

FORGIVENESS: INTEGRAL TO CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS AND
INIMICAL TO JUSTICE?

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*“It is mercy and forgiveness that lets us get on with living and
recognizes that we cannot be litigating Jarndyce v. Jarndyce forever. To
live is to forgive.”¹*

Although forgiveness has been explicitly acknowledged as a
fundamental part of human existence for thousands of years, only five

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¹ Linda Ross Meyer, *Forgiveness and Public Trust*, 27 *FORDHAM URB. L.J.*
1515, 1539 (2000).

scientific studies on the topic were published prior to 1985.² With the infusion of \$10 million of grant money in 1998 to stimulate research on this topic, scientific studies of forgiveness have since mushroomed. In psychology, the PsychINFO database shows that an average of 60 peer reviewed articles containing “forgive” or “forgiveness” in their title appeared each year over the past three years (62, 61, and 57 for 2005, 2006, and 2007, respectively).³ In this growing literature it is not atypical to find forgiveness and justice portrayed as competing responses to an interpersonal transgression.⁴ Accordingly, it has been argued that if forgiveness is to occur it requires “the loosening of justice standards.”⁵

At the same time, legal scholars have been exploring the application of forgiveness in various domains (e.g. bankruptcy law,⁶ criminal law⁷), and an entire issue of the Fordham Urban Law Journal has been devoted to forgiveness in criminal, civil and international law.⁸ To the legal outsider, the issue of forgiveness seems most obvious and relevant to the restorative justice movement that has arisen around the world.⁹ As conceptualized by one of the founders of this movement, Howard Zehr,¹⁰ restorative justice entails solutions that promote, repair, and reconcile victims and offenders with each other and their communities. Perhaps not surprisingly, restorative justice is attributed with the “ability to achieve emotional repair for the victim through processes that reduce vengefulness or increase empathy.”¹¹ As will soon be apparent, reduced vengefulness is a defining feature of forgiveness in many scientific studies and increased empathy is facilitative of forgiveness.

² EVERETT L. WORTHINGTON, DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES 1 (1998).

³ PsychINFO, <http://csaweb101v.csa.com/> (last visited May 9, 2008) (requires login).

⁴ Peter Strelan, *The Prosocial, Adaptive Qualities of Just World Beliefs: Implications for the Relationship Between Justice and Forgiveness*, 43 PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES 881, 882 (2007).

⁵ Julie J. Exline & Roy F. Baumeister, *Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers*, in FORGIVENESS: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 133, 146-147 (Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, & Carl E. Thoresen eds., 2000).

⁶ See generally KAREN GROSS, FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS: REBALANCING THE BANKRUPTCY SYSTEM (1997).

⁷ See generally Richard Lowell Nygaard, *On the Role of Forgiveness in Criminal Sentencing*, 27 SETON HALL L. REV. 980 (1997).

⁸ 27 FORDHAM URB. L.J. (June 2000).

⁹ See Restorative Justice Online, <http://www.restorativejustice.org/resources/world/> (last visited Aug. 12, 2008).

¹⁰ HOWARD ZEHR, CHANGING LENSES: A NEW FOCUS ON CRIME AND JUSTICE 181 (1990).

¹¹ Marilyn Peterson Armour & Mark S. Umbreit, *The Paradox of Forgiveness*, in HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS 491 (Everett L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005).

It therefore appears that we are confronted by a seeming paradox in that forgiveness can be viewed as either inimical or compatible with justice. Social scientists who study forgiveness tend to consider it inimical to justice, whereas those in the legal field see no such necessary contradiction in believing that there is a place for forgiveness in the justice system, particularly in problem-solving courts.¹² Can these views be reconciled? This article will examine the question drawing on social science literature on forgiveness. There has been some conceptual uncertainty, and in some respects outright confusion, regarding the nature of forgiveness leading at least one commentator to argue that the definition of forgiveness is the major issue facing the new science of forgiveness.¹³ It therefore behooves us to begin by considering the nature of this central construct.

I. CONCEPTUAL HYGIENE

Given that forgiveness is a “goal commonly advocated by all of the world’s longstanding religions,”¹⁴ there is a rich theological literature on the nature of forgiveness. It is these religious roots that have led philosophers¹⁵ and social scientists¹⁶ to shy away from the topic until relatively recently. With the understanding that forgiveness can be considered outside of a religious context, philosophical and social science literature is now replete with discussions of what constitutes forgiveness. It is this secular view of forgiveness that informs this article.

A fundamental distinction can be drawn when turning to the new contemporary literature. On the one hand are prescriptive analyses of forgiveness, captured well in the title of a philosophical treatise, “What Should ‘Forgiveness’ Mean?”¹⁷ Of course, prescriptive analyses give rise to subsidiary questions as well. Is forgiveness a virtue? If so, when? If one lets go of anger towards a transgressor, is that forgiveness or is specific motivation required? In contrast are the more descriptive,

¹² See generally David. A. Denckla, *Forgiveness as a Problem-Solving Tool in the Courts: A Brief Response to the Panel on Forgiveness in Criminal Law*, 27 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 1613, 1615 (2000).

¹³ Everett L. Worthington, *Initial Questions About the Art and Science of Forgiving*, in HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS 1, 3 (Everett L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005).

¹⁴ Carl E. Thorensen, Frederic Luskin & Alex H. S. Harris, *Science and Forgiveness Interventions: Reflections and Recommendations*, in DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS 164 (Everett L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 1998).

¹⁵ See generally CHARLES. L. GRISWOLD, FORGIVENESS: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION (2007).

¹⁶ See generally Frank D. Fincham, *Forgiveness: Integral to a Science of Close Relationships?*, in PROSOCIAL MOTIVES, EMOTIONS, AND BEHAVIOR, (Mario Mikulincer & Philip Shaver eds., forthcoming 2009).

¹⁷ Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, *What Should “Forgiveness” Mean?*, 36 THE JOURNAL OF VALUES INQUIRY, 483 (2002).

empirically driven analyses of forgiveness that are typically found in psychology. It is the latter that primarily inform the analysis offered in this article. Illustrating this descriptive approach is perhaps best done by considering responses to transgressions.

II. RESPONSES TO TRANSGRESSIONS

The question of forgiveness arises only when a person has been wronged by another. To forgive logically requires the victim to be conscious of being injured or wronged. Without injury there is nothing to forgive. However, it is also necessary for the victim to believe that the injury was intentionally or, at a minimum, negligently inflicted, although the level of responsibility for the injury will vary according to which of these two criteria is met. That is, criteria for inferring responsibility must be met, a circumstance that has been demonstrated empirically.¹⁸ It follows that when injury could not be foreseen and was not intended there is again nothing to forgive. Thus, forgiveness occurs in full knowledge that the transgressor is responsible for the injury, that he or she thereby forfeits any right to the victim's sympathy, affection or trust, and that the victim has a right to feel resentful.

In the face of such injury, victims commonly respond with immediate fear (of being hurt again), anger, or both.¹⁹ Motivation to avoid the source of the harm, or even a desire to retaliate or seek revenge, is also typical. Indeed, some have argued that retaliation in such circumstances "is deeply ingrained in the biological, psychological, and cultural levels of human nature,"²⁰ a position consistent with Aristotle's view of anger as "a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight."²¹ In sum, the victim of a transgression experiences an immediate negative affective state characterized by fear and/or anger.

¹⁸ Frank D. Fincham, Hope Jackson & Steven R.H. Beach, *Transgression Severity and Forgiveness: Different Moderators for Objective and Subjective Severity*, 24 J. SOC. AND CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 860, 868 (2005).

¹⁹ Everett L. Worthington, FORGIVING AND RECONCILING 83 (2003); John W. Berry, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Nathaniel G. Wade, Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, & R. Kiefer, *Forgiveness, Moral Identity, and Perceived Justice in Crime Victims and Their Supporters*, 29 HUMBOLDT J. SOC. REL. 137, 138 (2005).

²⁰ Michael E. McCullough & Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, *The Psychology of Forgiveness*, in HANDBOOK OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY 446 (C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez eds., 2002).

²¹ ARISTOTLE, RHETORIC 173 (1939).

How people respond to this state is important for their future behavior. Tice and Baumeister, in an analysis of self-control, offer an observation that is relevant here.²² They note that:

The core issue is how the person responds to an anger-provoking stimulus. If the person confines his or her reactions to that stimulus, it may be relatively easy to control. In contrast, if the person quickly begins to think about other anger-producing events such as past grievances, the anger state may spiral out of control and persist indefinitely.²³

In a similar vein, repeated reflection on what happened, rumination, leads to lasting resentment or ongoing state of unforgiveness.

Such states are usually experienced as unpleasant and they exact a physiological toll. Witvleit, Ludwig and VanderLaan had people either ruminate about a transgression or actively nurse a grudge towards the transgressor and compared their responses to when they imagined forgiving the transgressor.²⁴ In the unforgiving conditions, not only did participants rate the experience as more negative and more arousing, they also displayed higher sympathetic nervous system activity (higher heart rate and skin conductance). In addition, they showed higher tonic eye muscle tension and more brow muscle tension. Most importantly, systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure and mean arterial pressure were all significantly higher during the unforgiving versus forgiving imagery. In turn, the chronic anger and hostility that characterize ongoing vengeful rumination are linked to serious health consequences. For example, a meta-analysis of 45 published studies shows that hostility is an independent risk factor for coronary heart disease and premature death.²⁵ In short, it appears that unforgiveness likely perpetuates stress, facilitates sympathetic nervous system arousal and increases cardiovascular reactivity, all of which could contribute to adverse health outcomes. Not surprisingly, this unpleasant state

²² Dianne Tice & Roy Baumeister, *Controlling Anger: Self-Induced Emotion Change*, in HANDBOOK OF MENTAL CONTROL 5 (Daniel Wegner & James Pennebaker eds., 1993).

²³ *Id.* at 404-5.

²⁴ Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, Thomas E. Ludwig & Kelly L. van der Laan, *Granting Forgiveness or Harboring Grudges: Implications for Emotion, Physiology, and Health*, 121 PSYCHOL. SCI. 117, 118 (2001).

²⁵ Todd Q. Miller, Timothy W. Smith, Charles W. Turner, Margarita L. Guijarro & Amanda L. Hallet, *Meta-Analytic Review of Research on Hostility and Physical Health*, 19 PSYCHOL. BULL. 322, 341 (1996).

(unforgiveness) is characterized as one that people are motivated to overcome.²⁶

One way of dealing with the negative affective state induced by a transgression is to satisfy the desire for revenge. Seeking and obtaining revenge can bring about contentment in the short term. Revenge occurs across species and in virtually every culture, suggesting that the desire for revenge is the result of evolutionary selection.²⁷ This has the potential to create an infinite cycle of revenge, which would be most maladaptive if there were not more constructive mechanisms for exiting from a state of resentment.

III. FORGIVENESS

Another means of dealing with the negative affective state induced by a transgression is forgiveness, since a defining feature of forgiveness is the foreswearing of resentment. This comports well with lay persons' understanding of forgiveness as "letting go of negative feelings" and "letting go of grudges," which is the most frequent definition offered by research subjects.²⁸ Although there is as yet no consensus in the scientific literature on its exact nature, what is central to various approaches to forgiveness is the idea of a freely chosen motivational transformation in which the desire to seek revenge and to avoid contact with the transgressor is overcome. Forgiveness is inherently interpersonal and this is captured well by North's statement that it is "outward-looking and other-directed."²⁹ Note, however, that forgiveness annuls "not the crime itself but the distorting effect that this wrong has upon one's relations with the wrongdoer and perhaps with others."³⁰ Some describe forgiveness in terms of canceling a debt.³¹ But the analogy to relieving a debt that is commonly found in writings on forgiveness is not altogether accurate, as relinquishing a debtor from a debt makes it the case that there is no longer a debt. In contrast, forgiving does not make it the case that there is no longer a wrong done. The characterization of forgiveness as an altruistic gift is less

²⁶ Berry, Worthington, Wade, Witvliet & Kiefer, *supra* note 19, at 139.

²⁷ Michael E. McCullough, Lindsey M. Root, Benjamin A. Tabak, & Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, *Forgiveness*, in *HANDBOOK OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY* 1 (C. R. Snyder & Shane J. Lopez ed., 2nd ed., forthcoming 2009).

²⁸ Jarred W. Younger, Rachel L. Piferi, Rebecca L. Jobe & Kathleen A. Lawler, *Dimensions of Forgiveness: The Views of Laypersons*, 21 J. SOC. AND CLINICAL PSYCHOL 837, 847 (2004).

²⁹ Joanna North, *The "Ideal" of Forgiveness: A Philosopher's Exploration*, in *EXPLORING FORGIVENESS* 19 (Robert D. Enright & Joanna North eds., 1998).

³⁰ Joanna North, *Wrongdoing and Forgiveness*, 62 PHIL. 499, 500 (1987).

³¹ Roy F. Baumeister, Julie J. Exline, & Kristin L. Sommer, *The Victim Role, Grudge Theory, and Two Dimensions of Forgiveness*, in *DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES* 82 (Everett L. Worthington ed., 1998).

problematic and likely reflects the fact that it is intentional, unconditioned, and supererogatory.³²

IV. FORGIVENESS DISTINGUISHED FROM RELATED CONSTRUCTS

As noted before, forgiveness involves effort. To forgive entails a struggle to overcome the negative feelings that result from being wrongfully harmed and the magnitude of this struggle will differ across individuals. This conceptualization immediately distinguishes forgiveness from related constructs such as forgetting (to forgive is more than not thinking about the offence), the spontaneous dissipation of resentment and ill-will over time (to forgive is more than the passive removal of the offence from consciousness), condoning (no longer viewing the act as a wrong and removing the need for forgiveness), and pardon (granted only by a representative of society such as a judge). Thus the common phrase, “forgive and forget” is misleading as forgiveness is only possible in the face of a remembered wrong.

It is this latter observation about memory that helps undermine the argument that forgiveness is a sign of weakness. As noted, forgiveness requires the victim to acknowledge adverse treatment that entitles him or her to justifiably feel negatively towards the transgressor. It thus requires the strength to assert a right—the right to better treatment than that shown by the transgressor. Absent such assertion, conciliatory actions can reflect factors such as condoning of the transgressor’s behavior, a desire to appease the transgressor and so on. Accordingly, it is incorrect to label such behaviors as “forgiveness.” In addition to asserting one’s claim to a position of moral authority vis-à-vis the transgressor, forgiveness requires the strength to relinquish this position of moral authority and release the transgressor from the “debt” which was incurred by the transgression. As anyone who has attempted to forgive knows, forgiving is not an easy option but instead may prove to be extraordinarily difficult because it involves working through, not avoiding, emotional pain. It is little surprise then that Mahatma Gandhi asserted that “the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”³³

V. JUSTICE: AN ALTERNATIVE TO FORGIVENESS?

It may be argued that forgiving subverts the course of justice and that when forgiveness occurs justice is not served. In the aftermath of a transgression, it is common for victims to experience a “moral injury” in the sense that their beliefs about what is right and wrong have been

³² Frank D. Fincham, *The Kiss of the Porcupines: From Attributing Responsibility to Forgiving*, 7 PERS. RELATIONSHIPS 1, 7 (2000).

³³ MAHATMA GHANDI, THE COLLECTED WORKS OF MAHATMA GANDHI VOL. 51 301- 302 (Mahatma Gandhi Young India 2nd rev. ed. 2000).

assailed. This experience may lead to a strong desire to set the scale of justice back in balance. In fact, Worthington and colleagues describe transgressions in terms of an “injustice gap” in that they create “a discrepancy between current outcomes and desired outcomes.”³⁴ The injustice gap is “charged with negative emotion”³⁵ that takes the form of unforgiveness described earlier.

To the extent that transgressions are severe and intentional, they are hypothesized to accentuate the perceived injustice gap and make forgiveness more difficult.³⁶ There are substantial data to support this hypothesis as forgiveness is less likely to the extent that the transgression is perceived to be severe³⁷ and intentional.³⁸

It may be assumed that, analogous to forgiveness, justice brings closure to victims by narrowing the injustice gap. In the only study that appears to have explicitly investigated this issue, Witvliet et al. examined self report and physiological data in response to a common crime, burglary, in an experimental design that systematically varied justice (retributive justice, restorative justice and no justice) and forgiveness (forgiveness, no forgiveness).³⁹ Imagining retributive justice decreased anger and unforgiving motivations relative to no justice, but imagining restorative justice did so even more powerfully. As shown in Figure 1, these justice effects were muted when forgiveness was also imagined (i.e., there was a statistical interaction between justice and forgiveness). Imagining forgiveness yielded lower unforgiving motivations and anger regardless of justice outcome.

There were similar results for reported emotional arousal and valence of emotion experienced, as indicated by the physiological data. For example, during forgiveness imagery, participants’ heart rate was lower as were orbicularis oculi (under the eye) and corrugator (brow) muscle electromyographic (EMG) activity. Participants’ heart rates did

³⁴ Julie Juola Exline, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Peter Hill, & Michael E. McCullough, *Forgiveness and Justice: A Research Agenda for Social and Personality Psychology*, 7 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. REV. 337, 343 (2003).

³⁵ Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, Everett L. Worthington, Lindsey M. Root, Amy F. Sato, Thomas E. Ludwig, Julie J. Exline, *Retributive Justice, Restorative Justice, and Forgiveness: An Experimental Psychophysiology Analysis*, 44 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 10, 11 (2008).

³⁶ Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, *supra* note 34, at 344.

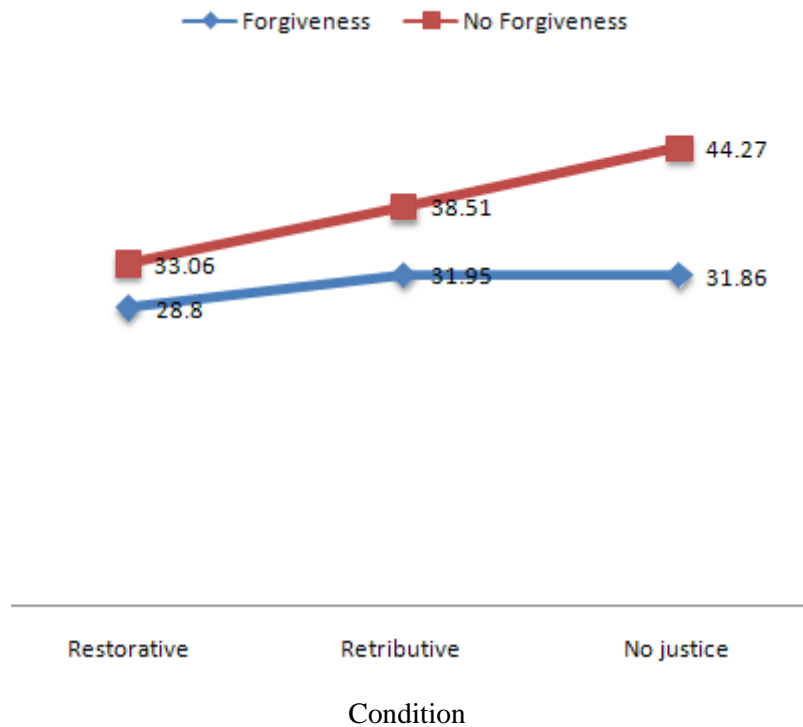
³⁷ Susan D. Boon, & Lorne M. Sulsky, *Attributions of Blame and Forgiveness in Romantic Relationships: A Policy-Capturing Study*, 12 J. SOC. BEHAV. & PERSONALITY 19, 31-33 (1997).

³⁸ Jeanne S. Zechmeister, & Catherine Romero, *Victim and Offender Accounts of Interpersonal Conflict: Autobiographical Narratives of Forgiveness and Unforgiveness*, 82 J. SOC. BEHAV. & PERSONALITY 675, 680-81 (2002).

³⁹ Witvliet, Worthington, Root, Sato, Ludwig, & Exline, *supra* note 35, at 16.

not change no matter what the justice conditions were (no justice, retributive justice and restorative justice). However, as justice conditions changed, the above described statistical interaction emerged for physiological changes such as skin conductance and the product of heart rate and systolic blood, which is a measure of myocardial oxygen demand and stress.⁴⁰ Specifically, restorative justice calmed the sweat response relative to no justice and retributive justice calmed cardiovascular stress relative to no justice.

FIGURE 1: UNFORGIVENESS MOTIVATION AS A FUNCTION OF EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION



From these data, Witvliet et al. conclude that justice is a problem-focused means of reducing the injustice gap whereas forgiveness is an emotion-focused means of coping with it. They go on to suggest that justice seeking may be a superior option when action is possible and that forgiveness may be more effective when direct action is not possible.⁴¹ Although arguably exceeding the reach of their data, this research ably demonstrates that justice helps reduce the negative state that is experienced as unforgiveness. This is not meant to imply that justice and forgiveness have the same functional impact; they clearly do not as

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 18.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 18-19.

evidenced by the data described above. This raises a question regarding the relationship between justice and forgiveness.

VI. ARE JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS INCOMPATIBLE?

To address the question posed, I offer both conceptual and data based arguments. In doing so, the construct of forgiveness is further specified and data are reported that speak to both the psychological relation between the two constructs and why the question in this section is posed.

A. FORGIVENESS ELABORATED

In choosing to forgive, a person gives up the right to anger and resentment and steps down from a position of moral superiority *vis-a-vis* the transgressor that is brought about by the transgressor's action. However, the forgiver does *not* give up the right to protect himself or herself from future occurrences of the injurious behavior. Forgiving is not equivalent to denial or foolishness. If it were, forgiveness would not be adaptive and would presumably have been selected out of the repertoire of human behavior. There is therefore nothing inconsistent in choosing to forgive an offender and, at the same time, choosing to ensure that the transgressor experiences the consequences of his or her action. Such consequences (e.g., appropriate punishment, compensation) might be justified on numerous grounds such as a necessary corrective to shape future behavior and the need to protect the self and others from potential future danger.

Thus, it is worth noting that even though forgiveness has relationship-restorative potential, it is quite distinct from reconciliation. Reconciliation involves the restoration of violated trust and requires the goodwill of both parties. Thus, reconciliation may entail forgiveness, but forgiveness does not necessarily entail reconciliation. Forgiveness removes the barrier to relatedness, but other factors (e.g., likelihood of further harm, the harm-doer's reaction to the victim's forgiveness) determine whether a relationship ensues and what specific form the relationship takes.

Given that logical analysis suggests no necessary incompatibility between pursuing justice and granting forgiveness, it is curious that they have been viewed as incompatible. Possible reasons for this state of affairs are now considered.

B. WHY THE QUESTION OF INCOMPATIBILITY?

One answer to this question lies in the observation that "the forgiveness literature has implicitly focused on only one justice motive,

namely, retributive justice”⁴² and that when researchers use the term “justice this typically mean(s) retributive justice (e.g., Exline et al., 2003).”⁴³ In a field that has almost exclusively examined the intrapersonal response of the injured party,⁴⁴ it is easy to see how a focus on the desire to take action by sanctioning an offender might lead to the view that forgiveness might at least mitigate, if not be incompatible with, this motivation. This becomes especially credible when one considers how the layperson views forgiveness. For example, in a national survey of 1,002 American adults, respondents rated the accuracy of various statements about forgiveness.⁴⁵ Remarkably, 60% of respondents considered the statement “if you really forgive someone, you would want that person to be released from the consequences of their actions” to be very accurate (28%) or somewhat accurate (32%). Such beliefs, which seem to be implicitly shared by many forgiveness researchers, appear to be incompatible with obtaining justice.

But laypersons seem to have a broader view of justice than that assumed by forgiveness researchers or evidenced in the above reported survey. For example, research on procedural justice⁴⁶ shows that people are concerned not only about how fairly they are treated but also with how fairly others are treated. Work on distributive justice similarly shows a concern about others’ welfare.⁴⁷ From this lay perspective, justice can be seen as having a prosocial component analogous to that reflected in forgiveness which is both prosocial (in releasing an offender) and adaptive (in providing injured parties with a coping mechanism for dealing with hurt). If this analysis is correct, then rather than being incompatible, forgiveness and justice should be positively related to each other and therefore quite compatible.

⁴² Johan C. Karremans & Paul A. M. Van Lange, *Does Activating Justice Help or Hurt in Promoting Forgiveness?*, 41 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 290, 291 (2005).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ Peter Strelan & Tanya Covic, *A Review of Forgiveness Process Models and a Coping Framework to Guide Future Research*, 25 J. SOC. & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 1059, 1066 (2006).

⁴⁵ ROBERT JEFFRESS, WHEN FORGIVENESS DOESN’T MAKE SENSE 218 (2000).

⁴⁶ Stephen LaTour, *Determinants of Participant and Observer Satisfaction with Adversary and Inquisitorial Modes of Adjudication*, 36 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1531 (1978); Kees van den Bos & E. Allen Lind, *The Psychology of Own Versus Others Treatment: Self-Oriented and Other-Oriented Effects on Perceptions of Procedural Justice*, 27 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1324 (2001).

⁴⁷ Paul A. M. Van Lange, *The Pursuit of Joint Outcomes and Equality in Outcomes: An Integrative Model of Social Value Orientation*, 77 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 337, 340-47 (1999).

At this point the astute Sherlock Holmes might note that “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.”⁴⁸ Therefore it is to data that we must turn.

C. JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS ARE POSITIVELY RELATED TO EACH OTHER

In an elegant set of experiments, Karremans and Van Lange provide the only data that directly address the question of whether forgiveness and justice are positively related.⁴⁹ In their initial study, they asked participants to write down what came to mind when prompted by the words justice, helpfulness or ambition and then had them complete a standard measure of forgiveness. Participants in a control condition received no prior task before the forgiveness assessment. Participants primed to think about justice showed the highest levels of forgiveness and all but one wrote down thoughts about justice that were reliably coded as prosocial. In contrast, only 4 of the 19 participants wrote down retribution related thoughts. Those who brought to mind retributive justice thoughts tended to show lower levels of forgiveness than those who did not do so.

In a second study, participants were asked to help with the selection of a book cover. The justice condition involved making ratings of an image of Justitia, the Roman goddess of justice, whereas in the control condition, the ratings were made for a picture of a trumpet. Following this exercise, all participants did a word completion task that included 6 words that could be completed as a justice related word (e.g., fair, unjust) or as a word unrelated to justice; the remaining 14 words were filler items. The final task involved completing the forgiveness measure. As expected, those in the justice condition completed more justice related words than those in the control condition, showing that the concept of justice had been made more cognitively accessible. More importantly, participants in the justice salient condition exhibited higher levels of forgiveness.

Justice salience was subtly manipulated in a third study by either using or not using Justitia as a watermark on the forgiveness questionnaire. To control for the use of a watermark, a third condition was used in which the university logo served as a watermark. When asked about the purpose of the study, no participant mentioned anything about the watermarks or justice.⁵⁰ However, those answering the questionnaire with the Justitia watermark showed higher levels of forgiveness than those in either of the two control conditions which did not differ from each other. Although only a sliver in the rich literature on

⁴⁸ A. C. DOYLE, SHERLOCK HOLMES 315 (Fenno & Co. 1903).

⁴⁹ Karremans & Van Lange, *supra* note 42, at 293.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 295.

commonsense justice, these data suggest a positive relationship between justice and forgiveness.⁵¹

Furthermore, the indirect evidence bearing on the justice-forgiveness association is consistent with the idea that there is a positive relationship between justice and forgiveness. For example, direct comparison of the restorative justice only and the forgiveness only conditions in the Witvliet et al. study described earlier showed that both had similar effects.⁵² Thus, restorative justice and forgiveness seemed to be functionally equivalent in their impact on self-reports and short term physiological responses in the laboratory. Similarly, there is evidence that factors affecting perceived injustice also affect forgiveness. In this regard, the severity and intentionality of the transgression have already been noted. Finally, factors facilitative of restorative justice also facilitate forgiveness. For instance, a sincere apology and restitution seem to reduce perceived injustice. Exline et al. review three studies that investigated responses of subjects who were asked to take on the role of a robbery victim the day after the crime and to imagine receiving either restitution, an apology, both, or neither.⁵³ They report that when victims imagined receiving "some amount of personal justice" through receipt of apology and restitution, both their self report and physiology were affected.⁵⁴ Specifically, relative to no communication with the offender, receiving a strong apology led to weaker revenge and avoidance motivations, as well as reduced anger, less fear, and more forgiveness; they also showed lower heart rate and lower facial muscular tension. Weak apologies had no effect, and similar results were obtained for imagined restitution. When both apology and restitution were imagined the same pattern of results obtained but the magnitude of the effect doubled.

Although data on the link between justice-related responses and forgiveness are extremely limited, it appears that both justice and forgiveness might be subsumed under a superordinate prosocial motivational concept. Indeed, using 40 samples from 20 different countries, Schwartz has attempted to map the content and structure of human values.⁵⁵ He identified 10 motivationally distinct value types

⁵¹ See generally Norman J. Finkel & Bruce D. Sales, *Commonsense Justice: Old Roots, Germinant Ground, and New Shoots*, 3 PSYCHOL., PUB. POL'Y & L. 227 (1997) (providing a general treatise of the relationship between justice and forgiveness).

⁵² Witvliet et al., *supra* note 35.

⁵³ Exline, Worthington, Hill & McCullough, *supra* note 34, at 344.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ See generally Shalom H. Schwartz, *Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries*, in 25 ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 1, 1-65 (Mark P. Zanna ed., 1992).

found across cultures that are used to determine value priorities.⁵⁶ Interestingly, justice and forgiveness fell into a domain of values that serve the same motivational goal—promoting the well-being of others—a result that may be predicated on the fact that justice was described to participants with the qualifier “social.”⁵⁷

VII. CAUTIONARY NOTES FOR PRACTITIONERS

Though justice is seemingly facilitative of forgiveness, what is the impact of forgiveness on justice? There appears to be no data on this question, though commentators have expressed concern that by granting forgiveness victims may not be motivated to pursue justice.⁵⁸ This possibility gains credence when one recalls the result of the national survey described earlier.⁵⁹ And if forgiveness is granted without pursuing justice it can be argued that transgressors are done a disservice—they are deprived of the important learning opportunity provided by experiencing the consequences of their actions. Indeed, in this context they may even view the situation as one that provides a license to transgress again. Against these considerations must be weighed the considerable psychological and health benefits for the victim associated with forgiveness.

As for the perpetrator, there is also experimental evidence to show that a transgressor is more likely to act in a prosocial manner after experiencing forgiveness as compared to not experiencing forgiveness.⁶⁰ Moreover, transgressors who imagined seeking and gaining forgiveness for an offense they committed showed improved emotional responses, namely, less anger, sadness, guilt, and shame relative to transgressors who ruminated about the response or who imagined an unforgiving victim. They also showed less furrowing of the brow and more smiling activity.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 59.

⁵⁷ *See id.* at 11-12, 24.

⁵⁸ *See* SIMON WIESENTHAL, THE SUNFLOWER: ON THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS 82-85 (Harry James Cargas & Bonny J. Fetterman eds., Schocken Books 1997) (1969) (presenting disagreement between two individuals on whether or not an SS soldier's request for forgiveness should be granted).

⁵⁹ JEFFRESS, *supra* note 45, at 218.

⁶⁰ *See* Brad R. C. Kelln & John H. Ellard, *An Equity Theory Analysis of the Impact of Forgiveness and Retribution on Transgressor Compliance*, 25 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 864, 869-70 (1999).

⁶¹ Charlotte V. O. Witvliet, Thomas E. Ludwig, & David. J. Bauer, *Please Forgive Me: Transgressors' Emotions and Physiology During Imagery of Seeking Forgiveness and Victim Responses*, 21 J. PSYCHOL. & CHRISTIANITY 219, 227-28 (2002).

A case therefore can be made for promoting forgiveness of transgressions from the perspectives of both victim and perpetrator. However, caution is appropriate here, especially given the observation that “restorative justice has much in common with forgiveness.”⁶² There is evidence to show that compared to those who forgive out of a sense of obligation, those who forgive out of love showed less elevated systolic and diastolic blood pressure when recalling the event.⁶³ Thus, if there is any real or perceived obligation to forgive, the victim will not reap the full benefits of forgiveness. In light of this observation and the fact that words such as “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” are often lightning rods for crime victims, Armour and Umbreit wisely point out that “the power of forgiveness in restorative justice may be tied to keeping it an implicit part of the process, rather than making it explicit.”⁶⁴ On this view, forgiveness is best dealt with by attending to factors known to facilitate it, such as empathy, full and sincere apology, uncovering new explanations for the transgression (e.g., “due to being under extreme pressure” vs. “due to being a malevolent person”), providing an explanation of the thoughts and feelings that led up to the transgression, making salient our common humanity, and reducing biases in victim memories of the event (see next section). If addressed, such issues should be approached in a neutral respectful manner so as to allow the victim to freely choose whether they wish to grant forgiveness.

Should the victim spontaneously talk about wanting to forgive or to be reconciled with the transgressor, it may be appropriate to address the topic explicitly given the diversity of lay understandings and misunderstandings of forgiveness. In particular, the victim may require input that makes clear that there is no contradiction between offering forgiveness and continuing to pursue justice, forgiveness is not a sign of weakness and so on. More importantly, a gentle inquiry should ensure that the victim is not feeling pressured to grant forgiveness and if she or he is feeling such pressure, to support him or her in resisting such pressure.

Finally, it is worth remembering that “forgiveness is the sort of thing that one does for a reason, and where there are reasons there is a distinction between good ones and bad ones.”⁶⁵ Forgiveness can lend

⁶² Walter J. Dickey, *Forgiveness and Crime: The Possibilities of Restorative Justice*, in *EXPLORING FORGIVENESS* 106, 108 (Robert D. Enright & Joanna North eds., 1998).

⁶³ See Shih-Tseng Tina Huang & Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness and Anger-Related Emotions in Taiwan: Implications for Therapy*, 37 *PSYCHOTHERAPY* 71, 71-79 (2000).

⁶⁴ Armour & Umbreit, *supra* note 11, at 493 (citing E. Wayne Hill, *Understanding Forgiveness as Discovery: Implications for Marital and Family Therapy*, 23 *CONTEMP. FAM. THERAPY* 369, 369-384, (2001)).

⁶⁵ JEFFRIE G. MURPHY & JEAN HAMPTON, *FORGIVENESS AND MERCY* 15 (1988).

itself to abuse. Undoubtedly, some succumb to the temptation to abuse their position of moral authority vis-a-vis the transgressor. Although one might expect such behavior to occur more frequently in dysfunctional relationships, it is likely not exclusive to such relationships. It therefore behooves one to ensure that forgiveness is not being used to manipulate or even as a weapon to exact revenge. In such circumstances its benefits are unlikely to be fully realized.

Thus, it can be argued that forgiveness is not inimical with justice. It remains therefore to address whether forgiveness is indeed integral to close relationships.

VIII. IS FORGIVENESS INTEGRAL TO CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS?

In a seeming paradox, fulfillment of our deepest affiliative needs as social animals occurs in close relationships where it appears to be accompanied by injury. It is a rare person who has never felt “wronged,” “let down,” “betrayed,” or “hurt” by a relationship partner. In intimate relationships we voluntarily make ourselves most vulnerable to another human being by linking the realization of our needs, aspirations, and hopes to the goodwill of our relationship partner. Rendering ourselves vulnerable is a double-edged sword. It makes possible the profound sense of well-being that can be experienced in close relationships. At the same time, the imperfection of any partner means that hurt or injury is inevitable, and when it occurs, the hurt is particularly poignant precisely because we have made ourselves vulnerable.

Although various alternatives exist for dealing with such hurt (e.g., withdrawal, denial, condoning, reframing the transgressions), over the course of a long-term intimate relationship such as marriage they are unlikely to suffice. Little surprise, then, that the well known journalist/humorist, Robert Quillen (the Garrison Keillor of his day), wrote that “a happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers.”⁶⁶ This quip is substantiated by open-ended data collected from highly satisfied married couples married for 20 or more years who reported that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and marital satisfaction.⁶⁷

To appreciate fully the insight offered by Quillen and why forgiveness is integral to close relationships, it is necessary revisit the concept.

⁶⁶ ROBERT QUILLEN, *THE VOICE OF SMALL-TOWN AMERICA: THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF ROBERT QUILLEN, 1920-1948* 255 (John Hammond Moore ed., 2008).

⁶⁷ David L. Fenell, *Characteristics of Long-Term First Marriages*, 15 J. MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING 446, 456-57 (1993).

IX. FORGIVENESS FURTHER ELABORATED

Thus far, forgiveness has been characterized in terms of a motivational change in which resentment, anger, retaliatory impulses, and so forth are overcome. This widely accepted view can be conceptualized, at least in part, as overcoming the negative view of the self implied by the transgressor's behavior, namely, that the victim is not deserving of better treatment. By overcoming the negative portrayal of the self, the victim removes an internal barrier to relatedness caused by the transgression. In turn, motivated avoidance of the transgressor is overcome and forgiveness can be viewed as successfully getting past a powerful avoidance motive (avoidance of an unwanted or unacceptable self-image). Perhaps because avoidance goals have an inherent primacy, most of what is known about forgiveness rests on inferences made from the absence of a negative motivational orientation towards the harm-doer. For some problem behaviors, this may be critical, such as changing a distressed couple's "tit for tat" mode of interaction.

But is it sufficient in the context of ongoing close relationships? It is a logical error to infer the presence of the positive (e.g., health, forgiveness) from the absence of the negative (e.g., illness, unforgiveness). It bears noting, therefore, that equally fundamental to forgiveness is "an attitude of real goodwill towards the offender as a person."⁶⁸ Forgiveness thus entails a positive or benevolent motivational state towards the harm-doer that is not achieved simply by overcoming the avoidance goal set in motion by an unacceptable self-image or the negative motivational state occasioned by the hurt associated with the transgression. Rather, the positive dimension of forgiveness provides the motivational foundation for approach behavior. Because approach behavior appears to be subsumed by a different motivational system than is avoidance behavior,⁶⁹ any such positive dimension of forgiveness should be measured directly and not merely inferred from the absence of the negative dimension.

Although this view remains controversial in the forgiveness literature, there is accumulating evidence to support it. An initial longitudinal study showed that in the first few weeks following a transgression, avoidance and revenge motivation decreased whereas benevolence motivation did not change.⁷⁰ Similarly, Wade and

⁶⁸ Margaret R. Holmgren, *Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons*, 30 AM. PHIL. Q. 341, 344 (1993).

⁶⁹ JEFFREY ALAN GRAY, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FEAR AND STRESS* 138-147 (2d. ed., Cambridge Univ. Press 1987) (1971).

⁷⁰ Michael E. McCullough, Frank D. Fincham & Jo-Ann Tsang, *Forgiveness, Forbearance, and Time: The Temporal Unfolding of Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations*, 84 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 540, 554 (2003).

Worthington showed that persons having difficulty forgiving a transgression experienced both forgiveness (benevolence) and unforgiveness, with those reporting higher amounts of forgiveness having a smaller range and lower level of unforgiveness.⁷¹ They also found that the pattern of predictors for these two constructs differed: trait forgiveness (forgivingness) and attempted forgiveness predicted forgiveness, but they did not predict unforgiveness; this suggests that those low in forgivingness use strategies other than forgiveness to deal with transgressions. Finally, Fincham and Beach formally examined the structure of forgiveness using married couples and showed that a two dimensional model comprising benevolence (forgiveness) and unforgiveness fit the data better than a unidimensional model.⁷² Both cross-sectional and longitudinal data show that the two dimensions function differently in marital relationships; spouses' retaliatory motivation following a transgression is related to partner reports of psychological aggression and, for husbands, to ineffective arguing. However, benevolence motivation correlates with partner reports of constructive communication and, for wives, partners' concurrent reports of ineffective arguing as well as their reports 12 months later.⁷³

In the context of close relationships, change in regard to both positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness seems necessary. It is difficult to imagine an optimal relational outcome without forgiveness restoring real goodwill towards the offending partner. Given ongoing interaction between intimates, the nature of the relationship (e.g., closeness, quality) was a natural starting point for the study forgiveness in relationships.

X. FORGIVENESS IS RELATED TO CENTRAL RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

A number of studies have shown that forgiveness is robustly and positively related to core relationship constructs, specifically commitment, closeness and relationship satisfaction.⁷⁴ In addition,

⁷¹ Nathaniel G. Wade & Everett L. Worthington, *Overcoming Interpersonal Offenses: Is Forgiveness the Only Way to Deal with Unforgiveness?*, 81 J. COUNSELING & DEV. 343, 349 (2003).

⁷² See Frank D. Fincham & Steven R. H. Beach, *Forgiveness in Marriage: Implications for Psychological Aggression and Constructive Communication*, 9 PERS. RELATIONSHIPS 239, 246, 248 (2002).

⁷³ *Id.* at 246; Frank D. Fincham, Steven R. H. Beach & Joanne Davila, *Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution in Marriage*, 18 J. FAM. PSYCHOL. 72, 75 (2004); Frank D. Fincham, Steven R. H. Beach & Joanne Davila, *Longitudinal Relations Between Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution in Marriage*, 21 J. FAM. PSYCHOL. 542, 544 (2007).

⁷⁴ See generally Fincham & Beach, *supra* note 72, at 246; Fincham, Beach & Davila, *Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution in Marriage*, *supra* note 73;

forgiveness is positively associated with the ability to effectively resolve relationship conflict. Although important, the documentation of such associations raises questions about the direction of effects. It can be argued that following a relational transgression, forgiveness has to occur in order for damaged closeness and commitment to be restored: it is difficult for the hurt individual to feel close to his or her offending partner if he or she still harbors a grudge about the transgression. On the other hand, it also has been argued that the forgiveness-commitment association is driven by commitment—as highly committed individuals may be more motivated to forgive simply because they intend to remain in their current relationship. Consistent with this viewpoint is some experimental data suggesting that greater commitment facilitates interpersonal forgiveness.⁷⁵ However, manipulation of constructs such as commitment and forgiveness in close relationships raises practical and ethical difficulties making experimental research difficult. Recognition that psychological changes in forgiveness, closeness and commitment following an interpersonal transgression necessarily have a temporal component points to longitudinal research as a potential means of determining direction of effects.

There is longitudinal evidence that forgiveness promotes increases in commitment, whether or not forgiveness is assessed in terms of decreased retaliation, decreased partner avoidance or increased benevolence towards the partner. There is also limited evidence of the effects from commitment to forgiveness in that greater commitment predicts decreases in partner avoidance. With regards to relationship satisfaction, the picture to emerge is one that also supports bidirectional effects. For example, a spouse's marital satisfaction predicts his or her forgiveness 12 months later and vice versa.⁷⁶ In a similar vein, husbands' marital satisfaction predicts later forgiveness by wives. In contrast, forgiveness by wives predicts husbands' later marital satisfaction.⁷⁷

Relationship satisfaction also influences documented differences between victim and perpetrator biases, which may explain why forgiveness and satisfaction are related. Specifically, it has been shown that victims tend to overlook details that facilitate forgiving and

Fincham, Beach & Davila, *Longitudinal Relations Between Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution in Marriage*, *supra* note 73.

⁷⁵ Eli J. Finkel et al., *Dealing with Betrayal in Close Relationships: Does Commitment Promote Forgiveness?* 82 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 956, 962 (2002).

⁷⁶ F. Giorgio Paleari, Camillo Regalia & Frank D. Fincham, *Marital Quality, Forgiveness, Empathy, and Rumination: A Longitudinal Analysis*, 31 *PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL.* 368, 375-76 (2005).

⁷⁷ Frank D. Fincham & Steven R. H. Beach, *Forgiveness and Marital Quality: Precursor or Consequence in Well-Established Relationships?*, 2 *J. POSITIVE PSYCHOL.* 260, 265 (2007).

embellish their memories with details that make forgiving more difficult. In contrast, transgressors tend to embellish details, such as extenuating circumstances that facilitate forgiving.⁷⁸ In addition to replicating this finding, Kearns and Fincham also showed that individuals in highly satisfying relationships are less likely to exhibit these self-serving biases than individuals in less satisfying relationships: specifically, victims did not magnify the transgression.⁷⁹ Instead, their data are consistent with a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality leads to more benign interpretations of a transgression, which in turn promote forgiveness. Relationship satisfaction may therefore help meet the challenge forgiveness poses since the victimized partner has to “cancel a debt” that is often perceived as bigger than the debt acknowledged by the transgressor.

XI. MORE THAN A TRAIT?

Perhaps forgiveness in close relationships simply reflects the partners' traits. Research on forgiveness as a personality trait has shown that a substantial portion of the variance in willingness to forgive a transgression (between 25 percent and 44 percent) is attributable to stable individual differences in the tendency to forgive.⁸⁰ This hypothesis embodies two notions, that forgiveness reflects a stable trait of the forgiver, their dispositional forgivingness (an actor effect), and/or the forgivability of the offending partner (a partner effect). In addition, forgiveness may reflect relationship-specific factors. When these effects were disaggregated, reactions to spouse transgressions were determined largely by relationship-specific factors, rather than individual tendencies toward forgivingness or the offending partner's forgivability. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

⁷⁸ See Roy F. Baumeister, Arlene Stillwell & Sara R. Wotman, *Victim and Perpetrator Accounts of Interpersonal Conflict: Autobiographical Narratives About Anger*, 59 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 994, 999 (1990); Arlene M. Stillwell & Roy F. Baumeister, *The Construction of Victim and Perpetrator Memories: Accuracy and Distortion in Role-Based Accounts*, 23 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1157, 1162-63 (1997).

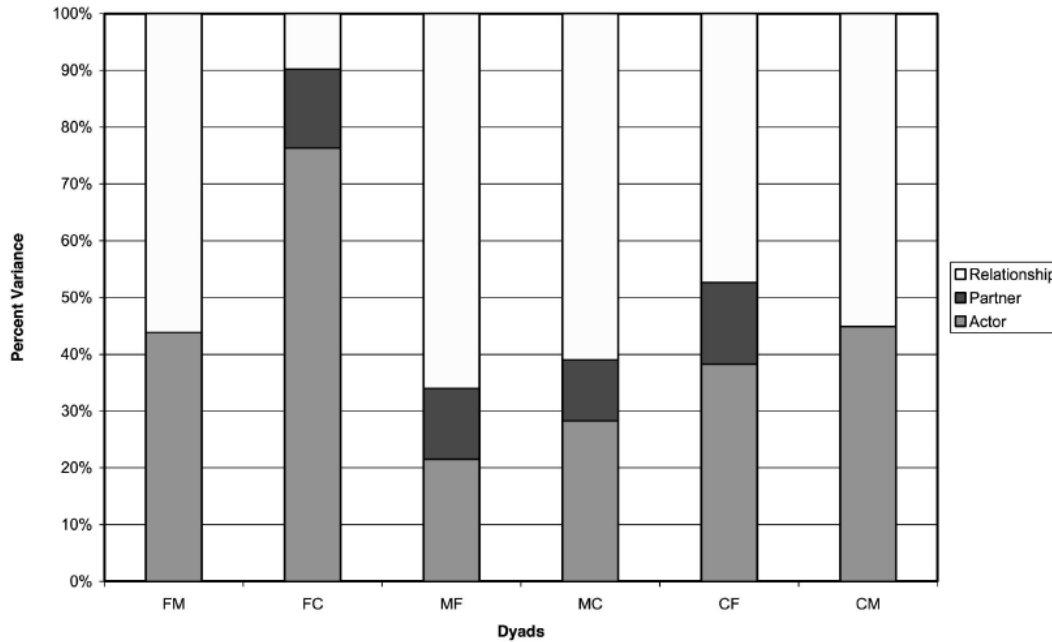
⁷⁹ Jill N. Kearns & Frank D. Fincham, *Victim and Perpetrator Accounts of Interpersonal Transgressions: Self-Serving or Relationship-Serving Biases?* 31 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 321, 329, 331 (2005).

⁸⁰ Michael E. McCullough & William T. Hoyt, *Transgression-Related Motivational Dispositions: Personality Substrates of Forgiveness and Their Links to the Big Five*, 28 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL. 1556, 1561 (2002).

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF VARIANCE IN PERCEIVED FORGIVENESS ATTRIBUTABLE TO ACTOR, PARTNER AND RELATIONSHIP EFFECTS BY DYAD (F=FATHER, M=MOTHER, C= CHILD; FROM HOYT, FINCHAM, MCCULLOUGH, MAIO. & DAVILA, 2005, P. 389).

XII. MORE THAN AN ACT?

There is the temptation to identify forgiving with a specific



statement of forgiveness or an overt act of forgiveness. However, the verb form *to forgive* is not performative but instead signals that a decision to forgive has occurred. The statement by itself does not constitute forgiveness but sets in motion a process with a presumed endpoint that unfolds over time.

This creates particular challenges in a relationship. Although the words “I forgive you” may signal the beginning of a process for the speaker (of trying to forgive the transgression), they tend to be seen as the end of the matter by the offending partner who is likely to be only too willing to put the transgression in the past and act as if it never happened. The offending partner may therefore be puzzled, annoyed, or angry when incompletely resolved feelings of resentment about the harm-doing intrude upon subsequent discourse or behavior in the relationship.

The potential for misunderstanding also occurs when communications regarding forgiveness are poorly executed. Even forgiveness that is offered in a genuine manner may be seen by the partner as a put down, a form of retaliation, or a humiliation if it is unskillfully executed. Finally, statements of forgiveness may be intentionally abused. They can be used strategically to convey contempt, engage in one-upmanship, and the like. Likewise, verbal statements of forgiveness may not reflect true feelings. Such statements of forgiveness without accompanying internal changes have been labeled “hollow forgiveness.”⁸¹

The complexity of forgiveness in relationships becomes very apparent in considering whether, like many processes in close relationships, forgiveness can also occur outside of consciousness and without much cognitive effort (i.e., automatically).

XIII. RELATIONSHIPS INCLUDE IMPLICIT PROCESSES: EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT FORGIVENESS

The idea that forgiveness requires effort by the forgiver has important implications that need to be made explicit if they are to receive systematic research attention. First, it makes sense to talk about degrees of forgiveness when the referent is the accomplishment of forgiveness. Second, the accomplishment of forgiveness may or may not be achieved regardless of effort. Third, aggrieved partners likely use cues about their effort to make inferences about forgiveness, and those inferences may or may not be correct.

For example, it can be hypothesized that after exerting effort that leads to some positive interactions with the partner, an individual may infer that he or she has forgiven the partner even though hurt feelings are not fully resolved. For such forgivers, it is easy to imagine circumstances (e.g., a reminder of the transgression) that prompt negative thoughts and attitudes related to forgiveness, making them relatively more accessible than positive thoughts. In contrast, for partners who have worked through the hurt and completely forgiven the partner, positive thoughts about forgiveness should be relatively more accessible regardless of situational cues. This accessibility effect should *moderate* the associations between forgiveness and related constructs. For example, in the presence of high accessibility there should be a substantial relationship between forgiveness and commitment, but this relationship should be significantly smaller when forgiveness is less accessible.

To investigate such implicit forgiveness processes, Terzino, Fincham, and Cross had partners complete a priming task designed to

⁸¹ See Baumeister, Exline & Sommer, *supra* note 31, at 86.

bring to mind thoughts about a recent transgression.⁸² They then completed an 80 item task where they had to decide whether a string of letters comprised a word. Embedded in the items were target stimuli comprising five positive (*reconcile, understanding, compassion, acceptance, empathy*) and five negative (*retaliation, grudge, avoid, withdraw, revenge*) forgiveness-related terms chosen to represent affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of forgiveness. The difference in mean reaction time between positive and negative forgiveness words was computed to identify completed forgivers (positive words < negative words) and uncompleted forgivers (positive words > negative words). There was no mean difference between the two groups on self-reported forgiveness, commitment, closeness after the offense, or general closeness.⁸³

As hypothesized, however, implicit forgiveness moderated the relationship between forgiveness, commitment and closeness: the measures were highly correlated among completed forgivers (where forgiveness was relatively more accessible) and unrelated among “incompleted” forgivers (see Table 1). It therefore appears that a useful distinction can be made between explicit forgiveness and implicit forgiveness.⁸⁴ Unlike explicit forgiveness, which can be accomplished relatively quickly, implicit forgiveness, like any automatic process, requires extensive practice to develop.

Karremans and Arts go a step further and argue that forgiveness is an automatic cognitive process (i.e., non-conscious, effortless, and requiring limited cognitive resources).⁸⁵ They suggest that forgiveness may be part of the “cognitive representation of the relationship with the close other” and that one therefore will be more inclined to forgive a close other as a habitualized response.⁸⁶ They provide data from four experiments to show that people are more inclined to forgive various offenses if subliminally exposed to the name of a close other rather than the name of an acquaintance (Studies 1 and 2); that a close other makes the construct of forgiveness more cognitively accessible (Study 3); and that

⁸² Kari Terzino, Frank D. Fincham & Susan Cross, *But Do You Really Forgive Me? An Implicit Test of Forgiveness* 10 (Nov 15, 2007) (unpublished manuscript, available from author).

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ To eliminate the possibility that this might simply reflect a preference for positive or negative words in general, we examined group differences for positive and negative unrelated matched words. No differences were found. It could also be argued that the priming task influenced affect, but no group differences were found in state affect following the task.

⁸⁵ Johan C. Karremans & Henk Aarts, *The Role of Automaticity in Determining the Inclination to Forgive Close Others*, 43 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 902, 913-14 (2007).

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 904.

limited cognitive resources (induced by time pressure) made no difference to forgiving a close other, suggesting that forgiveness occurs in an effortless “automatic” manner. In contrast, when fewer attentional resources were available, a non-close other was forgiven less (Study 4). However, in each study, participants indicated their responses on a single question asking about “forgiveness,” so it is thus unclear as to which component of forgiveness (negative and/or positive) accounts for these findings. Nor is it clear whether they reflect more than the temporary fluctuations in level of forgiveness documented in McCullough et al.’s longitudinal study.⁸⁷

It would appear that implicit forgiveness contradicts much of what has been said earlier about forgiveness being an effortful, deliberate process. Perhaps the contradiction is more apparent than real. Specifically, automatic processes may apply most fully to the emotional element of forgiveness; this serves to remind us that this element of forgiveness, like emotional responses more generally, is not always under volitional control, a factor that is evident in turning to a further important distinction.

XIV. SPECIFIC HURT OR HURTFUL RELATIONSHIP?

The imperfection of relationship partners necessarily gives rise to a history of hurts in any relationship. This means that forgiveness may not pertain to a particular transgression even when it appears to do so. Rather, the specific transgression in question may (knowingly or unknowingly) represent the accumulated hurts of numerous, functionally equivalent prior acts. The task of forgiveness is potentially rendered more difficult because it may now pertain to forgiving multiple harm-doing events, a possibility that has been ignored in forgiveness research. The importance of this oversight is easily illustrated.

Consider a couple in which one partner has been unfaithful. The aggrieved partner is unlikely to respond similarly to the transgression without regard to whether this is the first instance or the tenth case of infidelity. In the latter instance, the aggrieved partner may be experiencing on-going hurt from the prior transgressions, making this transgression fundamentally different than it would be for a partner experiencing it for the first time. In short, the history of infidelity may transform the “wrong” that needs to be forgiven into one that involves not a hurtful event, or even a series of events, but a “hurtful relationship.” A hurtful relationship carries with it a variety of broader concerns than does a single event, and it may arise in a variety of ways.

For instance, an aggrieved spouse may frequently be reminded of the harm resulting from a specific act (e.g., an adulterous one-night stand)

⁸⁷ *Id.*

by the partner's behavior (e.g., his/her comment on the appearance of an opposite-sex friend/stranger), because it can be viewed symbolically. In this event, the pain is likely to be experienced afresh and may be viewed as a new hurt, ultimately leading the spouse to conclude that he or she is in a hurtful relationship. The transition from a perceived hurtful event to a hurtful relationship is likely to be influenced by the extent to which a broad range of behaviors can be interpreted as symbolic of a prior transgression, by the spouse's proclivity to interpret the partner's behavior as symbolic of the transgression, and by the partner's attempts to avoid behaving in ways that lend themselves to such interpretation.

In the context of a hurtful relationship, reconciliation may not be wise. But because forgiveness can take place at the intrapersonal level and can confer benefits, it may still be worth pursuing as a coping mechanism for the victim to deal with hurt. This raises an important question that is now addressed.

XV. CAN FORGIVENESS BE TAUGHT?

Several interventions have been shown to increase forgiveness in romantic relationships, and various theoretical models of forgiveness have been used to develop these interventions. Most often these are delivered in the context of psycho-educational groups or relationship enrichment interventions. An initial meta-analysis of 14 studies showed that there is a linear relationship between the length of an intervention and its efficacy: clinically relevant interventions (defined as those of 6 or more hours duration) produced a change in forgiveness that is reliably different from zero (effect size = .76), with nonclinically relevant interventions (1 or 2 hours duration) yielding substantially smaller change (effect size = .24).⁸⁸ In a more recent meta-analysis of 27 studies Wade, Worthington and Meyer showed a substantial association between length of intervention (mean length = 396.4 minutes) and effect size ($r = .52$).⁸⁹

This meta-analysis, however, showed that intervention status predicted intervention effectiveness beyond the amount of time spent in the intervention.⁹⁰ Most of the interventions included attention to helping couples understand what forgiveness is and is not (87%),

⁸⁸ Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Steven J. Sandage & Jack W. Berry, *Group Interventions to Promote Forgiveness*, in FORGIVENESS: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE 228, 231-234 (Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament & Carl E. Thoreson eds., 2000).

⁸⁹ Nathaniel G. Wade, Everett L. Worthington, Jr. & Julia E. Meyer, *But Do They Work? A Meta-Analysis of Group Interventions to Promote Forgiveness*, in HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS 423, 428, 434 (Everett L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005).

⁹⁰ *Id.*

encouraged them to recall the hurt (95%), and helped victims empathize with the offending partner (89%).⁹¹

Although these findings demonstrate that we have made good progress in devising interventions to induce forgiveness it is important to note that they refer only to self-reported forgiveness. This raises the question, “does induced forgiveness produce positive individual and/or relationship outcomes?” Few studies address this question and those that do have provided mixed results. This reflects, in part, the fact that interventions tend to have been delivered to samples that are asymptomatic with regard to individual and relationship health. It is therefore noteworthy that participants screened for psychological distress prior to a forgiveness intervention showed improved mental health (less depression and anxiety) post intervention and at a 12 month follow up.⁹² Analogous research to document the impact of forgiveness interventions on relationship outcomes is less salutary as “the data remain inconclusive regarding the impact of couples-based forgiveness interventions.”⁹³

XVI. FINAL CAUTION

In the context of some severe transgressions in marriage forgiveness may be contraindicated. For example, forgiving domestic violence is potentially dangerous because women in domestic violence shelters who were more forgiving were more likely to form an intention to return to their partner.⁹⁴ Such findings emphasize the importance of helping potential forgivers to clearly distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation or reunion with the transgressor.

Notwithstanding the above caution, it is reasonable to conclude that forgiveness is indeed integral to ongoing close relationships. But not all close relationships should be maintained in the face of transgressions. As Smedes succinctly notes, “we do our forgiving alone inside our hearts and minds; what happens to the people we forgive depends on them.”⁹⁵ With this in mind, the severing of a relationship does not logically preclude the victim from experiencing the benefits of forgiveness.

⁹¹ *Id.* at 434.

⁹² Suzanne Freedman & Robert Enright, *Forgiveness As An Intervention Goal With Incest Survivors*, 64 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 983, 987 (1996).

⁹³ Kristina Coop Gordon, Donald H. Baucom & Douglas K. Snyder, *Forgiveness in Couples: Divorce, Infidelity, and Couples Therapy*, in *HANDBOOK OF FORGIVENESS* 407, 417 (Everett L. Worthington, Jr. ed., 2005).

⁹⁴ Kristina Coop Gordon, Shacunda Burton & Laura Porter, *Predicting the Intentions of Women in Domestic Violence Shelters to Return to Partners: Does Forgiveness Play A Role?*, 18 J. FAM. PSYCHOL. 331, 336 (2004).

⁹⁵ LEWIS B. SMEDES, *THE ART OF FORGIVING* 177 (1996).

XVII. CONCLUSION

In an attempt to answer the question posed in the subtitle of the article, a great deal of interdisciplinary territory has been traversed. When available data were provided to support the analysis offered and where appropriate the implications of the analysis for practice have been noted. Although it has been argued that forgiveness has a role in the legal system, especially in problem solving courts and in relation to restorative justice, explicit discussion of forgiveness is contraindicated. However, this does not preclude explicit consideration of factors that might facilitate forgiveness as long as victims are not pressured in any way to offer forgiveness. Handled appropriately, in the context of restorative justice, forgiveness by any other name may be just as sweet.

TABLE 1: CORRELATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP MEASURES WITH SELF-REPORTED FORGIVENESS IN EACH GROUP

	Completed forgivers		Incomplete forgivers		Z_{diff}
	r	z	r	z	
Closeness after offense	.61***	.71	.12	.12	2.88**
Commitment	.56***	.63	.14	.14	2.39**
Overall closeness	.45**	.48	-.01	-.01	2.39**

Note. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

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