New Dimensions of Forgiveness in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies

Dr. Jenny Hsiu-Ying Chang
Assistant Professor
Hwa Hsia University of Technology
New Taipei City, Taiwan

Dr. Kuang-Hui Yeh
Professor or Research Fellow
Academia Sinica
Taipei City, Taiwan

Dr. Shih-Chi Hsu
National Taiwan University
Taipei City, Taiwan

Abstract

This article entitled "New Dimensions of Forgiveness in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies" introduces interpersonal forgiveness, its individual target(s), therapeutic nature of past wounds, and effect of providing internal resolution to conflicted parties. It also explains the four forgiving stages (hurt, hate, healing, and coming together) and the importance of apology, change, truth-telling, and justice to forgiveness. The third and fourth forgiving stages highlight the distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation. In addition, the role of forgiveness in conflict resolution and peace studies is pointed out along with discussion of the inability of the structural perspectives of conflict resolution to effectively deal with emotions and healing involved in interpersonal forgiveness. To fill this void, it requires interdisciplinary work of psychologists, therapists, and conflict resolution and peace professionals that has been neglected by prior researchers.

Keywords: Forgiveness, healing, conflict resolution, peace studies, structural perspectives, and therapeutic process

1. Introduction

Forgiveness is one kind of choice a person or group may make in dealing with past situations involving abuse, pain, loss, and death. It can be a diverse path in making peace with the past and moving forward through dialoguing with an offender (Simmon & Simmon, 1990) or healing through therapy or self reflection. Forgiveness, when offered and accepted, enables the offending and offended parties to resume constructive communication (North, 1987), heal past wounds (Murphy, 1982), lift a burden of self-incrimination, and restore relationships (du Toit, 1996). All these methods can help transform the pain and conflict and pave the way for reconciliation, the ultimate coming together of both parties (Enright, Freedman & Rique, 1998).

From a conflict resolution perspective, forgiveness is a powerful therapeutic intervention (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). It can release the paralyzing effect of a damaging act from both the forgiver and the forgiven. Unlike revenge which is a zero-sum game, forgiveness can be a win-win resolution for both parties. By choosing forgiveness of the other, the harmed party can let go of resentment, anger and doubts, all impediments to constructive relationships.

In this way forgiveness has the power of transforming the giver, the receiver, and the community at large in a positive manner (Borris & Biehl, 1998; Tutu, 1999). Moreover, it frees individuals from a painful past and facilitates restoration of relationships. The release of the past gives peace and resolution to conflicted parties so that inner and relational harm can be reconciled.

Structural perspectives of conflict resolution cannot deal effectively with forgiveness. Research and practice in forgiveness require the interdisciplinary work of psychologists, therapists, as well as conflict resolution and peace professionals (Witty, 2012). These insights have been neglected in the forgiveness dialogues and conflict intervention.

2. Forgiveness in Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies

One of the ways scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution think about forgiveness grows from the depth of literature available from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience in South Africa (Umbreit & Armour, 2011; Zehr, 2002). A variety of such commissions with different formats and guidelines continue to grapple globally with the issues of truth and reconciliation, such as "Do we need both to heal and forgive to move forward in peaceful ways," "Is amnesty required to speak the truth," and "Is truth enough?" Existing and potential truth commissions are considered and analyzed every day in Bosnia, Serbia, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, and the United States. These forums have been reviewed elsewhere in great depth and detail (Hayner, 2011; Minow, 1998; Sullivan & Tifft, 2008; Toews, Barb & Zehr, 2004) and are beyond the scope of this article. The act of self forgiveness in situations of abuse, survivor guilt and post-traumatic healing will also remain outside of this article.

Interpersonal forgiveness occurs between people rather than between people, social systems, and forces of nature. Not all offenses require forgiveness. Forgiveness can be constructive when a victim's or offended party's "self-esteem is demeaned or diminished" (Scobie & Scobie, 1998, p. 396). To choose forgiveness is to let go of one's anger and resentment toward the offender. It is an effective route to resolution in terms of letting go of the past wounds.

Since forgiveness involves individuals, it does not have a prominent place in the structural perspectives of conflict resolution dominated by realism and structuralism. Thus, there is little place for these perspectives to deal effectively with human emotions, personal healing, or social healing. The healing of human relationships and rebuilding of social systems have thus been disconnected and conceptualized as two separate issues and specialties. It is time for that to change.

3. Forgiving Stages

Forgiveness has four stages: 1) hurt, 2) hate, 3) healing, and 4) coming together (Smedes, 1984). In the first two stages, individuals experience harm and hatred along with anger, shame, and negative self-worth. They may then reach a point where they have re-established their self-esteem and can view the offenders with compassion and empathy. This new perspective or change of attitude makes healing in the third stage possible. Nevertheless, whether the offending and offended parties can come together in the fourth stage hinges on the offenders' behavior. If the offenders come back with change of behaviors, both parties may be able to move forward to reconciliation by achieving a new and healed relationship. Otherwise, the offended parties have to engage in their own healing process.

> Stages 3 and 4 shed light on the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Scobie and Scobie (1998), Enright and Zell (1998) distinguish forgiveness and reconciliation as follows:
> Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Forgiveness is an inner response; reconciliation is a behavioral coming together. Forgiveness includes a willingness to reconcile … Reconciliation, of course, may be a result of forgiveness, but is not an inevitable step (p. 376)"

4. Apology and Change

Both forgiveness and reconciliation involve healing. Healing the effects of interpersonal and structural violence is both an individual and social process (Winslow, 1997). Apology, a repair work, plays an important role in this process. Hickson (1986) defined apology as "the written or spoken expression of one's regret, remorse, or sorrow for having wronged another individual" (p. 287). It is "the exchange of shame and power between the offender and the offended" (Schneider, 2000, p. 267). A genuine apology includes three essential components: acknowledgment, affect, and vulnerability (Schneider, 2000).

Specifically, the offenders should acknowledge the injury that has damaged their relationships with the offended, suffer from the consequence of their behavior, such as shame and regret, and apologize without defense or excuse. An apology is most effective if it is coupled with the promise of not committing the act again.

Genuine apology has the power to restore damaged relationships and move forward to reconciliation or "reconciliatory forgiveness" referred to by Augburger (1992, p. 279). This is an essential goal in all forms of conflict resolution intervention. To this end, effective communication between individuals to clarify what happened is critical. Other factors include stopping blaming the other party for the past wound, taking responsibility for one's feelings, appreciation, respect, openness to the possibility that things can be different, a willingness to change, and forgiveness (Katz, 1999). Repentance and retribution may help facilitate the forgiving process, but they are not preconditions of forgiveness. It is the change of the offended's attitude that is the driving force for forgiveness (Kalayjian & Paloutzian, 2010). Such change, if accompanied by the offenders' change of behavior and their adherence to the principles of justice and reciprocity, can lead to reconciliation.

While authentic apology is important for forgiveness, perpetrators of political violence seldom apologize voluntarily or with remorse but under the pressure of victims (Montiel, 2000). This strategic apology with justification is the stumbling block to forgiveness, especially when the wounded group sees remorseful apology as an essential step toward restoring social justice. To ensure constructive forgiveness, personal forgiveness should be consistent with "self-respect" and "respect for others" of equal human beings (Murphy, 1982, p. 505). Sociopolitical forgiveness should be based on the facts that abuses are stopped, truth is made known to the public, and sociopolitical mechanism to restore social justice are in place (Montiel, 2000).

5. Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment important for apology and forgiveness involves the issue of remembering and forgetting. Offenders tend to be forgetful, or avoidant, depending on the level of guilt associated with their actions. On the other hand, offended parties struggle to erase the past wounds from their memories. Ausburger (1992) vividly described these different states of mind of the offending and offended parties by saying: "The person who throws the stone, forgets; the one who is hit, never forgets" (p. 262). Memory is a part of the newly constructed identity that moves toward healing, especially for the offended. However, du Toil (1996) suggested that it is not what we remember, but how we remember that matters. He said, "We must excavate the past, not to our detriment, but to our benefit. Identity and memory are open entities that can be colored and interpreted in specific ways with different emphases" (p. 124). The stories we tell ourselves about our lives and our futures after conflict must be re-formed to be supportive and forward thinking.

At the societal level, state governments and local communities have recognized the importance of acknowledging past wrongs. Public truth-telling and accountable confessions have been essential to establishing what happened, who did what, and who was affected (Lederach, 1999). Public apology, in which the offending group makes restitution and offers compensation, helps facilitate forgiveness when it is authentic and spontaneous. While the offer of amnesty has been controversial in the South African experience, bearing public witness to the multiple perspectives of the truth and having the assurance that similar acts will never occur again can make forgiveness constructive and forward looking.

6. Justice

Justice or fairness is a factor of common importance to personal and sociopolitical forgiveness. According to Augburger (1992), Kenneth Kaunda, first President of Zambia, pointed out "Forgiveness is not a substitute for justice … To claim forgiveness whilst perpetuating injustice is to live a fiction; to fight for justice without also being prepared to offer forgiveness is to render your struggle null and void" (p. 277). Jesuit Theologian, Avery Dulles, also indicated "… for the ordering of society, restraint and punishment are necessary even for forgiveness" (p. 277). Similarly, Lederach (1997) opines that justice should be coupled with "Peace", which "underscores the need for interdependence, well-being, and security" (p. 29).

7. Applications and Future Directions

In keeping with the prevailing linear models of conflict resolution, we tend to think about the term "forgiveness" primarily in terms of someone forgiving another. The gravity of the protracted crises in many countries today suggests that governments need to engage more actively and genuinely with the underlying causes of conflicts. Baird (1999), in his analysis of ethnic conflict in the Transcaucas, identifies fear as a driving force in violence and aggressive alliances, but looks for solutions at the structural and governmental levels as most conflict resolution professionals do.

We would argue that the critical linkage between peacebuilding and forgiveness comes from research and practice dealing with the psychological impact of violence, war and torture on adults in general, and particularly on developing children. After the violence, what are the consequences of returning to the same culture of violence that exploded into armed aggression? How do people re-learn, or in the case of children, begin to learn, to be peaceful and conciliatory? Both questions focus on people, not structures. The second perspective raises the question of how we transform war victims into survivors who can visualize and participate in a more peaceful future. It requires that peace practitioners broaden their focus and integrate structural, social and personal healing into a systemic approach to social reconstruction.

One core function of human societies is to provide their members with traditions, institutions, and value systems that can protect citizens from devastation and destructions. This is one of the functions of culture in general, and in most societies, a prevailing function of pervasive, systemic family based social and political relationships. Religion can help some people transcend pain and suffering as well. The principal feature that distinguishes one religion from another is the culturally specific solutions to the uncontrollability of life's experiences that each offers to believers. Peacebuilding efforts must acknowledge and work with local, indigenous knowledge of healing, building a new cultural belief system, and finding meaning in life's experience. Indigenous movements need space to flourish, as in South Africa. As Kayser (2001) points it out so well,

> Apartheid not only targeted the people who refused to accept the supremacy of Western culture on African soil, but it also targeted the destruction of the very cultural basis of African society – Ubuntu. Ubuntu is that opportunity which seeks to draw new appreciation from marginalized cultures and to establish new relationships as a means of co-existence (p. 9).

After being traumatized by chronic violence or protracted warfare, few people can escape the notion that their pain, betrayal, and loss are meaningless. For many, this realization is one of the most painful lessons that trauma, war, violence and senseless loss brings; they often feel godforsaken, betrayed by their fellow human beings and neighbors, and in great pain. When social justice and control systems fail, and worse, when the perpetrator is the very government or leadership in which one expected to find safety and identity, the sense of rage, betrayal and despair is heightened even more. Peacebuilding efforts need to help local communities reclaim and reshape their spiritual and cultural centers.

Currently, peacebuilding efforts based on conflict resolution theory does not recognize or validate human behaviors learned during prolonged periods of violence that may compel human beings to use avoidance or aggression as normal survival strategies. Peace dialogues, conflict mapping, and other problem solving interventions that seek to change the meaning, conditions and circumstances of peoples' relationships are headed in the right direction, but are severely limited by their inability to accurately acknowledge and heal the anger, avoidance, fear, and psychological distortion created not only by war, but the pervasive discourse of violence that preceded the armed conflict and undoubtedly remains embedded in the cultural landscape after the visible violence has ceased (Byrne, 2001).

The profound influence of the truth and reconciliation movement, where development is slow but the peace is holding, has forced peace professionals to begin to grapple with the personal anguish of violence and war. Hopefully, we will realize that structural approaches to conflict analysis alone are not sufficient to heal the pain of people's souls; analysis, validation, healing and transformation have to come from the individual and family level. Only then can communities heal and take on the larger tasks of social justice and community rebuilding. Hamber (2001) notices this divergence in community interests and individual interests when he states that:

> The political process is fundamentally different from the personal healing process: a country and its politicians may be ready to move on before the victims have come to terms with the magnitude of their personal pain ... Healing is an inescapable prolonged and enigmatic process. There are often no clear starting points, and fairly often no clear signs that the psychological impact of the past has been completely ameliorated. Personal healing is distinctive, and it often stands at odds with social demands to bury the past (p. 138).

What does it take to produce forgiveness and reconciliation after horrendous acts of murder, rape, torture and other atrocities that can never or should never be forgotten, least they be repeated again? The *truth* helps, because however painful it may be, it can begin to bring movement and closure to individual and family grieving.

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Reparations or restitution may play a role, but in most war ravaged countries, there are no resources left to distribute to victims or survivors, no matter how just their cause. Attending to those root causes of the conflicts which often lie in structural inequality and a culture of violence within the community itself requires both external and internal shifts in meaning and beliefs. This means that self reflection, understanding of other's perspective, and forgiveness of other are critical components of healing and the creation of positive peace. As conflict resolution and peace professionals, we must acknowledge this piece of the analysis and recovery process.

8. Conclusions

Forgiveness is a powerful tool in achieving peaceful resolution of protracted conflicts. To forgive is to be free from the imprisonment of the past that prevents life from moving on to a prospective future. Forgiveness is a future oriented approach to conflicts. It helps transform the individuals involved to compassionate beings, facilitate harmonious communication, heal the past wounds with recognition and apology, and restore relationships. The forgiving process is therapeutic, integrating both problem-solving and transformational approaches to conflicts. Most importantly, forgiveness brings peace to both parties.

Forgiving is not forgetting. Inner healing requires building a new identity. It can lead to a psychological transformation concerning painful situations of one's relationship with the other. Research and practice in these areas will require the interdisciplinary work of psychologists, therapists and conflict resolution and peace professionals with diverse backgrounds (Witty, 2012). These insights are often neglected in the forgiveness dialogues, as well as in conflict analysis and intervention.

Notes on contributors

Jenny Hsiu-Ying Chang, Ph. D., is an assistant professor of conflict resolution who works as an English and cross-cultural communication professional as well. She has taught in the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of North Carolina Greensboro in the U.S. and worked as a researcher at Academia Sinica in Taiwan. She is a certified mediator in Florida, U.S., who has conducted conflict resolution workshops and presented in international professional conferences on topics including trust building, harmony and conflict resolution, cross-cultural conflict resolution, intercultural communication, and problem-solving and conflict transformation. Her publications include the influence of fulfilling role obligations on restoring parent-child relationships after conflicts, as well as trust conceptualization, trust development, and trust building from cross-cultural approaches.

Kuang-Hui Yeh, Ph.D. in Social and Personality Psychology, is now a research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology in Academia Sinica and a joint-appointment professor of Psychology Department with National Taiwan University. He has been exploring indigenous conceptualizations, theories, and paradigms for understanding Chinese family interactions and their impact on individual adaptation and development since 1985. In his recent publications, he has proposed the Dual Filial Piety Model and the Dual Autonomy Model for Chinese people.

Shih-Chi Hsu, Ph. D. in Psychology, has been graduated from National Taiwan University (NTU). She has worked as a research assistant at NTU. Her areas of specialization are: indigenous psychology, personality psychology, gender and psychology, and culture and family. She has won the Dissertation Award and the Dean's Award for doctoral students given in 2015 by Taiwanese Psychological Association and School of Science at NTU respectively. Her publications relate to the relationship between mother-and daughter- in law, parent-child relationship, role obligation, interpersonal relationship, harmony and conflict.

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