



## Forgiveness and lay conceptualizations of forgiveness

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### ABSTRACT

The relationships between conceptualizations of forgiveness and general propensity to forgive were assessed. A positive association was found between unconditional forgiveness and the beliefs that (a) forgiveness corresponds to a decrease in negative feelings and to an increase in positive feelings towards the offender and (b) forgiveness is a broad process that is not limited to the victim-offender dyad. A positive association between the view that forgiveness is immoral and propensity to lasting resentment was also found. These associations were evidenced beyond the associations already found with educational level, religious involvement, and personality variables. Overall, lasting resentment was the construct that was most associated with personality and demographic factors, and unconditional forgiveness was the construct that was most associated with conceptualizations factors (acquired positive conceptions about forgiveness).

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### 1. Introduction

Forgiveness has been studied under a variety of perspectives (e.g., neurological, cognitive, developmental, personal, social, clinical, cultural, and political). However, a quick look at the index of the handbook recently edited by Worthington (2005) suffices to show that no work has directly assessed the relationship between forgiveness – the disposition to forgive, and lay conceptualizations of forgiveness (see also McCullough, Pargament, & Thorensen, 2000; Worthington, 2006). This is unfortunate given that several authors have insisted on the fact that the views held on forgiveness strongly impact not only (a) the ability to forgive personal offenses, but also (b) the ability to seek forgiveness. As stated by Casarjian (1992, p. 12), “The beliefs that you hold about forgiveness open or close possibilities for you, determine your willingness to forgive, and, as a result, profoundly influence the emotional tone of your life”. It is precisely because forgiveness appears to be conceptualized in so many different, and sometimes antagonistic, ways that Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) recommended that before applying their process model of forgiveness in therapeutic sessions, a clear definition of forgiveness is given to the potential clients (see also Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005; Harris et al., 2006; Rye & Pargament, 2002, for similar warnings).

As an example, let's suppose that person A has been offended by person B, and that person B apologizes and requests forgiveness in an apparently sincere way. The way person A may react to the apologies and to the request for forgiveness may largely be associated

with the way he/she conceptualizes forgiveness. If person A believes that forgiving is nothing more than agreeing with the offender for the harm done or that forgiving strongly encourages the offender to behave even more harmfully in the future, then, despite person B's efforts, he/she probably will obstinately refuse to grant forgiveness. Moreover, if person B is not aware that people may conceptualize forgiveness in precisely the way person A does, he/she is at risk of not understanding person A's reaction, and thus the relationship between them may deteriorate instead of getting better.

However, if person B's counselor explains to her that some people confuse forgiving and pardoning, then person B would be less surprised by person A's lack of forgiving attitude, and she would be better prepared at reformulating her apologies (e.g., insisting more on her responsibility for what happened, and on her determination to never do it again). This concrete example shows that for both requesting and granting forgiveness it may be important to know (a) how people in general conceptualize forgiveness (e.g., perpetuation of harm doing), and more importantly, (b) to what extent people's conceptualizations differ from one another. If a majority of people conceptualizes forgiveness as having nothing to do with pardoning, and if the divergences on this point are minimal, then the above scenario may be an unlikely occurrence. By contrast, if extreme divergences in conceptualization of forgiveness are the rule (e.g., in terms of the offender's encouragement to keep behaving in a harmful way), one may need to be prudent when granting or being granted forgiveness. In such a case, it may be advisable for the forgiver and the forgiven to first agree on the definition of forgiveness.

As another example, let's suppose now that person A has been the victim of a collective offense; that is, an offense perpetrated

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by a like-minded group of people. If person A conceptualizes forgiveness as a process that can only take place between two persons (a strictly dyadic concept of forgiveness), then he/she will experience difficulties with the idea of forgiving a group of people. Also, this person possibly will not see much sense in the head of the group requesting forgiveness on behalf of the whole group. If, however, the way person A conceptualizes forgiveness, in addition to the dyadic offender-offended situation, includes other social configurations, he/she will be able to begin working hard at forgiving the group for the collective harm done. Therefore, before encouraging groups to offer collective apologies to individuals for a harm done or encouraging individuals to try forgiving collective offenses, it is helpful for counselors to know how most people tend to conceptualize forgiveness.

### 1.1. Conceptualizing forgiveness

Several studies have recently dealt with lay conceptualizations of forgiveness. Denton and Martin's (1998) conducted a survey among clinical social workers ( $N = 101$ ). Factor analysis of the responses showed several factors: forgiveness as a release of negative feelings, forgiving is not condoning, forgiveness requires two persons, and forgiveness is a slow process that does not guarantee forgetting or reconciliation. Kanz (2000) instructed students to answer conceptual forgiveness questions. A majority of participants agreed with the idea that it is possible to forgive someone without that person being aware of it, forgiveness is not a weakness, forgiving does not excuse (or justify) the offender's hurtful behavior, and anger decreases when forgiveness takes place. Younger, Piferi, Jobe, and Lawler (2004) showed that four major themes emerged from students' spontaneous definitions of forgiveness: letting go of negative feelings, acceptance and getting over it, going back to the relationship, and forgetting/not forgetting about the incident. Kearns and Fincham (2004) utilized a prototype approach to examine lay conceptions. Truthful, sincerity, open-minded, caring, giving someone a second chance, learning from mistakes, doing the right thing, finding a solution to a problem, an act of love, accepting someone's apologies, understanding that everyone makes mistakes, and making you feel good afterwards were considered as the more central attributes of forgiveness.

Mullet, Girard, and Bakhshi (2004) examined the extent to which lay people from a large community sample ( $N = 1029$ ) agree with conceptualizations of forgiveness encountered in the literature, notably that (a) forgiveness supposes the replacement of negative emotions towards the offender by positive emotions, (b) forgiveness is a process that can only take place between an offender and offended who know one another, (c) forgiveness is not a process that devalues the forgiven, and (d) forgiveness is a process that encourages the forgiven to behave better in the future. Through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, four robust conceptualization factors that were largely similar to the ones found in Denton and Martin (1998) study were identified: Change of heart (e.g., "To forgive someone who has done you wrong necessarily means to start feeling affection toward him again"), Broad process that is not limited to the victim-offender dyad (e.g., "You can forgive the person responsible for an institution which has done you wrong (the state, the church, an association)"), Encourages moral behavior (e.g., "To forgive someone who has done you wrong necessarily means to lead her to accept her wrongs"), and Immoral behavior (e.g., "To forgive someone who has done you wrong necessarily means to approve of what he has done to you"). Overall, a minority of the participants agreed with the ideas that forgiving supposes regaining affection or sympathy towards the offender or that forgiveness can encourage the offender's repentance, about half the participants agreed with the ideas that the forgiver can be someone other than the offended (but with a close relation-

ship to the offended) and that the forgiven can be an unknown offender or an abstract institution, and most participants disagreed with the idea that forgiveness is immoral. This four factor structure has proven to have cross-cultural value. The same factors have been evidenced in a sample of Congolese adults (Kadima Kadiangandu, Gauché, Vinsonneau, & Mullet, 2007), in a sample of Latin American adults (Bagnulo, Muñoz Sastre, & Mullet, 2009), and in a sample of Hindus (Tripathi & Mullet, 2009).

### 1.2. To what extent are conceptualizations of forgiveness and forgivingness associated?

As we wanted to measure the relationships between conceptualizations of forgiveness and forgivingness, we selected two measures of forgivingness – the Forgiveness Likelihood Scale (FLS) and the Forgivingness questionnaire – and one measure of conceptualizations that offers reliable scales: the conceptualization of forgiveness scale. The FLS (Rye et al., 2001) was developed as part of a study about the breaking of romantic relationships. It comprises ten scenarios involving hypothetical wrongdoing, and participants are instructed to indicate the extent to which they would forgive in each case. This measure has proved to have cross-cultural generality (Neto, Ferreira, & Pinto, 2007a).

The forgivingness questionnaire (Mullet et al., 2003) was based on common views regarding the forgiveness process that were synthesized by Worthington and Wade (1999); see also Wade & Worthington, 2003; Worthington, 2006). This comprises three scales. The Lasting Resentment scale contains items expressing the victim's tendency to hold negative emotions, negative cognitions, and exhibiting avoidance behaviors towards the offender, even in the presence of positive circumstances (e.g., I feel unable to forgive even if the offender has apologized). This scale, which expresses basic physiological reactions to the harmful situation, is the one that is usually the more strongly correlated with demographic characteristics and personality (Neto, 2007).

The sensitivity to circumstances scale contains items expressing the victim's ability to analyze the pro and cons of harmful situations, and to build on the many circumstances of these situations for deciding whether to forgive or not to forgive the offender (e.g., I feel it easier to forgive once the consequences of the harm have been cancelled). Sensitivity to circumstances has been shown to be at least partly a reflection of one's experience of forgiveness in the family (Mullet, Rivière, & Muñoz Sastre, 2006). It can be considered as representing the "earthly" aspect of forgiveness, one that has no relationship to religious involvement (Akl & Mullet, 2007).

Finally, the unconditional forgiveness scale contains items expressing the victim's tendency to harbor positive attitudes towards the offender even in the absence of positive circumstances (e.g., I can easily forgive even when the consequences of the harm were serious). Willingness to forgive has been shown to be essentially a reflection of one's conceptualization of ideal forgiveness (or God's forgiveness). It can be viewed as the product of a type of personal, spiritual growth that may be relatively independent of external influences. It is strongly correlated with the FLS (Neto et al., 2007a). This three-factor model has been shown to be cross-culturally robust (Paz, Neto, & Mullet, 2007, 2008; Suwarton-o, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007).

### 1.3. Hypotheses

As one of the main reasons for forgiving an offender is the desire to put an end to the more or less painful (as well as energy-consuming) resentment state in which one may have felt trapped since the offense, it was hypothesized that the belief that forgiveness decreases negative feelings and increases positive feelings towards

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