

FORGIVENESS

To Forgive Is Divine: The Scientific Study of Forgiveness

Campaign for Forgiveness Research is a nonprofit organization that funds scientific research on forgiveness. Supported by the Foundation and other philanthropists, the Campaign has funded almost 50 projects related to the scientific study of forgiveness, covering aspects of forgiveness in individuals, interpersonal relationships, relations among nations and in nature. Investigators have measured the psychological, social and emotional traits of forgiveness and have correlated them with the biological, physical and chemical responses — even studying images of how the brain works while making decisions about forgiving. Now finishing its final year, the Campaign is publishing its findings.

Uncommon Wisdom

Although the informal study of forgiveness has been ongoing, the more rigorous, scientific study of forgiveness is a recent area of research. As Dr. Everett Worthington, Jr., a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and director of A Campaign for Forgiveness Research, notes, “There’s not a person alive that doesn’t have to deal with transgressions. The common wisdom of what forgiveness is and means,” says Worthington, “is more like a scattered mosaic of information.” However Worthington is optimistic that is improving: “Scientific rationality helps us make a picture of what was a very sketchy mosaic.”

“As people have looked at it scientifically and have tried to define what forgiveness is more precisely, and then follow that up by actually measuring it,” says Worthington, “I think a lot of things are being revealed about forgiveness that weren’t in the common wisdom — or were there, but they were never put together.” Therefore by funding research in forgiveness, the Campaign is making these connections. Nevertheless, what “forgiveness” actually is, says Worthington, is less clear-cut. “You could say it’s just changing your thinking, or it’s changing your motivation. Some people say it’s just making a decision about the way you’re going to act,” he says. “My claim is that it’s a change in your emotional experience.”

Understanding forgiveness as a change in emotional experience necessarily allows for researchers to study the physical and biological effects that correlate with this emotional change. The psychological connection to the physical is the basis for the scientific study of forgiveness that has exploded since the Foundation became involved.

Scientific Findings About Forgiveness

In the fall of 2003 in Atlanta, Georgia, 65 researchers gathered to present their findings from more than 40 studies at a conference titled Scientific Findings about Forgiveness. Researchers from more than six countries, including Russia, South Africa, Italy and England participated. Their research covered the role of forgiveness in health, in our relationships, in nation-to-nation dealings and in primates.

Charlotte Witvliet of Hope College studied forgiveness, emotion and psychophysiology among victims and transgressors. People who forgave others had more positive physiological responses than those who harbored revengeful thoughts. June Tangney at George Mason University researched forgiving the self to discover the role of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. Her studies replicated recent research showing that people inclined to forgive others are generally well-adjusted, agreeable, other-oriented individuals with a well-developed capacity for self-control. Self-forgivers, on the other hand, tended to be self-centered, coming up short in the moral emotional domain. While they forgave themselves easily, they showed little remorse for their own transgressions and harshness in response to others’ transgressions.

Fred Luskin also studied forgiveness and relationships in a series of studies of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, which tested a specific forgiveness methodology in interpersonal relationships involving hurt among adult communities in the United States and Northern Ireland. People with unresolved hurt were taught to forgive in a group format through lecture, guided imagery, cognitive disputation and discussion. The results showed both

emotional and physical benefits, from decreased feelings of hurt, depression and stress to increased feelings of optimism and willingness to forgive others.

Northern Ireland was the subject of another study by Ed Cairns on intergroup forgiveness. To understand the role of forgiveness within the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, Cairns, who teaches at the University of Ulster, looked at intergroup and interpersonal conflict and forgiveness, finding that contact with “out-group” friends tended to correlate with forgiveness, more trust, and a more positive “out-group” attitude.

Even primates, researchers found, have a language of forgiveness. Chimpanzees, for instance, kiss and embrace after fights. Other species also show reconciling behavior. As Frans de Waal, who studies primates at the Living Links Center at Emory University, notes, “there is good evidence that reconciliation truly serves what its name suggests, i.e., the repair of social relationships. The dominant idea (known as the Valuable Relationship Hypothesis) is that reconciliation will occur whenever parties stand much to lose if their relationship deteriorates. . . . These mechanisms now seem so logical that the absence of reconciliation in a social species is considered puzzling.”

The Campaign’s ultimate goal for these scientific papers is to get findings out to the public. “We want them in the public square. We want them fighting with other scientific concepts for public attention,” Worthington says. “The obligation of the scientist,” he argues, “is not just to speak to his or her peers, but it’s also to try to translate this into something that people can use.”

At the beginning of the Campaign, Worthington said he reviewed the scientific literature and could find only 50 studies even remotely related to forgiveness. Since the Campaign’s inception, the number of citations of scientific papers has climbed to almost 4,500.

Looking Ahead

Worthington plans to compile and categorize these thousands of studies to make them available to researchers and the interested public on the Campaign’s website. He has also asked researchers to contribute chapters for a book the Campaign hopes will become a handbook on forgiveness.

“We’re in an acceleration phase,” says Worthington. “Big labs got drawn into this field because of the grant initiative by the Foundation. They’ve trained graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers, and they have an investment in this area now. I suspect this is going to continue.”

In addition, Worthington hopes that more courses on forgiveness can be taught similar to one he taught at a seminary in the Philippines and at the Rosemead School of Psychology in California.

“I think what’s happening is that people are realizing that there’s enough literature accumulating that a course can be organized,” says Worthington. He hopes to generate interest in a forgiveness course for undergraduate students as well. “I’ve not heard of anybody offering an undergraduate course. It seems like a logical step.” Along with publishing books and articles and developing courses, the continuation of the Campaign’s efforts is Worthington’s main goal. “Perhaps the best way to do that,” Worthington says, “would be for these pioneers in forgiveness research to combine their findings and apply for larger, nationally funded grants from institutions like the National Institute of Mental Health.”

Overall, Worthington said he sees room for expansion in forgiveness research: “I’ve got lots of dreams for what I would like the field to be. Especially, I would like to draw more young researchers into this area by giving support for research with dissertation awards to postdocs. These early-career awards might help young researchers see the value of this incredible field that they could spend 10 years studying,” says Worthington. “To me that’s like, the ‘Teach them to fish’ type of mentality,” he muses. “It’s a seeding of something that’s going to pay off dividends for years to come.”