

# Forgiveness, Intergroup

HERMANN SWART AND MILES HEWSTONE

Memories of past events and conflicts often remain inextricably woven into the fabric of the present in the lives of both victims and perpetrators living in post-conflict societies. Interpersonal forgiveness is important in the process of repairing the relationship between individuals previously in conflict. An act of interpersonal forgiveness allows the victim to let go of their feelings of anger and hurt felt towards the perpetrator and, in essence, cancels the “debt” owed on the part of the perpetrator. The victim thereby gives up their right to revenge, which allows the victim and the perpetrator to work towards repairing their relationship. (See FORGIVENESS, INTERPERSONAL.)

This understanding of interpersonal forgiveness can, in many ways, be extended to the realm of post-conflict intergroup relations. The concept of forgiveness between groups, or intergroup forgiveness, where “I as a member of my group” forgive “them as a group” for the harm that “their group” have caused “me and/or my group” has begun to gain momentum within the social psychological literature as an important psychological mechanism in the development of peace and reconciliation in post-conflict societies (Cairns, Tam, Hewstone, & Niens, 2005; Hewstone et al., 2004; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005).

In this article we briefly explore the concept of intergroup forgiveness and consider how it compares to interpersonal forgiveness. We also discuss how intergroup forgiveness may be achieved and what variables play an important role in either promoting or inhibiting intergroup forgiveness. Finally, we briefly consider ideas for future research on intergroup forgiveness.

## THE CONCEPT OF INTERGROUP FORGIVENESS

Social psychologists have for a number of decades understood the importance of differentiating between interpersonal-level behavior and intergroup-level behavior. There is an overwhelming body of research that supports the idea that individuals behave differently towards one another when group categories are made salient as compared to when group membership is not salient. Given this understanding, it is all the more surprising that, while there is an ever-growing body of literature on interpersonal forgiveness, the social psychological inquiry into intergroup forgiveness has only just recently begun to emerge.

Forgiveness may be regarded as an unfolding prosocial process of volitional change of affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes that serve to motivate the victim to modify or repair their relationship with the offender by pursuing relationship-constructive, as opposed to relationship-destructive, actions. It is worth emphasizing the *volitional* nature of forgiveness. As a complex prosocial transformation that can be powerfully healing, reconciling, and future-oriented, it cannot be prescribed or coerced. To do so could add to the cycle of violence rather than diminish it.

At first glance intergroup forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness seem very similar to one another insofar as they both involve the giving up of the right to revenge against the perceived perpetrator(s). From an interpersonal perspective the perpetrator(s) would be one or more specific individuals, whereas from an intergroup perspective the perpetrator(s) may comprise a collection of (often anonymous) individuals from a specific social group. However, upon closer inspection intergroup forgiveness appears to

differ from interpersonal forgiveness in a number of important ways (Hewstone et al., 2004).

First, interpersonal forgiveness is generally a private affair between individuals. Intergroup forgiveness, on the other hand, is often the subject of intense public scrutiny, and calls for intergroup forgiveness are frequently made with strong political undertones. Second, interpersonal forgiveness is more likely to follow subsequent to some form of apology or acknowledgment of guilt on the part of the perpetrator. Despite the groundswell of public apologies by perpetrator groups in post-conflict societies around the world, such apologies made by one group towards another are often received with skepticism. (See *APOLOGIES AND FORGIVENESS*.) Third, while interpersonal forgiveness is generally more likely to occur when there exists a fair chance that the consequences of the wrongdoing will disappear with time, the consequences of intergroup conflict are often of such a nature that they are very difficult to erase. A fourth distinction between interpersonal and intergroup forgiveness is that while it is often possible to distinguish between a distinct victim and perpetrator in an interpersonal dispute, such distinctions become more difficult to make when dealing with intergroup conflicts characterized by cycles of violence and revenge. In such cases it becomes more challenging to identify who it is that should be asking for forgiveness and who should be doing the forgiving.

Given these differences, interpersonal forgiveness might not be sufficient for improving intergroup relations in the aftermath of conflicts characterized not only by group-based violence but also by atrocities. As such, these differences highlight the importance of further research into how best to achieve intergroup forgiveness in post-conflict societies. Importantly, given the differences between interpersonal and intergroup forgiveness pointed out above, such research

should measure intergroup forgiveness at the community or group level rather than at the individual level of personalized trauma (Cairns et al., 2005).

The idea of forgiveness is often synonymous with forgetting about the wrongdoings one has suffered, and with reconciliation. As far as forgiving and forgetting is concerned, this is not always possible within societies characterized by a history of intractable conflict, nor is it necessarily desirable. In fact, a minimum degree of remembering the past is necessary in order for any forgiveness to occur. (See *RECONCILIATION, COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND*.) Calls for forgiveness in societies attempting to achieve post-conflict reconciliation are common. However, the precise nature of the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation remains as yet unresolved. It is unclear whether intergroup forgiveness is required in order to promote reconciliation, or whether reconciliation is necessary before intergroup forgiveness is possible. It may well be that intergroup forgiveness is likely to encourage greater reconciliation that, in turn, will further strengthen the desire towards intergroup forgiveness. Exploratory research suggests that there are subtle, yet meaningful differences between forgiveness, forgetting, and reconciliation (Hewstone et al., 2004). (See *RECONCILIATION: INSTRUMENTAL AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL ASPECTS*.) We turn now to a brief discussion on how intergroup forgiveness might be achieved.

## ACHIEVING INTERGROUP FORGIVENESS

Achieving peace and reconciliation in post-conflict societies has featured strongly on the international agenda over the past two to three decades. More often than not, the most persistent calls for forgiveness and reconciliation are made by foreign politicians who are removed from the conflict itself.

Historical perpetrator groups are asked to apologize, and truth commissions are established to create a collective memory of the past by bringing erstwhile victims and perpetrators together in mediated, public dialogue. As alluded to earlier, while apologies by historical perpetrator groups are welcomed by some they are also received with cynical skepticism by others, often because they do not go as far so as to include an explicit acknowledgment of guilt or any commitments towards making concrete reparations. (See TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS, PSYCHOLOGY AND.)

Empirical research on intergroup forgiveness in post-conflict societies faces a number of challenges, not the least of which is the potential to heighten intergroup anxiety and distrust. These challenges notwithstanding, the newly emerging body of research on intergroup forgiveness, within the context of Northern Ireland in particular, has begun to explore the group-level correlates of intergroup forgiveness (for reviews, see Cairns et al., 2005; Hewstone et al., 2004, 2006).

Positive intergroup contact experiences, particularly those that have acquaintance potential and encourage the development of cross-group friendships, have emerged as among the strongest predictors of a greater willingness to forgive the outgroup (even among segments of the population which have suffered the most during the conflict; see Hewstone et al., 2006). Our research suggests that this relationship between intergroup contact and forgiving the outgroup is mediated by reduced anger-related emotions, increased outgroup trust, increased perspective taking, and increased affective empathy towards the outgroup. Being able to put yourself “in the shoes” of the outgroup and recognizing the humanity in the outgroup by empathizing with them appears to be an important step towards being willing to forgive them. Conversely, dehumanizing the outgroup

discourages outgroup forgiveness. Thus, positive intergroup contact experiences through cross-group friendships not only mitigate those potential factors that may inhibit the willingness to forgive, such as anger, hatred, and the dehumanizing of the outgroup, but also augment those factors that promote a willingness to forgive the outgroup, such as trust and empathy (Tam et al., 2007). (See EMPATHY IN THE PROCESS OF FORGIVENESS; CONTACT THEORY: EXTENDED AND PARASOCIAL; CONTACT THEORY, INTERGROUP.)

Moreover, the degree of direct and indirect exposure to the conflict is a further important predictor of forgiveness. In Northern Ireland, for example, a greater degree of direct and indirect experience of victimization and violence during “the Troubles” is associated with a greater reluctance to acknowledge the wrongs committed by the ingroup in the course of the intergroup conflict, and with a reduced willingness to forgive the outgroup for the wrongs they have committed (Cairns et al., 2005; Hewstone et al., 2004, 2006).

Recent survey and experimental evidence suggests that group identity and categorization also play an important role in outgroup forgiveness. It seems reasonable to expect that a greater degree of identification with the ingroup would be associated with greater ingroup bias and a reduced willingness to forgive the outgroup. Survey and experimental data from Northern Ireland support this prediction; not only are higher levels of ingroup identification negatively associated with outgroup forgiveness, but they are also associated with ingroup bias. High ingroup identifiers are more willing to forgive ingroup perpetrators of group-based violence than they are outgroup perpetrators. This may be because the ingroup views the violence perpetrated by them during the conflict as justified. Similarly, those individuals who fought in the liberation struggle against the apartheid regime in South

Africa were unhappy with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report that was released after the hearings were concluded, which condemned the violence perpetrated on both sides of the apartheid struggle. Those fighting for the liberation forces felt that their acts of violence were justifiable in the face of apartheid oppression (Thompson, 2001; see also Gibson, 2004). (See TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS, PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF.)

A possible solution to this problem of strong ingroup identification is to encourage broader category inclusiveness within post-conflict societies. Wohl and Branscombe (2005) ran a series of experiments testing whether increasing category inclusiveness would lead to greater forgiveness of a historical perpetrator group (Germans and White Canadians) and reduced collective guilt assignment for their wrongdoing by historical victim groups (Jewish North Americans and Native Canadians, respectively). Category inclusiveness was manipulated by varying the degree of the uniqueness of the historical perpetrator group's harmful actions towards the ingroup. As predicted, varying levels of increased category inclusiveness (ranging from the intergroup level to the maximally inclusive human level) were associated with a greater willingness to forgive the outgroup and reduced expectations that the outgroup should experience collective guilt for their actions.

## CONCLUSIONS

While forgiveness will not solve intergroup conflict in and of itself, it provides an opportunity for post-conflict reconciliation. It offers post-conflict societies hope for the future as it orients groups towards a shared future, as opposed to continuously recycling the past in the form of reprisals and counter-reprisals. Policymakers are encouraged to give serious consideration to the role of

positive intergroup contact as a means of achieving a greater willingness to forgive the outgroup, while also encouraging greater category inclusiveness that extends beyond the intergroup level. (See COMMON INGROUP IDENTITY MODEL.)

Our understanding of intergroup forgiveness would be benefited by a deeper understanding of how intergroup forgiveness relates to interpersonal forgiveness. Furthermore, it is as yet unclear precisely *when* intergroup forgiveness should be encouraged within the cycle of conflict. Most of the research on intergroup forgiveness to date has been correlational in nature, and has been undertaken at the post-conflict phase of intergroup relations. Although ambitious, it would be of great value if further research were able to explore the nature of intergroup forgiveness and its correlates over the course of intergroup relations that spans the transition from conflict to post-conflict relations.

SEE ALSO: Apologies and Forgiveness; Common Ingroup Identity Model; Contact Theory: Extended and Parasocial; Contact Theory, Intergroup; Empathy in the Process of Forgiveness; Forgiveness, Interpersonal; Reconciliation, Collective Memory and; Reconciliation: Instrumental and Socioemotional Aspects; Transitional Justice Systems, Psychology and; Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, Psychological Impact of.

## REFERENCES

- Cairns, E., Tam, T., Hewstone, M., & Niens, U. (2005). Intergroup forgiveness and intergroup conflict: Northern Ireland, a case study. In E. L. Worthington, Jr. (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 461–475). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gibson, J. L. (2004). *Overcoming apartheid: Can truth reconcile a divided nation?* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Hewstone, M., Cairns, E., Voci, A., Hamberger, J., & Niens, U. (2006). Intergroup contact, forgiveness and experience of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Social Issues, 62*, 99–120.
- Hewstone, M., Cairns, E., Voci, A., McLernon, F., Niens, U., & Noor, M. (2004). Intergroup forgiveness and guilt in Northern Ireland: Social psychological dimensions of "the Troubles." In N. R. Branscombe & B. Doosje (Eds.), *Collective guilt: International perspectives* (pp. 193–215). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Tam, T., Hewstone, M., Cairns, E., Tausch, N., Maio, G., & Kenworthy, J. (2007). The impact of intergroup forgiveness in Northern Ireland. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, 10*, 119–135.
- Thompson, L. (2001). *A history of South Africa* (3rd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wohl, M. J. A., & Branscombe, N. R. (2005). Forgiveness and collective guilt assignment to historical perpetrator groups depend on level of social category inclusiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88*, 288–303.