

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LET GO?

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE
FACILITATING & OBSTRUCTING FACTORS
OF FORGIVENESS –**

THE THERAPIST’S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The phenomenon of forgiveness, initially neglected by psychotherapists due to its religious connotation, is finding increasing recognition as a transformative process involving the injured party in a profound way.

This thesis is based on therapists’ experiences with clients who have been wounded. However, its content may be of relevance also for those who are struggling to forgive as well as those who are in a position to help others undergoing this process.

Fifteen practitioners, most of whom are highly experienced, from eleven different countries on four different continents, have shared their observations and experiences by filling in an e-mail administered in-depth questionnaire.

The topic has been approached with the following study objectives:

the nature of forgiveness, intrapersonal and interpersonal factors affecting forgiveness, and the role of the therapist in the client’s process of letting go.

A qualitative research design has been applied for the data analysis, to identify the major themes of each research question, representing the facilitating and obstructing conditions relevant for forgiveness.

Since the danger of premature forgiveness emerged as a recurrent concern, a ‘forgiveness chart’ has been developed, assigning the analysed data to relevant categories:

A reference tool designed to support a genuine process of letting go.

Keywords: Forgiveness and psychotherapy, premature forgiveness
facilitating and obstructing factors of forgiveness

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Forgiveness - A human Phenomenon in the War-zone Between Religion and Psychotherapy

Forgiveness is one of the key concerns in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (Green 2004; Wade & Worthington, 2005; Macaskill, 2005a), a tradition that has strongly shaped our Western culture. It is this very culture that brought forth the ‘fathers of psychotherapy’, authorities like Freud, Jung, Adler, Reich, to name out a few. Psychotherapy was then a revolutionary new approach to the human mind, which traditionally had been under the care of religious leaders, whose tools were spiritual power, religious based morality and the authority to forgive wrongdoings.

The transition initiated by psychoanalysis is one from a religious to a secular age, or in other words

‘a transition from a cultural preoccupation with sin to a preoccupation with the ‘psychological’ or the ‘therapeutic’.’ (Falby, 2003:251)

Gellner characterizes psychoanalysis as a secularized version of Christianity (Gellner, 1993, in Falby, 2003).

In the process of establishing their own identity and focusing on the analysis of observable phenomena (McCullough et al., 2000), the innovators of psychotherapy tried to distance themselves from nebulous spiritual themes, and subsequently created their own vocabulary, avoiding terms with clear religious connotations. Gorsuch (1988, in McCullough et al., 2000) talks about the social

sciences' aversion to religious matters in this context. Sells and Hargreave (1998, in Macaskill, 2005b) suggest that an 'anti-forgiveness bias' in psychological literature built up due to the historically religious association of forgiveness.

Sigmund Freud tried to circumscribe what can be regarded as religious and spiritual, clearly polarizing psychoanalysis and religion (Simmonds, 2006).

Jung insisted on separating psychotherapy and religion, supporting 'the principle of the exclusion of the transcendent in psychotherapy' (Crossley & Salter, 2005). No wonder the term 'forgiveness', so widely used in the Christian context, is hardly ever found in the mainstream psychotherapeutic models (McCullough et al., 2000).

With a number of euphemisms like 'letting go', 'acceptance', 'reconciliation' (Ransley & Spy, 2004 a), 'putting it behind me and move on' (Ransley, 2004), 'working through' (Van Noort, 2003), 'interpersonal difficulties being resolved', 'coming to terms with the past' (Macaskill, 2005b), therapists have tried to protect clients from an unhealthy moral pressure, which traditional religious expressions might evoke in them, as they are often associated with power and the experience of its misuse (Ransley, 2004). Thus religious terms are frequently perceived as an impediment to the psychotherapist's effort to create a non-judgmental atmosphere in order to support the natural unfolding of the client's personal issues and his/her individual pace in moving through different therapeutic stages.

Time has passed and psychotherapy is recognized and well established, while according to the 'secularization thesis' (Falby, 2003), religion has declined. It might be partially this power-shift that allows contemporary therapists and counsellors to explore some of the initial taboo-zones, one of them being 'forgiveness'.

The first documented considerations of forgiveness and its relevance for mental health can be found in the early 1930s. Piaget and Behn (1932, in McCullough et al., 2000) discussed how the ability to forgive was linked to the development of moral judgment. In 1945 Litwinski took the issue further by attempting to

describe the 'affective structure of the capacity for interpersonal forgiving.' (McCullough et al., 2000:4).

As 'forgiveness' is increasingly showing up in books and professional journals (DiBlasio, 2000) since the 1980s, its popularity is clearly on the rise (McCullough et al., 2000).

RESEARCH RATIONALE

"Without exception, forgiveness is reported...as restoring relationships and healing inner emotional wounds." (DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993, in Konstam et al., 2002:56)

Both my experiences as a counsellor and as a client have led me to the conclusion that letting go of resentments is crucial for personal growth and healing to take place. Having read through considerable psychotherapy- and counselling standard literature, I started questioning why I rarely came across the term 'forgiveness' and how psychotherapy could possibly avoid such a crucial human phenomenon.

William West (2001: 416) confirms my observations when he talks about the 'lack of recognition of the key role of forgiveness in psychological healing' as being a major limitation in psychotherapy and counselling.

Beck (1995, in Macaskill, 2005b) and Ellis and Dryden (1997, in Macaskill, 2005b) believe that virtually all of human disturbance is the result of blaming others or self for painful occurrences, which, again, puts 'the concept of forgiveness...at the core of psychotherapeutic endeavour.' (Macaskill, 2005b:26)

Hope (1987, in DiBlasio, 2000) portrays forgiveness as 'a key part of psychological healing', and Christodoulidi (2005:142) perceives it as an 'essential ingredient of any personal journey towards self-awareness and healing.'

It was this discrepancy between my personal observations of the effects of genuine forgiveness and my impression of how little it has been regarded in professional literature that sparked my interest and thus initiated this study.

Freedman et al. (2005) suggest that both victims as well as their counsellors, need to get a better understanding of the nature of forgiveness and of *how* to forgive.

What conditions are required for forgiveness to be possible and which ones are hindering? - This is the main focus of this study.

Demystification of forgiveness as a predominately religious phenomenon appears to be vital for it to continue to claim its place amongst our commonly established relational tools.

'It is, generally, not [the clients'] biblical faith that brings them to the theme of forgiveness, but their need to be at one with themselves and not feel judged by themselves or others.' (Spy, 2004:33)

METHOD

The study at hand is largely rooted in the qualitative paradigm, exploratory in nature, based on interpretivist assumptions and follows phenomenological principles.

Some of my open-ended questions are introduced by a yes-no option, which consequently leads to a quantitative element in my study as well.

Participants

By virtue of their knowledge, experience and developed awareness, therapists and counsellors are in the advantageous position of witnessing and accompanying clients on a regular basis, as they navigate their path to forgiveness; this gives them a wealth of experience and insight on the subject, making them valuable study-participants.

Out of 20 questionnaires 15 have been returned, coming from England, Germany, Austria, Israel, South Africa, Kenya and the Philippines, or from expatriates living in Kenya (my present country of residence), representing America, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Netherlands and Kenya.

The fact that all, bar one, of the respondents have a minimum of 5 years, most in fact more than 10 years of professional experience, supports the reliability of this study, as they can be considered experts in their field.

Looking at their theoretical backgrounds, psychodynamic and humanistic approaches have been equally represented, while just one participant predominantly employs the tools of CBT, a practice that otherwise is mentioned only in combination with psychodynamic therapy.

Research Tools

The process moved through two preliminary stages, where open-ended interview and structured interviews were used.

The main phase was carried out through an email-administered in-depth questionnaire, using voluntary, snowball as well as convenience sampling techniques.

The questions were grouped under the following study-objectives:

- What does the process of forgiveness involve?
- What are the intrapersonal factors that affect the process of forgiveness?
- What are the interpersonal factors that affect the process of forgiveness?
- What is the role of the therapist in the process of forgiveness?

Analysis

Around 230 responses to open-ended questions have been analysed following the sociological tradition, which treats text as 'a window into human experience' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:769), not as an object of analysis itself.

The analysis, inductive in nature, is a result of immersing into the data, categorizing the extracted themes, reducing these phenomenologically, and finally interpreting the condensed outcome (McLeod, 1994).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Operational Definition

'Forgiveness is an inner process by which the person who has been injured is letting go of the anger, resentment, and fear felt and does not wish for revenge.' (Author's own, following Denton & Martin, 1998)

Summary of the Findings

Forgiveness is a process of pro-social transformation, involving the victim's cognition, emotion, and behaviour. It unfolds in phases, similar to those of grief and is completed with the construction of a cohesive life-narrative that provides new meaning.

Most respondents understand that forgiveness requires the victim's conscious choice in order to be achieved, but it has also been described as being the natural result of successful therapy.

The victim's empathy, self-strength, maturity, naivety, relationally oriented disposition, and transpersonal awareness have been pointed out as being forgiveness facilitating personality traits, while narcissism, paranoid, rigid or compulsive disorders, emotional imbalance appear to be hindering to the process.

An understanding of the causal factors of an offence has generally proved to be supportive of forgiveness, in that it may lead to the victim's empathy with the wrongdoer. If it reveals the offender's malicious intentions, however, it may cause additional trauma and aggravate the process of letting go.

The role of the offender's attitude is yet another significant factor in the client's transformative process: If the perpetrator genuinely repents, accepts responsibility for the inflicted hurt, and makes him/herself available to the victim if requested, forgiveness is more likely to happen. Conversely, if the offender does not show signs of remorse, letting go could only be a unilateral process, known for its effortful psychological challenges; in this case communication with the wrongdoer would be contraindicated.

Both the religious and the socio-cultural climate strongly determine the injured party's attitude towards forgiveness: by valuing forgiveness, acknowledging the

hurt, and providing sufficient safety for the victim, the environment can create a conducive atmosphere for him/her to genuinely let go.

Individuals with a spiritual orientation that appreciates forgiveness have been observed to be better equipped for coping with the challenges of forgiveness as their faith offers orientation, moral support and an additional source of strength. Conversely forgiveness is likely to be hindered in an atmosphere of revenge or where there are cultural taboos related to the offence.

Counsellors choose different approaches in their role of supporting the client's process of forgiveness:

Some take the role of a companion, aiming at a safe and non-invasive stance, whilst accompanying the client on his/her individual journey;

Others prefer the role of a guide, offering knowledge, direction, and support with various interventions.

Non-forgiveness and feelings of revenge may also play a crucial part in the victim's recovery, as they can help to restore his/her self-respect and rearrange the power-balance before the gift of forgiveness can genuinely be granted.

Overall Concern:

Genuine versus Premature Forgiveness

In all the wealth of themes arising from this study, the most prominent concern both of research participants and within the existing literature appears to be that of the danger of premature forgiveness, also known as pseudo- or fake forgiveness.

Due to the unquestionable benefits of genuine forgiveness and the attraction of its spiritual/religious reward, coupled with a general lack of understanding of the demands of its psychological process, counsellors, educators and religious leaders are at risk of promoting forgiveness prematurely (West, 2001; Lamb, 2002b; Holmgren, 2002; Puka, 2002).

'Forgiveness is only properly in place where resentment is initially properly in place.' (Murphy, 1982; in Neu, 2002:19)

The danger of pseudo forgiveness derives from 'forgiving' without undergoing the essential psychological process. Low self-esteem expressed as a sense of inferiority towards the offender, the fear of losing a valued relationship by facing a painful reality, religious duty and social pressure are common conditions conducive to fake forgiveness. (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Patton, 2000)

As a result, unacknowledged feelings of hurt and anger in particular, may emerge in subtler ways later on and cause damage to the individual such as loss of self-respect, chronic anger, and a continuation of an oppressive environment. Furthermore it is likely to jeopardize valued relationships (Lamb, 2002b).

A distinction between genuine- and fake-forgiveness can be made by looking at the emotional motive behind it: if forgiveness is based on anxiety, fear or other inhibitions (Haaken, 2002) then it is most likely to be premature, as these feelings might cause the client to deny the full reality of the offence and thus prevent him/her undergoing the process of transformation, which forgiveness requires (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; McCullough et al., 2000; Denham et al., 2005; Worthington, 2005b;)

On the basis of the study results, a 'Forgiveness-chart' has been worked out, containing the main categories relevant to 'forgiveness of the other' and the respective factors that can either promote, or obstruct, the process.

It could be used as a check-list, highlighting points that need to be considered in our task of supporting victims through the transformative process of genuine forgiveness and raising their awareness of potential pitfalls. Experience and empathic understanding are required to uncover which of the listed factors are of relevance in any given case.

Forgiveness-chart: Facilitating and Obstructing Factors of Forgiveness

Major categories involved	Facilitating Factors	Obstructing Factors
The Victim's Current Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acknowledges reality of offence ▪ Acknowledges own contribution to offence ▪ Acknowledges shared humanness with offender ▪ Wants to move on ▪ Chooses to forgive ▪ Seeks support ▪ Regains self-strength 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Denies extent of the offence ○ Externalises causes ○ Stuck in anger and resentment ○ Compulsive revenge fantasies ○ Continued exposure to harmful situation ○ Oppressive environment ○ Surrenders to role as victim
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compassionate ▪ Self-strength ▪ Mature + self-reflective ▪ Naive/ignorant ▪ Good relational skills ▪ Transpersonal awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Narcissistic ○ Paranoid ○ Perfectionist/rigid ○ Compulsive disorders ○ Emotionally unbalanced
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understands nature and process of forgiveness ▪ Perceives costs of non-forgiveness higher than its gain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Understands forgiveness as a concession to the offender ○ Uses non-forgiveness as revenge strategy
The Offence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Part of the past ▪ Level of hurt is manageable ▪ Causal factors comprehensible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Still ongoing ○ Level of hurt is overwhelming ○ Causal factors incomprehensible ○ Committed during childhood or adolescence
The Offender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sincerely repentant ▪ Takes responsibility for offence ▪ Is available to victim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Intentionally malicious ○ Still threatening ○ Unavailable for client ○ In a position of power over client
Socio-cultural/religious Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Values forgiveness ▪ Acknowledges victim's hurt ▪ Provides safety for victim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Revenge is inbuilt in the culture ○ Offence is taboo ○ Pressurizes the victim to forgive
Counsellor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Companion: safe presence with minimal intrusion ▪ Guide: offers knowledge and experience ▪ Supports process with interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Directive style ○ Suggests forgiveness prematurely ○ Imposes own values on client

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

In this section the potential implications of the findings will be highlighted following the categories of the chart.

Implications for Victims

It appears to be critically important for anyone considering forgiveness to have an understanding of its nature, its transformative character, its different phases and its emotional strains. Armed with this knowledge, victims are more likely to accept the necessary time and energy involved in the process, without exerting moral pressure on the self or allowing others to do the same. Acknowledging the possible values of non-forgiveness in certain circumstances, and comprehending what it takes to let go, is likely to reduce the risk of fake-forgiveness and prepares the victim to cope with the challenges ahead.

Implications for remorseful Offenders

For sincerely repentant offenders who look for ways to support the victim's recovery, the understanding of the process of forgiveness might be indispensable:

Despite of their genuine feelings of remorse they need to face the facts that the victim needs time and support to recover and that forgiveness is a free choice the injured person might or might not opt to make. If the offender is interested in the victim's well being, he/she will seek to avoid anything that could lead to premature forgiveness and further harm.

The availability of the offender, and his readiness to communicate apologies, feelings of remorse and compassion to the injured person, are listed amongst the forgiveness-facilitating factors. However, these only apply if the victim is emotionally ready to hear them.

Implications for the Victim's Socio-cultural / Religious Environment

Implications for the Victim's Community

The distress caused by a traumatic experience can bring the worst out in a person. In view of this emotional strain the victim's significant others might understandably push towards a quick fix: the long standing 'forgive and forget'-solution might be encouraged, particularly if forgiveness is valued by the community.

The awareness of both the possible damage resulting from premature forgiveness, and the considerable challenge of genuinely letting go, is invaluable for all those who are striving for the profound recovery and wellbeing of their afflicted member.

Due to the transformative nature of genuine forgiveness, the harmed person may not be the same after having completed the process. Systemic theory talks about the phenomenon of 'circular reciprocity' (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004), meaning that members of a community are constantly interrelating and influencing each other. The community will therefore be challenged to integrate the changes of the recovering person and allow itself to be changed.

Whether or not a society is flexible enough to accommodate its transformed member will decide the latter's future role in the society, be that more integrated or more alienated.

Implications for Pastoral Workers

It has been repeatedly emphasized that Christians are particularly prone to forgiving too quickly due to the following reasons:

The weight forgiveness is given in the Christian tradition, plus the lack of knowledge about its inherent psychological requirements. Although executed with best intentions, the process is not completed (and may not even have started!) and thus, instead of the growth-enhancing transformation, the victim may be faced with lower self-esteem, damaged self-respect and a raised level of anxiety around offence and offender (Holmgren, 2002; Puka, 2002). There is nothing liberating for the victim in premature forgiveness except for the superficial

restoration of peace. Creating awareness about its danger as well as elucidating the preconditions of genuine forgiveness seems therefore to be of some urgency within these religious settings.

Implications for Counsellors

The main aim of a counsellor when working with clients suffering from a traumatic experience is to support them to the best of his/her ability to move towards inner healing. In view of the negative implications premature forgiveness is considered to have, the therapist needs to insure a non-judgmental atmosphere and put aside his/her own personal position on forgiveness and non-forgiveness so that the danger of coercion is reduced to a minimum.

In the practitioner's effort to enhance a victim's ability to handle the offence, the therapist may need to clarify a client's misguided perception of what forgiveness entails and should therefore strive to allocate non-forgiveness to its justified place amongst the victim's options.

The forgiveness-chart may provide a guiding structure for emotional work with a client who wants to forgive, possibly supported by carefully chosen interventions to help the person through the process.

Throughout my study I observed two positions participating therapists tended take relating to the issue of forgiveness:

There are those who, by virtue of their knowledge and experience, were inclined to be in favour of the more 'hands-on' function of a coach or guide;

On the other hand, there are counsellors who try to remain, as much as possible, a marginal presence in the client's therapeutic endeavour, as their aim is to promote the client's innate sense of direction, which they avoid impeding or endangering by any suggestions or interventions. They trust that genuine forgiveness or non-forgiveness will present itself as a natural result of a successful therapeutic process.

As any given situation is unique, with a number of variables, it would not be sensible to ascribe one approach as being favourable to another. The decisive factors will always be the client's individuality and his/her stage in the process.

One and the same person might get much out of a talk on forgiveness in one session and a quiet audience in the subsequent ones.

It remains subject to the practitioner's ability to enter the client's inner world and decide accordingly.

Implications for Counselling Training

Forgiveness appears to have found its place within psychotherapy and counselling. However, due to its difficult history, which is still alive in the standard literature, particular attention needs to be drawn to it during counselling training.

According to my research, the following could be a trainer's challenges in addressing forgiveness:

- To convey forgiveness as a general human phenomenon rather than a religious one, as an expression of personal healing, transformation and growth, not as a morally pressurized duty
- To create awareness about the nature and process of forgiveness
- To look at the distinguishing features of genuine as opposed to premature forgiveness and its potential impact on the client
- To create understanding for the benefits and costs of forgiveness and also of non-forgiveness
- To look for possible circumscriptions and euphemisms of the phenomenon in various traditional therapeutic approaches to support its general validity
- To encourage the students' awareness of their personal position towards forgiveness and the importance of being able to 'bracket it off' during the sessions, to avoid unwitting coercion.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Forgiveness being a natural and somewhat 'fuzzy' concept is different from logical concepts which scientific researchers traditionally rely upon. Natural concepts are more probabilistic in nature (Prager, 1995) and add to the challenges of a researcher, in that definitions and thus clarity are more difficult to attain.

There is a vast and complex range of issues around the topic of forgiveness, but the time and resources allocated to this study has prohibited me from attending to all of them.

I have not addressed the interconnectedness between 'forgiveness of the other' – 'forgiveness of self' or 'seeking of forgiveness' (Enright, 1996, in West, 2001), nor have I covered the nature & function of non-forgiveness and revenge, which, however, has been addressed by several respondents.

My questionnaire also did not encourage respondents to specify the type of injury requiring forgiveness nor the background in which the injury occurred, both of which might affect the victim's process of forgiveness;

'Minor violations, insults, and more serious breaches of trust as well as extreme forms of human cruelty' (Haaken, 2002:180) have not been separately looked at, something which many other writers do in view of the particular challenges for the victim (Lamb, 2002a).

Although the respondents have been asked about their theoretical background, its influence on forgiveness work has not been further explored.

Methodologically, the weak spot in this study is the emailed questionnaire, because of 'the possibility that participants may not have been who they claimed to have been.' (James & Busher, 2006: 416)

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

In the course of this research work the following areas emerged as critical research questions:

- An Investigation into the facilitating & obstructing Factors of Forgiveness – the Client’s Perspective
- How does the Nature of the Offence impact on the Process of Forgiveness?
- “Your Weakness makes me suffer”: Forgiveness in ongoing Relationships. How is it possible?
- What is the Impact of the Age-factor on a Person’s Inclination to forgive?
- How does the Therapists’ theoretical Orientation influence their Approach to Forgiveness?
- Are the Offences experienced during Childhood and Adolescence different from those in Adult Life with regard to the Process of Forgiveness?
- Forgiveness versus mere Acceptance of the Offence. What is the Difference?
- Forgiveness in the Absence of the Victim’s Empathy with the Offender. How can it happen?
- Forgiveness in individualistic Societies versus Forgiveness in collectivistic Societies. How does the Community World-view influence the Individual’s Process of Forgiveness?
- Non-forgiveness and inner Peace – can they co-exist in one Person?
- Prevention of premature Forgiveness in religious Settings. How to go about it?
- Can negative Emotions have a positive Effect? An Exploration of the Role of vengeful Feelings in the Process of Forgiveness.
- Forgiveness as an intrapersonal Process. An Investigation into the Challenges of unilateral Forgiveness.
- How does a Victim’s spiritual Orientation impact on the Process of Forgiveness?

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