive,”* with anger *“taking away their energy”* and leaving him/her in danger of *“snapping.”* None of the students indicated that the unforgiving person would be more likely to engage in activism; rather, several stated that the issue of who would become an activist had less to do with forgiveness and more to do with the *“what type of person they are.”* One student responded that both would equally fight to end injustice since both had been *“violated.”* Another indicated that not forgiving would *“help her fight”* against the injury (sexual violence) but that the forgiving person would not become *“passive”* and would also work against the violence. The more salient factor for this student was *“whether they care about other people or not.”*

Finally, in relation to justice, students were asked about the possibility of forgiving institutions that harm people as opposed to individuals who harm people (e.g., Jim Crow laws, women receiving lower pay for equal work, etc.). Many of the participants were confused by this question, saying either that they had no answer or that one could forgive institutions but they weren't sure how or what it would mean. A small group of participants, however, displayed significant insight into the complexity of responding to systemic injustice. One African American female stated that it would be difficult to forgive without having *“a person to focus on”* but that an individual could forgive and *“try to change the system, to change minds.”* Another African American female indicated that forgiveness would depend on one's ability to fight and change the system, stating that *“if it's just constantly in your face, avoid it, move. You can't forgive if it is surrounding you.”* One African American male described the tension of living in a context where institutions and larger systems form much of the fabric of our lives, even as they continue to enact policies that are inequitable and unjust. He first stated that *“you have to forgive because you have to live in the system.”* He then appeared to backtrack and stated *“but it is good to protest against unjust systems,”* finally reconciling the two positions with the statement that a person can *“forgive and still protest.”* Another African American male stated that he would not forgive if the institution was based on *“deep racism because there is not hope then.”* A Hispanic female student referenced this question to treatment of immigrants and stated that she would not forgive since *“they are denying us. I don't forgive. Without our help, none of this could have been made.”* The level of both confusion and insight raise significant questions about the methodology of this study as well as the developmental nature of the participants' ability to conceptualize the issues.

*

Discussion and Implications

This study contains multiple limitations. Interviews where an adult asks children for their responses is problematic for several reasons including the power differential, developmental limitations of students' understanding of questions, and the students' willingness to sustain lengthy conversation. Having a white interviewer with participants of color also adds to the complexity and the caution we must use in approaching these findings. These issues were exacerbated by the fact that, with 22 of the participants, their classroom teacher had stressed the importance of being interviewed by a professor of a local university, increasing the possibility that students would simply tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. Finally, the atmosphere of the Catholic school very likely shaped the responses. Though the students themselves included Catholics, people of other Christian faith, or people with no apparent religious faith (not asked explicitly, but information volunteered by several), the fact that they were in a religious school where theology is taught may have produced "expected" answers, as well.

Given all these limitations, however, the need to hear the voices of individual students as expressed in qualitative data still remains crucial for any insight into their perceptions of forgiveness. For that reason, more interviews, with students in public secular schools, are needed, perhaps conducted by a person of color who does not represent either the allure or the power of "the university." Also, the fact that answers emerged that were not simply what would be expected from young people speaking with a white adult in a religious school context indicates enough validity to continue exploring the issues.

For example, these findings raise implications regarding the nature of forgiveness as experienced by members of specific socio-cultural groups, in general and in relation to responding to injustice. Rather than being an individual, personal act, forgiveness appears to be embedded in larger collective socio-cultural narratives of race, age, and perhaps gender, as Sandage and Williamson suggest (2005). The role of emotion in relation to gender and forgiveness is apparent, yet no common narrative emerged. The strongest evidence of the power of collective narrative emerged in the conflicted responses that forgiving people are strong yet the evaluation of their peers would be that they are weak. Which answer reveals the students' actual thought? If the response that forgiving people are strong is simply students' providing the "right answer," then their engagement in retaliatory violence would be expected. Yet, if they have answered honestly, that they believe one who walks away from the fight is strong, and if their appraisal of their youth culture's narrative that normalizes retaliatory, even pre-emptive violence is accurate, this finding adds complexity to the theories Zembylas proposes, that collective narratives shape people's perceptions and responses in conflict situations. These students indicated both the power of the collective narrative and, at the same time, the simultaneous presence of their own counter-narratives. Gaining clarity as to what those socio-cultural narratives are, how they shape a collective response of forgiveness/unforgiveness, and what will support the voicing of counter-narratives in urban contexts will require significantly more qualitative investigation.

And finally, the findings regarding forgiveness and racial injury and justice correlated in complex ways. The need to minimize the intent of racial violence seemed to be a coping mechanism to allow the youth to move beyond what they perceived as the entrapment of

anger over racially based hurt. The profession of many, that forgiveness would actually support an individual's efforts actively to resist the perpetuation of injustice and injury, also seems to indicate their belief that releasing anger and desire for revenge is a healthy move that will empower rather than create passivity. Finally, the findings evidence of some students' understanding of the complexity of responding to systemic injury with forgiveness indicates that youth are only beginning to conceptualize the larger experience of structural injustice and how their own response to it may or may not result in productive action, either for themselves or for the betterment of society.

Yet, what may appear to be a successful adaptation to racial injury, that is, release of anger and revenge through a process of forgiveness, may, in fact, be a maladaptive response of internalizing the pain of the injury, leaving individuals less able to resist injustice. Whether the response students' gave to these questions indicates a healthy stance of releasing debilitating anger or a minimizing of injury that only internalizes the pain experienced and perhaps diminishes the empowerment for activism is not clear and warrants serious attention. Moving from individual offender to systemic offender complicates this question further. In particular, further exploration is needed on the role of emotion surrounding these experiences, both expressed within individuals and collectively as politically constitutive forces that can reify relationships of inequitable power, on-going hostility, and Otherness.

Insight into power of the collective socio-cultural narratives to shape the understanding and practice of forgiveness is needed since an educational forgiveness intervention without sufficient attention to the reality and power of collective narratives of socio-cultural identity may be ineffective. This is particularly true in urban settings where students' higher levels of exposure to violence may construct a shared narrative that normalizes retaliatory response. More research on the power of the collective socio-cultural narrative, then, must occur. Does such a narrative impede forgiveness and support violence? Does it prompt premature forgiveness and reduce engagement for greater justice and peacemaking? In addition, how will urban youth of color experience an educational forgiveness intervention? To what extent is the process of forgiveness experienced as an individual action and to what extent is it a collective action embedded in and supported/impeded by the socio-cultural realities of the context? These questions, derived from the findings of this study, hold great importance in the pursuit of greater peace and nonviolence for urban students of color.

References

- Armour, M. P. & Umbreit, M. S. "The paradox of forgiveness in restorative justice." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. Everett L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 491-503
- Bodgan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. *Qualitative research for education. 4th edition*. Boston: Pearson, 2003.
- Dinkes, R., Kemp, J., & Baum, K. *Indicators of school crime and safety*. (NCES 2009-022/NCJ 226343). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, 2009.
- Enright, R. D. *Forgiveness is a choice: A step by step process for resolving anger and restoring hope*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.

- Enright, R. D. & Fitzgibbons, R. P. *Helping clients forgive: An empirical guide for resolving anger and restoring hope*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000.
- Enright, R. D., Knutson Enright, J., & Holter, A. C. "Turning from hatred to community friendship: Forgiveness education as a resource for strategic peacebuilding in a postaccord Belfast." *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World*. Eds. D. Philpott & G. F. Powers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Freedman, S. & Knupp, A. "The impact of forgiveness on adolescent adjustment to parental divorce." *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 39, (2003): 135-165.
- Freedman, S., Enright, R. D., & Knutson, J. "A progress report on the process model of forgiveness." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 393-406
- Gassin, E. A., Enright, R. D., & Knutson, J. "Bringing peace to the central city: Forgiveness education in Milwaukee." *Theory Into Practice*, 44(4), (2005): 319-328.
- Harris, A. H. S. & Thoresen, C. E. "Forgiveness, unforgiveness, health, and disease." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 321-348
- Holter, A. C., Martin, J. & Enright, R. D. "Restoring justice through forgiveness: The case of children in Northern Ireland." *Handbook on Restorative Justice*. Eds. D. Sullivan & L. Tift. New York: Routledge, 2006. 311-319.
- Mahoney, A., Rye, M. S., & K. I. Pargament, K. I. (2005). "When the sacred is violated: Desecration as a unique challenge to forgiveness." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 57-71.
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., Jr., & Rachal, K. C. "Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, (1997): 321- 336.
- Murphy, F. G. (2005). Forgiveness, self-respect, and the value of resentment. *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 33-40.
- Sandage, S. J. & Williamson, I. "Forgiveness in cultural context." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 41-55.
- Toussaint, L. & Webb, J. R. "Theoretical and empirical connections between forgiveness, mental health, and well-being." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 349-362.
- Worthington, E. L., Jr. *Forgiving and reconciling: Bridges to wholeness and hope*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003.
- Worthington, E. L., Jr. "Initial questions about the art and science of forgiving." *Handbook of Forgiveness*. Ed. E. L. Worthington, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2005. 1-14.
- Worthington, E. L., Jr. *The Path to Forgiveness: Leaders' Manual and Guide*. Virginia Commonwealth University. 2006
- Zembylas, M. "The politics of trauma: Empathy, reconciliation, and peace education." *Journal of Peace Education*, 4(2), (2007): 207-224.