

Forgiveness and Interpersonal Skills in Same-Sexed Friendships

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Abstract

Although forgiveness is a largely interpersonal process, little research has examined the relationship between forgiveness and the interpersonal skills that may be important in forgiving another for an offence. The current study addressed this issue by investigating the relationship between forgiveness and interpersonal skills in same-sexed friendships among a community sample of 210 people (mean age 38.32 years). Each participant completed the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005), which assesses forgiveness of self, others, and situations; and the same-sex friend version of the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988) which assesses skills in initiation, negative assertion, self-disclosure, emotional support, and conflict management. Positive correlations were found between all five interpersonal skills and the three types of forgiveness, with only the relationship between forgiveness of others and negative assertion failing to reach significance. Separate hierarchical regressions were conducted to predict each type of forgiveness, with age and gender entered at Step 1 and the interpersonal skills variables entered at Step 2. Age, initiation skills, and conflict management skills each contributed uniquely to the prediction of all three types of forgiveness. Discussion centres around the relationship between forgiveness and interpersonal skills.

Forgiveness and Interpersonal Skills in Same-Sexed Friendships

In recent years, researchers and clinicians have become increasingly interested in the potential of forgiveness for improving interpersonal relationships and well-being. For example, forgiveness has been associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007), better physical health (Lawler et al., 2005), and lower depression (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Forgiveness is often conceptualised as an intrapersonal variable in that actual reconciliation between the offender and the offended person is not necessary in order for a person to forgive another (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Fincham & Beach, 2002). However, the interpersonal nature of forgiveness in maintaining and enhancing existing social relationships cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect that good interpersonal skills would be necessary in order to work through the forgiveness process.

It is difficult to conceptualise interpersonal skills, as researchers and practitioners often use the terms ‘social skills’, ‘interpersonal skills’ and ‘communication skills’ interchangeably (Hargie & Dickson, 2004). However, communications skills can be viewed as a subset of the more global social and interpersonal skills categories. While there is a wealth of research on the importance of good communication skills in interpersonal relationships such as marriage and close friendships, less attention has been paid to the actual communicative behaviours associated with forgiveness. Bachman and Guerrero (2006) surveyed participants about forgiveness, apology, and their communicative responses to a hurtful event that had occurred within an exclusive romantic relationship. Not surprisingly, they found that apologising to the partner predicted forgiveness. However, three specific communication strategies were also important. Forgiveness was predicted by higher scores on integrative communication in which feelings were expressed in a non-threatening way in order to solve problems, but lower scores on de-escalation (e.g., letting the relationship

deteriorate or threatening to end the relationship) and distributive communication (e.g., yelling or blaming). Moreover, Waldron and Kelley (2005) found that different types of communication in the context of forgiveness predicted different relational outcomes. Specifically, conditional communication in which forgiveness was contingent on certain conditions predicted a weakening of the relationship. Nonverbal indicators of forgiveness (e.g., giving the offender a hug) predicted relationship normalising (i.e., a return to normal after the offence). However, relationships were actually strengthened if communication involved an explicit apology, discussion (e.g., an exploration of motives, emotions, and solutions), and nonverbal displays of forgiveness.

Few researchers have examined forgiveness communications within friendships. In an Israeli study, Hareli and Eisikovits (2006) presented undergraduate students with hypothetical scenarios in which a same-sexed friend hurt their feelings and then later called to apologise. The scenarios were manipulated so that different emotions were expressed along with the apologies. Results indicated that forgiveness for the hypothetical friend was higher if the offender expressed guilt and/or shame for their actions, but lower if the offender expressed pity for the hurt person. A second study indicated that apologies were seen as being more sincere when motivated by guilt or shame. Thus, appropriate expression of emotion can affect the effectiveness of an apology in eliciting forgiveness.

Lawler et al. (2005) explored the relationship between forgiveness and the broader category of social skills as part of a larger study on the effects of forgiveness on health. They included measures of trait and state forgiveness. Social skills were assessed via the negative assertion and conflict management subscales of the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ; Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). Competence in conflict management skills was positively correlated with both trait and state forgiveness. The correlations between negative assertion and forgiveness were in the same direction, but not significant.

The association between good conflict resolution skills and forgiveness is not surprising, given that an offence by one partner could be seen as a conflict that must be successfully negotiated in order for the relationship to endure. However, there are some questions left unanswered by Lawler et al.'s study. Buhrmester et al. reported significant main effects for sex and sex of partner, and sex by partner interactions for some the subscales of the ICQ. However, Lawler et al. did not investigate sex differences. Moreover, as Lawler et al. just report one set of correlations for the negative assertion and conflict management subscales, rather than separate correlations for same-sexed and opposite-sexed targets, it is not clear whether their participants completed the scale with regard to other targets in general or whether responses for same- and opposite-sexed others were pooled. Finally, the ICQ has three other subscales that were not investigated in that study (i.e., initiation skills, disclosure, and emotional support). Any of these skills could reasonably be expected to be associated with forgiveness. For example, initiation skills may be necessary in order to raise the offence as a topic for discussion or in order to offer an apology. Self-disclosure skills may be necessary in order for both parties to express how they feel about the transgression and the effect that it has had on them. Indeed, over 90% of participants in one study indicated that the modelling of self-disclosure by the leader in a forgiveness workshop was one of the most effective parts of the intervention (O'Neil, Davison, Mutchler, & Trachtenberg, 2005). The ability to give emotional support may also be important as both parties navigate the difficult terrain of the offence. Indeed, empathy is a dimension of social support that is positively correlated with forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010; Ferguson, Carlson, Zivnuska, & Whitten, 2010).

The main aim of the current study was to investigate the associations between forgiveness and interpersonal skills in same-sexed relationships. As we were interested in the broader conceptualisation of skills which encompassed both communication skills and other

behaviours associated with effective interpersonal interactions, we used Buhrmester et al.'s Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire as the measure of interpersonal skills. Although forgiveness of others is central to interpersonal relationships, researchers such as Thompson et al. (2005) have broadened the view of forgiveness to also include forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situations. Forgiveness of self may be relevant where individuals feel they are responsible or partly responsible for problems within a relationship. Forgiveness of situations may also be important in enabling the person to let go of difficult situations in the past that cannot be changed. In view of Lawler et al.'s (2005) findings, it is predicted that conflict management will be positively correlated with forgiveness of others and that it will significantly predict forgiveness of others. The relationships between the other interpersonal skills variables and the three forgiveness variables will be explored. In view of Buhrmester et al.'s (1988) findings, possible gender differences will also be investigated.

Method

Participants

As part of a larger study on interpersonal relationships, 210 surveys were completed by an adult community sample. There were 90 males and 118 females (2 did not specify). Ages ranged from 18 to 66, with a mean of 38.32 years ($sd = 11.81$). Most participants were Anglo-Australian (75.2%) or from British (8.1%) or European (7.1%) backgrounds. Most respondents were employed either full-time (47.6%) or part-time (18.6%), with 67.1% having done some post-secondary school studies (e.g., TAFE or university). Most participants had a romantic partner (41.9% married, 8.1% remarried, 11.0% cohabiting, and 1.9% same-sex partnership). As an incentive, participants were given the option of entering a draw for cash prizes at the completion of the study. All participation was voluntary.

Measures

As part of the larger study, participants completed a demographics questionnaire and various measures of personal and interpersonal variables. The variables of interest to the current study are discussed below.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was measured via the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005). This is an 18-item dispositional measure that assesses forgiveness in three areas: forgiveness of self (e.g., “Although I feel bad at first when I mess up, over time I can give myself some slack”), others (e.g., “With time I am understanding of others for the mistakes they’ve made”), and situations (e.g., “Eventually I let go of negative thoughts about bad circumstances that are beyond anyone’s control”). Scores on each subscale can range from 6 to 42, with higher scores indicating greater forgiveness. Concurrent validity for the scale has been demonstrated (Thompson et al., 2005). The scale also has adequate internal consistency, with alpha coefficients for the subscales ranging from .72 to .82 (Macaskill, 2007, Thompson et al., 2005).

Interpersonal skills. The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ; Buhrmester et al., 1988) was used to measure interpersonal skills. Participants rate 40 items on a scale from 1 (*I’m poor at this; I’d feel so uncomfortable and unable to handle this situation, I’d avoid it if possible*) to 5 (*I’m extremely good at this; I’d feel comfortable and could handle this situation very well*). The ICQ taps skills in five areas: initiation (e.g., “Going to parties or gatherings where you don’t know people well in order to start up new relationships”), negative assertion (e.g., “Telling a companion you don’t like the way he or she has been treating you”), disclosure (e.g., “Revealing something intimate about yourself while talking with someone you’re just getting to know”), emotional support (e.g., “Being able to say and do things to support a close companion when s/he is feeling down”), and conflict management (e.g., “Being able to admit that you might be wrong when a disagreement with a close companion begins to build into a serious fight”). While most of

the items focus on communication skills, some items also tap broader interpersonal skills (e.g., providing help). Scores for each subscale can range from 8 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher perceived interpersonal skills. The questionnaire can be completed separately with regard to either a same-sexed friend or an opposite-sexed romantic partner. However, as many of the items on the opposite-sexed version seemed more suitable for young, single participants rather than a broader community sample, only the same-sexed friend version was used in the current study. Buhrmester et al. reported alpha coefficients ranging from .77 to .86 for the same-sexed friend subscales. Test-retest reliability after four weeks ranged from .69 for conflict management to .89 for initiation.

Procedure

Four Honours students recruited participants via community groups and their own networks, predominantly in regional areas in southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales. People interested in taking part in the study were given a package that included a cover letter and instructions, a 10-page questionnaire, a consent form, and a reply-paid envelope. Contact details for the researchers and a relationships counselling service were also provided. Completed questionnaires and consent forms were separated so that all questionnaire data remained confidential.

Results

A series of *t*-tests was first conducted to determine whether there were gender differences on any of the forgiveness or social skills variables. A Bonferroni correction was used to control for the Type I error rate (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). With an alpha of .006, gender differences only emerged for the emotional support variable, with females ($M = 31.90$) scoring higher than males ($M = 29.38$), [$t(140.52) = -2.98, p = .006$, unequal variance used].

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were then computed between age, the three forgiveness measures, and the five interpersonal skills measures (see Table 1 for a summary of key findings). Age was positively correlated with all three forgiveness subscales, indicating that older participants were more forgiving of self, others, and situations. Moreover, there were positive correlations between all of the interpersonal skills and forgiveness variables. Only the correlation between negative assertion and forgiveness of others failed to reach significance. Thus, greater forgiveness of self, others, and situations were generally associated with higher scores on the skills variables. Age was also negatively correlated with disclosure ($r = -.19, p < .01$), indicating that older people felt less comfortable in disclosing to same-sexed others. Three separate hierarchical regressions were then conducted in order to predict forgiveness of self, others, and situations. In view of the gender difference for emotional support and the correlations between age and some of the variables of interest, age and gender were at Step 1 in each regression analysis, and the interpersonal skills variables were entered at Step 2. As recommended by Hair et al. (2006), dummy coding was used for gender, with males coded as 0 and females coded as 1. The results are shown in Table 2.

For forgiveness of self, age was a significant predictor at Step 1. When entered at Step 2, the interpersonal skills variables explained a further 14.9% of the variance. The full model explained 19.6% of the variance in forgiveness of self, $R = .44, F(7, 204) = 6.84, p < .001$. Age, initiation, and conflict management all made unique contributions to the prediction of forgiveness, such thus older participants and those who were more comfortable with initiation skills and conflict management were more forgiving of self.

For the regressions predicting forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations, however, a problem arose in that self-disclosure emerged as a significant negative predictor of forgiveness (i.e., less comfort in self-disclosure was associated with higher forgiveness

scores) even though self-disclosure was positively correlated with both forgiveness of others ($r = .21, p < .01$) and forgiveness of situations ($r = .15, p < .05$). Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) note that this may indicate the presence of a suppressor variable, which can inflate the multiple R^2 due to its correlation with other variables. In such cases, Tabachnick and Fidell recommend systematically leaving out each independent variable whose regression coefficient and correlation with the outcome variable is congruent in size and direction and then look for the changes in the variable that was inconsistent in the original regression analysis. To explore this further, a series of multiple regression analyses was conducted, with each of the other independent variables being systematically omitted. None of these analyses resulted in the beta weight for disclosure coming in line with the positive direction obtained in the bivariate correlations between disclosure and forgiveness of others and situations. For ease of interpretation, self-disclosure was removed from the regressions involving forgiveness of others and situations.

For forgiveness of others, age was a significant predictor at Step 1. When entered at Step 2, the remaining four interpersonal skills variables explained a further 31.5% of the variance. The full model explained 34.4% of the variance in forgiveness of others, $R = .59, F(6, 204) = 17.30, p < .001$. Age, initiation, and conflict management all made unique contributions to the prediction of forgiveness, such thus older participants and those who were more comfortable with initiation skills and conflict management were more forgiving of others.

For forgiveness of situations, age was again a significant predictor when entered at Step 1. The four interpersonal skills variables explained a further 22.8% of the variance when entered at Step 2. The complete model explained 31.5% of the variance in forgiveness of situations. Age, initiation skills, and conflict management all made significant unique contributions to the prediction. $R = .56, F(6, 204) = 15.18, p < .001$.

Discussion

As predicted, competence in conflict management with same-sexed others was positively correlated with forgiveness of others and was also a significant predictor of forgiveness of others. This is consistent with the findings of Lawler et al. (2005) and is not surprising when one considers that forgiveness occurs in a context that involves the negotiation of potential conflict surrounding an interpersonal offence. However, it is interesting to note that all five interpersonal skills were positively correlated with the three forgiveness measures, with only the relationship between negative assertion and forgiveness of others failing to reach significance. While the five interpersonal skills share some variance, they may also reflect different types of skills that are relevant in forgiveness scenarios (e.g., initiating discussion of the issue, disclosing feelings about the offence, being able to empathise with the offender and providing emotional support by engaging in behaviours such as active listening).

Moreover, age and competence in initiation skills and conflict management each made unique contributions to the prediction of forgiveness of self, others, and situations. The findings regarding age are consistent with previous research (e.g., Fehr et al., 2010). As people get older, they would have experienced more situations that may have required forgiveness (e.g., personal mistakes, interpersonal offences, and other difficult situations) and may have learned to take a more philosophical view of such events. Regarding the interpersonal skills measures, competence in initiation and conflict management may be particularly helpful in forgiveness contexts because they are both proactive skills that can be useful in promoting discussion and problem solving.

These findings may be helpful in refining forgiveness interventions. Other researchers have identified the relevance of skills such as integrative communication, discussion, and supportive nonverbal behaviours (e.g., Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Waldron

& Kelley, 2005). In view of the current findings, training in initiation and conflict management skills may also assist people through the forgiveness process. In view of the positive benefits of forgiveness for interpersonal relationships and general well-being, the development of effective intervention strategies is crucial.

Although the current study adds further insights regarding the interpersonal skills that are associated with forgiveness, the cross-sectional design and correlational nature of the study preclude any definitive statements of causality. It is not clear whether certain skills promote forgiveness, or whether people with a forgiving personality are also more likely to have other qualities that are conducive to good interpersonal skills. In some cases, such as those involving the resolution of interpersonal conflict and reconciliation between the transgressor and the offended person, forgiveness may also be seen as a type of interpersonal skill. More longitudinal research is needed to further explore the causal links between interpersonal skills and forgiveness.

Another limitation of the study is that it was restricted to self-report assessment tools and a dispositional measure of forgiveness. While dispositional and state measures of forgiveness tend to be correlated (e.g., Lawler et al., 2005), individuals may respond differently when faced with an actual transgression. Thus, future research would benefit from the inclusion of reports from partners or other significant others and measures of forgiveness in regard to particular offences. It would also be helpful to study forgiveness in relation to both friends and romantic partners in the same study in order to ascertain whether different skills are more relevant for different contexts. As more research is conducted in this area, clinicians will be in a better position to develop more effective interventions to help clients learn to forgive themselves and others, and to let go of difficult situations that they cannot change.

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations Between the Forgiveness Measures, Age, and Interpersonal Skills with Same-Sexed Friends (N = 210)

	Forgiveness		
	Self	Others	Situations
Age	.22**	.14*	.29***
Initiation	.30***	.36***	.36***
Negative assertion	.18*	.06	.17*
Disclosure	.22**	.21**	.15*
Emotional support	.24***	.40***	.28***
Conflict management	.33***	.53***	.42***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Forgiveness of Self, Others, and Situations

Variable	Final β	Cum. R^2	ΔF	Overall F
Forgiveness of self				6.84***
Step 1: Demographics		.05	4.98**	
Age	.23**			
Gender	.01			
Step 2: Interpersonal skills		.20	7.28***	
Initiation	.19*			
Negative assertion	.08			
Disclosure	.00			
Emotional support	-.04			
Conflict management	.26**			
Forgiveness of others				17.30***
Step 1: Demographics		.03	3.04*	
Age	.12*			
Gender	.02			
Step 2: Interpersonal skills		.34	23.75***	
Initiation	.27***			
Negative assertion	-.13			
Emotional support	-.01			
Conflict management	.45***			

Forgiveness of situations			15.18***
Step 1: Demographics		.09	9.59***
Age	.29***		
Gender	.05		
Step 2: Interpersonal skills		.32	16.51***
Initiation	.25**		
Negative assertion	.06		
Emotional support	-.11		
Conflict management	.39***		

Note. Cum R^2 = cumulative R^2 . For gender, 0 = males, 1 = females.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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