FORGIVENESS AS A COPING STRATEGY TO ALLOW SCHOOL STUDENTS TO DEAL WITH THE EFFECTS OF BEING BULLIED: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION

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In recent decades, school bullying has come to be recognized as a serious problem for students across the world. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that school bullying leads to significant negative outcomes for its targets. Bullying is also difficult to combat, with even the best interventions achieving only limited success. Thus, it is inevitable that some students will be bullied. This is why many researchers have investigated various coping strategies by which students might deal with the harmful effects of bullying. It is proposed that the process of forgiveness could act as an effective coping resource, allowing students to replace bullying-induced negative emotions with other-focused positive emotions. Indeed, bullying is characterized by interpersonal transgressions, and forgiveness has been conceptualized as a coping response to precisely such offenses. This paper explores the links between bullying and forgiveness, presents a new model of the pathways linking forgiveness and coping, and discusses how forgiveness could be applied within school-based initiatives. Theoretical issues and directions for future research are also discussed.

School bullying (defined in the next section) affects thousands of students across the world, and its targets are placed at greater risk of numerous negative outcomes, such as degraded health or psychological problems (Due et al., 2005; Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

However, efforts to reduce the prevalence of bullying have achieved only limited success. School bullying can be difficult to combat, and so inevitably some students will be targeted. Therefore, it is argued that students need to be equipped with effective coping resources for dealing with the negative effects of being bullied. The present paper makes the novel suggestion that forgiveness could act as such a resource. Bullying is characterized by interpersonal transgressions and other such hurtful offenses. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is a coping strategy for overcoming the negative emotional impact of these offenses. While bullying damages its targets' health and well-being, forgiveness has been found to provide benefits in these areas. Thus, forgiveness presents itself as a coping strategy with potential for use in the context of school bullying.

It is proposed that targets of school bullying could utilize forgiveness in order to recover from the emotional hurt of being bullied. Operating via the process of *emotional juxtaposition* (Worthington & Wade, 1999), forgiveness could allow students to replace bullying-induced negative emotions with positive emotions. Forgiveness could also act as a buffer against the impact of bullying: those who are more forgiving have been found to possess superior physical and mental health (Berry & Worthington, 2001), which could be protective against future offenses. In reviewing the harmful effects of school bullying, and the corresponding benefits of forgiveness, the present paper aims to demonstrate the conceptual and empirical links between the two areas of inquiry.

SCHOOL BULLYING DEFINED

The issue of school bullying (also referred to as peer victimization), neglected until the late 1970s (Olweus, 1993, 1995), has been the subject of increasing research interest in recent decades. Confined initially to the Scandinavian countries, research into school bullying has grown steadily in influence and has extended to many other countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia. According to one of the most widely accepted definitions, a school student is being bullied when he or she is "exposed repeatedly, and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus, 1995, p. 197). Olweus (1991) and Smith and Sharp (1994) describe bullying as a deliberate,

repeated, and harmful *abuse of power*. Bullies' superior power can be either physical or psychological (Hazler, 1996; Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004).

Bullying behaviors are usually placed into one of three categories. Physical bullying refers to overt physical behaviors such as hitting, punching, and theft. Verbal bullying refers to overt verbal behaviors such as name-calling, teasing, and threatening speech. The most clandestine bullying behaviors are categorized as *relational* (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Targets of relational bullying suffer exclusion from social groups, are the subject of hurtful rumors, or are rejected by their peers. The most covert examples of relational bullying can even include behaviors such as directing a threatening or intimidating stare towards someone (Rivers, 2001a). Essentially, relational bullying aims to hurt its targets by damaging their peer relationships or social standing (Egan & Perry, 1998). Physical and verbal bullying are seen as direct forms of victimization, while relational bullying is seen as indirect (Reid et al., 2004). Both boys and girls are vulnerable to the three forms of school bullying (Whitney & Smith, 1993), with boys more likely to experience physical bullying and girls more likely to experience relational bullying.

While it is generally viewed as unfair or unacceptable (Rigby, 1997), school bullying can nevertheless be expected to occur in any school (Smith & Brain, 2000). School bullying has been reported in many countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland, Korea, Japan, and China (Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001; Smith et al., 1999). Indicators of school bullying have also been identified in the developing world. Bullying affects a significant proportion of students: Whitney and Smith (1993) surveyed 6,000 pupils from 24 schools in Sheffield, England, and found that 27% of primary school students and 10% of secondary school students reported having been bullied at some time in the school term during which they were surveyed. Other studies indicate an even greater prevalence: of the 377 secondary school students surveyed by Sharp (1996), 18% had experienced bullying in their current school year, and 50% had suffered school bullying at some point in their lives. Sharp, Thompson, and Arora (2000) found that 49% of the students in their sample had been bullied in the year prior to being surveyed. Seals and Young (2003) investigated the prevalence of bullying in three American

schools. Of the 454 secondary students surveyed, 32.3% reported being targets of physical bullying, 22.8% of threats of harm, 50.2% of name-calling, and 43.7% of *mean teasing*, with 32.1% reporting being excluded.

Prior to the 1970s, school bullying generally was not acknowledged as being particularly harmful to school students. Many adults viewed it as "character forming and a necessary part of growing up" (Smith & Brain, 2000, p. 3). However, a substantial body of research has shown that bullying is a serious problem for students, and can have long-term negative effects on physical and mental health functioning.

NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SCHOOL BULLYING

What follows is a brief overview of the negative effects of bullying on its targets. Later, when the benefits of forgiveness are discussed, these negative effects should be borne in mind, as the outcome domains (e.g., psychological wellbeing, physical health) affected by bullying are often the same as those affected by forgiveness. In other words, where bullying has a negative impact, forgiveness is likely to have a positive impact.

The targets of school bullying are more likely to experience significant psychosocial maladjustment, including depression, social anxiety, generalized anxiety, low social self-worth, low global self-worth, and loneliness (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). School bullying is also predictive of a range of psychological and psychosomatic symptoms, including bodily aches, sleeping difficulties, emotional and mood-related problems, and dizziness. On average, those who are bullied more extensively suffer from more numerous and severe symptoms (Due et al., 2005). Bullied students are more likely to have academic problems and to demonstrate submissive-withdrawn or aggressive behavior, and are less likely to demonstrate assertive-prosocial behavior (Schwartz et al., 2001). School bullying is also linked to suicidality, with targeted students more likely to be depressed, and to have contemplated, attempted, or committed suicide (Carney, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantenan, 1999; Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2005; Morita, Soeda, Soeda, & Taki, 1999; O'Moore, 2000). Numerous other cross-sectional studies have found school bullying to predict a host of physical, psy-

chosomatic, psychological, and emotional symptoms (see Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Bauman, 1999; Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996).

Longitudinal studies support the conclusions drawn from the aforementioned cross-sectional research. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) concluded that school bullying leads to adjustment problems in targeted students, with the highest levels of maladjustment observed in those who were bullied consistently. Egan and Perry (1998) found that while low self-regard can invite victimization, being bullied can also cause decreases in self-regard. Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop (2001) observed that school bullying can cause decreased social satisfaction and increased feelings of loneliness in targeted students. Evidence has also been found for carry-over effects: while maladjustment decreases once a student is no longer targeted, formerly targeted students often continue to experience elevated levels of maladjustment (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Thus, bullying can have a lasting negative impact on students that extends beyond the period in which they were targeted.

Evidence from intervention evaluations also highlights some of the detrimental effects of school bullying. Bullying detracts from the school environment, hampering students' social and educational progress. Anxiety, depression, antisocial behavior, poor discipline, adjustment problems, negative attitudes towards schoolwork, and low satisfaction with the school environment are hallmarks of schools in which the problem of bullying is not adequately addressed (Olweus, 1994; Twemlow et al., 2001).

The preceding evidence indicates that bullying has an immediate detrimental effect on its targets and on the school environment as a whole. To make matters worse, the negative impact of bullying can persist even into adulthood, as a number of retrospective studies have shown. Crozier and Skliopidou (2002) found that adults who recalled their experiences of verbal bullying as most hurtful were significantly more likely to report current feelings of hurt, unhappiness, anger, embarrassment, and shame. Childhood targets of verbal bullying are also more likely to experience depression, trait anxiety, social anxiety, and anxiety sensitivity as adults (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002). A childhood history of bullying has also been associated with social anxiety and social phobia in adulthood (McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, & Swinson, 2003). Adults

classified as having been childhood targets of school bullying are significantly more likely to indicate experiencing a number of current negative outcomes, including suicidal ideation, workplace victimization, negative self-perceptions (including lower self-esteem), and emotional loneliness. They are also more likely to suffer from emotional maladjustment and relationship difficulties (Schafer et al., 2004). The reliability of retrospective studies such as the aforementioned is supported by a number of researchers (see Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993; Rivers, 2001b; Schafer et al., 2004).

In all, a large body of cross-sectional, longitudinal, intervention evaluation, and retrospective research attests to the fact that school bullying has a significant negative impact on targeted students, both immediately and in the long term. School bullying is evidently a serious problem that needs to be addressed, and, if students are to be spared from its harmful consequences, efforts must be made to both reduce its prevalence and combat its effects.

COPING WITH SCHOOL BULLYING

Numerous initiatives have focused on the important task of combating school bullying and its effects. For example, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program has been successfully implemented in Norway, with school bullying decreasing by 30-70% (Eisenberg & Aalsma, 2005; see also Olweus, 2005). As a result, anti-bullying interventions in other countries (including the USA, Germany, and Belgium) have been modeled on Olweus's program. Unfortunately, these replications have yielded only modest results, with reductions in bullying of 5-30%.

Targets of bullying often need to seek support and advice from others (Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001; Stevens, Van Oost, & de Bourdeaudhuij, 2000), and so many interventions involve the creation of peer-support systems within schools. While these systems can help bullied students to avoid further episodes of bullying (Cowie, 2000; Smith, 2004), they are relatively ineffective for helping students to overcome the negative emotions caused by having been bullied. Furthermore, school bullying can isolate its targets from their peers, making peer-support more difficult to implement (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005).

Most school-based interventions have yielded limited successes, and some have failed altogether (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Smith & Brain, 2000). No initiative has ever resulted in the complete elimination of bullying at a school, and it is no doubt impossible for even the best intervention to do so. These facts do not imply that interventions should not be implemented: a reduction in school bullying is always desirable, no matter its size. The point is that school bullying will inevitably affect some students, regardless of whether there are anti-bullying initiatives in place. As such, efforts must be made to help students deal with the emotional aftermath of being bullied (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005); effective coping strategies are required. It is argued that forgiveness presents itself as one such strategy.

THE ROLE OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness has been conceptualized as a coping strategy employed in response to interpersonal transgressions, betrayals, and other such offenses (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). After suffering a transgression, an individual will likely experience a negative emotional reaction known as *unforgiveness*, particularly if he or she ruminates on the transgression (Worthington & Wade, 1999; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Forgiveness is one of the ways of dealing with unforgiveness. In the literature, the term "forgiveness" usually refers to interpersonal forgiveness, whereby one person forgives another. In keeping with this, the present paper uses the term in the interpersonal sense.

Theoretical and empirical investigations suggest that forgiveness and unforgiveness can be understood within a stress-and-coping framework (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Unforgiveness is conceptualized as a stress reaction to interpersonal transgressions (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001), and can involve a wide range of negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, hostility, resentment, bitterness, fear, and anxiety. Unforgiveness can be alleviated in many ways, such as avoiding the transgressor, exacting revenge, seeking restitution, achieving reconciliation, or granting forgiveness.

Some coping strategies for addressing unforgiveness are problem-focused, whereby the offended individual deals with the trans-

gression itself, or attempts to bring about justice. Other strategies are meaning-focused: the transgression is reappraised to seem less offensive or even non-offensive. Still other strategies are emotion-focused, whereby the offended individual attempts to deal with the negative emotions elicited by the transgression. Forgiveness falls into this third category (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Specifically, forgiveness is defined as an emotional juxtaposition (Worthington & Wade, 1999), whereby the negative emotions of unforgiveness are neutralized or replaced by the positive emotions of forgiveness. These positive emotions are other-focused, and include "empathy, sympathy, compassion, romantic love, and altruistic love" (Worthington & Scherer, 2004, p. 387). Further, "forgiveness still allows for holding the offender responsible for the transgression, and does not involve denying, ignoring, minimizing, tolerating, condoning, excusing, or forgetting the offense" (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001, p. 118). Forgiveness allows one to both acknowledge the full impact and wrongfulness of a transgression and overcome resultant emotional hurt.

Forgiveness is conceptualized as a primarily emotional process, and the cognitive dimensions of forgiveness are relatively under-emphasized in the research literature. Still, studies of the use of forgiveness in therapeutic and psychoeducational settings give some indication as to the cognitive processes that might underlie forgiveness. One counseling model of forgiveness, developed by Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991), points to the importance of cognitive reframing, ceasing to ruminate, and addressing attributional errors and inaccurate perceptions. Another counseling model, described by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997), also addresses these aspects, and additionally emphasizes the need for both cognitive and emotional empathy, so that the transgressor can be humanized. Empathy has come to be seen as one of the most important preconditions to the granting of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997).

BENEFITS OF FORGIVENESS

Now that forgiveness has been defined, it is appropriate to examine how it benefits those who forgive, and thus how it could benefit the targets of school bullying. What follows is a discussion of key stud-

ies that have demonstrated the specific positive effects of forgiveness, and how they relate to the issue of school bullying. Note that these studies examined how forgiveness affects adults; forgiveness amongst school-age children/adolescents is yet to be investigated. While this may limit the relevance of the studies, they are at present the only source of empirical evidence available when considering how forgiveness might benefit school students. It seems reasonable to expect that at least some of the many benefits of forgiveness observed in adult populations could also apply to children and adolescents.

Witvliet et al. (2001) assessed the physiological and emotional reactions of 71 adults, each of whom was asked to think about a transgression in both forgiving and unforgiving ways. When taking a forgiving perspective, the participants displayed lower stress symptomatology and healthier emotional reactions. In contrast, unforgiving perspective-taking was associated with negative physiological and emotional responses, which persisted through a subsequent relaxation task. This suggests that the detrimental influence of unforgiveness can extend beyond the immediate experience or remembrance of a transgression. In daily life, the negative impact of transgressions is likely to be far more pronounced than that observed by Witvliet et al. (2001), as their short (16 second) imagery trials provided a rather conservative measure of the participants' stress reactions. Furthermore, even acute episodes of stress can be detrimental to health, via a cumulative effect on the body's immune system (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002).

It is crucial to note that the positive effects of forgiveness observed by Witvliet et al. (2001) did not require the participants to be more forgiving at the trait level, or to receive extensive education/preparation; they needed merely to be instructed to adopt a forgiving perspective in order to receive emotional and physiological benefits. This fact should encourage those who would introduce forgiveness-based initiatives to the school context, as it points to the potential effectiveness of instructing students to be forgiving when confronted with episodes of bullying, to counteract bullying-induced unforgiveness. As Kaltiala-Heino et al. (1999) assert: "Being bullied frequently is likely to be a considerable source of stress" (p. 350). Forgiveness presents itself as an effective process by which to reduce such stress (Witvliet et al., 2001).

The link between forgiveness and physical health has also been demonstrated by Lawler et al. (2003), who found that higher levels of both trait and state forgiveness predicted healthier cardiovascular reactivity during and following relived interpersonal transgressions. Those with higher state forgiveness also reported fewer symptoms of physical illness. Berry and Worthington (2001) found trait forgiveness to predict lower stress levels and better self-reported health. These findings suggest that forgiveness serves to counter the physiological impact of transgressions, and may thus serve as a buffer against health problems. This suggests that if school students could be assisted to be forgiving (i.e., increase their state forgiveness) in response to being bullied, they might enjoy superior health and be protected against some of the detrimental effects of unforgiveness.

Toussaint, Williams, Musick, and Everson (2001) carried out a nationwide survey of U.S. adults, and found that interpersonal forgiveness was associated with lower psychological distress. For adults categorized as middle- or old-aged, higher forgiveness predicted greater life satisfaction. For old-aged adults, higher forgiveness also predicted better self-reported physical health. Stress can have a cumulative negative effect on the body (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002), which explains why forgiveness was not associated with physical health in the young- and middle-aged groups. This is not to say that forgiveness is unimportant early in the lifespan: it seems important for individuals to establish healthy response patterns early enough to avert the long-term negative health impact of frequent unforgiving. School-based initiatives to promote forgiveness could play a valuable role in this regard: teaching children and adolescents to forgive could not only help them to overcome the hurtful effects of being bullied, but also equip them with an important, health-protective life-skill that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Forgiveness has also been linked with psychological health and wellbeing. Subkoviak et al. (1995) measured the relationship between forgiveness and anxiety in a sample of 197 university students and their same-gender parents. Each participant was asked to reflect on his or her most recent experience of being deeply and unfairly hurt by someone else. Those who displayed more forgiving responses to their remembered transgressions were significantly more likely to indicate lower state anxiety and lower trait anxiety, particularly when reflecting on an especially deep and relevant hurt.

This suggests that forgiveness facilitates the process of overcoming the anxiety provoked by interpersonal offenses. The link between bullying and anxiety is well-documented (see Hawker & Boulton, 2000; McCabe et al., 2003; Roth et al., 2002; Twemlow et al., 2001), but if school students were encouraged to respond to being bullied in forgiving ways, they might experience less anxiety as a result.

If forgiveness is to be employed in interventions aimed at assisting bullied students, the effectiveness of forgiveness in therapeutic and counseling settings must first be established. Baskin and Enright (2004) conducted a meta-analysis synthesizing the results of nine forgiveness intervention studies, which reported on counseling interventions that promoted forgiveness as a means for addressing a range of mental health issues. It was found that forgiveness-based interventions - compared with other established treatments and with control measures - can effectively promote mental health, provided that they focus on the emotional and cognitive process of achieving forgiveness (rather than merely on the decision to forgive). The process-based interventions evaluated by Baskin and Enright (2004) did not only result in higher levels of forgiveness: the participants reported improved self-esteem, higher levels of empathy, and lower levels of depression, grief, and anxiety. With regard to emotional health, the effect size for the process-based interventions (1.42) was well above the standard effect size for effective psychotherapies (placed at .82 by Lambert & Bergin, 1994), and these benefits were maintained at follow-up (follow-ups ranged from 12 weeks to 14 months). It was concluded that forgiveness-based counseling can be at least as effective as other forms of therapy in the treatment of clients who have experienced an interpersonal transgression, or have been troubled by anger. In addition, Denton and Martin (1998) found wide support amongst surveyed clinicians for the use of forgiveness-based treatments in addressing problems of an interpersonal nature, such as relationship difficulties or the loss of a loved one.

SCHOOL BULLYING AND FORGIVENESS: THEORETICAL LINKS

Forgiveness has been studied in the context of theft, assault, conflict with romantic partners, betrayal, and other offenses (Berry et al.,

2001; Berry & Worthington, 2001; Lawler et al., 2003; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), but, as we have seen, not in the context of school bullying. This is somewhat surprising, given the prevalence of bullying and the fact that it is one of the most common forms of interpersonal conflict (Reid et al., 2004). It should nonetheless be clear that the conjunction of school bullying and forgiveness is a logical one: bullying is characterized by interpersonal transgressions, and forgiveness facilitates coping with such offenses. The preceding empirical evidence gives reason to think that forgiveness could be useful for bullied school students, and the following discussion highlights the theoretical links between forgiveness and school bullying.

Forgiveness is not only especially appropriate for coping with transgressions; it also seems particularly suited to the life circumstances of school students. Contrast the circumstances of school bullying those of the adult equivalent, workplace bullying: if an adult were confronted with workplace bullying, he or she could take legal action, change jobs, or report the bully to a supervisor. School students are relatively restricted: for example, changing schools is not often feasible because where a student attends school is usually a function of where his or her parents live and work, and legal action is typically not a realistic option for a school-age individual. Bullied students often refuse to attend school, or resort to absenteeism, but these are not adaptive strategies and can impair the students' educational progress (DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). The basic point is that children and adolescents have less control over their environments than do adults, and so they often have no choice but to live with the presence of bullying at their schools (this is especially true given that bullying is so difficult to eradicate). Thus, while there is a range of strategies for dealing with transgressions and reducing unforgiveness, school students are unlikely to have ready access to many of them. Of the more positive, productive strategies, forgiveness is likely to be the most accessible within the school environment.

In support of the preceding claim, consider the research of Lazarus (1999), who found that problem-focused coping strategies are superior to emotion-focused ones, provided that direct action is possible. However, when it is not possible to take direction action to remove a stressor, or when such action is difficult, emotion-focused coping strategies (such as forgiveness) are superior. It is often difficult for targets of school bullying to take direct action, especially given the

power imbalance between bully and target (Reid et al., 2004), and the stressor of school bullying can never be entirely removed from any school. As such, emotion-focused coping is probably the ideal option for bullied students, and forgiveness may be of benefit in this regard.

Targets of school bullying often become isolated as a result (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), and so interpersonal coping strategies may not be accessible to many bullied students. One of the benefits of forgiveness is that it is "rooted within the individual" (Worthington & Scherer, 2004, p. 385). While transgressions are interpersonal in nature, and while the positive emotions of forgiveness are other-focused, forgiveness itself can be utilized without needing to involve anyone else in the process. This is in contrast to strategies such as reconciliation or retaliation, which both involve contact (of a positive or negative kind) with the transgressor. Bullied students who have difficulty accessing the support or contributions of others may benefit immensely from employing forgiveness to achieve emotional relief.

When offended individuals use forgiveness to help regulate their emotions (via emotional juxtaposition), they can also receive an added benefit in the form of an increased sense of agency and control: by regulating their emotions they exercise control over their emotions, and thus over the situation (Witvliet et al., 2001). Individuals cope more effectively when they feel that they have greater control over their circumstances (Hunter & Boyle, 2004). School students employing forgiveness to manage their negative emotions may therefore cope better with being bullied.

The preceding arguments point to the theoretical links between forgiveness and school bullying, and as the first step in empirically testing these links, Egan (2005) carried out a survey of 50 first-year undergraduate students. The participants completed a questionnaire assessing their immediate and long-term reactions to bullying. The Trait Forgivingness Scale (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005) was employed to measure trait forgiveness. Each participant imagined himself or herself as the target in a bullying scenario described by a written vignette. Controlling for other important variables (such as religiosity and prior experiences of bullying), it was found that those with higher trait forgiveness indicated significantly lower levels of emotional hurt in response to the

vignette. This supports the claim that forgiving dispositions buffer individuals against the emotional detriments of being bullied.

In Egan's (2005) study, not only was trait forgiveness significantly correlated with emotional hurt, but the corresponding effect size was medium-to-large in magnitude (calculated with reference to Cohen & Cohen, 1975), suggesting a meaningful relationship between the variables. The semipartial correlation (-.471) between forgiveness and emotional hurt was as large as could have been anticipated, given that research in the behavioral sciences rarely yields correlations greater than .5. While these findings marked the beginning of research into the role of forgiveness in coping with bullying, it must be noted that the participants were not school students. While they were relatively young (with an average age of 20 years), they were no longer active within a school environment. Still, this preliminary study demonstrated that forgiveness-focused research has real potential when employed in the investigation of bullying.

REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF FORGIVENESS IN SCHOOLS

How would forgiveness be applied within the school setting, to benefit bullied students? This is a difficult question, given that forgiveness is yet to be investigated in the context of school bullying. However, previous anti-bullying interventions—while not forgiveness-focused—provide a number of important indications as to how a forgiveness-focused initiative might best be implemented in schools.

Empathy is considered to facilitate forgiveness, and is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the forgiveness process (Baskin & Enright, 2004; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997). As such, any forgiveness-focused intervention would need to address the empathy levels of serviced students. Helpfully, a number of previous interventions have included empathy-focused components (Liepe-Levinson & Levinson, 2005; Olweus, 1993); these interventions could serve as models for a forgiveness-focused initiative, with the empathy components expanded to include instruction in how to translate empathy into forgiveness. Alternatively, an existing, empirically-supported intervention (such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program) could be delivered in its present form,

with the addition of forgiveness-focused components in the appropriate areas.

The four-step Olweus Method (described and analyzed in Liepe-Levinson & Levinson, 2005) seems to be an ideal model for a future forgiveness-focused intervention. Not only has the method been empirically validated, but two of its four steps present themselves as excellent locations for added, forgiveness-focused training. The first two steps teach students how to report bullying and respond to it. Step 3 involves self-management training to help students react appropriately when bullied: psychotherapeutic techniques (such as from Rational Emotive Therapy) are employed to assist students to cognitively reframe their bullying experiences and identify attributional errors, in order to regulate their emotions and cope better with being bullied. Forgiveness can be promoted in this very way (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991; McCullough et al., 1997), and so it would be relatively easy to incorporate forgiveness into Step 3 of the Olweus Method, given that the required therapeutic techniques are already in place.

Step 4 of the Olweus Method is explicitly focused on empathy. All students—bullies and targets alike—are encouraged to have empathy for one another. Again, forgiveness-focused instruction could be provided during this step, building upon the empathy training. Empathy can be taught to students in a number of ways, such as role-playing exercises, having teachers model empathy during classes, and creating reconciliation programs (Liepe-Levinson & Levinson, 2005). These strategies could be adopted for the purpose of teaching students how to forgive. Teachers are influential role models for their students (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004), and if they exhibit empathy and forgiveness in how they teach, discipline, and relate to students, the students themselves are more likely to be empathic and forgiving.

Whether the Olweus Method or another such intervention is chosen as the template for a future forgiveness-focused initiative, the instruction in how to forgive would be best provided by trained mental health professionals such as educational psychologists or school counselors, especially where psychotherapeutic techniques are employed. If, due to limited resources or other constraints, school teachers were to provide this instruction, they would probably need to receive specialized training in how to deliver the in-

struction, and in this case the instruction would not include psycho-therapeutic elements.

Previous research has found that anti-bullying interventions are more likely to be successful when implemented across the entire school (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Olweus, 1994). It is therefore recommended that future forgiveness-focused initiatives be delivered school-wide, with all students and teachers learning about forgiveness and how to promote it. Of course, given that forgiveness has not yet been incorporated into a school-based initiative, the efficacy of forgiveness-focused training may need to be demonstrated in smaller-scale studies before a school-wide intervention is possible. Alternatively, small forgiveness components could be incorporated into larger, pre-existing interventions, in order to test the efficacy of forgiveness in the midst of a school-wide program.

There are further reasons why a forgiveness-focused initiative would ideally be delivered to all students at a school. First, forgiveness can be a useful coping strategy for anyone, regardless of whether he or she is a target of bullying. Second, even if a student is not currently being bullied, he or she should still be taught how to forgive, since he or she could then employ forgiveness in the event of future bullying, or to overcome the hurt caused by any past bullying experiences. Third, it has been found that equipping targets of bullying with new skills is more effective when there is a corresponding shift in the attitudes of the targets' peers (Fox & Boulton, 2003). Many interventions seek to improve the entire school environment, creating an atmosphere of respect, tolerance, and harmony (Aluedse, 2006). Teaching all students how to forgive would likely create a desired school-wide shift in attitudes and behaviors, making it easier for students to practice forgiveness.

Providing forgiveness-focused training to all students comes with a few caveats. Some students may have particularly high levels of unforgiveness resulting from especially painful bullying experiences. These students may need extra training sessions, or more intensive training, in order to help them to forgive. On the other hand, while forgiveness-based therapy can be highly beneficial (Baskin & Enright, 2004), it is not always appropriate for individuals who have suffered an especially hurtful transgression: Denton and Martin (1998) gave the example of an abuse survivor who uses his or her negative emotions as a personality stabilizer. Such a person

would not be prepared to relinquish his or her negative emotions, at least not from the outset. It is conceivable that many targets of school bullying would not be prepared to abandon their negative emotions, even if it meant replacing them with positive ones. For these students, it would be inappropriate to encourage them to forgive until sufficient time had elapsed since the cessation of their bullying experiences. Nonetheless, these students could still participate in school-wide forgiveness-focused training: they could learn about forgiveness, and how to forgive, without necessarily being encouraged to forgive immediately. Forgiveness has many immediate benefits (Witvliet et al., 2001), but it is also effective as a delayed response to transgressions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and so students could be equipped with forgiveness for use at a later date, when they are ready to overcome their negative emotions. The important point is that the targets of bullying are not a homogeneous group (Fox & Boulton, 2003), and any school-wide intervention would need not only to provide universally applicable training, but also tailored training for specific subgroups. The mental health professionals who would ideally lead the intervention would be charged with the task of determining which students could immediately benefit from forgiveness and which students should delay practicing forgiveness.

At what age would it be appropriate for students to receive forgiveness-focused training as part of a school-based intervention? Specifically, by what age have students undergone sufficient cognitive and social development for forgiveness to successfully take place? Empathy has been found to emerge at approximately 2-3 years of age, and continue to develop throughout the lifespan (Eisenberg, 2005). Aluedse (2006) recommends that school counselors provide empathy training to students (bullies and targets alike) as young as five years old, in order to reduce levels of aggression and bullying. As such, it may be possible for forgiveness to benefit even the youngest students. However, it would be wise initially to test forgiveness with older school students, because even graduate students can lack the cognitive development necessary for thorough empathizing to take place (Lovell, 1999). Still, Yardley (1999) points to instances in which cognitive development is unrelated to empathic development, and Kanetsuna, Smith, and Morita (2006) found that "[a]t least by 12-15 years, pupils can think in sophisticated ways about coping with . . . different (bullying) scenarios"

(p. 578). Therefore, it is suggested that initial forgiveness-focused interventions be delivered to students 12-15 years of age, as they appear to possess sufficient cognitive maturity to employ emotion-focused coping strategies such as forgiveness, and they still have many years of schooling ahead of them in which this strategy may be beneficial. If initial programs are successful at promoting forgiveness in 12-15 year olds, subsequent interventions could explore the utility of forgiveness amongst younger students.

It is crucial to note that a forgiveness-focused intervention would not be intended to lead to reductions in school bullying. Of course, the empathy-focused components of such an intervention could prevent some students from becoming bullies (Aluedse, 2006), or cause some students to discontinue their bullying behaviors (Liepe-Levinson & Levinson, 2005), but such outcomes would be bonuses. The proper application of forgiveness within the school setting would be to help students deal with the hurtful emotions caused by their having been bullied. Other efforts would need to be made simultaneously with a forgiveness-focused intervention in order to reduce the prevalence of bullying. In other words, a two-pronged approach is needed to combat both bullying and its negative emotional effects: a traditional anti-bullying intervention could reduce the prevalence of bullying, and a new, forgiveness-focused intervention could help students to overcome the emotional hurt elicited by bullying. This approach would be especially important given that it is unknown whether an individual's forgiveness resources can be depleted. The more frequently a student is subjected to bullying, the more rapidly he or she could be expected to abandon forgiveness as a viable coping strategy, and so there would clearly be a need to shield him or her as much as possible from being bullied. Obviously, the question of whether forgiveness can be depleted, or whether it is perpetually effective, should be addressed in future research.

One way in which the two-pronged approach could be realized would be to train teachers in how to combat bullying (through effective programs such as Bully Busters; see Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004) while simultaneously training students in how to forgive those who bully them. Indeed, as Smokowski and Kopasz (2005) have pointed out, interventions should focus not only on eliminating bullying, but on addressing the emotional needs of bullied students, who have often experienced substantial emotional hurt. To date, most anti-bullying interventions have not been concerned

with this latter goal, despite the observation that targets of bullying may need counseling or other assistance in order to overcome bullying-induced maladjustment (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). A forgiveness-focused initiative could be an effective way in which to meet these needs.

EVALUATING FORGIVENESS: PROPOSED PATHWAYS LINKING FORGIVENESS AND COPING

The evaluation of a forgiveness-focused initiative for bullied students would need to measure not only whether the serviced students have become more forgiving (or whether they employ forgiveness more frequently and successfully), but whether they have experienced reductions in levels of stress and negative emotions (i.e., reductions in unforgiveness) as a result of the intervention. These measurements could be made using questionnaires and other tools employed in previous research into school bullying and forgiveness. Of course, in evaluating any such initiative, it will be important to know not only whether forgiveness leads to benefits, but how it operates to achieve its benefits. It is proposed that there are two key pathways by which forgiveness might facilitate coping with bullying and other offenses. Figure 1 depicts these pathways, and it is recommended that future forgiveness-focused interventions be evaluated with reference to this model. The pathways are labeled "restorative" and "preventative" respectively.

Following the restorative pathway, forgiveness is employed subsequent to experiencing an interpersonal transgression, in order to neutralize (via emotional juxtaposition) the negative emotions of unforgiveness elicited by the transgression. Following the preventative pathway, prior acts of forgiveness have led to better mental and physical health, which is protective against future transgressions (regardless of whether these future transgressions themselves are forgiven). In other words, if an individual has practiced forgiveness in the past, he or she is likely to enjoy superior health and well-being, which will act as a buffer against the impact of any future offenses.

As their names suggest, the restorative and preventative pathways are temporally distinct. In the restorative pathway, forgiveness is employed in response to transgressions, while in the pre-
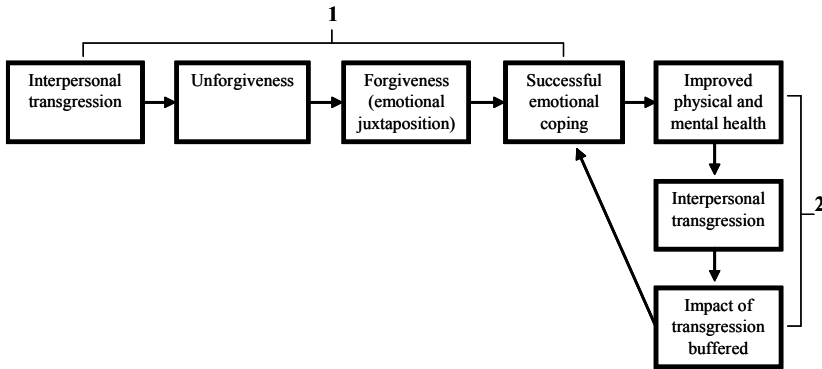
FIGURE 1. Model of the two pathways by which forgiveness is proposed to facilitate successful emotional coping: the restorative pathway (1) and the preventative pathway (2). In the restorative pathway, interpersonal transgressions produce unforgiveness, which is then counteracted by the emotional juxtaposition of forgiveness (positive emotionality is thus 'restored'). This leads to successful emotional coping, which in turn fosters improvements in mental and physical health. In the preventative pathway, the improved health resulting from prior acts of forgiveness serves as a buffer against further transgressions, and this buffering effect facilitates successful emotional coping. In addition to being buffered, these further transgressions could also be forgiven via the restorative pathway. In order for the preventative pathway to work, the restorative pathway needs to have been previously operational. In contrast, the preventative pathway need not work in order for the restorative pathway to be operational.

ventative pathway, forgiveness precedes future transgressions. As such, a given individual may benefit from both pathways simultaneously. He or she may enjoy superior health as a result of past acts of forgiveness (preventative), and he or she may go on to employ forgiveness in response to a future transgression (restorative).

The plausibility of the proposed model is supported by findings that forgiveness allows individuals to overcome the negative effects of transgressions, and that forgiveness predicts better health. Future studies might profitably investigate forgiveness in terms of this model, in order to discover whether the model accurately describes how forgiveness benefits the people who practice it.

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness could have an important role in helping students cope psychologically with school bullying. Given that bullying is difficult to combat, it is not enough to focus only on how to eradicate bullying: the negative emotional impact of bullying also needs to be addressed. Forgiveness has potential as an emotion-focused coping strategy to help students overcome bullying-induced negative emotions. Future anti-bullying initiatives should incorporate forgiveness-focused training, to explore whether bullied students are able to benefit from forgiveness as adults can. In evaluating such initiatives, researchers should investigate whether the restorative or preventative pathway (or both) is responsible for any improvements. There is also the important question of which of the negative effects of bullying would be most mitigated by forgiveness. The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that the physiological stresses, physical symptoms, and negative emotions caused by being bullied could be effectively counteracted by forgiveness, but perhaps there are other variables that would also be affected by a forgiveness-focused initiative (e.g., self-esteem). In all, the process of forgiveness is promising as a coping resource for bullied students, and future research will no doubt explore the extent to which this promise can be realized.

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