

## The Use of Forgiveness in Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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### **Abstract**

**Objective:** The objective of this review article is to explore the development of the use of forgiveness in adolescent romantic relationships. **Background:** Often adolescent romantic relationships and platonic friendships are grouped together based on their voluntary nature. Research is identified that describes the unique nature of romantic relationships and thus justifies exploring them independent of friendships. Due to a lack of research on the use of forgiveness in adolescent romantic relationships, parallels were drawn between the use of forgiveness and the use of other conflict resolution skills in these relationships based on the similarity of the 3 level models of both, as well as other developmental patterns. **Results:** Significant differences were found between adolescent friendships and romantic relationships in the development of use of general conflict resolution skills with adolescents using higher levels of conflict resolution skills in romantic relationships at an earlier age than in platonic friendships. **Conclusions:** Parallels were drawn to justify the hypothesis that adolescents will use higher levels of forgiveness in romantic relationships at an earlier age than in platonic friendships. Some causal theories were proposed and future research directions were suggested.

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## **Introduction**

The last two decades have seen a surge in interest in the study of forgiveness. This has been partially encouraged by clinical interest in using forgiveness as an intervention tool for anger and aggression. There is some preliminary evidence that the use of forgiveness is related to personal well-being (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003), in addition to well-being in interpersonal relationships (McCullough, Rachal, et al., 1998). In this paper a review of current models of forgiveness will be explored as well as how forgiveness develops.

Though romantic relationships and friendships are often grouped together in forgiveness research due to their voluntary nature and level of commitment (e.g., McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, & Worthington, 1998), Davis and Todd (1982) noted that romantic relationships are uniquely different from platonic friendships. To examine the unique qualities of romantic relationships, an exploration of the differences in the development and use of forgiveness between friendships and romantic partnerships would be valuable. Due to the limited amount of research done comparing forgiveness in romantic relationships to other types of peer relationships correlations will be drawn between the differences in use of general conflict resolution skills between these two types of relationships. Thoughts for future directions in research will also be discussed.

## **Models of Forgiveness**

A great deal of variety exists among current models of forgiveness. This is not due to a lack of ability of researchers to find consensus, but rather that the concept of forgiveness is so complex that many different factors can be explored. Some research has focused on interpersonal aspects of forgiveness (Park & Enright, 1997), whereas other research has concentrated on its intrapersonal processes (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). There also exist differences in what constitutes forgiveness, such as whether it can be defined only as the reduction of negative emotions towards the offender or whether it must also include replacing negative emotions with positive emotions (Wade & Worthington, 2003).

Park and Enright's (1997) research has focused primarily on the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness. Their model consists of three patterns: revenge, external, and internal forgiveness. With revenge forgiveness the injured person seeks to retaliate or get back at the injurer; to inflict pain similar to that felt. Only once this compensation has been made can the forgiveness happen. Though this may lead to the end of the overt conflict, the injured person may still harbor internal aggression. The second pattern is external forgiveness, a pattern that is driven mostly by the social pressure to forgive. The injured person feels obligated to forgive and therefore suppresses the residual feelings of hurt and resentment in order to outwardly forgive. Only in the third pattern, internal forgiveness, does the injured person begin to experience an internal process of

forgiveness. Here the injured person genuinely seeks to understand her role in the conflict as well as the motivations of the injurer. She forgives out of a principle of love and benevolence. Unlike the other two patterns, an outward display of forgiveness may follow but is not necessary.

Though this is an insightful model it is not completely consistent with other definitions of forgiveness. Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989) defined forgiveness as the injured party releasing the injurer from possible behavioral retaliation. In Park & Enright's (1997) first pattern this release cannot occur since behavioral retaliation is the defining element. Additionally Enright et al. (1989) asserted that with forgiveness the injured party is released from inner anger and resentment, which is not integral to either pattern 1 or 2. Though all three of these patterns describe the ending of an overt conflict or the response to an injury, according to the above definitions only the third actually reaches forgiveness. Based on these definitions an interpersonal look at forgiveness does not offer a complete picture.

In a phenomenological description of forgiveness Fow (1996) described the intrapersonal process of forgiveness with three themes. In the first theme the injured person experiences a cognitive dissonance between her involvement in, or in reaction to, the injury and some part of her concept of self. This motivates the injured person to search for further explanations for the incident. This theme of reconsideration is termed *Movement Toward Forgiveness*. In the second theme, *Transformation of Meaning*, the injured person begins to reframe the situation and more deeply consider the motivations of the other in order to remove the dissonance. Only then can she reach the third theme, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, in which internal release from the emotional consequences of the transgression occurs. It is important to note here that because of Fow's focus on the intrapersonal process of forgiveness reconciliation may occur following forgiveness but is not necessary.

McCullough, et al. (1997) offered another intrapersonal model by defining the process of forgiving in terms of motivational changes. In their description of the process of forgiveness, one becomes motivated less by retaliation and maintaining estrangement and more by "conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions." (pg. 321) They noted that forgiveness is not a motivation in itself but rather a name given to the process of changing internal motivations. This definition expands upon Fow's concept of *Movement Toward Forgiveness* and may offer more insight into the "cognitive dissonance" he described.

In looking at the intrapersonal process of forgiveness the question has been raised about what actually constitutes forgiveness. A great deal of research has focused on the decrease of negative emotions associated with un-forgiveness, such as anger, avoidance, or desire for retaliation (McCullough et al. 1998).

However, simply removing negative emotions could describe a number of other reactions to an offense such as denial, pity, or “moving-on.” Other researchers believe that this is only a piece of the total process of forgiveness. Holmgren (1993) asserted that a fundamental step in forgiving is “an attitude of real goodwill towards the offender”. This is also reflected in the McCullough et al.’s (1997) third motivational change towards “conciliation and goodwill for the offender.” The variation and convergence of these models indicates that neither a purely intrapersonal nor interpersonal view can completely describe the process of forgiveness and that an integrated model is necessary. Also forgiveness cannot be viewed simply as the reduction of negative emotions; the incorporation of new positive emotions must replace the reduced negative emotions.

### **Development of Forgiveness**

The literature shows support for a developmental pattern in use of forgiveness. Testing their own three pattern model, Park and Enright (1997) found that their participants generally moved across the three patterns with age. Junior high students were found to be in transition from *Revenge* (pattern 1) to *External* (pattern 2) forgiveness, but they still use both. They appeared to be motivated to forgive by both retaliation and social pressure. Comparatively, college students had moved past *Revenge*, being most affected by social pressure to forgive, but beginning to show some principles of beneficence by using *Internal* forgiveness (pattern 3). Subkoviak et al. (1995) found a significant age difference with college students experiencing a much lower level of forgiveness and much higher level of anxiety due to deep interpersonal injuries when compared to their same-gender parent. In testing an earlier developmental model Enright et al. (1989) found that both 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders were significantly lower in use of forgiveness than college students and adults. By 10<sup>th</sup> grade, though, adolescents more closely resembled college students but were still significantly lower than adults.

Though the findings are consistent, the literature exploring the development of forgiveness is limited and what is available has focused on either non-romantic peer relationships or hypothetical moral situations. A gap in the research exists in comparing the development of forgiveness in romantic and non-romantic peer relationships. By framing Park and Enright’s (1997) three forgiveness patterns as strategies for ending overt conflict and exploring some of the literature on general conflict resolution development some insight may be gained to the development of forgiveness as well as provide a base from which to make hypotheses about the use of forgiveness in romantic relationships.

### **Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution**

In a 2001 meta-analysis Laursen suggested three patterns of conflict resolution. *Coercion* is a process in which one party makes demands and the other submits. This can include commands, denials, and physical or verbal

aggression. *Negotiation* involves one party making compromises to find a middle ground. It involves sharing, turn-taking, or talking things out. *Disengagement* describes abandoning the conflict without attempting to find a resolution.

Clear parallels can be drawn between these three patterns and Park and Enright's (1997) patterns of forgiveness. In both revenge forgiveness and coercion, some type of force is used by one party to meet her own needs at the expense of the other. Though this tactic may end the overt conflict no resolve has been met and one or both of the parties involved may still harbor resentment or anger. The use of disengagement, like external forgiveness, allows for the conflict to be dropped without any attempt being made to find resolution. This could be motivated by social or moral pressure as well as by a lack of interest in finding, or an inability to find, a resolution. Because no resolution is found, the negative emotions associated with the conflict most likely will not be released. In both Laursen and Park & Enright's models the third pattern is unique because of the presence of an internal process and an attempt to find meaningful resolution to the conflict. Like internal forgiveness, a person engaging in negotiation is able to examine her own role in the situation and is willing to accept some responsibility for the conflict. However the negative emotions that resulted from the conflict are actually processed and relieved. It can be argued that only through the third stage in each model are the goals actually met; the dissolution of the conflict and the injured party and the injurer are released from the negative emotions.

Evidence has been found that these conflict resolution strategies also occur in a developmental pattern. Laursen, Hartup, and Koplas (1996) found that children primarily use coercion to resolve conflicts whereas adolescents prefer negotiation, and use coercion and disengagement equally often. Indeed, Selman et al. (1986) found a developmental increase in the use of negotiation and collaborative conflict resolution strategies across adolescent years.

Both forgiveness and general conflict resolution appear to follow a similar developmental pattern. In the earliest stage the individual is concerned only with fulfilling a personal need, to release aggression in the case of revenge forgiveness and to defend one's self or assert one's power in coercion. As children enter adolescence, social acceptance becomes of paramount concern. Social judgment of behaviors such as coercion and revenge could explain why external forgiveness and disengagement become more common resolution tools. Without the understanding or the ability to truly resolve conflicts, adolescents may adopt resolution strategies that quickly end the conflict and offer the illusion that the conflict has been mediated even though no internal release from the emotional consequences of the incident is reached. At some point in adolescence or young adulthood, however, a desire emerges to genuinely resolve conflict and better understand the causes of the conflict; perhaps this can be attributed to the increasing importance of interpersonal relationships

and the growing understanding of what is needed to maintain them. Regardless of contributing factors, strong enough parallels can be made between the developmental patterns of forgiveness and conflict resolution skills to draw reasonable comparisons between them.

### **Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution in Romantic Relationships**

Adolescent romantic relationships differ from friendships on level of passion and fascination with one another (Davis & Todd, 1982). Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2006) noted that adolescent romantic relationships, as well as adult romantic relationships, are distinctly characterized by exclusivity. However, these two relationships differ in duration with friendships lasting longer (Gordon & Miller, 1984). This difference in duration could reflect a higher resiliency to conflict in friendships. Rather than attributing the difference in resiliency of adolescent romantic relationships to a lesser ability to resolve conflict, I propose that it is this low level of resiliency that encourages the development of higher conflict resolution strategies. From an evolutionary standpoint, the ability to forge and maintain cross-gender romantic relationships is of primary importance in adolescence (Weisfield & Woodward 2004). This priority paired with the relative instability of this type of relationship creates an environment of increased growth as adolescents strive to maintain these new relationships.

Research supports this hypothesis with the finding that in both adolescents and young adults, negotiation is used more often in romantic relationships than in friendships (Laursen, Finkleston, and Betts, 2001). One study found that participants reported greater willingness to oblige and greater hesitancy to dominate or avoid romantic partners than friends (Richardson et al., 1989). Even when compared to cross-gender friendships, Shute (2006) found that youth used more compromising and less overt anger in romantic relationships. Given the similarities between the development of forgiveness and general conflict resolution skills, I hypothesize that higher levels of forgiveness will be used in adolescent romantic relationships compared to non-romantic peer relationships. Perhaps the differences seen between these two types of relationships can be attributed to the individual's attention the future of the relationship. With friendships there is not a great deal of need to focus on the future of the relationship because the nature of the relationship stays relatively steady over time. In contrast, successful romantic relationships develop from being mostly affiliative and affectionate into being based in a more mature bonding and attachment and may culminate in the ultimate goals of cohabitation, marriage, and procreation. This attention to future planning could affect the individual's desire to genuinely resolve conflict. More research is necessary to draw any empirical connections.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that there are wide gaps in the research done on the use of forgiveness. Future research should focus on refining an integrated model of

forgiveness reflecting both interpersonal and intrapersonal processes. Current research has described how the use of forgiveness differs between voluntary (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships) and involuntary relationships (e.g., parent-child relationships, co-workers). Because romantic relationships are uniquely different from friendships, more exploration is needed into how the two differ in their use of forgiveness. More specifically, are there differences in future planning between these two types of relationship and does this have an effect on the development of forgiveness and other conflict resolution skills?

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