

The Concept of Forgiveness and its Social Cultural Significance among Tabwa People of Congo

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Abstract: Forgiveness is one of the hardest things to give and it is almost always given to those who don't even deserve it. Some people don't even like to think or even talk about it when someone hurts them. Holding on to anger and resentment can be an attitude adopted by some people in this world. On the other hand, some other people choose to practice forgiveness. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the practice of forgiveness and its significance among people who have experienced hurt from others among some members of the Tabwa ethnic community (DRC). The study used a Transcendental Phenomenological Research design. Convenient sampling was used to select 10 participants aged between 20 to 60 from the Tabwa ethnic community. The study used an interview guide for data collection. A thematic approach was employed for data analysis. The results of the study indicated that the participants allocated a great importance to forgiveness. It was found that the practice of forgiveness had produced some positive emotional outcomes and behaviors such as peace, happiness, freedom, sense of humility among other values.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Anger, Resentment, Conflict, Culture, Social-Cultural

I. INTRODUCTION

A human being is by nature socially connected to other humans. In this world, where human beings are living, it is common to find that people are behaving differently in the face of societal interpersonal relationships. The increase in individualist interests may lead to the rise in conflictual situations. It is familiar to see that some people overlook the value and interest of others for the sake of their selfish desires. And those whose interests or values are undermined are ready to find means of getting back whatever they feel is loss or demeaned. The conflicting situation may open an access to a highway of violence, destruction of lives and properties. In response to this conflictual outcome, people may likely resort to the rule of law, or engage in the spiral cycle of revenge and vengeance. Forgiveness becomes unlikely.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of forgiveness includes these key phrases such as “cease to resent or claim requital for” and “give up resentment, anger against a person”. And this clearly directs our attention to the fact that forgiveness is undertaken, at least in the first instance, for the benefit of the forgivers, in order to release someone from the pain which accompanies the afflictive emotions of anger, hatred, regret and resentment (Terry Hyland, 2017).

Scholars have tried to refine the definition of forgiveness based on their conceptual and empirical works.

There are broadly two approaches. The first approach tried to differentiate forgiveness from unforgiving actions and outcomes, and the second approach tried to explain the processes and outcome of forgiveness (Lijo, 2018). Definitions of forgiveness depend on long-standing cultural factors impacted by religious, philosophical, and theoretical perspective. According to a view of an aborigine from Australia, forgiveness is a conscious decision to let go of the anger and resentment held towards someone that has inflicted hurt and pain (Report, 2013). According to Lijo (2018), forgiveness is an expression of altruism and moral forms to overcome injustice for victims through kindness toward the perpetrator. For Tucker et al. (2015), forgiveness is the replacement of negative, unforgiving emotions with positive emotions toward the offender. The authors stated that the object of forgiveness can be a third person or the self. It seems that the forgiveness to self is as challenging as the one offered to a third person. This challenge is well described by Lijo (2018) as stated: Forgiving to oneself is the most effortful form of forgiveness. In some occasions, individuals feel anger to oneself when any of their behavior, verbal or nonverbal, leads to any significant self-defeat or non-correctable consequences. Self-forgiveness is defined as a process of releasing resentment towards oneself for a perceived transgression or wrongdoing.

In the study, the focus is mainly on the importance attached to the concept of forgiveness as well as the benefit obtained from the practice of forgiveness. From the humanistic angle, letting go or forgiveness is a quality of growth seeking individual. In other words, human beings have the capacity to choose forgiveness, instead of the negative reaction to the wrongdoer. This is how the earth has survived so far. Major religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism have celebrated the virtue-forgiveness saying ‘committing mistakes is the natural and humane, but forgiving is divine’ (Lijo, 2018).

The act of forgiveness faces a great challenge, especially in the communities with culture of honor. In a research comparing Turkish and Dutch participants, Shafa and colleagues (2017) as cited by Castillo (2019) examined different types of apologies and forgiveness. They found that even after an apology, members of an honor culture (Turkey) were less likely to forgive the offender than were members of a dignity culture.

According to Lijo (2018) people adopt a variety of responses in the face of interpersonal transgressions such as

active or passive retaliation, holding grudges, and denying the seriousness of the offense. It is likely that the unforgiving responses to wrongdoer are the habitual tendencies. The negative reaction to wrongdoer and resistance to forgive are learned as part of survival need or power need of human beings. But the human being has the humane capacity to overcome this 'habitual barrier' through compassion and forgiveness (Lijo, 2018).

The importance of forgiveness was also acknowledged and promoted by spiritual, philosophical, and cultural backgrounds. Above and beyond the usual moral and social dimensions of forgiveness, the Buddhist practice of forgiveness also has spiritual and transcendent aspects; and that because of these aspects, forgiveness is unconditional and repentance is not compulsory for a victim to forgive the wrongdoer (Hyland, 2017).

According to a theological perspective, true forgiveness culminates in a healing of what has been broken. It is a struggle where both culpability and wrongdoing are examined and ultimately overcome by the restoration of community. The purpose of forgiveness is not to feel better, but to deepen and enrich community. It is a way of life; not an inner way of life, but a way of living with others" (Feigenblatt, 2011).

In Australia, among the aborigine people, the importance of forgiveness is well known. According to a Report (2013), Palmer, a local leader stated. We all experience pain and hurt over the course of our lives and we must come to realize that continuing to carry the pain is a decision. Just as deciding to forgive and begin the journey of healing is also a decision. Not forgiving others can damage our spiritual, emotional and even physical well-being. Holding on to hurts is like carrying red-hot coals inside us that can be fanned into flames at the least expected.

The influence of culture in the importance and the understanding of the concept of forgiveness is quite significant. Feigenblatt (2011) stated that if culture is inextricably linked with most aspects of human behavior, then it can also be expected that such as complex phenomenon as forgiveness is also influenced by the construct. Since culture shapes the way events are interpreted and that interpretation triggers emotions, culture will exert some influence on the way forgiveness is felt by the victim and by the offender. Another way to approach the possible influence of culture on forgiveness is to explore whether the phenomenon is experienced as an individual or a relational event. This brings up the well-worn distinction between collectivist and individualist societies. While the previously mentioned categories are very broad they are useful in that they provide some important information regarding the orientation of an individual from a certain cultural group. A member of a collectivist culture can be expected to be more other-oriented than someone from an individualist culture. Moreover, a person from a collectivist culture is expected to view group goals as more important than personal ones.

The above literature review has shown the importance of the practice of the forgiveness among people of different

cultural backgrounds such as the Australian Aborigines as well as the Turkish. Scholars in behavioral science have identified the personal and interpersonal benefits of forgiveness and the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social dimensions of forgiveness (Lijo, 2018).

It is important to note that the act or fact of forgiveness goes through different stages. According to Tucker et al. (2015), there appears to be some general agreement amongst theorists on the stages involved in the process of forgiveness. These include the five steps of (a) a recognition that an offense has occurred along with associated feelings of anger and hurt, (b) continued negative thoughts and emotions in response to the offense, (c) a recognition that previous strategies of dealing with the hurt are not working, (d) a freely-chosen decision to forgive, and finally (e) affective, cognitive, and/or behavioral changes in the person's response to the offender (p.14).

The benefit of forgiveness is well acknowledged in the Buddhism. Accordingly, forgiveness under Buddhist and Hindu perspectives hinges largely on the meditative practice of understanding the illusion of self. According to Newberg, and DeMarici (2000), as cited by Tucker et al. (2015), in their neuropsychological model of forgiveness, suggest that such meditative practices help to reframe interpersonal hurts by reconciling one's understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world. The meditator who focuses on forgiveness engages parasympathetic nervous activity including decreased heart rate, more relaxed breathing, improved immune functioning, and decreased pain perception. Thus, when conceptualized through Buddhist and Hindu traditions, the salutary effects of forgiveness are likely to occur as a result of the same systems implicated in the association between meditation and health.

According to Lijo (2018), forgiveness is not only a positive indicator of mental health but also of physiological health. A study has found that unforgiving thoughts not only lead to negative emotional experiences, and but also make negative physiological effects like higher corrugator (brow) electromyogram (EMG), skin conductance, heart rate, and blood pressure changes. The forgiving thoughts enhance perceived control and lower physiological stress responses in individuals. The findings also revealed that chronic unforgiving responses may erode health whereas forgiving responses may enhance it.

Forgiveness is a powerful phenomenon in explaining individual wellbeing. It has been related to numerous mental health benefits including reduced stress, anger, depression, and state anxiety; positive relational health including improved social support and marital quality; and an array of physical health benefits including lowered blood pressure and improved cardiovascular health (Tucker et al, 2015).

A series of studies involving large samples of undergraduate students showed that forgiveness was positively correlated with positive and pro-social traits like agreeableness, empathic concern, extraversion and perspective taking, and negatively with neuroticism, trait anger, hostility, depression,

and fear. Another notable finding was a strong negative association between forgiveness and the tendency to ruminate vengefully (Lijo, 2018).

Forgiveness is a gift to yourself. Unforgiveness has been described as carrying around a red hot rock, intending to someday throw it back at the person who hurt you. Forgiving allows you to release the burden of anger and pain and lay that hot rock down. I know from the times that I have truly been able to grasp these lessons that forgiveness gives me a sense of personal freedom, hope, peace, and happiness which I get in no other way (Jampolsky, 1999).

These statements are a picture of how people around the world consider the concept of forgiveness and its value for the individual who practiced it. At this point, the study assessed the importance allocated to forgiveness and the benefit derived from it among who have lived experienced of forgiveness.

There is no much literature on the concept of lived experiences of forgiveness in the Tabwa community. The purpose of the study was twofold, to find out the importance of forgiveness among some selected participants (1), and to assess the benefits gained through the practice of forgiveness (2).

II. METHODOLOGY

The study used a Descriptive Transcendental phenomenological research design. The study targeted members of the Tabwa community living in the Moba area in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A Convenient sampling was used to select 10 participants aged between 20 to 60 from the Tabwa ethnic community. The study used an interview guide for data collection. A thematic approach was employed for data analysis.

III. RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Variables of the Participants

Demographic Variables of the Participants

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Age	20- 30 yrs	2	20
	31- 40 yrs	3	30
	41- 50 yrs	1	10
	51 and above	4	40
Gender	Male	2	20
	Female	8	80

The results in Table 1 indicate that age of the 10 respondents was spread from 20 years old to above 50 years. This is an important indication that the study involved respondents of different age and captured rich lived experiences across ages. The European Institute for Gender Equality (2016) asserts that “gender inclusion in research is a key factor in determining whether society is healthy”

Benefits of Forgiveness.

The following were the main themes developed from the data collected. The themes of liberation, peace, happiness, freedom, power, fallibility of human being, were identified.

These themes transpired in the following participants’ opinions.

In relation to the theme on liberation, these were some of the views of the respondents.

On my behalf I personally forgive because I do not want to have any weight on my heart. When I forgive, I feel that the number of my enemies has reduced. When I forgive someone I feel light, relieved and free (Female Respondent, 42 years Old. November 10, 2022).

And another respondent added:

Forgiveness is one way of liberating yourself. When I forgive I feel liberated, unloaded and free (Male respondent, 25 Years old. November 13, 2022).

In relation to the theme on peace, these were some of the views of the respondents.

I forgive in order to remove any burden from my heart. When I forgive, I don’t longer have a pressure or some form of weight on my heart. When I forgive someone I feel light, I have peace. I can enjoy my life, have a peaceful sleep (Female Respondent, 50 years. November 13, 2022).

Another participant stated the following:

Forgiveness is a difficult thing. But it is something we all end up having to do at one time or another. Especially if we want to keep our peace or live in peace of mind (Female Respondent, 60 years. November 15, 2022).

In relation to the theme on power, these were some of the views of the respondents.

Forgiveness is a door, a way to healing. When I had practiced forgiveness, I felt liberated, delivered from a prison of anger and other grudges (Male Respondent, 45 Years old. November15, 2022).

A participant indicated:

Forgiveness frees us from bitterness. Forgiveness is essential. It helps regain our internal peace. Whenever you hold resentment towards someone and refuse to forgive, it opens a door for bitterness, insecurity and even block your way to healing (Female Respondent, 44 Years old. November 16, 2022).

In relation to the theme on happiness, these were some of the views of the respondents.

After forgiving it gives me joy in my heart and I feel freedom in my mind (Female, 55 years old. November 17, 2022).

Another participant indicated the following:

When I forgive, I feel that I have recovered something which was lost. I feel relieved of letting go the emotional pain. I feel relaxed in my body and mind. All the body tensions are over. I feel renewed (Female Respondent, 50 Years old. November20, 2022).

In relation to the theme on fallibility, these were some of the views of the respondents.

Then, knowing that I'm not perfect and that I can hurt others too, I do practice forgiveness and enjoy its benefits of internal peace (Female respondent, 58 years old, November 20, 2022).

Another participant provided the following statement:

There is no Saint on earth. We are all at fault and each one needs to be forgiven and if we need to be forgiven we are called to give it to others (Female, 30 years old. November 20, 2022).

These were the summary of the participants' responses to the questions about the importance and the significance of practicing forgiveness in their lives.

IV. DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to assess the importance and significance of the practice of forgiveness. The results indicated that forgiveness produced some positive outcomes in those practicing it. The outcomes were mainly happiness, peace, freedom.

Happiness is one of the products of forgiveness. This outcome is supported by other studies conducted on the topic of forgiveness. The study conducted by Jiang et al. (2014), on the topic "Can you forgive? It depends on how happy you are" among university students in Hong Kong. The results which were consistent with previous literature, indicated that forgiveness was positively associated with happiness. According to Again, Sapmaz et al. (2015) (as cited by Amanze, 2022) conducted a study to explore the relationship and predictive levels of gratitude, forgiveness, humility and happiness amongst 443 students in Turkey. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire short form were used for forgiveness, and happiness respectively. The results indicated that while forgiveness was positively correlated with happiness, only the forgiveness of situation (a sub-dimension) of the 3-dimensions of forgiveness in the Heartland Forgiveness Scale was significantly predicting happiness. But in a culture of honor, forgiveness might not be considered as something good and might not produce happiness. When there is a reputation threat, members of an honor culture perceive confronting as more appropriate than withdrawing from the situation. Forgiveness is not seen positively in cultures of honor because it is perceived as risky to one's reputation. Members of an honor culture may perceive forgiveness as moral if their reputation has been restored (Castillo, 2019).

The results of the study indicated that people who have practiced forgiveness enjoyed peace in their lives. This study's finding was supported by the results of Norman (2017) which indicated that forgiveness has become an important part of research in positive psychology, with valuable consequences for both mental and physical well-being. The book written by Judith (2017) explained that unforgiveness opens the door to

demonic-fueled pressures that can spiral completely out of control, leading downward from revenge to hatred to violence. But forgiving from the heart has power to set us free and bring peace. According to Metcalfe and Briggs (2020) forgiveness is not easy but it is necessary if we are to live peacefully. To have peace is to be at ease with your life without fear of loss of life, security, or identity. But according to the study of Norman (2017, p. 44), too much forgiveness would be permissiveness, and this might leave the transgressed individual vulnerable to transgression again. Therefore, permissiveness is the extreme of forgiveness and must be avoided.

The results of the study showed that participants who practiced forgiveness experienced more freedom and positive emotions. Goffman (1967) as cited by Tucker et al. (2015) argued that apologies decoupled an offender from the offensive actions he or she committed. As such, apologies often encouraged victims to see their offenders as more remorseful, concerned for their well-being, and ultimately more deserving of the victim's forgiveness, thereby making it easier for the victim to forgive an offender. This process can aid in the development of positive and prosocial emotions, ultimately mitigating sympathetic nervous system activation and reducing negative emotions. A series of studies involving large samples of undergraduate students showed that forgiveness was positively correlated with positive and pro-social traits like agreeableness, empathic concern, extraversion and perspective taking, and negatively with neuroticism, trait anger, hostility, depression, and fear. Another notable finding was a strong negative association between forgiveness and the tendency to ruminate vengefully (Lijo, 2018). But that was not the case for those living in culture of honor as described in the study conducted by Castillo (2019). Members of an honor culture may be able to forgive if their reputation has been restored after a threat. One way to restore one's honor is to confront the person who challenged that honor.

V. CONCLUSION

The focus of the study was on the importance and the significance of the concept of forgiveness among some members of the Tabwa ethnic community. The results indicated that the participants acknowledged the importance of practicing forgiveness in their lives. The findings showed that the practice of forgiveness produced peace, freedom, happiness and other positive emotions among the initiators. Based on the fact that human beings are intrinsically marked by fallibility, the practice of forgiveness becomes recommendable for experiencing social, psychological and physiological positive outcomes.

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