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**Dr. Nilanjana Mitra**

Assistant Professor & Head,  
Department of Psychology,  
Swami Vivekananda  
University, West Bengal, India

**Paromita Mitra Bhaumik**

HOD, Department of Clinical  
Psychology, George Group of  
Colleges, MAKAUT, Kolkata,  
West Bengal, India

## The value of forgiveness in human life

**Nilanjana Mitra and Paromita Mitra Bhaumik**

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### Abstract

Forgiveness is a soulful creative act that leave people in a position to move forward into the future together. With regard to the human emotion of forgiveness, Hannah Arendt (1958) has phrased in her book, *The Human Condition*: “Without being forgiven we would remain the victims of its consequences forever” and it is ‘forgiving’ that serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose “sins” hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation.

**Keywords:** Forgiveness, soulful creative act, moving forward, human emotion, consequences of the past

### Introduction

Factually, the true origin of forgiveness lies within the ancient religious traditions and there is no dispute about it. Todd (1985) <sup>[49]</sup> have found forgiveness to be linked to Judaeo-Christian tradition. McCullough and Worthington (1999) <sup>[32]</sup> have equally observed how most of the world’s religions have endorsed the concept of forgiveness for millennia and how all the great monotheistic traditions have upheld that since human beings are always forgiven by God, they should learn to forgive their own transgressors, as well.

However, it is a pity to see how ‘post enlightenment thought’ failed to capture the essence of forgiveness, how social scientists, vehemently ignored the concept for almost three centuries. That forgiveness has both conceptual connection and historical association with ‘religion’ created an *anti-forgiveness bias* amongst a section of the social scientists. According to Sells and Hargrave (1998) <sup>[48]</sup>, it is this bias that became one of the possible reasons for the scantiness of literature in the initial years.

However, this void didn’t last forever and the subject, slowly but steadily, found its place within the positivist and humanistic traditions. The new generation of psychologists started to acknowledge the healing power and significance of forgiveness and there had been a gradual upsurge of academic discourse since the last five decades. Many eminent scholars (Hope, 1987; Shontz and Rosenak, 1988; McMinn and Rhoads, 1996) <sup>[26, 46, 36]</sup> started beginning to accept it as a mainstream subject of social science. As in the gradual course of run, the concept of forgiveness got freed from the realm of religiousness, it crossed the boundaries of churches, synagogues, mosques and temples and eventually stopped being perceived just as a religious theme (DiBlasio & Benda, 1991; DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993) <sup>[10, 11]</sup>. Alongside philosophers and scholars of spiritual faiths, the new-age psychologists, too, tried to grasp the notion of forgiveness with an intention to delineate its boundaries (McCullough *et al.*, 1997; Kaminer, 2006; Zechmeister & Romero 2002; Worthington *et al.*, 2005) <sup>[35, 28, 56, 52]</sup>. So, it was through research and academic discourse that ‘forgiveness’ gradually began to be explored as a tool of social science by the psychologists.

### Forgiveness: Context & Relevance

There is hardly any individual who does not at some point of time feel betrayed, disappointed and wronged by other individuals. Human beings are social beings and cannot avoid contact with other fellow beings. It is this communal nature of human beings that sometimes put them into troublesome or unfavourable situations. So, human life may involve instances in which one man may strike out against another in an injurious manner. Hence, getting insulted, offended or threatened by another individual is quite a common affair in one’s life. Throughout history and across culture, there are innumerable instances showing how much

**Corresponding Author:**

**Dr. Nilanjana Mitra**

Assistant Professor & Head,  
Department of Psychology,  
Swami Vivekananda  
University, West Bengal, India

human beings are vulnerable, how much people are exposed to the risks of getting harmed or wronged at the hands of another. In the opinion of Orcutt (2006) <sup>[40]</sup>, when persons get involved in such interpersonal conflicts, they may have bouts of negative feelings and thus suffer from emotional distress and social anxiety. Such unpleasant interpersonal issues may also give rise to a sense of unfairness, betrayal and humiliation along with a desire of revenge and avoidance (Orth *et al.*, 2008) <sup>[41]</sup>. While *avoidance* means both seeking and maintaining distance from the transgressor, *revenge* is an ill feeling of reciprocating harm with more harm i.e. taking an opportunity to harm the transgressor in kind. Living in an age of aggression and counter-aggression, most human beings have become revenge seeking and hence are prone to cause damage to one another. It is in such contexts of avoidance and revenge, that the human emotion of forgiveness has earned recognition and found its rightful place within the humanistic traditions of Positive Psychology. Since, the behavioural virtue of forgiveness acts as a balm and keep in check the destructive propensities of human beings, it is essential to sensitize the society about this human emotion of forgiveness and also gather more knowledge about its blissful essence.

Though the topic of forgiveness is increasingly gaining focus with time, scholars have widely differed in their opinions about the exact nature of *forgiveness* and so there are various definitions of the same.

### **Forgiveness: Definitions & Viewpoints**

The first important definition has been given by North (1987) <sup>[28]</sup>. According to him, forgiveness is a wilful decision by a victim to let go his resentment and anger toward his offender. There is an underlying sense of mercy and compassion infused in this definition. In the latter years, this definition got wide recognition from Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1992) <sup>[39]</sup>, Hebl and Enright (1993) <sup>[19]</sup> and Gassin (1996) <sup>[20]</sup>.

According to Pingleton (1989) <sup>[21]</sup>, forgiveness is a psychological condition that helps an injured person first to win over his initial tendency of retaliating or seeking retribution and then to renounce his desire to hit back upon a perpetrator, who caused him injury. The concept of 'antithesis' of a man's innate response towards violation and victimization is the core area of this definition.

According to Bass and Davis (1994) <sup>[22]</sup>, forgiveness is a virtue that helps a person to give up his anger and to not hold grudge against his perpetrator and not seek any compensation from him. In the future years, Sells and Hargrave (1998) <sup>[48]</sup> have pointed out that this simplistic definition has failed to incorporate the multi-dimensionality of the concept of forgiveness and lacks the ability to incorporate the intergenerational factor that helps recovery from injury.

Smedes (1984) <sup>[23]</sup> has drawn a unique parallel between 'surgical procedure' and 'forgiveness' and has argued that forgiveness is the only way to remove the wrong doings of the past from our memory.

McCullough *et al.*, (1997) <sup>[35]</sup> have tried to give a more appropriate definition of forgiveness. According to them, forgiveness involves a change of motivation on the victim's part whereby the victimized person becomes less motivated to retaliate against an offender; less motivated to maintain distance from the offender; and more inclined towards

conciliation with the offender despite the latter's harmful actions.

Robert Enright, who has dedicated 12 long years of his life (1989 – 2000) in the study of this construct, has defined forgiveness as a willpower that propels the victim to get rid of all kinds of negative judgements and resentment with respect to his transgressor. Instead of having indifferent attitude towards the offender, one should utilize his willpower to foster enough generosity, love and compassion and thus get into a loving relationship with him. The fruition of forgiveness lies in the willingness of developing a benevolent stance towards one's transgressor and abandoning all sorts of negative feeling towards him (Enright & Zell, 1989; Enright *et al.*, 1992; Andrews, 2000) <sup>[24, 39, 2]</sup>.

As social scientist progressed with their definitions through the years, it has been found that forgiveness helps human beings to relinquish certain negativities from their mind such as

- Anger (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Davenport, 1991; Bass and Davis, 1994) <sup>[22]</sup>
- Resentment (North, 1987; Enright *et al.*, 1996) <sup>[38, 12]</sup>
- Record of wrongs (DiBlasio, 1991) <sup>[10]</sup>
- Revenge (Cloke, 1993) <sup>[57]</sup> and Shame (Halling, 1994) <sup>[58]</sup>

### **Forgiveness & its connotations**

To understand the psychological construct of forgiveness, it is also necessary to differentiate among three senses as per its properties: as a response, as a social capital and as a personality disposition.

#### **As a Response**

For many psychologists, forgiveness is a cognitive, emotional and/or behavioural response to inter personal or intra personal conflict. It is an essential response to a basic human challenge – how to maintain connectivity with fellow humans in the face of a transgression. McCullough & Worthington (1994), McCullough *et al.*, (1997) <sup>[35]</sup>, McCullough (2000) <sup>[30]</sup> have viewed forgiveness as a kind of response that brings a motivational change on the victim's part and in turn helps him establish a pro-social attitude towards a blameworthy transgressor.

According to McCullough *et al.*, (1998) <sup>[34]</sup>, the relevance of forgiveness arises in the context of a transgression when a victim, instead of walking along the path of righteous indignation, becomes pro-social and responds to the injurer in a more positive way and in turn restore benevolent and harmonious interpersonal relations with their transgressors. They have further observed that people who locate forgiveness at their motivational level can counteract or modulate their negative attitudes with passage of time and learn to respond towards their offender in a less negative and more positive or prosocial way. Since forgiveness is truly a productive response, in the face of hurt and pain, for McCullough *et al.*, (2001) <sup>[33]</sup> this human emotion of forgiveness is not only mutually beneficial to the individuals concerned but it is also beneficial on the societal level.

#### **As a Social Capital**

The construct of forgiveness has also been perceived as a social tool that helps in the harmonious operation of various social units (families, marriages and communities) by maintaining peace and reducing social friction. Power

(1994) <sup>[42]</sup> has advocated that when forgiveness involves 'ideal reciprocity' then it allows individuals to not only restore relationship but also establish an equitable social order. Hargrave (1994) <sup>[17]</sup> has focussed on the dimensions of relational ethics and has added that an innate sense of justice and morality is required to maintain an equitable balance amongst family members. The study has conceptualized the process of forgiveness as a combination of two over-arching categories – Exoneration and Forgiveness, each in turn involving 2 stations *viz.* insight, understanding, allowing compensation and over act of forgiveness. Hargrave has reaffirmed that forgiveness, being a reciprocating interaction between these 4 stations, is a social capital which aims at restoring relationships through its progressive effort. The belief that forgiveness acts as an essential tool for maintaining relationships and independence amongst family members has also been confirmed by Sells and Hargrave (1998) <sup>[48]</sup>. In this respect, Witvliet *et al.*, (2001) <sup>[51]</sup> is of the opinion that while some social units (marriage, family) need to be highly forgiving; other social institutions (education, service) need to be less forgiving and may call for punishment.

### As a Personality Disposition

As a personality disposition, forgiveness may be understood as an inherent quality of mind and character to forgive an offender, in the face of inter-personal transgressions. Such individuals are naturally forgiving and are often driven by a deliberate decision to let go the negative emotions and forgive the offender. Tangney *et al.*, (2007) <sup>[47]</sup> have remarked that the decision regarding, whether to forgive or not, very much depends on the mental attitude or disposition of an individual. In this regard, they have also tried to assess individual differences in the propensity to forgive. In this sense, Witvliet *et al.*, (2001) <sup>[51]</sup> has observed that most people, scaled along a forgiving-unforgiving continuum, fall somewhere intermediate on the range. It is also noteworthy that disposition to forgive has many aspects ingrained in it (Mullet *et al.*, 1998) <sup>[37]</sup>.

According to many eminent researchers, the forgiving disposition is correlated (Positively or negatively) with a broad array of variables that includes several personality traits, psychological symptoms, moral emotions, hope and self-esteem (Tangney *et al.*, 2007; Berry *et al.*, 2001) <sup>[47, 6]</sup>. Several scholars have even tried to simplify the issue by relating the forgiving quality to a set of higher-order personality factors, such as the Five-Factor (Big Five) personality taxonomy as proposed by Costa & McCrae (1999) <sup>[8]</sup>. According to various literary findings, forgiving personalities are generally in possession of two of such higher order dimensions *viz.* Agreeableness and Emotional Stability (McCullough & Hoyt, 1999; McCullough *et al.*, 2001; Berry *et al.*, 2001) <sup>[32, 33, 6]</sup>.

The quality of *agreeableness* is a personality factor that involves positive traits like altruism, empathy, care and generosity. According to Trait theorists, persons who are highly agreeable tend to thrive in the inter personal realm and experience less conflict in comparison to those persons who are less agreeable. They have also added that agreeable people have a higher sense of moral responsibility and are more empathic towards others. Based on these assumptions the trait psychologists clarify that agreeable people are low on descriptors such as "vengeful" and highly rated them as "forgiving" personalities. This association between

*Agreeableness* and *Forgiveness* have been very much confirmed by renowned psychologists like Ashton *et al.*, (1998) <sup>[5]</sup> and Allemand *et al.*, (2013) <sup>[1]</sup>.

People who appear dispositionally inclined to forgive are also blessed with the quality of *emotional stability*. Emotionally stable people are neither too moody nor too sensitive. So, emotional stability may be defined as a personality dimension that involves 'low vulnerability to experiences of negative emotion'. Thus, according to the trait theorists like Ashton *et al.*, (1998) <sup>[5]</sup>; McCullough & Hoyt, (1999) <sup>[32]</sup>; Berry *et al.*, (2001) <sup>[6]</sup>, people who are high in emotional stability score higher in terms of their dispositional forgiveness in comparison to their less emotionally stable counterparts.

The research study conducted by Hoyt *et al.*, (2005) <sup>[27]</sup> has demonstrated that the dispositional characteristics of the forgiver are very much linked to the nature of the relationship and the circumstantial situation around the offensive act. Likewise, Day & Maltby (2005) <sup>[9]</sup> have asserted that dispositional forgiveness is a crucial tool for maintaining strong social ties while lack of forgiveness is related with disposition of loneliness. They have also stressed the fact that those individuals who are keen to psychologically adjust through interpersonal forgiveness can keep themselves away from loneliness as well as disruptive social and emotional effects. In the opinion of McCullough *et al.*, (2001) <sup>[33]</sup>, a forgiving person suffers less turmoil and is more emotionally stable than the person who fails to forgive. The study has also shown that forgiveness not only reduces loneliness but also helps human beings to keep away from negative emotions like hatred, hostility, bitterness and resentment.

### Forgiveness & misconceptions about it

Enright *et al.*, (1992) <sup>[39]</sup> have put much effort to clear various misconceptions about forgiveness. They have asserted that forgiveness should not be confused with

- Pardoning (As it is strictly a legal concept)
- Condoning (As it justifies an offence)
- Excusing (As it relates an act of transgression to extenuating circumstances)
- Forgetting (As when memory of a transgression has decayed or slipped out of conscious awareness)
- Denial (As being an unwillingness or inability to perceive the harmful injuries that one has incurred).
- Reconciliation (which rather implies the restoration of a fractured relationship)

### Forgiveness: A Way to Achieve Balance

To provide a broad overview of the topic of forgiveness from a psychological view point, it is very significant to mention the study of Wade & Worthington (2003) <sup>[49]</sup>, whereby they have viewed the topic of forgiveness from a psychological view point and have proposed the metaphor 'injustice gap'. According to them, when people harm, mistreat or misbehave with others by breaking social rules – they create states of injustice. Here, the word 'injustice gap' refers to a gap between the way that things have become and the way that they should have been if things would have been fair and normal. Such situation necessitates that this gap must be filled somehow; or balance must be restored for establishing a proper sense of justice. According to scholars this 'injustice gap' may be filled through apologies (Exline *et al.*, 2007) <sup>[15]</sup>, attempts at restorative justice or retributive

punishment of offenders. Scholars like Exline (2013) <sup>[14]</sup> has further affirmed that people often experience intense anger when they believe that injustices have been committed not only against them but also against their loved ones (Green *et al.*, 2012) <sup>[16]</sup> or groups with whom they identify themselves (Browne, 2009) <sup>[7]</sup>. So, it is in the wake of such interpersonal offenses that 'forgiveness' may come as a positive response to fill up the 'injustice gap' and illuminate both the offender and the offended.

There are two other parallel theories that support Worthington's point of view in connection to 'injustice gap'. According to Social Exchange theory, transgressions create debts that need to be repaid so that a sense of fairness can be restored. Again, according to the Equity theory (Walster *et al.*, 1973) <sup>[50]</sup>, offensive acts or transgressions may create an imbalanced state and thus cause the offended party to receive outcomes that are poorer than deserved. In echo of these two earlier theoretical frameworks, Worthington further adds that the 'injustice gap' is substantial in case of serious offenses and can never be easily overlooked as opposed to trivial offenses.

### Forgiveness & Its Application

The decision about forgiving may not be so easy in practicality; particularly when a victim finds himself as a target of a serious offense or engulfed in a highly charged crisis situation. In such cases, the act of forgiveness may not be considered as a trivial issue, as it necessitates considerable effort on the victim's part. In support of this view, Worthington *et al.*, (2000) <sup>[55]</sup> have observed that forgiving usually takes time. Worthington (2007) <sup>[54]</sup> has even come up with a five-step forgiveness model or intervention plan that he has worked on for long years.

The acronym that stands for the model is REACH and what it signifies is as follows.

R = Recalling the hurt and acknowledging the feeling of hurt

E = Empathy helps the offender to replace hatred (negative emotion) with love and compassion (positive emotion)

A = Altruistic attitude enables one overcome the hesitation to forgive and inspires one to become unselfish and forgive the offender.

C = Committing to the experience of forgiveness and finally

H = Holding onto the experience of forgiveness

### Forgiveness Versus Unforgiveness

Scholars have unanimously shown how attitude of unforgiveness adversely affects the health of those who haven't been forgiven. What's more is that such feeling of sadness stays for long and further affects health (Hill *et al.*, 2015; Harris & Thoresen, 2006; Ricciardi *et al.*, 2013; Riek & Mania, 2012) <sup>[25, 18, 43, 44]</sup>. According to scholars, unforgiveness is a delayed reaction and not an immediate response that follows an offense. Negative emotions like hatred, resentment, anger, bitterness and rumination give rise to un-forgiveness (Worthington *et al.*, 2007; Harris & Thoresen, 2006) <sup>[54, 18]</sup>.

### Conclusion

Whenever there is an act of transgression, that is, when somebody breaks social rules and harm others – it is not the victim who gets affected alone but also those people surrounding him, in spite of not being directly involved in

the confrontation. Conflict of any kind may affect the overall atmosphere and rob peace of mind of people both, absent or present in the scene of confrontation. There is every chance that an incident of aggression will lead to further incidents of retaliative counter aggression which may again lead to negativities of escalating nature. So, that is no less than a potential threat to a social group and their peace of mind. In absence of submissive gestures, it is perhaps only forgiveness that may break a violence-cycle and bring stability in the social structure. So when human beings become generous and forgive their transgressors, not only this noble act affect the offender positively but also produce positive feelings among the surrounding people thus clearing the air. Talking about sub-human creatures, scientists have discovered how lower animals sometimes display submissive gestures and thus bring a stop to the aggression cycle. In an analogous fashion, it is the human emotion of forgiveness that has the right potential to lower any level of hostility and bring a pause in an ongoing cycle of violence. In this sense, forgiveness too has an adaptive evolutionary advantage (Komorita *et al.*, 1992; Enright, 1996) <sup>[29, 12]</sup> as it may play a crucial role in helping social groups live together with interpersonal accord and greater stability. Since, forgiveness helps preserve social structure and promotes human-survival and peace, the consensus according to Worthington *et al.*, (2005) <sup>[52]</sup> is that it is beneficial to all human beings across culture and time

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