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FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a response to being wronged that entails a change of heart in which anger, resentment, or indignation gives way to an attitude of goodwill toward the wrongdoer. Married persons view the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness as one of the most significant factors contributing to marital longevity and marital satisfaction, supporting Robert Quillen's widely cited observation, "A happy marriage is the union of two forgivers." In Western culture, forgiveness is thus considered critical in close relationships. The relevance of forgiveness for intimate relationships is further emphasized by the fact that our deepest affiliative needs are satisfied in close relationships and that partners in such relationships inevitably injure each other. Forgiveness provides a means of maintaining relatedness in the face of such injury. Recognition of this fact has led to an explosion of research on forgiveness in close relationships over the last decade.

Because it is a complex construct, considerable effort has been expended on conceptualizing forgiveness and how it might best be studied. Although a consensus has yet to emerge, 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. It is generally agreed that forgiveness is an intentional process initiated by a deliberate decision to forgive. This position is consistent with philosophical writings that define forgiveness as the forswearing of resentment toward the wrongdoer. This entry reviews what is known about forgiveness and its effects on close relationships.

Forgiveness Distinguished From Related Constructs

The reference to effort by the forgiver embodied in the definition of forgiveness just outlined distinguishes forgiveness from related constructs such as forgetting (passive removal of the offense from consciousness; to forgive is more than not thinking about the offense), condoning (no longer viewing the act as a wrong and thereby removing need for forgiveness), and pardon (which can be 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.

In the relationship context, forgiveness needs to be distinguished from reconciliation. Although an inherently interpersonal construct, forgiveness occurs primarily within the individual. Interpersonal events, such as expressions of remorse by the wrongdoer, influence forgiveness, but the motivational change it embodies occurs largely within the individual. Reconciliation, in contrast, restores a relationship between persons and is a dyadic process that requires appropriate participation by both parties: It involves the restoration of violated trust and requires the goodwill of both partners. Forgiveness increases the likelihood of reconciliation but is not synonymous with it. There is no contradiction involved in forgiving a wrongdoer and ending one's relationship with the person. Reconciliation can occur without forgiveness, further emphasizing the need to distinguish between them.

Forgiveness also needs to be distinguished from accommodation. Accommodation involves responding to potentially destructive partner behavior by inhibiting the natural tendency to react in kind and instead reacting in a constructive manner. Potentially destructive partner behavior may take many forms but only when it represents a wrong is forgiveness relevant. Wrongs give rise to moral anger, a form of anger that occurs when a moral principle (an ought) is abrogated. In addition, accommodation might occur because potentially destructive partner behavior is construed in such a way that its destructive nature is ignored, overlooked, or downplayed or, when fully recognized, is condoned or excused. Under these circumstances, forgiveness is not a relevant concern. Although under certain conditions accommodation and forgiveness overlap,

accommodation is a much broader construct than forgiveness.

Who Benefits From Forgiveness?

Considering this question highlights a further characteristic of forgiveness. One view is that release from negative affect, cognition, and behavior toward the offender makes the forgiver the primary beneficiary. Because research on forgiveness has focused primarily on the forgiver, forgiveness has been viewed from this perspective. Most of what is known about forgiveness therefore rests on inferences made from the absence of a negative motivational orientation toward the transgressor. A second viewpoint emphasizes the offender as the primary beneficiary because he or she receives an undeserved gift and is released from an obligation. This perspective tends to emphasize the positive dimension of forgiveness. At the empirical level, there is evidence of at least two underlying dimensions of forgiveness, a negative dimension and a positive or benevolence dimension. However, there is less agreement among researchers about whether forgiveness requires a benevolent or positive response (e.g., compassion, empathy, affection, approach behavior) to the offender or whether the absence of negative responses (e.g., hostility, anger, avoidance) is sufficient.

The negative dimension, known as unforgiveness, sometimes yields two sub-dimensions, retaliation directed at the partner and partner avoidance. In the context of close relationships, change regarding both positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness is necessary. It is difficult to imagine an optimal relational outcome without forgiveness restoring real goodwill toward 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 of forgiveness in relationships.

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. In addition, 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 before damaged closeness and commitment can 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. Conversely, it also has been argued that the forgiveness-commitment association is driven by commitment because 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. However, manipulation of constructs such as commitment and forgiveness 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.

Longitudinal evidence indicates that forgiveness promotes increases in commitment, whether forgiveness is assessed in terms of decreased retaliation, decreased partner avoidance, or increased benevolence toward the partner. Limited evidence also shows effects from commitment to forgiveness in that greater commitment predicts decreases in partner avoidance. Regarding relationship satisfaction, the picture that emerges also supports bidirectional effects. For example, a spouse's marital satisfaction predicts his or her forgiveness 12 months later and vice versa. In a similar vein, husband marital quality predicts later wife forgiveness whereas wife forgiveness predicts husband's later marital satisfaction.

Relationship satisfaction also influences documented differences between victim and perpetrator perspectives of transgressions, which may explain why forgiveness and satisfaction are related. Specifically, victims tend to overlook details that facilitate forgiving and embellish their memories with details that make forgiving more difficult, whereas transgressors tend to embellish details, such as extenuating circumstances, that facilitate

forgiving. However, individuals in highly satisfying relationships are less likely to exhibit these self-serving biases than are individuals in less satisfying relationships. Existing 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 whereby the victimized partner has to cancel a debt that is often perceived as bigger than the debt acknowledged by the transgressing partner.

More Than an Artifact?

The robust association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction raises an important challenge. Because forgiveness is conceptualized and measured at the intrapersonal level, data pertaining to it rely exclusively on self-reports. It is thus possible that forgiveness serves merely as a proxy for relationship satisfaction. Research on marriage is replete with constructs and measures that unknowingly tap into the same domain. As a result, the marital literature is strewn with an unknown number of tautological findings resulting from content overlap in the operations used to assess purportedly different constructs. Is the study of forgiveness in relationships simply the latest instance of this phenomenon?

A few studies have addressed this challenge by statistically controlling relationship satisfaction scores when examining forgiveness and its correlates. This work suggests that forgiveness is not simply relationship satisfaction by another name. For example, a well documented correlate of relationship satisfaction is conflict behavior. Forgiveness accounts for variability in concurrent conflict resolution beyond that which can be attributed to the relationship satisfaction of the partners in the relationship. Moreover, over a 12-month period, wives' self-reported benevolence predicts husbands' reports of conflict resolution independently of each spouse's satisfaction and wives' reports of conflict resolution.

More Than a Trait?

Perhaps forgiveness in close relationships simply reflects the partners' traits. This seems like a

reasonable hypothesis given the finding that a substantial portion of the variability in willingness to forgive a transgression (between 22 percent and 44 percent) is attributable to stable individual differences in the tendency to forgive. This hypothesis embodies two notions, that forgiveness reflects a stable tendency of the forgiver, their dispositional forgivingness, or the forgivability of the offending partner. But there is also a third possibility in that forgiveness may reflect relationship-specific factors. When these possibilities were examined, reactions to spouse transgressions were found to be determined largely by relationship-specific factors rather than by individual characteristics of the forgiving spouse or the offending partner.

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 on subsequent discourse or behavior in the relationship.

The potential for misunderstanding also occurs when communications regarding forgiveness are poorly executed. The partner may see even forgiveness that is offered in a genuine manner 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-upping, 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*.

What Determines Forgiveness?

Researchers have repeatedly found that the more severe the transgression the harder it is to forgive. Forgiveness can be observed in exchanges between the offender and the victim, and how these exchanges unfold is likely to influence the forgiveness process. For example, it is well established that a sincere apology from the transgressor facilitates the forgiveness process.

Certain individual differences are related to forgiveness of relationship partners. Greater forgiveness is predicted by more agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extraversion and higher self-esteem and need for approval. However, as noted earlier, relationship level factors are relatively more important in predicting forgiveness, and these include the factors mentioned thus far, as well as the tendency to repeat offenses and the degree of dependent and anxious attachment that exists between partners.

Benign attributions for the offending partner's behavior (e.g., "He was late for our date because the traffic was heavier than usual") are related to greater levels of forgiveness than are nonbenign or conflict-promoting attributions (e.g., "He was late for our date because he doesn't value our time together"). Among married couples, benign attributions predict forgiveness both directly and indirectly through lessening negative emotional reactions to the transgression and increasing empathy toward the transgressing spouse. Evidence also suggests that, compared with husbands, wives' attributions are more predictive of their forgiveness, a finding that is consistent with a larger body of evidence that supports a strong association between attributions and behavior among women. The robust association between attributions and forgiveness has led practitioners to pay explicit attention to attributions in interventions designed to facilitate forgiveness.

Finally, empathy plays an important role in the forgiveness process. Empathy has been shown to weaken motivations to avoid and seek revenge against the transgressor and to foster benevolent motivations regarding him or her. These motivational changes are assumed to occur because empathy causes the victim to resume caring for the transgressing partner on the basis of (a) the transgressor's imagined guilt or distress over his or her

behavior, (b) the transgressor's imagined longing for a restored relationship, or (c) a desire to repair the breached relationship. Empathy may also help restore the perceived overlap between one's own identity and the identity of the transgressing relationship partner. This perceived overlap might cause the victim to view forgiveness as being in his or her own best interests as well as in the best interests of the transgressor. However, the precise mechanism whereby empathy influences forgiveness remains unclear.

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 psychoeducational 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, with nonclinically relevant interventions (defined as 1 or 2 hours duration) yielding a small but measurable change in forgiveness.

A more recent meta-analysis of 27 studies yielded a similar result and demonstrated that interventions were more effective in promoting forgiveness of partners than were attention placebo and no treatment control groups. In this analysis, however, intervention status predicted intervention effectiveness beyond the amount of time spent in the intervention. Most of the interventions included attention to helping couples understand what forgiveness is and is not (87 percent), encouraged them to recall the hurt (95 percent), and helped victims empathize with the offending partner (89 percent).

Although these findings demonstrate that we have made good progress in devising interventions to induce forgiveness, they refer only to self-reported forgiveness. This raises the question, "Does induced forgiveness produce positive individual 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 before a forgiveness intervention showed improved mental health (less depression and anxiety) post intervention and at a 12-month follow-up. The analogous investigation to document impact on relationship outcomes remains to be conducted.

Cautionary Note

Research on forgiveness interventions and on forgiveness more generally has paid insufficient attention to an important element of the relationship context. Specifically, by focusing on forgiveness of isolated transgressions, patterns of offenses and forgiveness within a relationship have been overlooked. Given the rich history of transgressions that most couples experience, it is important to move beyond single offenses because each transgression is embedded in a complex relational story. For example, one cannot help a wife move toward forgiveness of her husband's onetime infidelity in the same manner that one would treat a couple in which the husband had a history of multiple transgressions of this kind. Thus, there is the need to consider how the pattern of transgressions over time influences the forgiveness of subsequent offenses within the relationship.

Conclusion

Recognition that forgiveness can be conceptualized and studied in secular terms has led to a marked increase of research on the topic, including its role in close relations. Forgiveness is related to core relationship constructs such as commitment and relationship satisfaction, though the mechanisms that account for the relationship are not yet fully understood. Evidence also indicates that psychoeducational interventions can facilitate forgiveness, but the impact of such interventions on individual and relational well-being remains to be determined. Promising findings from basic research on forgiveness in relationships suggests that facilitating forgiveness will prove to be salutary.

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See also Apologies; Attribution Processes in Relationships; Conflict Resolution; Couple Therapy; Revenge; Satisfaction in Relationships; Vengeance

Further Readings

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FOSTER CARE, RELATIONSHIPS IN

In 2005, Child Protective Services (CPS) found that almost 1 million children in the United States were substantiated victims of child abuse and neglect. Importantly, more than one third of these children were placed in foster care because they were at “imminent risk” for danger. Based on federal statistics, children enter foster care for several reasons: neglect (64.4 percent), physical abuse (9.1 percent), sexual abuse (3.3 percent), or multiple abuses (16.0 percent). Family-based foster care is the most common placement for children removed from their biological families, with 70 percent of