Forgiveness is not always divine: When expressing forgiveness makes others avoid you

Gabrielle S. Adams *, Xi Zou, M. Ena Inesi, Madan M. Pillutla

Organisational Behaviour, London Business School, United Kingdom

**A R T I C L E   I N F O**

Article history:
Received 10 July 2013
Accepted 5 October 2014
Available online 9 December 2014
Accepted by Francesca Gino

Keywords:
Forgive
Self-righteous
Moral superiority
Transgression
Conflict repair

**A B S T R A C T**

Organizational scholars have recently become interested in forgiveness as a way to resolve workplace conflicts and repair relationships. We question the assumption that forgiveness always has these relational benefits. In three studies we investigated participants’ responses to people who expressed forgiveness of them versus those who did not. We found that when the ostensible transgressor did not believe he or she had committed a wrongdoing, expressing forgiveness damaged the relationship relative to a control condition. This effect occurred when participants were made to believe that a real person had forgiven them (Studies 1 and 2) and when they imagined a co-worker had forgiven them (Study 3). Furthermore, in the absence of wrongdoing, participants’ perceptions of the forgiver as self-righteous mediated the effect of forgiveness on avoidance of forgivers (Studies 2 and 3). We discuss implications for conflict management.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Introduction**

Forgiveness is frequently touted as a socially desirable and even morally correct response to harming another person. This may be because it yields both intrapersonal and relational benefits. Not only does it provide physical, emotional, cognitive, and relational benefits for the forgiver (e.g. Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Goodstein & Aquino, 2010; Hannon, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2012), it also serves to repair relationships damaged by conflict. After forgiveness, both transgressors and victims express a greater desire to stay in the relationship (Katz, Street, & Arias, 1997), victims are more likely to participate in favor exchanges with their transgressor (Kelln & Ellard, 1999), and inter-employee conflict in organizations is more likely to be resolved (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

At the same time, some researchers have theorized that forgiveness can damage relationships (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). Oscar Wilde’s insightful observation—“Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much”—suggests that such expressions may not always be well-received by those being forgiven. For example, imagine that you stop a colleague in the hallway one day at work and state that you forgive her for taking credit for your project idea in a recent meeting. Although she has a vague memory of meeting with you to discuss the project, she believes that she thought of the idea by herself. In situations such as this, what are the consequences of your expression of forgiveness for your relationship with this co-worker?

In the current research, we investigate responses to forgiveness from the perspective of the ostensible transgressor. Specifically, we look at the circumstances under which expressed forgiveness has negative consequences for relationships. We theorize that when an individual doubts whether they have committed a transgression, the expression of forgiveness has the potential to ‘backfire’ by making the forgiver appear morally self-righteous. Thus, instead of improving the relationship, expressing forgiveness under these circumstances may actually lead to the relationship’s deterioration.

**Expressed forgiveness and relationships**

Forgiveness has been defined from the perspective of the forgiver as “an individual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context” (McCullough, Root, Tabak, & Witvliet, 2009, p. 9). 1 Expressing

---

1 We focus on interpersonal forgiveness—forgiveness of an offender by a person who has been wronged—rather than forgiveness of or by groups (e.g. McLernon, Cairns, Hewstone, & Smith, 2004), third-party forgiveness (e.g. Green, Burnette, & Davis, 2008), or self-forgiveness (e.g. Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005).
forgiveness enables forgivers to move past a conflict toward relationship repair (for reviews, see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001). As a response to injustice, it can free people from the inner turmoil that comes from harboring grudges and helps them to let go of any emotional injury that they have sustained (Richards, 1988). Much research has investigated these and other ways in which victims decide to forgive and its impact on and benefits for the forgiver (e.g. Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Although researchers have examined the victim’s experience of forgiveness, few have examined how people react to its expression (see Finkel, Rusbelt, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002, who distinguish between interpersonal/experienced and interpersonal forgiveness). Because the victim’s internal experience of forgiveness is often opaque to the transgressor, we focus on expressed forgiveness.

Interpersonal transgressions create an imbalance in resources: the victim is left with worse outcomes than the transgressor. Thus, transgressors are indebted to victims because they have caused harm or injury and thus owe them symbolic or financial compensation or restitution (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). Interpersonal forgiveness brings balance to the exchange by signaling that the forgiver is willing to erase the debt, thus restoring the relationship to its original equilibrium (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). Indeed, forgiveness expressions imply that the forgiving downplays or relinquishes claims to restitution or desires for punishment (Exline et al., 2003), thereby allowing the relationship to be repaired. One notable empirical study by Kelln and Ellard (1999) shows that forgiveness benefits relationships: participants who were inconvenienced others because he was tending to a sick child. Thus, there is high potential for disagreement about the transgressor’s ostensible blameworthiness for wrongdoing. This suggests that forgiveness may sometimes be offered to individuals who perceive themselves to have done wrong as well as to those who do not.

Forgiveness conveys very different messages when transgressors perceive themselves to have committed a wrongdoing compared to when they do not. When transgressors perceive themselves to be responsible for wrongdoing, forgiveness does not convey any additional information beyond what they previously knew. However, if forgiveness is expressed when people believe they have not done anything wrong, as is sometimes the case (Exline et al., 2003), it may communicate that the forgiver thinks the recipient has committed a transgression. Thus, such messages inform the person being forgiven about the forgiver’s perception of them. Instead of leading to relationship repair, it may lead the recipient of forgiveness to avoid the forgiver. Why? We argue that under such circumstances, those who are forgiven may attribute the offer of forgiveness to be due to a flaw in the forgivers’ character—in this case, self-righteousness.

Perceived wrongdoing moderates the relational benefits of expressed forgiveness

When transgressions occur, the involved parties may have different interpretations of the event (e.g. Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), thus leading to disagreement about whether the transgressor has committed a wrongdoing. For example, they may disagree about whether the event constitutes a wrongdoing: one party may blame the other while the accused party denies responsibility. Even if people agree that a wrongdoing has occurred, they may differ in how serious they think it is; offenders may perceive their transgressions to be less serious than victims do (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). They may also disagree about the mitigating factors that could put the transgression in perspective—for example, a colleague may have missed an important deadline that inconvenienced others because he was tending to a sick child. Thus, there is high potential for disagreement about the transgressor’s ostensible blameworthiness for wrongdoing. This suggests that forgiveness may sometimes be offered to individuals who perceive themselves to have done wrong as well as to those who do not.

Forgiveness conveys very different messages when transgressors perceive themselves to have committed a wrongdoing compared to when they do not. When transgressors perceive themselves to be responsible for wrongdoing, forgiveness does not convey any additional information beyond what they previously knew. However, if forgiveness is expressed when people believe they have not done anything wrong, as is sometimes the case (Exline et al., 2003), it may communicate that the forgiver thinks the recipient has committed a transgression. Thus, such messages inform the person being forgiven about the forgiver’s perception of them. Instead of leading to relationship repair, it may lead the recipient of forgiveness to avoid the forgiver. Why? We argue that under such circumstances, those who are forgiven may attribute the offer of forgiveness to be due to a flaw in the forgivers’ character—in this case, self-righteousness.

Self-righteousness

We define perceived self-righteousness as the perceivers belief that the forgiver erroneously views him or herself as morally superior to them. This is a definition that is close to Falbo and Belk’s (1985) measure of self-righteousness as the “conviction that one’s behaviors or beliefs are correct” and similar to the dictionary definition: “having or characterized by a certainty, especially an unfounded one, that one is totally correct or morally superior” (oxforddictionaries.com). Perceived self-righteousness, as we have conceptualized it, is an inference about what the target believes about his/her morality relative to the perceiver.
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات