University of Southampton

Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology

Title: The importance of forgiveness: How can psychological research inform educational practice?

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Abstract

Forgiveness is a process of cognitive, behavioural and emotional change towards a transgression. It can be seen as a positive psychological resource to interpersonal harm. This essay examines the importance of forgiveness by examining why it is related to increased wellbeing and positive relationships. It then examines how the research on forgiveness can be related to children and adolescents. There has been much investigation on forgiveness and forgiveness interventions with adults, however the research on forgiveness with children and adolescents is still an emerging area. In order for schools to effectively promote forgiveness, an understanding of the developmental prerequisites of forgiveness and how children understand the construct of forgiveness is essential. There is currently limited research on the effectiveness of forgiveness education and intervention in schools. This essay will examine how schools can promote forgiveness at three different levels: a whole school preventative approach, targeted interventions and informal responses to transgressions. Future research is needed to determine the most effective method of fostering forgiveness in a school setting. Implications for Educational Psychologists are discussed.

The importance of forgiveness: How can psychological research inform educational practice?

Forgiveness has been described as a "*positive psychological response to interpersonal harm*" (p. 147 Bono & McCullough, 2006) and is a process of cognitive, motivational and emotional change (Denham, Neal, Wilson, Pickering & Boyatzis, 2005; McCullough, Bono & Root, 2007). The empirical study of forgiveness can increase knowledge and understanding of what psychological processes underlie a transgression (Worthington, 2006) and explores the contexts and conditions in which forgiveness occurs (Fehr, Gelfand & Nag, 2010). Research also establishes how forgiveness can be a psychological resource for well-being that aids a positive response to another person's harmful behaviour (Bono & McCullough, 2006; Worthington, 2006). Forgiveness as a psychological resource is in line with Positive Psychology, an emerging area of research which aims to enhance the understanding of "*positive emotions, positive character traits and the institutions that enable them to flourish"* (p 41. Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). This essay aims to explore how forgiveness can increase an individual's well-being and examine how institutions such as schools can promote forgiveness. Much of the empirical research on forgiveness has been conducted with adults (Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). This research has demonstrated that forgiveness has been linked with increases in physical health, mental well-being and the maintaining of positive relationships (Baskin & Enright, 2004; McCullough et al. 1998; Fehr et al. 2010). The research on forgiveness with children and adolescents is an emerging area that needs to be developed (Denham et al. 2005), including the role of forgiveness in education (Zembylas &Michaelidou, 2011). This essay will explore evidence that demonstrates that forgiveness is related to increased well-being and is an important psychological resource, it will then consider how this evidence applies to children and adolescents and review research which can inform educational practice and the work of Educational Psychologists (EP).

Definition of forgiveness

There is disagreement within the literature about the operational definition of forgiveness (Worthington, Witvliet & Miller, 2007). This has implications for the construct being open to interpretation (Van Dyke & Elias, 2007) and results in potential discrepancies in methodological and conceptual comparisons of the literature (Denham et al. 2005). There is however, a broader consensus on what forgiveness is not: it differs from related concepts such as pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting and denying (e.g. Baskin & Enright, 2004; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Worthington & Scherer (2004) also differentiate unforgiveness from forgiveness. They posit that unforgiveness is not experienced by everyone who does not forgive, but occurs when people ruminate angrily, anxiously or depressively. Negative emotions of anger, resentment, hostility and hatred are the consequences of such ruminations. Unforgiveness can be reduced by employing defences such as denial, avoidance, and excusing or employing retribution seeking behaviours such as revenge (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). A positive alternative to unforgiveness is forgiveness, this is a process of reframing that involves an individual becoming more positively disposed towards another individual who has harmed them and recognising them as separate from the offending act (Scobie & Scobie, 2002; Worthington, 2006). Reconciliation is also distinct from forgiveness; this involves a resolution of the relationship between the transgressor and the victim (Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005). Luchies, Finkel, McNulty and Kumashiro (2010) posit that if reconciliation is confused with the concept of forgiveness then negative consequences such as poor relationship satisfaction, low self-respect and potential victimisation can occur. Reconciliation should only be a consequence of forgiveness when the individual feels safe and valued in a continued relationship with the transgressor (Luchies et al. 2010). This is a critical point to consider in

the teaching of forgiveness in schools, in terms of bullying and child safety (Enright, Enright, Holter, Baskin & Knutson, 2007).

Forgiveness can be defined as a process involving cognition, motivation, behaviour and emotion (e.g. Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). It has been proposed that decisional and emotional forgiveness are distinct concepts (Worthington, 2006). Decisional forgiveness is the motivation and behavioural intention to respond to the transgressor in a similar manner as before the offence. Emotional forgiveness describes a change from negative unforgiving emotions to more positive emotions such as empathy, sympathy, compassion and altruistic love (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). It is this affective transformation in emotional forgiveness that is important for health and well-being (Worthington, 2006; Denham et al, 2005). The distinction between decisional and emotional forgiveness has implications for how educators can promote forgiveness in schools. It is important for educators to acknowledge that the process of forgiving involves a decisional process, which relies on children's understanding of the construct of forgiveness (Scobie & Scobie, 2000). It is also imperative that forgiveness is not simply thought of as a cognitive act and attention is also given to the emotional process of forgiving (Zembylas & Michaelidou, 2011). This essay will now examine the literature on why forgiveness is related to increases in well-being.

Forgiveness and wellbeing

There have been many correlational studies that have examined the link between forgiveness and well-being. These studies have established that forgiveness is negatively associated with anger, depression and stress and positively associated with physical health, mental wellbeing and the quality of relationships (e.g. Breen, Kashdan, Lenser, Fincham, 2010; Fehr et al. 2010; Lawler-Row, Karremans, Scott, Elias-Matityahou & Edwards, 2008; Worthington, Witvliet,

Lerner, & Scherer, 2005). Meta-analyses of forgiveness interventions have also established that forgiveness can cause a reduction in anger and revengeful thoughts and have positive consequences for relationships and wellbeing (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry 2000). Crucially, there have been a small number of studies that have investigated these relationships empirically with the aim to establish a causal relationship. McCullough, Bono & Root (2007) investigated the effect of rumination on forgiveness and well-being. Rumination is a psychological response that has corresponding negative consequences on health and well-being. Rumination prolongs depression, anger and negative emotions, and results in prolonged and intensified psychological distress (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). A time-lagged analysis demonstrated that rumination predicted the level of unforgiveness a person would subsequently experience. Reductions in rumination were causally related to an increase in the level of forgiveness and greater wellbeing the following day. Lawler-Row et al. (2008) demonstrated that forgiveness has positive effects that go beyond just a decrease in anger and rumination; this empirical study concluded that forgiveness is not just a reduction in the negative physiological responses, but has a positive impact on psychological and health responses.

These outcomes are consistent with the Emotional Replacement Hypothesis (Worthington 2006), a theory that describes how forgiveness increases wellbeing and can be seen as a psychological resource (Worthington, 2006; Bono & McCullough, 2006). Worthington (2006) and which proposes that forgiveness mediates the negative emotional consequences of interpersonal transgressions that result in unforgiveness and replaces them with positive other-orientated emotions such as empathy, compassion, sympathy, romantic love and altruistic love. Wade et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis on forgiveness interventions, the proportion of empathy in the intervention strongly predicted subsequent propensity to forgive. In a meta-analysis of research into forgiveness, state and trait empathy were

positively associated with forgiveness (Fehr et al. 2010). The link between empathy and forgiveness has also been empirically investigated. Sandage & Worthington (2011) experimentally manipulated empathy by comparing empathy-orientated seminars with a control seminar. Not only were the empathy seminars more effective in promoting forgiveness, there was also an overall positive relationship between empathy and forgiveness scores, regardless of experimental condition. This experiment builds on positive results of empathy seminars conducted by McCullough et al. (1997). There has also been research that has demonstrated that forgiveness is a mechanism that increases positive emotions and wellbeing within relationships. Forgiveness has been found to be more frequent in committed relationships (McCullough et al. 1998, Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk & Kluwer, 2003); however, it is the restoration of interpersonal relationships after a transgression that is the mechanism that increases wellbeing (Bono et al, 2008). Forgiveness can lead to a restoration of relational closeness because it leads to a reduction in avoidant behaviour and increased cooperation (Bono et al, 2008; McCullough et al. 1998). It also results in both individuals in the relationship recognising that the transgression is separate from the offender (Wade et al. 2005). A longitudinal study by Bono et al. (2008) looked at the causal association between forgiveness, connectedness, relationship quality and well-being. The conclusions drawn in were that the positive association between forgiveness and wellbeing could be explained by the restoration of a subjective sense of relational closeness and commitment to the offending partner. This is consistent with the literature that positive social relations are crucial human needs (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Empathy and re-connectedness of relationships are examples of positive other-orientated emotions that can increase wellbeing. More empirical research is needed to discover how sympathy, compassion and altruistic love can replace unforgiveness (Worthington, 2006).

Emotional forgiveness relates to the Broaden and Build Model of Positive Emotions (Fredrikson, 2001; Worthington, 2006). This theory describes the process by which positive emotions undo lingering negative emotions and mediate "*an upward spiral towards enhanced emotional well-being*" (p.224, Fredrikson, 2001). Worthington, Witvliet, Lerner & Scherer (2005) propose that forgiveness can benefit well-being in line with Fredrikson's theory of positive emotions in two ways: firstly, it works to undo the effects of the negative responses of unforgiveness; secondly it "*broadens people's cognitive and behavioural framework and builds new adaptive techniques*" (p.169 Worthington et al. 2005).

Forgiveness in children and adolescents

This essay has so far described how forgiveness can be seen as a psychological resource that has the effect of replacing the negative consequences of unforgiveness, increasing wellbeing and re-establishing relationships. The positive consequences of forgiveness demonstrate the value of promoting forgiving in schools. Children's peer relationships are an important part of their social and emotional development (Denham et al. 2005; Rose & Asher, 1999). As children can get their feelings hurt in conflicts involving siblings, peers and parents, the study of forgiveness in children should be as important as in adults (Denham et al. 2005; Zembylas & Michaelidou, 2011). Knowledge and understanding of how children understand forgiveness is important in establishing how forgiveness can be promoted and nurtured by educators (Scobie & Scobie, 2000; Zembylas & Michaelidou, 2011). This essay will now examine research that has been conducted with children and adolescents and relate this to how schools can nurture and promote forgiveness.

It has been hypothesised that the development of forgiveness is related to children's moral understanding (Enight Santos and Al-Mabuk, 1989), emotional regulation (Denham et al. 2005; Worthington, 2006) and empathy and perspective-taking skills (Denham et al. 2005;

Scobie & Scobie, 2000). In order for forgiveness to be promoted in schools, an understanding of the developmental prerequisites of forgiveness and knowledge of what age children can understand forgiveness is vital (Scobie & Scobie, 2000). However, there are inconsistencies in the literature about the age in which forgiveness can be understood in children. Enright & the Human Development Study Group (2004) relate the development of forgiveness to theories of cognitive and moral reasoning and propose a stage model of forgiveness development. This model hypothesises that the earlier stages of moral reasoning about forgiveness are linked to revenge and reciprocal forgiveness, this develops to incorporate the expectation of others and society. In the final stage of this model, forgiveness is seen as a gift and an expression of unconditional love (Enright et al. 2004). From this model, Enright et al. (1989) posit that the understanding of forgiveness is related to age. Younger children are at an earlier stage of moral reasoning and forgiveness is dependent on reversing negative consequences, whereas adolescents are more strongly influenced by the expectation of others. The assumptions of this model and methodology, however, have received some criticism. Denham et al. (2005) argue that the dilemmas used required abstract reasoning and involved adult situations, which may not be understood by children and did not allow for differentiating among transgressions. More recent research emphasises that younger children understand forgiveness from a variety of perspectives; although these may not be fully mature, they do not appear to be significantly different to how adults understand forgiveness (Denham et al. 2005; Chiaramello, Mesnil, Muñoz-Sastre, & Mullet 2008). Chiaramello et al. (2008) investigated forgiveness with young adolescents, older adolescents and adults, and found results that were inconsistent with Enright et al. (1989). The study used a forgiveness scale that measured constructs of forgiveness such as lasting resentment, pressures from others to forgive, response to apologies and overall propensity to forgive or avenge. No significant differences were observed between adolescents and adults. Furthermore, the older

adolescents displayed a higher level of lasting resentment and lower willingness to forgive compared to younger adolescents. This outcome has important implications for educational practice; although replication of the research is needed to establish whether the results can be generalised, it indicates that interventions targeting forgiveness in adolescence could be valuable. A limitation of the methodology used in this study is that participants' willingness to forgive was measured and this may not relate to actual behaviours of the individuals studied. Work by Denham et al. (2005) used an age appropriate assessment tool, the Children's Forgiveness Inventory (CFI) to measure emotional, moral and behavioural aspects of forgiveness in young children aged 7-12. This study established that although age was related to level of abstract reasoning about forgiveness, propensity and motivation to forgive did not vary across age categories. (Neal, Basset & Denham, 2004 as cited in Denham et al. 2005). Furthermore, Zembylas & Michaelidou (2011) conducted a qualitative study of children aged 10-12 which explored children's perceptions of forgiveness. The study concluded that children view forgiveness from a number of different perspectives and that the developmental stages of forgiveness proposed by Enright et al. (1989) were concurrently present for many of the participants. The examination of the available research has shown inconsistencies in the evidence relating to the age that children understand forgiveness. This highlights an important area for future research.

The limited studies that have been conducted with children also demonstrate that factors such as emotional regulation, empathy and perspective taking are related to children's understanding of forgiveness (Denham et al. 2005). These aspects are consistent with research in adults which demonstrates that emotional forgiveness involves a process of positive emotions replacing the negative affect of unforgiveness. A strength of the study by Denham et al. (2005) is that the CFI allowed the investigation of emotional aspects of children's forgiveness and looked at forgiveness across different contexts. The outcomes

related to children's emotions were consistent with research in adults (Denham et al. 2005). For example when a transgression was carried out on purpose, shame and anger prone children reported that they were less likely to forgive and if the transgressor made an excuse it would also take longer to forgive compared with other children. The results of the study also illustrated that propensity to forgiveness or to expect forgiveness varied in different scenarios, e.g. when a transgression was accidental or on purpose, or whether an apology or an excuse was given. Children's level of perspective taking, empathy and moral understanding were related to the level of forgiveness in these different scenarios (Denham et al. 2005). This highlights another important area for future research, to further examine how the development of empathy, moral and perspective taking relate to forgiveness and by what processes adults can intervene and foster forgiveness. This research would complement the literature on how a family environment can affect forgiveness with factors such as relationship quality, martial forgiveness (Chistensen, Padilla-Walker, Busby, Hardy & Day, 2011) and parental modelling (Maio, Thomas, Fincham & Carnelly, 2008). It would also have important implications for designing interventions in schools (Zembylas & Michaelidou, 2011). Currently, promoting forgiveness in schools is mostly informal and non-curricular (Scobie & Scobie, 2000). However, knowledge of forgiveness development can still be important for how educators can nurture forgiveness at an informal level e.g. after an interpersonal transgression. If educators can understand that forgiveness is both a cognitive and emotional construct that relates to child's development, they could be more able to take on a role of mediator and use a child's zone of proximal development (ZPD) to nurture the concept of forgiveness (Scobie & Scobie, 2000). ZPD refers to the area between the level of current development and level of potential development given appropriate support by an adult (Vygotsky, 1978). Instead of simply giving a 'sorry lesson' after an interpersonal transgression, educators could develop and build on children's level of empathy, compassion,

perspective taking and motivation to forgive or ask for forgiveness. There has been no empirical research to date that has explored how teachers informally discuss forgiveness with children, other than promoting apologies after interpersonal transgressions (Denham et al. 2005). The value of schools having an understanding of the development of forgiveness and its developmental requisites is key, this also highlights an area that EPs could develop in consultation or conduct training on. However, it is very important that there should be an emphasis on a preventative approach to forgiveness development in schools.

Current research in school

There are a limited number of forgiveness interventions that have been conducted in schools, these interventions were conducted at a whole school level and as targeted interventions. The outcomes of these studies have demonstrated significant positive results. However, the studies that have been published have all been based on the work of Enright et al. (1994). Due to the inconsistencies in the literature of how children understand forgiveness, this is a limitation of what research is available. However, forgiveness interventions are an exciting area of emerging research that could have implications for the work of EPs. It represents an area of research generation that EPs could be in a unique position to carry out.

Recent research into forgiveness in schools has taken a preventative approach and used a whole school curriculum to promote forgiveness. Enright, Holter, Baskin, Knutson (2007) conducted a study in the post conflict zone of Northern Island. The premise of this study was that if the intervention could equip students with the knowledge and practice of forgiveness, it could have implications at an interpersonal level and could also benefit the wider community. A consultation-based approach was used in this study, teachers were first trained on the construct of forgiveness and an age specific curriculum. This curriculum used a story-based approach and focused mainly on children's understanding on the construct of

forgiveness, rather than individual transgressions. Consistent with the literature, children were also taught the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation (Enright et al. 2007). Children taking part in the forgiveness curriculum showed a significant increase in their propensity to forgive and demonstrated a significant decrease in anger levels, compared to children who received a control intervention (Enright et al. 2007). Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Enright & Enright (2008) built on the positive results from Enright et al (2007) and implemented a preventative intervention in an impoverished urban community in the USA. This study replicated the positive findings from Enright et al. (2007), it is notable that in both studies effect sizes similar to adult intervention groups was demonstrated (Holter et al. 2008). The large effect sizes that were gained have implications for EPs, these interventions used a consultation approach that equipped teachers with the skills to implement a curriculum that had a positive effect in a large number for children. The main focus of both studies was anger reduction, considering the benefits of forgiveness on wellbeing and relationships, it was a major limitation of this study that these constructs were not measured. A targeted intervention based in a high school has also illustrated positive results in anger reduction; in addition increases in well-being and academic performance were also demonstrated (Gambaro, Enright, Baskin & Klatt, 2008). The participants identified for this targeted intervention had scores of high trait anger, had experienced hurt from a transgression from a significant person in their lives and were identified by teachers as being a risk of academic failure. A forgiveness intervention was compared with a client-centred control intervention. The experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in forgiveness, self-perception, attitudes towards teachers and parents and also showed gains in academic achievement. They also displayed a significant reduction in problem behaviour at school, e.g. detentions and suspensions. Crucially, a four-month follow up demonstrated that these gains were maintained (Gambaro et al. 2008). Key components of this intervention included the

introduction to the concept of forgiveness and examination of the negative impacts of anger and aggression. The intervention also taught and nurtured empathy, compassion and attributions to past injuries. Further research will need to be conducted to see if the outcomes of this study can be generalised and replicated. An area for further study that was highlighted by the authors was to establish whether a developmentally appropriate intervention with younger children could show the same effectiveness. Forgiveness interventions with adults have been used for people who have experienced abuse or trauma and helped adults overcome neglect and negative parental relationships (Worthington et al. 2005). This study shows the potential for forgiveness interventions to be used in a school based setting, in addition the positive outcomes also generalised to other areas of the school environment. This has implications for how EPs could incorporate forgiveness in their work with individuals who experience high levels of anger or have experienced trauma or destructive family relationships.

EP implications

To summarise points already made, EPs are well placed to work at the level of the whole school, in a consultation model with class teachers and with individuals. The research on forgiveness has implications for EPs on each of these levels. A crucial theme across this essay was the limited published research on forgiveness in children and adolescents. It is vital that interventions recommended by EPs are evidence-based, however EPs could extend this evidence base and be involved in research generation about forgiveness. Areas for further research could include how children understand forgiveness, the developmental prerequisites that are required to express forgiveness and the effectiveness of whole school interventions and targeted interventions.

In addition, this essay has discussed how forgiveness can be an important psychological resource that increases well-being and promotes positive relationships. Furthermore, developing this skill could have important implications for a child's future well-being and relationships. When EPs advise schools about the value of promoting well-being among students, they should include the promotion of forgiveness as a mechanism to increase wellbeing. It has also been discussed that the outcomes of forgiveness interventions have demonstrated a reduction in levels of anger and have incorporated skills such as empathy and perspective taking. EPs can be involved in anger management programmes in schools, these programmes also have the aim of anger reduction and increased social skills. Knowledge and understanding of the process of forgiveness and positive other-orientated emotions that increase emotional forgiveness could be important in designing and tailoring these programmes to individuals.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is a process of cognitive, behavioural and emotional change towards a transgression. This essay has highlighted how forgiveness can be a positive psychological resource for overcoming interpersonal harm and has implications for increased well-being and positive relationships. The majority of the research has been conducted with adults, however, it has been argued that forgiveness in children and adolescents should become an important area of future research. There are currently inconsistencies in the literature on the age that children understand forgiveness. The limited research that has been conducted has also demonstrated that empathy, perspective taking and moral understanding play a vital role. Knowledge of how children understand forgiveness is vital for educators to effectively promote forgiveness in schools. Forgiveness can be promoted on an informal level through mediating the negative cognitive and emotional consequences of transgressions. In addition, it has the potential to be incorporated into whole school interventions that implement a

forgiveness curriculum and targeted interventions with pupils that experience anger or have been hurt by a previous transgression. EPs can also contribute to the evidence generation on the topic of forgiveness in children and adolescents.

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