

Forgiveness in Close Interpersonal Relationships: A Negotiation Approach

Tanja M. Gerlach, Dmitrij Agroskin, and Jaap J. A. Denissen

Abstract The current chapter deals with forgiveness in close interpersonal relationships, i.e., how individuals in close relationships manage to overcome the negative effects of interpersonal hurt and experienced relational injustice. After introducing the concept of forgiveness and discussing its benefits as well as possible downsides, we turn to a genuinely dyadic perspective. Herein, we put forward the idea of forgiveness as a *process of negotiated morality* during which partners not only mutually influence each other following a transgression, but forgiveness is highly contingent upon partners' behavior indicating a return to relationship rules. Drawing on the ideas of Waldron and Kelley (2005, 2008) and examining the role of revenge behaviors in close interpersonal relationships, we elaborate on the communicative processes involved in forgiveness seeking and granting. Finally, we take a look at the way justice-related dispositions shape the processes involved in forgiveness negotiation. We conclude by discussing how negotiation approaches to forgiveness can benefit counseling and forgiveness interventions.

Introduction

The ones we love are the ones most likely to hurt us. Where individuals live together and form personal bonds, their well-being becomes – at least partly – dependent upon the others' goodwill and behavior. Therefore, although close relationships generally have a variety of positive effects on human beings (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995), they put one at risk as well: Since personal preferences and self-related concerns might interfere with the needs and wishes of a significant

T.M. Gerlach (✉) • J.J.A. Denissen
Personality Development Lab (PerDev), Humboldt-University Berlin, Berlin, Germany
e-mail: tanjamgerlach@googlemail.com

D. Agroskin
Department of Social Psychology, University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria

other, conflict and mutual hurt are often inevitable. In the current chapter, we will focus on an especially close sort of relationship – the couple relationship.

Beyond the effects of partner disagreement on individual well-being and physical as well as psychological health, relational conflicts and hurt are among the most potent threats to relationship satisfaction, adjustment, and relationship stability (cf. Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; Feeney, 2004; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). Well-documented high separation and divorce rates in Western societies create an impression of romantic relationship and marriage as a high-risk venture (Olson, 1990): In Germany, for example, there is one divorce for every three marriages; in urban centers that ratio even goes up to 1:2 (Asendorpf & Banse, 2000). Asked for their formula of success, partners in successful long-term relationships indicate their ability to ask for and to grant forgiveness as one of the major factors contributing to their relationship satisfaction and longevity (Fenell, 1993). In that light, forgiveness of interpersonal hurt appears to represent a powerful means of maintaining relatedness in the face of inevitable injury.

The Concept of Forgiveness

During the last 15 years, there has been an enormous increase of empirical work dealing with the concept of forgiveness. After being treated in disciplines such as theology and philosophy, forgiveness has not only become a key subject in clinical psychology but also in personality and social psychology (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001; Worthington, 2005).

On the most abstract level, forgiveness research addresses the question of how individuals manage to overcome the impact of interpersonal hurt or harm. The act of forgiving a person for harm he or she has caused is referred to as *situational forgiveness* or *forgiving*, one's general readiness or capacity to forgive is referred to as *trait forgiveness* or *forgivingness*. Whereas the latter term refers to a personality trait that has been shown to be relatively consistent across situations and time, situational forgiveness refers to a specific hurt incurred – or rather, to another person's act that is perceived as harm- or hurtful. The subjective experience of a hurtful act or a deviation from relationship-specific norms or rules – the perception of a relational *transgression* – represents the starting point of forgiveness processes.

There has been a longstanding discussion on what actually constitutes the phenomenon of forgiveness, and considerable effort has been expended on distinguishing it from related constructs such as *forgetting* (the passive removal of a transgression from consciousness), *condoning* (no longer viewing the act as a wrong, thereby removing the need for forgiveness), or *pardon* (which can be granted by a judge or other representatives of society, cf. Fincham, 2009). While the majority of researchers agrees that forgiveness represents a complex process, in which cognitive, emotional, motivational, and relational factors interact and jointly affect behavior as well as intra- and interpersonal consequences (Allemand, Sassin-Meng, Huber, & Schmitt, 2008), and constitutes a rather conscious and to some

degree effortful phenomenon, consensus about what defines the *core* of forgiveness has yet to emerge. Some researchers have stressed the cognitive aspects of forgiving (Thompson & Snyder, 2003), for example the change in appraisals of the transgressor and the transgression episode. Others have argued that emotional aspects such as the down-regulation of aversive emotional states constitute the most important part of forgiving (cf. Worthington & Scherer, 2004). While acknowledging that cognition and emotion play an important role in this process, McCullough and colleagues have defined forgiveness in predominantly motivational terms (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). In that view, the core component of forgiveness is to be seen as a *prosocial change of motivation towards a transgressor* in which negative motivational states towards the transgressor gradually cease and the inner motivation to restore or maintain the relationship increases again. Negative motivational states that are to be reduced in the process of forgiveness are on the one hand the desire to seek *revenge* for the harm incurred and on the other hand the tendency to actively *avoid* the person that has caused the harm. Although earlier conceptions of the construct have solely focused on these two negative aspects of transgression-related interpersonal motivation (revenge and avoidance), recent work has begun to emphasize the positive dimension of forgiveness – the restoration of goodwill, warmth and *benevolence* towards the transgressor (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006). Whereas this assumption might be debatable in the context of non-close relationships (e.g., when we think of a transgression committed by a distant acquaintance or a co-worker, where forgiveness does not necessarily imply a return to warm-hearted feelings, but at least the ceasing of strong negative motivational states), full forgiveness in a close relationship (e.g., one's spouse or a very close friend) cannot easily be thought of without the restoration of warm-hearted feelings or one's desire to be close to the person again.

Inherent in this motivational definition of forgiveness as intrapersonal prosocial change of motivation towards a transgressor are two further noteworthy distinctions. Firstly, although the transformation of motivation termed forgiveness might increase the likelihood of reconciling with a significant other, forgiveness is not synonymous with the restoration of the relationship implied by reconciliation. In principle, forgiving in the sense of ceased negative motivational states towards a transgressor can happen although one might choose to terminate the relationship. In other cases, relationship partners might opt to reconcile and to resume their relationship, although full forgiveness in terms of ceased negative motivational states might not have been reached. Secondly, although forgiveness might at first glance resemble Rusbult's concept of accommodation (i.e., reacting constructively to potentially destructive partner behavior, by inhibiting the natural tendency to react in kind; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), accommodation might as well occur when destructive partner behavior is construed in a way that its destructiveness is ignored, overlooked or downplayed, or else condoned or excused. In contrast, forgiveness would always entail the occurrence and conscious awareness of a wrong or moral violation (cf. Fincham, 2009) and therefore is the narrower construct that can be subsumed in the broader category of relational accommodation.

Forgiveness in the Dyad: A Gift Best Granted on Condition?

Research has for a very long time highlighted the benefits of forgiveness on the individual as well as on the relationship level. On the individual level, it has been shown to be associated with increased well-being and improved psychological adjustment (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). On the relationship level, forgiveness of one's partner has been demonstrated to go along with higher relationship satisfaction, more constructive conflict resolution (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; Fincham et al., 2004), and the restoration of relational closeness (Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). Consequently, researchers have come up with various interventions focusing on the individual as well as on the couple to foster forgiveness. However, it has been only recently that scientists have begun to question whether forgiveness is beneficial under all circumstances.

Evidence for cases where forgiveness is clearly not beneficial comes from couples that are severely distressed and whose relationship is characterized by psychological and even physical abuse. Although unhappy, highly dysfunctional, and looking back at a long history of often mutual transgressions, these relationships are likely to be very stable, even in cases where economic barriers do not prevent partners from separation (Bartholomew, Henderson, & Dutton, 2001). Forgiveness is likely to play a role in the stability of these highly dysfunctional relationships. For example, Gordon and colleagues (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004) examined women living in domestic violence shelters and found evidence that women's likelihood to forgive their spouses for psychological and physical abuse predicted their willingness to return into these clearly maladaptive relationships.

More evidence for the notion that forgiveness might not necessarily be beneficial in the long run comes from recent work by McNulty (2008), who followed 72 newlywed couples over the first 2 years of their marriage in a four-wave longitudinal design. Although across all spouses positive main effects of forgiveness emerged cross-sectionally, longitudinal results revealed an interesting interaction between spouses' tendency to forgive with the frequency of their partners' negative behavior: Spouses whose partners rarely behaved negatively tended to remain more satisfied over time to the extent they were more forgiving, but spouses who were married to partners that frequently behaved negatively experienced much steeper declines in marital satisfaction to the extent they were more forgiving.

In a related vein and drawing on the ideas of interdependence theory, Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, and Kumashiro (2010) have put forward the idea that forgiveness should critically depend on the relationship partner and his/her behavior. The authors proposed that forgiveness should only be beneficial for the victim in cases where the perpetrating partner signals that the victim will be safe and valued in a continued relationship, whereas forgiving a spouse that does not signal safety will not be for the sake of the victim since it might diminish the victim's self-respect and self-concept clarity. Employing a mixture of experimental and longitudinal

designs, the authors attained evidence that a) the association of marital forgiveness with trajectories of self-respect over the first 5 years of marriage depended on the perpetrator's dispositional tendency to indicate that the victim partner will be valued and safe (i.e., the perpetrating partner's agreeableness), and b) effects of forgiveness on self-respect and self-concept clarity depended on the perpetrator's situational indication that the victim will be valued and safe (i.e., perpetrator makes amends). Together, these results suggest that forgiveness might be best conceptualized as an interpersonal response which is likely to be adaptive in some contexts, but probably maladaptive in others.

A Negotiated Morality Approach to Forgiveness Processes in Close Interpersonal Relationships

After focusing merely on intraindividual, victim-centered aspects of forgiveness within the early phase of its systematic investigation, researchers have turned to the interpersonal dimension of the phenomenon. This genuinely dyadic perspective becomes increasingly important in the case of very close relationships, in which partners do not only have a past, but importantly have as well a potential future (cf. Rusbult, Stocker, Hannon, & Finkel, 2005). As Rusbult and colleagues have pointed out, victims' degree of forgiveness may be largely determined by partners' post-transgression behavior: Whereas perpetrators expressing remorse, asking for pardon, or explicitly offering amends for the harm caused may be quite likely to attain relatively high levels of partners' forgiveness, perpetrators that deny responsibility or fail to show remorse might hinder their partners' forgiveness. Evidence for the beneficial effects of apologizing behavior can also be found in the literature on account-making (e.g., Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster, & Montada, 2004; Schönbach, 1990). In the close relationship context, a recent study among intimate partners focusing on betrayal within the relationship demonstrated that perpetrator amends had unique predictive power for the resolution of the betrayal incident above and beyond victim's degree of forgiveness (Hannon, Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2010).

According to Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2005), intimates facing major hurt in their relationships have to move through different phases in the process of forgiving, including *absorbing and experiencing the impact* of the interpersonal hurt, searching *meaning or sense* in the event and *moving forward to the relationship future*. Of course, in that process *both partners* should be essentially involved. Recent work stemming from the field of communication research has not only elaborated on the ways in which forgiveness in close interpersonal relationships is sought and granted, but has as well concisely addressed means by which 'revenge' is taken. Together, these studies inform us about how perpetrator and victim behaviors may meaningfully interact in the process of forgiveness.

Examining the variety of communicative acts between partners and their possible functions in the forgiveness process, Waldron and Kelley (2008) have argued

for the necessity to reconceptualize forgiveness episodes as a *process of communication between partners* and introduced the idea of forgiveness as a process of *negotiated morality*. In view of these communication researchers, all human relationships are interpreted with reference to a system of implicit or explicit values and norms, and therefore negotiating forgiveness involves reinforcing or re-establishing shared moral codes – or, say, shared relationship-specific rules.

The communication processes relationship partners report after having experienced transgressions, involving communicative acts of forgiveness seeking and granting, may reflect this negotiation. Figure 1 shows a modified version of the process model of communication during forgiveness episodes as proposed by Waldron and Kelley (2008). Through communication, transgressions can be revealed or *identified* as such, leading transgressing partners to *acknowledge* their wrongs and the consequences these actions have had for the victim. Victim partners can be inclined to *empathize* with their partners when these express feelings of sadness or guilt. Partners may be enabled to *make sense* of the episode by discussing explanations and motives with each other. Often, aggrieved victim partners actively set new conditions for the future of the relationship as part of the forgiveness process ('I forgive you as long as you don't do it again'). Perpetrators who *propose new rules* and/or pledge to comply with relational conditions (e.g., when talking through dos and don'ts in their relationship or when suggesting certain restrictions for the relationship's sake) may increase the degree of psychological safety perceived by their hurt partners. Furthermore, offenders can restore trust in the future of the relationship by *reassuring* communication. In that view, forgiveness episodes hold the opportunity for partners to renegotiate the 'relationship covenant' by revising rules and possibly imposing new conditions (Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Table 1 summarizes prototypical behaviors on the victim and the perpetrator side taking place in the different phases of the forgiveness negotiation process.

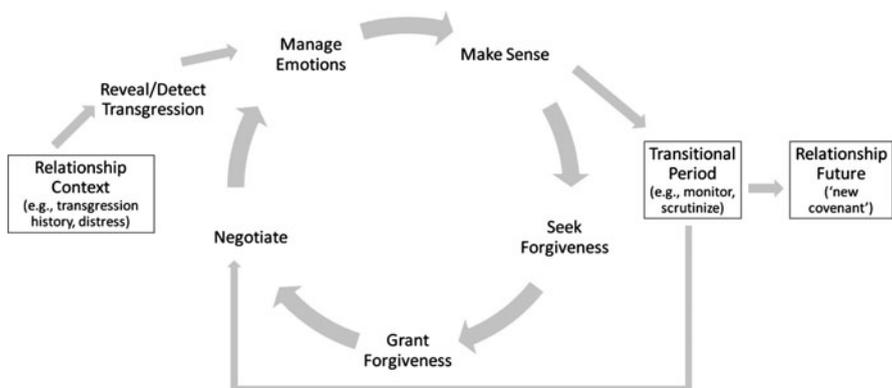


Fig. 1 A process model of forgiveness negotiation (modified after Waldron & Kelley, 2008)

Table 1 Victim and perpetrator behaviors during the forgiveness negotiation process

Phase	Victim	Perpetrator
Manage emotions	Express feelings, e.g., anger, hurt, disappointment	Express empathy; sympathize; try to console partner
Make sense	Ask for reasons and motives of partner behavior; explore context	Give explanations; clarify context/circumstances
Grant & Seek forgiveness	Express willingness to forgive; clarify/set conditions ('I'll forgive you if...'); payback revenge	Ask for pardon; make amends; offer compensation; signal regret
Negotiate	Suggest/set new rules; talk over dos and don'ts impose restrictions	Suggest new rules; talk over dos and don'ts accept restrictions

Moreover, one may reason about the purposes unforgiving motivational states and reactions of the victim serve in the context of intimate relationships. Instead of assuming that these negative motivational states are per se maladaptive, we propose that they may constitute an essential part in forgiveness negotiation. For example, a victim maintaining unforgiving motivational states in the aftermath of a transgression may communicate the wrong that has been done, hereby instigate feelings of remorse or regret in the perpetrator, and moreover elicit conciliatory behavior like amend-making, apology or compensation in the wrongdoer. Keeping unforgiving motivation up for a while and expressing it – verbally or nonverbally – can communicate the hurt incurred and create an awareness for its consequences, which may represent the first step in the dyadic regulation during a forgiveness episode.

Evidence that exhibiting unforgiving reactions may indeed serve these communicative purposes has been obtained, for example, by examinations of revenge in romantic relationships and shall be discussed in more detail for offering further insights into the communicative dynamics involved in processes of forgiveness negotiation. Focusing on motives to perform revenge-like acts in romantic relationships, Fitness and Peterson (2008), for example, described ‘to communicate the depth of one’s pain’, ‘to regain some power in the relationship’, ‘to discourage re-offending’ and ‘not to let the other off the hook’ as the primary goals underlying punitive and revengeful acts of intimate partners. Similarly, analyzing interview data of 85 individuals, Deveau and colleagues (Boon, Deveau, & Alibhai, 2009; Deveau, 2007) found that the motives underlying partners’ revengeful acts could be classified such as ‘to bring about change in the partner’, ‘to redress own unpleasant feelings’ or ‘to rectify injustice’.

Interestingly, whereas everyday revenge acts performed in Deveau’s study (2007) were manifold, a number of participants indicated some sort of symmetry between the transgression incurred and the corresponding response, such as responding to partners’ rule breaking by flouting the rules of good relationship conduct themselves. Sometimes this ‘payback’ rule-breaking happened in the same domain: For example, when a partner had violated norms of relationship exclusivity, victims responded in kind, for example by flirting with someone else. In other cases, victims’ responses entailed other domains, such that violations of exclusivity

norms were required by deviation from responsiveness norms (e.g., withdrawing or ignoring the partner), disclosure norms (e.g., by not talking about personal matters anymore), or dependability norms (e.g., by not living up to a promise or standing the other up). In Deveau's study, 'payback' rule-breaking was indeed more common than any other, more severe sort of punitive responses.

Of course, when feeling severely offended, partners sometimes deviate from that symmetry in seriousness and may as well respond in severely relationship-destructive ways, such as physically or verbally abusing or even abandoning the partner following relatively minor transgressions. In that context, the study of Fitness (2001) deserves mention. Examining forgiven and unforgiven offense episodes in married couples, Fitness unsurprisingly found marital satisfaction closely related to partners' reported ease of forgiving one's spouse or having been forgiven themselves for various kinds of offenses. Interestingly, marital happiness was not related to the extent victims reported to have punished their partners or having being punished by them for *forgiven offenses*. The majority of reported 'punishments' involved reminders of the offense – teasing, joking and being asked to 'remember what you did'. In a supplementary study, however, exploring *unforgiven offenses* with divorced partners, Fitness found reported punishments to be more severe (e.g., physical abuse, infidelity, denunciation of the partner to family and friends) and often explicitly described as 'revenge'. Taken together, these findings are not only consistent with the notion that unforgiving reactions may, but do not have to be destructive, but also suggest that revenge or punishment are not necessarily antithetical to forgiveness. Rather, whether the final outcome of a transgression episode or relationship conflict is forgiveness or not, *some sort of punishment is likely to have occurred along the way* (Fitness & Peterson, 2008), and might represent part of the renegotiation of relationship norms and rules described earlier.

As research on individual differences has demonstrated, many aspects of the forgiveness process may be influenced by personality traits. In the following, we will take a look at the way dispositional sensitivity to injustice may shape negotiation processes taking place when overcoming relational transgressions.

The Role of Personality: How Justice-Related Dispositions Shape Forgiveness Negotiation

There are numerous findings in the individual differences literature that highlight the influence of specific traits on forgiveness. For instance, forgiveness has been shown to be decreased by neuroticism and augmented by agreeableness (cf. Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Likewise, narcissism has been demonstrated to be inversely related to forgiveness, above all in terms of a pronounced tendency to seek revenge (e.g., Brown, 2004; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004).

A further interesting trait highly relevant to forgiveness processes stems from the area of justice research – justice sensitivity. In the following, we are to delineate how this personality trait might contribute to forgiveness negotiation.

Broadly speaking, justice sensitivity measures to what extent people are bothered by injustice, hereby taking into account that there are considerable individual differences in the intensity of the discomfort and indignation most people feel when being confronted with injustice (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2009). Justice sensitivity is composed of four facets corresponding to four different perspectives people can have when experiencing injustice: justice sensitivity from an observer's, a victim's, a perpetrator's, and a beneficiary's perspective. Justice sensitivity from a victim's perspective, which has received considerable attention lately, represents a combination of moral concerns and self-protective motives and has been shown to be associated with self-related concerns and antisocial tendencies (e.g., paranoia, jealousy, vengeance). In contrast, the other three justice sensitivity facets rather reflect generally high moral standards and correspondingly are linked to prosocial, other-related concerns. Considering that interpersonal hurts are often perceived as immoral and unjust, one would expect that a variable like victim sensitivity measuring the intensity of the justice motive in addition to self-related concerns should predict unforgiveness. In our research, we investigated this presumed negative link between victim sensitivity and forgiveness. In a representative sample, we found all three forgiveness facets linked to victim sensitivity and furthermore explored possible mediators of these effects in two follow-up studies in the context of close relationships (Agroskin, Gerlach, & Maes, 2009; Gerlach, Allemand, Agroskin, & Denissen, manuscript in preparation). Specific cognitive reactions to the transgressions were found to mediate positive victim sensitivity effects on revenge and avoidance, as well as a negative effect on benevolence. In a vignette-based study, the effects of victim sensitivity on all forgiveness facets were found to be partially mediated by mistrustful interpretations of partners' reconciliatory behavior following the wrongdoing. Interestingly, moderated mediation analyses disclosed the negative indirect effects of victim sensitivity on forgiveness as being buffered by observer and beneficiary sensitivity alongside with empathy, highlighting the prosocial tendencies of these two justice sensitivity facets, as opposed to victim sensitivity (Agroskin et al., 2009).

In another study, the mediation of the effect of victim sensitivity on forgiveness was analyzed more differentiatedly. It appeared that victim sensitivity heightened revenge and avoidance motivation and weakened benevolence through different cognitive mediators (Gerlach et al., manuscript in preparation). The positive effect of victim sensitivity on revenge motivation was solely mediated by normative legitimizing cognitions of unforgiveness, such as the belief that the perpetrator must be taught that his/her wrongdoing cannot remain unpunished. This finding might be best understood in terms of the victim's need to restore justice. In contrast, the effects on benevolence and avoidance were mediated by three other cognitive

processes. Mistrustful interpretations of friends' post-transgression behavior acting as mediator heightened avoidance and weakened benevolence. Furthermore, pro-relationship cognitions¹ displayed a mediating effect on both forgiveness facets as well, augmenting benevolence and diminishing avoidance. Finally, specific legitimizing cognitions of unforgiveness reflecting a self-protective motivation (e.g., 'I have to defend myself, otherwise he/she will do that again') functioned as mediator, increasing avoidance and decreasing benevolence. Interestingly, this pattern of results emerged when the offender regretted the hurt after the transgression, as well as when he did not show remorse. This suggests that victim sensitivity effects cannot be neutralized by partners' attempts to propitiate by explicitly regretting the transgression (*ibid.*).² Since perpetrators' reconciliatory behavior has been shown to heighten victims' forgiveness in a fairly strong way (cf. metaanalysis of Fehr et al., 2010) and moreover should be especially relevant to victim sensitive individuals, the finding that victim sensitivity effects were large unaffected by perpetrators' regretful behavior is quite remarkable.

Considering these findings in light of the interactional forgiveness negotiation approach may be particularly useful, as it is not difficult to see how the irreconcilability of high victim sensitive individuals might affect their partners' behavior following transgressions. For example, it may become more and more unlikely that perpetrators will express regret and make amends if their reconciliatory behavior does not promote victims' benevolence and fails to diminish victims' avoidance due to victims' inflated need for self-protection. Furthermore, when partner attempts to reconcile prompt victims to allege dishonest motives, this open suspiciousness might prove a barrier to the restoration of trust in the relationship. In the long run, partners of victim sensitive persons may gradually cease to show signs of regret after transgressions, thereby omitting to weaken victims' revenge motivation and increasing the likelihood of vengeful acts. In future research, the usage of microlongitudinal interaction-based designs (i.e., forgiveness diary studies of naturalistic transgression episodes) along with dyadic longitudinal approaches in which the development of close relationships can be traced are to merit further insights.

¹ These cognitions included value-seeking concerning the relationship, considering interpersonal conflicts as something that is part of everyone's life and, thus, has to be accepted, as well as thinking about own wrongs that resemble the partner's transgressions.

² This applied only to avoidance and benevolence, whereas the effect of victim sensitivity on revenge motivation was significantly diminished when the perpetrator regretted the hurt. Thus, partners' regret prompted victim-sensitive persons to refrain from retaliating, but it did neither mitigate their avoidance nor augment their benevolence.

Practical Perspectives: Incorporating Process Models of Forgiveness Negotiation in Interventions

Forgiveness is generally believed to be a positive thing, whereas withholding forgiveness or seeking revenge for harm incurred are considered as problematic, destructive, or even immature. The well-established findings of beneficial effects of forgiveness for the individual as well as the relationship seem to corroborate this view. Likewise, close relationship partners facing major hurt are not only often overwhelmed by the impact of the event, experiencing enormous difficulty dealing with partners' strong emotional reactions as well as their own unpleasant feelings, but experience immense irritation when forgiveness does not come with ease ('I really wanted to leave the past behind, but I simply couldn't – I felt really bad for being that childish and resentful'). However, as has been pointed out earlier, recent contextual approaches to close interpersonal relationships have begun to challenge the view that forgiveness is to be aimed at under all circumstances. In the case of severely distressed couples, for example, certain amounts of unforgiveness have been shown to lead to better long-term outcomes (e.g., McNulty, 2008), thus questioning traditional 'cure and disease' models of forgiveness and unforgiveness (cf. McCullough, 2008). Process-oriented approaches to interpersonal forgiveness that focus on partners' negotiation behaviors and explicitly take into account relationship context might explain why offering immediate forgiveness might not always be the best choice. To arrive at a new relationship covenant, partners have to move through different phases – an often uncomfortable and sometimes lengthy, yet challenging and vital process, offering the opportunity to address relational nuisances and renegotiate relational standards and rules. Premature or hasty forgiveness can undermine this chance, leaving dysfunctional couples with exactly those relationship patterns that might have contributed to the occurrence of the transgression event. When working with close relationship partners – be it in the context of marital therapy or couple counseling, often involving partners having experienced infidelity or other forms of relational betrayal – psycho-education can contain processual models of forgiving. By reframing the overcoming of the transgression as such a process and highlighting its specific parts, a counselor may not only help to normalize the couple's unique and often severely challenging situation, but might as well set the stage to adequately work the episode through (e.g., by discussing current emotional experiences of both partners, illuminating underlying motives and the context provided by the pre-transgression relationship, as well as identifying specific post-transgression demands, such as ways to restore trust in the partner and the relationship by setting minimal conditions or finding ways to compensate for the harm caused). Likewise, payback revenge – frequently occurring as a gut-level response or out of justice considerations, and often being very disturbing for the partner that has initially transgressed – can in some cases be reframed as part of the renegotiation process eventually leading to forgiveness, hereby minimizing the chance of future escalation. Given their high face validity and plausibility and emphasizing the dynamic and interactional nature of forgiving,

process models of forgiveness negotiation might act as a powerful tool to help individuals understand and successfully resolve experienced hurt.

References

- Agroskin, D., Gerlach, T., & Maes, J. (2009, October). *Justice sensitivity and forgiveness in close interpersonal relationships: The role of mistrustful interpretation of partner's reconciliatory behaviour*. Poster presented at the symposium 'The potential of justice research for conflict resolution and the understanding of societal problems', Eichstätt, Germany.
- Allemand, M., Amberg, I., Zimprich, D., & Fincham, F. D. (2007). The role of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction in episodic forgiveness. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 26*, 199–217.
- Allemand, M., Sassin-Meng, A., Huber, S., & Schmitt, M. (2008). Entwicklung und Validierung einer Skala der Bereitschaft zu verzeihen (SBV) [Development and validation of a measure of willingness to forgive]. *Diagnostica, 54*, 71–84.
- Asendorpf, J., & Banse, R. (2000). *Psychologie der Beziehung* [Psychology of a relationship]. Bern, Switzerland: Huber.
- Bartholomew, K., Henderson, A. J. Z., & Dutton, D. G. (2001). Insecure attachment and abusive intimate relationships. In C. Clulow (Ed.), *Adult attachment and couple psychotherapy: The "Secure Base" Concept in practice and research* (pp. 43–61). London, UK: Routledge.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*, 497–529.
- Berry, J. W., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Parrott, L., III, O'Connor, L. E., & Wade, N. G. (2001). Dispositional forgivingness: Development and construct validity of the transgression narrative test of forgivingness (TNTF). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*, 1277–1290.
- Boon, S. D., Deveau, V. L., & Alibhai, A. M. (2009). Payback: The parameters of revenge in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 26*, 747–768.
- Brown, R. P. (2004). Vengeance is mine: Narcissism, vengeance, and the tendency to forgive. *Journal of Research in Personality, 38*, 576–584.
- Deveau, V. L. (2007). *Getting even: An investigation of revenge in romantic relationships*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada.
- Exline, J. J., Baumeister, R. F., Bushman, B. J., Campbell, W. K., & Finkel, E. J. (2004). Too proud to let go: Narcissistic entitlement as a barrier to forgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*, 894–912.
- Feeney, J. (2004). Hurt feelings in couple relationships: Towards integrative models of the negative effects of hurtful events. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21*, 487–508.
- Fehr, R., Gelfand, M. J., & Nag, M. (2010). The road to forgiveness: A meta-analytic synthesis of its situational and dispositional correlates. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*, 894–914.
- Fenell, D. L. (1993). Characteristics of long-term first marriages. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 15*, 446–460.
- Fincham, F. D. (2009). Forgiveness: Integral to a science of close relationships? In M. Mikulincer & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Prosocial motives, emotions, and behavior: The better angels of our nature* (pp. 347–365). Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Fincham, F. D., Beach, S. R. H., & Davila, J. (2004). Forgiveness and conflict resolution in marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*, 72–81.
- Fincham, F. D., Hall, J. H., & Beach, S. R. H. (2005). 'Til lack of forgiveness doth us part: Forgiveness in marriage. In E. L. J. Worthington (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 207–226). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fincham, F. D., Hall, J., & Beach, S. R. H. (2006). Forgiveness in marriage: Current status and future directions. *Family Relations, 55*, 415–427.

- Fitness, J. (2001). Betrayal, rejection, revenge and forgiveness: An interpersonal script approach. In M. Leary (Ed.), *Interpersonal rejection* (pp. 73–103). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fitness, J., & Peterson, J. (2008). Punishment and forgiveness in close relationships: An evolutionary, social psychological perspective. In J. Forgas & J. Fitness (Eds.), *Social relationships: Cognitive, affective, and motivational processes* (pp. 255–269). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Gerlach, T. M., Allemand, M., Agroskin, D., & Denissen, J. J. A. (manuscript in preparation). Justice sensitivity and forgiveness in close interpersonal relationships: The mediating role of mistrustful, legitimizing, and pro-relationship cognitions.
- Gordon, K. C., Baucom, D. H., & Snyder, D. K. (2005). Forgiveness in couples: Divorce, infidelity, and couples therapy. In E. L. J. Worthington (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 407–422). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gordon, K. C., Burton, S., & Porter, L. (2004). Predicting the intentions of women in domestic violence shelters to return to partners: Does forgiveness play a role? *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*, 331–338.
- Hannon, P. A., Rusbult, C. E., Finkel, E. J., & Kumashiro, M. A. (2010). In the wake of betrayal: Perpetrator amends, victim forgiveness, and the resolution of betrayal incidents. *Personal Relationships, 17*, 253–278.
- Karremans, J. C., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2008). Forgiveness in personal relationships: Its malleability and powerful consequences. *European Review of Social Psychology, 19*, 202–241.
- Kelley, D. L., & Waldron, V. R. (2005). An investigation of forgiveness-seeking communication and relational outcomes. *Communication Quarterly, 53*, 339–358.
- Luchies, L. B., Finkel, E. J., McNulty, J. K., & Kumashiro, M. (2010). The doormat effect: when forgiving erodes self-respect and self-concept clarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98*(5), 734–749.
- McCullough, M. E. (2008). *Beyond revenge: The evolution of the forgiveness instinct*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- McCullough, M. E., Pargament, K. I., & Thoresen, C. E. (2001). *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K. C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington, E. L. J., Wade-Brown, S., & Hight, T. (1998). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships II: Theoretical elaboration and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 1586–1603.
- McCullough, M. E., Root, L. M., & Cohen, A. D. (2006). Writing about the benefits of an interpersonal transgression facilitates forgiveness. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 74*, 887–897.
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L. J., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 321–336.
- McNulty, J. K. (2008). Forgiveness in marriage: Putting the benefits into context. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 171–175.
- Olson, D. H. (1990). Marriage in perspective. In F. D. Fincham & T. N. Bradbury (Eds.), *The psychology of marriage: Basic issues and applications* (pp. 402–419). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Rusbult, C. E., Hannon, P. A., Stocker, S. L., & Finkel, E. J. (2005). Forgiveness and relational repair. In E. L. J. Worthington (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 185–205). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rusbult, C. E., Verette, J., Whitney, G. A., Slovick, L. F., & Lipkus, I. (1991). Accommodation processes in close relationships: Theory and preliminary empirical evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60*, 53–78.
- Schmitt, M., Baumert, A., Fetchenhauer, D., Gollwitzer, M., Rothmund, T., & Schlösser, T. (2009). Sensibilität für Ungerechtigkeit [Sensitivity to injustice]. *Psychologische Rundschau, 60*, 8–22.

- Schmitt, M., Gollwitzer, M., Förster, N., & Montada, L. (2004). Effects of objective and subjective account components on forgiving. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 144*, 465–486.
- Schmitt, M., Gollwitzer, M., Maes, J., & Arbach, D. (2005). Justice sensitivity: Assessment and location in the personality space. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment, 21*, 202–211.
- Schönbach, P. (1990). *Account episodes: The management or escalation of conflict*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, L. Y., & Snyder, C. R. (2003). Measuring forgiveness. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 301–312). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Waldron, V. R., & Kelley, D. L. (2005). Forgiving communication as a response to relational transgressions. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 22*, 723–742.
- Waldron, V. R., & Kelley, D. L. (2008). *Communicating forgiveness*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Worthington, E. L. J. (2005). *Handbook of forgiveness*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Worthington, E. L. J., & Scherer, M. (2004). Forgiveness is an emotion-focused coping strategy that can reduce health risks and promote health resilience: Theory, review, and hypotheses. *Psychology and Health, 19*, 385–405.