Bringing about forgiveness: Up-dating theory, reconceptualising practice

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Abstract

Forgiveness features in the discourse of multiple disciplines including theology, law and psychology. It is also a central concern for practitioners who work with clients who have suffered harm. However, key aspects of forgiveness remain debated and therapeutic practices appear to be somewhat formulaic. Therefore, the current paper will explore the structural and dynamic features of forgiveness and, in light of these, endeavour to improve therapeutic practice. Initially, forgiveness is disambiguated from synonyms such as reconciliation. Forgiveness is, however, consistent with the dual notion of pardon and release. Key intrapersonal dynamics of forgiveness are then identified using examples of therapeutic best-practice. Uniquely, the interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness are explored according to General Systems Theory, Cybernetics and Social Network Theory. From these related perspectives forgiveness becomes a response to broken relational bonds, that is attachments, and the need for a community of people, broadly defined, to maintain its social integrity through homeostatic mechanisms. Ultimately, current therapeutic practices are questioned with respect to an implied bias towards system-wide needs at the expense of client autonomy. Given this, practitioners are encouraged to consider "forgiveness work" as existential in character and not primarily cognitive/emotional.

Key words:

Forgiveness; counselling; ministry; General Systems Theory; Cybernetics; Social Network Theory.

Introduction

While forgiveness has always been a part of theological discourse and good pastoral care, it is only in the last three decades that researchers have sought to investigate it from a psychological perspective (Enright, 1991; Freedman & Chang, 2010; Worthington, 2005). This research has yielded important insights for practitioners, including pastors, chaplains, psychologists and counsellors, as well as providing considerable benefit to clients. In particular, forgiveness is now seen as a way to effectively engage hurt/suffering, corrosive anger, anxiety/depression, poor self-esteem and hope (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Fitzgibbons, 1986, 1998; Hope, 1987; Malcolm et al., 2005; Ripley & Worthington, 2002; Rye et al., 2005). This variety of applications, coupled with the rise of trauma-informed practice, has almost turned forgiveness into a panacea. For this reason caution is warranted; even more so since therapeutic practices have developed somewhat independently of theory. For instance, the Forgiveness Process Model (FPM, explained below), being the gold standard therapeutic approach, represents only a "best estimate" (Freedman et al., 2005, p. 394) and a conglomeration of "virtually all published works that describe intervention models" at the time of its development (Hebl & Enright, 1993, p. 659). It is therefore the authors' contention that if further strides are to be made in helping people to forgive, then theory must be up-dated and therapeutic practice considered in light of this.

How is forgiveness structured?

It is interesting, and puzzling, to note that "…there is little consensus [in the literature] regarding what forgiveness is." (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016, p. 46). Yet without this basic knowledge it is difficult to see how we can advance the study and practice of forgiveness.

For instance, forgiveness and reconciliation are often used interchangeably but are very different (Gulliford, 2004; Knutson et al., 2008). It is possible to forgive but not reconcile with another person, as may occur when one forgives a deceased parent. More curiously, and perhaps at odds with Worthington and Drinkhard (2000), two people can reconcile yet still harbour unforgiveness (Waal & Pokorny, 2005). A simple example of this is divorced parents who effectively co-parent in the best interests of

their children without forgiving each other's wrongs. In this way we come to learn that while forgiveness is virtuous, reconciliation is pragmatic.

In addition, forgiveness must also be distinguished from condoning, forgetting, excusing or justifying harmful behaviour (Gulliford, 2004; Wade & Worthington, 2005). Nor is forgiveness the absence of unforgiveness. Because of these exclusions, forgiveness now fits well with a broader justice framework. This is useful given that forgiveness is applied after a wrong has been committed. More precisely, forgiveness aligns to the justice-infused synonym of "pardon". Yet to pardon another person is a behaviour. What is the psychological change within a victim that aligns with pardon and heralds forgiveness? This interior shift has been termed "release" and has a number of positive psychological correlates. Therefore, , a composite definition of forgiveness has emerged which encapsulates pardon and release (Knutson et al., 2008; Worthington, 2003).

Yet beyond this two-part definition it must also be recognised that forgiveness has core elements, as well as features which remain debated. Core elements include: (1) that a wrong has been committed; (2) that forgiveness can only occur after the offence has ceased; and (3) that forgiveness can only occur once a person has become aware of their unfair treatment (American Psychological Association, 2006). In working towards forgiveness, we must also consider it to be a multi-dimensional psychological construct having cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, motivational, existential and transcendent elements (American Psychological Association, 2006; Belicki et al., 2020; Lichtenfeld et al., 2019). Forgiveness is also recognised to be a lengthy process entered into by a victim as opposed to a momentary shift in one's psychological state (American Psychological Association, 2006).

The debated elements of forgiveness present as a series of questions whose answers have important implications for researchers and practitioners alike (American Psychological Association, 2006). For example:

1. Does forgiveness exist on a continuum or only in binary form? This is an important question for researchers and practitioners in the West who often assume, given a worldview influenced by two millennia of Christianity, that forgiveness must be offered once, utterly and in perpetuity.

2. Does forgiveness, as a virtue, require a virtuous mind-set? This has important implications for researchers when seeking to understand the interpersonal

aspects of forgiveness, and for practitioners when called upon to assist with reconciliation.

3   To what extent do intrapersonal, as opposed to interpersonal, forces contribute to forgiveness? This is a critical issue for the development of both theory and practice and is considered by the authors in the remaining sections of this paper.

4   Is self-forgiveness the same as, or different to, forgiving others? That self-forgiveness ignores the interpersonal, is often associated with shame, and is more difficult to achieve may suggest it is a special case, or only a related construct.

5   Is anonymous and *en masse* forgiveness — as may occur after armed conflict — the same as, or different to, forgiving a limited number of known others? Again, this may well be a special case better dealt with under a different psychological rubric.

To begin to grapple these questions, and therefore extend beyond current understandings, let us consider both the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness.

The intrapersonal dynamics of forgiveness

The intrapersonal dynamics of forgiveness are most clearly observed in counselling when working with a client who has suffered harm (i.e. a victim). Prominent amongst counselling modalities used to bring about forgiveness are two divergent therapeutic approaches: (1) Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT); and (2) the Forgiveness Process Model (FPM).

EFT considers unforgiveness to be "unfinished business" (Perls cited in Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000, p. 185) which prevents a client from moving on while also being characterised by a hyperaroused state (Greenberg et al., 2008). That EFT pays a significant debt to Gestalt Theory means that unforgiveness is also held to be currently felt (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000). As such, a moment-by-moment, non-linear, process-experiential approach is used to effect positive change (Elliott et al., 2004).

Through the use of a diverse set of interventions EFT seeks to have clients lessen their emotional arousal, make sense of painful experiences through dialectic, and finally

access alternate healthy adaptive emotions (Greenberg, 2002, 2004). Ultimately, forgiveness is found when anger, contempt and pain are transformed (Fredrickson, 1998; Greenberg, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2008) and acceptance begins to flourish in place of retaliation (Malcolm, et al., 2005).

More specifically, within an EFT task-analytic model of forgiveness a client typically begins the process of change by expressing unresolved feelings, including blame, complaints and/or hurt. Following the activation of schematic emotional memories of the unfinished situation, alongside unresolved primary feelings, there is typically an intense expression of anger towards the offender, followed by displays of considerable sadness, fear, grief and/or vulnerability. Change gathers pace when the client comes to express their unmet needs whilst recognising that vulnerability is key to shifting their internal representation of the offender. Only then can feelings of empathy and compassion be expressed as clear signs of an adaptive emotional response. Now that the capacity to forgive is present a new personal narrative can take shape with resolution to follow (Greenberg et al., 1993; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000).

By contrast, the FPM (Enright, 1991) uses a cognitive-behavioural framework to bring about forgiveness. Specifically, therapy consists of 20 units generalised into four broad phases (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Freedman et al., 2005; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Klatt & Enright, 2011; Knutson et al., 2008). These phases are: (1) uncovering (i.e. admitting that harm has occurred as well as its negative consequences); (2) deciding to forgive (i.e. feeling a need for change and committing to forgiveness as the best strategy with which to reengage life); (3) working (i.e. trying to see the offender from a broader perspective, and to feel compassion for them); and (4) deepening (i.e. finding meaning and purpose in suffering alongside experiencing the benefits of forgiveness) (Knutson et al., 2008).

Not surprisingly, strong emotion is often evident early on in therapy as the client comes to recognise their anger/sadness/anxiety alongside any material loss. Yet it is decisional forgiveness which is critical to the FPM. A client's decision to forgive represents the beginning of change and also a personal awareness that they now have a level of control over the offender. With the commitment that choice brings, and a newfound level of control, the client is able to reframe the offender, ultimately coming to see them as a person. This, in turn, allows empathy and compassion to be brought forth. It is the emergence of empathy that signifies the beginning of the client's

release from unforgiveness. The client is now able to learn to bear, or absorb, their pain and to accept what has happened to them. The final phase of the FPM is often more tranquil. Therapeutic work may even conclude with the client expressing forgiveness to the offender by means of a simple greeting, a comment of concern, a letter, or by talking positively about them to others. Ultimately, forgiveness blossoms when the client finds meaning in suffering and a new purpose in life (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

Given the above therapeutic examples we can discern that the key intrapersonal dynamics of forgiveness include: (1) the feeling of strong negative emotion accompanying vulnerability; (2) a cognitive shift; (3) the emergence of empathy towards an offender; (4) adaptive emotional/behavioural responses; and (5) the development of new personal meanings.

The interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness

Although Christian researchers (Walker & Gorsuch, 2004) and practitioners of restorative justice acknowledge the interpersonal nature of harm (Restorative Justice Council, n.d.), therapeutic approaches to forgiveness often focus exclusively on a single client, typically a victim. This is a major limitation of therapeutic practice for harm ripples out to affect both the victim and offender, their support networks, potentially their workplaces and sometimes the community-at-large. As such, forgiveness occurs in an interpersonal, if not social, context which is, at present, largely ignored. Without a developing knowledge of the interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness we may expect theory and practice to stall.

Although only limited evidence exists we can, nevertheless, comment on a few of the key interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness. For instance, it is useful to state up-front that researchers have found that people in happy intimate relationships demonstrate reduced blaming and increased forgiving. Moreover, these people were less prone to believe that their partners were less forgiving than themselves (Friesen et al., 2005). These findings were also generally consistent with the work of Webb et al. (2006), who investigated the relationship between adult attachment style and dispositional forgiveness. Participants with a secure attachment style (i.e., characterized by the maintenance of productive long-term relationships based in trust) demonstrated

significantly higher dispositional forgiveness when compared to participants demonstrating insecure attachment styles.

However, relational dyads are not representative of how people live, for we are all nested within a complex set of social relations extending out from our intimate partners to encompass our communities. As such, we need a way to understand this greater relational complexity if we are to advance our knowledge of forgiveness. Not unfamiliar to family therapists, General Systems Theory (GST) provides such a framework.

In brief, a system can be thought of as a stable set of related elements (e.g. members of a family, employees at a workplace, an ethnic group, or a community) with each system taking its identity from the particular organisation of its elements. Consequently, a system must also have a boundary which controls information exchange with the environment and thus influences system adaptability. Therapeutically, the degree to which a system's boundary is open to information exchange will affect the speed and depth of forgiveness work (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016) and may be influenced by hope-based strategies given that hope sees beyond the immediate, while also negating threats to promote useful qualities including curiosity (Edwards & Jovanovski, 2016). Yet even more than system adaptability, the most important implication arising from the above description is that a system's elements interact in an organised way to promote the system's purpose and to maintain its integrity (Goldenberg et al., 2017).

Following in-group harm, such as when one person in the group offends another, system integrity can be maintained in four ways: (1) the offender shows remorse and is forgiven; (2) an offender of good standing and/or high status has their actions excused; (3) an offender is shunned (i.e. unforgiveness); or (4) the victim is ostracised. Incidentally, in recent times all four strategies have been found to be used by various religious institutions when seeking to deal with allegations of child sex abuse.

Interestingly, the strategy a system applies to reassert its integrity following an act of in-group harm appears to depend not on the victim, but on the offender. Moreover, members of the system appear concerned to appraise only two variables: threat and relationship. For example, Branscombe et al. (1993) linked threat to social identity in the context of US undergraduates, the implication being that if an in-group offender posed a great enough threat to group cohesion then forgiveness was unlikely.

Alternatively, Takada and Ohbuchi (2004) found that within a Japanese cohort, people were more likely to forgive an in-group offender if they were relationally close. Indeed multiple motives to forgive a relationally close offender (e.g. altruistic, ego-centric and normative) were apparent. Finally, and consistent with both Branscombe et al. (1993) and Takada and Ohbuchi (2004), similar threat to cohesion and relational reasons were also identified in the Moluccan ethnic community as to why forgiveness may, or may not, be offered to members following the breaking of a marriage taboo (Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2018). Again, unforgiveness resulted when social identity was threatened. However, people tended to forgive an in-group offender out of relational motives. Taken together, GST places emphasis on system integrity. Usefully, this perspective is also consistent with the work of Hook et al. (2009) who investigated social harmony and forgiveness. What is perhaps disorientating for practitioners who seek to bring about forgiveness is the importance of the offender in the eyes of their community as compared to the justice owed to the victim.

While GST highlights the objective of system integrity, the related field of Cybernetics describes how this is achieved (Goldenberg et al., 2017). Integrity is brought about through system stabilisation (i.e. homeostasis). In turn, homeostasis is brought about by social rules/norms which, when enacted, produce feedback loops within the system.

To demonstrate this let us exclude three of the four system-wide strategies described above to deal with in-group harm. In doing so, let us focus our attention only on how forgiveness is brought about. While an act of interpersonal harm amongst in-group members disrupts homeostasis, two interdependent forgiveness-related feedback loops appear to be initiated sequentially to re-establish system homeostasis. In the simplest form, an offender is punished which initiates a negative feedback loop to quell a victim's hesitancy to forgive. Second, in the act of forgiving a punished offender the victim initiates a positive feedback loop to repair relational bonds and so re-establish system-wide homeostasis (Strelan & van Prooijen, 2013).

Yet systems vary, to some extent, on the rules they use to bring about forgiveness and therefore to re-establish homeostasis. To demonstrate this let us consider forgiveness across the three Abrahamic faiths.

In Judaism, *Torah* considers forgiveness to be a *mitzvot* (i.e. a law or rule; Montgomery, n.d.). But forgiveness occurs according to a precise ritual. For example, the word *salach* is the most commonly used word to describe forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible

and is akin to pardon, but a second word, *kipper*, is also used. Importantly, *kipper* suggests atonement. *Kipper*, when paired with *salach*, also precedes it, thus suggesting a ritual of forgiveness in which atonement for the wrong committed comes before the pardon offered (Silverberg, n.d.).

Interestingly, Islam allows for proportional revenge to re-establish homeostasis after harm but maintains a parallel, and preferable, pathway which overlooks the wrong committed. For example, "Islam taught a middle path between turning the other cheek and never-ending blood feud, that is, revenge to the extent harm [is] done is allowed but forgiveness is preferred." (Rye et al., 2000, pp. 31).

As a unique contribution to world culture, it is Christianity which has departed most radically from the notion of punishment and forgiveness. For example, when asked how often one should forgive, Jesus enigmatically set no upper limit (Matt. 18:22). When asked how much a person should forgive, Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) whose father forgave all the boy's indiscretions utterly. Moreover, Jesus extended this limitless forgiveness to all people — not just the "chosen people" of God (Lk 24:47).

Even so, and perhaps forgotten by some, forgiveness is still paired with repentance (Luke 24:47). While Christ has taken our punishment there is still the expectation of remorse (2 Cor. 7:10) and behaviour change (Rom. 12:2; Jas. 2:26), even if these occur following the forgiveness offered. Therefore, a Christian worldview does not so much remove established social norms regarding forgiveness but: (1) inverts their order; and (2) replaces punishing the offender with the expectation of a change of heart. Indeed, Paul persuaded against further punishment in the Corinthian church (2 Cor 2:5-11) extolling forgiveness, encouragement/comfort and love as the way to positive behavior change. He even correctly understood that hefty punishment is counter-productive. From a cybernetic perspective, the effect of this inversion of expected forgiveness norms is to activate a positive feedback loop before a negative feedback loop.

Finally, an important extension of GST is Social Network Theory (SNT). Whilst now using words such as network in place of system, and node to identify a group member, the two theories are in strong correspondence. The value of SNT to the present discussion is two-fold. First, SNT considers a system not as an amorphous mass of elements but as a set of interconnected nodes. In other words, SNT looks

closely at the individual relationships within a system. In doing so it adequately mimics the attachments between people which are jeopardised when harm is done and restored when forgiveness is offered. That SNT implies attachments between people makes it particularly useful when trying to understand psychological phenomena. Second, social network theorists are particularly interested in identifying influential people within a network by looking for highly attached nodes (i.e. in direction, quantity or spread). In this way our attention is shifted from system-wide attributes to consider key people responsible for the creation and/or maintenance of social norms (Arif, 2015; Pupazan, 2011). Importantly, a victim, or offender, may not be one of these influential individuals and so be subject to limited choice or undue pressure to conform. At the extreme, some influential people may even have the power to "crash" a person's social network if conformity is not forthcoming.

Taken together, from a systems/network perspective it is naïve to consider forgiveness to be only about a victim and their autonomy. The system to which a victim belongs will maintain its integrity, appraise an offender's worth, impose rules (i.e. social norms) and use influential members to achieve its outcomes.

Implications and conclusion

In bringing together the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of forgiveness new insights emerge which are valuable for researchers and practitioners alike.

For example, what is forgiveness? From a victim's perspective (i.e. the intrapersonal) forgiveness is a specific response to injustice. This implies both choice and virtue. For a victim, pardon and release embody a multidimensional psychological construct worked-out over time. Yet from the system's/network's perspective (i.e. the interpersonal) forgiveness is not considered in terms of injustice, but as broken attachments disrupting system organisation and ongoing integrity. Forgiveness can therefore be assumed to be one of several mechanisms designed to re-establish system homeostasis following insult. This perspective is amoral and suggests little, if any, choice for individuals in how they respond to harm. Indeed, both the victim and offender are subject to system-wide rules of punishment/revenge/atonement/repentance. Given this, one may even speculate as to whether pardon and release is simply the psychological basis for conformity and self-justification having acquiesced to system-wide demands?

For practitioners, such as psychologists and counsellors, this expanded understanding of forgiveness has significant implications. However, other professionals, including chaplains and local church pastors, also routinely work to bring about forgiveness. Arguably it is these professionals, being both designated representatives of a larger system and responsible to hurting individuals, who must grapple most deeply with how to bring together the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness. To assist, let us keep in mind the following questions. First, do we prize a theology which takes as its focus Christ's salvific mission which is, of course, forgiveness-potent? Second, have we created an ecclesiology (i.e. a church system) able to find new forms of homeostasis and therefore willing to productively engage both hurt and forgiveness? Third, how does liturgy help, or hinder, forgiveness? For example, is pardon and release promoted by a general confession and corporate absolution, or does forgiveness require an act of repentance? Fourth, what is the power of the sacraments, as signs pointing to God's forgiveness of us, to promote forgiveness between people? Indeed we may well consider the sacraments to be powerful spiritual remedies to bring together, or unite, that which is estranged, divided or broken.

Beyond an acknowledgement of the complexity of bringing together the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of forgiveness, it is also necessary to provide some guidance to practitioners on how to work with clients, congregants etc. to facilitate forgiveness. To begin with, it must be understood that a practitioner, of whatever form, and the person seeking their assistance (i.e. client/victim) are members of the same system. However the practitioner is an influential member having education, position, and often title. Reappraising this power differential in light of the interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness, we should ask for whom is the practitioner working? Indeed, some practitioners may not be fully aware of the agenda they serve by the social and professional norms they uphold. Yet practitioners do genuinely seek to work on behalf of those who come to them for help. However, for practitioners to do so effectively requires a cognitive shift. The practitioner needs to deliberately shift from working "for" forgiveness, as a system requirement, to working "with" forgiveness, being an open-handed exploration of client needs. Only now can client autonomy be promoted without conflict of interest. Unfortunately, this important distinction is not apparent in current therapeutic approaches to forgiveness. Cynically, one may even argue that current therapeutic practices are implicitly designed to help clients cope with the forgiveness demands imposed on them by their systems at the expense of their own

autonomy. This somewhat radical position is consistent with the need for clients to express strong negative emotion and the time spent in therapy attempting to reframe the offender, both. of which would appear to be important elements in resolving the cognitive dissonance of self versus system. Moreover, the therapeutic expectation that clients choose to forgive, and demonstrate forgiveness, has the effect of locking them into a system-preferred way of behaving.

In reappraising forgiveness work given the above concerns, several considerations now become apparent. First, there is a distinct need for psycho-education at the commencement of forgiveness work. Unless a client is aware of both the intrapersonal and interpersonal components of forgiveness, they cannot exercise their limited autonomy. In fact, without adequate psycho-education they risk blindly following a social script which may leave them confused, embittered or even unsafe.

Second, in accordance with these newfound learnings, and because the practitioner is now working *with* forgiveness, a fearless exploration can take place. This may reasonably begin with the harm done but, as appropriate, may seek to reframe this in terms of broken attachments. Such a discussion can then be broadened to broken attachments within the client's family of origin and throughout their life, thus providing insight into the traumatising nature of the harm inflicted. In this way, the affective dimension of harm is brought together with the cognitive dimension to create a web of narratives which can then be worked upon. Importantly, these narratives contain key system, cybernetic and social network principles. Bringing these to the fore, including system rules, is critical therapeutic work.

Third, given this new knowledge, the client now has the insight, and therefore the autonomy, to either disengage from their system or reintegrate within it, irrespective of the system-wide strategy imposed. However, both choices carry significant consequences which the client must accept. Therefore, to reappraise forgiveness work is to shift its focus from the cognitive/emotional to the existential.

Now, if a client chooses to leave their system the practitioner has a duty-of-care to help them manage the consequences of self-broken attachments. This may include assistance to identify resources to maintain lifestyle and wellbeing, as well as to consider the client's personal safety given the damaging effects of loneliness. In fact, important clinical work may ultimately be necessary to help the client transition to a new system when ready. It is also following the option of disengagement that

reconciliation work may commence, creating a mutually beneficial interaction between the client and their former system in spite of unforgiveness.

Alternatively, if a client wishes to reengage their system, the practitioner should seek to use the rules and norms of the system to achieve an optimal outcome. Interestingly, this may involve the offender, influential people within the system, as well as system-approved rites and practices (e.g. a public apology) to establish a form of homeostasis which up-holds the client's rights as the victim of an unjust act (Dhami, 2016; Tait, 2018). It is now that therapy begins to blend with restorative justice practices.

a commonsense view of forgiveness poorly represents the complexity inherent in this virtue. Moreover, the willingness of people to forgive often represents a socially conditioned response more than a choice born of personal autonomy. Ultimately, it is the authors' contention that if forgiveness is to be fulsome and cathartic, current therapeutic practices must be adapted. In doing so, forgiveness work needs to shift from focusing on changing a victim's cognitions and emotions to become exploratory, existential, and in sympathy with key features of the system to which they belong. Forgiveness work is therefore not solitary therapeutic work nor victim-centric. Forgiveness is about an offender as much as a victim and the needs of their community.

Acknowledgement:

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