

Day, M.V. (2014). Forgiveness. In B. A. Arrigo (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of criminal justice ethics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Forgiveness

Following an interpersonal wrongdoing, one possible option for the victim is to forgive the offender. Some scholars believe that the ability to forgive is natural and innate. That is, people are born with the capacity to forgive, which may vary depending on cultural and individual life experiences. Although forgiveness has long been part of human existence, there still remains some debate over the exact definition of forgiveness. Nonetheless, in the last 15 years there has been a surge of research which has examined predictors of situational and trait forgiveness. We have learned that victims' willingness to forgive depends, in part, on factors related to the offense, the relationship between the offender and the victim, as well as reactions and dispositions of the victim. Even though forgiveness is granted by the victim, the offender can also take meaningful steps to potentially foster forgiveness, such as by offering an apology. Forgiveness may have consequences beyond interpersonal processes, as indicated by its potential impact on physical and mental health. In general, forgiveness tends to have positive connotations, but evidence suggests that forgiveness may not always be associated with positive outcomes. Though forgiveness has mostly been studied in everyday interpersonal contexts, it is also relevant to criminal justice domains, as indicated by an emerging area of scholarship.

To explore the nature of forgiveness it is useful to have a working definition. After an offense, forgiveness is the tendency for a victim to shift from having negative feelings towards a harmdoer to positive feelings. However, what may seem like a straightforward concept is actually still subject to debate among scholars. For example, some believe that forgiveness mostly involves the absence of unforgiving motivations (e.g., avoidance, revenge), whereas others contend that it involves the promotion of positive thoughts and feelings. Generally there is agreement that forgiveness does not necessarily mean trust or reconciliation has been reached, that the offense has been forgotten or excused, or that any legal recourse has been nullified.

In order to scientifically study forgiveness many researchers have sought to measure it empirically. There are, however, variations in how forgiveness is measured. For example, forgiveness for a transgression may be measured by asking respondents how forgiving they feel towards a transgressor, how much they have benevolent feelings and positive relationship motivations (e.g., a desire to move forward with the relationship), or how much there is a lack of revenge (e.g., desire to get even) and avoidance motivations (e.g., distancing oneself from an offender). Measures have also been created to assess trait forgiveness, the relatively stable tendency for individuals to forgive. Although different measures of forgiveness exist they often correlate with each other, and thus allow a reasonable level of comparability across research studies.

When predicting victims' willingness to forgive, there are several factors related to the offense that have been found to be useful. For example, more severe wrongdoings tend to be associated with less forgiveness. In addition, the more that the offender is responsible for the harm, and the degree that the offender intended to harm, are both factors associated with less victim forgiveness. Victims' feelings related to the offense can also affect the degree of forgiveness. For instance, victims' negative mood is associated with less forgiveness, whereas positive mood is associated with more forgiveness. Similarly, victims' situational feeling of

anger is linked to less forgiveness, but the degree that victims' feel empathy in the situation is related to more forgiveness.

Victims' personality traits can also influence how the offenses and offenders are viewed, and thus facilitate or hinder forgiveness. For example, victims who tend to be more agreeable, take the perspectives of others, and who demonstrate greater empathy for others, are more likely to be forgiving. In contrast, those who are more likely to be depressed, have neurotic tendencies, or tend to be higher on trait anger, are less likely to be forgiving.

The relationship between victims and offenders is also an important factor in determining forgiveness. In general, close relationships (e.g., a romantic partner, good friend, sibling, etc), are associated with more forgiveness following an interpersonal offense than distant relationships (e.g., an acquaintance, stranger, etc).

Following a wrongdoing, transgressors have a limited set of options that can positively affect victims' forgiveness. One key act is to offer an apology. Victims tend to positively respond to apologies with more forgiveness. Although the exact nature of an apology may vary across situations and individuals, what is important is whether it is perceived to be sincere by the victim. When combined with an apology, there is evidence that other actions can be helpful. For example, signaling a personal cost or gesture that lowers one's standing (e.g., embarrassment), or providing some form of compensation to the victim may also encourage forgiveness.

Some scholars suggest that forgiveness has implications beyond interpersonal functioning. A provocative finding is that a greater tendency to forgive is associated with better physical health. For example, those who are forgiving also tend to have better functioning cardiovascular, immune, and endocrine systems. Trait forgiveness is also associated with better mental health, including less anxiety and depression, as well as more personal control and happiness.

Although forgiveness has been associated with the positive psychology movement, and is often portrayed as beneficial, forgiveness does not always lead to positive outcomes. For example, women with higher tendencies to forgive and who are in domestic abuse shelters are more likely to return to their abusive situations. Moreover, married partners who are highly forgiving of partners who are chronically low on agreeableness, report lower self-respect over time. Although high trait forgiveness is associated with marital satisfaction, this is only the case when there are few hostile behaviors (e.g., insults) in the relationship, and if there are many, forgiveness is associated with marital dissatisfaction. In other research, people who are chronically more forgiving have been found to also live longer, however, it appears that the forgiveness-longevity link occurs only to the extent that individuals subscribe to conditional forgiveness (e.g., if the offender apologizes then they forgive), as opposed to unconditional forgiveness. Thus, whether forgiveness is associated with positive or negative outcomes can depend on the nature of forgiveness, situational factors, and personal qualities of who is being forgiven.

Forgiveness is relevant outside of everyday interpersonal contexts, and has spread to domains such as criminal justice. Following an injustice, such as a criminal offense, victims may seek retributive justice, which typically focuses on punishing the offender. Some victims, however, desire a restorative justice route, which has been found to foster forgiveness towards

offenders. Restorative justice is a victim-centered approach, and broadly aims to repair the emotional and material harms of the crime to the victim and the broader community. In restorative justice programs, victims can meet with offenders and mediators to engage in dialogue, negotiation, and problem solving. In many cases, offenders apologize and offer some form of restitution for their criminal acts. These programs often lead to more healing, more satisfaction with the process, and more victim forgiveness than traditional justice outcomes. Both victims and offenders may benefit from this alternative system. Although forgiveness is relevant to restorative justice, requiring or encouraging forgiveness in this setting may be problematic and perhaps inappropriate in some cases (e.g., if the offender did not apologize, or may re-offend), and promoting unconditional forgiveness may even lead to re-victimization. Considerable care needs to be taken to respect victims' feelings and restorative justice goals. Therefore, forgiveness is typically not an explicit goal of restorative justice, however, it is clear that the nature of restorative justice programs can indirectly lead to forgiveness. Research on forgiveness in restorative justice and other legal domains is still in its beginning stages, and determining the fit of forgiveness in various applied justice settings is a direction of future research.

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See Also: Altruism; Empathy; Guilt; Restorative Justice; Retribution.

Further Readings

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