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## Empathy and Forgiveness Relationship

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years in which differences have increased and tolerance in inter-personal relationships has equally reduced in societies, the empathy and forgiveness concepts have started to gradually come to the forefront. Research carried out has revealed that there is a relevant relation between individuals' forgiveness levels and their empathetic behaviours and the importance of these two concepts (Farrow et al., 2001; Macaskill, Maltby and Day, 2002; Kmiec, 2009; Norton, 2009). In this study, in consideration of the research indicating that it affects the empathy-forgiveness level, the relationship between the forgiveness and empathy levels is evaluated.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Forgiveness, Empathy and Forgiveness Relationship

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### INTRODUCTION

Human brain uses a psychological scaffold in order to take interest in and care of other people and forgiveness is built upon a part of this same scaffold (Zechmeister and Romero, 2002, s.675; McCullough, Worthington and Rachal, 1997, s.321). This is a situation which may be considered to be both positive and negative. Its positive aspect is that it is much easier for an individual to forgive the people with whom he has close relations. Its negative aspect is that numerous people who cause damage in real life are sometimes people from those groups that are not trusted or hated and sometimes strangers, those people whom an individual does not feel close. Then, how a man will take interest in and care of a person with whom he does not particularly have any relationship? The most important way to do this is the empathetic feeling. Empathy is not a warm and vague feeling as it is usually considered. And in particular, it may be discouraging if it is related with suffering of another individual. When one feels too much empathy for another one, he may be said to have "sincere and intimate", "sympathetic", "compassionate" or "anxious" feelings for such individual. When one feels empathy for a person who really needs it, one tends to try to mitigate such individual's sorrow, notwithstanding whether or not such individual is a genetic relative (Batson, Ahmad, Lishner, Tsang, 2002, s.485).

The best way of taking away the feeling of revenge and replacing it with forgiveness is to ensure people to feel empathy for the person who has caused damage to them. The study carried out by McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) has shown that when people start to feel empathy for a rule violator, it now becomes harder for them to be in an attitude containing willingness for revenge and that instead forgiveness usually becomes apparent. According to the research carried out by Eaton and Struthers (2006) and further by Berry, Worthington, Wade, OyenWitvliet and Kiefer (2005), Empathy encourages forgiveness in the relationships between workmates, friends, romantic couples, Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland and even between offenders and their victims. To feel empathetic for someone leads to the complete loss of willingness to retaliate (Giancola, 2003, s.113; Batson, Ahmad, 2001, p.25).

### EMPATHY-FORGIVENESS RELATIONSHIP

Harmon-Jones, Vaughn-Scott, Mohr, Sigelman and Harmon-Jones (2004) have studied the empathy and revenge centres in the research they carried out on human brain. Researchers have experienced a high level of activity in the seeking systems in men's brains when they have been made to watch a wrongdoing player being given painful shocks on his hands in this study. However, the same increase has not occurred in women. Instead, they have experienced an activity in the side of the brain which

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generates the distress when we feel a physical pain when a wrongdoing player is given some shock. This experience has shown that women develop empathy. Further, neither men nor women have experienced seeking system activation while watching an equitable player is given painful shocks. In such cases, they have also experienced some activity in the pain networks of the brain; according to the measurement in the study carried out, the higher the “empathy” scores received by the subjects the higher pain network activation experienced. This study has revealed that people do not experience any increase in the left prefrontal cortex activation which typically accommodates willingness for revenge in a case where they feel empathy for those people who have harmed them/others. To stand aside passively and watch a foe to suffer may make someone feel good. However, it has been observed that if suffering of a foe creates some sorrow in a person, then revenge seems useless, irrelevant and cruel and instead feeling of forgiveness comes to the forefront (McCullough, 2008, p.149).

Likewise, Toussaint (2005) has studied the gender differences in the relationship between empathy and forgiveness and found women’s level of empathising to be higher in the inter-gender comparison he carried out in terms of empathy as supported by the findings of this study. Women have usually been stimulated to be empathetic and they are trained to have an empathetic tendency by their parents (Klein and Hodges, 2001). This may lead to the fact that women achieve higher scores in the empathetic tendency measurements as compared to men.

In the social psychological determinative model of forgiveness, as the determinants of forgiveness, the most important of psychological variables is designated to be affective empathy (McCullough et al., 1998, p.1558). In the study carried out in order to support this model, the results have shown a higher relationship with avoidance and revenge, relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, apology, empathy and rumination considered to be the sub-aspects of forgiveness. In forgiveness therapies, efforts may be made to ensure an individual to be able to empathise so that any negative impacts experienced by injured individuals may be overcome. In general terms, ability to forgive is closely related with the ability of establishing empathy with one another (Konstam, Chernoff and Deveney, 2001, p.26).

In forgiveness therapies, the injured is ensured to have more information about the offender in order to create empathy (Hill, 2001, p.370). It is stated that forgiveness does not occur as those individuals with lower empathetic ability such as narcissists and people with antisocial personality disorder cannot establish the empathy required to forgive. Therefore, empathy appears to be one of the important intermediaries. In the study they have carried out, McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997), who study the relationship of forgiveness with personal and relational variables, state that empathy is related with forgiveness as forgiveness is related with reconcilability and honesty. They have stated that the empathy felt for an offender is influential in the achievement of a successful forgiveness. In their study, Zechmeister and Romero (2002) have found out that individuals have higher possibilities of being able to consider the incident from the viewpoint of the offender in the stories in which they forgive the offender who has made them victims as compared to those stories in which forgiveness does not occur. In this study, to forgive is associated with less anger against the offender, thinking less of his actions and encumbering him less. The most effective attempt in convincing one to forgive may be establishing empathy (McCullough, Worthington and Rachal, 1997, p.321).

In a way similar to this opinion, Greenberg, Warwar and Malcolm (2008) have also stated that forgiveness contains two important emotional processes and that one of these processes is the analysis of the rage and anger experienced due to injury and the other one is to start feeling empathy with such positive feelings as affection and liking towards the injurer. In a study carried out recently, Hodgson and Wertheim (2007) has stated that empathetic tendency manages the relationship between feeling management and forgiveness. As Malcolm and Greenburg (2000) have stated, this opinion is one which supports the opinion that paying attention to feelings and trying to repair them makes it possible to see from another one’s perspective and thus nourishes forgiveness.

McCullough (2008) has included the following story about the empathy-forgiveness relationship in his book entitled “Beyond Revenge”. “

Steven McDonald was a cop in New York City. One day in 1986, Shavod Jones shot him in the Central Park and he was paralysed below his neck. In a strange way, McDonald could not find any sense of revenge in him: “I was angry with him, but confused as well because I noticed that I did not hate him. I was even sorry for him. I wished he would use his life to help people but not to

injure/harm them. I wished he would find peace and the purpose of his life. I therefore forgave him.

What happened to him in the Central Park confined him to the wheelchair for his life. The life he knew irreversibly changed. Still he felt empathy for Jones, and this empathy turned to care and care to forgiveness.” (McCullough, 2008, p.149).

McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) have carried out a sectional questionnaire and a controlled field experiment and studied the causal role which empathy plays in encouraging forgiveness. Researchers have found out that forgiveness is a motivational behaviour which prevents destructive relationships of people and which ensures them to be constructive towards someone rather than destructive and that empathy positively mediates apologising and forgiving behaviours by using the structural equalisation model. In the same study, a forgiveness model is defined, basing on the thesis that others may only be forgiven if they empathise. An empathy model is studied for forgiveness. Authors have found a result consistent with the following hypotheses: (a) relationship between forgiving one’s offense and apologising is a function of increasing empathy for the offender and (b) forgiveness is uniquely related to soothing behaviour. Results usually support the behaviour and empathy-forgiveness connection and have revealed that empathy plays an important role in the forgiveness process.

Worthington (1998b) has studied a forgiveness empathy-modesty-commitment model applied to couples in a family. The study carried out supports this model in the individual therapy and psycho-educational groups in which the forgiver does not have to face the offender. Researcher has stated in the conclusions that the family therapy in which spouses, parent-child couples or siblings have to admit forgiveness and forgiving needs vis-a-vis requires a special process containing empathy as well. Further, in this study, the relationship of forgiving processes with empathy, modesty and commitment is also dwelled upon.

In their study entitled “Consultancy and Values”, Konstam, Chernoff and Deveney (2001) have studied the role of embarrassment, guiltiness, anger and empathy in forgiveness as well as forgiveness and its relationship with expected ethical emotional processes (embarrassment, guiltiness, anger and tendency to empathetic response). Gender differences related to forgiveness have been analysed. Participants consisted of 138 graduate students at a big northeastern urban university. Results have shown a high relationship with avoidance and revenge, relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, apology, empathy and rumination considered to be the sub-aspects of forgiveness. In the forgiveness therapies of the study, it is suggested that efforts should be made in order to ensure the counselee to be able to establish empathy so that the negative impacts experienced by the injured individuals may be overcome. In the conclusions of the study, it is found out that the ability to forgive is closely related with the ability to establish empathy for another individual.

Macaskill, Maltby and Day (2002) have carried out a study on forgiving one’s own self and others and emotional empathy. The objective of this study is to study the two aspects of forgiveness and the correlation between empathy and forgiving. In this study, a sample group of 324 people (100 men and 224 women) consisting of British university students who are between 18 and 51 years of age and who have applied self-forgiveness (Mauger, Perry, Freeman and Grove, 1992) and emotional empathy (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972) scales has been used. In the study, the forgiveness scale of Mauger and his colleagues has been used because this scale addresses the attitudes and behaviours for forgiveness from two different perspectives: forgiving one’s own self and others. Further, the emotional empathy scale has been used. The reason for this is that this scale brings two different theoretical approaches to empathy: a) tendency to be able to notice the feelings of others, b) attempt to share one’s feelings. Cronbach alpha values at satisfactory level have been found for all scales; no relevant Pearson correlation has been found between the forgiving one’s own self, forgiving others and emotional empathy, age and forgiving one’s own self, age and forgiving others and age and emotional empathy variables.

It is observed that there is not relevant difference between the scores of the men and the women on forgiving one’s own self and forgiving others in terms of both forgiveness scales. However, it is observed that the difference between men and women is relevant in terms of emotional empathy and women got higher scores in the scale of this variable. According to the findings obtained, women have usually got higher scores in the empathy scale than men; however, no such difference is involved in terms of overall forgiveness scores. Despite the difference in the empathy scores, findings show that individuals with higher empathy levels among both men and women find it easier to take a step

for forgiving others while this is not involved in forgiving one's own self. This difference is apparent due to, perhaps, the fact that empathy is related with thinking of others; but this difference is still important because it provides researchers to be able to make theoretical distinctions between these two aspects of forgiveness. Findings obtained suggest that individuals make harsher judgment about their own selves than they do about others and the identified findings point out that emotional empathy is positively related with forgiving others but the relationship between empathy and forgiving one's own self is not high.

In their study, Fincham, Paleria and Regalia (2002) found out that relationship compatibility, stresses, empathy and affective responses predict forgiveness in married couples. They have stated that relationship compatibility predicts positive stresses farther and reduces negative affective responses and increases emotional empathy, thus directly or indirectly facilitating forgiveness.

Toussaint and Webb (2005) have studied gender differences in the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. The objective of this study is to study the gender differences at empathy and forgiveness levels and to determine how empathy and forgiveness relationship interact with gender differences. 127 participants are society members with various differences and completed personal reports about empathy and forgiveness. The existing results of the said study show that women's sense of empathy is higher as compared to men's. However, it is found out that women and men are equally forgiving. However, the relationship between empathy and forgiveness varies by gender differences. In men, empathy is associated with forgiveness while this is not the case with women. Unlike other studies, whether or not empathy is important in forgiveness in terms of women has not become definite in this study.

Blanchette (2011) has studied compassion fatigue, forgiveness and empathy in foster families. In this study, the researcher has aimed at studying the relationships between forgiveness, empathy, tenderness satisfaction, exhaustion and compassion fatigue in a therapeutical foster parental treatment. This study has been implemented with 70 foster care parents by the Virginia private therapeutical care centre. It has been assumed that positive variables of compassion fatigue are related with empathy and negative variables with forgiveness. It has been estimated that tenderness satisfaction will be positively associated with the variables of both forgiveness and empathy. Further, it has been expected that empathy and forgiveness will be positively correlated. Compassion tenderness is significantly related with the variables of forgiveness and negative exhaustion. It has been observed that empathy is a protective factor for mercy and compassion fatigue. Results of the study have further revealed that forgiveness significantly correlated with compassion fatigue and empathy. Moreover, empathy, tenderness satisfaction and forgiveness have also been found to be associated with exhaustion.

The study carried out by Skoda (2011) has been implemented to study the role of self-consciousness and the relationship between depression and forgiveness. Participants are the students of the Psychology Department of the Midwestern Catholic University. Participants' tendencies of self-compassion, forgiveness, depression and rumination have been studied. According to the result of the study, self-compassion, “abstraction” and rumination contain relevant connections with depression independent of one another and in a relevant manner. Further, it has been found out as a result of this study that self-compassion is associated with forgiveness. Positive aspects of self-consciousness (thoughtfulness, self-kindness) are closely associated with the conduct of forgiving others. These findings suggest not only that the scales of being good are correlated but also that thoughtfulness and self-kindness are two integral parts of the forgiveness process. As a result of the study, it has been observed that the self-forgiveness variable which is similar to self-compassion is not associated with empathy or forgiving others. Moreover, researchers have also wished to evaluate whether or not forgiving one's own self is a determinative factor on forgiving others. They have applied the forgiveness and empathy scales to the participants (n = 104). As the findings obtained from earlier studies state, empathetic concern is associated with forgiving others but not with forgiving one's own self.

Mapp (2013) has studied the relationships between forgiveness, imaginative interactions, empathy and relational satisfaction in those couples who live far from each other. The objective of this study is to build bridges over the theoretical and conceptual gaps between forgiveness theory, empathy, imaginative participation, satisfaction in the relationship and maintenance of the relationship strategies (Dialectic Theory). This study has formed a sample group consisting of couples who live long and short distances (n=181). According to the results of this study, forgiveness is considered to be an important factor in order to maintain romantic relationships in a healthy way. A lot of couples who live at long

distances rely on each other's empathy and inter-personal communication ability (in the form of imaginative interactions) in order to mitigate tension, talk mutually and review and scrutinise problems. The view as to the existence of a relationship having continued for a long time between empathy and forgiveness is supported.

Chung (2014) has carried out a study on the relationship between commitment and marital satisfaction, rumination (thinking about an injuring incident frequently), empathy and forgiveness intermediation roles. This study has studied the marital satisfaction basing on commitment theory. For this purpose, a sample adult commitment, empathy, forgiveness and marital satisfaction questionnaire has been applied to 208 Korean married teachers. It has been found out that spiritual forgiveness intermediation is a cause leading to adult commitment through structural equality modelling (SEM). It has been found out that apprehensive and withdrawn commitment, rumination, lack of empathy and non-forgiveness affect the marital satisfaction. The results of this study in which attention is drawn to the interrelationship of empathy and forgiveness verify the relationship between commitment, rumination, empathy and forgiveness and marriage.

## CONCLUSION

As it will be found out in this literature information, those individuals who learn the forgiveness process and internalize the forgiveness concept act with empathy, tolerance and remedial feelings instead of vindictiveness, self-pity, anger and aggression which are qualified as negative feelings, and this leads to some relief in mental health and psychological terms (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick and Johnson 2001, p.601). Research made advocates that view that the processes of empathy and forgiveness work together (Norton, 2009; Kmiec, 2009; Berry, Worthington, O'Connor Parrott and Wade, 2005).

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