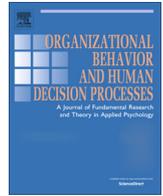




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## Forgiveness is not always divine: When expressing forgiveness makes others avoid you



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

Organisational Behaviour, London Business School, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

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.

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### 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 coworker?

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).<sup>1</sup> Expressing

\* Corresponding author at: London Business School, Regent's Park, London NW1 4SA, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: [gadams@london.edu](mailto:gadams@london.edu) (G.S. Adams).

<sup>1</sup> 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, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002, who distinguish between intrapersonal/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 forgiver 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 led to believe they had broken a piece of laboratory equipment were more likely to comply with a researcher's request to deliver envelopes when the researcher preemptively offered forgiveness instead of enacting retribution.

The finding that forgiveness repairs interpersonal relationships following transgressions might lead to the assumption that forgiveness invariably benefits relationships, or to the conclusion that one should always forgive transgressions. Some pilot data we collected confirms this assumption: we asked 103 participants on mTurk (65 men, 36 women, 2 unreported;  $M_{age} = 31.2$ ) how much there is a moral mandate to express forgiveness ("People should express forgiveness when they believe they have been wronged" and "If people believe they have been wronged, the morally correct response is to express forgiveness") (1–7 strongly disagree/agree). We created a composite of these items, and found that 64.4% agreed (were above the midpoint of 4) that expressing forgiveness is a morally correct response to being wronged. Thus, people seem to agree that the correct response to victimization is forgiveness.

However, under some circumstances, expressing forgiveness might exacerbate rather than restore the imbalance in the relationship that the transgression created. We explore how an individual's belief about his or her own wrongdoing (or lack thereof) alters the positive effects of expressed forgiveness on relationships. We suggest that people's reactions to being forgiven depend on whether they believe they have committed a wrongdoing, and we propose that individuals will react negatively if they doubt that they are guilty of wrongdoing. Specifically, we explore the implications of forgiveness in the absence of perceived wrongdoing for avoidance intentions and behavior.

Our interest in avoidance serves as a counterpoint to research showing that forgiveness impacts desires to repair relationships after transgressions. Much of this research assumes that individuals seek to maintain relationships and that transgressions can be dealt with by seeking and receiving forgiveness or exacting revenge. For transgressors, there cannot be a desire

to seek revenge, as there is nothing for them to avenge. Instead, they may seek to avoid the (alleged) victim or withdraw from the relationship. We study this avoidance behavior as the primary outcome of interest, and indeed, some research points to the relevance of this outcome, showing that transgressors sometimes withdraw from relationships due to self-protective motivations (Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, & Brown, 2012; Schmader & Lickel, 2006). A unilateral expression of forgiveness might exacerbate such tendencies. The study of avoidance (as opposed to revenge) is a natural consequence of our central research question that makes the transgressor (rather than the victim) the focal actor.

### 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 perceiver's 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.

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