

The Malleability of Forgiveness

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“Forgiveness is not an emotion, it’s a decision.”

--- Randall Worley

The basic idea that forgiveness is a “decision,” often reached after a process of judgment, evaluation, and thought, is one that seems widely accepted in the scientific literature on forgiveness. The US pastor Worley is not alone in his view of forgiveness; the scientific literature also portrays forgiveness as a *deliberative* process in which people consciously and actively seek to overcome their negative thoughts, feelings, and behavioral tendencies toward a transgressor in order to regain a more positive stance, despite the transgressor’s hurtful actions (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Surely, in some cases people do actively decide to forgive their offenders and may actually succeed in transforming their negative feelings into more positive ones toward the offender. At other times, however, people may have difficulty forgiving their offenders and find themselves unable to get rid of their hurt feelings, despite their intention to forgive someone. Moreover, a person may have consciously forgiven an offender at a certain time, yet still experience negative feelings afterwards – for instance, when something reminds him or her of the offense.

Indeed, findings from longitudinal research in which people report their level of forgiveness regarding a past offense on several occasions suggest that forgiveness fluctuates considerably (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Although people generally display roughly linear increases in forgiveness over extended periods of time, on different measurement occasions the level of forgiveness often deviates from what would be expected on the basis of the linear trend: On some days the level of forgiveness may be higher, and on other days lower. Thus, as noted by McCullough and colleagues, forgiveness is not likely to be a simple,

continuous phenomenon. Once a person decides to forgive an offender, his or her negative feelings toward the offender are likely to fluctuate, even if they generally decrease over time.

One of the reasons why forgiveness may be rather labile is that, although some offenses are unambiguously terrible and unacceptable (e.g., rape), many and perhaps most offenses can be interpreted in different ways. For example, failure to keep a secret may be attributable to a “weak moment,” or it may be viewed as a deliberate attempt to damage one’s reputation. Even offenses that are generally unacceptable, or that clearly violate rules or norms (e.g., cheating on one’s partner), can be “softened” by circumstances (e.g., “He drank too much”) or downward social comparison (e.g., “Compared to other men, he’s not that bad”). Such interpretive latitude provides the offended person with means to adopt various perspectives on the offense, although this may occur in an implicit, automatic fashion, as we argue below.

The causes of fluctuations in forgiveness, called *temporary* forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2003), have received remarkably little attention in the research literature. This is unfortunate, because temporary fluctuations may have important consequences for a relationship (and for the individual, as we discuss later), even in the long run. For example, imagine Bob, who has been cheated on by his girlfriend Jessica in the past. Bob once decided to forgive Jessica, and his negative feelings toward her have diminished somewhat since then. However, when something reminds him of the incident, Bob realizes that his negative feelings toward Jessica have become much stronger again. One might say that Bob experiences a drop in his level of forgiveness. And despite things going fairly well in the relationship since Bob decided to forgive Jessica, this temporary drop in forgiveness is likely to decrease Bob’s pro-relational motivation and behavior (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). This in turn may frustrate Jessica (who thought Bob had forgiven her), causing a drop in her pro-relationship motivation and behavior as well (cf. Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999; also Rusbult & Agnew, Chapter 16, this volume).

In this manner, a temporary drop in forgiveness can initiate a downward cycle of reciprocity that ultimately threatens the well-being and stability of the relationship.

In an alternative – and more optimistic – scenario, Bob generally cannot and will not forgive Jessica for what she did, suffering the hurt whenever recalling her infidelity. Then, one day Bob realizes that his negative feelings toward her have become less intense, and his thoughts and feelings toward Jessica are much more positive again: He experiences a temporary rise in his level of forgiveness. This temporary increase in forgiveness may set the stage for reconciliatory behavior on Bob's part. Jessica in turn may express gratitude for Bob's forgiving attitude, and mutual trust and confidence in the relationship may be re-established.

These examples of Bob's rising and falling forgiveness illustrate that forgiveness is not always and entirely driven by conscious and deliberative decisions. In the first scenario, despite Bob's willingness to forgive his partner, he later finds that he has not really succeeded in doing so. In the latter scenario, despite Bob's reluctance to forgive Jessica, at some point he realizes that he has actually forgiven her after all. Furthermore, it shows that there can be a clear distinction between one's decision to forgive and one's actual level of forgiveness viewed in emotional terms (Worthington and colleagues make a similar distinction between what they term decisional and emotional forgiveness; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007).

In the present chapter, we argue that a person's inclination to forgive an offender as well as the level of actual forgiveness (i.e., an actual reduction of negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior; Fincham, 2000) are at least partially influenced by situational circumstances and may also be affected by unconscious processes. Although we do not wish to discard the possibility that deliberative processes influence forgiveness, we argue that deliberative decisions tell only part of the story and do not provide a complete understanding of the forgiveness process. Instead,

there may be hidden forces at play that significantly influence one's level of forgiveness toward an offender, and a decision or inclination to forgive may not be as self-determined as one thinks.

To provide evidence for this general idea, we will first review recent research findings demonstrating that subtle situational cues can have a substantial influence on both a person's inclination to forgive and the person's temporary level of forgiveness regarding a past offense. We then discuss how such apparently minor, temporary changes in forgiveness can have important consequences. We close by outlining some theoretical and practical implications of our analysis and research. We adopt a "malleability" approach to forgiveness, arguing that forgiveness, rather than being a linear process initiated by conscious intentions, is best considered to be a malleable state driven largely by unconscious affective processes.

#### *Influencing Temporary Forgiveness through Subtle Situational Cues*

In recent years, a number of studies have been conducted in which priming techniques were used to influence temporary levels of forgiveness regarding either a past offense or hypothetical offenses. In one of the first demonstrations of subtle situational influences on forgiveness, Karremans and Van Lange (2005) examined the association between people's justice values and their inclination to forgive others. This association is particularly interesting because reading different literatures may result in making different predictions about it. On the one hand, several authors have argued that justice values may be essential in obstructing a person's inclinations to forgive (e.g., Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). According to these scholars, justice conceptions entail an eye-for-an-eye approach to the offender, which clearly hinders reconciliatory motives. On the other hand, the available theoretical and empirical literature on social justice suggests that justice conceptions are much broader than retribution alone. For example, justice values are usually associated with the belief that conflicts should be settled fairly (i.e., that there should be

procedural justice; Tyler, 1987), or the belief that resources should be distributed fairly (distributive justice; Adams, 1965). In other words, conceptions of justice influence concerns for others' welfare.

Based on our assumption that justice values are often much more *social* than is generally assumed in the forgiveness literature (an idea that is empirically supported by findings concerning human values; Schwartz, 1992 and Chapter 11, this volume), Karremans and Van Lange (2005) set out to test the idea that the activation or salience of justice values would increase, rather than decrease, people's inclinations to forgive. In the first study, in order to cognitively activate different values, some participants were simply asked to write down their thoughts when thinking about the concept of justice; other participants wrote down their thoughts about the concept of helpfulness (a prosocial value); still others wrote down their thoughts about the concept of ambition (a self-oriented rather than a prosocial value); and the remaining participants did not write down thoughts regarding a value. Subsequently, all participants completed the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (TNTF), a scenario-based measure of people's inclinations to forgive, developed and validated by Berry and colleagues (2001).

Results were in line with expectations. Participants for whom the values of justice and helpfulness were activated by means of the thought-listing task displayed significantly greater inclinations to forgive compared to participants for whom the value of ambition was activated, or for whom no value was activated (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005, Study 1). Moreover, content coding of participants' justice descriptions confirmed that most participants came up with very prosocial ideas about the concept, most referring to principles of both procedural and distributive justice. These findings are in line with the general idea that a person's inclination to forgive depends on specific features of the context.

The next two studies were designed to replicate these findings using more subtle situational cues to activate the concept of justice. Specifically, participants in both studies were primed with a universal symbol of justice, Lady Justitia, the Roman goddess of justice. In one study, half of the participants were first exposed to a picture of Lady Justitia, while the other half were exposed to a control picture (of a trumpet). Participants primed with justice, compared to the control group, subsequently had higher scores on the TNTF (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005, Study 2). In the next study, justice was primed even more subtly. All participants completed the TNTF, but in the experimental condition this forgiveness measure was printed on paper bearing a watermark picture of Lady Justitia. In two control conditions, the paper contained a watermark logo of the university (all participants were university students) or did not contain a watermark at all. Again, participants for whom justice was made salient, even in this subtle manner, displayed stronger inclinations to forgive compared to participants for whom the concept was not made salient (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005, Study 3). Together, these findings provide evidence for the idea that situational cues can alter one's decision or inclination to forgive, and the latter two studies suggest that people are not aware of such influences. In none of the studies did participants report any suspicion regarding the hypotheses; in particular they did not guess that the studies examined whether the justice primes influenced their inclinations to forgive.

In another line of research suggesting the role of subtle and nonconscious processes in forgiveness, Karremans and Aarts (2007) examined the link between closeness and forgiveness. Although previous research has established an almost intrinsic link between level of closeness toward an offender and forgiveness, deliberative processes are often regarded as the mechanism responsible for this association (e.g., Finkel et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 1998). The argument goes as follows: An offended person who is close and committed to the offender (e.g., a romantic partner or a good friend) will attempt to see the other's harmful act and underlying motives in a

less negative light: The partner may not have acted intentionally. Such deliberative attribution processes will result in greater forgiveness (i.e., a reduction of negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward the offender).

However, as argued by Karremans and Aarts (2007), over the course of a close and committed relationship, people are likely to “learn” that forgiving responses (compared to retributive responses) to the partner’s harmful acts generally result in more positive outcomes (including individual as well as relationship well-being; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). If conflicts arise repeatedly in a close relationship (as they generally seem to do; Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002), forgiveness may eventually occur in a relatively habitual and nondeliberative fashion. That is, the positive outcomes that accompany forgiveness may reinforce a person for automatically exhibiting forgiving rather than retributive responses to a partner’s negative acts. In other words, forgiveness as a response to a close other’s negative behavior may become part of the mental representation of the relationship with that person (Baldwin, 1992; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2005).

Karremans and Aarts (2007) tested this prediction in a series of experiments, the first two of which are most relevant to the present chapter. If forgiveness is indeed part of the mental representation of the relationship with the close other, cognitively activating the relationship representation should automatically increase people’s inclination and willingness to forgive (cf. Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). In these studies, participants were asked to indicate their inclination to forgive a number of negative behaviors (e.g., lies, insults) that were presented sequentially on a computer screen. Unbeknownst to the participants, right before each negative behavior either the name of a close other or the name of a non-close other was flashed on the screen for 23 milliseconds, which was outside participants’ awareness (i.e., subliminal). Participants had provided these names before their inclination to forgive the negative behaviors was measured.



Thus, while responding to the negative behaviors, for half of the participants the mental representation of a close relationship was activated, whereas for the other half the mental representation of a non-close relationship was activated.

The results of both studies provided good support for the central prediction. Those who were subliminally primed with the name of a close other displayed a greater inclination to forgive the behaviors than those who were primed with the name of a non-close other (and, in one of the studies, compared to participants who were primed with a random letter string). In addition, the second study revealed that the close versus non-close primes did not differentially affect participants' evaluation of the severity of the behaviors. That is, the close other prime did not lead to significantly lower, or higher, ratings of severity of the offenses, suggesting that the close prime did not simply result in a general positivity effect. Together, the findings demonstrate that people's inclination to forgive a particular behavior does not depend solely on the content of the behavior itself. Although a person may consciously weigh certain features of the behavior (e.g., its severity; its likelihood of being intentional) when deciding whether it should be forgiven, the findings indicate that this is only part of the story. Participants in these studies were not aware of the closeness primes, yet the primes influenced their inclination to forgive beyond the effects of any conscious deliberative processes.

A recent series of experiments by Wohl and McGrath (2007) on the influence of subjective temporal distance from an offense on forgiveness provide further evidence for the claim that subtle situational cues may influence forgiveness. Time may be considered the "mother" of all determinants of forgiveness, and as noted, longitudinal research generally reveals that forgiveness increases as time passes (McCullough et al., 2003). Wohl and McGrath (2007), however, did not examine the *objective* temporal distance from the offense, but rather the effects

of participants' *subjective* perception of the elapsed time since the offense on willingness to forgive it (controlling for the actual temporal distance from the event).

Participants in one study were asked to imagine a hypothetical offense that occurred one month before, or, in another study, to recall a real offense that they experienced about a month before (Wohl & McCrath, 2007, Studies 2 and 3). Suppose (for the sake of simplicity) that both studies were conducted in April, so the hypothetical and real offenses took place in March. The subjective perception of how long ago the offense took place was manipulated using the following procedure. Participants in the subjectively temporally close condition were asked to mark when the offense took place on a time line ranging from November to April. Participants in the subjectively temporally distant condition marked when the offense took place on a time line ranging from February to April. That is, participants in the latter condition placed the mark further away from the right side of the scale – that is, further away from the present, April. As expected, participants reported higher levels of forgiveness (i.e., were less likely to desire revenge or to avoid the transgressor) regarding both the hypothetical offense and the actually experienced offense, when the time since the offense was manipulated to *seem* further in the past.

A last example of the malleability of forgiveness comes from recent research by Karremans and Smith (2007), who explored the role of power in forgiveness. Although power is an intrinsic aspect of interpersonal relations, the effects of power on forgiveness have received little attention (but see Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006). It was hypothesized that the experience of power should facilitate forgiveness, but only toward an offending partner to whom one is strongly committed. This prediction was based on recent research suggesting that the experience of high power causes people to become more goal-directed (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Guinote, 2007). Because strong commitment by definition implies that one has the goal to maintain the relationship, the increased goal-directedness engendered by a person's experience of

high power (compared to low power) would lead him or her to focus on the goal of maintaining the relationship with the offending partner, resulting in a greater willingness to forgive

Most relevant to the present chapter, in one study a relatively high sense of power was induced by means of priming. That is, in one condition participants were asked to recall an instance in which they had power over others, whereas in another condition participants recalled an instance in which others had power over them. As previous research has shown, such primes temporarily induce differential levels of experienced power (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Smith & Trope, 2005). Subsequently, participants reported their inclinations to forgive a number of hypothetical offenses, in some cases where the protagonist was a close other (a good friend), and in other cases where the protagonist was not close (an acquaintance). In line with predictions, participants who were primed with high power (compared to low power) displayed greater inclinations to forgive, especially in cases where a close other had behaved badly.

Together, the reviewed studies provide compelling evidence that level of forgiveness (in some of the studies operationalized as a reduction in revenge toward and avoidance of the offender) is at least partly influenced by subtle environmental inputs. Situational reminders of power, closeness, social justice, and the subjective passing of time all affect people's inclinations to forgive, including cases in which there was an actual past offense. Moreover, some of the studies suggest that people are often unaware of these influences, and that their level of forgiveness may go up or down without awareness of the causes of the fluctuations. These findings are especially interesting in light of previous theorizing and research on the factors determining forgiveness, which has typically focused on the features of the offense itself (e.g., severity, intentionality) or on the relationship between the offended person and the transgressor (e.g., commitment, closeness, apologies; see McCullough et al., 1998, for an overview). However, and most strikingly, that in each of the aforementioned studies level of forgiveness was

influenced by temporary variations in factors essentially *unrelated* to the offense, while the offense itself, and the relationship with the offender, remained constant. In other words, the very same offense can be more or less forgiven depending on the offended person's situation.

*The Effects of Temporary Fluctuations: How a Small Change Can Have Profound Consequences*

Considering its apparent malleability, is there any behavioral predictive value left to forgiveness?. Do fluctuations in forgiveness occur unnoticed, residing only in the offended person's mind? Or can changes in forgiveness resulting from subtle situational inputs still have major consequences? A number of recent studies suggest the latter. That is, although forgiveness can be relatively easily influenced by subtle changes in the environment, the resulting changes in level of forgiveness seem to affect, just as easily, a number of both individual and relationship outcomes (e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2008; Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Witvliet, Ludwig, & VanderLaan, 2001).

One of the first and most intriguing demonstrations of the impact of temporary changes in forgiveness comes from a study by Witvliet and her colleagues (2001). Participants in this study were asked to recall an incident in which they felt hurt by someone, and subsequently they were asked to *imagine* a forgiving response toward the offender or to imagine an unforgiving response toward the offender. During these imagery tasks, participants' physiological reactions were monitored, providing an on-line assessment of the immediate effects of participants' forgiving or unforgiving thoughts. Participants reported higher levels of forgiveness during the forgiving imagery task than during the unforgiving imagery task, and these fluctuating levels of forgiveness were associated with physiological changes. Higher levels of forgiveness were associated with less facial tension in the corrugator (brow) muscle region, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and lower skin conductance – each being a physiological indicator associated in other studies

with physical health. Thus, merely *imagining* forgiving or unforgiving responses influenced temporary levels of forgiveness and concomitant physiological responses.

In a study by Karremans et al. (2003), in which the association between forgiveness and psychological well-being was examined, participants were led to *believe* that they had forgiven an offender. Participants were told that, because people find it generally difficult to introspect on and thus to determine clearly their level of forgiveness toward an offender, scientists from the United States had devised an instrument by which one's true level of forgiveness could be measured. In fact, participants completed an implicit association task (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) with the name of the offender as a target, after which they received false feedback regarding their response times. In the forgiveness condition, participants were told that they had displayed faster responses when the name of the offender was coupled with positively valenced words than when the name was coupled with negatively valenced words, indicating that "at least at an implicit level, you seem to have forgiven the other." In the unforgiveness condition, their responses were allegedly faster when the name of the offender was coupled with negative words than when it was coupled with positive words, indicating that "you have not entirely forgiven the other." This manipulation significantly affected participants' temporary level of forgiveness, with greater forgiveness in the forgiveness condition. More importantly, these temporary increases in forgiveness were associated with several indicators of psychological well-being, including state self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and positive and negative affect.

Not only can temporary fluctuations influence individual well-being, recent research suggests that such fluctuations may have important consequences for a person's relationship with an offender. Karremans and Van Lange (2008) demonstrated that thinking of forgiven versus unforgiven offenses subtly influences the way people speak about their relationship with the offender. When thinking of forgiven offenses (compared to thinking of unforgiven offenses),

people tend to speak, literally, more in terms of “we” and “us” when describing their relationship with the offender. Although on the surface such an effect may appear rather minor, such subtle differences in language use reflect differences in self-other overlap (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998) and are related to several indicators of relationship quality (Acitelli, 1998; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Simmons, Gordon, & Chambless, 2005).

Finally, it appears that different levels of forgiveness regarding a particular past offense can have consequences *beyond* the relationship with the offender, as research by Karremans, Van Lange, and Holland (2005) suggests. They demonstrated that for people who are thinking about past offenses, their current level of forgiveness regarding the offense affects cognitions, feelings, and behavior toward others who have nothing to do with the offense. For example, in one study participants who were reminded of a forgiven offense reported stronger feelings of relatedness toward other people in general than participants who were reminded of unforgiven offenses. Another study demonstrated that recalling forgiven offenses (compared with unforgiven offenses) affected the amount of money participants donated to a charity organization. Although these studies did not examine the effects of fluctuating levels of forgiveness regarding a single past offense, they raise the possibility that temporary ups and downs in forgiveness (as described earlier) can create different levels of a more generalized prosocial mind-set. In other words, a person who currently experiences relatively high levels of forgiveness toward an offender, may not only respond more positively to the offender, but may also be at least temporarily more inclined to behave in a prosocial manner toward others as well.

Together, the findings suggest that, although forgiveness can be influenced by the environment quite easily, it can still be a state that has important consequences ranging from effects on health to behavioral responses that spill over to other relationships. Put differently, a person who has forgiven an offense, as compared to a person who has not forgiven an offense,

may be a rather different person, behaving, feeling, and thinking differently in relation to his or her social environment. As such, forgiveness is not only central to individual healing processes, as often claimed in the psychological literature, it may be key to explaining a host of interpersonal motives and behaviors that have been overlooked by social scientists.

#### *Theoretical Implications of the Malleability of Forgiveness*

Although there is good evidence, as demonstrated here, that forgiveness is influenced by unconscious and implicit processes, it is important to recognize that several other research findings suggest an association between deliberative processes and forgiveness. Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon (2002), for example, examined the link between commitment and forgiveness and found that this association was – at least partially – mediated by cognitive interpretations of the offense. Their research suggests that people in close relationships are more likely to discount dispositional causes for an offense, find it easier to find external explanations for the offense, and *therefore* be more likely to forgive. Fincham, Paleari, and Regalia (2002) showed that the relation between marital satisfaction and forgiveness is mediated by causal and responsibility attributions regarding the offense. McCullough, Root, and Cohen (2006) demonstrated that participants who wrote about personal benefits resulting from a transgression subsequently reported higher levels of forgiveness (compared to control conditions in which participants wrote about a topic unrelated to the offense or wrote about negative features of the offense). Writing about the benefits led to increased cognitive processing of the event (e.g., greater insight, clearer cause-and-effect relations, and so on), which in turn facilitated forgiveness. Such findings suggest that deliberative processes occurring after an offense can facilitate forgiveness, and that forgiveness may sometimes involve thoughtful and effortful processes.

But do people spontaneously engage in conscious and effortful processing with the aim of forgiving a relationship partner? Surely it is possible that, following an offense, people may sometimes spontaneously contemplate the reasons for the offender's behavior. If so, motivated reasoning – induced, for example, by strong commitment to the offender – may elicit more benign attributions regarding the offender's behavior. People may sometimes spontaneously consider the personal benefits of a transgression, as participants did in the study by McCullough and colleagues described in the previous paragraph. Both forms of active and deliberative processing may sometimes result in forgiveness. At the same time, it is questionable whether people always (or even often) engage in such active and deliberative thinking about an offense. Actually, it may be quite rare for people to actively make attributions or indulge other considerations regarding the offense (cf. Haidt, 2001). Is such higher order cognitive processing really necessary if we are to forgive our offenders, especially those to whom we feel close?

Granted, deliberative (e.g., attribution) processes may determine a person's level of forgiveness when he or she actively reflects on the offense and the motives and intentions of the offender (we do not want to disregard this possibility). At the same time, it is possible (even plausible, we think) that deliberative processes often *follow* rather than *precede* forgiveness (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). For example, a person may make benign attributions of responsibility (i.e., "It was not really his fault") only *after* more intuitive and implicit processes have diminished negative feelings toward the offender. One may see the benefits of a transgression only *after* one has intuitively forgiven the other. Such a forgiveness-attribution sequence is congruent with the general idea that reasoning processes are often guided by intuitive affective processes rather than vice versa (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Haidt, 2001; Wilson, 2002). For example, in his Social Intuitionist Model, Haidt (1991) proposes that moral judgment depends largely on automatic and intuitive affective responses rather than reasoning. According to the



model, a particular immoral act automatically elicits an affective evaluative response *followed* by a moral reasoning process, which helps a person justify his or her moral judgment. While this may give a person the illusion that his or her judgment is based on the moral reasoning he or she engaged in, ultimately it is the intuitive affective response that determines the judgment.

In fact, the emerging view in the social-psychological literature is that most of our attitudes, judgments, goals, and even behaviors are elicited automatically or intuitively and are driven largely by automatic evaluation (affective) processes (Bargh, 1994; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Zajonc, 1980). Is the process of forgiveness an exception? We believe not. Similar to the process that leads to moral judgment as just described, deliberative attribution processes may often serve as post-hoc explanations for one's level of forgiveness. The research findings reviewed in this chapter are in line with this reasoning, suggesting that situational circumstances may affect one's level of forgiveness even outside of awareness. If a person has no conscious access to the reasons for his or her forgiving attitude toward an offender, it is difficult to retain the idea that for most offenses, forgiveness is the exclusive (or even primary) result of a careful and deliberate process. Instead, similar to what has been written by Haidt about the moral reasoning process, we suggest that forgiveness is largely determined by intuitive affective processes. Although deliberative processes may sometimes influence the affective response (and thus the level of forgiveness) toward a transgressor, the conscious deliberative process may merely "justify" an intuitively determined level of forgiveness. In this sense, contrary to Randall Worley's account of forgiveness as a decision rather than an emotion, one could argue that forgiveness is an emotion, not a decision.

#### *Further Implications and Future Directions*

In recent years, there has been a rising interest in the therapeutic application of forgiveness interventions. In an overview of the effectiveness of such interventions, Baskin and

Enright (2004) found that individuals who took part in forgiveness interventions were more likely to forgive than were members of waiting list control groups, and they enjoyed better emotional health. However, the underlying mechanisms are not yet clear, and although reappraisal, perspective taking, or other cognitive strategies may be responsible for the increases in forgiveness and health, other factors such as the qualities of the counselor or the attention or social support clients got during the intervention may also have contributed to its effectiveness. In fact, although there has been little research on the effects of third parties in the forgiveness process, perceived social support may be an important and powerful facilitator of forgiveness. Social support may help a person overcome the stress resulting from an offense, and this reduction in negative feelings may in turn – possibly through misattribution processes – facilitate forgiveness toward the offender.

Interestingly, Baskin and Enright (2004) found that *decision-based* interventions were not particularly effective (e.g., Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995; McCullough & Worthington, 1995), suggesting that, in line with our analysis, a decision to forgive does not in itself evoke actual forgiveness; that is, it does not necessarily decrease negative feelings toward the offender. Still, it is important to acknowledge that most of the research reviewed here, which de-emphasized the role of deliberative processes in forgiveness, is not concerned with the kind of traumatic experiences often recounted in counseling settings. However, we would argue that an exclusive focus on the cognitive aspects of an offense, or on the decision to forgive an offender, may not maximize the chances of forgiveness interventions being effective. And even if interventions do show improvements in forgiveness, given the malleability of forgiveness it is questionable whether the improvement is likely to be stable and long-lasting. As McCullough et al. (2006) wondered regarding their forgiveness writing intervention: “Did [it] create long-term

changes ... or did the reductions in revenge and avoidance motivation ... dissipate a few moments after participants left?" (pp. 895).

Recently, researchers have begun to explore a phenomenon possibly even more complex than *interpersonal* forgiveness: *intergroup* forgiveness. So far, this research has examined the role of intergroup contact or common group identification in facilitating intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation (e.g., Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; Hewstone et al., 2004; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). Although there may be several other factors that help members of a one group to forgive another, forgiveness at the intergroup level may fluctuate at least as much as it does at the interpersonal level. Although at some point negative feelings associated with a group of people (e.g., Whites in South-Africa as perceived by Blacks) may subside, as indicated for example by negotiations and an end to hostilities, such periods of apparent forgiveness can be followed by a sudden outbreak of further conflict, often clear or demonstrable reasons (e.g., the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Palestinians and Israelis, or, on a smaller scale, gang rivalry in Los Angeles). Similar to the ways in which subtle situational changes may affect interpersonal forgiveness, subtle societal changes may subtly affect intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation, making it difficult to understand and at the same time extremely important to study.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

To portray forgiveness as a decision is unrealistic when one understands that subtle influences can affect forgiveness in powerful ways. Evidence is emerging that such influences can be largely unconscious. In light of the scores of studies reviewed in this chapter, we suggest that forgiveness is most accurately conceptualized as a state that is subject to fluctuations rooted in subtle or unconscious reminders of the offense, the partner and his or her qualities, the relationship, and other factors . This notion of malleability is increasingly used to understand

phenomena such as moral judgment, and it seems in that case that cognitions often serve to rationalize or interpret and label intuitive feelings that are actually responsible for variations in forgiveness. Clearly, the malleability approach can be viewed in terms of cost-effectiveness. If relatively small, inexpensive means can be used to yield powerful benefits of forgiveness, then the benefits for the forgiver (as well as the offender and the relationship between the two people ) may easily outweigh the costs. One might speculate that stable forgiveness is likely to occur only if one has repeatedly experienced the state of forgiveness. This possibility, which needs to be researched further, has important implications for forgiveness interventions.

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