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ABSTRACT

While forgiveness has long been a crucial concept in the churches' formulations for the establishment and the preservation of spiritual, social, and emotional health, consideration of forgiveness by psychology pales in comparison. Research is needed to identify the psychological factors in mothers and fathers which serve as antecedents of the nurturance which they provide their children. In this study, college students (N=111) were asked to assess the nurturance they had received from their mothers and their fathers using a Likert scale. Scale items included "I am an important person in my mother's eyes;" "My mother expresses her warmth and affection for me;" and "My mother is generally cold and removed when I am with her." The parents of the student participants responded to a forced-choice forgiveness scale with items such as "I am a very forgiving person, ready and willing to forgive anyone who has wronged me." The results suggest a strong relationship between self-reported forgiveness by parents and the degree of parental nurturance reported by their adolescent children. Mothers and fathers who reported the least level of forgiveness were appraised as having rendered significantly less nurturance than other parents. (Author/ABL)

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Forgiveness as a Psychological Antecedent of Perceived

Parental Nurturance

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*ABSTRACT: College students were asked to assess the nurturance they had received from their mothers and their fathers; the parents of these student participants responded to a forced-choice forgiveness scale. A simple ANOVA yielded an  $F$  of 9.18 ( $p < .0001$ ). A posteriori comparisons revealed that those parents who selected none of the high-forgiveness alternatives were judged to provide significantly less nurturance than were the other parents.*

To forgive has been defined in the following ways: "to excuse for a fault or offense;" "to renounce anger or resentment against;" and "to absolve from payment of" (Morris, 1976, p. 515). While forgiveness has long been a crucial concept in the churches' formulations for the establishment and the preservation of spiritual, social, and emotional health, psychology's consideration of this theme has paled by comparison. In fact, treatment of the

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topic of forgiveness in the psychological literature is nearly non-existent. As Benner (1985) has pointed out, "Even though it has been a continuing problem throughout history, modern psychological literature does not offer much discussion of the concept of forgiveness" (p. 425). When it has been mentioned, forgiveness has generally been discussed as a neurotically need-based concept (e.g., Freud, 1927), in theoretical therapeutically-oriented literature (e.g., Mowrer, 1972), or in explicitly Christian psychological writings (e.g., Strong, 1977). As Shontz and Rosenak (1988) stated, "No formal psychotherapeutic schools of thought today provide direct insight into the process of forgiveness" (p. 23). While any discussions of forgiveness are obviously scarce in the psychological literature, even more rare are discussions of forgiveness in the empirical psychological literature. It is to this general area of deficiency that the present study has been addressed.

The absence of acceptance, warmth, and nurturance in the interactions of parents with their children has been implicated in numerous behavioral, psychological, and intellectual disabilities among children and adolescents. For example, inadequate parental nurturance has been associated with delinquency (Bachman, 1970), "acting-out" behaviors (Nielson, 1983), lower levels of self-esteem (Buri, Kirchner, & Walsh, 1987), drug abuse (Baer & Corruis, 1974), poorer academic performance in school (Starkey, 1980), and poorer emotional adjustment (Adler, 1963). Yet, little is known about the factors that influence parents' capacity for this acceptance and nurturance of their children. While Rohner (1986) has suggested several sociocultural and maintenance systems which help to explain why some parents are more nurturant than others (e.g., three-generation family households, single-parent families,

number of children in the family, father-importance in the family), much research is needed concerning those *psychological factors* in mothers and fathers which serve as antecedents of the nurturance they provide their children.

In the present study, a Likert-type scale was completed by students to assess the nurturance which each perceived he or she had received from his/her mother and father. Also, a forced-choice measure of forgiveness was completed by the mothers and fathers. Based upon the suggestions by authors (such as Oates, 1973, and Pattison, 1965) who contend that unforgiveness is a source of interpersonal callousness and unconcern, it is hypothesized that the degree of parental forgiveness is predictive of students' assessments of their mothers' and fathers' nurturance.

#### Method

##### *Subjects*

The participation of 149 college students (as part of an introductory psychology course requirement) and both their parents (through mailed questionnaires) was solicited. Twenty-four subjects were eliminated from the study because their parents were divorced or separated. An additional 14 subjects were eliminated because their response forms had been inadequately completed. For the remaining 111 student participants from intact families, 145 of the parents (65%) responded.

##### *Materials*

*Parental Nurturance Scale.* The Parental Nurturance Scale (Buri, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988) consists of 24 Likert items (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) stated from the point of view of an individual evaluating the parental nurturance he/she received. Sample Parental Nurturance

Scale items are: "I am an important person in my mother's eyes;" "My mother expresses her warmth and affection for me;" and "My mother is generally cold and removed when I am with her." Each student participant completed two forms of the Parental Nurturance Scale, one to evaluate the nurturance of his/her mother and one to evaluate the nurturance of his/her father.

*Forgiveness Scale.* Concepts and items from the Character Assessment Scale (Schmidt, 1987) were used to construct three forced-choice items to measure parents' general tendency toward forgiveness. These items are: (1) "If I hurt someone by my actions, but I was morally right in what I had done, then I would not ask that person's forgiveness" vs. "Asking for someone's forgiveness is the best policy in all cases;" (2) "I am a very forgiving person, ready and willing to forgive anyone who has wronged me" vs. "To forgive someone who has hurt me is hard for me;" and (3) "When I have been so mad that I have said something hurtful to someone, I usually go to that person and apologize" vs. "I am seldom the first one to apologize to end an argument." The higher the score on this scale, then the greater is the general tendency toward forgiveness. [For item (1), the latter alternative was scored as higher forgiveness; for items (2) and (3), the former alternative was scored higher.]

### Results

A simple ANOVA was used to analyze the data, with the number of forced-choice forgiveness items answered by each parent (ranging from 0 to 3) serving as the independent variable and the students' assessments of their mothers' and fathers' nurturance serving as the dependent variable. This ANOVA yielded an  $F$  of 9.18 ( $p < .0001$ ). Table 1 contains a summary of these analyses. A

Table 1

*Summary of Simple ANOVA*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Forgiveness	3	5063	1688	9.18***
Error	140	25745	184	
Total	143	30808		

\*\*\* $p < .0001$

posteriori comparisons revealed that the students' perceived nurturance of those parents who selected none of the high-forgiveness alternatives was significantly lower than the perceived nurturance of the parents in the remaining three forgiveness groups. These differences are presented in Figure 1.

#### Discussion

The results of the present study suggest a strong relationship between self-reported forgiveness by parents and the degree of parental nurturance reported by their adolescent offspring. Mothers and fathers who reported the least level of forgiveness were appraised by the adolescent participants as having rendered significantly less nurturance than other parents. In view of the numerous and varied childhood and adolescent disorders that have been linked to lower levels of parental nurturance (see Rohner & Rohner, 1975, and

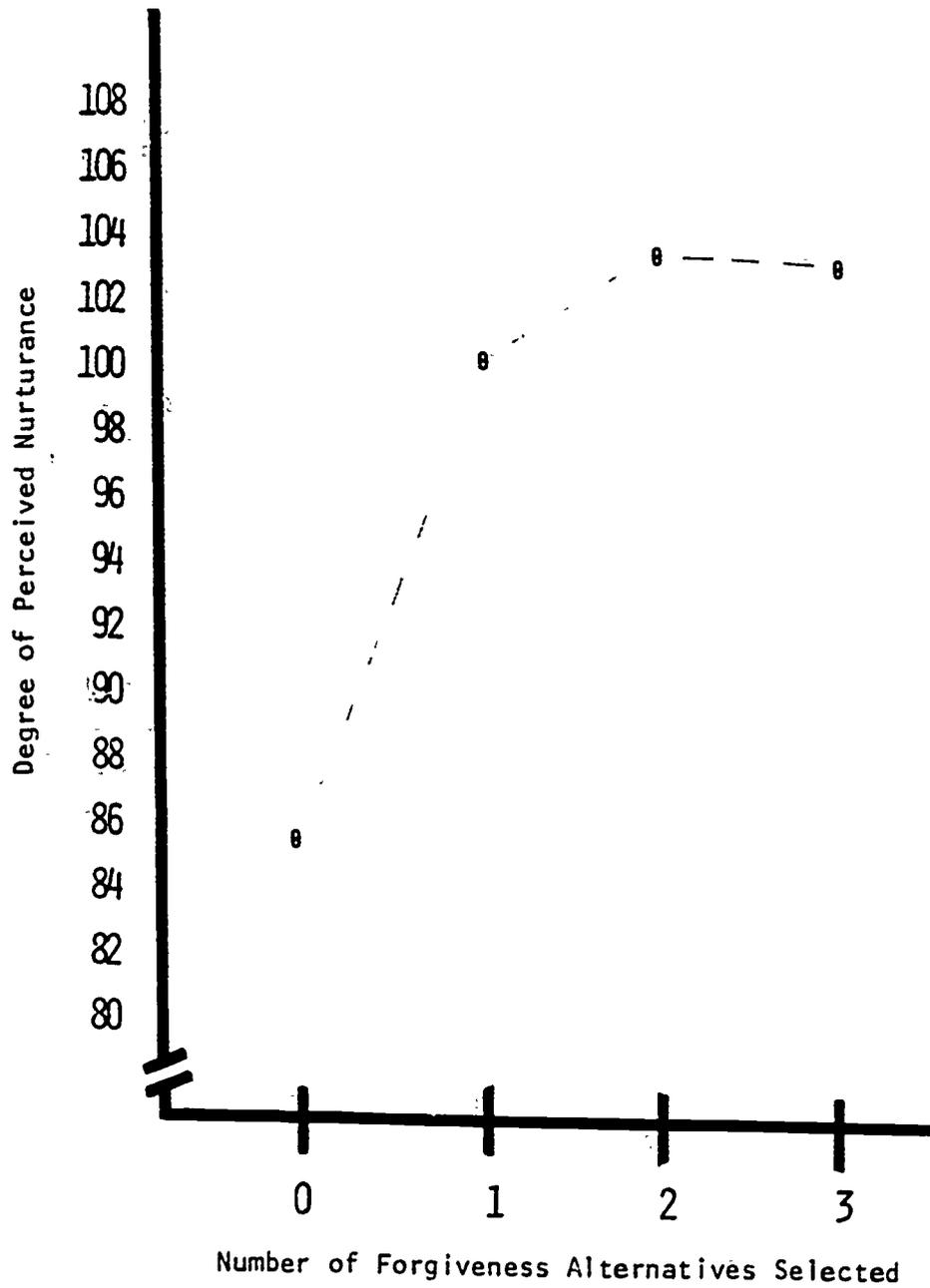


Figure 1. Perceived parental nurturance as a function of parents' reported tendency toward forgiveness.

Rohner & Nielson, 1978, for reviews of this literature), these results suggest an important avenue for future research.

The present results may be even more noteworthy given the assertions by Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) that general measurements of a selected attitude (e.g., forgiveness in the present study) will seldom yield a close correspondence between that attitude and some other more specific behavioral domain (e.g., degree of parental nurturance). The fact that the self-reported measure of general forgiveness-tendencies was so strongly related to the independent measure of the more specific dimension of parental nurturance suggests that forgiveness may be a powerful variable in explaining the presence or absence of nurturance and warmth by parents.

A shortcoming of the present study derives from the fact that the results do not enable us to understand whether the observed relationship between parental forgiveness and parental nurturance has occurred because of specific unforgiveness of the parents toward their children or because of a more general "hardness of heart" which has negatively affected interpersonal warmth in many relationships, including those with their children. In either event, however, given the number of circumstances in which counselors and therapists must work (both implicitly and explicitly) with forgiveness-related issues and given the dearth of empirical work in this area, the present study suggests a viable research perspective that is in need of greater attention by psychologists.

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