

Forgiveness interventions for optimal close relationships:

Problems and prospects

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Abstract

After proving a historical context for understanding the three core constructs explored in this chapter, forgiveness, optimal functioning and close relationships, the chapter provides a conceptual analysis of each construct. A review follows of basic research on forgiveness in close relationships and of efficacy research on forgiveness interventions. Existing research is briefly critiqued before addressing how relationships can be improved through forgiveness. A number of issues are identified that need to be addressed in this task, including context, how forgiveness occurs, type of forgiveness offered, relationship history, the focus and beneficiary of forgiveness, and self-forgiveness. This lays the groundwork for working towards forgiveness interventions that change the way people think, feel and behave in daily life to promote optimal functioning. These ‘wise” interventions target underlying psychological processes that amplify effects and change downstream consequences. Finally, prayer is considered as a way in which forgiveness might be related to optimal functioning that goes beyond the identification of dynamic psychological processes for wise interventions. The chapter concludes by noting that there is evidence to support the value placed on forgiveness in close relationships but that it is not yet clear how best to facilitate forgiveness in such a way that it optimizes relationship development.

Keywords: forgiveness, optimal relationships, close relationships, prayer, wise interventions

It takes a strong person to say sorry, and an ever stronger person to forgive.

Anonymous

Forgiveness, optimal functioning and close relationships are the subject matter of this chapter yet scholarly writings have seldom integrated these three core aspects of human existence. Because the present chapter is among the first to do so it begins by providing some necessary historical context for this exercise. This historical analysis makes clear the need for conceptual clarity, a task that is addressed before moving on to consider forgiveness in close relationships. The efficacy of forgiveness interventions and specifically the possibility of using them to improve relationships is considered next. In the penultimate section of the chapter several issues are highlighted to advance understanding of forgiveness and optimal relationship development. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points.

Historical context

Forgiveness is a “goal commonly advocated by all of the world’s longstanding religions” (Thoreson, Luskin & Harris, 1998, p. 164) and it is these religious roots that have led philosophers and social scientists to shy away from the construct until relatively recently. For example, less than 25 years ago, pioneering publications on forgiveness did not contain reference to any published empirical research. But with the infusion of \$10 million in grant money in 1998 by the John Templeton Foundation to stimulate research on this topic, scientific studies of forgiveness have since mushroomed (for reviews, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012).

Concomitant with the rise of research on forgiveness has been the emergence of interest in human strengths and virtues among psychologists. Indeed, the formal naming of a field of positive psychology occurred in 1998 by the then APA President Martin Seligman. Like forgiveness, this area has since undergone tremendous growth. Attention has focused on the

three pillars of positive psychology- positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions - as captured in the definition of the field: “Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 630).

Both of these developments took place in the context of steadily growing interest in research on close relationships. In fact, their emergence occurred almost simultaneously with the coming of age of what Berscheid (1999) called, the “greening” of relationship science. But neither the forgiveness nor positive psychology literatures emphasized relationships per se. However, in forgiveness research a small body of work has begun to emerge on forgiveness in close relationships based on the view that forgiveness might function differently in this context (see Fincham, 2010). At first glance it may appear that the study of close relationships was integral to positive psychology as positive psychologists openly acknowledged that "close relationships are essential to well-being" (Diener & Oishi, 2005, p. 162) and even stated that there is a "three-word summary of positive psychology: *Other people matter*" (Peterson, p. 249, italics in original). Notwithstanding such observations, in their research “positive psychologists have paid relatively little attention to how strengths, well-being, and human flourishing may be embedded in relational contexts” (Maniaci & Reis, 2010, p. 47).

The upshot has been that each of the 3 domains mentioned above has developed in relative isolation from the two others. An unfortunate consequence is that constructs central to this chapter, such as the nature of optimal relationship functioning, have not been well articulated. As science is advanced more by error than by confusion, we turn to offer a brief analysis of the constructs addressed.

Conceptual Hygiene

Forgiveness. Because it is a complex construct, considerable effort has been expended on defining forgiveness. Central to various approaches to forgiveness is the idea of a freely chosen motivational change in which the desire to seek revenge and/or to avoid contact with the transgressor is overcome. This reduction in negativity towards the transgressor has been accepted as the operational definition of forgiveness in the research literature. Researchers also agree that forgiveness is distinct from pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denying. Finally, forgiveness is viewed as inherently interpersonal in that it is “outward-looking and other-directed.” (North, 1998, p. 190). However, forgiveness (an intrapersonal process) should not be confused with relationship reconciliation (a dyadic process).

Forgiveness can also be conceptualized at different levels of specificity: as a trait, as a tendency toward a specific relationship partner, and as an offense-specific response. Trait forgiveness, or forgivingness, occurs across relationships, offenses and situations whereas the tendency to forgive a particular relationship partner, sometimes referred to as dyadic forgiveness (Fincham et al., 2005), is the tendency to forgive him or her across multiple offenses. Finally, offense-specific forgiveness, or episodic forgiveness, is defined as a single act of forgiveness for a specific offense within a particular interpersonal context. Associations among these levels of forgiveness are modest at best (e.g., Allemand et al., 2007; Eaton, Struthers & Santelli, 2006). In many studies of forgiveness, trait level forgiveness is studied and thus these studies tend to ignore the importance of relationship context for understanding forgiveness.

Optimal relationship functioning. In light of the historical context offered earlier, it is perhaps not surprising that analysis of optimal relationship functioning is nowhere to be found in positive psychology. Even relationship scientists have expended little effort on this task. For example, the definitive *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships* has no entries pertaining to

flourishing or optimal relationships. However, there are discussions of positive affectivity in relationships, a defining characteristic of a recent attempt to conceptualize relationship flourishing.

Fincham and Beach (2010) argue that a flourishing relationship “is emotionally vital; is characterized by intimacy, growth, and resilience (e.g., rising to challenges and making the most of adversities or setbacks); and allows a dynamic balance between relationship focus, focus on other family subsystems, focus on other social network involvement, and engagement in the broader community within which the relationship exists.” (p. 7). These authors go on to suggest that a science of relationship flourishing would examine how various processes in relationships (e.g., positive affect, forgiveness, love, trust, spirituality) combine to give partners “a sense of meaning and purpose in life, a sense that their life as a couple is a life well lived.” (p. 7). Although this conceptualization is helpful in drawing attention to optimal relationship functioning, it is not without problems (for critiques, see, Caughlin & Huston, 2010; Karney, 2010; Maniaci & Reis, 2010; Walker & Hirayama, 2010). Clearly there is much work to be done in order to characterize fully optimal or flourishing relationships but this is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Close relationships. Kelley et al.’s (1983) landmark text offered a functional definition of close relationships as those that involve high interdependence as evidenced by frequency, intensity and diversity of impacts over an extended period of time. Although Berscheid, Snyder and Omoto (1989) operationalized this definition in developing the Relationship Closeness Inventory, the field did not adopt this measure as a gold standard for identifying close relationships. Rather it adopted legal (e.g., marriage), biological (e.g., family relationship), subjective (e.g., “close friend”) or temporal (e.g., dating for at least 3 months) definitions of

close relationships. Despite being less than ideal, these approaches have for the most part, served the field adequately.

Forgiveness in close relationships

Although most forgiveness research has studied overcoming the desire to seek revenge and/or to withdraw, legitimate questions arise as to whether this decrease in unforgiveness is adequate for understanding forgiveness in the context of ongoing 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). Therefore, it bears noting that equally fundamental to forgiveness is “an attitude of real goodwill towards the offender as a person” (Holmgren, 1993, p. 342), and this is especially relevant to ongoing relationships. However, measurement of forgiveness has primarily focused on unforgiveness (avoidance, retaliation), and hence most of what has been learned about forgiveness rests on inferences made from the absence of the negative (dysfunction). Forgiveness research has therefore (unwittingly) focused on human dysfunction in opposition to which positive psychology was born. Although the benevolence dimension of forgiveness is not entirely absent from general research on forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Root & Cohen, 2006), concerns about measuring forgiveness adequately in close relationships have led to the development of relationship specific measures (e.g., The Marital Offence Forgiveness Scale; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009).

There is some evidence to show that positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness have different correlates in relationships. For example, unforgiveness predicts partner reported acts of psychological aggression in marriage whereas forgiveness predicts partner reports of constructive communication (Fincham & Beach, 2002). Moreover, wives’ forgiveness predicts husbands’ reports of conflict resolution 12 months later whereas neither spouse’s unforgiveness

predicts later partner reports (Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2007)¹. In the first few weeks following a transgression, avoidance and revenge motivation decrease whereas benevolence motivation does not change (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Finally, Worthington et al. (2007) marshal evidence to show that some peripheral and central nervous system changes do not occur because of reduced unforgiveness but are unique to forgiveness.

Because it is a major component of a popular current approach to couple therapy (Christensen et al., 2010), acceptance needs to be distinguished from forgiveness. Whereas acceptance implies that the victim changes his/her view of the offense, forgiveness does not require the transgression to be seen as anything less than unacceptable. This is one reason why Gandhi (2000) stated that “the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong” (p. 301). Rather, an individual forgives despite the wrongful nature of the offense and the fact that the offender is not entitled to forgiveness.

Is forgiveness associated with relationship well being?

From a theoretical perspective, McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2011) argue that “forgiveness systems evolved in response to selection pressures for restoring relationships that, on average, boosted lifetime reproductive fitness” (p. 231). This evolutionary perspective comports well with interdependence theory where relationship maintenance has been integral to forgiveness (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro & Hannon, 2002). Not surprisingly, then, forgiveness tends to promote prosocial motivational processes that can lead to relationship repair and the re-emergence of a healthy relationship. In fact, it has been argued that the main function of forgiveness is to help “individuals preserve their valuable relationships” (McCullough 2008, p. 116).

¹ Many studies do not use separate measures of forgiveness and unforgiveness. Instead, they use a single unidimensional measure that comprises both types of items. For ease of presentation the word forgiveness is used in describing results from these studies.

At an empirical level, researchers have investigated the association between forgiveness- and relationship quality possibility because relationship quality is widely accepted as the common pathway that leads couples to seek help. An association has been documented between both forgiveness and unforgiveness and marital quality (see Fincham, 2010; Fincham et al., 2005), with some indication of a more robust relationship for unforgiveness (Coop Gordon, Hughes, Tomczik, Dixon & Litzinger, 2009; Paleari et al., 2009). Longitudinal evidence suggests that marital quality predicts later forgiveness and that forgiveness also predicts later marital satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2007; Paleari et al, 2005).

Turning to mechanisms that might account for the association, Fincham et al. (2004) suggested that unresolved transgressions may spill over into future conflicts and, in turn, impede their resolution, thereby putting the couple at risk for developing the negative cycle of interaction that characterizes distressed marriages. This is further supported by the finding that forgiveness predicts behavioral responses to partner transgressions (Fincham, 2000). However, Braithwaite, Selby and Fincham (2011) provided concurrent and longitudinal data for two mechanisms linking forgiveness to relationship satisfaction that parallel the positive and negative dimensions of motivational change posited to underlie forgiveness in intimate relationships. The mechanisms involved the relative absence of negative conflict tactics and the presence of increased positive behavior (behavioral regulation), respectively. Each mechanism was found to operate in the presence of the other showing that both are important, nonredundant means by which forgiveness may influence relationship satisfaction. There is also some evidence that trust mediates the forgiveness-marital satisfaction association in the case of both positive and negative forgiveness dimensions (Gordon et al., 2009). Finally, Schumann (2012) provides evidence to

suggest that partners with higher relationship satisfaction are more forgiving as they tend to view apologies offered by the transgressor as more sincere.

It is possible to continue in this vein and document further aspects of relationships (e.g., commitment, trust, gratitude) associated with forgiveness but there is no need to do so as it is readily apparent that forgiveness likely influences relationship health and vice versa. Given the link between relationship quality and numerous psychological disorders (Beach & Whisman, 2012), it comes as no surprise that forgiveness is also related to indices of mental health. Across 22 studies involving 4,510 participants a statistically significant inverse relationship emerged between forgiveness and depression ($r = -.26$, Riek & Mania, 2011). As might be expected, higher levels of forgiveness are related to greater life satisfaction ($r = .25$, 11 studies, 2,984 participants) and reported positive affect ($r = .32$, 9 studies, 1,502 participants, Riek & Mania, 2011). In a similar vein negative associations exist between forgiveness and anxiety ($r = -.18$), perceived stress ($r = -.23$) and negative affect ($r = -.47$, Riek & Mania, 2011). These links with relationship health and mental health raise the question of whether it is possible to implement interventions that will increase forgiveness.

Do interventions for forgiveness work?

Various models of forgiving have emerged in the intervention literature (Enright, 2001; Luskin, 2007). However, model builders in this literature have skipped the task of validating their models and proceeded directly to intervention outcome research. Perhaps more importantly, the intervention literature has far outstripped empirical data on forgiveness, leaving us in the awkward position of attempting to induce forgiveness without knowing how it operates in everyday life. Finally, it is important to note that the vast majority of invention studies have not been conducted with clinical populations but instead with community samples.

Several meta-analyses have emerged on intervention research beginning with Worthington, Sandage, and Berry's (2000) summary of 14 available studies (delivered to 393 participants) that showed a linear dose-effect relationship for the effect sizes they yielded. Specifically, clinically relevant interventions (defined as those of six or more hours' duration) produced a change in forgiveness (effect size, $ES=0.76$) that was reliably different from zero, with nonclinically relevant interventions (defined as one or two hours' duration) yielding a small but measurable change in forgiveness ($ES=0.24$). These authors tentatively concluded, "amount of time thinking about forgiveness is important in the amount of forgiveness a person can experience" (p.234).

In a subsequent meta-analysis of 27 studies, Wade et al. (2005) showed that although amount of time spent in the intervention predicted efficacy, intervention status (full vs. partial vs. no intervention) predicted outcome over and beyond intervention duration. However, the outcome investigated was limited to forgiveness, making these efforts analogous to a manipulation check. A further limitation is that only group interventions were examined.

Focusing on 16 studies of "process" models of forgiveness, where forgiveness is achieved only after going through several different phases or steps, Lundhal, Taylor, Stevenson, and Roberts (2008) found large effect sizes for increasing forgiveness ($ES = 0.82$) and positive affect ($ES = 0.81$). Negative affect was also decreased ($ES = 0.54$). Participants with elevated levels of distress benefitted more than those with lower distress levels and participants who received the intervention individually showed greater improvement than those who experienced group interventions. In contrast to individual outcomes, no improvement in the relationship with the perpetrator of the transgression was found. This led to the suggestion that intervention

programs designed to enhance forgiveness may “not be consistently better than no treatment in improving relationships” (p. 474).

In the most recent meta-analysis using 53 posttreatment effect sizes involving 2,323 participants who had received a forgiveness intervention for a specific hurt, Wade et al. (2014) showed not only that participants displayed greater forgiveness than nonparticipants or those who received an alternative intervention but that they also displayed fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms and greater hope. Importantly, the effect size obtained for depressive symptoms ($ES = .34$, studies = 10), anxiety symptoms ($ES = .63$, studies = 7) and hope ($ES = 1.00$, studies = 6) did not differ significantly from those obtained for forgiveness in these studies. However, the effects of the intervention for reducing depression and anxiety were 40-50% lower than for forgiveness. Overall, greater change in forgiveness was achieved in individual as compared to group interventions and in interventions of longer duration² but the small number of studies involved did not allow testing of moderators for mental health indices.

Do forgiveness interventions improve relationships? Notwithstanding Lundhal, et al.'s (2008) conclusion that general forgiveness interventions do not improve the relationship with the transgressor, it is worth asking whether couple based forgiveness interventions improve relationships. Before doing so, it is noteworthy that the association between relationship health and mental health documented in the above findings provides indirect evidence to answer the question posed in the affirmative. Even though marital therapists note that forgiveness is a critical part of the healing process for major relationship transgressions such as infidelity (Gordon et al., 2005), and survey data support this view (Heintzelman et al., 2014), direct evidence is quite limited.

² These moderator effects were not significant in comparisons with alternative interventions.

In reviewing the literature Worthington, Jennings and DiBlasio (2010) identified 11 couple intervention studies, several of which showed improvements on relationship (e.g., intimacy, satisfaction, communication) and individual mental health outcomes (e.g., anger, anxiety, depression and global symptoms). They conclude that "interventions to help couples have been found to be consistently effective" (p. 242). Unfortunately, the literature from which this conclusion is drawn includes numerous studies that use small sample sizes (4 of the 11 studies comprise samples of 10 or fewer couples) and are therefore underpowered. Nonetheless, consistent with the basic research findings reviewed earlier, the results of the three recent and adequately powered intervention studies in Wade et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis are worthy of note. For example, Baskin et al. (2011) found that their intervention improved forgiveness ($ES = .51$) and marital satisfaction ($ES = .45$) and decreased depressive symptoms ($ES = .34$); improvements that were maintained at 3.5 month follow up. Importantly, Greenberg et al. (2010) showed that changes in forgiveness correlated significantly with improved marital satisfaction and trust in their study.

Summary. There is compelling evidence that interventions can improve forgiveness and promising data that they also improve individual mental health outcomes, particularly depressive symptoms. Evidence regarding forgiveness interventions in relationships is more rudimentary but suggests that forgiveness, and likely some relationship outcomes, can be changed by these interventions.

Critique. Because intervention studies are often experimental in design, they are an important test of the hypothesis that facilitating forgiveness may cause benefits in romantic relationships rather than merely being associated with beneficial relationship outcomes due to third variables. However, interventions are a relatively blunt experimental manipulation that

comprise many components and may influence a number of variables. It is therefore imperative that a component analysis is conducted to determine what actually causes change in forgiveness interventions. Such an analysis has yet to be conducted for forgiveness interventions in general or in relation to couples. Its importance is emphasized by findings such as (a) improvements in observed couple communication following a forgiveness intervention unaccompanied by changes in forgiveness or (b) changes in forgiveness without changes in relationship outcomes (see Worthington et al. 2010).

The most important question in intervention research, however, was long ago articulated by Paul (1967) when he asked “*What treatment, by whom, is most effective for this individual with that specific problem, and under which set of circumstances?*” (p. 111). The diversity of problems addressed in forgiveness interventions relating to couples (from relatively minor hurts, through men hurt by partners’ abortion decision, to extramarital affairs) as well as diversity of samples studied (from community samples engaging in marital enrichment to clinical samples engaging in intensive psychotherapy), do not readily address this question which requires greater homogeneity in problems addressed, greater specificity of treatment populations and so on.

Perhaps most troubling in regard to the question posed above is the failure to investigate possible iatrogenic effects of forgiveness interventions. For example, facilitating forgiveness for someone who has a strong social network that encourages a hostile response may deprive the person of social support and, at worst, set him or her in conflict with support providers. In a similar vein, there are some data to show that women in domestic violence shelters who forgive their abusive partner intend to return to the partner, thereby placing themselves at risk of re-experiencing domestic violence (Gordon, Shacunda & Porter, 2004). What such examples highlight is the danger of decontextualizing the study of forgiveness and its facilitation, an issue

that is addressed in considering how to best facilitate forgiveness in the service of improving relationships.

The way forward for improving relationships through forgiveness

In considering the way forward, it is worth noting that because hurt in relationships is so ubiquitous, the need for intervention far outstrips available resources as interventions are typically delivered by a professional to an individual or a small group of individuals. It therefore behooves us to conceive of forgiveness interventions more broadly than is typically done.

Forgiveness interventions can potentially range from universal preventive intervention (e.g., a forgiveness awareness media campaign), through selective prevention (psychoeducation for those at risk) and indicated prevention (psychoeducation that includes instruction on how to forgive for those who have suffered a transgression), to forgiveness-focused individual psychotherapy. Elsewhere the first author has outlined various interventions using breadth of delivery (reach) and depth of delivery (intensity) as an organizational framework (Fincham, in press) and has offered a forgiveness intervention approach to relationship transgressions conceptualized as a public health concern (Fincham & Beach, 2002).

In moving forward it is also useful to look for existing interventions in the community that might include forgiveness as well as those that might be enhanced by including a focus on forgiveness. The first author has identified the legal system as a promising starting point because forgiveness is gaining attention in new problem solving courts as well as restorative justice programs, such as victim–offender mediation (see Fincham, 2009). Although ripe with opportunity, such possibilities are also fraught with potential danger if we do not more fully embrace the view that anything that has the potential to help also has the potential to harm.

Informed by this observation, the remainder of this section highlights issues that need to be addressed to better ensure that forgiveness facilitates optimal relationship functioning.

Context matters

McNulty has emphasized the importance of contextual factors in understanding forgiveness (see McNulty & Fincham, 2012, for discussion). His research shows that the isolated study of forgiveness may be counterproductive for its facilitation in relationships. For example, McNulty (2010) demonstrated that less-forgiving spouses experienced declines in the psychological and physical aggression their partners directed toward them over the first four years of marriage, whereas more-forgiving spouses actually experienced stable or growing levels of psychological and physical aggression over those years. Similarly, among newlyweds forgiveness helped maintain marital satisfaction among spouses married to infrequently hostile partners, but was associated with steeper declines in satisfaction among spouses married to partners who more frequently engaged in hostile behaviors (McNulty, 2008). Finally, McNulty and Russell (2011) demonstrated that spouses' tendencies to forgive their partners lead to decreases in partners' use of psychological aggression over time for agreeable partners but was associated with increases in partners' use of psychological aggression over time when partners were disagreeable.

McNulty (2008) suggests that by removing aversive stimuli experienced by the transgressor (e.g., feelings of guilt, remorse), forgiveness may sometimes increase the likelihood of future hurtful behavior. This perspective is consistent with others in which negative reinforcement maintains aversive relationship behaviors that are difficult to extinguish (Patterson, 1979). McNulty (2008) may be correct in viewing the withholding of forgiveness as a

means of regulating partner behavior but his findings could reflect something about the way people communicate forgiveness rather than forgiveness per se.

How forgiveness occurs matters.

Forgiving is an intra-individual process even though the referent is interpersonal. As a consequence, a person might forgive a relationship hurt without verbally communicating such forgiveness to the partner or indeed even saying anything about the hurt to the partner. In such cases it is quite possible that the partner infers that his/her hurtful behavior is acceptable. This would be consistent with the view of forgiveness as a negative reinforcer and is likely to have the adverse relationship consequences outlined earlier. Theoretically, such consequences could be avoided by a clear and unequivocal statement from the victim that the hurtful behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in the future. This is fully compatible with also silently forgiving the partner and resuming loving behavior towards them. It therefore may not be necessary to withhold forgiveness in order to regulate partner behavior.

It is also possible to verbally communicate forgiveness to the partner. How this happens is critical. It follows from the above analysis that communication should include a clear statement about the wrongfulness of the hurt and its unacceptability in the future. Beyond this, however, communicating about forgiveness is fraught with danger. This is because talking about forgiveness may lead to harm when it is unskillfully done. For example, forgiveness may be conveyed in a manner that puts down the transgressor or explicitly elevates the forgiver as morally superior to the transgressor. Even forgiveness that is offered in a genuine manner, when done poorly, can come across to the partner as a form of retaliation, or a humiliation. Likewise, if there is disagreement about whether a transgression has occurred, statements of forgiveness may be seen as accusatory. In addition, 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 (Baumeister et al., 1998), should not be confused with genuine forgiveness, and could result in different outcomes.

It is also easy to confuse forgiveness with a specific statement of forgiveness (e.g., Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Baumeister et al. 1998). However the statement “I forgive you” is not performative. That is why the statement “I will try to forgive you” make sense. Compare this to the statement, “I promise.” Because the utterance of the promise statement completes the action (i.e., it is performative) it does not make sense to say, “I will try to promise.” Thus because the words “I forgive you” are not performative they really signal the beginning of a process for the speaker (of trying to forgive the transgression), but tend to be seen as the end of the matter by the offending partner—who is also likely to be only too willing to put the transgression in the past and act as if it never happened. This brings us to our next issue concerning time

Time matters.

As noted, forgiveness is not instantaneous but occurs over time, a circumstance that can lead to problems when the offending spouse takes a partner’s statement of forgiveness literally rather than as a promissory note (“I am trying to forgive you”). The temptation to equate forgiveness with a specific act at a specific point in time (usually now) is strong. Thus, when hurt feelings regarding a transgression arise after a statement of forgiveness, the offending partner may experience confusion or anger if they believe that the matter had been previously resolved; in the normal course of events, the statement “I forgive you” is more likely to occur than the statement “I want to try and forgive you.”

It is also the case that the rate at which forgiveness occurs is a function of the perceived value of the relationship (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006) and is independent of relationship closeness. The issue of relationship value therefore might need to be addressed in facilitating forgiveness. Regardless of perceived value, however, there are data to show that some level of unforgiveness will continue to be experienced. Even those reporting “complete forgiveness” displayed some degree of unforgiveness although the magnitude and range was smaller than for those who endorsed lower degrees of forgiveness (Wade & Worthington, 2003). Attempts to facilitate forgiveness that explicitly or implicitly focus on the complete eradication of unforgiveness are likely to be unrealistic and potentially harmful.

Type of forgiveness matters

A distinction that may be useful to make is that between “decisional” and “emotional” forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2007). Decisional forgiveness is defined as a behavioral intention to control one’s negative behavior towards the offender whereas “emotional forgiveness is the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions” (Worthington et al., 2007, p. 291). Although it can be argued that this definition is tantamount to relabeling the negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness, it serves a useful function. By using the language of emotion the temporal dimension becomes salient as control of emotions is not easily achieved and usually takes time. Also, because emotions may be re-experienced long after the event that triggered them it may be easier to cast experiences of unforgiveness as normative even in the face of “complete” forgiveness.

Adding to the distinction noted between hollow and genuine forgiveness, Fincham, Hall and Beach (2005) distinguished between different forms of forgiveness, drawing upon the positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness. Ambivalent forgiveness exists when the

forgiver experiences high levels of both positive and negative sentiment toward the offender. In contrast, low levels of positive and negative sentiment characterize detached forgiveness.

Complete or genuine forgiveness involves low levels of negative sentiment and high levels of positive sentiment toward the offender. It is unlikely that these different forms of forgiveness follow the same temporal course or function in the same manner. The need to document these differences to ensure that forgiveness leads to optimal relationships is apparent.

Relationship history matters

Each transgression in a close relationship is embedded in a complex relational history and that history will matter. For example, one cannot help a person move toward forgiveness of a partner's one-time infidelity in the same manner that one would treat a couple where the partner had a history of multiple transgressions of this kind. Thus, transgression history influences the forgiveness of subsequent offenses within that relationship, particularly because the avoidance and retaliation that characterize unforgiveness of one transgression may spillover into subsequent interactions. Moreover, chronic transgressions, such as longstanding emotional neglect, do not constitute an event and how partners forgive one another for hurts that are endured day after day is not known. Addressing such issues necessarily entails considering patterns of wrongdoing in the relationship and in some cases the referent for forgiveness may change to become forgiveness of a hurtful relationship.

Because partners in a close relationship can be both transgressors and victims an important dimension of relationship history is the balance between forgiving the partner and being forgiven by the partner. However, there is only weak evidence of reciprocity in marital forgiveness (Hoyt et al., 2005), suggesting that, at least within these relationships, perceiving imbalance in forgiveness may be a more common experience than perceiving equity. Equity

theory suggests that such imbalance would predict negative psychological and relational outcomes. Paleari, Regalia and Fincham (2011) provide some longitudinal data to support this view in that the effects of forgiveness in married couples depended more on the experienced imbalance between giving and receiving forgiveness than the total amount of forgiveness given or forgiveness received in the relationship, especially for wives. Thus to ensure that forgiveness facilitates optimal relationship functioning it will be important to pay attention not only to partners' propensity to grant forgiveness or to accept it, but also to their perceptions of fairness and equity of forgiveness in the relationship.

The focus and beneficiary of forgiveness matters

A partner's view of who is the primary beneficiary of forgiveness is likely to have important implications for how they, among other things, interpret attempts to encourage forgiveness. Although analyses of lay beliefs about forgiveness identify self-healing as a primary reason for forgiving a transgressor, researchers have tended to overlook the issue of who benefits from forgiveness.

Addressing this lacuna, Strelan, McKee, Dragana et al., (2013) offer a functional analysis of forgiveness, arguing that transgressor, victim and relationship can all be (nonexclusive) foci of forgiveness. They go on to suggest that transgressor and relationship foci will be related to both unforgiveness and forgiveness whereas a victim (self) focus will only be related to the avoidance component of unforgiveness. Strelan et al. (2013) provide data that are largely consistent with this perspective. Interestingly, however, concern for the transgressor was associated only with reduced vengefulness and not relationship satisfaction whereas self focus was associated with avoidance in the immediate aftermath of a transgression and may therefore ultimately not be beneficial for the relationship. Relationship focus seems to be important for promoting optimal

relationships as it was related to benevolent responding, less unforgiveness and greater closeness and relationship satisfaction.

Self forgiveness matters.

Forgiveness research has tended to focus on victims of transgressions, leading self-forgiveness by transgressors to be labelled “the stepchild of forgiveness research” (Hall & Fincham, 2005). But what is self-forgiveness and why might it be important for relationships? Briefly stated, self-forgiveness is the process whereby a transgressor who acknowledges responsibility for the offence, overcomes negative emotions directed towards the self (e.g., self-resentment, shame) and is more benevolent toward the self (e.g., shows greater self-compassion, restores self-respect and a positive image of the self; Holmgren, 1998). As long as offenders do not forgive themselves, they are more likely to dwell on the wrongdoing and be troubled by intrusive feelings and thoughts that are likely to impact adversely their motivation to apologize and to seek forgiveness and conciliation toward the victimized partner. So, just as forgiveness may be the victim’s relationship-oriented coping strategy that serves as a relationship maintenance mechanism (Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005), self-forgiveness might be considered the offender’s relationship-oriented coping strategy. If this is the case, then one might expect transgressor self-forgiveness to have interpersonal consequences and impact the victim’s relationship satisfaction.

Examining such possibilities, Pelucci et al. (2013) found that assessment of self-forgiveness for perpetrating a relationship hurt also yielded two distinct dimensions: a positive dimension reflective of benevolence and compassion toward the self, as well as self-growth (forgiveness of self), and a negative dimension that captured lack of benevolence and compassion toward the self as well as the presence of self-resentment and a negative self-view

(unforgiveness of self). For men and women in romantic relationships both self-forgiveness dimensions were related to their own self-reported relationship satisfaction whereas only unforgiveness of self was related to partner-reported relationship satisfaction: less negative (but not more positive) thoughts and feelings toward themselves were associated with greater relationship satisfaction in their victimized partners. For the victim, it may be particularly dissatisfying to live with a partner who is prone to negative thoughts and feelings, like remorse, rumination, guilt, distrust, and depression, fostered by a lack of self-forgiveness (Hill & Allemand, 2010; Mauger et al., 1992). It is also known that offenders who ruminate about the transgression are less motivated to apologize and to ask for forgiveness and conciliation with the victim (Witvliet et al., 2011).

The relatively greater importance of unforgiveness of self is one instantiation of research showing that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister et al., 2001, p. 362), both generally and specifically in marital relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2010), in that negative events tend to influence emotion, cognition, and behavior more strongly than positive ones (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). This is consistent with interpersonal forgiveness research where, as noted earlier, the negative dimension of forgiveness is a better predictor of both self-reported and partner-reported dyadic satisfaction than the positive dimension (e.g., Gordon et al., 2009). It is also consistent with an evolutionary perspective; being able to recognize and control negative emotions and/or situations is more adaptive than being able to recognize and control positive ones.

In sum, facilitating optimal relationship functioning is likely to require us to pay attention to self-forgiveness as it may help address both personal and relational distress resulting from hurts committed in close relationships such as marriage.

Working towards wise forgiveness interventions.

Walton (2014) has identified a new class of brief, focused and precise interventions analogous to everyday experiences which he labels “wise interventions” or interventions that “alter a specific way in which people think or feel in the normal course of their lives to help them flourish” (p. 73). They are “*wise* to specific underlying psychological processes” that “contribute to recursive dynamics that compound with time” (p.76) thereby having the potential to alter consequences downstream.

An example is provided by Finkel et al.’s (2013) study. This study sought to prevent the negativity that develops around conflicts using a simple task. In the context of a 2 year study in which spouses were surveyed every 4 months, some couples received a perspective taking intervention in their survey where they wrote about how a “neutral third party who wants the best for all” would view a conflict in their marriage and how they could apply this perspective to future conflicts (Finkel et al., 2013, p. 1597). Whereas marital satisfaction, love, intimacy and trust decreased among those in the control group, they did not decrease for those who received the intervention.

Although not a forgiveness intervention per se, the Finkel et al. (2013) study is relevant as it addressed conditions, conflict in this case, that often give rise to transgressions and hence potential forgiveness. Its success likely reflects the fact that it addressed a critical process that often gives rise to conflict, namely, the failure to see the partner’s perspective. Fincham and Beach (2009) have conceptualized this process that gives rise to conflict as a change in goal orientation. They argue that when conflicts of interest arise, couples switch from the cooperative goals they profess and believe most of the time to emergent goals that are adversarial in nature. For example, rather than focusing on generating a couple-level solution to the problem at hand (taking into account the other’s perspective), partners find themselves focused on getting their

way—or at least focused on not losing the argument to the other partner. Fincham and Beach have used this conceptualization to inform their intervention research on forgiveness.

In several studies, Fincham and colleagues have argued that an everyday activity that is common to most of the world's population, prayer, can be used to facilitate the transition from emergent goals back to cooperative goals. These studies show that prayer has an impact on relationships, including forgiveness in relationships (e.g., Fincham et al., 2010). The focus of this work is prayer for the partner's well-being. They have shown experimentally that such prayer, unlike prayer as usual and several other control conditions, leads to greater forgiveness both in laboratory studies as well as in everyday life (e.g., Lambert et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2013).

This work draws attention to a way in which forgiveness might be related to optimal functioning that goes beyond the identification of a dynamic psychological process for intervention. Specifically, the exercise of forgiveness facilitates gratification in one of the main realms of life (the interpersonal) and thus contributes to the good life (Seligman, 2002a). But forgiveness may also promote a meaningful life. All three of the major monotheistic religions emphasize forgiveness, and the practice of forgiveness in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can easily be seen as serving something much larger than the forgiver and, therefore, contributing to the meaningful life. However, two very important caveats must be added. First, forgiveness does not necessarily contribute to a meaningful life among the faithful; it will do so only when exercised freely and not as the mindless exercise of a religious obligation (cf. Huang & Enright, 2000). Second, the exercise of forgiveness can also contribute to the meaningful life for nonreligious forgivers. However, to do so, it is likely to require the forgiver to be consciously motivated by a desire to contribute to something larger than the self (e.g., create a better community or society) and to view his or her action as contributing to the realization of this goal.

At an applied level, the implication is that, where appropriate, efforts should be made to show the link between the individual's action and the service of something greater than the individual, such as God's will for the faithful, or for the secular, the betterment of a social unit (e.g., family, neighborhood, school) or the community as a whole (e.g., through the establishment of more humane norms). In short, attention to an important but relatively unexplored issue pertaining to forgiveness, is its meaning for the forgiver which may have important implications for how it relates to optimal functioning.

Conclusion

Many researchers and clinicians believe that forgiveness is the cornerstone of a successful close relationship such as marriage (e.g., Worthington, 1994), a view that is often shared by spouses in that they cite the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness as one of the most significant factors contributing to marital longevity and marital satisfaction (Fenell, 1993). As this chapter shows there is some evidence to support the value placed on forgiveness in close relationships and attempts to facilitate it have been shown to have both individual and relationship benefits. At the same time, however, research is increasingly showing the boundary conditions under which forgiveness is beneficial rather than harmful.

Despite the progress made to date, however, it is not clear how best to facilitate forgiveness in such a way that it optimizes relationship development. The second half of the chapter was therefore devoted to identifying numerous issues to advance understanding of forgiveness in relationships. Such understanding will allow the development of wise interventions that can be implemented as part of everyday life. Given the ubiquity of transgressions in close relationships, easily implemented, large scale interventions are needed if forgiveness is to be used to facilitate optimal relationship functioning.

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