Forgiveness: Who Does It and How Do They Do It?

Michael E. McCullough[1]

Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

Abstract

Forgiveness is a suite of prosocial motivational changes that occurs after a person has incurred a transgression. People who are inclined to forgive their transgressors tend to be more agreeable, more emotionally stable, and, some research suggests, more spiritually or religiously inclined than people who do not tend to forgive their transgressors. Several psychological processes appear to foster or inhibit forgiveness. These processes include empathy for the transgressor, generous attributions and appraisals regarding the transgression and transgressor, and rumination about the transgression. Interpreting these findings in light of modern trait theory would help to create a more unified understanding of how personality might influence forgiveness.

Keywords

forgiveness; research; review; personality; theory

Relating to others—whether strangers, friends, or family—inevitably exposes people to the risk of being offended or harmed by those other people. Throughout history and across cultures, people have developed many strategies for responding to such transgressions. Two classic responses are avoidance and revenge—seeking distance from the transgressor or opportunities to harm the transgressor in kind. These responses are normal and common, but can have negative consequences for individuals, relationships, and perhaps society as a whole.

Psychologists have been investigating interpersonal transgressions and their aftermath for years. However, although many of the world's religions have advocated the concept of forgiveness as a productive response to such transgressions (McCullough & Worthington, 1999), scientists have begun only recently to devote sustained attention to forgiveness. Nevertheless, researchers have made substantial progress in illuminating forgiveness during this short amount of time.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Most psychologists concur with Enright, Gassin, and Wu (1992) that forgiveness is distinct from pardon (which is more apposite to the legal realm), condonation (which implies justifying the transgression), and excusing (which implies recognition that the transgressor had a good reason for committing the transgression). Most scholars also concur that forgiveness is distinct from reconciliation—a term implying restoration of a relationship. But what is forgiveness foundationally? The first definition for "forgive" in *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1983) is "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; to stop being angry with; to pardon" (p. 720). Although this definition conflates the concepts of forgiveness and pardon, it nearly suffices as an adequate psychological definition because it points to what is perhaps the essence of forgiveness: prosocial motivational change on the victim's part. By using the term "prosocial," I am suggesting that when people forgive, they become less motivated to harm their transgressor (or their relationship with the transgressor) and, simultaneously, become more motivated to act in ways that will benefit the transgressor (or their relationship with the transgressor).

My colleagues and I have assumed that most people are motivated (at least initially) to respond to transgressions with other forms of negative behavior—particularly, to avoid contact with the transgressor and to seek revenge. When people forgive, they counteract or modulate these motivations to avoid or seek revenge so that the probability of restoring benevolent and harmonious interpersonal relations with their transgressors is increased (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). When people indicate that they have forgiven a transgressor, we believe they are indicating that their perceptions of the transgression and transgressor no longer stimulate motivations for avoidance and revenge. Instead, a forgiver experiences the return of benevolent, constructive motivations regarding the transgressor. In this conceptualization, forgiveness is not a motivation per se, but rather, a complex of prosocial changes in one's motivations.

Locating forgiveness at the motivational level, rather than at the level of overt behaviors, accommodates the fact that many people who would claim to have forgiven someone who has harmed them might not behave in any particularly new and benevolent way toward their transgressors. Forgiveness might not cause an employee who forgives her boss for an insult to behave any less negatively toward the boss: Avoidance and re-

venge in the workplace can put one's job at risk, so most people are probably careful to inhibit the expression of such negative motivations in the first place, regardless of how strong they might have been as a result of the transgression. The motivational definition does imply, however, that the employee would experience a reduced *potential* for avoidant and vengeful behavior (and an increased potential for benevolent behavior) toward the boss, which might or might not be expressed overtly. A motivational definition also accommodates the fact that someone can make public gestures of forgiveness toward his or her transgressor even in the absence of such prosocial motivational changes.

How would one describe the sorts of people who tend to engage in the motivational transformations collectively called forgiveness? What psychological processes appear to help people forgive? Several research teams have been investigating these questions in detail. In this article, I describe what psychological science has revealed about who tends to forgive and the psychological processes that may foster or hinder forgiveness for specific transgressions.

THE FORGIVING PERSONALITY

Researchers have found that the disposition to forgive is correlated (positively or negatively) with a broad array of variables, including several personality traits, psychological symptoms, moral emotions, hope, and self-esteem (e.g., see Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, in press; Tangney, Fee, Reinsmith, Boone, & Lee, 1999). For simplicity, it is useful to reduce this potentially bewildering array of correlates to a smaller set of higher-order personality factors, such as those in the Five Factor (or Big Five) personality taxonomy (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Several recent research efforts suggest that the disposition to forgive may be related most strongly to two of these higher-order dimensions: agreeableness and emotional stability (Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, & Jackson, 1998; Berry et al., in press; McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 1999). Some evidence also suggests that the disposition to forgive is related positively to religiousness and spirituality.

Agreeableness

Agreeableness is a personality dimension that incorporates traits such as altruism, empathy, care, and generosity. Highly agreeable people tend to thrive in the interpersonal realm and experience less conflict in relationships than less agreeable people do. Trait theorists and researchers have long been aware that agreeable people typically are rated highly on descriptors such as "forgiving" and low on descriptors such as "vengeful." Research specifically on the disposition to forgive has also confirmed the agreeableness-forgiveness association (Ashton et al., 1998; McCullough & Hoyt, 1999).

People who appear dispositionally inclined to forgive also possess many of the lower-order traits that agreeableness subsumes. For instance, compared with people who are not inclined to forgive, they tend to be less exploitative of and more empathic toward others (Tangney et al., 1999). They also report higher levels of moral responsibility and demonstrate a greater tendency to share resources with people who have been rude and inconsiderate to them (Ashton et al., 1998).

Emotional Stability

Emotional stability is a personality dimension that involves low vulnerability to experiences of negative emotion. Emotionally stable people also tend not to be moody or overly sensitive. Several studies demonstrate that people who are high in emotional stability score higher on measures of the disposition to forgive than do their less emotionally stable counterparts (Ashton et al., 1998; Berry et al., in press; McCullough & Hoyt, 1999).

Religiousness and Spirituality

A third personality trait that might be related to the disposition to forgive—and one that recent research suggests is empirically distinct from the Big Five personality factors—is religiousness or spirituality. A review of results from seven studies suggested that people who consider themselves to be highly religious or spiritual tend to value forgiveness more highly and see themselves as more forgiving than do people who consider themselves less religious or spiritual (McCullough & Worthington, 1999).

Despite the consistency of the existing evidence on this point, few studies have addressed whether religiousness and spirituality are associated with forgiving specific transgressors for specific, real-life transgressions. Indeed, studies addressing this issue hint that religiousness-spirituality and forgiveness of individual transgressions may be essentially unrelated (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Therefore, it is possible that religious and spiritual people are no more forgiving than are less religious and spiritual people in real life, but only believe themselves (or aspire) to be highly forgiving. The connection of religiousness and spirituality to forgiveness of actual transgressions remains to be investigated more fully (McCullough & Worthington, 1999).

WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY FORGIVE?

Recent research has also helped to illuminate the psychological processes that people employ when they forgive. The processes that have been studied to date include empathy, attributions and appraisals, and rumination.

Empathy for the Transgressor

Empathy has been defined by some scholars as the vicarious experience of another person's emotional state, and by others as a specific emotion characterized by compassion, tenderness, and sympathy. Empathy (defined as a specific emotional state) for a particular transgressor correlates strongly with the extent to which a victim forgives the transgressor for a particular transgression. In several correlational studies (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Worthington et al., 2000), people's reports of the extent to which they had forgiven a specific transgressor were highly correlated with the extent to which they experienced empathy for the transgressor.

Empathy also helps explain why some social-psychological variables influence forgiveness. The well-known effect of transgressors' apologies on victims' likelihood of forgiving apparently is almost totally mediated by the effects of the apologies on victims' empathy for the transgressors (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998). When transgressors apologize, they implicitly express some degree of fallibility and vulnerability, which might cause victims to feel empathic, thereby motivating them to forgive the transgressors. Also, research on psychological interventions designed to help people forgive specific transgressors has revealed that empathy fosters forgiveness. Indeed, empathy for the transgressor is the only psychological variable that has, to date, been shown to facilitate forgiveness when induced experimentally (McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington et al., 2000), although experimental research on this issue is still in its infancy.

Generous Attributions and Appraisals

Another factor associated with the extent to which someone forgives a specific transgressor is the extent to which the victim makes generous attributions and appraisals about the transgression and transgressor. Compared with people who have not forgiven their transgressors, people who have forgiven their transgressors appraise the transgressors as more likable (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999), and the transgressors' explanations for the transgressions as more adequate and honest (Shapiro, 1991). In such situations, forgiveness is also related to the victim's appraisal of the severity of the transgression (Shapiro, 1991). People who tend to forgive their spouses also tend to attribute less responsibility to their spouses for their negative behavior than do people who do not tend to forgive their spouses (Fincham, 2000). Thus, forgivers apparently are inclined to give their transgressors "the benefit of the doubt." Whether the correlations between appraisals-attributions and forgiveness reflect the causal effects of attributional and appraisal processes, or simply reflect victims' accurate perceptions of the actual qualities of transgressors and transgressions that cause them to be more or less forgivable, remains to be explored more fully in the future.

Rumination About the Transgression

A third factor associated with the extent to which someone forgives a specific transgressor is the extent to which the victim ruminates about the transgression. Rumination, or the tendency to experience intrusive thoughts, affects, and images about past events, appears to hinder forgiveness. The more people brood about a transgression, the higher are their levels of revenge and avoidance motivation (McCullough et al., 1998, 2001). In a recent longitudinal study, my colleagues and I also found that victims who continued to ruminate about a particular transgression made considerably less progress in forgiving the transgressor during an 8-week follow-up period (McCullough et al., 2001). This longitudinal evidence indicates that the degree to which people reduce their ruminations about a particular transgression over time is a good predictor of how much progress they will make in forgiving their transgressor.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND THEORY

So far, research has shown that people who are more agreeable, more emotionally stable, and (possibly) more spiritual or religious have a stronger disposition to forgive than do their less agreeable, less emotionally stable, and less spiritually and religiously inclined counterparts. Moreover, research has shown that empathizing with the transgressor, making generous attributions and appraisals regarding the transgressor and transgression, and refraining from rumination about the transgression are associated with the extent to which a victim forgives a specific transgressor.

An interesting step for future research on the personality factors and psychological mechanisms associated with forgiveness would be to explore the specific cognitive and emotional habits of agreeable, emotionally stable, and (perhaps) reli-

giously or spiritually inclined people that predispose them to forgive. For example, agreeableness reflects a tendency toward kindness and prosociality, so perhaps agreeable people are particularly inclined to experience empathy for their transgressors. They might also be inclined to perceive the transgressions they have incurred as less intentional and less severe, and their transgressors as more likable and contrite, than do less agreeable people.

Likewise, emotionally stable people might find forgiveness easier than people who are less emotionally stable because of perceptual processes: Emotionally stable people perceive many environmental factors—including physical pain and negative life events—less negatively than do less emotionally stable people. Emotionally stable people also ruminate less about negative life events. Research addressing such potential links between personality traits and psychological processes would enrich psychology's understanding of how personality might influence the extent to which people forgive particular transgressors.

Such empirical advances should be coupled with theoretical refinements. It might prove particularly useful to frame such investigations in the context of modern trait theory. Trait theorists such as McCrae and Costa (1999) have advocated for conceptualizing the empirical links between traits and real-life behavioral proclivities as causal connections that reflect how *basic tendencies* (i.e., traits) are "channelized" into *characteristic adaptations*, or approaches to negotiating life within one's own cultural and environmental context. Using McCrae and Costa's framework to theorize about forgiveness might explain how the basic, biologically based tendencies that are reflected in measures of higher-order personality dimensions lead people to use forgiveness to address certain problems encountered in daily life—namely, interpersonal transgressions.

Such a theoretical framework could lead to other interesting questions: Insofar as forgiveness can be viewed as a characteristic adaptation of agreeable and emotionally stable people, why might agreeable and emotionally stable people be predisposed to use forgiveness for navigating their social worlds? Is forgiveness a by-product of other characteristic adaptations resulting from agreeableness and emotional stability (such as a capacity for empathy, a tendency to make generous attributions regarding the negative behavior of other people, or an ability to refrain from rumination about negative events)? Or is it more accurate to view forgiveness as a goal to which agreeable and emotionally stable people actively strive, using the other characteristic psychological adaptations (e.g., capacity for empathy, tendency to form generous attributions, disinclination to ruminate) associated with agreeableness and emotional stability as footholds on the climb toward that goal? Answers to these questions would raise even more interesting questions. In any case, more sophisticated theorizing would transform this new area of research from simply a search for the correlates of forgiveness to a quest to truly understand forgiveness and its place in human personality and social functioning.

Recommended Reading

McCrae, R.R., & Costa, P.T., Jr. (1999). (See References)

McCullough, M.E., Bellah, C.G., Kilpatrick, S.D., & Johnson, J.L. (2001). (See References)

McCullough, M.E., Pargament, K.I., & Thoresen, C.T. (Eds.). (2000). *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Guilford.

McCullough, M.E., Rachal, K.C., Sandage, S.J., Worthington, E.L., Brown, S.W., & Hight, T.L. (1998). (See References)

McCullough, M.E., & Worthington, E.L. (1999). (See References)

Note

1. Address correspondence to Michael McCullough, Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, PO Box 750442, Dallas, TX 75275-0442; e-mail: mikem@mail. smu.edu.

References

Ashton, M.C., Paunonen, S.V., Helmes, E., & Jackson, D.N. (1998). Kin altruism, reciprocal altruism, and the Big Five personality factors. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *19*, 243–255.

Berry, J.W., Worthington, E.L., Parrott, L., O'Connor, L.E., & Wade, N.G. (in press). Dispositional forgivingness: Development and construct validity of the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgivingness (TNTF). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Bradfield, M., & Aquino, K. (1999). The effects of blame attributions and offender likeableness on forgiveness and revenge in the workplace. *Journal of Management*, *25*, 607–631.

Enright, R.D., Gassin, E.A., & Wu, C. (1992). Forgiveness: A developmental view. *Journal of Moral Education*, *21*, 99–114.

Fincham, F.D. (2000). The kiss of the porcupines: From attributing responsibility to forgiving. *Personal Relationships*, *7*, 1–23.

McCrae, R.R., & Costa, P.T., Jr. (1999). A five-factor theory of personality. In L.A. Pervin & O.P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 139–153). New York: Guilford.

McCullough, M.E., Bellah, C.G., Kilpatrick, S.D., & Johnson, J.L. (2001). Vengefulness: Relationships with forgiveness, rumination, well-being, and the Big Five. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 601–610.

McCullough, M.E., & Hoyt, W.T. (1999, August). *Recovering the person from interpersonal forgiving*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston.

McCullough, M.E., Rachal, K.C., Sandage, S.J., Worthington, E.L., Brown, S.W., & Hight, T.L. (1998). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships: II. Theoretical elaboration and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 1586–1603.

McCullough, M.E., & Worthington, E.L. (1999). Religion and the forgiving personality. *Journal of Personality*, *67*, 1141–1164.

McCullough, M.E., Worthington, E.L., & Rachal, K.C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 321–336.

Shapiro, D.L. (1991). The effects of explanations on negative reactions to deceit. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *36*, 614–630.

Tangney, J., Fee, R., Reinsmith, C., Boone, A.L., & Lee, N. (1999, August). *Assessing individual differences in the propensity to forgive*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston.

Webster's new universal unabridged dictionary. (1983). New York: Dorset and Baker.

Worthington, E.L., Kurusu, T.A., Collins, W., Berry, J.W., Ripley, J.S., & Baier, S.N. (2000). Forgiving usually takes time: A lesson learned by studying interventions to promote forgiveness. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *28*, 3–20.