Suffering Need Not Beget Suffering: Why We Forgive

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Highlights

- Examines intergroup forgiveness as a potential conflict resolution strategy

- Offers conceptual clarity based on integrating recent research insights

- Showcases a set of psychological interventions which foster intergroup forgiveness

- Forgiveness can reduce enmity, but may conflict with the pursuit of justice

Abstract

The concept of intergroup forgiveness has gained a research momentum. Here, I examine its utility as a viable conflict resolution strategy. After advancing a more refined definition of intergroup forgiveness than had been previously proposed by researchers, I review research testing the efficacy of social psychological interventions aimed at fostering forgiveness between historical as well as ongoing adversarial groups. While several interventions based on social identity processes and the re-categorization of the victimhood category seem to offer potential promise for increasing forgiveness, some research also highlights that forgiveness may come at the cost of suppressing motivation to seek justice and demand restitution. The conclusion reminds that while forgiveness is not a panacea for resolving intergroup conflict, it may offer one of the rare strategies for curtailing the impulse for revenge and thus reducing conflict escalation.

Suffering Need Not Beget Suffering: Why We Forgive

Perhaps one of the most cogent arguments for why adversarial groups consider, or ought to consider, forgiveness as a strategy to resolve conflict is because forgiveness can prevent each group from becoming the new victimizer [1**, 2]. As such, forgiveness can end the seemingly hard to disrupt cycle of revenge. The utility of forgiveness further becomes apparent when considering the difficulty of how to correct a wrong accurately and fairly [3]. In fact, research has shown that often punitive measures to rectify a wrong are perceived as too lenient by victims and too severe by perpetrators [4, 5]. Psychology has discovered the concept of intergroup forgiveness on the back of scholars' efforts who have been studying forgiveness at the interpersonal level [6, 7]. Additionally, interest in intergroup forgiveness has also increased due to major world events, such as the fall of the totalitarian regimes in South Africa, Chile, and Eastern Europe, and continued violent conflicts (e.g., in the Middle East). Arguably, because the traditional justice system is limited in dealing with the consequences of mass violence involving hundreds of thousands of perpetrators and even a larger number of victims, new forms of justice-seeking commissions and institutions have shone light on forgiveness as a viable strategy to address trauma, loss, and fractured intergroup relations. It is, for example, contended that however problematic the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa may have been, forgiveness may have served as a rare strategy to prevent civil war in the region [8]. This was primarily achieved by the government's approach to using the commission to facilitate the exchange of truth about the injustices committed during the Apartheid regime in return for the victims's forgiveness [9].

Conceptual Understanding of Intergroup Forgiveness

Given the novelty of intergroup forgiveness, a definitive conceptualization of it is still lacking. Overall, one can observe that psychologists have defined intergroup forgiveness by

way of highlighting its affective and motivational components. To illustrate, intergroup forgiveness has been conceptualized as the tendency to refrain from assigning guilt to a perpetrator group [10**], leave behind past grievances and let go of grudges [11], and to suppress the motivation to retaliate against a violent perpetrator group [12]. While these attempts have been useful to advance research, perhaps intergroup forgiveness would benefit from a more precise definition. Accordingly, intergroup forgiveness can be viewed as a conscious decision that is determined by multiple factors, namely: (a) the extent to which groups are able to regulate their negative emotions toward each other [13]; (b) the extent to which groups are able to regulate their negative thoughts by enhancing control over their executive function [14]; (c) the extent to which each group values their relationship with the other; (d) the extent to which groups perceive the risk of repeated exposure to harm by the other group [15]; and finally, (e) the extent to which groups can imagine that the other group is capable of changing their harmful behaviors [16].The latter aspect could also include simply the ability to recognize the differentiation between the outgroup members responsible for the harm and their descendants in the contemporary generation (e.g., Lebanese Muslims during the regional war and contemporary Lebanese Muslims, [17]). Thus, conceptualizing intergroup forgiveness goes beyond the management of negative feelings and thoughts about the outgroup [18] and aligns closely with the recent understanding of forgiveness at the interpersonal level [15]. For, aside from the negative affects and cognitions, unless the conflicting groups perceive some importance and value in maintaining their relationship, unless the risk of future exploitation at the hand of the other group is assessed as sufficiently low, and unless the group has some hope [19, 20**] that the outgroup is capable of changing, there would be little or no motivation for groups to want to restore their damaged relationship using forgiveness.

The Link between Suffering and Forgiveness via Psychological Interventions

When considering intergroup forgiveness, one cannot by-pass a discussion of collective suffering [21**, 22**, 23**]. First of all, inflicting harm onto others must follow as a result of viewing the victims as a collective entity. Here, social categorization and social identity theories [24, 25] offer important insights in that the perpetrator group must view the victims of their harm-doing as sharing a social category (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, gender). In other words, a common characteristic is assigned to individuals, which defines them as a group. Often such group-based victimization is justified by reviving past, sometimes even ancient animosities and feelings of threat, as has been the case with mass violence in Nazi Germany, former Yugoslavia, or Rwanda [26]. What is intriguing though is that the very same categorization processes that give rise to harm-doing also tend to determine a victim group's decision whether (or not) to forgive their perpetrator group. To illustrate, Noor and colleagues [27] observed that in the Northern Irish conflict, both Catholics and Protestants' perceptions of their victimhood were positively associated with how strongly each group identified with their own group, which in turn was negatively associated with their willingness to forgive one another. Put differently, it seems that the same victimization experiences leading to a profound sense of victimhood may bolster conflicting groups' narrow and exclusive self-categorization efforts. The stronger the identification with one's own group the more remote forgiveness becomes as an option for conflict resolution. Indeed, Wohl and Branscombe [10**] succeeded in validating the above work by providing experimental evidence in support of the critical role of social categorization in intergroup forgiveness. Specifically, those researchers found that when grave harm doing such as the Holocaust was framed as an intergroup event in which Germans behaved aggressively toward Jews (intergroup categorization) North American Jews were less willing to forgive today's Germans than when the Holocaust was presented as pervasive across humanity (most inclusive social category).

Beyond forgiving historical harms, Shnabel, Halabi and Noor [28**] developed the notion of *common victim identity* as an intervention strategy to foster intergroup forgiveness in the ongoing conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian groups in the Middle East (for similar conceptual work see 22, 29, & Young & Sullivan, this issue). Common victim identity [28] aims to draw both groups' attention to their common suffering as a result of the regional conflict, in spite of their diverse victimization experiences. In an experiment [28], researchers induced such a notion of common victim identity among Israeli and Palestinian participants by reminding them that both groups are victims of the prolonged conflict and have experienced substantial individual and national losses in human life, property, hope, and trust. Relative to a control condition (reading an article on aircrafts), the common victim identity condition led both groups to engage in less competition over their victimhood experiences, which in turn increased their willingness to forgive one another. It is also important to highlight that an additional condition aimed at inducing a generic sense of common identity (i.e., unrelated to the regional conflict and emphasizing common cultural heritage between Jews and Palestinians) was unsuccessful to bring about a similar positive shift in participants' intergroup forgiveness attitudes. Thus, it appears that the power of the common victim identity intervention for reducing intergroup hostility is contingent on highlighting commonality of both groups' mutual suffering [see also 30].

In addition to the above interventions facilitating intergroup forgiveness, both generic intergroup contact and intergroup friendship were found in a representative sample of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland to be positively associated with intergroup forgiveness [31]. An intriguing aspect of this research was that the association between outgroup friendship and forgiveness was moderated by the degree to which participants had experiences of violent conflict (i.e., low vs. high). Interestingly, the positive effect of contact with outgroup friends was larger under high than low actual conflict experience. Generic

contact, on the other hand, was associated with increased intergroup forgiveness only when experience was low, but not when experience was high.

Interventions focusing on the characteristics of the perpetrator groups have also been tested for their efficacy to increase forgiveness in victim groups. Most notably, research has examined whether an apologetic (vs. non-apologetic) perpetrator group prompts more forgiveness in their victim group. Though initially the link between apology and forgiveness at the intergroup level seemed elusive [32, 33], recently researchers have identified that an apology message focusing on the victims (vs. on the perpetrators) may strengthen the link between apology and forgiveness (34). Additionally, an intergroup apology is likely to lead to forgiveness if the victim group holds the implicit view that the perpetrator group has the capacity to change (35, 36).

Beyond apology, researchers have also studied the impact of exposing victims to the *redemptive narratives* of the group that harmed them. Such narratives typically communicate to the victims the perpetrator group's concession that they were wrong and that they have learned to be more moral. Although research shows a positive impact of such narratives on victims in terms of their commitment to reconciliation with the transgressing group, these narratives did not affect the level of intergroup forgiveness among the victims (37).

The Costs Associated with Intergroup Forgiveness

Forgiveness is costly. Recently researchers have also cautioned of the power of social categorization and identity processes that appear to lead to intergroup forgiveness. For example, Greenaway and colleagues [38**] replicated the common humanity categorization effect on intergroup forgiveness shown earlier by Wohl and Branscombe [10**], in the context of the intergroup relations between Australian Aborigines and White Australians. However, Greenaway et al. also revealed that the same categorization framing manipulation

reduced Aborigines' willingness to demand restitution for the injustices inflicted on them by European Australians. Similarly, across groups created in the laboratory, Wenzel and Okimoto [39**] reported that participants who were encouraged by their ingroup to forgive a transgressing group perceived less injustice than participants who were not encouraged by their ingroup to forgive. Interestingly, participants who were encouraged to forgive, in turn, displayed improved sentiments (e.g., reduced anger, increased sympathy) toward the transgressing group. Thus, these researchers raise an important issue concerning the utility of intergroup forgiveness as well as its unintended consequences for challenging inequality and injustice. Indeed, such consequences serve as a further reminder of the conceptual discussion of intergroup forgiveness at the outset of this article. Namely, when victim groups consider forgiving their perpetrator groups, they would need to assess not only the degree to which they value a relationship with the transgressors, but they ought to consider equally their vulnerability of being exploited by the same or new transgressor groups in the future.

That said, while it is important to continue to study the potential negative costs associated with intergroup forgiveness, such costs ought not to distract from the potential benefits of forgiveness as a prosocial facilitator even in contexts of prolonged intergroup violence. To illustrate, in the context of the Northern Irish conflict between Protestants and Catholics, researchers have found intergroup forgiveness mediates the relationship between both perceptions of victimhood (how the ingroup was affected by the conflict) and group identification as predictors, and the conflict-related psychiatric morbidity, as an outcome variable [40]. Similarly, among Israeli participants, forgiveness has been shown to facilitate the link between their trust in Palestinians and perceptions of inclusive victimhood (acknowledging the outgroup has suffered as well due to the conflict) as predictors, and their willingness to reconcile with Palestinians [41].

Conclusions

In many ways it is surprising to see the interest in intergroup forgiveness research rising to the extent that there now exists a meta-analysis [42]. It is surprising because etymologically forgiveness has been associated with sentiments ranging from naivety and unrealistic pacifism to misplaced religious and spiritual moralisation [43]. Yet, analysis of real-life stories of victims (www.theforgivenesstoolbox.com) [44] and academic research [1] conducted in post- and ongoing-conflict settings challenge such sentiments as well as our common association between weakness and forgiveness. A key goal of forgiveness is to break the cycle of revenge and to protect the victims from becoming victimizers [23, 45]. However, before forgiveness can be viewed as a serious and viable strategy within the political and conflict resolution spheres, researchers and affected communities may be required to re-define their understanding of strength and weakness, and conceptions of leadership. For often it is not the most hurt and wounded who halt the process of forgiveness, but rather those surrounding them who have been spared from direct injury [31].

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