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Piloting forgiveness education in a divided community: Comparing electronic pen-pal and journaling activities across two groups of youth

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We used a randomized quasi-experimental design to test the effectiveness of three types of perspective-taking condition in a forgiveness education program. Allport's Contact Hypothesis was used as a framework for the study design. Eighth graders ($n = 132$) in an urban Midwestern city were invited to participate. We evaluated the effectiveness of perspective-taking approaches in promoting forgiveness and reducing prejudice, anger and emotional reactivity. We also explored the effects of forgiveness education across socially and culturally diverse groups. We did not find differences between the perspective-taking conditions; however, all three groups improved on both forgiveness and prejudice. We also found the pattern of outcomes was different for the African American participants than for the European American participants. Implications for research and education are discussed.

Keywords: forgiveness, intervention, perspective-taking, prejudice, school

Introduction

Over the past few years, researchers have conducted several studies of school-based forgiveness programs and have concluded that forgiveness education leads to many positive psychological, behavioral and academic outcomes for students (Gambaro, Enright, Baskin, & Klatt, 2008; Hui & Chau, 2009; Shechtman, Wade, & Khoury, 2009). Furthermore, some have implemented these programs in areas

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with long-standing group conflicts (e.g., Enright, Knutson, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007) and argue that forgiveness education may be able to improve intergroup relationships (Hewstone et al., 2008). Given the known benefits and potential uses of forgiveness education, we believe it is important to compare the effectiveness of different forms of school-based forgiveness education programs and investigate how they affect diverse populations of youth. We explore both of these issues in typical classroom settings.

Our first goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of three different perspective-taking approaches in supporting engagement in the forgiveness process among youth in a divided community. Youth in contentious regions are at risk of psychological compromise that can affect their current and future relationships (Enright et al., 2007). Klatt and Enright (2009) argued researchers can determine the most effective structure and pedagogy for forgiveness education by identifying the process variables used to help youth forgive. Therefore, we used Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis as a framework for designing and testing perspective-taking activities in a school-based forgiveness program that aimed to improve psychological well-being among youth in a divided community. Educators need to know if some educational activities are more effective than others in promoting forgiveness.

Our second goal was to explore the effects of forgiveness education across socially and culturally diverse groups in a highly segregated city. The effectiveness of forgiveness education has been tested with several populations of youth, including youth in Hong Kong (Hui & Chau, 2009), Northern Ireland (Enright et al., 2007), urban Israel (Shechtman et al., 2009) and the United States (Gambaro et al., 2008). However, no known research has directly compared the effectiveness of forgiveness education programs across different groups of youth. Educators do not know if different groups of youth respond to forgiveness programs in varying ways. For example, African American and European American youth in segregated areas often live in different sociocultural contexts, which could result in variations in forms and degrees of interpersonal hurt, levels of continued risk of interpersonal injury and quantities of available resources supporting forgiveness. Therefore, we investigated differences among African American and European American participants' responses to the forgiveness programs.

Forgiveness education programs

Forgiveness education has been proposed as an approach to reducing anger in children who encounter stressful life events. Forgiveness education teaches youth to perceive people who treat them unfairly, and the accompanying injustices, through a wide lens and encourages them to respond with kindness and compassion (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Researchers have conducted several research projects that validate this premise.

Enright and colleagues conducted studies of forgiveness education in developmental ecologies troubled by economic hardships and conflicts (e.g., Enright

et al., 2007). In these studies, children in forgiveness groups reported lowered levels of anger and depression than children in control groups. Freedman and Knupp (2003) reported similar findings in a study of forgiveness education for youth coping with their parents' divorce. Shechtman et al. (2009) found Israeli adolescents who participated in a forgiveness intervention showed greater gains in empathy and endorsed less aggression, revenge and hostility than youth in a control group. Other researchers found forgiveness education increased hope, self-esteem and emotional intelligence (Hui & Chau, 2009). Based on these studies, many conclude forgiveness education has positive effects on the psychological well-being of youth.

Gambaro et al. (2008) showed that the benefits of forgiveness education go beyond psychological well-being. The researchers compared a forgiveness education program to an alternative program on both behavioral and academic variables. The youth in the forgiveness group showed greater gains in academic performance, as measured by grades in two subjects, and greater reductions in behavioral problems, as measured by detentions and suspensions, than youth in the alternative treatment group.

Scholars debate over whether or not an injured person should grant forgiveness, and if this should be conditional or unconditional. Some argue for conditional forgiveness, in which an offended person does not go forward with forgiveness until the offender apologizes and a system of justice is clearly established (Griswold, 2007; Haber, 1991). We take the position that forgiveness can be granted unconditionally; the choice to forgive does not rest on the actions of the offender or on a system of justice, but rather on the offended person's desire for emotional healing. If the offended person must wait on an apology or system of justice, which may never come, then the injured person is trapped in unforgiveness. When understood as an unconditional choice, forgiveness can begin if and when the offended person is ready. The opportunity for positive change rests with the offended person rather than in social circumstances. This conceptualization of forgiveness is consistent with previously published forgiveness education programs (Enright et al., 2007; Freedman & Knupp, 2003; Gambaro et al., 2008).

Forgiveness has benefits for youth. However, few studies compare specific educational activities to determine the optimal structure and pedagogy of forgiveness education programs.

Communication and writing activities in forgiveness education

For centuries, scholars have argued that dialogue has an important role in relationships. Socrates emphasized the importance of dialogue for helping groups of people understand one another more deeply (see for example Plato's *Republic* as translated by Grube & Reeve, 1992). Aristotle extended this line of thinking to emphasize the role of dialogue in fostering friendships (e.g., Enright, Knutson Enright, & Holter, 2010). In modern psychology, Allport (1954) proposed his Contact Hypothesis, which states that interactions between people from minority and majority groups can reduce prejudice; interactions lead group members to a

deeper understanding and appreciation of each other. Researchers have found some evidence that direct communication can reduce interpersonal conflicts. For example, research on victim–offender mediation (McGarrell, 2001; Umbreit, 1989) demonstrates victims of crime can benefit from interacting with their offenders. The potential importance of dialogue in promoting positive relationships among individuals and groups has led scholars to call for dialogue about forgiveness between people from contentious groups (Hewstone et al., 2008; Tam et al., 2007). They believe direct contact will help people on both sides of a conflict understand the other’s perspectives and actions more accurately, which will increase forgiveness and diminish prejudice.

Communication and writing exercises are commonly used in forgiveness education programs (Fincham & Beach, 2002). Although Klatt and Enright (2011) demonstrated that dialogue between a victim and an offender can promote forgiveness, additional research could help educators understand how to incorporate dialogue in forgiveness education programs. Several researchers have found writing exercises facilitate forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006; Romero, 2008). McCullough et al. (2006) explored how writing about the benefits of an interpersonal transgression affected forgiveness. Participants were assigned to one of three groups in which they responded to writing prompts. Participants wrote about either a traumatic aspect of a recent hurtful incident, personal benefits of a hurtful incident or a control topic that was not related to interpersonal injury. Participants in the benefit-finding condition showed a greater positive change in forgiveness than participants in the other two groups. Romero (2008) conducted a similar study in which participants were assigned to one of three 20-minute writing tasks. Members of one group wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to a transgression. Members of another group wrote about benefits to the self and the transgressor if the participant forgave the transgressor. The third group was a control condition, and wrote about daily events. The group that wrote about the benefits of forgiving experienced reduced avoidance and increased perspective-taking. The other groups did not experience these outcomes.

Some communication/writing activities may be more effective than others. We used the Contact Hypothesis as a framework for testing three communication/writing exercises in a school-based forgiveness program among youth living in a divided community. Members of two groups engaged in written communication with a peer. In one of these groups students were paired with a peer from the same community and in the other group students were paired with a peer from the ‘other’ community. The third group of students kept a reflective journal.

Although dialogue with an offender and writing exercises are important for the forgiveness process, studies have not compared school-based forgiveness programs using different types of communication and journaling exercises. One obstacle to doing so has been the difficulty in bringing students from two highly divided communities into close and sustained contact. The programs presented here allowed students to safely study forgiveness as part of their school’s curricular offerings. The schools where the study took place are segregated along racial lines; therefore

contact among students across racial groups is significant. Young people were able to get to know fellow students from the 'other side' in an attempt to reduce prejudice.

Differences in forgiveness across groups

Researchers have explored the relationships between forgiveness and several demographic and social variables. Their findings indicate that people across demographic and social groups have different tendencies to forgive. It is possible that the effectiveness of forgiveness education programs also varies across groups. Educators need to know if this is the case so they can tailor the pedagogy of forgiveness curricula to meet the needs of specific groups.

Researchers consistently find age and gender differences in forgiveness. One of the early empirical studies of forgiveness explored the relationship between the ways in which youth reason about forgiveness and the ways in which they reason about justice. There were age-related differences in both types of reasoning (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989). Ghaemmaghami, Allemand, and Martin (2011) examined age differences in forgiveness among younger, middle-aged and older adults. They found forgiveness was more common in the everyday life of middle-aged adults compared to younger ones. In a meta-analysis, Miller, Worthington, and McDaniel (2008) found females were more forgiving than males and vengeance had the largest gender difference of all measures related to forgiveness. Orathinkal, Vansteenwegen, and Burggraeve (2008) investigated the relationship between forgiveness and several demographic variables. They found forgiveness is more common in women than in men and that number of children and educational attainment had a significant positive association with forgiveness.

Researchers have also studied the effects of social factors on forgiveness. For example, Toussaint and Williams (2008) studied various dimensions of forgiveness in Protestant, Catholic and non-religious groups. They found religious affiliation and spirituality accounted for differences in forgiveness. The community in which one grows up can also influence forgiveness. Youth growing up in violent communities have higher levels of anger and aggression than children in non-violent communities (Enright et al., 2007; Shahinfar, Kupersmidt, & Matza, 2001).

McFarland, Smith, Toussaint, and Thomas (2012) argue a complete understanding of how forgiveness relates to health requires consideration of race and social context. Using data from the Religion, Aging, and Health Survey, McFarland et al. (2012) found forgiving others had a protective effect on health for African Americans, but not Caucasians. In addition, for African Americans there was an interaction between forgiveness and neighborhood. The positive effects of forgiveness on health did not extend to those living in deteriorating neighborhoods.

Based on these studies, it is reasonable to ask if forgiveness education should be structured in a 'one-size-fits-all' fashion. It is possible, for example, that not all youth will respond to an educational program in the same manner. Youth from relatively safe neighborhoods may be more responsive to forgiveness education

than youth from violent neighborhoods who have greater experience with both actual and potential threats of injury. Studying forgiveness programs across groups will lead to more effective forgiveness education.

Hypotheses

We tested two hypotheses. First, we used Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis to structure an investigation of the effectiveness of pen-palling as a form of communication in forgiveness education. We hypothesized the participants with a pen-pal from the 'other side' of the divided community would show greater gains on forgiveness and greater reductions in anger, prejudice and emotional reactivity than participants in other pen-pal conditions. This hypothesis was based on the idea that students would learn more about forgiveness by interacting with peers who had different life experiences and perspectives to share.

Second, we hypothesized the intervention would be effective for both the African American and European American youth in the sample. However, based on the literature suggesting that demographic and social factors affect forgiveness, we thought the pattern of effects could be different across the two groups. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we did not have specific hypotheses on how the patterning of effects may differ.

Methods

The hypotheses were evaluated using a quasi-experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of three writing/communication conditions. Pretest and follow-up measurements were taken and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data.

Participants

Eighth-grade classrooms in an urban Midwestern city were invited to participate in this study. We contacted school principals via email and made in-person visits to explain the study. When a classroom teacher agreed to participate, a member of the research team visited the classroom and gave a short presentation to the students that explained the study and parental consent. The research team member also answered questions from the teachers and students. Participating classrooms received \$500; instructors knew about the incentive prior to agreeing to participate in the study.

This study had three treatment conditions: two pen-pal groups and one individual journaling group. The three conditions included activities for the participants to either communicate with their partners or reflect individually about concepts presented in the curriculum. In one pen-pal condition students from the same racial group were paired (e.g. an African American student with another African American student) and in the other, students from across the racial groups were

paired (e.g., an African American student with a European American student). In the journaling condition participants worked individually.

Roughly equal numbers of African American and European American participants were needed for the pen-pal part of the study to work correctly. Due to the segregated nature of schools in the city where the study was conducted, many classrooms were 100% African American or 100% European American. Therefore, when a classroom agreed to participate, there was a focused effort to recruit another classroom with the opposite demographic background. For example, when three eighth-grade classrooms in an almost exclusively African American school agreed to participate, a large effort was made to recruit schools with primarily European American students. Students who returned both a parent/guardian consent form and a self-assent form were included in the study. Students were blocked by racial group, African American or European American, and then randomly assigned to the three conditions. Students in the pen-pal conditions were then randomly matched to a pen-pal. Students were removed from data analysis if they switched schools or were expelled during the study. The final data set consisted of 132 eighth-graders ($m = 13.48$ years, $sd = .56$ years). The sample was 48.5% female and 51.5% male, 47.7% African American and 52.3% European American.

Procedures

After a sufficient number of schools agreed to participate and the teachers received training, the forgiveness program was implemented. We developed a secure website for this study to communicate with participants and allow the participants to communicate with their pen-pals or make journal entries. Group membership was communicated to students via the website. Writing prompts facilitated the pen-pal interactions and journaling activities. Students read the prompts and submitted their responses through the website.

All of the schools started the program the same week of the semester. Although spring recess schedules differed across schools, all classrooms progressed through the program within two weeks of one another. A member of the research team emailed all teachers weekly to remind them which lesson they should deliver. Teachers were also told if other classrooms were behind so they could prepare their students for the possibility that pen-pals were working on a different lesson.

A member of the research team also emailed each teacher a list of how many pen-pal messages, or journal entries, each student completed each week. Teachers could then encourage those who got behind to contact their pen-pals, or make journal entries. Teachers delivered the content of the lessons and tracked participation, but were blind to group membership.

We collected pretest data one week prior to the program and follow-up data three weeks after the program ended. This allowed knowledge of whether effects lasted after the intervention. We used Qualtrics, an online survey tool, to administer all assessment measures. Instruments were presented in random order to prevent order effects. Students completed the assessments in a school computer

lab. At least one researcher was present at all assessment periods to read instructions and guide students through the instruments.

Forgiveness curriculum

The forgiveness program was a 12-week curriculum based on the Forgiveness Process Model (FPM, Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). The FPM focuses on anger reduction and has been validated (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). The model describes what people do cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally as they move through the forgiveness process. The model has 20 individual guideposts distributed over four phases. In the first phase, the Uncovering Phase, injured people become aware of their anger and how they are responding. In the second phase, the Decision Phase, injured people examine options for responding to the transgressor and choose to work toward forgiveness. In the third phase, the Work Phase, injured people reframe the offender and cultivate empathy and compassion for the offender. In the fourth phase, Discovery and Release from Emotional Prison, injured people see that they are not alone, find meaning in the injury they experienced and find new purpose in life. The FPM is meant to be flexible to accommodate individual differences in types of injury and coping resources.

We organized the 12 sessions around important forgiveness concepts. Teachers delivered a single hour-long lesson per week. Each lesson began with a review of the previous week's content, then teachers presented new forgiveness concepts. Group activities helped students deepen their understanding of forgiveness. Sessions concluded with a review and explanation of the homework along with instructions for communicating with pen-pals or journal entries. Although participants were asked to apply forgiveness concepts to an instance of unfair treatment during the program, they were not compelled to forgive. Following Aristotle (Ross, 2011), the curriculum emphasized one never practices any virtue in isolation from other virtues, specifically stressing the need to pursue justice while practicing forgiveness. The curriculum also distinguished forgiveness from reconciliation.

We randomly selected two lessons to observe in each participating classroom to assess program fidelity. One week before visiting, we informed the classroom instructor we would be observing the session and asked for the lesson plan. We then evaluated the content of the lesson and activities relative to the program curriculum. With this analysis, we concluded that the teachers accurately followed the program curriculum in every observed session.

Measures

Forgiveness. We measured forgiveness with two instruments. First, the Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children (EFI-C; Enright, 1993) is a 30-item scale assessing cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to one who was unfair. A child identifies a person who hurt him or her and then answers a series of questions. A sample item includes 'Do you think of ways to get even with the person?' Items are

rated on a four-point scale with 1=Yes, 2=A little bit yes, 3=A little bit no or 4=No. Scores range from 30 to 120, with a high score representing higher forgiveness. Cronbach's alpha was .94, similar to previous studies (Gambaro et al., 2008).

Second, we administered the Willingness to Forgive Scale (Hebl & Enright, 1993) to assess participants' tendencies to choose forgiveness as a problem-solving strategy. The scale has nine hypothetical scenarios that each have nine possible courses of action. For each scenario, participants select three courses of action that represent (1) how they would respond right away, (2) how they would deal with the problem after a period of time and (3) the best, or ideal, way to respond. A sample scenario includes, 'Shots are fired in your neighborhood by someone of another race.' Several of the responses include: Talk with a friend, Get even (revenge), Seek a fair solution (talk out the problem with the person), Just try to forget (put it behind me), Physical activity (play football, sports, etc.) and Forgive (cease resentment and view the person with compassion). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .67.

Prejudice. We developed a scale to assess two dimensions of prejudice. Questions assessed how participants think about ($n = 8$) and behave toward ($n = 8$) others from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. A sample item is 'People from the other group tend to be more violent than my group'. Participants respond to items on a six-point scale: 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Slightly disagree), 4 (Slightly agree), 5 (Agree) and 6 (Strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .86.

Emotional Reaction. We developed a 12-item Emotional Reaction (ER) scale to assess how participants feel about others from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. A sample item is 'When I think of people who are different from me ethnically/culturally I feel fear.' Items have a six-point scale: 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Slightly disagree), 4 (Slightly agree), 5 (Agree) and 6 (Strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .86.

Anger. We used the Beck Anger Inventory for Youth (BANI, Beck, Beck, & Jolly, 2001) to measure anger. The BANI is a 20-item scale assessing perceptions of mistreatment, negative thoughts about others, feelings of anger and physiological arousal. A sample item is 'When I get mad, I have trouble getting over it'. Participants respond to items on a four-point scale: 1 (Never), 2 (Sometimes), 3 (Often) and 4 (Always). Convergent validity with other measures of anger is reported as adequate and the Cronbach's alpha is reported as .91 (Beck, Beck, & Jolly, 2001). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .90.

Results

We present means and standard deviations on each measure for the three groups in Table 1. Parametric tests were selected for all analyses. An initial multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) test was conducted on the pretest

Table 1. Means and standard deviations on each measure for each intervention condition

	Cross-community		Within-community		Journaling	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
EFL-C	81.11 (25.404)	95.58 (32.792)	86.41 (22.104)	101.79 (29.337)	85.21 (21.721)	100.23 (29.741)
WTF	2.24 (2.423)	2.98 (2.667)	1.25 (1.480)	2.35 (2.256)	2.20 (2.119)	3.27 (3.675)
ER	29.76 (7.631)	31.24 (7.989)	34.27 (8.777)	33.28 (7.839)	32.73 (10.031)	32.07 (9.138)
Prejudice	33.96 (10.014)	33.89 (10.406)	40.61 (9.558)	38.19 (10.375)	38.91 (11.091)	35.80 (12.034)
BANI	20.55 (8.463)	20.20 (10.326)	19.79 (9.357)	20.58 (10.020)	19.60 (8.790)	18.41 (8.131)
Total messages	19.42 (7.219)	–	21.66 (7.051)	–	20.73 (4.843)	–

scores for each group to investigate preexisting differences on the dependent measures. The omnibus test was significant, $F = 2.029$, $p = .031$, $r^2 = .977$. Two measures, Willingness to Forgive ($F = 3.381$, $p = .037$, $r^2 = .050$) and Prejudice ($F = 5.087$, $p = .007$, $r^2 = .073$), had significant differences between the pen-pal groups. The cross-community group scored significantly higher on Willingness to Forgive and scored significantly lower on Prejudice than the within-community group. Despite random assignment, the groups differed on outcome variables at the pretest. We address this issue in the discussion section.

Group differences

To investigate group differences, we compared the groups' change scores on each measure. We chose to compare change scores rather than follow-up scores because of the preexisting group differences. We calculated change scores by subtracting follow-up scores from pretest scores. We compared the change scores on each dependent measure using directional MANOVA. Directional tests were used because our theoretical framework suggested the cross-community group would produce increased perspective-taking. The omnibus test was not significant, $F = .570$, $p = .838$, indicating there were no differences in the amount of change each group reported on the outcome measures. Based on our findings we conclude that the participants in the cross-community intervention did not make greater positive progress on the outcome measures than the participants in the other two groups. It is worth noting that the groups did differ in their level of engagement. The paired peers in the cross-community group had a significantly lower number of interactions than the paired peers in the within-community group, $t = 6.02$, $p < .0001$, $r^2 = .218$. We address this in the discussion section.

Given Osterndorf, Enright, Holter, and Klatt's (2011) study in which both a forgiveness intervention and an alternative intervention proved effective, a second question of interest emerged. Were there no between-group differences because the interventions were ineffective, or because participants in each of the interventions improved on the outcome measures? To answer this question, directional matched-pair t tests were used to analyze within-group change for all participants as one group. Directional tests were used because many studies demonstrate forgiveness interventions produce positive effects (see Baskin & Enright, 2004 for a meta-analysis). The Bonferroni correction was used to control family-wise type 1 error. With the correction, the p value of each comparison needed to be less than, or equal to, .01 to be significant. Participants showed significant improvement on three measures from pretest to follow-up: EFI-C, $t = -7.993$, $p < .00$, $r^2 = .073$; WTF, $t = -3.810$, $p < .00$, $r^2 = .0350$; and Prejudice, $t = 2.301$, $p = .01$, $r^2 = .0075$. The forgiveness program was therapeutic across the groups.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for each ethnic group

	African American		European American	
	Pretest Mean (SD)	Follow-up Mean (SD)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Follow-up Mean (SD)
EFI-C	82.30 (24.77)	96.72 (29.3)	85.62 (21.22)	101.44 (31.73)
WTF	1.34 (1.69)	1.83 (2.72)	2.43 (2.30)	3.85 (2.80)
ER	34.06 (8.35)	33.14 (8.59)	30.47 (9.34)	31.28 (8.02)
PREJ	37.55 (10.59)	36.92 (12.30)	38.03 (10.66)	34.99 (9.67)
BANI	21.16 (9.64)	21.55 (10.67)	18.50 (7.80)	18.01 (8.00)
Total Messages	17.45 (7.18)		23.5 (4.03)	

Ethnic differences

The current study provides an opportunity to investigate how different populations of students respond to forgiveness education. We explored this issue in two ways. First, we examined patterns in the inter-scale correlation coefficients on the pretest scores for the African American students and the European American students. Second, we compared the pattern of within-group change for the two groups. We present the means and standard deviations of each outcome measure for the African American and European American students in Table 2.

For the African American students ($n = 64$) only one inter-scale correlation was significant. The ER and Prejudice scales had a significant positive correlation, $r = .415$, $p = .001$. For the European American students ($n = 68$) two inter-scale correlations were significant. The EFI-C and BANI scales had significant negative relationships, $r = -.272$, $p = .025$. The ER and Prejudice scales had a significant positive correlation, $r = .718$, $p < .000$.

To examine the patterns of within-group change for the two groups we calculated directional matched-pair t tests for each measure. We used the Bonferroni correction to control family-wise type 1 error. With the correction, the p -value of each comparison needed to be less than, or equal to, .01 to be significant. From pretest to follow-up, the African American participants changed significantly on the EFI-C, $t = -5.488$, $p < .000$, $r^2 = .0658$. From pretest to follow-up, the European American participants changed significantly on the EFI-C, $t = -5.779$, $p = .000$, $r^2 = .0791$; WTF, $t = -4.608$, $p = .000$, $r^2 = .0713$; and Prejudice, $t = 3.225$, $p = .001$, $r^2 = .0218$ scales.

Discussion

Several researchers have found forgiveness education can improve psychological health and academic functioning for school-aged youth (Enright et al., 2007; Gambaro et al., 2008; Shechtman et al., 2009). We studied forgiveness education in a divided community because of the psychological risk that accompanies living in a contentious region (Enright et al., 2007). This study was the first investigation

of a forgiveness program that brought youth from both sides of a divided community into contact with one another. Researchers have not yet determined if some educational activities are more effective than others in promoting forgiveness. We piloted an innovative pen-pal design that used Allport's Contact Hypothesis as an organizational framework. We directly compared three types of perspective-taking condition to discover the best methods of structuring forgiveness education. In one group students were paired across divided groups, in another peers from the same community were paired and in the third, students completed individual journaling exercises.

We thought students would learn more about forgiveness from interacting with peers who had different life experiences and perspectives to share than from peers who were similar. However, we did not find group differences on the outcome measures. We followed the between-group analyses with within-group tests. When combining the groups we found participants exhibited significant improvement on EFI-C, WTF and Prejudice. All three groups were therapeutic.

We also wondered if the African American and European American students would respond to forgiveness education in the same way. Previous research suggests there may be differences in forgiveness across groups (e.g., Miller et al., 2008; Toussaint & Williams, 2008). We explored this issue in two ways. First, we examined patterns in the inter-scale correlation coefficients on the pretest scores of each measure for the African American students and the European American students. The European American group had an important relationship between anger and forgiveness that was not present in the African American group. Both groups had correlations between ER and Prejudice. However, the relationship was stronger for the European Americans.

Second, we explored patterns of within-group change for the African American and European American groups separately. From pretest to follow-up, the African American participants reported significant change on degree of forgiveness. For these students, forgiveness education improved their degree of forgiveness, but did not have a significant effect on their psychological well-being (ER and BANI) or attitudes toward other groups (Prejudice). From pretest to follow-up, the European American participants had significant change on both forgiveness measures and Prejudice. However, the interventions did not have a significant effect on their psychological well-being (ER and BANI). We conclude the program was more successful for the European American group than for the African American group. Baskin and Enright (2004) found longer forgiveness interventions had stronger results. It is possible that a longer or more intense educational program would produce positive change on Willingness to Forgive and Prejudice for the African American participants. Given findings in other research, it is possible that social factors would interfere with the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being and prejudice. For example, as noted earlier, McFarland et al. (2012) found the positive effects of forgiveness on health were not present for African Americans living in deteriorating neighborhoods. Although interventions may increase forgiveness for all groups, the other benefits of forgiveness interventions

might differ across groups. This study cannot determine why the intervention did not affect psychological health and prejudice for the African American students. Additional research can identify factors that account for our findings.

Although our results were not as strong as we expected, we recommend testing this intervention method again. Based on our search of the literature, this is the first forgiveness program to bring groups from a divided community into contact with one another. In this pilot study we learned the pen-pal intervention method can work logistically and can be implemented safely. We believe this method of promoting interactions among groups could be implemented in other contentious or divided communities with both youth and adults. We recommend using outcome measures commonly found in other forgiveness intervention studies. In this study we developed two measures, which provided greater flexibility to measure dimensions of emotional reactivity and prejudice that we thought would change; however, it also meant using measures with an unknown relationship to forgiveness. Measures commonly used in forgiveness education research may have produced different results.

We also learned there may be barriers to participation which are important for the success of the program. Participation in the intervention was not consistent across the groups. The participants in the cross-community group had a significantly lower number of interactions than the participants in the within-community group. Studies using similar methods should plan for this challenge. There may be some additional supports needed by the cross-community group. For example, the cross-community group could be given more structured directions for interactions. Larger efforts could be made to introduce the cross-community pairs to one another. The additional structure may be needed to get the cross-community pairs feeling comfortable and motivated to interact with each other. The cross-community group relied on peer-to-peer interactions to help each member of the dyad expand his or her perspective. If participants did not adhere to this part of the intervention, they did not receive the full benefit of the intervention.

Many potential barriers exist to conducting a study like this, in which two contentious groups were brought into contact with one another. We had some success by focusing on segregated populations. However, this was not a perfect test of the Contact Hypothesis. Participants were from different parts of a segregated city, but not necessarily in direct conflict with one another. We recognize that bringing together victim/perpetrator pairs would be an ideal test of the Contact Hypothesis; however, our goal was to implement and test a forgiveness intervention in a typical educational setting. Identifying appropriate victim/perpetrator pairs would make implementing a study like this in a typical educational setting impractical. Although in this pilot study we did not limit the hurts participants were working through to instances involving prejudice, a future study could focus specifically on injustices related to between-group conflicts.

Limitations

At pretest, the cross-community group scored significantly higher on Willingness to Forgive and significantly lower on Prejudice than the within-community group. The cross-community group may have been more ready to forgive their offenders than the within-community group. In addition, the cross-community group did not have as much opportunity to improve on Prejudice, given it started the study with lower scores than the within-community group. This complicates the interpretation of the findings. Were there no differences because the interventions were equally effective, or because of pre-existing differences?

We only collected data one week before the intervention and three weeks after the intervention because of the amount of school time taken to complete the tests. A posttest right after the intervention may have shown important nuances in the pattern of results.

We used change scores for the tests of between-group differences. Due to error inherent in all pretest and posttest measurement, change scores may be unreliable. As this area of research receives more attention, researchers will be able to develop theoretical models of forgiveness that specify how demographic and program variables affect dependent variables. This will allow researchers to use different analyses, such as hierarchical regression, that can improve reliability.

We feel the results of this study extend the existing literature on forgiveness education. We describe a unique approach to stimulating perspective taking and increasing understanding between groups of people. Although we did not find between-group differences, the combined groups benefited from forgiveness education. This study also allowed us to explore how different groups of students respond to forgiveness education. With additional research, educators can determine the best pedagogy for forgiveness programs with different groups of students.

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