QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF A SLOVAKIAN SAMPLE OF THE LAY POPULATION’S UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS WITH REGARD TO AGE DIFFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. The main aim of this study was to qualitatively explore the general population’s understanding of forgiveness with regard to its definition, factors, and effects. The special focus of the study was on comparing the views on forgiveness by two generations, young adults, and seniors.

Participants and setting. Semi-structured interviews were done with 20 participants from two age groups: ten young adults aged 21 to 29 years ($M = 23.4, SD = 2.79$) and ten seniors aged 61 to 68 years ($M = 64, SD = 2.47$).

Research questions. Research questions were focused on examining how laypersons conceptualize forgiveness; notably, how they view the factors and effects of forgiveness. It was also explored whether there are any specifics and differences in the views on forgiveness between young adults and seniors.

Data analysis. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed by Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill et al., 2005).

Results. For the most individuals in both generations, the basis of forgiveness was letting go of anger and pain. The most significant factor positively related to forgiveness was an apology and admitting the mistake. The most noteworthy negative factor was the depth of the hurt. Individuals perceive positive consequences of forgiveness, especially on their mental health and strengthening their relationships. It seems that young adults perceive forgiveness more as an interpersonal process, while seniors perceive it more as an internal process of an individual.

Study limitations. The use of qualitative methodology and the sample size limit the generalization of the findings and comparing two samples at the level of statistical significance. Participants may have had various experiences dealing with hurt and forgiveness throughout their lives which could have influenced their views on forgiveness.

Implications. Gaining a deeper understanding of how young adults and seniors understand forgiveness and its effects, what they perceive as helpful or blocking in their forgiving, can help counselors and therapists to improve their interventions aimed at promoting forgiveness.

key words:
- forgiveness,
- factors of forgiveness,
- age differences,
- qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness has been defined as a moral virtue, a willingness to give up one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward the person who has injured us unjustly (Enright, 2016). McCullough (in McCullough et al., 2000) defines the nature of forgiveness as a prosocial change in the wounded person’s motivation towards another person. Worthington (2005) emphasizes the differentiation between decisional forgiveness, when people intentionally decide to reduce their negative behavior toward the offender, and emotional forgiveness, which means replacing the

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negative emotions of unforgiveness with emotions of forgiveness (e.g., empathy, sympathy, compassion). Although scholars define forgiveness in various ways, they all agree that forgiveness is a process, during which the one who has been treated unjustly gradually gives up negative emotions, such as anger and resentment, negative thoughts and behaviors towards the offender and tries to replace them with positive ones (Enright, 2016; Worthington, 2005).

Kearns and Fincham (2004) point out that there exist some differences between lay and professional definitions of forgiveness. In the lay population, forgiveness is often confused with excusing, condoning, forgetting, or reconciling. In fact, to forgive does not mean to excuse the offender, condone, or forget what happened. While forgiving, we admit what has happened to us was unfair, should not be repeated, and despite that awareness, we decide to forgive. Also, remembering the hurtful experience can prevent us from being hurt by similar injuries again in the future (Enright, 2016). Although forgiveness is related to reconciliation, it needs to be distinguished from it. Reconciliation happens when two people come together following a separation, and for that to happen, a renewal of trust or forgiveness on both parts is often required (Enright, 2016). Altogether, these misconceptions often prevent people from the decision to forgive and can thus lead to prolonged resentment and painful unforgiveness. For example, Ballester et al. (2009) found that the belief that forgiveness is immoral is positively associated with lasting resentment. On the other hand, unconditional forgiveness was positively linked to the belief that forgiveness corresponds to a decrease in negative emotions and an increase in positive emotions towards the offender.

Mullet et al. (2004) were interested to see if students agreed with conceptualizations of forgiveness in the scientific literature. They found that only a minority of participants agreed that forgiveness includes the replacement of negative emotions toward the offender with positive emotions. Similarly, participants in the study of Younger et al. (2004) understood forgiveness mainly as “acceptance and dealing with it”, as well as “letting go of negative feelings and grudges”, and did not mention the building of positive emotions. Lawler-Row et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study that explored lay definitions of forgiveness in young adults. The results showed that most of the participants (45.6%) saw forgiveness only as intrapersonal or focusing on the self; then 31.1% of the sample saw forgiveness as interpersonal or focusing on the offender, and 20.4% described forgiveness as both intrapersonal and interpersonal. Interestingly, many definitions of young adults included forgetting and reconciling as attributes of forgiveness. The majority of these young adults described that forgiveness is forgetting, while less participants stated that „forgiveness is not forgetting“.

Previous quantitative research has identified several reliable predictors of forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2004; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). These predictors can be divided into broader categories, namely personality factors, social factors, and situational factors. Personality factors include religiosity or personality traits, such as low neuroticism, high agreeableness, and humility, which predict higher forgiveness (Bell & Fincham, 2019; Rey & Extremera, 2014). Forgiveness is also influenced by the victim-offender relationship (Decaporale-Ryan et al., 2013; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016; Karremans & Aarts, 2007) and its qualities, such as relationship satisfaction and closeness (Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). Situational factors, like the presence and sincerity of the apology, depth, and intentionally of the hurt, also significantly affect the willingness to forgive (Azar et al., 1999; Finkel et al., 2004; Girard & Mullet, 1997).

Forgiveness as an adaptive reaction to interpersonal conflicts has many individual and social benefits. Forging others has been shown effective across a wide variety
of interpersonal offenses, such as in incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996) or patients with coronary artery disease (Waltman et al., 2009), especially in terms of alleviating symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger, increasing self-esteem, hope, or meaning in life (Baskin & Enright, 2004). Forgiving others can also help improve relationships, and especially, it can protect children from injustices that are passed on through generations (Enright, 2016). On the other hand, higher unforgiveness is associated with higher aversive emotions, heart rate, or blood pressure (Witvliet et al., 2001).

Forgiveness is not only influenced by the predictors mentioned above and by the definition an individual attributes to it, but it can also be influenced by the age of an individual. While children understand forgiveness more on an eye for an eye principle and require an offender’s apology to forgive, adolescents are influenced by the opinion of others, mainly peers and authorities, in their decision to forgive (Al-Mabuk et al., 1995; Enright, 2016). An increase in the tendency to forgive from adolescence into old age was observed in the study by Girard and Mullet (1997), as well as in the study by Cheng and Yim (2008). Moreover, Enright (2016) believes that older adults focus on the consequences of forgiveness in their motivation to forgive, and see forgiveness as a kind, unconditional choice, or a form of higher-good that moves society forward.

Taken together, most of the studies examining the consequences of forgiving are done with clinical populations. The factors and consequences of forgiveness are mainly measured quantitatively by correlational studies or as a result of experimental interventions, mainly done in clinical populations, with Enright’s process model of Forgiveness therapy of Worthington REACH model of forgiveness therapy (see for example Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Baskin & Enright, 2004; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Wade et al., 2014). Definitions of forgiveness are derived from scholars, scientists, and psychologists in the field. Although there exist some qualitative studies on conceptualizations of forgiveness in laypersons (e.g., Friesen & Fletcher, 2007; Kanz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Lawler-Row et al., 2007), they were conducted mainly in Western cultural context. Since conceptualizations of forgiveness may be influenced by cultural factors, it may be important to understand more deeply how laypersons in Slovakia understand forgiveness. Moreover, previous qualitative studies were mainly interested in understanding the definitions of forgiveness by laypersons, factors and effects of forgiveness were mainly studied quantitatively. Therefore, we are also interested to see what laypersons perceive as helpful or blocking in their forgiving, and what effects do they experience from forgiveness. This knowledge may be helpful for counselors and therapists to improve their interventions. Therefore, our study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how laypersons understand forgiveness (Q-1); what concepts individuals perceive as similar or different from forgiveness, and why (Q-2); what are the factors the laypersons perceive as positively and negatively influencing the forgiveness process (Q-3); and what kind of effects from forgiveness do the laypersons perceive (Q-4). Furthermore, our aim was to find out what are the specifics and differences in the views on forgiveness between young adults and seniors (Q-5).

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A total of 20 individuals participated in the study: 10 young adults, ranged in age from 21 to 29 years ($M = 23.4, SD = 2.8$) and 10 seniors, ranged in age from 61 to 68 years ($M = 64, SD = 2.47$). Both groups consisted of five women and five men. In
young adults, seven participants reported obtaining a high-school degree and three participants completed graduate school with a master’s degree. In seniors, similarly, seven participants reported obtaining a high-school degree, two participants completed graduate school with a bachelor’s degree, and one participant completed graduate school with a master’s degree. Regarding marital status, the majority of young adults (7; 70%) reported being single, two being in a romantic relationship (20%) one being married (10%). The majority of seniors reported being married (7; 70%) two being in a romantic relationship (20%) one being widowed (10%). Regarding religion, the majority of young adults reported their religion as Catholic (5; 50%), four participants described themselves as believers without a specific religion, e.g., believing in a Goodness in people (40%) and one participant (10%) described himself as not believing in any religion. Nine seniors (90% of them) reported their religion as Catholic, and one described themselves as a believer without a specific religion.

Procedure

The criteria for participation in the study were: a) not having a professional qualification regarding the work with forgiveness, e.g., as a scientist, teacher, counselor, or a therapist; b) being either a young adult aged 20-30 years or a senior aged 60 to 70 years. The recommended sample size for consensual qualitative research method (CQR) is 8-15 participants, and since we planned to compare two different age groups, we planned to recruit ten participants from each age group. We used a snowball sampling technique. Based on the selection criteria, potential participants were invited, either through phone or email, to participate in a study about the general population’s understanding of forgiveness. Data were collected through individual, in-person, semi-structured interviews. Prior to face-to-face interviews, participants were informed about all research conditions in the consent form. The second author conducted the interviews. Participants could choose the location of their interviews and the majority of them chose to meet at their homes. Participants provided their written consent to be interviewed and audio recorded.

Consistent with the methodology of consensual qualitative research (Hill, 2012), a core set of questions that followed our research aims was developed. Participants were asked the following questions: How do you understand the concept of forgiveness? How would you define it? What is helpful to you in your forgiving? What prevents you from forgiveness? Do you think there are any concepts that are similar to forgiveness and why? Do you think there are concepts that, despite being associated with forgiveness, are different from it, and why? How would you describe the effects of forgiveness?

Data analysis

To analyze the data, the consensual qualitative research method (CQR) was used. This method allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ inner experiences and attitudes, compared to quantitative methods. An essential component of CQR is having a team of researchers who independently code data and discuss each step of the analysis until consensus is reached (Hill, 2012). In our case, these were two students of psychology, who received training in the CQR-method from the first author of the study. There was also an auditor, the first author, who provided external review and feedback for the data analysis.

In the first step of the analysis, based on reading the transcripts and with regard to our research questions, two judges individually developed a list of domains. Then they discussed their lists of domains until the consensus was reached. In the next step, the transcripts were divided into two halves and each judge individually started to
analyze the first half of the transcripts, by coding data into categories and subcategories. After the first half of the transcripts was analyzed, two judges met, discussed the categories, and reached a consensus. The same step was repeated with the second half of the interviews when categories were revised, and eventually, new categories were created. The auditor provided detailed feedback on the data analysis with the aim of minimizing the effects of groupthink in the primary team of judges (Hill, 2012). After the feedback was provided, the primary team discussed the feedback and edited the data analysis. After the consensus about the coding was made, the data analysis was completed. Each category or subcategory was coded as general (applies to all participants), typical (applies to half of the participants), and variable (applies to at least two individuals, but less than a half of participants) (Hill, 2012).

RESULTS
As part of the first research question, we created a domain called the definition of forgiveness. This domain reflects how participants from the lay population understand forgiveness. The majority of participants described forgiveness as letting go of anger, followed by viewing forgiveness as the loss of pain and suffering. Eight participants, mostly young adults, understood forgiveness as a mutual discussion and solving a problem with another. In their forgiveness, these individuals emphasized in particular the expression of remorse or some kind of reparation from the offender. Six participants expressed that forgiveness means reaching freedom and peace. Categories with representative items can be seen in Table 1.

| Domain                          | Category                                      | Representative item                                                                 | YA | S | TC |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|----|
| Definition of forgiveness      | Letting go of anger (12/20)                    | Forgiveness for me means that I stop feeling angry.                                 | 7  | 5 | T  |
|                                | The loss of pain and suffering (11/20)        | All the suffering and pain leave you when you forgive.                              | 6  | 5 | T  |
|                                | Mutual discussion, solving a problem with another (8/20) | And in that moment, when you discuss the problem with them, shake hands, forgive them, it begins to be alright, and everyone is happy. | 6  | 2 | V  |
|                                | Freedom, peace (6/20)                         | It is when I feel good, so free.                                                   | 3  | 3 | V  |

Note. Participant responses were translated by team members from Slovak into English. YA – young adults, S – seniors, TC – typology of categories, T – typical, V – variable.

The second domain, concepts related to forgiveness, summarizes factors that are, according to our participants, similar to and different from forgiveness. It can be seen from Table 2 that more participants were able to describe the concepts different from forgiveness than those similar to forgiveness. The majority of participants found forgetting to be different from forgiving. Specifically, individuals believed that when there is a really hurtful act, you can forgive it, but you cannot forget it. However, there were two individuals who perceived forgiving as similar to forgetting, meaning that a person does not replay the event over and over in one’s head. Reconciliation was perceived by most of the participants as a concept different from forgiveness. They described it as a more external, verbal process, which includes another person, while
forgiveness can be an internal work of an individual. Three participants described reconciliation as similar to forgiveness, as a process that already includes forgiveness. Different concepts from forgiveness also included an apology, asking for forgiveness, and reparation of an act. Two individuals perceived forgiving as an act of being humble and one linked forgiveness to some kind of purification of conscience.

**Table 2 Concepts related to forgiveness**

| Domain                        | Category                                           | Representative item                                                                 | YA | S | TC |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|----|
| Different concepts            | Forgetting (18/20)                                 | Forgiving does not mean to forget, it is impossible, when there is something hurtful, you cannot simply forget it… | 10 | 8 | T  |
|                               | Reconciliation (17/20)                             | Reconciliation for me is something that I put into words - we tell each other that we forgive each other. But forgiveness, it is more an internal work. | 9  | 8 | T  |
|                               | Apology, asking for forgiveness (5/20)             | Saying I am sorry, but it is not a synonym, it is something else.                    | 4  | 1 | V  |
|                               | Reparation (4/20)                                  | Reparation of an act contains a part of forgiveness, but it does not have to, it is not necessary for forgiveness. | 2  | 2 | V  |
| Similar concepts              | Reconciliation (3/20)                              | I would say reconciliation is like a synonym to forgiveness. Many times, when people reconcile with each other, automatically it is also perceived that they have also forgiven each other and moved on. | 1  | 2 | V  |
|                               | Forgetting (2/20)                                  | It is similar to when I want to forget about the incident… not playing it over again and again in my head… | –  | 2 | V  |
|                               | Humility (2/20)                                   | It means to humble oneself.                                                          | –  | 2 | V  |
|                               | Letting go (1/20)                                  | To forgive is like letting go…                                                       | 1  | 1 | V  |
|                               | Unconditional acceptance of another (1/20)         | Accepting another the way he is. He hurt me, but it is his character which I cannot change, it is just him and I accept it. | 1  | – | –  |
|                               | Purification of conscience (1/20)                  | Forgiveness is like purifying your conscience.                                      | 1  | – | –  |

*Note. Participant responses were translated by team members from Slovak into English. YA – young adults, S – seniors, TC – typology of categories, T – typical, V – variable.*

The third domain (Table 3) concerns *Factors associated with forgiveness*. This domain was divided into factors associated with forgiveness positively, and factors associated with forgiveness negatively. Under the factors positively associated with forgiveness, the majority of participants stressed that apology and admitting the mistake from the offender are most helpful in their forgiveness. Similarly, a long time after the hurt can significantly promote forgiveness, based on our participants. Participants also pointed out, that there might be some personality characteristics important for forgiveness. Some individuals talked about unspecified positive characteristics of a person, others stressed generosity, serenity, and strength of personality, fast anger management, empathy, and humility as helpful for forgiveness. A close relationship with an offender seems to be an important factor in forgiveness, both positively and negatively related. Seven participants stated that it is easier to forgive those who are...
closer to them and the desire to forgive is stronger when it comes to family members. On the other hand, nine participants mentioned the closeness of the victim-offender relationship as a factor buffering the process of forgiveness. These individuals explained that when they have a strong emotional connection with someone and they hurt them, the loss of trust is so significant that they are unable to forgive. For seven participants, forgiveness is positively influenced by their faith, when they value forgiving another person because they have already been forgiven by God or by life. Five participants explained that forgiveness is strengthened by life experiences and age, three individuals explained that when they see an offender trying to repair the hurtful act, it helps them in their forgiving.

The strongest factor negatively linked to forgiveness clearly was the depth of the hurt. Individuals stated that the deeper the hurt is, the harder it is to forgive. Also, when an incident is perceived as intentional or it is a repeated incident, it is more difficult to reach forgiveness. Interestingly, participants also mentioned that when a person is stubborn and does not show any signs of admitting a mistake, it is difficult to forgive them.

The fourth domain describes the effects that forgiveness has according to our participants. All participants described its positive effects on mental health. This was mainly described as a feeling of relief when an individual is no longer suffering from negative emotions of anger, resentment, or sadness. Other possible effects of forgiveness on mental health were also mentioned — such as happiness, internal peace, freedom, but also increased joy and meaning.

When asking about possible effects of forgiveness, participants also described the effects of unforgiveness as the opposite of forgiveness. The majority of participants similarly described the effects of unforgiveness on our mental health. When an individual cannot forgive, it is mainly experienced in terms of pain and suffering. Some participants described unforgiveness as a form of stress, related to ruminations about the hurt, loss of concentration, and even depression. Eleven participants described the negative effects of unforgiveness on our relationships, mainly in terms of disruption of these relationships and in terms of long-term conflicts, even in many generations of families. Half of the participants described the negative effects of unforgiveness on physical health in terms of various diseases, some specifically mentioned cancer and heart disease as a result. All categories can be seen in Table 4.

In the fifth research question, our aim was to find out the specifics and differences in understanding forgiveness between two age groups. In the first domain, the definition of forgiveness, mutual discussion, solving a problem with another was mentioned by six young adults, but only by two seniors. In the second domain, concepts related to forgiveness, young adults were also able to describe more concepts similar to forgiveness, such as purification of conscience or unconditional acceptance of another. We were also able to see some intergenerational differences in the third category, factors associated with forgiveness. Victim’s personality characteristics positively related to forgiveness, namely serenity, the strength of personality; fast anger management, empathy, and humility were only mentioned by young adults. Also, a close relationship with an offender as a factor negatively influencing forgiveness was mentioned by eight young adults, but only one senior. In the domain of the effects of forgiveness, only older individuals mentioned the effects of forgiveness in terms of joy, meaning, and the effects of unforgiveness in terms of depression and regrets for not forgiving. On the other hand, eight young adults believe that unforgiveness may disrupt the relationship with another, while only one senior mentioned this possible effect.
Table 3 Factors associated with forgiveness

| Domain | Category | Subcategory | Representative item | YA | S | TC |
|--------|----------|-------------|---------------------|----|---|----|
| Factors associated with forgiveness positively | Apology, admitting the mistake (18/20) | | In my opinion, apology is the best for another person, because everyone needs to hear it. | 10 | 8 | T |
| | Time since hurt (14/20) | | Sometimes it needs time. With time, forgiveness is surely different. | 7 | 7 | T |
| | Personality characteristics (9/20) | Unspecified positive characteristics (5/20) | Time has its effect on it, but it also really depends on the personality. | 3 | 2 | V |
| | | Generosity (3/20) | Being generous, trying to understand another, to forgive… one who is generous, forgives. | 1 | 2 | V |
| | | Serenity, the strength of personality (2/20) | I think the stronger the person is, the sooner he or she forgives. When you are emotionally weak, have low self-esteem and so on, forgiveness is more difficult for you. | 2 | – | V |
| | | Fast anger management (2/20) | I am the type of person that I cannot feel angry for a long time, I do not suffocate it inside. | 2 | – | V |
| | | Empathy (1/20) | It specifically depends on whether the person has a capacity for empathy. | 1 | – | |
| | | Humility (1/20) | I believe the person who forgives is also humble. | 1 | – | |
| | Close relationship with an offender (7/20) | | It is influenced by the closeness of the relationship, when someone close makes you angry, you try to forgive, because they are “yours”… | 3 | 4 | V |
| | Faith (7/20) | | And I was forgiven, forgiven by life…There is no bigger reason than had the One who forgave me. | 4 | 3 | V |
| | Life experiences, age (5/20) | | It is influenced by age and life experiences. | 2 | 3 | V |
| | Reparation (3/20) | | When he or she is trying to repair it somehow. | 1 | 2 | V |
| Factors associated with forgiveness negatively | Depth of the hurt (18/20) | | It also depends on the seriousness of the hurt, the more serious it is, the more difficult it is to forgive. | 8 | 7 | T |
| | Intentionality (12/20) | | It is more difficult to forgive him or her when the event is intentional. | 5 | 6 | T |
| | A repeated hurt (10/20) | | When it is repeated, it is the worst. | 5 | 5 | T |
| | Close relationship with an offender (9/20) | | I think that it is more difficult to forgive close persons. | 8 | 1 | T |
| | Personality characteristics (5/20) | Stubbornness (5/20) | When someone is stubborn, it just gets impossible, when they cannot admit the mistake… | 3 | 2 | V |

Note. Participant responses were translated by team members from Slovak into English. YA – young adults, S – seniors, TC – typology of categories, T – typical, V – variable.
Table 4 The effects of forgiveness

| Domain                  | Category                       | Subcategory                                      | Representative item                                                                 | YA | S | TC |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|----|
| The effects of forgiveness | Mental health (20/20)   | Relief (17/20)                                   | It feels as if you have a stone on your chest and it just falls off you.              | 10 | 7 | T  |
|                         |                               | Happiness (5/20)                                 | That means, I consider it as a kind of happiness                                      | 2  | 3 | V  |
|                         |                               | Internal peace (5/20)                            | I feel peace, internal peace, I do not have stress any more.                         | 2  | 3 | V  |
|                         |                               | Freedom (4/20)                                   | As I said it brings me freedom, that I did not feel anything heavy anymore…           | 3  | 1 | V  |
|                         |                               | Joy (2/20)                                       | When I forgave, I really felt pure joy.                                              | –  | 2 | V  |
|                         |                               | Meaning (1/20)                                   | I think forgiveness brings such happiness, joy, and meaning as well…                  | –  | 1 |    |
|                         | Mental health (14/20)        | Pain, suffering (11/20)                          | I believe it is a great suffering when we cannot forgive.                            | 6  | 5 | T  |
|                         |                               | Stress (4/20)                                    | I think stress comes out of unforgiveness; you still stress your mind…                | 3  | 1 | V  |
|                         |                               | Ruminations about the hurt (4/20)                | When you still think about it all over again.                                        | 3  | 1 | V  |
|                         |                               | Loss of concentration (2/20)                    | You even lose concentration in everything you do.                                    | 1  | 1 | V  |
|                         |                               | Regrets for not forgiving (1/20)                 | It is like pulling you down, that I should have forgiven, and I did not…            | –  | 1 |    |
|                         |                               | Depression (1/20)                                | I believe you can get depressed from unforgiving.                                    | –  | 1 |    |
|                         | Relationships (11/20)        | Disruption of a relationship with another person (9/20) | You cannot establish a relationship back with that person.                         | 8  | 1 | T  |
|                         |                               | Long-term conflicts (3/20)                       | And then those long-term conflicts happen, families get angry, they do not even know why they are angry… | 2  | 1 | V  |
|                         | Physical health (10/20)      | Various health problems (8/20)                   | It can even cause a disease…                                                        | 5  | 3 | T  |
|                         |                               | Cancer (3/20)                                    | It can even lead to cancer since it causes a huge stress.                             | 1  | 1 | V  |
|                         |                               | Heart disease (2/20)                             | Even heart diseases are connected to it…                                             | 1  | 1 | V  |

Note. Participant responses were translated by team members from Slovak into English. YA – young adults, S – seniors, TC – typology of categories, T – typical, V – variable.

Based on the data analysis, we have identified two typical cases for each age category describing the ways participants perceive forgiveness. The typical case for seniors is an older woman who perceives letting go of anger, pain and suffering as a basis for forgiveness. In her decision to forgive, apology from an offender and time since the hurt is helpful. Her forgiving may be easier when there is a close relationship with
an offender and more difficult when the hurtful incident was intentional. She sees forgiveness as a unique matter and does not confuse it with other concepts. According to her, forgiveness has many positive effects on mental health in the form of relief, inner peace, or experience greater meaning in life. On the other hand, she believes unforgiveness can cause suffering and health problems, even depression and cancer.

The typical case for young adults is a young man who considers letting go of anger, pain and suffering as a core for forgiveness. His decision to forgive is influenced primarily by whether the offender apologizes and acknowledges the mistake. The sincerity of an apology is especially important in his forgiveness. His forgiving may be more difficult when the hurt is more serious, repeated, and when there is a close relationship with the offender. He considers it important to discuss the event with the offender and try to solve it together. He believes forgiveness can help re-establish and strengthen the relationship, and unforgiveness can disrupt relationships, and bring pain, suffering, and health problems.

**DISCUSSION**

Our study has shown that lay definitions of forgiveness are markedly individual, which is in line with previous research findings showing that lay people's perception of forgiveness differs based on their previous life experience (Freedman & Chang, 2010; Kanz, 2000). The findings of our research have also shown that there are some differences between lay concepts and scientific definitions of forgiveness, but also certain commonalities (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Mullet et al., 2004; Younger et al., 2004). Participants mainly understood forgiveness as letting go of anger, pain, and suffering, which is the core of the most scientific definitions of forgiveness (Enright, 2016; Worthington, 2005). However, scholars argue that forgiveness is not only about the decrease in negative emotions, but it should also include a “change of heart” - an increase in positive emotions towards the offender, such as compassion, empathy, or even agape love (Enright, 2016; Worthington, 2005). It is possible that our participants from the lay population did not mention positive emotions as a basis of their forgiveness definition, since an increase in positive emotions towards the offender may not always happen (e.g., in the case of serious hurts) and when one is very hurt, ceasing to be angry may be an important step in their forgiveness process. Our finding is in line with the results of a study in students (Mullet et al., 2004) where only a minority of them agreed that forgiveness includes regaining affection or sympathy toward the offender. Similarly, young, and older adults in the study of Younger et al. (2004) mostly saw forgiveness as accepting and letting go of negative feelings.

Regarding the concepts related to and different from forgiveness, seventeen individuals agreed with scholars that forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation, although it is an important component of reconciliation (Enright, 2016; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Specifically, one older man described the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation in the following way: “...reconciliation is like forgiveness, but it is not the same...I do not know how to say it... I can forgive, but that relationship with another person is a lot harder to establish again. Reconciliation is a way more difficult than forgiveness “. This quote represents that people intuitively distinguish these concepts, even though they do not perceive them as completely different. Moreover, the opinion of laypersons is in line with Enright’s (2016) belief that for reconciliation to happen, a renewal of trust or forgiveness on both parts is often required, and thus, reconciliation can be more difficult to achieve.

According to McGary (1989, as cited in Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016), forgiving and forgetting are “incompatible.” This is in line with the opinion of almost all individuals
from our sample of the lay population. Humility, letting go, unconditional acceptance of another, or purification of conscience – concepts that our participants stated as related to forgiveness – may, in fact, represent individual components of the forgiveness process (Enright, 2016) or personality variables related to forgiveness, i.e. humility (Bell & Fincham, 2019).

The results of our research have shown that individuals from the lay population, especially young adults, perceive the role of certain personality characteristics of a victim as helpful factors in forgiveness. Some participants mentioned generosity, empathy, and humility as helpful, and stubbornness as unhelpful for forgiveness, but they mostly described unspecified personality characteristics. Wade and Worthington (1999) argue that individuals who believe in God show more willingness to forgive, less lingering anger and resentment, than those who do not. The role of religiosity or faith was indeed mentioned by seven individuals as a strong motivation for their forgiveness. This may be also related to the fact that religiosity is high in the Slovakian population in general. The social factors associated with forgiveness include the relationship between the offender and the victim. Previous research has shown that individuals are more likely to forgive those with whom they have a closer relationship (Karremans & Aarts, 2007; Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). Interestingly, seven individuals from our research mentioned a close relationship with the offender as positively associated with forgiveness, while nine participants perceived a close relationship with the offender as negatively related to forgiveness. This finding may be due to the fact that even though it may be more difficult to forgive close loved ones (since hurts caused by them are more painful), still individuals may be more willing to forgive them because they value the relationship with them more. Situational factors have been shown to be the most important in the decision and the process of forgiveness. Our findings support the results of previous research that the depth of the hurt, time since hurt, intentionality, and apology seem to influence forgiveness (Azar et al., 1999; Glaeser, 2008; Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). As many as eighteen individuals stated apology and admitting the mistake as factors positively related to forgiveness. Moreover, from all situational factors, the depth of injury was probably the most decisive factor (see also Finkel et al., 2004; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016; Williamson & Gonzales, 2005) - the more deep the hurt is, the more difficult it is to forgive.

All participants expressed that forgiveness has a positive effect on mental health, in terms of experiencing greater relief, happiness, or meaning in life. These results of our qualitative research on the lay population are therefore in line with the results of previous experimental forgiveness intervention studies on various clinical populations (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014). Moreover, individuals perceived negative effects of unforgiveness, such as experiencing pain, stress, depression, disrupted relationships, or even heart disease and cancer. Previous research has similarly shown that greater unforgiveness is associated with mental and physical distress, such as higher blood pressure, cortisol reactivity, or higher depression (e.g., Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Witvliet et al., 2001). Participants supported Enright’s (2016) belief that anger is an emotion affecting both mind and body, citing its direct concrete consequences such as reduced concentration, greater ruminations, or reduced performance.

In our study, we were interested to see whether there are any qualitative differences between groups of young adults and seniors in the way they define forgiveness, perceive its factors or effects. We are able to see one main qualitative difference between these groups. It seems that younger individuals perceive forgiveness more as an interpersonal process, while older individuals perceive it more as an internal process.
of an individual. Concretely, while six young adults described mutual discussion and solving a problem with another as a core of forgiveness, it was mentioned by only two seniors. Eight young adults perceived a close relationship with an offender as a factor negatively associated with forgiveness, while only one senior. A greater emphasis on the interpersonal domain was also visible under the effects of unforgiveness – the disruption of a relationship with another person as an effect of unforgiveness was mentioned by eight young adults, while only one senior. Altogether, it could indicate that seniors perceive forgiveness more as an internal process, which they must resolve primarily within themselves. Seniors may have experienced various hurts during their lives when reconciliation was impossible and therefore may perceive forgiving more as an internal process, beneficial for their mental and physical health, regardless of reconciliation with the offender. Young adults, on the other hand, may associate forgiving more with their current romantic and friendly relationships, where there may be higher hope and willingness to maintain the relationship after being hurt. Another explanation of this finding can be found in previous research studies, which have suggested that the older one gets, the higher their ability to forgive (Azar et al., 1999; Cheng & Yim, 2008; Girard & Mullet, 1997; Subkoviak et al., 2005), as well as their emotional empathy and compassion for others (Beadle et al., 2013; Beadle, de la Vega, 2019; Sze et al., 2012), is. Therefore, it might be easier for an older individual to forgive another even with the absence of apology or conciliatory behavior.

Also, the majority of seniors in our sample reported their religion as Catholic. Although the majority of young adults also stated being Catholic, there were more believers without a specific religion in this group. It is possible that a belief in the goodness of people could influence forgiveness positively in young adults, however, the catholic religion of our senior participants may be a factor influencing their attitude toward forgiveness, where they do not need an apology from the offender or do not allow a transgression to lead to a disrupted relationship with another.

Interestingly, in previous qualitative studies on lay conceptualizations of forgiveness (e.g., Friesen & Fletcher, 2007; Kanz, 2000; Younger et al., 2004), forgiveness was closely linked to reconciliation in individuals’ views. In our sample, the majority of individuals stated that forgiveness is not reconciliation. This difference in our findings may be related to the difference in the research sample. In these previous qualitative studies (Friesen & Fletcher, 2007; Kanz, 2000; Younger et al., 2004), there were mainly young adults and no seniors in the research sample. It is therefore possible that seeing forgiveness as an intrapersonal process is indeed relevant for seniors. Given the qualitative character of our study, more studies would be needed to explore this finding.

The results of our study have to be interpreted with respect to some limitations. Firstly, although the sample size was optimal for the use of in-depth interviews and their analysis with CQR methodology, the results of our study cannot be generalized. Secondly, our participants might have experienced various hurtful events during their lives and have had different experiences with forgiveness, all of which could have influenced their views on forgiveness. Thirdly, young adults and seniors did not have the same characteristics in terms of marital status and religion. Understandably, the majority of seniors were married, and the majority of young adults single, and still young adults stressed the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness. Fourthly, although we did not have any requirement for participation regarding participants’ religion, most of the participants reported having Catholic religion, which is understandable for the Slovakian population. It is possible that the results could have been different if more participants had different religions or were atheists. Therefore, future studies might
consider using a heterogeneous sample in terms of religion when studying the general population. Lastly, the use of qualitative methodology does not allow us to make comparisons between groups at the level of statistical significance, but only at the level of description.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that most of the individuals from the lay population considered forgiveness to be a markedly unique phenomenon and did not confuse it with concepts such as forgetting or reconciliation with the offender. Forgiveness was mainly perceived as letting go of anger and pain. As the most important helpful factors in forgiving seem to be apologizing and admitting the mistake from the offender, longer time since hurt, and certain personality characteristics. It seems that young adults perceive forgiveness more as an interpersonal process, while seniors perceive it more as an internal process of an individual. Specifically, only young adults considered mutual discussion about the problem with an offender as a core of forgiveness. They also stressed that unforgiveness can disrupt relationships with others. Positive effects of forgiveness were mainly described in terms of improving mental health and strengthening interpersonal relationships.

We hope that our findings can be an asset to a better understanding of forgiving from the view of laypersons, which can be helpful for counselors and therapists, but also as a stimulus for future studies in this area. It can be recommended for psychologists who work with forgiveness in a therapeutic context to educate clients who are young adults about the true nature of forgiveness, which does not necessarily have to include an apology from the offender, renewal of trust or reconciliation, and the client may still experience the benefits of forgiving. Also, it may be important to work on building empathy, compassion, and humility, in order to promote forgiveness of a client.

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Worthington, E. L., Jr., Berry, J. W., & Parrott,
VÝSKUMNÉ OTÁZYKY: Výskumné otázky boli zamerané na vnímanie odpustenia u laickej populácie; špecificky na vnímanie faktorov a dôsledkov odpustenia. Skúmané boli špecifiká a rozdiely v nazeraní na odpustenie u mladých dospelých a seniorov.

Analýza dát. Dáta z pološtrukturovaných rozhovorov boli analyzované pomocou Konsenzuálneho kvalitatívneho výskumu (Hill et al., 2005).

Výsledky. Pre väčšinu jednotlivcov oboch generácii bola základom odpustenia hneď a bolesti. Najdôležitejším faktorom pozitívne súvisiacim s odpustením bola ospravedlnenie a priznanie chyby. Najvýznamnejším blokujúcim faktorom odpustenia bola hláška zranenia. Jednotlivci popisovali pozitívne dôsledky odpustenia, predovšetkým na ich psychické a fyzické zdravie a posilnenie vzťahov. Zdá sa, že mladí dospelí vnímajú odpustenie viac ako interpersonalný proces, kým seniori ho vnímajú viac ako interný proces jednotlivca.

Limitácie. Použitie kvalitatívnej metódologie a veľkosť výskumného súboru neumožňuje zovšeobecnenie výsledkov alebo porovnanie dvoch skupín na úrovni štatistického signifikance. Zranenia a odpustenie sú francúzsko-hustými príznakmi, čo mohlo ovplyvniť ich postoje k odpusteniu.