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Forgiveness among college students with past bullying victimization experiences

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Dissertation

FORGIVENESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH PAST BULLYING VICTIMIZATION EXPERIENCES

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

2017

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my little brother Ming, who has inspired me to start this journey, reminded me to run at my own pace, and cheered me cross the finish line.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Boston University School of Education and the faculty at the Counseling Psychology and Applied Human Development Cluster for offering me the opportunity to pursue my dream of becoming a counseling psychologist. To my committee, Dr. Melissa Holt, Dr. Jennifer Green, and Dr. Steven Sandage, I am deeply grateful for all your generous academic and emotional support throughout my dissertation project and years of training. I would also like to thank the Social Adjustment and Bullying Prevention Lab at BU School of Education for all of your support. To my colleagues at Arlington School and Cambridge Health Alliance, thank you for giving me a home I could always return to. To all the patients I've had the privilege to work with throughout the years, thank you all for teaching me about love, compassion and humor. My deepest gratitude goes to my family and friends in China and in the US for being with me through sleepless nights, moments of doubt and uncertainty, and for sharing my pride and joy along the way. Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Melissa Holt, my mentor and advisor, whose kindness, humility, diligence, generosity and integrity will continue to inspire me for the rest of my life.

FORGIVENESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS
WITH PAST BULLYING VICTIMIZATION EXPERIENCES

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Boston University School of Education, 2017

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ABSTRACT

Current literature has highlighted the positive associations between forgiveness and mental health, and the negative associations between childhood bullying victimization experiences and individuals' psychological functioning. However, little is known about the how students with childhood bullying victimization experiences understand forgiveness, or the relationship between forgiveness and students' college experience and mental health. In this study, 15 senior year college students from a Northeastern university who reported bullying victimization experiences prior to college participated in semi-structured interviews and described their past bullying victimization, their college experience as well as their perspectives on forgiveness. Analysis of the interviews identified (a) the negative impact of bullying victimization; (b) forgiveness as a coping strategy; (c) forgiveness as a situational construct, as well as key facilitators of forgiveness among college students reporting past bullying victimization experiences. A model of forgiveness among college students with past bullying victimization experiences is proposed, and implications of these findings for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: bullying victimization, forgiveness, college mental health, qualitative methodology

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Extensive research has shown that exposure to bullying victimization experiences during childhood and adolescence is associated with psychological distress (e.g. Holt et al., 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2009; Finkelhor et al., 2008). Although limited effort has been focused on the experience of college students exposed to bullying victimization, current literature shows that childhood negative peer experiences can not only have an impact on various domains of college experience including psychological, social, and interpersonal functioning (Rosen et al., 2012; Aosved & Long, 2011; Himelein, 1995), but are associated with individuals' long-term adjustment later in life (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Lund et al., 2008). When combined with past negative peer interactions, college students meeting the demands of social and academic challenges posed by higher education may experience heightened stress.

With the high level of bullying victimization among youth and the general agreement in the literature on the associations between such transgressions and social emotional problems in youth (e.g. Finkelhor, 2008), researchers have been making extensive effort to find ways to buffer the negative consequences of bullying victimization. Among these efforts, research on forgiveness-based prevention and intervention has become a burgeoning field of scientific research. Though defined differently by different people, forgiveness has traditionally been seen as a conscious decision to let go of negative emotions related the transgressor(s) and transgression(s)

(Thompson et al., 2005; Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000). It is also identified as an aspect of a person's individual capacity that can be both stable and changed (Worthington, 1998). Researchers have highlighted the positive associations between individuals' psychological functioning and situational and dispositional forgiveness (Baskin & Enright, 2004). However, very limited effort has been devoted to the study of forgiveness among the youth and little is known about whether or how forgiveness might influence the relationship between bullying involvement and mental health among college students exposed to past bullying victimization experiences. In order to further explore best prevention and intervention strategies that buffer against the negative consequences of bullying victimization, it is worthwhile to investigate forgiveness in youth exposed to such transgressions, and to address questions related to the role and the process of forgiveness as college students meet with different challenges as they transition into different stages of development, such as different social groups and academic demands.

To bridge the gaps in current literature, this proposed qualitative study aims to understand: 1) the relationship between forgiveness and psychological functioning among college students exposed to past bullying victimization; 2) the relationship between individuals' college experience and their understanding of forgiveness.

Purpose of the Study

Overall, current literature presents strong evidence of the positive role forgiveness plays in individuals' mental health functioning (Worthington, 1998;

McCoulough et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2000; Wade et al., 2005). Forgiveness-based treatment has been considered one of the most important and effective clinical interventions for people who have suffered from adverse or traumatic events (Enright, 2001). It is of essential importance to continue developing our knowledge about the potential role of forgiveness as a reactive coping strategy for current stressors, as well as a part of students' moral and cognitive developmental process that might benefit their later adjustment in life.

The purpose of the current study is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and psychological functioning among youth who have been exposed to peer victimization. This research will address the current gap in the literature and provide further information on the role and the developmental process of forgiveness among college students reporting past bullying victimization. This research also aims to provide further evidence for the role forgiveness plays in individuals' mental health.

Research questions

This proposed qualitative study aims to understand:

1) What is the relationship between forgiveness and psychological functioning among college students exposed to past bullying victimization?
2) What is the relationship between students' college experiences and their perspectives on forgiveness?

Significance of the Study

Despite a lack of empirical research so far, the study of forgiveness among college students exposed to past bullying victimization can have important implications for researchers and mental health professionals working with this population. As negative interpersonal experiences can be part of life, it is quite natural that young people may bring up issues of forgiveness or revenge when addressing past victimization experiences. It is therefore, highly important that clinicians could identify moments when opportunities present themselves as individuals express intentions directly or indirectly to work on forgiveness. Findings of this research could potentially generate results that might inform the development of valid and reliable forgiveness that help with assessing youth' situational and dispositional forgiveness. Besides addressing youth's past victimization experiences, integrating forgiveness in the therapeutic relationship may also help with developing new relational experiences and serve as a safe space for developing secure relational attachment that may lead to potentially positive growth. Processing and letting go such emotions may help youth create a distance between the past and the present, and thus increases their ability to be more mindful of new opportunities of joy and happiness. Forgiveness can also be potentially integrated into other empirically proved effective clinical interventions among college students such as mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions or behavioral-focused therapies. In cases when individuals find it challenging to forgive the perpetrators of aggressions, it might also be helpful to assist youth with self-forgiveness, which could potentially build higher level of tolerance for negative events as well as higher level of resilience to deal with adverse experiences that

may occur in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Bullying Victimization in Youth

As one type of interpersonal transgression and one of the most prevalent types of victimization among youth, bullying poses serious public health threats to individuals, families and communities (CDC, 2014). According to a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, bullying is defined as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated” (CDC, 2014, p.1). A 2011 national survey revealed that 20% of youth reported bullying involvement at school during the past year (Eaton et al., 2012).

The association between bullying victimization and youth’s emotional and academic problems has been well documented in the literature. In general, targets of school bullying perpetration can be at higher risk for emotional problems than uninvolved youth (Klomek et al., 2007; Sourander et al., 2007). A recent meta-analysis conducted by Holt and colleagues (2015) revealed that bullying involvement in any capacity is linked with suicidal ideation and behaviors in youth. Some other studies (e.g. Borowsky et al., 2003; Espelage & Holt, 2003) presented similar findings, stating that relational peer perpetration can be a significant contributor to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Some researchers argued that bullying victimization can be a significant risk factor for psychopathology (e.g. Arseneault et al., 2010). Also, bullying victimization is found to be

linked with general psychosocial functioning in youth. In a recent study, Green and colleagues (2011) attempted to identify individual-level and school-level variables associating with bullying in Boston public school students and found that students' experience of psychological distress may be associated with individual experiences of bullying. Holt et al. (2007) found that even after controlling for other forms of victimization such as dating violence and sexual aggression, bullying involvement is still found to be associated with psychosocial functioning.

Recent research effort has also been focusing on the association between bullying involvement and academic performance. Current literature presents mixed results regarding the impact of bullying victimization on academic performance in college. For example, although Eliot and colleagues (2009) found a positive correlation between past victimization and students' academic performance in college, another multi-site study of college students found no relation between history of bullying victimization and academic performance (Holt et al., 2015).

A large-scale study of 7343 adolescents from 56 schools in Norway, for example, reported a direct positive association between lower grades and bullying victimization (Strom et al., 2013). Perceived bullying experiences can also influence educational attainment leading to more high school dropout and less college enrollment (Cornell et al., 2013). Other researchers pointed out that bullying experiences can lead to compromised academic engagement due to psychological distress and thus affect academic performance (Juvonen et al., 2011; Kartal & Bilgin, 2009).

Associations with College and Later Life Adjustment. Traditionally, research on students' adjustment has been focused on pre-college school settings and very limited research has been devoted to the effects of bullying and the adjustment of youth from high school to college. Peer victimization in early life can severely affect the quality and various domains of an individual's adult life. According to the results of a recent large-scale study of 1420 young adults, targets of bullying in childhood and adolescence presented higher rate of psychiatric disorders in early adulthood including panic disorders, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder and depression after controlling for childhood psychiatric disorders and family problems (Copeland et al., 2013). In this same study, bullying perpetrators also showed high risk for anti-social personality disorder (Copeland et al., 2013). Lund et al. (2008) also found that bullying victimization experience is a strong predictor for adult depression in men. In addition to mental health problems, researchers have found links between childhood bullying experiences and relational difficulties, income status, as well as poor physical health in adulthood (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Allison et al., 2009; Brown & Taylor, 2008; Schafer et al., 2004; Sigurdson et al., 2014). For example, Sigurdson and colleagues (2014) found that bullying could have significant social costs such as poor psychosocial adjustment in adulthood even 12 years after the aggressions occurred. More specifically, individuals involved in bullying as a child in any capacity reported poorer general health and higher level of tobacco use, as well as higher level of unemployment in adulthood compared with uninvolved individuals (Sigurdson et al., 2014).

Most college students are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, a period of

time when students face novel challenges as they move away from home and enter into a new social and academic environment. Students could also be exposed to risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol abuse on college campuses (Labrie et al., 2007). Labrie and colleagues (2007) have found that, for example, increased drinking behavior among female college students is associated with peer influence, sorority involvement, and the willingness to try out new things in a new environment. Individuals who have experienced childhood victimization are also at greater risk for college adjustment difficulties, particularly those with exposure to high cumulative levels of victimization (Elliot, 2009). Prior negative peer experiences can have an impact on various domains of college experience including psychological, social, and interpersonal functioning (Rosen et al., 2012; Aosved & Long, 2011; Himelein, 1995). Issues like substance abuse, sexual risk-taking and subsequent aggression have been highlighted (Kendra et al., 2012; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2011; Marx & Sloan, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). Aosved and Long (2011), for example, found that direct and vicarious victimization in young males are significant predictors of psychological distress and subsequent aggressive behaviors in college (Aosved & Long, 2011).

Forgiveness: Associations with Mental Health

Traditions. Across continents and cultures, forgiveness has been highlighted in major religious traditions (Rye, et al., 2000). For example, Christian traditions have emphasized on the love of Jesus Christ that transcends the limits of human compassion by interpreting the stories of Jesus forgiving those who persecuted him (Marty, 1998).

Joy and happiness are also advocated as associated with forgiveness of such divine nature (Marty, 1998). In Buddhist traditions that embrace the concept of karma, forgiving the transgressions of others is a way of creating positive karma for the next life given that negative experiences in this life are regarded as consequences of bad karma from previous life (Sharma, 2005). It is advocated that even though forgiveness of others may be difficult, good deeds are conducive to positive experiences in the next life (Sharma, 2005).

Empirical Research. Though with a relatively short history, empirical studies on forgiveness have been drawing increasing attention from researchers in the past decades. According to Scherer, Cooke, and Worthington (2005), 90 percent of the 950 studies on forgiveness were done since 1996. Positive psychology, an emerging discipline of scientific knowledge investigating human traits related to positive psychological development, also has listed forgiveness as an important personal strength and virtue (Peterman & Seligman, 2004).

Scientific investigation of forgiveness as a psychological construct has enhanced our understanding of its effects on mental health. Understanding of forgiveness and its associations with mental health already goes beyond our mere curiosity and continues to inform the development of strategies for living a more fulfilled life. Forgiveness research, though with a short history, has been drawing increasing attention from researchers in the field. Current literature presents strong evidence of the positive role forgiveness plays in individuals' mental health functioning (Baskin & Enright, 2004). To examine the benefits of forgiveness, scholars have been investigating its role in religious traditions (Rye et al.,

2000; Marty, 1998; Sharma, 2005). Forgiveness is considered as a positive coping tool that helps people recover from hurtful or traumatic events (Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005; Lamb & Murphy, 2002). However, not all researchers support this claim. For example, Garrard and McNaughton (2003) underscore that revenge also provides psychological satisfaction.

Theories in Current Literature Although there is no consensus on the definition of forgiveness, current literature has mostly studied forgiveness through both a dispositional and a situational lens.

Pioneers of forgiveness in modern psychology research Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) defined forgiveness as follows:

> People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive
> when they will fully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of hurtful act or acts, has no right) (p. 24).

Forgiveness is considered as a conscious and moral decision to let go of negative emotions related to the transgressions and the transgressors. Thompson et al. (2005) highlighted the cognitive reframing of negative experiences by defining forgiveness as the "the framing of a perceived transgression such that one's responses to the transgressor, transgression, and sequelae of the transgression are

transformed from negative to neutral or positive" (p. 318). Both definitions underlined that behavioral reactions to the transgressions should be non-negative, though they differed on the level of acceptance. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) embraced a warmer attitude in the definition by incorporating concepts of compassion and love, whereas Thompson et al. (2005) identified that forgiveness could also be neutral responses to negative experiences. Researchers including Thompson et al. (2005), besides focusing on forgiveness in contexts, have also investigated forgiveness as a potentially stable individual trait. McCullough & Witvliet (2002), for example, has found that dispositional forgiveness has been positively related to individuals' mental health and general well-being. Worthington (1998) also identified forgiveness as an aspect of a person's individual capacity that can be both stable and changed. Current forgiveness assessments have mainly focused on the dispositional forgiving qualities associated with individuals' socio-emotional health (Thompson et al., 2005; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Denham et al., in press). Berry and Worthington (2001) also found that trait forgiveness can be a strong predictor of lower stress levels and better reported physical health in individuals.

The Social-Cognitive-Developmental Model. Early research frames forgiveness as more of a moral concept rather than a psychological one. Enright and colleagues (1989) proposed a social cognitive developmental model of forgiveness in their seminal work and called for further attention in exploring the developmental process of forgiveness in the context of individuals' socio-ecological contexts. This model draws on traditional

research in developmental psychology such as Kohlberg (1976)'s seminal work on moral development in youth. Under such a framework, forgiveness is understood as a developmental process that involves stages of development along with the maturation process of youth's emotional and cognitive capacities. In his later works, Enright (2001) emphasized the idea that forgiveness is a choice that requires the development of emotional and cognitive skills for better decision-making. Under the hypothesis that forgiveness is a developmental process, one of the assumptions is that the stages of forgiveness varies among different age groups. In Enright (1989)'s famous escaped prisoner dilemma study, strong correlations between age and forgiveness stages were found. To understand better the associations between age and forgiveness, Subkoviak and colleagues (1995) conducted another study later and found that among individuals in their later adolescence and in their middle adulthoods revealed that adults scored higher on forgiveness than adolescents. However, current literature shows few substantial studies that further investigate potential factors related to age among adolescents, nor is there sufficient research on other cultural factors such as gender or race and ethnicity.

Gilligan's (1982, 1996) important works on moral development challenged Kolhberg's model through the investigation of gender differences. Gilligan (1996) proposed that the socio-moral development of females centered on building and cultivating intimate relationships and therefore evolves around the ethics of care. If forgiveness can be conceptualized as a trait that entails individual's generalized capacity and tendency to forgive (Worthington, 2000), it is worthwhile to examine the Gilligan's model through further investigation of how forgiveness develops in both genders.

Similarly, Peterman and Seligman (2004) categorized forgiveness as character trait in positive psychology. Some other researchers also pointed out that forgiveness is not only a positive character trait, but also an active developmental process during which adaptive reaction to transgressions contributes to moral growth (Freedman & Knupp, 2003; Enright, 2001).

The Stress-and-Coping Model. Worthington and Scherer (2004) identified a stress-and-coping framework of forgiveness and underlined the importance of investigating the role of forgiveness in individuals' reactions toward interpersonal transgressions. Under this framework, it is assumed that most of us human beings experience feelings of hurt or pain when encountering negative intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences, and forgiveness has been a way of coping with such negative experience and its related stressors (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Wade, Worthington, and Meyer (2005) suggested that forgiveness could be a valuable tool for individuals adjusting to hurtful experiences. On the other hand, earlier research conducted by Berry and colleagues (2001) conceptualized unforgiving behaviors as stress reactions to negative interpersonal experiences as well as negative emotions aroused by the experiences, such as anger, hostility, fear and anxiety. In Worthington and Sandage (2016)'s most recent research on forgiveness in psychotherapy, the authors also highlighted that forgiveness can be an important form of efforts in coping with interpersonal transgressions.

Although the stress-and-coping model of forgiveness has yet to be further examined among youth, a number of important studies have made significant

contributions to the current literature through the investigation of both emotion-focused and behavior-focused coping strategies among youth experiencing adverse experiences in peer and familial relationships. Hampel and colleagues (2009), for example, conducted a large-scale study of 409 children and adolescents in Germany and found that both emotion-focused and behavior-focused coping buffered the adverse effects of bullying victimization experiences. Toussaint and Jorgesen (2008)'s study of 260 university students showed that forgiveness as a coping strategy mediated the associations of inter-parental conflict and mental health and wellbeing in students who identified as Christians. In both studies, forgiveness contributed to the positive adjustment right after adverse interpersonal experiences. These findings have significant implications for understanding the immediate effects of forgiveness on individuals' mental health. Current literature, however, has yet to address whether these effects can have persistent or long-term effects on individuals' later adjustment after being exposed to negative interpersonal interactions.

Positive associations between forgiveness-based treatment and mental health have also been highlighted in counseling interventions. Baskin and Enright (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of 9 studies that focused on forgiveness-based interventions among individuals seeking counseling services. It is found that individuals in forgiveness-based intervention groups reported better mental health than 75% of the control groups. The authors also highlighted the key aspects of interventions focusing on the emotional and cognitive process of achieving forgiveness, stating that these interventions not merely improved individuals' forgiveness level but also lower levels of negative clinical

symptoms such as anxious and depressed moods. The sample of this important study, however, comprised largely of adults.

Besides mental health, the association of forgiveness with physical health is also gaining the attention of researchers. Newberg and colleagues (2000) conducted a study on the neuropsychological correlates of forgiveness and revealed that individuals reporting higher level of forgiveness also reported lower heart rate and respiratory rate. Though still speculative at this stage, it is possible that forgiveness can be potentially associated with indicators of physical health as well.

Overall, most research to date on forgiveness among youth has addressed its associations with mental health through the stress-and-coping framework (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Forgiveness is conceptualized as a coping strategy for dealing with abnormal stressors in the lives of youth such as familial distress, domestic violence and political/societal turmoil. Current literature indicates that across cultures, forgiveness has shown promising results as an effective coping strategy. Schechtman (2009), for example, conducted an empirical trial of a forgiveness program among Arab-Israeli adolescents in Israel. Participants of the program later reported increased empathy and decreased approval for hostility and aggression, which may have significant implications for forgiveness-based interventions among at-risk youth experiencing day-to-day religious, political, or racial conflicts on the societal levels. Some early works investigating forgiveness among college students exposed to distress in familial relationships also showed positive associations between forgiveness and decreased clinical symptoms such as anxiety and depression (e.g. Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Subkoviak

et al., 1995). Subkoviak and colleagues, for example, studied the relationships of 197 university students and their same-gender parents and the participants were asked to reflect on their recent experience of transgressions. Both lower state anxiety and lower trait anxiety were found in participants who reported more forgiving responses to the negative experiences. In line with the findings of quantitative studies, the positive effects of forgiveness in coping with distressful events were also identified in the narratives of adolescents exposed to domestic violence (Benavides, 2012). Through focusing on the role of forgiveness in youth's responsive coping toward on-going stressors, these important research efforts have significant implications for future research targeting youth experiencing stressors of similar nature, for example, repeated and on-going stressors in peer relationships such as bullying victimization.

The Forgiveness and Relational Spirituality Structural Model. In Worthington and Sandage (2016)'s most recent work, the authors identified a forgiveness and relational spirituality structural model. This model draws upon the attachment theory proposed by Bowlby (1969/1988) that identified infants' attachment styles with early caregivers, and the re-enactment of such attachment in individuals' later relationships. It is proposed that individuals' forgiveness and psychological functioning can be influenced by therapeutic relationships. The authors studied the relationships among the Victim (V), The offender (O), the transgression (T) and the Sacred (S) and proposed that individuals' relational experience with sacred objects can also influence their responses to the transgressors, the experience of the transgression, as well as their experience of stress and coping through forgiveness (Worthington & Sandage, 2016). More specifically,

individuals may consider and assess the relationships between themselves and the sacred, between the offender and the sacred, as well as the transgression and the sacred in their decision-making process of whether to forgive. The authors also highlighted that forgiveness is a context-based construct depending on various variables such as individual personality traits, interpersonal structures and processes and environmental changes (Worthington & Sandage, 2016).

Forgiveness and Bullying Victimization

As bullying occurs and peaks in youth (Nansel et al., 2001), extensive research has been devoted to the understanding the adaptive coping strategies of youth exposed to bullying victimization. Although forgiveness is rarely studied among this population, the limited number of research exploring the associations between forgiveness and youth experiencing peer victimization provided important evidence and perspectives that could inform future research efforts to address current gaps in the literature.

Flanagan and colleagues (2012) extended this area of research through their study on youth who had experienced bullying. They found that forgiveness not only served as an adaptive coping strategy that could regulate mood and affect of the participants, but it also predicted higher possibilities of prosocial behaviors such as support seeking and conflict resolution. The authors suggested that forgiveness might potentially predict better adjustment of youth when faced with negative peer experiences in the future. Similar findings (or something to that effect) emerged from a recent study conducted in Australia revealed positive results of forgiveness intervention in reducing anger among

youth experiencing bullying (Watson et el., 2015). The implications are that these youths might also adopt healthier behaviors as a reaction to past victimization. One key aspect of the intervention is the creation of physical distance between targets and students engaging in bullying perpetration. The authors stated that the intervention might be most effective when forgiveness could be combined with certain amount of avoidance of the perpetrators (Watson et al., 2015).

Egan (2005) conducted a survey of 50 first-year college students and asked participants to imagine being a target in a bullying scenario. The Trait Forgiveness Scale (Berry et al., 2005) was employed to assess trait forgiveness. Findings of the study showed that higher scores of trait forgiveness predicted lower level of emotional hurt in response to the imagined scenario of victimization. As one of the first studies to investigate the associations between forgiveness and bullying victimization, this research called attention to the positive effects of forgiving dispositions in buffering against negative emotions aroused by peer victimization experiences; however, it was unknown whether the participants in this study experienced bullying victimization in real life.

A number of key bullying prevention programs have also included elements such as empathy-focused components that might translate into forgiveness components in the future (Olweus, 1993; CFC, 2015). In the fourth stage of the Olweus model of bullying prevention, both bullying perpetrators and targets were encouraged to develop empathy for each other (Olweus, 1993). Second Step (CFC, 2015), as a universal prevention program designed to reduce aggressive and impulsive behaviors in children and adolescents, also incorporated core skills such as empathy and anger management.

Though the effectiveness of these programs is still under extensive review among researchers, Espelage and colleagues (2013) conducted multilevel analyses of the data and found that the intervention group using this program, for example, reported significant reduction in bullying involvement. Further investigations of whether forgiveness-related components, such as empathy, may have significant implications for future efforts to design effective bullying prevention and intervention programs. Forgiveness can potentially serve as both a restorative pathway that buffers against the negative effects of transgression, and a preventive pathway that precedes future transgressions.

In general, although a number of recent studies showed promising results in the positive associations between forgiveness and mental health in youth (Toussaint & Jorgesen, 2008; Hampel et al., 2009; Flanagan et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2015), few studies have directed their attention to the role and the perspectives of forgiveness among these youth as they experience important developmental challenges such as college transitions. Current studies have raised interesting questions that may inform future research directions. Empirical research has yet to address questions related to the role and the experience of forgiveness as youth meet with different challenges as they transition into different stages of development, such as different social groups and academic environment.

In summary, current literature has highlighted the deleterious effects of bullying as one important type of interpersonal/peer transgression on youth's mental health as well as the potential positive associations between forgiveness and individuals' psychological

functioning. It remains to be seen, however, whether and how forgiveness might serve as a buffering factor between past bullying victimization experience and mental health among youth, especially college students. This study studies the lived experience and perspectives on forgiveness of college students exposed to past bullying victimization in the hope of addressing current gaps in the literature and providing new directions for future research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Research Design

Methodological Approach. This current study is informed by Grounded Theory, which was developed through the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and had its' foundation in the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). As codes develop and themes emerge, a theory is usually formulated based on analysis of gathered data. In this study, it is the hope that a new theory or new perspectives on forgiveness among college students with past bullying victimization experiences will be formulated.

Recruitment Process As part of a larger scale study on bullying victimization, 1,500 first-year college students completed the California Bullying Victimization Scale (CBVS), a valid and reliable instrument (Felix et al., 2011) during the fall of 2012 about their history of bullying, other childhood victimization, physical health, substance abuse, and mental health, as well as their initial adjustment to college. As a behaviorally based self-report measure of peer victimization, the CBVS assessed the frequency and characteristics of seven forms of bullying victimization, such as having been teased or called names by another student or pushed or having been left out of a group or ignored. Respondents who indicated on the CBVS that they experienced intentional victimization at least 2–3 times a month from an aggressor who they perceived to be more powerful were identified as targets of bullying.

In a preliminary study, 68 first-year college students in one college sample endorsed bullying victimization on this college student survey. These students were

contacted through email and invited to participate in an interview in the spring of 2013. 26 students (38% participation rate) participated in semi-structured interviews that collected data on their past victimization experiences as well as their adjustment during their first year of college. Findings of this research showed both the negative effects of past bullying victimization and promising results of students' resiliency in college.

The current study followed up with the 26 students in the sample three years later when they were in their senior year in college, who participated in the above-mentioned qualitative study and endorsed permission to be contacted for later research, as well as 2 students who consented to participate in the first study but were not able to complete the interviews. 15 out of 28 students responded to the emails and completed the interviews for this study, with a relatively high response rate of 54%.

One of the research questions of the study aims to address the relationship between forgiveness and participants' psychological functioning, it is therefore important to investigate participants' current perspectives on past victimization experience, including their memories of past events, current thoughts and feelings, as well as their understanding of the nature of these events. These perspectives help with the investigation of participants' overall psychological functioning in college. An understanding of participants' college experience is also important to answer questions about participants' psychological functioning and its contexts. Participants in this study were asked about their overall impressions of college; they were also asked to identify successes, challenges and support in college. To understand participants' perspectives on forgiveness, questions were asked about how they define forgiveness, and how their

definitions apply to their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward their transgressors and past transgression.

Informed by the review of current literature and the research questions, semi-structured interview questions with the participants addressed the following areas: overall college life experience, negative peer interactions prior to college, general coping strategies, and current perspectives on forgiveness. These questions aimed to gather data on participants' lived experience of bullying victimization, stress and coping in relation to their victimization experiences, overall mental health and relational experiences in college, as well as their lived experience of forgiveness or non-forgiveness.

Participants. Participants were 15 senior year students from a university in the Northeast who met criteria for prior bullying victimization on the California Bullying Victimization Survey (CBVS) (Felix et al., 2011). Students were between 22 and 23 years old, and 13 self-identified as females, one self-identified as male and one identified as non-gendered. The self-reported racial and/or ethnic identity of the participants was: White (n = 6), White Hispanic (n = 4), Asian (n =2), White/Cuban (n=1), Hispanic (n = 1), White/Black or African (n = 1). One student identified as homosexual, one as bisexual, one as questioning, and 12 as heterosexual.

Participant profiles are outlined in the following table:

Participant	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race and Ethnicity
A	22	Non-Gendered	Questioning	White/Hispanic
B	22	Female	Heterosexual	White
C	22	Female	Heterosexual	White/Cuban
D	22	Female	Heterosexual	Asian
E	22	Female	Heterosexual	Asian
F	22	Female	Heterosexual	Hispanic
G	22	Female	Heterosexual	White
H	23	Male	Heterosexual	White
I	22	Female	Heterosexual	White/Hispanic
J	22	Female	Homosexual	White
K	23	Female	Heterosexual	White/Black or African American
L	22	Female	Heterosexual	White
M	22	Female	Heterosexual	White
N	22	Female	Heterosexual	White /Hispanic
O	22	Female	Bisexual	White/Hispanic

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Data Collection. The author and two graduate students in psychology conducted semi-structured interviews in person. Interviews were between 30 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted between March and April of 2016 during the business hours of Student Health Services of the university in consideration of participant's potential emergency needs for mental health support. At the beginning of each interview, the participating individual was informed of the confidential and voluntary nature of the study, and asked to read an informed consent to determine whether they would like to participate in the interview. All participants signed the written consent form prior to the

recording of the interviews started.

Interview data analysis used an inductive thematic analysis procedure with the assistance of NVivo 10, a computer software designed for qualitative research. The goal of the analyses was to identify themes that emerge in the data. Given the explorative nature of the study, no hypotheses have been set forth.

Researchers. The principal investigator of this research collaborated with university faculty members with expertise in bullying prevention and social adjustment as well as forgiveness research. Graduate students and undergraduate students in the Social Adjustment and Bullying Prevention Lab of Boston University were also involved in the data collection and analysis process. The researchers participating in this study all received training in qualitative methods and methodology including interview skills as well as effective ways to conduct a study that minimize personal biases and generate credible findings.

Data Analysis. Analysis of collected data involved the following steps: a) Two graduate research assistants transcribed all recorded interviews; b) the leading researcher "cleaned" the data by listening to the recordings again to make sure all data were transcribed correctly; c) the leading researcher entered enter all data into NVivo 10, and used the software to assist first-stage open coding; d) codes were summarized into categories; e) themes were generated, discussed, and examined throughout the transcribed data; and f) the investigator identified new models of understanding forgiveness among college students with past bullying victimization experiences based on thematic analyses.

Establishing Credibility

In order to establish trustworthiness of the current study, the investigators employed two primary strategies to meet the criteria of a methodologically rigorous qualitative study. First, the leading researcher in the study used both hand coding and software systems to code the data independently during the initial stage of data analysis. After the initial stage, the leading researcher continued to employ the assistance of qualitative analysis software (NVivo) and compare notes in both methods on themes. Second, to prevent biased interpretation of the data, the researcher reflected regularly through the personal memos the potential influence of cultural backgrounds and preferences, perception of the research topic and process as well as personal feeling and thoughts on the data collection and analysis process. The researcher sought consultation with faculty members and presented initial findings at a faculty's research team and requested feedback. The researcher also engaged in regular discussions in an off-campus research clinic about the research methods and ways to prevent biases.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This proposed qualitative study aims to understand: 1) the relationship between forgiveness and psychological functioning among college students exposed to past bullying victimization; 2) the relationship between individuals' college experience and their understanding of forgiveness.

Findings of the study have revealed important themes to help address the above research questions. In summary, analysis of the data identified the following main themes: (a) current perspectives on past victimization, (b) college experience, and (c) perspectives on forgiveness.

Key results of the analysis of the interview data will be presented in this chapter.

Current Perspectives on Past Victimization

The analysis of participants' description of past peer victimization has revealed four sub-themes: (a) definition of bullying, (b) perceived reasons for bullying, (c) perceived impact of bullying, and (d) current contact with transgressor(s).

Definition of Bullying

As all participants endorsed some form(s) of peer victimization, only 5 participants used the word "bullying" to describe their past experiences.

Participant A, for example, used the words "teasing and bullying" together to describe saying "hateful things" and threatening of physical violence. Participant G remembered "a little bit of bullying" but not "major bullying or anything." Participant I endorsed that she was "bullied" because of her name, but "never really bullied."

Participant J reported being “bullied constantly” when referring to her experience of being called names and isolated by peers in elementary school. Participant M described her experience of being socially isolated, endorsing “bullying” but said that she was not bullied “extensively.” She stated:

There wasn’t a real like putting my head in the toilet or anything I wasn’t bullied extensively. I think it was mostly just like I didn’t try to fit in to their cool groups, I mean some part of me probably wanted to because you want to do that when you’re fifteen, but I think I just felt very different and not included often.

10 participants clearly stated that their past peer victimization experiences were “regular,” “normal,” or “part of growth.” Participant B, for example, reported that her experience was “just regular girl drama” and that “nothing that really traumatized” her. Participant E described her experiences as “more of ostracization” rather than “really bullying all that much.” Participant H stated that his experience of being teased and socially isolated were “the rite of passage” for high school students, and that it was not “the worst thing ever.” Participant A reported that their (participant identified as non-gendered) past negative peer interactions were not “life-threatening” and distinguished between these experiences and abuse, explaining that the experience did not have significant impact as experiences of abuse:

I think it was like, kind of like something that a lot of kinds go through where you just grow out of it and like even if you cant be friends like I don’t know it doesn’t affect your interactions with them anymore. I know that for some things that’s not the case with like abuse, but I feel like that was not like that kind of thing.

Participant J also identified her experiences as “typical” stating that “I feel like everybody has that situation where they feel that way and they look back on it and they’re like this person was so mean to me and it meant so much to me.”

On the other hand, Participant G reported feeling “surprised” and “upset” about her experience of being teased, and identified strong and positive attachment to family members as the reason why she believed the victimization experience to be unexpected:

I remember at the time I was very surprised that it was even happening because I had never even considered that like a negative in my life. I always considered it like okay I have a wonderful mom who works very hard to put me through school and everything and I have two grandparents on top of that that are a great part of my life so I was very surprised that that was something that someone would pinpoint as a bad thing that they wanted to tease me about. And I was also very upset.

Perceived Reasons for Bullying

When asked to describe past victimization experience, all participants were able to recall some memories from elementary school, middle school and high school. However, the clarity of the memories varies with individual participants. 8 out of 15 of the participants reported challenges providing clear and specific details of what exactly happened, stating that they “can’t remember” or that the remembrance is “foggy.”

It seems that one factor associated with the clarity of their memories is whether the participants felt that they were singled out as targets of victimization.

For example, Participant A reported the following when asked about specific memories of the event(s):

I don't know I remember in like fourth grade me and my friends didn't like this other group of friends and it was kind of a two way thing with teasing and bullying…Mostly saying like hateful things, but also like childish things—like that kind of things. And then there was like this one kid who was like throwing bricks, but he wasn't really throwing at us. I don't know.

Participant A reported being targeted as a member of a group of students at school and understood the events as part of the dynamic between two groups that did not like each other. Participant A initially was not able to pinpoint whether the experience happened elementary school of middle school. Although it was identified later that it happened in fourth grade and pointed out different forms of victimization such as teasing and threatening of physical violence, Participant A could not recall any events being targeted alone. Similarly, Participant D identified "girl drama," "cliques," and "negative things" said, but she couldn't recall specific examples. Participant H specifically said that he was "not singled out" and that everyone was teasing each other.

On the other hand, 7 participants reported clear memories of the victimization experience. Participant E, for example, recalled being called a "terrorist" during her second grade after 9/11 because of her skin color and her accent as an immigrant child. Participant I also remembered clearly her experience being "bullied" for her name "15 years ago," and recalled memories of having nobody to sit with during lunch recess in high school. Participant F reported being called names by her boyfriend in high school, who later started rumors about her after their breakup. It appears that in these cases, the participants believe that they were identified as individual targets of victimization for

very specific reasons. Participant J is another example:

So I had a really difficult time in elementary school, I was bullied like constantly and part of the reason was because I was fat and just kids are mean—I don't think they know that they're mean but kids are mean I think. And the other part of the reason was because I lived in a very small affluent white upper middle class community and my father was suffering from mental illness, and you know news like that just spreads like wild fire, so people would be like "Oh you can't hang out with her; her dad is crazy."

Participant J identified her appearance and her father's mental illness as reasons why she became a target and gave clear description of the experiences even if they occurred a long time ago in elementary school.

Among the participants who identified vague memories of past victimization experience, other presenting factors influencing the clarity of their memories include the degree of harm of and the change of perspectives about those experiences. When Participant C was describing the "mean girls" situation in elementary school, she reported that girls talked behind people's back and being "petty" but said that she could not remember the details:

I mean girls are petty…there was definitely a thing that happened and I don't really remember the details. There were a couple of girls with all the behind your back talked… whatever was going on there, but like we were seven and I wasn't super traumatized.

For Participant C, even if she recalled the existence of a particular event, she had difficulties describing specifics due to the time of the event and the level of its perceived

effects. Participant L, who reported difficulties remembering specific examples, stated that the event(s) seemed “minor” now:

I don’t really remember specific examples. I don’t know it seems really minor now. I guess it was a little bit isolating but I can’t think of one specific instance. It was more of just the ongoing not having like a close group of friends, kind of missing out on that experience but I don’t have like one major instance.

She then compared with her current feelings with how she felt it was “a big deal” in high school. It appears that even if she remembered the overall feelings of isolation and “missing out.” In her case, her memories of specific events have a close connection with her change of perspectives on the victimization experience.

Perceived Impact of Bullying

While the majority of participants reported limited impact of their past victimization experience on their current mental health or relationships, many endorsed mood disturbance and relationship problems while living through those experiences. Participant I, for example, described her experience having nobody to sit with at lunch, stating that it felt like eight hours of “hell” going to high school every day. Participant J disclosed exhausting anger in retrospect. Participant perceived her own reactions to peer victimization as “hysterical,” indicating disturbance in mood and behavior. Participant N, although not reporting directly negative impact on herself, disclosed that her friends “self-harmed” because of similar events and asked perpetrators of bullying to seriously consider the consequences of their behavior. Participant E, for example, reported that she became rebellious at home because she felt judged by her skin color at school by peers,

which affected her relationship with her mother for a few years. Participant C reported personality differences between the “mean girls” and her, saying that she “hated” school. She stated that she was very “fluid” about friendships because of her experience, “very in between groups” and that for a very long time, she was not interested in making friends due to a lack of trust in friendships, which she identified as problematic. She also reported feeling angry and consumed with thoughts about her experience. When asked about her current thoughts, she stated:

You just do not deserve any of my thoughts so that was not what I was focused on dealing with them and their pettiness and drama and stupidity.

Two participants reported elevated anxiety about seeing past transgressors in college.

Participant F described how she ran into her ex-boyfriend who used to spread rumors again her in high school:

It’s funny because this past weekend I ran in to him at the apple store, he worked there and I got so much anxiety just seeing him. Because it’s been more than four years since I saw him…And then he (current boyfriend) said his (transgressor’s) name and I was like “oh” so that’s when I was like, I put my head down and I was like so many memories in my head and he was like do you want to leave, and I was like no, I was there to get my headphones repaired, and I really want my headphones repaired. And then he brought up what if he’s the one who attends us. And that’s when I started to freak out a little bit, because I don’t know what our conversation would have been like.

Participant F reported later that she managed to have a casual and brief

conversation with the transgressor, but it appears that close encounters with the transgressor brought up memories from the past, anxious feelings and some avoidance behavior. She also reported negative feelings having current boyfriend witness the encounter.

Similarly, Participant L revealed high level of anxiety knowing that one of the girls who used to socially isolate her was admitted to a college close by:

> That's kind of nearby and so I would get sort of panicky almost if I was near her school like what if I run into her? What if she is around here? Like what do I talk about? You know how people get nervous about going to like college reunions or high school reunions and stuff and like living up to peoples' expectations of their future. I guess it was like a version of that like kind of like what do I say? How do I make sure that I look like I'm still doing well? And I… it wasn't like anything had gone terribly wrong. I was just worried that nothing was good enough.

She also showed concerns that peers from high school would compare her to the transgressor, exhibiting anxiety about her competency and achievement, which she described as her fears throughout high school years in a very competitive academic environment. The possibility of seeing the transgressor again reactivated her fears.

On the other hand, several participants reporting reflections on their own behavior identified personal or professional growths living through past peer victimization experience. Participant B shared her experience of being targeted due to her closeness to a boy who was dating "everyone" in her friend group. She first described the experience as "silly," "dramatic," "unnecessary," and "immature," stating that she was clearly

“upset” about it at the time. She then reflected on what she could’ve done to navigate peer relationships in a more considerate manner:

I mean I feel like an experience like that taught me that you need to think about your actions and you know… actually think about your friendships and what could affect them. Umm… So I guess just being a better friend than I was. But besides… but I don’t think it would have had any further effect besides that.

Similarly, Participant D emphasized on his positive growth out of past negative experiences, reporting later that “being called out” by peers helped with his social skills:

I felt like that was kind of like a positive side of people calling you out for being different in certain ways not necessarily in like an oppressive way but if you were behaving kind of relentlessly in a way that was bothering other people they were never shy to say like hey shut up you suck and then you would take that like bummer my feelings are hurt but wait let me reflect how my behavior caused them to do that.

It is worth noting that Participant D did not condone the transgression. He clearly stated the harm of verbal aggression toward others:

You do have a bigger impact sometimes than you think they do and that just because you’re not physically hurting someone you still have an impact on people. Because I know that for some of my other friends who were also with me in the same boat in middle school they were effected more by what happened and so I think that I would probably tell those girls that they should really consider the impact of what they say to other people so.

Despite his experiences, Participant D also expressed gratitude toward his past

negative peer experience, comparing himself to a college friend who reportedly lacked social skills for missing out on opportunities of growth prior to college.

Participant E is another example of positive personal growth. She reported using her success in overcoming past challenging peer experience as a source of strength in times of distress:

I think at this point instead of taking it as "Oh my god I've suffered this in the past," I now take it more as "Look what I can do; look what I can go through and still survive at the end."

In terms of professional growth, Participant J stated that her personal experience being laughed at and teased due to her weight and appearance helped her learn in classes focusing on adolescent development and better prepared her to be a teacher. She said, "I have useful perspective." Participant N also reported taking psychology classes in college to gain a better understanding of adolescent development, saying that she had thoughts about pursuing psychology as her major.

Current Contact with Transgressor(s)

In order to further investigate participants' current thoughts and feelings toward past transgressors and transgression, questions about current contact with transgressors were also asked during the interviews. Among all participants, 7 endorsed no contact with past transgressors, 6 endorsed very limited contact mostly via social media such as Facebook, and 2 did not reveal current status of contact.

The 7 participants who endorsed no contact with transgressors reported different reasons. Some reported losing contact naturally after graduation and endorsed interest in

"catching up" if the occasion arises. Some reported attempts to look for transgressors on social media but decided not to connect. Participant E stated that she found them on Facebook but did not want to friend them, and when two peers who used to target her tried to friend her, she accepted at first and then quickly "unfriended" them. Some reported traumatic experiences with no direct relation to past victimization experience that made it challenging to keep in touch with old peer groups in general. For example, Participant F reported that her best friend from high school passed away during participant's first year in college, and she did not make the effort to stay connected with old friends:

Like when I saw them I hugged them and everything, and then the funeral happened and everything and we all, they all told me oh you should keep in touch more, we should hang out and I was like yeah definitely, but it's just I never made the effort. I was interested like it would be nice to hang out with my group of friends again, but I just didn't. I don't know why because I've still felt like I want to have a group of friends again, but I just didn't keep in touch.

For participants who endorsed current contact with transgressors, most contact has been restricted to social media and some participants tried to keep the interactions at a relatively superficial level. Here are what Participants I and M's statements when describing their interactions with the transgressors:

I'm linked to them on social media…I will like them or what not and like they all congratulated me on getting a job its like subtle things...but if I ever run into them its nothing and we're not gonna like go sit down and have a beer and reminisce about the old

days or anything but yeah it's definitely it's like a weird feeling knowing that they know a lot about you but that was like 6 or 7 years ago and its different now but yeah just like social media and I feel like that's a hard thing with social media is like it always keeps you connected to people and there's no real way to like delete people or get them out of your life because they're always there. ---Participant I

I don't talk to them. I mean there will be times when they'll come up in my Facebook feed and I'll be like oh what are you doing, where you at school, what's new in their life, because it's such a small school I pretty much knew everybody. It's not like who's that random football player it's like oh I knew you and what are you doing. Even though I didn't like you. ---Participant M

Participant C spoke about curiosity about the transgressors' life trajectories when experiencing turning points in her life, but also ambivalence toward her connections with them:

I kind of wonder now what will become of them. I wonder what has become of them so far. I'm friends with a lot of them on Facebook or I was before I deleted Facebook recently because I'm tired um… but yeah…. I kind of wonder if their way of life paid off for them and in what ways, and it what ways it didn't and… and probably as a result of my own hmm… how should I put this? I could have gone various routes throughout life, like we always have turning points where we think: Oh I could have done this and what would have happened had I… you know.

In the context of Participant C's report that she had very different values such as being academic oriented and hard working as a daughter of immigrants versus past

transgressors' focus on "girl drama," she seemed to be comparing her life with those of the transgressors hoping to identify evidence for different value systems.

Similarly, Participant E who reported no contact with the transgressors also expressed a sense of curiosity, though for different reasons, when speaking about her attempts to find them on social media:

I'd be curious if they remember me at all in the first place. Second I'd be curious if they remembered how they handled me, how they treated me, how they behaved with me at all. I wouldn't want to be provocative: if they don't remember they don't remember.

Participant E appeared uncertain about whether the transgressors were aware of the impact of their behavior and she was seeking some knowledge on their perspectives.

College Experience

Overall, most participants reported a generally meaningful college experience and a relatively positive senior year after meeting academic, professional and social challenges during the first years. 2 participants identified college experience as a more difficult experience compared to other participants, which will be explored in depth later in this section. Analysis of participants' reported college experience reveals three subthemes: a) overcoming challenges, (b) embracing choices, and (c) utilizing support.

Overcoming Challenges

Academics. No participant's college experience was without challenges and all of them identified aspects of their college life they had struggled with. It seems that

participants' experience overcoming challenges and their last year of experience carry more weight than their reported difficulties when they were assessing their overall college experience. When asked about her overall impressions of college years, Participant G reported the following:

College was great I would say that the first year was probably the hardest, as it is for anyone in college, just adjusting. Second year was probably the easiest course-wise and all of that and then my senior year was definitely the most rewarding, so overall a really good experience.

She reported difficulties during her freshman year and successful adjustment in the second year, described her last year as "rewarding," and concluded that her college experience was a positive one. It seems that her success meeting academic challenges and her satisfaction toward her senior year delineated her general impressions of college. Like Participant G, Participant N also described her challenges adjusting to the first year of college as a typical experience for most college students. She also identified her senior year as the most positive:

I think in one word you definitely can describe it as a whirlwind. I definitely had a few issues like coming into college but I think overall every year has been pretty typical and also pretty amazing in terms of growth but I think if I had to pick a year of which one has been the best one, it's definitely been senior year.

Participant I described a similar journey: "I've had an overall positive experience I think it was a little bit of a hard transition freshman sophomore year but now as a senior I love it. I'm sad to leave. But I'm prepared and I'm ready and excited." Participant M

described "ups and downs" of her four years as enjoyable and endorsed similar nostalgic feelings for her overall college experience.

13 out of 15 participants talked about high demands for academic work, reporting classes and assignments, worries about grades, or challenges managing busy schedules. More specifically, for example, Participant A had particular difficulties with larger classes and anxiety-provoking exams in a big university:

I'd say the most difficult thing has been classes. They're a lot harder than high school classes. The university [tackles] grade inflation, as I'm sure you know and we have larger classes and exams are in one big room and it's kind of like a shark tank.

Participant J underlined the amount of pressure at the end of semesters:

The frustrating thing about the way that college is structured is that the final month of the semester there's 15 things due every week. It's absurd.

Participant J gave another example of the pressure of meeting academic deadlines:

Like I said last week I was sick so I had so much work to catch up on, I was awake for like 48 hours doing work and doing more work and doing more work. I was trying to catch up on old work that I missed when I was out plus the new deadlines for the week.

For some participants, overcoming academic challenges serves as a significant boost for their confidence. Participant L stated that meeting academic challenges in college made her feel prepared for dental school, the next step of her career. Participant D also associated the healthy academic competition in college with her success in receiving

multiple job offers before graduation.

Participant H self-identified as a lower than average student in high school in terms of academic performance. He reported feeling surreal "flipping a switch" being admitted into an "elite school" for college, and doing "very well" in college. When asked about his general college experience, he responded:

I feel like compared to most people I'm one of the few people that after four years still wakes up and looks at the Prudential Center like oh my god I can't believe I'm here, so I've definitely tried to make the most of like the academic experience here and take advantage of being in such a cool different city. Umm yeah overall it's been pretty amazing.

In addition to academic performance, some participants also endorsed increased self-knowledge in terms of learning skills and more confidence dealing with work related stress. Participant M stated:

Just coming to know myself I guess it's been a very introspective process learning about how I learn, how I do well in classes and I've worked really hard on relaxing academically and not working so hard and not being stressed out about working so hard and finding that I can still do well. So that's been a very positive thing but of course was very hard at first when I was stressing out and freaking out about everything. But I figured it out. Sophomore year I started to loosen up; junior year I really got it. Now I'm not stressed about work very often at all.

Social relationships. In terms of social relationships, 13 out of 15 participant identified strong connections to a certain friend group at the time of the interviews.

Participants reported positive feelings toward opportunities meeting new people in a variety of setting. Some made friends through first-year orientation programs, some through classes or involvement in student organizations, others through employment opportunities on campus or outside school.

Participant F and Participant N were the two students who reported feeling disconnected with friends during college years. Participant F initially reported difficulties with her first-year roommate, stating that she ended up getting a single's room later. She also talked about the mismatch between her values and those of her peers, stating that there were "rich people" she could not connect with. She said, "I worked hard to get here," indicating disagreement with her peers' lifestyle. She also highlighted that she lost interest in making friends in her sophomore year and had no friends for her birthday that year. At the same time, she relied more on the support of her boyfriend and her family, stating that she went home every weekend.

Participant N reported doubt about whether her peers consider her as a friend:

I've never felt comfortable or does this just mean that today is a bad day and I'm feeling disconnected from people today. You know so I think that's something I've always struggled with throughout my college career which kind of puts a damper on things because then I'm not- I'm leaving not feeling like I've made amazing friends. I've met amazing people but whether or not they would identify me as a friend I'm not sure. I would identify them as a friend but I would hope that they would see me as a friend.

Participants also reported challenges in forming and maintaining positive social relationships. Common issues identified include conflicts with roommates, limited time

and energy to make friends, difficulties choosing friend groups, or lack of interest or social skills.

Participant E reported ongoing adjustment living with a roommate whose daily schedule differs from hers. Participant C, for example, reported that she was often "overbooked and overscheduled" because of her involvement in many student organizations. Similarly, Participant I and Participant M reported difficulty choosing friend groups. Participant O highlighted initial difficulties forming friend groups, stating that it was "reaching beyond" her "comfort zone" because she knew less people coming into the school. Participants who reported these initial difficulties eventually adjusted well and reported strong and positive peer connections.

Other Variables. Besides adjusting to academic and social demands in college, some participants also pointed out other variables outside school that influenced their college experience, such as family changes, studying abroad, natural disaster and unexpected trauma events. Participant C, for example, talked about the separation of her parents and then geographical relocations of family members during her freshman year. Participant D spoke about opportunities studying abroad and experiencing cultural shock and language barriers. Participant G talked about entering college at a time when her hometown and family were recovering from Hurricane Sandy. Participant J had to take a semester off after experiencing sexual assault by a friend. All participants who identified significant negative events outside college reported seeking help from friendships, authority figures, spiritual resources or mental health resources in college. Although some experience significant disrupted participants' academic course, at the time of the

interviews, participants reported positive adjustment. Participant J, for example, reported contacting everyone she knew after the sexual assault, and using semester off to spend time with family members and to participate in meaningful volunteer work. She reported doing well academically and feeling fulfilled by her professional development during her last semester in college.

Embracing Choices

Another subtheme identified by participants was the variety of choices provided by their college experience and their positive attitude toward a stronger sense of freedom to make choices. Such a greater sense of freedom was highlighted in many important domains of their lives: social, academic, professional and cultural.

Socially speaking, many participants endorsed a greater variety of friend groups to choose from compared to their high school experience. Participant D, for example, talked about her pressure to be “cool” in high school, and reported limited amount of choices but to try to fit in groups that dressed or socialized in a particular way, whereas in college, she said that there was no “identified cool group,” and that she could “hang out” with different groups. Participant M also reported having to choose between a popular group that focused on their social status, shoes and “right hair,” and another “little group” with “don’t need anyone else” attitude. Participant H described experiencing people’s open-mindedness during his first year and stated that people were more “evolved and grown” in college. Participant I reported taking advantage of the opportunities to connect with different friend groups with different interests, and utilizing different type of support from friends.

Academically and professionally, participants emphasized on the benefits of being able to choose classes and majors they were interested in. Both Participant B and Participant H reported advantages of being able to switch majors into a field of study their enjoyed. Participant H also highlighted his experience working as a teaching assistant and the many research opportunities presented to him. In terms of required classes, Participant L stated that even if she was not interested in some of classes, she enjoyed the process because she was given more choices choosing the next step of her career because of the classes she took. A number of participants reported feeling prepared and ready given the number of career choices they had toward the end of their college years.

Culturally speaking, many participants reported gaining from the diversity the college and the city provide. Participant H said:

I think the best thing about it is how diverse it is both with respect to like where you come from geographically, and where you come from with tax bracket and where you come from just different like psychological ways.

Participant D also pointed out the difference between her past experience and her college experience in terms of cultural diversity:

I grew up in a suburb of Massachusetts where it was pretty like mono-cultural like I had a few friends that were from non-white backgrounds but for the most part my friends were white and so I really wanted to come here and really like befriend people of other cultures and really like engage with that and really learn about you know how to cross cultures and relationships.

Participant L also drew attention to the variety of choices a big city offers:

Just like there's a lot more to do being in a large city than being in a rural school which I think is one of things that drew me here from the beginning…I like that there is more to do here than just go to parties. Like you can do that if you want. There's certainly parties around but its not like at a rural school where that's the only thing happening on a Friday night. You can go to the movies or you can go to the Museum of Fine arts or you can go to a restaurant. Whatever you want there's a lot of other things going on.

Of course, not all participants identified the city where their college is situated as diverse. For example, Participant I talked about how the city is more "closed down" where people usually stay to themselves. However, she identified college as a particularly positive place to make different connections:

I think this university is like an awesome place for it to happen because everyone's always you know open and talkative and everything which is kind of hard in like this city is a closed down place where people stay to themselves.

In retrospect, many participants reported a different perspective looking back on their past experience prior to college. Participant L summarized her college experience in the following way:

I think once I realized that there is a lot more going on in the world and everyone has had this type of experiences it's kind of like your… your high school experience doesn't define if you're going to rule the whole world. Everyone has to deal with that it's just like…I don't know umm…yeah just seeing that there is a lot bigger scope.

At ages 22 and 23, participants of this study transitioned from their late

adolescence to early adulthood during their college years. At this unique stage of their development, many reported challenges faced with new choices, but a stronger sense of self with the confidence and independence gained through their college experience.

Participant K reported that living away from their parents for the first time in her life was a big challenge at first, and she felt more confidence facing the challenges of moving on from college after four years:

And just like I'm still a little bit weary of actually having my first job and my first apartment and all of that but I definitely have a mountain of experiences at this point that I can stand on top of and you know look toward that even bigger mountain…

For Participant M, being able to feel "legal" when she turned 21 was a transformative experience:

I tried to do more social things and I tried to go out more and finally I turned 21 so I could go out and not be worried about the police coming because that's very stressful. So that was nice too to be able to be legal, even though drinking's not a huge part of my social life, not having to be worried was nice.

Turning 21, it seems, meant more to her than reaching the age that she could legally consume alcohol. It also meant that she was treated as an adult and was given more options to choose her social life.

She emphasized on her independence and stronger sense of self in other aspects of her life too. She stated that the accomplishments in college made her realized that she could be an "adult" out of the context of school. When speaking about her social life, she also said:

…[in high school] you had your role and your spot and that's who you were, that's your social strata and that's it. But then in college it's kind of like everything is up for grabs and you can craft your own identity, which is kind of new… so I think that kind of contributed to me floundering at first, but then because it was so open ended it helped me to figure out who I wanted to be.

Utilizing Support

As stated in previous sections, participants of this sample were faced with unique social, academic, cultural and developmental challenges. All participants identified support one way or another that they relied on throughout college years. The utilization of support, it seems, depended on both the availability of support systems and participants' own thoughts, feelings and actions toward these systems.

In terms of the availability of support, some participant relied on resources already available prior to college, such as old friends and family. Participant E reported significant amount of support from her family members, stating that whenever she called her mother, 99% of the time she would pick up the phone and that she knew what she might be doing other times. She also shared that her father told her to "multiple the love and divide the pain." For participant E, the available and consistent nurturing and support provided by parents contributed greatly to her mental health in college.

Other participants relied on support from the school, such as their friends, academic staff including teaching assistants and professors, or residential, career, or spiritual resources. Some participants identified that even if they did not use most of the services, having one source of support provided sufficient support. For example,

Participant A reported “not using a lot of the services” but academic office hours and support from the teaching assistants were very helpful. Participant C relied mainly on the spiritual resources on campus such as the chaplains and her sermon group for mental health support. For academic issues, she relied on her academic advisor and reported that the advisor’s resourcefulness when it came to planning for classes and credits had been of tremendous help. Participant D highlighted her involvement in a choir, stating that the leader reached out to her and asked her to join, which boosted her confidence and helped her feel connected to the group throughout college. Participant G described her biggest challenge during her first year was coming into college while recovering the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. She identified university leadership to be crucial in easing her financial concerns. For others, support from workplace also made a difference. Participant E reported very limited support peer-wise stating that she had a very small group of friends. However, connections at work with her boss helped her cope with challenging situations in college. For some others, knowing that the resources are available was sufficient support. For example, both Participant I and Participant H said that they never used any support on campus but that knowing they were available was great.

Not all participants reported positive feelings toward the support they received in college. Two participants reported limited or no support while endorsing having a relatively negative overall college experience. Participant F reported limited support from parents financially, limited support from advisors in terms of classes and credits planning as well as support around deciding on her majors, and disconnect with peers in college with different values. She also found it stressful and challenging to communicate with

internship supervisors about the requirements. She was among the three participants who reported negatively about her overall college experience. Participant O, for another example, was involved in the legal system for reportedly "mistrusting" her friends. She reported "no support" and "zero support" from the university after the incident. She reported relying solely family members especially her father and expressed wish that there could be more mental health support and more investment in students' mental health from leadership.

In general, students reported a lack of professional mental health support from college behavior health services. The main complaints focused on the length of waiting time to get mental health services, high threshold of eligibility for services, the cost of services outside campus, as well as systematic stigma of mental health problems.

A number of participants talked about the waiting time before getting mental health services:

I have heard from friends that those resources for mental health aren't as good as they should be. I have no experience about it umm… but I have heard of girls in my sorority because we often have big presentations about all that stuff. Umm… that they've tried to use it before and there have been waits for them to talk to someone for a few weeks. --- Participant B

With like student health especially with the behavioral health they are so busy they have so many students that need different services that they are not really able to provide like... I wasn't expecting to get an appointment like tomorrow I wasn't expecting that but I think that is definitely a resource maybe for this semester I could have used a

little bit more but other than that I feel like the other sources that have been supportive have been really helpful. --- Participant D

I think the school could do a better job at representing its resources and also garnering its resources—because they're very short staffed at behavioral med—there's a long waiting list and I think we owe our students better to provide them better resources. --- Participant N

Participant J talked about her experience needing to stay on track academically after experiencing sexual assault and her difficulties justifying her needs to the school as well as identifying policies that accommodate students with individualized needs:

I mean the main thing for me is that as you've heard all of these things have happened and in the midst of all these things I still have registering for classes and taking exams and reading novels and writing papers and you know like applying for internships and filling out resumes and you know the entire very overwhelming sometimes high commitment world of academia is still happening. And I want people to understand, that my life did not get put on hold when I signed up for classes I wish but it's not an option you know…And I think that policies don't necessarily reflect that, I think that policies do a good job for people who fit the typical experience.

She continued by saying that systematic misunderstanding and stigma around mental health issues made it difficult for her to seek help effectively:

It's very hard to describe and it's also the way that our culture is that it's not always—you know we don't treat trauma and mental illness the same way that we treat physical illness and stuff so if I need a weekend off from my life because I have the flu

it's perfectly justifiable, it's a one line statement, everybody's okay with it, extensions off from work—whatever that's fine but you can't send an email and say I can't be in work today because I had a panic attack people are like what's a panic attack, how does that happen, what does that mean, what you were just sitting in your room crying for 24 hours what does that mean? It's not the same thing. People aren't as comfortable saying that oh I was sick versus oh I was upset there are different connotations.

In addition, Participant O reported challenges with the high eligibility standards required for receiving services:

[I hope there could be] better mental health support for people who are going through a bit of a rough patch but aren't maybe like chronically depressed or have a substance abuse problem. Because you know sometimes you go through pretty stressful periods.

On the other hand, when support was provided and available, participants' thoughts, feeling and actions also affected how the support systems were utilized. Some participants demonstrated strong agency in seeking out support or learning skills on asking for support. Participant I, for example, described the interesting experience of identifying the staff in a Starbucks on campus as part of her support system. At the same time, she reported having a different group of friends every year in college while gaining various type of support from each group. She identified small portions of support and short-term relationships to be just as helpful as long-term support from family and mentors. For some, learning to ask for help is part of their growth in college. Participant D, for example, reflected on her expectations of herself and others:

I've learned in college is asking for help and like being able to reach out to people. I think a lot of times like definitely in my freshman and sophomore year of college I was like "I'm here in college, I'm a big kid and I'm going to try and do this myself" but I think that this year especially like going to Ecuador and being here for second semester senior year and applying for jobs next year I think I've realized that I do need help and that I do need other people so I think that has been a huge learning experience.

She identified the expectations for her to be independent because she was in college and the process of finding a balance between self-reliance and help seeking.

In terms of seeking professional mental health services, participants also highlighted the lack of knowledge and education of mental health on a personal level. For two participants in particular, the possibility of carrying a diagnosis of mental illness provoked tremendous amount of anxiety.

Participant D said the following when talking about her experience being told by a doctor that she might have depression while she was studying abroad:

I got really scared by that because I was like for me like a few of my friends have been diagnosed with mental illnesses recently or stuff like that and for me hearing that like even though it wasn't really a diagnosis on paper or anything official like that was really hard for me to be able to process because it's like well was he (the doctor) just saying that? Did he mean it? Was that just a language barrier?

Participant O spoke of her concerns having a diagnosis "on paper" and reported ambivalence about seeking support due to these concerns:

I didn't want anything clinically diagnosed and for someone to say like oh you have depression and you need to do this and this and this but umm it would have been nice to have at least a peer or a counselor to talk to.

Participant K also talked about how not having an official diagnosis hindered her from receiving services initially:

I was never really formally diagnosed… I could guess that I had a depressive episode at the point where I was like rapidly going downhill but umm I think making sure people know what to look out for in their friends or what to look out for in themselves because a lot of college students are depressed because all the stress and social anxiety and everything so I think having that information out there would probably be helpful to some portion of that population just to know they're not just feeling sad.

She later reported being able to educate herself about mental illnesses and reaching out for professional support.

Perspectives on Forgiveness

In general, all participants reported potential benefits of forgiveness, concluding that it would be "nice" or "best" to be able to forgive. 14 out of 15 participants also endorsed their forgiveness toward past transgressors and transgression. Analysis of the data under the category of participants' transgressors definitions of forgiveness reveals five sub-themes: (a) situational vs. dispositional, (b) complete vs. partial, (c) religious vs. secular, (d) intrapersonal vs. interpersonal, and (e) passive vs. active. Analysis of the data under the category of facilitators of forgiveness reveals the following three sub-themes:

(a) justice, (b) power, and (c) compassion.

Definition of Forgiveness

Situational vs. Dispositional. While all participants reported positive attitudes toward forgiveness, no participant identified forgiveness as “required,” highlighting the importance of assessing each individual situation. Participants also underlined “unforgivable” situations. Overall, three factors seem to play a significant role when participants were assessing their willingness to forgiveness: the intention of the transgression, the degree of harm done, the extent of moral permissibility, and the distance from past experience.

Participant O provided a comparison between her attitudes toward her high school experience and college experience. She reported being isolated, excluded and targeted by a group of girls that she described as “toxic, bitchy and cliquish” in high school. She reported having forgiven them because “cattiness” was not “a big deal” and that they did not intend to hurt her. In contrast, she reported not forgiving her college peers who put her at risk for legal consequences:

You don’t have to, because that person was genuinely out to hurt you and there’s a good chance they’ll do it again. Or that person you know almost hurt you and it would have been a very permanent hurt or it caused you a lot of emotional or physical pain. So in those cases you absolutely do not have to forgive them.

In this statement, she pinpointed the intention of the transgressors as “genuinely” hoping to “hurt” her, and that the consequences could be “permanent.”

Similarly, Participant J compared her past experience of being targeted and teased

for her weight in elementary school, and her college experience of being sexually assaulted. She stated that her peers in elementary school "did not do it intentionally to hurt" her. In comparison, she stated that the person who assaulted her could not be forgiven because the damage was irreparable for her:

So like the person who assaulted me, I have not forgiven. I think that is an unforgiveable act. You know like you steal something from someone and you can't give it back that is unforgiveable I would say. I would say that you have done something unforgiveable.

A number of participants also brought up "murder" as an unforgiveable act or a very difficult act to forgive, given the degree of the harm:

Like what you're forgiving them for… like if there's someone who does something really horrific, like you know a murder or whatever like that I don't think you would have to forgive anyone for but if it's just a minor misunderstanding or mistreating a friend I think it… I think it's good to forgive them if you can find that in yourself.
--- Participant L

Participant H also mentioned domestic violence as "revolting" stating that it violates his basic moral values and is thus unforgiveable.

As all participants talked about situational forgiveness, two participants also indicated their dispositions as a more forgiving person. For example, Participant N said that she is "not a huge grudge holder." Participant B also identified herself as "the type to forgive people" stating that she usually forgives "faster" than others. While she joked about not fully understanding why that was the case, she also disclosed that she had never

gone through a situation where someone had “really hurt” her in an “extremely awful” way.

Complete vs. Partial. While all participants have taken a binary approach distinguishing clearly between forgiving and not forgiving, participants disagreed on the emotional and cognitive states associated with their definitions.

Participant B, for example, defined forgiveness as being able to “completely let go of however someone may have wronged you or hurt you” and being able to “really feel no anger or hatred or any negative feelings towards that person” because of whatever they had done. She stated that true forgiveness would have to meet these criteria. Participant H talked about “real forgiveness” and defined it as “really coming to terms and move on.” Similarly, Participant C also pinpointed the emotions related to forgiving as having no negative feelings or ill will toward the person. Participant G also reported having a “full forgiveness” approach and added in gratitude as part of her approach:

I think I’ve taken that full forgiveness approach where I’ve come to terms with things that at one point had upset me, and realized that it’s kind of a natural part of how we grow as like a functioning person of society and I actually look back on it and I’m like thank you for doing it kind of thing.

Shifting her focus on the cognitive understanding of past experience, Participant K talked about partial and complete forgiveness:

So in some ways things are kind of unforgiveable where you can’t let go of your emotions even though you can understand where the people were coming from or you

can let go of your emotions but you just can't understand where somebody's coming from so that's like partial forgiveness but not complete forgiveness.

She later emphasized that while complete forgiveness could be very challenging to achieve, partial forgiveness at least is important to a person's mental health.

While using similar words "total forgiveness," Participant E identified herself as progressing toward complete forgiveness while endorsing acceptance of her negative emotions toward her past experience:

Where total forgiveness is you know what happened you let it go, and no forgiveness is like you know what happened you know exactly how you're feeling, you know exactly what day what time of the day, what you were wearing and things like that. And for me I'm close to like the completely forgiving. I don't think I'll ever be like completely forgiving of a person. Because it does hurt, a little bit, but I'm beyond the point where I would proactively seek them out and whatever blah blah. It would harm me in the process so why bother.

She disclosed that the factor influencing whether to move toward total forgiveness as she described was her feelings of safety when processing past experience.

Religious vs. Secular. While most participants discussed forgiveness as a secular construct, three participants identified their religious affiliations or beliefs as an important part in their definitions of the forgiveness. It is also worth noting that all three participants, however, provided different connotations of forgiveness in interpreting the spiritual guidance offered by the religious traditions they identified with.

Participant F identified as a Catholic and stressed on the importance of finding

peace within self:

I'm Catholic and it's kind of like the whole thing if you do something to somebody and things never really got resolved, as long as you find peace within yourself- it's kind of like, you're kind of forgiving yourself for something that you did.

She highlighted the limitations of individuals' power in resolving hurtful events externally when harm is done, and pinpointed the concept of self-forgiveness. In saying "forgiving yourself for something that you did," she also seemed to indicate that individuals experiencing victimization could have partial responsibility in the negative events, and that through taking the responsibility to forgive oneself, an individual would be able to resolve at least intrapersonal peace.

While comparing and integrating her definition of forgiveness in both social and religious contexts, Participant D underlined the idea of "wholeness" by acknowledging the past and moving on to the future:

I think for me forgiveness is something that I see from both a social and religious sense. Like I grew up in a religious household like going to church and stuff like that and so the idea of forgiveness is always related to like wholeness and like restoring relationships and so I think I also bring that into my social view of forgiveness that when you forgive someone you are acknowledging what happened and you're sort of moving on and saying I want to work back to where we were. I want to make this relationship whole if that makes sense.

Underlying Participant D's definition, there was this idea of "brokenness" either within an individual's psyche or within an external relational experience. In this context,

forgiveness means acknowledging the brokenness and expressing hope to repair or restore this brokenness. She emphasized on interpersonal relationships and considered making efforts to restore past relational experience as an essential part of forgiveness.

Participant N talked about not only how her religious views informed her thinking about forgiveness, but also how her relationship with her identified god influenced her interpretation of her received spiritual guidance:

I guess there's the religious definition which would be resolved by god and forgive people of their sins but if just speaking literally it would be like not holding the past against people and letting it define them…I don't demand that they do it because I think everyone needs to go through their own journey of absolution so that way they can feel like they can arrive at a place where they're not just saying the words but actually meaning them…I identify as religious, less solidly than I would have in high school, but I identify myself as a follower of Christ and a believer in Jesus. I do think that you need to give people a second choice—77 times 7 is what the scripture says I think. So I guess you kind of like—it's a 50-50 split, I don't define in that way but the definition might actually be that way—and I am not Jesus so my attempt to die is nowhere near his—just for clarification.

She explained her past victimization as the result of people's sins that could only be resolved by god, but also offered a secular explanation stating that people should be given a second chance. She also used the word "absolution" to describe the process of letting go of negative emotions and arriving at genuine forgiveness. She also distinguished herself from Jesus, indicating that while she accepts the spiritual guidance

from god, she might set limits to how many second changes she could offer to others.

Intrapersonal vs. Interpersonal. While most participants highlighted the idea of "moving on" from past experiences, they disagreed on whether changes happen in the intrapersonal or the interpersonal contexts. 4 out of 15 participants identified forgiveness as mainly an intrapersonal construct, meaning that forgiveness happens within the individual and does not involve any effort to restore the relationship with their transgressors. All other participants included the quality of relationships with the transgressors as part of their definitions.

Participant I was one of the students who considered forgiveness to be solely intrapersonal. She said, "I forgive you; that doesn't mean that I'm going to allow you back in my life." In this statement, she made a clear distinction between forgiveness and the restoration of her relationship with the transgressor. In another statement, she also said:

I don't tell them so they don't think I forgave them but I did, for myself.

It seems that for Participant I, forgiveness serves the purpose of benefiting the self, instead of the transgressor(s). In fact, she considered it unnecessary to let the transgressor(s) know whether she forgive or not. To further illustrate her thoughts, she stated the following:

I think that forgiveness is never for another person; it's for yourself, because at the end of the day you can. Not everyone's gonna ask for forgiveness from you because sometimes they don't think what they did was wrong or that it hurt you or they just don't care so I think for me forgiving someone or maybe not even forgiving… or like…not just

acknowledging that I'm not gonna let it affect me anymore and they did what they did for whatever reason they needed to do it. That's fine.

Participant I provided compelling reasons why forgiveness is for oneself: the transgressor(s) may not ask for forgiveness; they may not acknowledge they did something wrong; they may not care. These reasons, it seems, are related to factors that victims of the transgression cannot control. Rather, they put power in the hands of the transgressor(s) in deciding forgiveness.

Similarly, Participant E reported that the transgressor(s) may not be affected by the transgression, and therefore, forgiveness is work that needs to be done within the victims themselves. She also reported that not asking for an apology from the transgressor is a way of self-protection as taking the action to confront the transgressor may aggravate her negative feelings toward past events.

On the other hand, most participants underscored the importance of efforts to remediate negatively affected relationship with the transgressor(s). For example, Participant A spoke about the importance of not thinking of the transgressor as "toxic" or not eligible to be friends again. Labeling someone as toxic, it seems, defines the person as the other, and deprives of the person of any opportunity to be considered differently. Similarly, Participant N also talked about "not letting their (transgressors') negative actions necessarily define them for the future" and looking at them as holistic human beings. Taking one step further, Participant G talked about the two-sidedness of forgiveness, stating that for him, "forgiveness involves having a comfortable conversation" with the transgressor, even if it may not mean fully "mending the

relationship."

Participant L also talked about how being able to carry out a casual conversation with the transgressor is a necessary part of true forgiveness. Framing interpersonal interactions in a different way, Participant C reported wishing the transgressors well as a strong indicator of forgiveness in her opinion.

Passive vs. Active. Is forgiveness a passive or active process? Participants of this study also gave different answers. While most participants believe that forgiveness involves active effort of confronting uncomfortable emotions and engaging in internal reflections, a few participants also pointed out that forgiveness could happen naturally with time and maturation.

A common reason identified by participants for actively pursuing forgiveness was the deleterious effects of negative emotions associated with past victimization experience. Many participants pointed out the functionality of forgiveness, highlighting that it is not "useful" or "helpful" to hold on to the negative emotions as they may affect their own current mental health or optimal functioning. For example, Participant M reported the following:

I think it's important to forgive people. If you don't forgive someone it's hurting you more than it's hurting someone else because it's still inside of you and you're letting it bother you when really it's something they've done in the past.

Similarly, Participant K explained the necessity of forgiveness as it may impair her overall daily functioning:

I know that I'm capable of forgiving because if I were to live all of these days

thinking about all the negative things that happened it would be to really hard to go day by day and thinking everything is all right.

By recognizing the necessity to forgive, some participants described the decision-making process and the efforts followed to work toward forgiveness. For example, Participant M talked about forgiveness as a process that requires reflections that may bring up difficult emotions:

I think that there's—once you decide to forgive someone you still have some time to go. I think you have to really think about it, and you have to articulate what the problem was so that you can let it go, which kind of makes you relive it, which can make you upset I guess.

On the other hand, a few participants also reported how forgiveness sometimes just happened naturally. Participant I reported that by focusing on other things in her life now, she naturally "forgot" the past experiences:

…it seems like there's almost nothing to forgive it's just like part of life and growing up. Umm…I don't know... just… more like people say forgive and forget. I guess it's more like forget. Like it's in the past. Umm…it's just like a small thing to me.

As another example, while Participant M endorsed that sometimes forgiveness involves serious decision-making, there are also incidences in which forgiveness just occurs with time:

I feel like there's a big process like you kind of have to decide actively to forgive someone, like sometimes, sometimes if it's just been forever you're like oh yeah I don't care about that.

Facilitators of Forgiveness

As stated earlier, analysis of the data reveals three sub-themes on the facilitators of forgiveness: (a) justice, (b) power, and (c) compassion. This section will present evidence of these three factors and how they influenced participants' perspectives on forgiveness.

Justice. Results from analysis of this sample show that the need for justice is evidenced in the following aspects: the importance of safety; the value of apology; hope for change.

First of all, one prerequisite of forgiveness is that the transgression has stopped. When giving an example of how she could not forgive one of her peers in college, Participant O emphasized on how she felt unsafe because the transgressor might intend to hurt her in the future. In other words, what was done wrong in the past should not repeat in the future. The understanding is that the injustice discontinues serves as a prerequisite when participants consider forgiveness.

Secondly, a number of participants highlighted how an apology from the transgressor(s) is a significant facilitator of forgiveness. For example, Participant E who reported earlier that she would not seek an apology from the transgressor(s) due to the possibility of rejection also reported the following:

And if anything it shows your maturity if you are able to apologize. I'm all for apologies. If you did something wrong go apologize, I don't care what wrong you did, you should apologize. Now, if something happened to me, and the person didn't apologize I just won't talk to them.

In other words, a simple verbal statement from the transgressor(s) will open the

door for her to communication and reconsideration of the relationship. Participant O also gave significant weight to an apology:

If you go and admit that you were actively wrong and you take that step that shows that you value your relationship with me and you're genuinely sorry and it takes a big step to do that but depending on the gravity of the situation I will absolutely forgive them.

What is important with an apology, it seems, is that it is a way for the transgressor(s) to admit that injustice is committed and to acknowledge that the victims are treatment unfairly, thus freeing the victim from self-doubts and self-blame. As Participant F described very succinctly:

I did convince myself maybe it wasn't your (referring to herself) fault that that happened because it happened it's not your fault and everything I feel like that wasn't negative.

As another example, Participant I spoke about her high school peers who inherited their "privileges" and her difficulties forgiving them for excluding and isolating her socially:

This was just a bunch of privileged white kids who had way too much money at their disposal and were like flying around the country on the weekends. Like… this is like absurd wealth and they didn't do anything to get that, which just bothers me.

In addition to the feelings of injustice having been treated unfairly by this group of students, the participant also endorsed feelings of injustice about their inherited socioeconomic status, which the participant did not have.

Thirdly, when in reality their experience of being victimized may not be validated or acknowledged, participants also resorted to imagining being acknowledged and assigning moral traits to the transgressors through their expressed hope that the transgressors have "changed" or turned into "good" or "better" people. Participant J clearly expressed hope that her peers in elementary have changed by stating that she would forgive them "as long as you are a good person now, and acknowledge that you were a jerk." Take Participant N for another example, she first concluded that the transgressor was not a "nice" person and then hoped that he was better now:

But at the same time I forgive him because there's nothing I can do about it. I can moan and complain and I don't think he's a very nice person but I think he's probably a better person I hope now that wouldn't do that to someone.

Power. In addition to justice, participants also indicated power as a significant facilitator of forgiveness. Power, in this particular sample, is achieved through following three ways: acceptance, ownership, and confidence.

For example, Participant I stated the following when speaking about the definition of forgiveness:

I guess forgiveness as a concept is [an] understanding that you can't change what happened and you can't maybe even change future actions of the person but to know that you are going to accept what happened to learn from it and move forward regardless of if you move forward with the person or the situation.

This statement captures all three areas highlighted above. In her definition, Participant I first addressed the acceptance of the past, the identification of an

individual's ability to the change the present and the future, and the confidence for an individual to make the changes.

For some participants, power does not mean one party overpowering the other; rather, it means accepting that both the transgressor(s) and the victim(s) can co-exist after the transgression. For instance, Participant M stated the following:

I just accept that they have different goals, they have different values and they want to live a different life, and that's okay, and I want to do what I do and we can both operate in the world together.

She continued by saying "they perceived you in a certain way that not's accurate but that's who they are and who they saw, so taking the ownership away from you I guess," indicating that she did not have to be defined by the transgressors or their transgression, and that she had the choice and the responsibility to affirm her own identity.

Similarly, Participant G talked about taking responsibility for one's future:

…you no longer hold that person completely responsible but at the same time you don't forget, you hold on from that lesson, but you move on from it…I think generally you forgive someone when you realize that you don't need to let whatever they did to you have any bearing on you and the way that you decide to live your life.

For many participants, the acceptance of past victimization experience is a process that involved the intellectual understanding and cognitive reframing of past victimization experience. 14 out of 15 participants reported some degree of "understanding" of the transgressor(s) or the experiences that served the basis of their

acceptance, ownership and confidence. In Participant M's case, understanding the "reason" behind the transgression may be a big step toward forgiveness:

I mean people don't do things for no reason. So everyone that does things has a reason and they're doing it to help someone or because they think it's the right thing to do. You know like—even ISIS, like they're killing people but that's because they think it's what they're supposed to do. There's a logical reason there so if you don't see that people have reasons for doing things—it's easy to not forgive anybody.

In contrast, Participant K talked about her struggles with forgiving her ex-boyfriend who excluded her socially at school due to challenges understanding his behavior:

…because it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't really make logical sense even though I understand where he thought he was coming from and like to put me through that just for the sake of that non-logical sequence of events just makes me a bit frustrated. So I think that's the main negative emotion I would pinpoint there.

Similar difficulties were reported by Participant J who reported "not sure" if she could forgive her best friend in high school who isolated her:

I was there for you when your brother died, it's just like it's hard for me to fathom that someone so important in my life would treat me with such neglect.

Participant E also stressed on the importance of "an explanation" or an understanding in the process of letting go:

So why bother harming yourself when you can just know that it happened and try to understand why it happened come up with an explanation, come up with a solution,

and sort of let it go.

She continued to talk about how shifting her thoughts to the positive side of things helped her get through the experience:

Just let it happen—things happen not everything going to go perfectly well every single time for you so just hold to what good—there's always something good and get through with that.

Likewise, Participant K pointed out that she focused more on the positive when reflecting on her overall experience during pre-college school years:

I think I tend to a put pretty positive spin on my own past because memory you know is very subjective. And so it's you know I would prefer to look back and instead of focusing on say like 6th grade when everybody was really mean to me—I focus on eighth grade when I was friends with almost everybody in my class.

Compassion. The third facilitating factor of forgiveness revealed in the analysis of this sample is compassion. Participants endorsed the ability to feel the needs or suffering of the transgressors as a significant reason why they forgive.

Participant N reported her increased compassion for the transgressor with time and maturity especially when she was able to mentalize the transgressor's possible childhood experiences:

As I grew older I knew that he was probably exposed to things that affected his development and therefore unfortunately it was something that transferred on to me through his actions and now being in college and going through child resilience and just also my own human trafficking research and seeing how foster care is a disruption of

attachment and that can really mess up your development I can further understand why he maybe experienced things that you would hope that no child would have to experience things should ever see, so I forgive him and I've never really not.

Compassion, it seems, also involves a "de-othering" process during which the participants willingness try to take the perspectives of the transgressor and reflect on their own potential biases. Participant I, for example, reported that she was able to see the transgressor's perspective and see how "she was hurt" more, which motivated her to reestablish connections with the transgressor. Participant H also reflected on how one's subjective opinions are shaped by their cultural upbringing, and reported open-mindedness about possibilities to forgive if given a different context.

Interestingly, while Participant H endorsed forgiving students who teased him in the past, he reported never forgiving a friend's partner who committed domestic violence. He said, "I mean I didn't know him well enough before that to have anticipated that and when I saw that I was just like okay I perceive you as a scumbag. We're not speaking again." He reported that he might never be able to "reconcile" that, calling the behavior "revolting." Similarly, Participant K reported the following about the transgressor and reported challenges forgiving:

I've definitely talked to basically all my friends in college about what happened and basically they've all agreed that he was an asshole and an asshole is as an asshole does.

In both cases, the transgressors were defined as a lesser being, and therefore "the other" who cannot be empathized with or understood. Participant K also affirmed and

enhanced the other-ing experience by seeking validation from her current peers.

When speaking about what facilitated the perspective taking process, some participants reported the diversity in college promoted the understanding of the complexity and fluidity of people's identities:

I guess meeting a variety of people in college has been really helpful, realizing that there are all different kinds of people and we all have different experiences has helped to create a persons perspective. So I guess realizing that a person's identity is so complicated and fluid, so you can't blame a person for doing something because they are just at that point in their development and they don't know what they're saying.
---Participant M

Summary of Key Findings

To summarize, the following main themes have been presented in the findings: (a) current perspectives on past victimization, (b) college experience, and (c) perspectives on forgiveness. Some key findings are highlighted below to assist further discussion.

When speaking about current perspectives on past victimization experience, the majority of the participants did not define their previous negative peer experience as "bullying." The main reasons that the participants did not endorse bullying included the intentions of the transgressors, the degree of harm, and the forms of peer victimization. Analysis also revealed a close connection between the perceived reasons for peer bullying victimization and participants' memories of the experiences. When it comes to the perceived impact of past victimization experiences, most participants endorsed

negative feelings that decreased over time and limited impact on their overall college experience. For some participants, past victimization experience informed their personal and professional growth in college. Participants were roughly divided into two camps in terms of their current contact with the transgressors: no contact or limited contact via social media.

When describing their college experience, most participants reported an overall positive experience in their senior year, challenges especially with their academic performance during the first two years, positive attitude toward the range of choices provided in college, as well as the importance of support from at least one available, consistent and nurturing relationship. Although most participants identified various sources of support in college, they also endorsed a general dissatisfaction toward mental health services currently available.

Participants' perspectives on forgiveness are categorized into their definitions of forgiveness and the facilitating factors of forgiveness. Analysis of the data shows all participants endorsed the importance of forgiveness, and the majority of the participants endorsed their forgiveness toward past transgressors and transgression. Participants consider forgiveness as a situational and intrapersonal construct with significant interpersonal implications and varying degrees of emotional and cognitive states that may or may not carry religious connotations. Participants also endorsed justice, power and compassion as three main facilitators of their forgiving of past peer victimization experience.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Current literature has extensively investigated the associations between bullying victimization among youth and mental health. It is widely acknowledged the link between bullying victimization and individuals' short-term and long-term psychological functioning (e.g. Holt et al., 2015; Klomek et al., 2007; Sourander et al., 2007; Espelage & Holt, 2003). To investigate effective ways to remediate and prevent negative consequences of exposure to bullying, researchers have made extensive efforts to explore individual and systematic factors that may help buffer these negative consequences. Although research on forgiveness has mainly focused on adult populations presenting negative relational experiences other than bullying victimization, it is generally agreed that forgiveness either situational or dispositional, is positively associated with individuals' mental health (Baskin & Enright, 2004).

To address gaps in the current literature, this study aims to better understand two main research questions: 1) the relationship between forgiveness and psychological functioning among college students exposed to past bullying victimization; 2) the relationship between individuals' college experience and their understanding of forgiveness.

Findings of this study provide important perspectives for addressing the two proposed research questions. The following two sections offer detailed discussions of these perspectives.

Addressing Research Question 1: What Is the Relationship Between Forgiveness and Psychological Functioning among College Students Exposed to Past Bullying Victimization?

To best understand the findings of this study in terms of the relationship between forgiveness and the mental health of individuals with past bullying victimization experience, discussions in this section will be centered around three areas: (a) negative impact of bullying victimization; (b) forgiveness as a coping strategy; (c) forgiveness as a situational construct.

Negative Impact of Bullying Victimization. While participants in this sample reported limited impact of past bullying victimization on their overall college experience, it is worth noting that all participants reported varying degrees of short-term effects at least of these experiences. First of all, participants reported a number of negative emotions when they were undergoing these experiences, such as anger, doubt, sadness, frustration, guilt, shame and fear. Some also reported the impact of these experiences on their self-esteem, confidence, social experience and family relationships prior coming to college. Most participants also compared their emotions at the time of the interviews with their emotions at the time of the victimization. Although participants generally did not offer detailed descriptions of their emotional states about past experiences, most agreed with the notion that the experiences caused more psychological pain back then. They also used words such as “not brutal” or “not life-threatening” to describe the severity of the negative experience, indicating still a relatively significant level of emotional struggles.

For some participants, certain emotions continued into college and certain values

formed prior to college also has an influence on their college experience despite their reported overall positive attitude toward their college experience. It is also worth noting that two participants identified college as an especially difficult experience unlike the majority of the participants due to significant peer problems. For many others, stress from challenges in college it seems, could have left limited room for them to process emotions and thoughts from the past. A number of participants reported increased anxiety when they were re-connected with past transgressors. One participant also shed tears during the interview session when past experiences were brought up. It is therefore very important to highlight that even though participants may define bullying differently, negative peer victimization experiences endorsed by participants in this study seemed to have had varying levels of negative impact on participants' short-term or long-term mental health functioning.

Forgiveness a Coping Strategy. Consistent important ideas proposed in the stress-and-coping model (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), findings of this study also underscored the functionality of forgiveness as a coping strategy. When exploring whether forgiveness is a passive or active process, most participants endorsed that forgiveness involved a cognitive process of decision-making, and the rationale behind making the decision to forgive was the uselessness or unproductiveness of negative emotions, which hindered their daily functioning or optimal developmental. In other words, these negative emotions caused varying degrees of impairment in the individuals' psychology functioning that called for the action of the individuals to change the status quo. On the other hand, participants also reported a general lack of interest or motivation

to confront or reconnect in a meaningful way with the transgressors while acknowledging the importance of correcting the wrong or restoring the injustice.

Their general emotional and behavioral reluctance to seek apology or explanations from the transgressor makes it nearly impossible to actually receive the justice from the transgressors that they identified as significantly valuable. Almost inevitably, they were relying on their own internal reflections to "solve the problems" about their own emotional disturbances. By accepting a past that was broken and impossible to change, most of them decided that forgiveness would be the necessary solution to the problem so that they could "move on."

An important area that this research has addressed is participants' own definitions of forgiveness. Most participants also endorsed that forgiveness is not a once-and-for-all solution; rather, it could be a process that requires quite an amount of intrapersonal work. As one of the participants described, she may never arrive at her end goal of completely forgiving, which in most participants' definitions of forgiveness means completely letting go of their negative emotions associated with their experiences. It seems that despite the clear distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation in the literature, some participants have included reconciliation as an important part of "true forgiveness," although most participants do not support such a perspective.

Forgiveness as a Situational Construct. An important finding of this study is that most participants did not consider their past victimization as qualifying for the criteria of bullying. Their main argument was that the transgressors did not intend to hurt or that the degree of the harm was not severe enough to cause permanent consequences. While it is

nearly impossible to investigate their transgressors' intention or the objectivity of participants' report on the severity of the harm, the findings reveal that most participants did not identify themselves as the "victim" at least in retrospect. They also described the experiences as "regular" or "part of growth," indicating that they considered their struggles as part of the whole adolescent population's struggles, which in an interesting way, helped to normalize their experience and promoted their mental health. To explore this idea from another perspective, those participants who identified as being targeted individually for specific reasons, for example, their weight or their family status, reported clearer memories of the events and more challenges to "forget" their emotional responses toward their past experience, and thus harder to move on from the experience. In contrast, as discussed in the results section, when participants were not targeted individually, they generally reported their past experiences to be "minor" or no longer important.

Another important finding of this study is that participants all highlighted the importance of forgiveness despite their disagreement on whether they forgave their past transgressors or the degrees of emotional, cognitive and behavioral states associated with forgiveness. It seems that all participants would choose forgiveness if given the circumstances or capacities to do so. A few participants listed the murder of a family member, an extremely anti-humanity crime probably only second to losing one's own life to murder, as the ultimate unforgivable. In less extreme cases, Participant H, for example, listed domestic violence, as the unforgivable that went beyond the limits of his moral beliefs.

The valuable data on some participants' different reactions toward their

victimization experiences in different contexts provided unique windows for us to see how participants were using their full forgiving capacities in any circumstances that facilitated forgiveness. Even with transgression that participants were not able to forgive, hope was expressed that full forgiveness, though not required, could be achieved someday. Participants' openness to changes and their flexibility in reframing their perspectives may provide valuable opportunities for prevention and intervention efforts.

Addressing Research Question 2: What Is the Relationship between Students' College Experiences and Their Perspectives on Forgiveness?

Findings of this study show that though participants' college experience might not determine how they understand forgiveness, many aspects of their college life provided strong factors that may have influenced their perspectives on forgiveness and on their past victimization experience. In this section, discussions of these factors will be focused on the following areas: (a) creating distance, (b) providing opportunities, (c) promoting confidence, and (d) encouraging learning.

Creating Distance. Profiles of the participants show that 12 out of the 15 participants relocated from out of states to attend college. Even for participants coming from within the state, one participant reported noticing major cultural difference relocating from her suburban home to the urban college campus. Relocation itself, for most participants, created a natural physical distance between the participants and their transgressors. As the findings indicated, the new academic and social challenges faced by participants entering into college also helped created a temporary psychological distance

between the participants and their past experience, given their limited time to deal with everyday tasks of college life. The physical and psychological space provided by their college experience could have increased their sense of safety to explore new opportunities. And as indicated by participants' report, most of them showed very limited interest in reconnecting with the transgressors in meaningful ways, or in other words, shortening the distance. In fact, two participants reported elevated anxiety when encountering or knowing the possibility of encountering their past transgressors. A safe distance, it seems, ensured that the participants had sufficient space to explore new opportunities and develop their own identities without feeling threatened by the transgressors or their own emotional reactivity.

Providing Opportunities. Findings of this study show that college provided a wide range of opportunities and choices for the participants to develop new positive intrapersonal, interpersonal as well as spiritual identities. As many participants pointed out, it is important that college is "different" from high school and that students are given opportunities for a fresh start. Participants identified various ways to make meaningful connections with people from residential housing, classes, student organizations, teaching staff, or employment on and off campuses. Some used the support of different groups to develop different aspects of their identities, and some used the support of one or two groups that they found most comfortable with. Even participants who reported the least support were able to identify at least one class or one person in college that sustained them emotionally. As the participants highlighted, having the choices to craft one's own identity might be challenging at first, but could be rewarding and meaningful in

retrospect.

To put this in the context of forgiveness, new opportunities to develop interpersonal opportunities in a structured environment that could help develop secure and nurturing attachment with others. Through experimenting and exploration of different types of attachment with different people, participants were also given new opportunities to develop a stronger sense of self also helped with developing a more secure attachment with individuals themselves.

As part of a big academic institution of higher learning, participant also witnessed opportunities provided by other students. Many students highlighted the positive impact of a diverse student community on their overall college experience and on their perspectives on forgiveness.

Promoting Confidence. With the diverse opportunities that come with participants' college experience, they were also given choices to develop their confidence in various ways. For some students, overcoming the academic challenges and identifying themselves as an outstanding student significantly boosted their confidence. For some, involving in student organization and identifying themselves as student leaders contributed greatly to the meaning of their college experience. For some, despite identifying themselves as not as successful academically or socially, developing communication skills with their romantic partner in college was a transformative experience. For others, a strong match with their field of study and a promising future career that fits their aspirations was the highlight of their college experience. Participants' college experience provided the confidence they needed to affirm a stronger sense of self,

to transition successfully out of college and to face the new challenges after graduation.

As young adults faced with many developmental challenges, participants in this sample also reported a strong sense of curiosity toward the developmental trajectories of the transgressors. They seemed to compare themselves to the transgressors to assess their power differences, and confidence not only serves to buffer the negative impact of past peer victimization experience, but also serves to empower these students in the future whenever difficult emotions associated with the past are aroused.

Encouraging Learning. College also offers the moral education needed at participants' unique developmental stage to deepen their learning on justice and injustice, and to increase their cognitive capacities for critical thinking, and thus increasing participants' capacity for forgiveness. Many reported the realization about how the transgressors were wrong or the victimization they experience was unfair. Intellectual learning in college may have played a significant role in producing these validating thoughts and self-compassion.

In addition, a number of participants reported new or more rational perspectives on their past experience or more compassion toward their transgressors because of one class or one research project. Increased capacity to understand, to explain, and to mentalize other's motivations, feelings, thoughts and behaviors gained through intellectual learning in college served as a significant contributor to their perspectives on forgiveness.

A Proposed Model

Findings of this research resonate with some of the key ideas proposed in the current literature. In line with the findings of extensive research on bullying victimization in youth, the majority of the sample reported the negative psychological impact of past bullying victimization experience. Worthington and Scherer (2004)'s stress-and-coping model argues that individuals develop hurtful feelings when experiencing interpersonal transgression, and that forgiveness is a way to adjust to these emotions and experiences. Participants in this study highlighted the negative impact of past peer victimization experiences and endorsed on varying levels negative emotions associated with the experiences. One of the compelling reasons participants offered when thinking about forgiveness was that forgiveness could help with letting go of negative feelings. The majority of the participants recognized forgiveness as a necessity for "moving on" from hurtful experiences. On the other hand, the conscious decision to work toward forgiveness does not necessarily lead to actual forgiveness. Berry and colleagues (2001)'s research on unforgiving behaviors becomes especially informative when considering some participants' reported difficulties in forgiving certain past experiences compared to other experiences. Findings reveal that strong negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and fear were aroused among these participants when they described past experiences at the time of the interviews. Two participants endorsed heightened anxiety when speaking about he possibility of seeing past transgressors in person. One clearly identified anger toward her peers and difficulties with considering forgiveness.

Therefore, it seems that although the majority of participants endorsed forgiveness as a coping strategy against negative emotions related to past victimization, whether forgiveness actually happens and to what extent participants would like to forgive depend on situational factors such as the nature of past victimization, participants' perceived impact of past experience, their current physical and emotional distance from their past experience and the perpetrators of the transgression, opportunities in college to develop new interpersonal relationships, their confidence to meet with developmental challenges in college, as well as their cognitive capacities for reconstructing their past victimization experience and their own sense of self. These findings also echo some important ideas proposed by Enright and colleagues (1989) in their social cognitive developmental model of forgiveness that underlines the understanding of forgiveness in the context of individuals' socio-ecological environment. The physical and emotional distance from participants' past experience or transgressors, meaningful relationships in college, a stronger sense of self through academic/professional achievement, and the increased mental capacity to take into the perspectives of their perpetrators with intellectual education can all be facilitators of forgiveness, according to participants of this sample.

Based on findings of this study, the following model is proposed as a way of understanding forgiveness among college students with past victimization experiences.

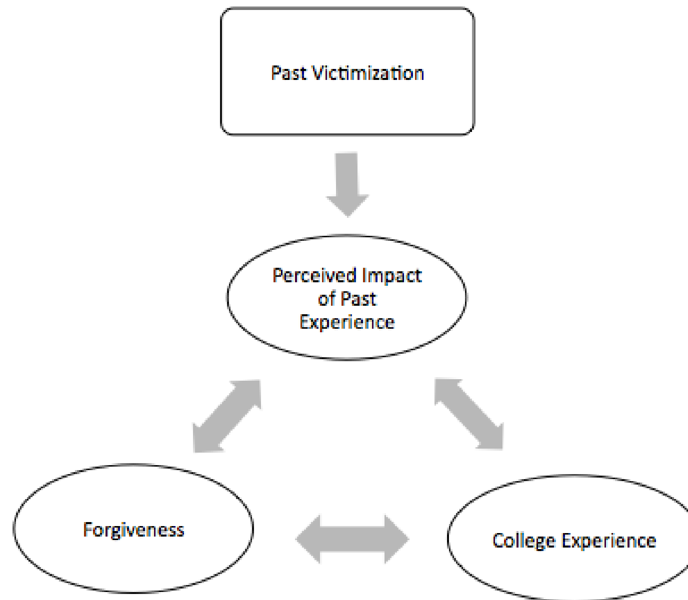

Table 2. A Proposed Model

This model aims to capture the relationships among four key elements of forgiveness among college students with past bullying victimization experiences: 1) past victimization; 2) perceived impact of past experience; 3) forgiveness; 4) college experience. To begin with, participants' past victimization experiences directly affects their perceptions of these experiences. As we can see from the findings, the time, intensity and the nature of past events influence participants' current emotions about these events, as well as their definitions of the nature of the victimization. When we take a closer look at the key findings of this research, we see bi-directional interactions among all three other factors: participants' perceived impact of past experience, their perspectives on forgiveness, and their college experience. First of all, while most participants endorsed negative emotions while going through the victimization experience, they normalized it as part of pre-college life and expected college to be a new

and different experience. On the other hand, the few participants significantly impacted by past victimization also endorsed difficulties with social relationships, especially during the college adjustment process. College experience, in return, may also change participants' perceptions of past events. Most participants, for example, recalled the impact of those events as "bigger" at the time compared to now. Secondly, how participants perceive the impact of past events also influences whether participants would consider forgiveness and to what extent they can forgive. On the other hand, when participants have made the conscious decision to forgive, their cognitive reconstruction of past events may also affect how they perceive the impact of these events. Last but not least, participants' perspectives on forgiveness shaped before their college experience, be it from family, social, religious, or spiritual upbringings, may have served as a guide when they deal with negative emotions associated with past events, and their relational experience in college. In return, college also provides new academic, social, relational and spiritual experiences that either helped with facilitating or prevented them from their process of forgiving. It is worth highlighting that in this particular sample, positive relational experience in college not only serves as a strong protective factor for psychological wellbeing, but also a strong facilitator for forgiveness in general.

Implications

Given the high level of interpersonal transgressions among youth and the general agreement in the literature on the deleterious effects of such transgressions (e.g. Finkelhor, 2008), it is worthwhile to investigate the role forgiveness can plays in the

prevention and intervention efforts that target interpersonal violence in youth. Negative effects of childhood bullying victimization, considered an important form of peer victimization, have been well documented in the literature. Current literature also pinpointed the strong association between peer victimization and youth's later adjustment (Holt et al., 2014; Adams & Lawrence, 2011). Youth entering adolescence and early adulthood already face an increased number of normative stressors (Seiffge-Krenke, 1993, 2000). When combined with the negative peer interactions, youth may experience heightened stress that can lead to deleterious effects. It is therefore of essential importance to continue developing our knowledge in the potential role of forgiveness as a reactive coping strategy for current stressors, as well as a part of youth's moral and cognitive developmental process that might benefit youth' later adjustment in life.

The proposed model of understanding forgiveness among college students with past bullying victimization experience may have implications for bullying prevention and intervention in both K–12 school setting and college settings. It is quite surprising that findings of this research reveal that the majority of the participants considered their victimization as a normal part of school life despite its negative impact, the implications of which call for further investigation. For example, how may such a perspective influence their sense of self or their help seeking behavior? It also reminds us as researchers that more effort needs to be made in the education about bullying victimization among youth. Despite the general agreement among researchers that bullying victimization can pose serious deleterious on individuals' general emotional wellbeing as well as educational attainment and career pursuits, current bullying

prevention programs have demonstrated limited effectiveness at reducing bullying (Merrell et al., 2008). Some program components, however, have been identified as more promising. For example, some researchers identified that peers reflect a particularly salient component of adolescents' social-ecological contexts, and therefore programs that potentially include peer-focused components such as empathy and compassion. In terms of intervention, it is important to take into consideration that students in K–12 settings may be exposed to day-to-day bullying victimization in which context forgiveness-based intervention may be always be helpful. This research has shown that individuals' lived experiences are quite different from each other. This may serve as a reminder that schools, teachers and parents need to focus on the identification of at-risk youth for mental health issues such as anxiety and depression due to bullying victimization as well as proper clinical attention to this population.

At the same time, findings reveal that college provides valuable opportunities for students to develop new positive relational experiences and self-confidence, which all serve as protective factors against negative impact of past victimization and facilitators of forgiveness. The question is how we can create more space and opportunities for students with a past history of bullying victimization experience. As some participants pointed out, continued education about bullying and intellectual learning about youth development can be one way to gain a better understanding of their past experiences. Most students also highlighted difficulties with college adjustment, which may have implications for the design and the implementation of reach-out programs for first year college students that focus on developing positive relationships and assisting with

academic needs. As participants also pointed out the lack of mental health resources in college, it may be worthwhile to consider the possibilities of alternative mental health assistance projects or programs, such as the training of faculty and staff about bullying and mental health, first aid mental health intervention, forgiveness-based group prevention and intervention programs, or the identification and development of community mental health resources outside of college campus.

Limitations

As the first qualitative study that investigated the relationship between forgiveness and college experience of students reporting past bullying victimization experiences, this project provides evidence and ideas that may inform future research efforts. However, due to limited time and resources, this study was not able to address in depth individual experiences and perspectives on prevention and intervention programs. It is hoped that future research could focus more on the development and improvement of prevention and intervention initiatives or programs on college campuses that take into account individual as well as contextual factors such as the support of families, schools and peers.

Given that this research did not gather data on participants' spiritual/religious beliefs and related themes around forgiveness, it may not be accurate to conclude that most participants conceptualized forgiveness in secular terms. In light of some of the most research on forgiveness and spirituality, it is hoped that future projects could address the role of spirituality in the relationship between forgiveness and bullying

victimization. It is also hoped that future research could include data on students' early attachment experience in order to further understand participants' attachment styles.

It is worth mentioning that all participants are students successfully enrolled in a four-year private college; therefore, the sample of this study is not representative of students experiencing diverse types of higher education and training, e.g. two-year colleges. Also, this study could have potentially excluded participants who might have been impacted by bullying experiences and yet have not entered college. Findings of this research cannot be generalized to other populations experiencing bullying victimization especially given that college students could be a population that has demonstrated certain level of psychological resilience in order to be enrolled in higher education.

APPENDIX I
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date ___________________________

Time ___________________________

Location ________________________

Interviewer ______________________

Interviewee ID ______________________

Consent form signed? ____

<u>Overview of the Project</u>

- The interviewer will introduce him/herself at the beginning of the interview.
- The interviewer will briefly explain the purpose and method of the research.
- The interviewer will address issues around confidentiality and obtain informed consent from the interview participant.
- The interviewer will explain the emergency protocol to the interview participant.
- The interviewer will indicate the typical duration of interviews and provide an overview of the types of questions that will be asked.

My name is XXX. I am a XXX (graduate student) at Boston University working on this research project to study college students' experience in college. As you know from the email you received, you have been selected as part of a group of approximately XX students who have been invited to complete an in-person interview. The purpose of this interview is to hear more from you about your college experience, your experience prior to coming to college and your perspectives on these experiences.

(This project has been approved by the Boston University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research.) I will begin by describing your rights as a participant in this research study and then will answer any questions that you have. Your participation in this interview portion of the study will involve completing this one-time interview that will last approximately 30–40 minutes. During this interview, you will be asked some questions about your experiences in college, including your academic experiences, experiences with peers, and extracurricular involvement. Next, you will be asked some questions about your life before arriving at BU. You will then be asked questions related to your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors about your life events. Our hope is that the

results of this study will contribute to understanding important factors that influence students' college experience.
Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions or to end the interview at any time. Your responses to questions may be used in publications or presentations from this study, but they are confidential and public reports from this study will never include identifying information about you. In addition, I will ask for your permission to audiotape the interview so that our research team can go back to your responses at a later time. All audiotapes will be stored securely in a locked computer server and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

The main risk of allowing us to use and store your information for research is a potential loss of privacy. Your name is currently recorded in a master file that we are using to keep track of study participants. In order to protect your privacy, only an ID number will be attached to the information you provide. Once the study is completed, the list with your name will be destroyed. In addition, it is important that you please do not use your name or the names of any of your peers or family members during the interview.

There is one exception to confidentiality: if you disclose anything that indicates you are having thoughts about harming yourself or others, or are planning to hurt yourself or others, I will have to break confidentiality and contact relevant people or authorities.

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research study. The information from this study will help our research team to further understand the students' college experience and provide supports and services for college students. If you have any questions about this research or your rights as a research participant now or in the future, please contact Cong Zhang at congcong@bu.edu or Drs. Melissa Holt or Jennifer Green at holtm@bu.edu. You may also contact the Boston University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research at irb@bu.edu or 617- 358-6115.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Interview Questions

Please note that every research participant will be asked questions in **bold font**. Follow-up questions in *italic font* may or may not be used to illicit further information.

Questions Regarding College Experience

I am interested in hearing about your experiences at BU this past year and about how the transition to college has been for you.

1) **Overall college experience:**
   Can you tell me a little about how your college life has been?
   [Follow-up questions if needed]:
   - *What has gone well?*
   - *What has been difficult?*
2) **Expectations:**
   What were your expectations coming to college? [Follow-up questions if needed]:
   - *Did you have any worries?*
   - *Did you have any positive expectations or hopes?*

   How have your expectations been met so far?

3) **Social Life:**
   What has your social life been like for the past years in college?
   [Follow-up questions if needed]:
   - Friendships: *Tell me more about the people you spend time with here.*
     - *How do you feel about these friendships?*
   - Friendship forming: *Since starting college, what has the process of making friends been like for you?*
     - *How comfortable do you feel when meeting new people at college?*
   - [IF participant reports few friendships]: *What do you think has made it difficult for you to make friends here?*

4) **Support:**
   What support have you had that has helped improve your college experience?
   [Follow-up questions if needed]:
   - External support**:** *Is there anyone who has been particularly supportive?*
     - *What have they done?*
     - *How was that helpful?*
   - *Have you done anything that might have helped your college experience?*
     - *What did you do?*
     - *How was that helpful?*
   - [IF participant reports poor adjustment to college]: *What do you think would have made your college experience a more positive experience? What support do you wish was available?*

Questions Regarding Experiences Prior to College

Now that I have some understanding about your college experience, I would like to hear about some of your experiences before coming to college.

5) **<u>Negative interactions</u>:**
It is not uncommon for people to experience negative interactions with peers during elementary school, middle school or high school. Have you had anyone acting hurtful toward you in the past?
   - [If yes]:
     - o *Can you describe the experience?*
     - o *What's your relationship with the person acting hurtful?*
     - o *How do you think about the experience in the past in general?*
   - [If no]:
     - o *During a study you participated a few years ago, you indicated that you have been [teased/threatened/hit] by your peer? Can you say more about that?*
     - o *Can you describe one or two experiences in life that you can remember when someone has acted hurtful toward you?*

What are some ways that being hurt affected you at the time it was happening?
OR
<u>[If participant has mentioned effects earlier in the interview]</u>: **Can you tell me more about that?**
[Follow-up questions if needed]:
   - *<u>Mood</u>: How did you feel when this was happening to you?*
   - *<u>Self-esteem</u>: How did you feel about yourself when this was happening?*
   - *<u>Academics</u>: Were your grades affected?*
   - *<u>Social life</u>: What about your social life? How did your peers perceive you before and after being [teased/threatened/hit]?*

6) **Do you think your experiences being hurt had any impact on your college experience?**

Questions Regarding Forgiveness

7) **During your college years, have you thought about the person/group that have acted hurtful toward you in the past?**
   - [If yes]:
     - o *On what occasions have you thought about the person/group?*
     - o *How do you think about the person/group now?*

- o *How do you think about the experience in the past in general?*
- [If no]:
  - o *How do you think about the person/group now?*
  - o *What do you think about this experience in the past in general?*

8) What are your feelings about the experience now?

- o *If you were to identify a few words to describe your feelings toward the experience now, what would they be?*
- o *Have the feelings been different in the past?*
- o *What part of the experience has made it challenging to process your feelings?*

9) Since you have been in college, what have you done to process the feelings or thoughts you have just mentioned?

- o *What strategies have been helpful for a better college experience?*
- o *What strategies have not helped?*

10) What experience in college have you had that may have affected your perspectives on your understanding of what happened in the past?

- o *Can you say more specifically how that may have affected your understanding?*

11) At this point of your life, what do you think about the idea of forgiving the people who have been hurtful to you in the past?

- o Can you say more about it?
- o What part of the past experience makes it challenging to forgive?
- o If the people who have hurt you were here, what would you say to him/her/them?

12) These are some more general question and you may or may not answer it based on your own experience.

- o The word “forgiveness” can be defined differently by different people. How would you define forgiveness?
- o Some people believe that we need to forgive those who hurt us. Some people don’t. What’s your perspective on this?
- o How do you know if you can or have forgiven someone or certain experience?

13) Is there anything we have not yet discussed that you would like to share with us?

14) **Your feedback about the questions asked is very important. Besides the questions we've discussed in this interview, do you have any comments or thoughts that you want to add?**

Reflections by Interviewer

- Closure
    - Thank you to interviewee
    - Reassure confidentiality
    - Ask permission to follow-up ______

Emergency Protocol

If the interview participant reveals intent to hurt him/herself or others, the interviewer will assess the severity of the situation by obtaining information based on the following questions.

Ideation (Assessing whether the subject has the intent to hurt)

Are you thinking about hurting yourself or others now?

Plans (Assessing how specific/immediate/lethal the plans are)

Do you have a specific plan for how you would harm/kill yourself/others?

Means (Determining if the subject has the means to carry out their plan)

Do you have [guns, weapons, etc.] available to you now?

If the participant expresses imminent danger to themselves or others during the interview and demonstrates willingness to see a counselor at the moment, the interviewer will call Student Health Services at 617-353-3575 and walk the participant to the service on 881 Commonwealth Avenue. The interviewer will not leave the participant alone until they have ensured contact with a counselor or staff member at Student Health Services.

If the participant expresses imminent danger to themselves or others during the interview and is unwilling to see a counselor, the interviewer will call Boston University Police at 617-353-2121.

If the participant has expressed that they are depressed, but do not intend to harm themselves or others, the interviewer will provide the participant with appropriate resources of national and local organizations. [See attached sheet]

In all cases, the interviewer will promptly call Drs. Holt and Green who will review the audiotaped discussion of the risky situation. All instances will be reported to the Boston University IRB.

APPENDIX II

CONSENT FORM

I volunteer to participate in a dissertation research project conducted by Cong Zhang from Boston University. I understand that the project is designed to understand the college experience of students at BU. I will be one of approximately 10 people being interviewed for the research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that other than a compensation of a 25-dollar gift card, there is no direct benefit for me to be part of the research. I may withdraw from participation at any time or decline to answer any question during the interview.

2. I understand that participation involves being interviewed by trained researchers or graduate students from Boston University who are collaborating on the project. The interview will last approximately 30–40 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be stored securely in a locked computer server and will be destroyed upon completion of the study. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.

3. I understand that I will be asked a series of questions about my experiences since arriving at Boston University. I will also be asked a series of questions about my life before arriving at Boston University, including my academic life, social life, and family life. I will also be asked to share my feelings and thoughts toward life's events.

4. I understand that the researchers of the project will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from the interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant will remain secure through the assignment of an ID number to my name. Once the study is completed, the list with my name will be destroyed. However, I also understand that there is a risk of loss of privacy due to unexpected or uncontrollable circumstances. In addition, I understand that it is important that I do not use my name or the names of any of my peers or family members during the interview.

5. There is one exception to confidentiality: if I disclose anything that indicates I am having thoughts about harming myself or others, or are planning to hurt myself or others, the interviewer will have to break confidentiality and contact relevant people or authorities.

6. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Behavioral Sciences Committee at Boston University. For research problems or

questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Board may be contacted through irb@bu.edu or 617- 358-6115.

7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

______________________________	______________________________
My Signature	Date
______________________________	______________________________
My Printed Name	Signature of the Investigator

For further information, please contact Cong Zhang at congcong@bu.edu.

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