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Self-Forgiveness, Trauma, and Community: An Ethical Perspective

Kelley Raab Mayo PhD

Chaplain, Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre,

Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

In recent years promoting forgiveness has become popular in mental health circles. Lending credence to its popularity is research suggesting that forgiveness improves mental health. Those who caution against universal forgiveness most often write from the vantage point of philosophy, where the emphasis is on forgiveness as an ethical issue, one concerning rights and duties, versus a psychological issue. In cases of trauma, issues of forgiveness are often of paramount concern – both forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness. Due to guilt and shame over the trauma, individuals may engage in self-harm behavior as a form of self-punishment, which in turns reflects damaged self-respect. The paper focuses primarily on self-forgiveness and restoration of self-respect in situations of trauma. In order for self-forgiveness to occur, a moral community must take a role in providing safety and restorative love. The paper explores perspectives on forgiveness, self-forgiveness and trauma, communities and forgiveness, and self-reunification.

Key Words: Self-forgiveness; trauma; moral community; self-respect; self-reunification.

In recent years promoting forgiveness has become popular in mental health circles. Lending credence to its popularity is research suggesting that forgiveness improves mental health (Karen 2003). Some mental health professionals have issued caveats on forgiveness, however, suggesting that one can move on with life in meaningful way without it. Those who caution against universal forgiveness most often write from the vantage point of philosophy, where the emphasis is on forgiveness as an ethical issue – one concerning rights and duties – and not a psychological one to be undertaken for one's own peace of mind.

In cases of trauma, issues of forgiveness are often of paramount concern – both forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness. Individuals who experience trauma early in life often carry the effects for the rest of their lives. One effect can be self-harm behavior, particularly through addictions such as abuse of drugs, alcohol, prescription medication, or food. Due to guilt and shame

over the trauma, individuals may engage in self-harm behavior as a form of self-punishment, which in turns reflects damaged self-respect. In what follows I focus primarily on self-forgiveness and restoration of self-respect in situations of trauma. I attempt to demonstrate that in order for self-forgiveness to occur, a moral community must take a role in providing safety and restorative love. Experiencing forgiveness from an appropriate community, I argue, is often necessary in order for self-forgiveness to occur and for positive change to transpire. The paper explores perspectives on forgiveness, self-forgiveness and trauma, communities and forgiveness, and self-reunification.

Perspectives on Forgiveness:

There are numerous ways to conceptualize forgiveness. Bash (2007), for example, observes that there is no agreed upon definition of forgiveness among those working in the mental health field. In the interests of time, I will offer an overview of one popular psychological approach and one philosophical one, followed by a discussion on self-forgiveness. Robert Enright's (1996) stages of forgiveness are widely discussed in circles of psychology. Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) offer the following definition of forgiveness: "a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge toward an offender who acts unjustly while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her." Enright (1996) proposes four phases to the process of forgiving another, each phase marked by subphases: Uncovering Phase, Decision Phase, Work Phase, and Outcome Phase.

While Enright places high value on the psychological benefits of forgiveness, philosopher Charles Griswold (2007) focuses on its moral virtues. Forgiveness is the expression of the virtue of "forgivingness," implying a moral relation between two parties. In part it is the forswearing of "resentment." This does not mean giving up every negative feeling associated with the injurious event – one may still feel disappointment, sorrow, depression, etc. But forgiveness is not mercy. Forgiveness, argues Griswold, comes with conditions attached: it has not "been given, or received, simply because one believes or feels that it has been" (xv). The following apply: 1) the wrongdoer must take responsibility, 2) he/

she must repudiate the deed, disavowing the notion that it could happen again, 3) the wrongdoer must experience and express regret at having caused that particular injury, 4) he/she must express contrition – committing to becoming the sort of person who does not inflict injury, 5) the wrongdoer must demonstrate an understanding of the damage incurred due to the injury, and 6) the wrongdoer must offer a narrative that accounts for the wrongdoing, putting him/herself and the injury in a context.

Through these steps Griswold attempts to demonstrate that forgiveness is fundamentally an interpersonal process:

> Consequently, forgiveness should not be understood as a 'gift' that may be bestowed at the discretion of the injured party. It also follows from this view that forgiveness is not to be understood primarily as therapy, as a psychologically effective way to deal with injury, or simply as the overcoming of anger, however welcome those may be. Genuine forgiveness does not consist simply in a change of attitude or feelings on the part of the would-be forgiver (p. 212).

Griswold's view points to the vulnerability of persons in a world where they are dependent on others. Obvious questions from the psychological perspective are: What if the offender does not take the above steps or dies before doing so? Is the offender unforgiven if the victim is unable to forswear resentment even after the six steps have been completed? For Griswold, each party holds the other in its power – the offender depends on the victim in order to be forgiven, and victim depends on the offender in order to forgive. This is unsettling in a therapeutic context where offender and victim may not both be present.

Concerning self-forgiveness, Enright (1991) suggests similar steps as for other-forgiveness. Griswold notes that failure to forgive self may lead to destruction of one's capacity for agency and even to self-annihilation. In turn he recommends that reframing one's view of self; making a commitment to change one's ways; confronting the self-injury; having self-compassion; refraining from treating oneself as a "moral monster;" and developing a coherent narrative are necessary steps. Griswold's view shares with Enright's the notions of moral accountability, reframing, and finding meaning. Making a commitment to change, to become a person who no longer commits the unethical act, is more prominent in Griswold's perspective and will be important to a discussion of self-reunification.

Psychologists J. Hall and F. Fincham (2005) and philosopher R. Dillon (2001) both offer additional perspectives on self-forgiveness. Hall and Fincham, for example, provide the following definition: "… we conceptualize self-forgiveness as a set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to avoid stimuli associated with the offense, decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the self, (e.g., punish the self, engage in self-destructive behaviors, etc), and increasingly motivated to act benevolently toward the self" (Hall and Fincham, 2005, p. 622). They outline differences between intrapersonal and interpersonal forgiveness: in self-forgiveness thoughts, desires, and feelings in addition to behaviors can cause offense, empathy can be inhibiting rather than helpful, limits may be conditional or unconditional, and reconciliation with the victim is necessary. The authors conclude that consequences of unforgiveness are extreme in the case of self-forgiveness and moderate in the case of other forgiveness – being

unable to forgive oneself is associated with lower self-esteem and life satisfaction and higher neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and hostility (Coates, 1997; Maltby et al., 2001; Mauger et al., 1992; cited in Hall and Fincham, 2005).

Robin Dillon argues that self-respect issues are at the heart of self-forgiveness. Since self-respect also has important mental health benefits, the topic offers a meeting ground for psychology and philosophy. Margaret Holmgren (1998), for example, argues that in forgiving oneself an offender overcomes attitudes of guilt, self-resentment, or self-contempt, in order to reach a morally more appropriate attitude, which Holmgren identifies as self-acceptance – comprising compassion, love and respect for oneself as a person. Yet if forgiveness is undertaken prematurely, it will be incompatible with self-respect and therefore morally inappropriate. Dillon identifies a particular form of self-forgiveness – which she calls "transformative"- as capable of restoring damaged self-respect. With this type, in forgiving oneself one overcomes negative self attitudes in order to realize self-acceptance. Transformational self-forgiveness, for Dillon, can potentially address the following elements: 1) painful feelings of self-assessment, 2)negative self-judgments, 3) replaying the past, 4) beating oneself up, 5) self-alienation, 6) obsession with oneself, 7) undermining of one's agency.

Dillon then queries – Which kind of self-respect? – and offers three options: recognition, evaluative, and basal. Since the negative stance that transformative self-forgiveness might overcome involves renouncing one's wrongs, making the world "right" again, and giving evidence of "moral rebirth," she concludes that it is an evaluative one. Through self-forgiveness one comes to see oneself differently, by means of transcending the past and releasing its hold. Yet this does not mean that one necessarily overcomes all self-reproach:

> Self-forgiveness does not require extinguishing all self-reproach, for it is not really about the presence or absence of negative feelings and judgments; it's about their power. Forgiving oneself means not that one no longer experiences self-reproach but that one is no longer in bondage to it, no longer controlled or crippled by it, no longer alienated from oneself, so that one can now live well enough (Dillon, 1991, p. 83).

Dillon suggests that transformative self-forgiveness is necessary when one's self-conceptions are constituted by one's past acts. Since in cases of trauma individuals often get stuck in the past, a discussion of self-forgiveness for trauma is in order.

Self-Forgiveness and Trauma:

Most discussions of trauma refer to post-traumatic stress disorder. Self-forgiveness is a critical issue in these cases, for two reasons: first, individuals who suffer trauma frequently obsess about what they could have done differently to avoid it, and second, trauma in early life can predispose individuals to self-harm behavior when adults, causing guilt and shame. Due to space constraints, background on post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, will not be covered here (see Schiraldi, 2000, and Rosenbloom and Williams, 1999).

The experience of trauma inevitably brings loss, and that loss most be mourned. Losses that are not explored, experienced, and expressed can result in physical and emotional symptoms, some of which can be increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to medicate the pain. "A large part of healing from traumatic events involves forgiving yourself"(Rosenbloom and Williams, 1999, p. 189). Notions of responsibility, choice, and regaining a sense of power and control are emphasized in the process of self-forgiveness from trauma.

As stated, self-forgiveness is closely tied to recovery from trauma. Psychologist Mary Harvey (1990) identifies seven criteria for resolution of trauma: 1) physiological symptoms have been brought within manageable limits, 2) the person is able to bear feelings associated with traumatic memories, 3) the person has authority over memory, 4) the memory is a coherent narrative, linked with feeling, 5) damaged self-esteem has been restored, 6) important relationships have been reestablished, 7) a coherent system of meaning and belief has been reconstructed that encompasses the story of the trauma (Harvey, 1990; cited in Herman, 1992). Yet issues that were resolved at one stage of recovery may be reawakened under stress or at later psychological milestones. Thus, resolution of trauma can be a lengthy process and never fully resolved. Being able to "live well enough" is often the therapeutic goal.

Communities and Forgiveness:

The community has an integral role in promoting self-forgiveness from trauma. "Community" can take many forms – from family to religious organization to mental health treatment team – and can be defined as a social group whose members share a common vision and ethical code. Enright and North, in their edited collection Exploring Forgiveness (1998), explore both individual and communal aspects of forgiveness. Rev. David Couper (a former chief of police) argues, for example, that if a forgiveness and reconciliation mechanism is not incorporated into interpersonal, institutional, and community lives, society will continue to suffer the effects of broken relationships, rampant vengeance, and uncontrolled anger: "The ultimate result is that we will see even more murder, assault, and rape in an increasingly weapon-oriented and 'vengeance happy' society" (p. 129). Psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons in turn observes that anger is often used to defend against feelings of inadequacy and fear, especially fear of betrayal, rendering many individuals unable to move ahead with the forgiveness process until their self-esteem and basic ability to trust are enhanced. For many who have sustained major loss, only a sense of being loved in a new and special way can enable them to accept their pain. I believe this is the meaning of restorative love. While restorative justice has been addressed in the context of rehabilitation of incarcerated persons, restorative love applies more generally, to those who have been emotionally wounded. To reiterate, Fitzgibbons notes: "For many who have sustained major loss, only a sense of being loved in a new and special way can enable them to accept the pain" (1998, p. 70).

In Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman (1992) indicates that the ability, however slight, to form loving connections is what sustains the individual through a descent into despair. She observes: "Her healing depends on the discovery of restorative love in her own life;

it does not require that this love be extended to the perpetrator" (p. 190). A positive memory of a caring comforting person can be a lifeline during the mourning process. Moreover, the individual's own capacity to feel compassion for animals or children can be a fragile beginning of compassion for herself. As a result of mourning, the individual can shed her "evil" identity and dare to hope for new, authentic relationships. Herman suggests that as individuals recognize and let go of those aspects of themselves that were formed by the traumatic environment, they also become more forgiving of themselves – more willing to acknowledge the damage done to their character when they no longer believe the damage must be permanent. The more actively survivors are engaged in rebuilding their lives, the more accepting they are toward the memory of the traumatized self.

The authors cited in this section point to ways that communities can promote self-forgiveness. Key features that a community can provide, I suggest, are acceptance, guidance, gentle accountability for one's actions, and a vision for the individual which he or she may not yet see. Communication of this vision to the individual assists in the process of self-reunification, to which we now turn.

Self-Reunification:

In both unforgiveness and post-traumatic stress disorder, one is either trapped in the past or trying to escape it (Rafman, 2008) Finding a way to integrate past, present, and future selves – or self-reunification – is important for trauma recovery as well as for the self-forgiveness process (Baker, 2008). As Kathryn Norlock (2008) explains, we are fragmentary, rather than unified, selves-in-relation; the fragmented nature of the self, especially the traumatized self, is one that supports and enables the possibilities of both self-inflicted evil and self-forgiveness. The fragmented self is also the source of obstacles to forgiveness, as is the unpredictability of memory. Trauma in particular fragments selves because it disrupts personal narratives about past, present, and future. A predominant theme of self-forgiveness literature is the intentional and unintentional disconnections people make between their self-conceptions and their chronological selves. To begin the process of empathizing with oneself or parts of oneself, one has to be able to see oneself; one must recognize oneself as both agent and victim. Articulating past, present, and future selves is a first step towards self-reconciliation. Norlock explains: "Given my adherence to the ontology of the fragmented self, I see forgiveness as a commitment to the ultimate long-term relationship: the set of relationships between one's past, current, and future selves" (p. 151). Norlock sees an important role for a caring other in self-forgiveness. Recognition from others provides individuals with sources of control and aids in integrating self-narratives. The denial of recognition can leave one trapped within oneself, while dialogue and narrative can foster self-integration. Norlock emphasizes that basic capacities for self-acceptance and self-respect rely on the perceptions of our worth on the part of others as well as our own self-perception. There still may be regret, but by developing empathy for one's own past self, one may come to see oneself as worthy of self-improvement.

I recently led a group in an addictions rehabilitation program in which participants were encouraged to find a Higher Power. One member of the group indicated that he had chosen "future self" as

his higher power. By this he meant the self he wants to become, informed by spiritual principles. I had a private conversation with him later in which he asked for my opinion on future self as a higher power. Was it too selfish, too much an aspect of the addictive personality? I told him that committing to one's future self may help one move beyond past self and present self, yet he needed to consider what force or forces were informing future self. Perhaps beyond cognitive reach, future self should represent a self with greater connections to others, self, and the surrounding world than present self and past addictive self. He has begun addressing his journal entries to Future Self rather than HP (Higher Power). This individual still plans to attend Narcotics Anonymous and use the resources of the mental health team; future self will not be his sole resource. Thus, his new-found community can foster his commitment to future self, helping him move towards his vision.

Conclusion:

The road to forgiveness is often unstable – characterized by fluctuating states and imagery rather than a unified state of mind (Haaken, 177). At best, suggests Bash (2007), human forgiveness may have these results: relief for the wrongdoer from a collection of past wrongs that is painful, recovery and restoration for the victim from a recollection of past hurts that is painful, and reconciliation of both wrongdoer and victim. Yet forgiveness cannot be earned, even by acts of atonement, and he argues against a moral obligation to forgive.

While forgiveness may not be a moral obligation, I have attempted to demonstrate that restoration of self-respect may be impossible without the aid of a moral community. Since the role of community is to promote a common vision in accordance with an ethical code, it is in the best interests of that community – whether it be family, religious organization, mental health treatment team, or other social grouping – to assist suffering individuals in relieving their suffering so that they can once again contribute to that vision. Along this line of thinking, if one member of the community is ill, we all suffer. If the community can assist in making a commitment to an individual's future self – promoting self-reunification and restorative self-respect – then it is utilitarian to do so.

In conclusion, we return to Griswold's notion of the interpersonal nature of forgiveness. As he has articulated, each party holds the other in its power – the individual and the community to which he or she belongs. A philosophical exploration of forgiveness and self-forgiveness yields the importance of human relations in the process of self-forgiveness. Human beings live in a world of other human beings, and it is in our best interests to assist others in their own process of self-reunification. Without ethical engagement self-forgiveness may not be possible, for we are morally interdependent beings.

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