The Concept of Forgiveness as a Tool in Counseling Intervention for Well-being Enhancement

Dini Farhana Baharudin[a], Muhammad Asyraf Che Amat[b], Mohd Rushdan Mohd Jailani[a], Melati Sumari[c]*

[a]Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Negeri Sembilan, 71800, Malaysia
[b]Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, 43400, Malaysia
[c]Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur,50603, Malaysia

Abstract

Throughout the history of mental health and well-being research, the pre-dominant focus of study has been pathological in nature. However, a trend toward the study of positive well-being has taken hold in the mental health field recently and one such concept is forgiveness. Forgiveness is considered a human strength and an important factor that influences human development. Based on previous research, in general, both lay person and therapists consider forgiveness to be beneficial and therapeutic. This paper tries to look at the conceptualization of forgiveness, models of forgiveness and factors that affects forgiving. Counseling implications and future research directions are also discussed.
© 2011 Published by PERKAMA International Convention 2011.

Keywords: well-being; mental health, forgiveness, counseling, therapy

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of mental health and well-being research, the pre-dominant focus of study has been pathological in nature. However, a trend towards the study of positive well-being has taken hold in the mental health field recently and one such concept is forgiveness. Since the last two decades, research on forgiveness has been growing, varying from neuro-imaging of forgiveness to controlled experiments of forgiving responses to efficacy studies of interventions promoting forgiveness (Wade, 2010; Worthington, 2005). Forgiveness is considered a human strength and an important factor that influences human development. In counseling setting, application of forgiveness can be seen in interpersonal relationships like dating, marriage, family and friendships. Many counselors also are frequently involved in conversations with clients regarding forgiveness – be it to forgive or to seek forgiveness (Blocher & Wade, 2010; Legaree, Turner & Lollis, 2007; Wade, Bailey & Shaffer, 2005).

Based on previous research, in general, both lay person and therapists consider forgiveness to be beneficial and therapeutic. The use of forgiveness in a variety of populations who have experienced deep hurts such as incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996), parentally love-deprived college students (Al-Mabuk, Enright & Cardis,

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-006-798-8000; fax: +6-006-798-8244.
E-mail address: dini@usim.edu.my.

1995); elderly women (Hebl & Enright, 1993); men hurt by their partner's abortion (Coyle & Enright, 1998); victims of spousal abuse (Reed & Enright, 2006); terminally-ill cancer patients (Hansen, 2002); at-risk adolescents (Freedman, 2008; Gambaro, 2002), sexual abuse and compulsion (Freedman & Enright, 1996) and substance abusers (Lin, Mack, Enright, Kahn & Baskin, 2004) has illustrated that forgiveness can be a powerful counseling tool for a variety of clients (Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008; Freedman & Chang, 2010). This paper tries to look at the conceptualization of forgiveness, models of forgiveness and factors that affects forgiving.

2. Conceptualization of forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness has been explored in a variety of ways (Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga & Zungu-Dirwayi, 2000) and because it is derived from many different fields (e.g. theology, psychology, philosophy, political science, sociology, etc.), it is considered a multidimensional construct (Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008; McCullough, Pargament & Thoreson, 2000).

Forgiveness has been conceptualized as a person's progression, moving from a position of hatred, resentment and bitterness to one of diminishment of anger and desire for revenge toward the perceived wrongdoer. (Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008; Denton & Martin, 1998, McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick & Johnson, 2001; Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005). Forgiving has also been conceptualized to include benevolence (Legaree et al., 2007), that it goes beyond the cessation of negative affect, judgment and behavior toward and the presence of positive affect, judgment and behavior toward the wrongdoer such as compassion, mercy, empathy and perhaps love (Benson, 1992; Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008; Enright & the Human Development Study Group (1991), Enright (1992), Enright (1998), McCullough, 1995, Pingleton, 1989; Rosenak & Harnden, 1992). According to Legaree et al. (2007), this happens because of the differences in the client population served (individual clients vs. couples/families) as well as their underlying values and ideological positions.

The majority of research view forgiveness in a positive light – that forgiveness is very important and beneficial, and possibly even crucial for the resolution of injury and betrayal, the reparation of relationships and ultimately, personal healing. In addition, the literature also highlighted the applicability and healing potential of forgiveness in diverse counseling settings with a variety of clients and across a range of issues (Ferch, 1998; Legaree et al., 2007). However, there is also the concept of un-forgiveness. Un-forgiveness is defined as a combination of cold negative emotions such as resentment, bitterness, hatred, hostility, anger and fear along with the motivated avoidance of or retaliation against the wrongdoer who has violated a personal boundary (Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005; Worthington & Wade, 1999). It often develops after rumination about a wrongful deed. This alternate views of forgiveness are cautious about forgiveness in therapy and do not readily embrace it as a healing mechanism (Legaree et al., 2007). They argue that un-forgiveness is sometimes a positive state and that forgiveness can even be dangerous especially when working with survivors of abuse and other severe injustices (Bass & Davis, 1994; Forward, 1989) or hold cultural and moral values that diverge from forgiveness (Lamb & Murphy, 2002). However, there are yet no empirical studies supporting this presumptive position.

Forgiveness has also been discussed in combination with other issues. Reconciliation is often included in forgiveness (Freeman & Chang, 2010). Some authors see reconciliation as an inherent part of the forgiveness process while others distinguish both concepts (Freedman & Chang, 2010; Hargrave, 1994; Veenstra, 1992). Enright et al. (1991) argue that forgiveness is an internal process of the forgiver while reconciliation is an external behavior involving the wrongdoer; the former is necessary but insufficient condition for the latter. Most researcher also agree that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, condoning, excusing, pardoning or justifying the wrongdoing (Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright et al., 1991; Enright & Zell, 1989, Kurzynski, 1998).

Researchers also conceptualized forgiveness in relation to intentionality of whether forgiveness involves a voluntary, intentional decision to forgive or whether it is discovery-oriented (Legaree et al., 2007). Another conceptualization of forgiveness is related to the idea of 'true', 'untrue' and 'psudo' forgiveness. According to Freedman & Chang (2010), these terms may help explain between the forgiveness that leads to actual increases in psychological well-being as a result of effort on the part of the injured; the forgiveness that results when people are fearful of confrontation (Sandage, Hill & Vang, 2003) or unwilling to acknowledge their own anger; and the forgiveness that is simply saying the words and overlooking the personal hurt and anger and the right to express it. Distinctions like 'authentic' and 'pseudo' forgiveness are necessary because too often, the word forgiveness is used

to describe many different forms of response that do not necessarily bring about a genuine decrease in negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors towards the wrongdoer or a focus on the wrongdoer, which distinguish forgiveness from alternative ways of healing and moving on after an injury (Enright et al., 1991).

In addition to the confusion about the conceptualization of forgiveness, many models of forgiveness also exist (see Butler et al., 2002; Kaminer et al., 2000; Sandage & Worthington, 2010; Freedman & Chang, 2010). This will be discussed in brief in this paper.

3. Models of forgiveness

Although there are various theories that can be used to examine factors or conditions associated with forgiveness, specific models of forgiveness have been proposed and some were developed for interventions to promote forgiveness.

The first is the cognitive developmental model of forgiveness of Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) which was based on Kohlsberg's (1976) moral development theory. They proposed six stages of forgiveness that includes revengeful forgiveness, restitutional or compensational forgiveness, expectational forgiveness, lawful expectational forgiveness, forgiveness as social harmony and forgiveness as love. The initial two stages of the Enright model involve as distortion of forgiveness when forgiveness and justice are confused. The middle two stages imply that forgiveness is prompted by social pressure and forgiveness and justice are no longer confused. The fifth stage suggests that a person is willing to forgive if social harmony is restored by an act of generosity. And the last stage indicates that a person forgives unconditionally because it promotes a true sense of love. These stages are flexible as they presumed that most people utilize various stages in their thinking. This model suggests that as individuals develop cognitive skills, they become more able to assume the perspectives of others.

Enright in his later work (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) combined affective and behavioral elements into his earlier model. He believed that a person needs to change all three elements in order to forgive. He developed a 17-step model for a forgiveness intervention and later expanded it to a 20-step model. This model is known as the Forgiveness Process Model and is divided into four phases – uncovering phase, decision phase, work phase and deepening phase.

Another model is the Pyramid Model of Forgiveness, developed by Worthington (1998) which consists of a 5-step intervention that include recall the hurt, empathize with the one who hurt you, altruistic gift of forgiveness, commitment to forgive and hold on to the forgiveness; simplified with the acronym REACH. This model evolved from the earlier model called Empathy-humility-commitment Model (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullogh, 1997).

On the other hand, DiBlasio (1998) emphasized on the decision-making aspect of forgiveness. He believed that people can make choices and have cognitive control over whether or not to forgive. He stated that when forgiveness is understood to be driven primarily by feelings, people may wait for a long time. According to him, decision-based forgiveness is the cognitive letting-go of resentment and bitterness and need for vengeance. It is viewed as an act of the will, a choice to let go or to hold on to.

Hargrave's forgiveness model (1994) was derived from contextual family therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987; Bozomenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1984). According to him, there are two main categories. Exoneration, which includes two stations - insight and understanding - empowers the one who has experienced injustice to lift the load of culpability from the one who has caused hurt. Insight allows for one to recognize and alter the destructive patterns which perpetuate unjust re-enactments. Understanding allows for recognition of the limitations of the victimizer without removing their responsibility. The second of Hargrave's categories is forgiveness. It comprises the final two stations: giving an opportunity for compensation and the overt act of forgiveness. Unlike other models, Hargrave does not define forgiveness as a sequential stage process. Rather, it is viewed as a reciprocating interaction between four stations as a progressive effort to forgive and restore relationships.

Bass & Davis (1994) and Forward (1989), on the other hand, provide a feminist view that are more critical of the concept of forgiveness which place priority on forgiving oneself rather than the wrongdoer as it may evade the healing expressions of anger.

4. Factors that affect forgiveness

The earlier sections show that the concept of forgiveness is something that cannot be separated from multicultural issues. Forgiveness can be understood and defined in many different ways, based on a particular tradition, whether religious or cultural (MacIntyre, 1984, Sandage, Hill & Vang, 2003). To date, there is no well-developed body of research on the relationship between forgiveness and culture (Hook, Worthington & Utsey, 2009; Sandage & Williamson, 2005). Previous studies are on the relationship between forgiveness and culture include comparison between Muslims and Christians in Beirut (Azar & Mullet, 2001; Azar, Mullet & Vinsonneau, 1999), youth in United States and in Taiwan (Huang & Enright, 2000) and comparison between nations (Scobie, Scobie & Kakavoulis, 2002; Kadiangandu, Mullet & Vinsonneau, 2001; Takaku, Weiner & Ohbuchi, 2001, Temaoshok & Chandra, 2000; Sandage, Hill & Vang, 2003).

Most of the forgiveness intervention research is also based in the Western culture, which value individualism. Thus, this intervention may not be effective in other cultures, especially those of collectivistic nature (Worthington et al., 2010). According to Fu, Watkins & Hui (2004) and Sandage et al. (2003), people from collectivistic cultures view forgiveness as a way to overcome loss of face, restore social harmony and heal a damaged relationship. This is in contrast with the individualistic conceptualization that tend to differentiate between forgiveness and reconciliation (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, Worthington, 1998, 2009, 2010).

Besides the factor of culture and religion, personal factors also influences one's attitude to forgiveness. Personal factors include those which relate to personality, dispositional traits and personal characteristics such as age, attitudes towards revenge, styles of anger and religiousness. Subkoviak (1992) for example, found that age factors had a significant effect on forgiveness affect, cognition and behavior. Enright et al (1989) found that adolescents' reasoning about forgiveness differed from children and adults and thus, conceptualized forgiveness as a cognitive developmental process. While Hebl & Enright (1993) found that forgiveness therapy resulted in higher self-esteem and reduced state and trait anxiety and depression in elderly women. Some studies also show that gender and relationship histories also are factors to be considered (Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002; McCullough & Worthington, 1995).

Another factor that effect forgiveness is offense-related factors that are those directly related to the offense itself as well as what happened after the offense such as apology, time lapse since the offence, intentionality, severity and immediate consequences (Gauche & Mullet, 2005; Girard et al., 2002; Girard & Mullet, 1997, Takaku et al., 2001). In addition to this, relational factors are also of concern. These are factors that relates to the relationship between the wrongdoer and the victim which includes length of relationship before offense, commitment to the relationship, relational quality (McCullough et al., 1998; Gauche & Mullet, 2005; Girard et al., 2002; Girard & Mullet, 1997).

As a whole, it can be concluded that religion and culture, personal factors and all the variables mentioned above should be taken into consideration as factors that may influence forgiveness. It is important to be aware of not only the multifaceted views of forgiveness in general but also when working with a client, the client's own meaning and worldview as it relates to forgiveness (Balkin, Freeman & Lyman, 2009).

5. Conclusion

Forgiveness is considered a human strength (McCullough, 2000) and an important factor that influences human development. Peterson and Seligman (2004) classified forgiveness as one of the strengths of the core virtue 'temperament'. Forgiveness is understood to be a matter of choice (DiBlaiso, 1998; Enright, 2001) while it may also involve a process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). This can be seen in the models proposed by previous researchers. Several studies have investigated factors that affect forgiveness (e.g. Butler, Dahlin & Fife, 2002; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Subkoviak, 1992).

All of these help counselor get a better understanding of what forgiveness is, why and when to apply in order to provide effective counseling for their clients. Counselors have to be more sensitive, aware and knowledgeable with regards to client diversity to be competent in serving them. Based on the existing literature, future studies may want to look into issues of cultural divergence, religious differences and their impact on the inclusion of forgiveness as a tool in counseling intervention, especially in the context of Malaysia.

References

Al-Mabuk, R., Enright, R.D. & Cardis, P. (1995). Forgiveness education with parentally love-deprived college students. *Journal of Moral Education, 24*, 427-444.

Azar, F., & Mullet, E. (2001). Interpersonal forgiveness among Lebanese: A six-community study. *International Journal of Group Tensions, 30*, 161–181.

Azar, F., Mullet, E., & Vinsonneau, G. (1999). The propensity to forgive: Findings from Lebanon. *Journal of Peace Research, 36*, 169–181.

Balkin, R.S., Freeman, S.J. & Lyman, S.R. (2009). Forgiveness, reconciliation and Mechila: Integrating the Jewish concept of forgiveness into clinical practice. *Counseling & Values*, 53, 153-160.

Bass, E. & Davis, L. (1994). *The courage to heal* (3rd Ed.) New York: Harper & Row.

Benson, C.K. (1992). Forgiveness and the psychotherapeutic process. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 11,* 76-81.

Blocher, W.G. & Wade, N.G. (2010). Sustained effectiveness of two brief group interventions: Comparing an explicit forgiveness-promoting treatment with a process-oriented treatment. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32,* 58.

Butler, M.H., Dahlin, S.K. & Fife, S.T. (2002). "Languaging" factors affecting clients' acceptance of forgiveness intervention in marital therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 28,* 285-298.

Cosgrove, L. & Konstam, V. (2008). Forgiveness and forgetting: Clinical implications for mental health counselors. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 30*, 1-13.

Coyle, C.T. & Enright, R.D. (1998). Forgiveness intervention with post-abortion men. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 65,* 1042-1046.

Denton, R.T. & Martin, M.W. (1998). Defining forgiveness: An empirical exploration of process and role. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 26,* 281-292.

DiBlasio, F.A. (1998). The use of a decision-based forgiveness intervention within intergenerational family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy, 20*, 77-94.

Enright, R.D. & the Human Development Study Group. (1991). The moral development of forgiveness. In W. Kurtines & J. Gewirtz (Eds.) *Handbook of moral behavior and development*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Enright, R. D., & Coyle, C. T. (1998). Researching the process model of forgiveness within psychological interventions. In E. L. Worthington Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 139–161). Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.

Enright, R.D., Eastin, D.L., Golden, S. Sarinopoulos, I. & Freeman, S. (1992). Interpersonal forgiveness within the helping professions: An attempt to resolve differences of opinion. *Counseling and Values, 36*, 84-103.

Enright, R. D., & Fitzgibbons, R. P. (2000). *Helping clients forgive: An empirical guide for resolving anger and restoring hope.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

Worthington, E. L., Jr. (2009). *A just forgiveness: Responsible healing without excusing injustice*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Enright, R.D. (2001). *Forgiveness is a choice*. Washington: APA Books.

Ferch, S. R. (1998). Intentional forgiving as a counseling intervebtion. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 76,* 261-270.

Forward, S. (1989). *Toxic parents.* New York: Bantam Books.

Freedman, S. & Chang, W.R. (2010). An analysis of a sample of the general population's understanding of forgiveness: Implications for mental health counselors. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32,* 5-34.

Freedman, S. & Enright, R.D. (1996). Forgiveness as an intervention goal with incest survivors. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, 64*, 983.

Fu, H., Watkins, D., & Hui, E. K. P. (2004). Personality correlates of the disposition towards interpersonal forgiveness: AChinese perspective. *International Journal of Psychology, 39,* 305–316.

Gambaro, M.E. (2002). *School-based forgiveness education in the management of trait anger in early adolescents*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Hansen, M.J. (2002). *Forgiveness as an educational intervention goal for persons at the end of life*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Hargrave, T.D. (1994). Families and forgiveness: A theoretical and therapeutic framework. *The Family Journal, 2,* 339-348.

Hebl, J. H. & Enright, R.D. (1993). Forgiveness as a psychotherapeutic goal with elderly females. *Psychotherapy, 30,* 658-667.

Hook, J. N., Worthington, E. L., Jr., & Utsey, S. O. (2009). Collectivism, forgiveness, and social harmony. Counseling Psychologist, 37, 786–820.

Huang, S.T. & Enright, R.D. (2000). Forgiveness and anger-related emotions in Taiwan: Implications for Therapy. *Psychotherapy, 37*, 71-79.

Kadiangandu, J.K., Mullet, E. & Vinsonneau, G. (2001) Forgivingness: A Congo-France comparison. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology, 32,* 504-511.

Kaminer, D., Stein, D.J., Mbanga, I. & Zungu-Dirwayi, N. (2000). Forgiveness: Toward an integration of theoretical models. *Psychiatry, 63,* 344-357.

Kurzynski, M.J. (1998). The virtue of forgiveness as a human resources management strategy. *Journal of Business Ethics, 17,* 77-85.

Lamb, S. & Murphy, J.G. (Eds.) (2002). *Before forgiving: Cautionary views of forgiveness in psychotherapy* (pp. 3-14). New York: Oxford University Press.

Legaree, T., Turner, J. & Lollis, S. (2007). Forgiveness and therapy: A critical review of conceptualizations, practices and values found in the literature. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 33*, 192.

Lin, W., Mack, D. Enright, R.D., Krahn, D. & Baskin, T. (2004). Effects of forgiveness therapy on anger, mood and vulnerability to substance use among inpatient substance dependent clients. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 72,* 1114-1121.

MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame.

McCullough, M.E., Bellah, C.G., Kilpatrick, S.D. & Johnson, J.L. (2001). Vengefulness: Relationships with forgiveness, rumination, well-being and the Big Five. *Personality Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*, 601-610.

McCullough, M.E. & Worthington, E.L. Jr. (1995). Promotion forgiveness: the comparison of two brief psychoeducational interventions with a waiting-list control. *Counseling & Values, 40*, 55-68.

McCullogh, M.E., Sandage, S.J. & Worthington, E.L. Jr. (1997). *To forgive is human*. Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press.

Peterson, C. and Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.

Pingleton, J.P. (1989). The role and function of forgiveness in the psychotherapeutic process. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 17,* 27-35.

Reed, G.L. & Enright, R.D. (2006). The effects of forgiveness therapy on depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress for women after spousal emotional abuse. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 74,* 920-929.

Rosenak, C.M. & Harnden, G.M. (1992). Forgiveness in the psychotherapeutic process: Clinical applications. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 11*, 188-197.

Sandage, S. J., Hill, P. C., & Vang, H. C. (2003). Toward a multicultural positive psychology: Indigenous forgiveness and Hmong culture. *Counseling Psychologist, 31,* 564–592.

Sandage, S. J., & Williamson, I. (2005). Forgiveness in cultural context. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), Handbook of forgiveness (pp. 41–56). New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Scobie, G. E. W., Scobie, E.D. & Kakavoulis, A.K. (2002). A cross-cultural study of the construct of forgiveness: Britain, Greece and Cyprus. *Psychology, 9,* 22-36.

Takaku, S., Weiner, B. & Ohbuchi, K. (2001). A cross-cultural examination of the effects of apology and perspective taking on forgiveness. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 20*, 144-166.

Temoshok, L.R. & Chandra, P.S. (2000). The meaning of forgiveness in a specific situational and cultural context: Persons living with HIV/AIDS in India. In McCullogh, Pergament & Thoreson (Eds.) *Forgiveness: Theory, research and practice* (pp 41-64) New York: Guildford Press.

Wade, N.G. (2010). Introduction to the Special Issue on Forgiveness and Therapy. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32*, 1-4.

Wade, N. G., Bailey, D.C. & Shaffer, P. (2005). Helping clients heal: Does forgiveness make a difference. *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice, 36*, 634.

Wade, N.G., Worthington, E.L. & Meyer, J. E. (2005). But do they work? A meta-analysis of group interventions to promote forgiveness. In E.L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 423-440). New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Worthington, E.L. Jr. & Wade, N.G. (1999). The psychology of unforgiveness and forgiveness and implications for clinical practice. *The Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 18,* 385-418.

Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1998). The Pyramid Model of Forgiveness: Some interdisciplinary speculations about unforgiveness and the promotion of forgiveness. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 107–137). Philadelphia: The Templeton Foundation Press.

Worthington, E.L., Jr., (Ed.) (2005). *Handbook of Forgiveness*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Worthington, E.L. Jr., Hunter, J.L., Sharp, B.C., Hook, J.N., Van Tongeren, D.R., Davis, D.E., Miller, A.J., gingrich, F.C., Sandage, S.J., Lao, E, Bubod, L., Monforte-Milton, M. (2010). A Psychoeducational intervention to promote forgiveness in Christians in the Philipenes. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32*, 75-93.