Strengthening and repairing relationships: Addressing forgiveness and sacrifice in couples education and counselling

Robyn Parker and Rosalie Pattenden

In recent decades, conflict and communication have been a primary focus of relationships research. However, there is increasing interest in the role of pro-relationship behaviours in repairing and maintaining couple relationships. This paper examines the research and application of two of these behaviours: forgiveness and sacrifice.

Introduction

Recent and emerging trends

For many years, couples research has focused a great deal on marital distress and dissolution and, in particular, the types, frequency and management of conflict. However, some researchers are suggesting that there are limitations to the efforts being made to understand couple relationships through a narrow conflict lens. In a 2007 article in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, three noted relationships scholars suggested that the accumulating evidence on conflict in relationships shows that it may be less central to long-term relationship outcomes than has been thought. They suggested that a richer understanding of couple relationships might be gained by moving the focus of research towards examining the "larger meanings and deeper motivations about relationships" and the positive constructs underlying behaviours and attitudes that help to strengthen and repair a relationship (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007, p. 276; see also Stanley, 2007; Stanley & Markman, 1998). Fincham et al. also suggested that, in taking this broader view, further mechanisms for understanding relationships may be revealed, although constructs relating to the more positive aspects of relationships seem to be more difficult to investigate. Their suggestion of shifting the focus of relationships research was met with cautious enthusiasm by a number of relationships scholars.

Nevertheless, intuitively it makes sense that studying the constructs that are manifest in a range of pro-relationship behaviours and attitudes is likely to contribute to our understanding of the complexities of couple relationships. These investigations would also build on other major

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shifts in the focus of relationships researchers in recent years, such as the highly productive application of attachment theory to adult intimate relationships, from which therapeutic applications have also been developed. Such a move would also reflect a broader shift towards viewing relationships in terms of their strengths and wellbeing rather than deficits and distress, also evident in both research and public policy (see, for example, Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

This "shift" per se is not the primary focus of this paper. Rather, it is concerned with the notion that better understanding of relational dynamics can be gained through studying constructs that contribute to the strength of a relationship. Some of these constructs have the capacity to temper or modify partners' reactions to everyday or occasional disruptive events or actions in ways that do not damage satisfaction with the partner or the relationship. As such, they may aid in the repair of relationship discord and help to explain how and why distressed relationships recover some measure of happiness without professional intervention or other external influences (for example, changes in health or income; see Karney, 2007). Findings from studies based on a more positive or strengths-based perspective can then be translated for application in psycho-educational and counselling settings aimed at protecting or improving relationships.[1]

Fincham et al. (2007) noted that a number of emerging constructs are "self-regulatory" means by which couples can maintain or repair their relationship. They include commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness and sanctification. Examination of all of these is beyond the scope of this paper, and there already exists a substantial literature on commitment. Sanctification has received very little research attention. Thus, this paper will examine two of those constructs—sacrifice and forgiveness—and explore their application in marriage and relationship education (MRE) and couples counselling.

Sacrifice

It is perhaps inevitable that a situation will arise in a relationship in which the partners experience competing needs or interests. When this occurs, one or other partner may choose to forgo their preferred activity in order to allow their partner's to take priority. Where romantic relationships are concerned, views about the role of sacrifice in relationships tend to be polarised. As Whitton,

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1   An in-depth review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper.

Stanley, and Markman (2002) noted, some members of the research community and the general public associate sacrifice with poor individual wellbeing, low relationship satisfaction, depression and co-dependency. To others, it serves a positive function in relationships, such as indicating commitment. Nonetheless, it is recognised that sacrifices are typically made for loved ones rather than strangers. Sacrificing one's interests is one of a number of possible responses to a conflict between partners in a romantic relationship; hence, sacrifice is considered an important variable that should be incorporated into theories about marriage.

What sacrifice is and isn't

Sacrifice is described in terms of behaviours—forgoing a desired behaviour, enacting an otherwise undesirable behaviour, or both. Acts of sacrifice can vary in form and magnitude, from being minor, transient and situation-specific (attending a movie your partner wants to see but you don't) or major and substantial (re-locating for a partner's job) (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). An act of sacrifice is not necessarily unpleasant, and is actually linked to the attainment of something pleasant—the wellbeing of one's partner or the relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997). It can also be part of how people understand "love" (Noller, 1996).

Another important distinction is drawn in the literature between sacrifice and martyrdom. Sacrifice involves *freely* giving up one thing for something else that is valued more—putting one's partner's needs before one's own because it will benefit the partner and/or the relationship. Sacrificing one's own interests to a partner's in order to create a sense of guilt or obligation in the partner constitutes martyrdom (Stanley, 1998, cited in Whitton et al., 2002).
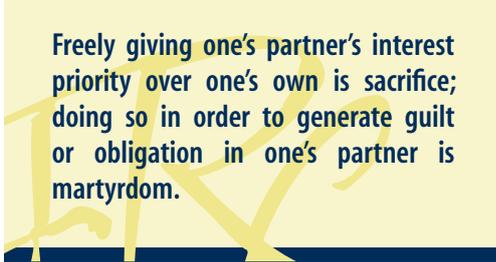
Freely giving one's partner's interest priority over one's own is sacrifice; doing so in order to generate guilt or obligation in one's partner is martyrdom.

Some empirical findings

Working within an *interdependence* framework (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), which suggests that individuals are required to choose between self-interest and sacrifice when situations arise in which there are conflicting preferences, Van Lange and his colleagues (1997) conducted six studies of the willingness to sacrifice. They employed a range of methods, measures and samples to test several hypotheses about the willingness of individual partners to make sacrifices and how this impacts on the couple relationship.

At the individual level, being willing to sacrifice was connected to a higher level of commitment to the relationship,[2] higher relationship satisfaction,[3] greater investment in the relationship,[4] and prospective, alternative partners being perceived as being less attractive.[5]

Van Lange et al. (1997) theorised that willingness to sacrifice provides a pathway to a robust relationship for committed individuals, in that by repeatedly choosing to put their relationship first, an individual may strengthen the relationship through demonstration of trust or increased investment in the relationship. In both cases, commitment and adjustment are enhanced. However, the authors were cautious about drawing inferences regarding causality. A process whereby commitment promotes willingness to sacrifice, which in turn strengthens relationship functioning, fits within an interdependence framework and the accumulation of related evidence support. However, other interpretations are possible—for instance, willingness to sacrifice may lead to commitment, which then improves relationship functioning; or commitment and willingness to sacrifice may operate concurrently to enhance the relationship. Nevertheless, choosing to put the relationship first over individual needs seems to promote relationship health.

Is sacrifice always good?

Although its beneficial role in maintaining intimate relationships has been well accepted, the downside of sacrifice has also been noted, particularly for women in relation to depression (Impett,

2   Sample item: "Do you feel committed to maintaining your relationship with your partner?"

3   Sample item: "All things considered, to what degree do you feel satisfied with your relationship?"

4   In terms of personal identity, effort or material possessions.

5   Sample item: "How attractive are the people other than your current partner with whom you could become involved?"

Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Lerner, 1985). Sacrificing too much for the partner or the relationship is likely to have negative effects on both the individual and the relationship. If sacrifice has only positive effects on individuals and their relationships, then more sacrificing should be associated with happier and healthier relationships. However, evidence from the attachment literature indirectly suggests that there is a point beyond which sacrifice has negative consequences. Frequent, even extreme, sacrificing is consistent with a *preoccupied* attachment style (Whitton et al., 2002).[6] Indeed, while "compulsive care giving", caring too much, and inappropriate self-disclosure as ways of achieving intimacy have been demonstrated in preoccupied individuals, their efforts do not appear to be reflected in relationship satisfaction—those with a preoccupied attachment style report less positive and less satisfactory relationships (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Pistole, 1989; Simpson, 1990). Thus, the relationship between sacrifice and relationship functioning may actually be curvilinear, generating positive effects when performed in moderation, but having a negative impact at very high levels (Whitton et al., 2002).

In considering the positive and negative consequences of sacrifice, Whitton et al. (2007) proposed that sacrifice might be good or bad for an individual or their relationship depending on their perception of sacrifice. If sacrifice is seen as an act that benefits the couple relationship, then its effects will be positive. If such actions are perceived as losses to the individual and not to the benefit of the relationship, there may be negative health and relationship outcomes. Indeed, participants who viewed sacrifice in negative terms tended to report more depressive symptoms (Whitton et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is less likelihood that sacrifice will be seen as negative if it is reciprocated; but if one partner perceives that they are doing more than their fair share of making sacrifices, dissatisfaction is likely to set in (Whitton et al., 2002).

> **Balance is important: dissatisfaction is likely if one partner thinks they are doing more than their fair share of sacrificing.**

Forgiveness

Attention to forgiveness in the relationships literature has grown quickly in recent years (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006) and far outstrips that paid to the role of sacrifice in relationships. Forgiveness theorists and researchers acknowledge that beyond its core elements, there is little agreement on how to define forgiveness (see, for example, Freedman, Enright, & Knutson, 2005). Nevertheless, forgiveness is accepted as a critical element for healing a relationship damaged by a significant transgression, and a correlate of mental and physical health, marital satisfaction and stability (Harris & Thoreson, 2005; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001, cited in Fincham et al., 2006). Without forgiveness, past or ongoing resentment of prior behaviour may impact negatively on couples' efforts to resolve later problems (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004).

In the absence of an integrative theory of forgiveness, researchers have tended to investigate how it is related to the "usual suspects"—commonly studied relationship indicators such as satisfaction, commitment, conflict, and others. Often these indicators are studied singly, but when forgiveness is conceptualised as a process and incorporated into an intervention, the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects are usually considered (Worthington, 2005).

What forgiveness is and isn't

Forgiving is an active, deliberate decision (Freedman et al., 2005; Worthington, 2005) offered to an offender as a gift, not a right (Landman, 2002). It occurs with the knowledge that the forgiver is entitled to feel negatively towards their partner and that the partner is not entitled to sympathy (North, 1998). Lamb (2002) noted that there is less agreement among theorists on what forgiveness *is* than on what it *is not*. Forgiveness:

- does not constitute acceptance of a transgression, because the behaviour is still seen as wrong (Fincham et al., 2006);
- is not the same as condoning or excusing the behaviour, because the behaviour is not seen as justifiable nor was there a good reason for it—if that were the case, there would be no need for forgiveness (Fincham et al., 2006; Landman, 2002);

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6   For a full description and analysis of attachment styles, refer to Bartholomew & Perlman (1994).

- is not the same as forgetting or denying (being unwilling to perceive the harm received by) the transgression (Fincham et al., 2006); and

- does not require reconciliation—it may be *aimed* at reconciliation, but ultimately, continuing a relationship does not mean the behaviour has been forgiven, just as forgiving the behaviour does not prevent a relationship being terminated (Fincham et al., 2006; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000).

Forgiveness often has religious connotations, sometimes being thought of as a religious act or a characteristic of a religious person (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Researchers, however, increasingly take the view that forgiveness is a process wherein, over time, one becomes less motivated to think, feel or act in negative ways about someone who has inflicted an "interpersonal injury" (Butler, Dahlin, & Fife, 2002, p. 285; Fincham et al., 2006). When a person forgives another, their life—including their other relationships—is no longer dominated by the hurt and negativity caused by the "injury" (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005). Some suggest that forgiveness also involves becoming motivated to overcome distrust in or restore harmony to the relationship (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Although it can be seen as being done only for the benefit of the injured partner, forgiving can benefit both parties as well as those in their immediate environment (Freedman et al., 2005). Clearly, forgiveness is very complex.

> **Forgiveness involves an active process of reframing over time how the injured party thinks, feels, and acts towards the transgressor, and a decision to not let their life or the relationship be dominated by negativity.**

Some empirical findings

Forgiveness is an *intra-individual* construct in that it changes the way in which the forgiver thinks, feels and acts. It is also an *interpersonal* construct because it occurs within the context of a relationship (McCullough et al., 2000). Each actor is affected by and responds to the transgression in different ways (Worthington, 2005). The "victim" may be angry, fearful or resentful, and may approach or withdraw from the offender, seek revenge, be more or less communicative, or dwell on the hurt. The "offender" may apologise or offer restitution, express remorse and contrition, or continue to inflict harm. She/he may be able to forgive her/himself or feel unable to accept forgiveness. Further, personality factors such as narcissism, empathy, pride and self-esteem may influence how each party responds (Worthington, 2005). Forgiveness, then, needs to be examined in the context of couple relationships (Fincham et al., 2006), drawing on the perspective of both partners and employing a range of data collection methods, including observations of partner interaction (Fincham et al., 2005).

Recently, research has pointed to forgiveness being multidimensional (Fincham et al., 2004). Fincham et al. (2004) initially began examining both positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness in relation to couple conflict. However, their research revealed the need to think of forgiveness as having three dimensions: *benevolence* (expressing goodwill towards partner), *retaliation* (seeking revenge or harm), and *avoidance* (avoiding personal and psychological contact with partner). Although further evidence of these three constructs as core dimensions of forgiveness is needed, the findings do support the view that forgiveness is important to more than just the quality of couple relationships. After controlling for marital satisfaction, all three dimensions were linked with conflict resolution in couples in both relatively new and more established marriages. This association was also found to be gendered: ineffective conflict resolution was reported by men whose wives scored low on benevolence, and by women whose husbands scored highly on retaliation and withdrawal.

McCullough et al. (1997) hypothesised that a central pathway to forgiveness is through empathy for one's partner. Empathy facilitates helping behaviour by tapping into the capacity for altruism (Batson & Oleson, 1991, cited in McCullough et al., 1997). A similar process is suggested for forgiveness; however, the relationship between empathy and forgiveness is still rather unclear. McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown and Hight (1998) suggested that empathy is one of a number of determinants of forgiveness that include attributions, rumination, the severity of the transgression, evidence of remorse, the closeness of the relationship before the hurtful incident, and personality factors such as agreeableness and religiousness. Their research

showed that closeness before the transgression, apologising, empathy and forgiveness are highly interrelated, indicating two possible mechanisms:

- In close, satisfactory, committed relationships, offenders are more likely to apologise and show remorse for their behaviour, either from guilt stemming from their own empathising with their partner or their concern at possibly losing the relationship.
- Victims are more likely to empathise with the offender if the relationship is close, satisfactory, and committed. Offender apologies may also be involved here, but pre-offence closeness was particularly important.

Further research found evidence for a process whereby relationship quality determines attributions for behaviour, which in turn promotes forgiveness through affective reactions and empathy (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). These researchers also noted that relationship quality sets the context for the impact of these factors. As McCullough, Exline, and Baumeister (1998, cited in Fincham et al., 2002) argued, the sense of wellbeing experienced by partners in happy relationships positively influences the way in which they interpret transgressions, their empathy for the partner and, in the end, forgiveness. Although the role of empathy in forgiveness has as yet received little in-depth testing and replication, the results to date demonstrate its heuristic value for both researchers and clinicians.

Process models of forgiveness

The notion of forgiveness as a process is common in the literature, and forms the basis of forgiveness interventions. A number of models have been developed, reflecting different degrees of emphasis on the core elements of forgiveness: the cognitive, emotional and behavioural. The number of stages may vary across interventions. One of the earliest models, put forward by Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991), posits that an injured person passes through a series of four phases on their way to deciding to forgive an offender, with each phase encompassing several elements. What distinguishes Enright's approach from some others is that the attention is not solely on the injured partner—some time and energy is given to understanding the offender and developing some level of empathy and compassion for him/her. Although it seems paradoxical that this shift in focus could be helpful to the injured partner, as will be demonstrated later in this paper, it has been shown to be effective.

Broadly speaking, the following issues are addressed in three phases:

1. The first phase of the process covers the period of uncovering and acknowledging the hurt, pain and injustice, its impact on the injured partner, and becoming open to the need for change (from having a completely negative view to being open to the possibility of forgiving).

2. In the second phase, the concept of forgiveness is examined and discussed and the injured party decides to do what is necessary in order to forgive. Reframing occurs in phase three, in which the injured person endeavours to attain a level of understanding of the offender and the context in which the transgression occurred.

3. In the final phase, the injured person comes to see forgiveness as leading to his or her own healing and improved psychological health.

Knowledge and awareness of its benefits for both partners does not guarantee forgiveness.

The model takes into account the need for individuals to progress through the stages at their own pace and that forgiveness cannot be forced—that even with the knowledge and awareness of the benefits of forgiveness, a person may still choose to not forgive the offender (Freedman et al., 2005). And, as others have also noted (Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005), the process may take some time.

Commitment, sacrifice and forgiveness

The research presented in the preceding sections on sacrifice and forgiveness demonstrates that sacrifice and forgiveness are closely entwined with commitment. As Amato (2007) noted, commitment is an important factor contributing to marital satisfaction. While there are a number of models of commitment (refer to Rusbult, Coolsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006, for discussion of three prominent models), one that has found particular favour within the field of marriage and

relationship education in Australia is that put forward by Scott Stanley and his colleagues (see, for example, Stanley, Kline, & Markman, 2005). In Stanley's formulation, commitment refers to the sense of security about the longevity and exclusivity of a relationship. The theory rests on two higher order constructs—*dedication* and *constraints*—and *alternatives to the relationship*.

High *dedication* is marked by a strong sense of couple identity (often referred to as "we-ness"). Members of highly committed couples also prioritise their partner's needs and the good of the relationship before their own. *Constraints* refers to the forces preventing a person from leaving an unhappy relationship (such as having children or lacking independent resources), and how hard a partner would find it to actually take the actions necessary to end the relationship.

Influencing both of these aspects of commitment are evaluations of *alternatives to the relationship*. Perceiving alternatives to being in *this* relationship as being less desirable acts as a constraint to leaving the relationship. Serious consideration of alternatives to the relationship is associated with lower dedication and commitment and higher dissatisfaction with the current relationship.

Although commitment and happiness are highly correlated, it cannot be assumed that commitment equals happiness, or that staying in an unhappy relationship necessarily implies commitment to it (Amato, 2007). Essentially, the strength of commitment can only be determined when the relationship is tested. Whitton et al. (2007) and Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, and Markman (2006) considered commitment to be the basis of sacrifice in that it is part of the (conscious or unconscious) cognitive shift that motivates partners to behave in the interests of couple rather than individual wellbeing. As commitment builds and couple identity develops, the interests of the couple come to be seen as being in the interest of the self.

Commitment is clearly linked with forgiveness, although the direction of the relationship is unclear. Findings show that happier and more committed partners report higher levels of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Data from a longitudinal study indicated that forgiveness is related to increases in commitment; however, contradictory results were also found, further muddying the waters regarding the direction of causal relationships between forgiveness and commitment (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006).

Based on the research, the interconnectedness of sacrifice, forgiveness and commitment and their impact on the quality of couple relationships—both uniquely and in concert with each other and other relationship constructs—is clear.

Applications to practice: Addressing sacrifice and forgiveness in couples counselling and education

Couple relationships reap greater benefits when partners engage in positive behaviours such as sacrifice and forgiveness. Indeed, according to Impett et al. (2005), such behaviours are likely to be more helpful than those aimed primarily at preventing tension and conflict. Of the two constructs, forgiveness has attracted a great deal more research attention, and a number of structured "forgiveness interventions" have been developed for application in educative and counselling settings. Less emphasis has been placed on sacrifice as an intervention per se, but it is viewed as an important element of couples therapy and a construct that is of value to couples education (Stanley et al., 2006).

Relationship professionals can play a key role in helping couples understand the role played by forgiveness and sacrifice in healthy relationships.

Sacrifice

Research supports the position that sacrifice can play a significant role in the ongoing quality and stability of a couple relationship (Impett et al., 2005; Van Lange et al., 1997). Relationship counsellors or educators can play a key role in helping couples to understand how *healthy* sacrificing, either specifically or as part of a more general discussion about relationship maintenance behaviours, contributes to a satisfying relationship. Although sacrifice is not the focus of specific, tested interventions, counsellors can also facilitate for a distressed client a shift from a concern with their partner's behaviour to a focus on their own behaviour and their contribution to their partner's—and the relationship's—wellbeing. Both educators and

counsellors can emphasise how, as a visible reflection of their commitment to the partner and the relationship, putting aside one's own needs on occasion can lead to a satisfying and lasting relationship. It is crucial, though, that relationship professionals have a clear understanding of the difference between sacrifice and martyrdom, and the potential for sacrifice to become a negative aspect of a relationship. Acts of sacrifice in a relationship that can be harmful to individuals as well as to the relationship (Stanley et al., 2006):

- are typically major rather than minor;
- are performed by one partner to a much greater degree than the other;
- are seen by the partners as being detrimental to themselves; or
- arise out of fear.

Van Lange et al. (1997) also suggested that helping couples to identify and acknowledge instances where their partner has forgone their own self-interest, and discussing in depth issues such as *interdependence* and *mutual trust* would be a useful addition to the traditional emphasis on couple interaction processes in couples therapy (and, one would assume, relationship education).

Forgiveness

The process models outlined earlier in this paper have been translated into programs of intervention and applied in diverse settings. The integrity of the original model, its constructs and measures have been preserved to varying degrees, and evaluations of their effectiveness vary in their rigour, although many employ control or wait-list groups. However, helping a client move towards forgiveness—if that is a desirable goal—does not necessarily require participation in a structured "forgiveness intervention" per se. Discussion and exploration of forgiveness can take place in a neutral and supportive environment with a relationship counsellor or educator.

Forgiveness interventions

Enright's process model (as discussed earlier), or variations of it, has formed the basis of a number of interventions. Two key early clinical studies of the effectiveness of the process model put forward by Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) demonstrated the value of the model for elderly women[7] (Hebl & Enright, 1993) and female childhood incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996). Both studies were small-scale experimental designs employing control groups. In both cases, significant declines in anxiety and depression were found pre- to post-test. The incest survivors also reported increases in forgiveness and hope. The wait-list control group reported similar results when they completed the program. Patterns of a more forgiving attitude towards their abuser and greater psychological wellbeing were also maintained over a 12-month period. Individual participants also reported applying what they had learned in the program to other relationships (Freedman & Enright, 1996).

The above two studies were included in a meta-analysis with seven other published studies of forgiveness interventions (Baskin & Enright, 2004).[8] Baskin and Enright classified the interventions as being: process-based programs for individuals, process-based programs for groups, and decision-based programs. Their analysis demonstrated the effectiveness of process-based programs, particularly those for individuals. The length of the program may be a key factor here, because decision-based programs are inherently shorter than process-based. However, the findings do underline the link between mental health and forgiveness.

Another clinical study of forgiveness therapy found that clients with substance dependencies, when compared to controls, recorded significant improvements in self-esteem, depression, anger, anxiety and vulnerability to drug use. The improvements were attributed to the exploration and examination of past

> **Relationship professionals also need a clear understanding of the potential for sacrifice and forgiveness to be harmful to an individual and a relationship.**

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7   Twenty-six women aged over the age of 65 years were recruited into the study. Each had identified a definite emotionally hurtful event and had a specific person in mind to forgive.

8   The criteria for inclusion of studies were: the design included a control group, the study had been published in a refereed journal, and the study employed quantitative measures.

resentments and emotions as part of the process (Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004, cited in Freedman et al., 2005). Most benefits were sustained over a four-month follow-up period, and initial low levels of forgiveness rose to and stayed above the published adult norms.

As part of a comprehensive meta-analysis of group-format forgiveness interventions, Wade, Worthington, and Meyer (2005) summarised the intervention studies into four groups, according to the type of intervention used and the structure of the evaluation, and then compared their impact on participants' ratings of forgiveness[9] of an offender. The biggest effects were found for interventions grounded in theory (for example, the process models) and specifically addressing forgiveness. These findings held when the time spent in the intervention was taken into account. There were also indications that certain components of programs—those relating to *empathy*, *commitment* and *overcoming negativity*—contribute to their effectiveness in raising forgiveness ratings. Although the meta-analyses supported the conclusion that forgiveness was better promoted via a targeted, theory-based intervention than the passing of time, the authors cautioned that the findings need to be substantiated by further, more rigorous, research. Gordon et al. (2005) also called for more (and better quality) research.

It may be that forgiveness is being incorporated into relationship education programs; however, since in Australia few of these programs are documented or evaluated (Simons & Parker, 2002), the way in which forgiveness is portrayed to couples and the extent to which it is discussed and understood by couples is unknown. It may be difficult to do so adequately in shorter programs. Even longer relationship education programs operate under significant time constraints, not to mention the challenge of fitting forgiveness into the range of content already contained within most programs. However, this is not to say that efforts to include forgiveness as a regular component of relationship education should not be made; the research evidence points to the value of forgiveness in couple relationships. Thus, fostering a sound, evidence-based understanding of forgiveness through relationship education could be considered a worthwhile goal.

Conclusion

While sacrifice has not been the object of structured programs, guidelines for exploring its value to clients in a counselling or educative setting are relatively straightforward: inform couples about *healthy* sacrifice and its potential for improving and maintaining a relationship, assess and address the past and current patterns of sacrifice to ensure balance, and ensure that couples are aware of the negative aspects of sacrifice and the circumstances in which it has the potential to detrimentally affect the wellbeing of individual partners.

The lack of consensus on the definition of forgiveness attests to its complexity. Forgiveness clearly plays a role in the wellbeing of individuals and in fostering happy and lasting relationships but can be difficult to achieve—even if it is the client's desired goal. Like sacrifice, forgiveness has the potential to be damaging to an individual if it places or keeps the client in an unsafe environment. Thus, its introduction into a clinical or educative situation requires careful consideration. Forgiveness interventions have largely been shown to be effective but, as Wade et al. (2005) noted, questions remain. For example:

- What is the optimum length of an intervention necessary to produce meaningful benefits?
- Which client groups will be helped by a forgiveness intervention?
- What other benefits might forgiveness have on the couple relationship, or the health and wellbeing of the partners?
- Are forgiveness interventions cost-effective?

> **Forgiveness interventions have largely been shown to be effective, although there are methodological issues with the research and little is known about the conditions and participants for which benefits accrue.**

Methodological issues in the evaluation of forgiveness interventions also need to be addressed (Wade et al., 2005). Progress thus far has been promising, but the full potential has yet to be realised (Gordon et al., 2005). Furthermore, it is unknown whether discussing forgiveness in a

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9   There are a number of quantitative measures of forgiveness. Examples include the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, Gassin, Freedman, Olsen, et al., 1995, cited in Wade et al., 2005) and the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998).

primary prevention setting, such as a couples relationship education program, would actually prevent or at least ameliorate future relationship distress.

The contribution of sacrifice and forgiveness to the quality, stability, repair and maintenance of couple relationships appears to be supported by research. To the extent that they are seen as adaptive relationship behaviours, they offer a means of helping couples to focus on proactively strengthening their relationship by adopting more desirable behaviours, rather than simply avoiding those that are less desirable (Impett et al., 2005). Notwithstanding the potential for the unhealthy occurrence of either sacrifice or forgiveness to have negative consequences on individual wellbeing, the evidence points to the value of their prudent and appropriate use as part of a preventive, educative approach or as a secondary or tertiary intervention in a counselling setting.

Case study: Forgiveness and sacrifice in counselling

There is no doubt that research informs and contributes to a counsellor's ability to conceptualise relationship dynamics, and highlights and focuses on the positive constructs that may help couples to manage conflict and put both their individual wellbeing and couple connectedness back on track. However, the constructs in research must be studied in isolation in order to substantiate their effect, whereas in counselling they contribute to the many and varied intervention strategies applied to helping couples deal with the difficulties they face. So how do the constructs of sacrifice and forgiveness fit within a holistic approach to couple therapy?

From an *attachment perspective*, the couple relationship provides the individuals with the secure base that not only provides them with the sense of belonging, but also the sense that each partner's wellbeing is held by the other, and that their individuality is supported and encouraged. Each partner is intrinsically expected to protect the other, and to be part of the "team" that provides a "safe haven" (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). However when difficulties arise in the relationship—with the resulting disappointments, hurts, resentments, sadness, loneliness and anger—the "safe haven" is questioned. If the belief that the other is "there" for them is shaken, individuals tend to either start to pull away to protect themselves, or sacrifice their individual wellbeing in an attempt to "save" the relationship. The tension is between looking after the self, and looking after the relationship, and the wellbeing of both becomes precarious. If the "other" is no longer seen as caring about a partner's wellbeing, or fails to protect him or her, then the need to protect oneself from further harm can "click in". Yet separation from a partner creates attachment distress, which can propel one partner to ignore their own wellbeing in order to retain the connection that their partner is threatening to sever. Each partner can oscillate between fighting for self and fighting to remain together.

In counselling, a safe space is created in which the partners can gradually explore their difficulties. It is the usual case that neither has felt, heard or understood by the other, and usually one or both are critical or defensive. This leads to a "pulling away" from the relationship, and usually both feel isolated from the other. As their story unfolds, each partner expresses how their partner has failed to be there for them in difficult times, or betrayed the trust and belief that the other holds their wellbeing as a high priority. The other tends to be seen as either "bad" or "mad". However, as each partner develops an understanding of the attachment injury for the other, compassion can become unlocked. Forgiveness for transgressions can be considered when this understanding is thorough, and acts of sacrifice can then be made in order to re-establish trust in a re-commitment to the relationship.

The following case study illustrates the complexity of the issues facing a couple in difficulties, and the holistic process involved in therapy. Forgiveness and sacrifice are involved in the process.

Rhonda and James came to counselling deeply distressed. Rhonda was at the airport with their two boys, aged 11 and 7, waiting to catch a plane to Brisbane for the Christmas holidays with her parents. James was coming separately by taxi to join them, but had to deliver some furniture he had made for a client (needed for a Christmas present) on the way. As he checked in, Rhonda took an SMS on his mobile—it was from a woman who worked with James, singing the praises of the sex they had had that morning, and saying how much she would miss him over the Christmas break. A primitive cry of anguish came up from Rhonda's depths.

On returning from holidays, they came to me for counselling. Rhonda was not sure whether she could ever forgive James this time. He had had an affair when they lived in Brisbane 12 years ago. She had forgiven him then, as he had convinced her that it was a terrible mistake, and that he would never risk losing her again. Her belief in the importance of the relationship for her and for him was strong, but it was a stretch for her to allow herself to trust him again.

They had since had the boys, and James had been a devoted father. Further, when she had been offered her dream job as an associate professor at a university in Melbourne, James had made the sacrifice of leaving a promising business in designer furniture in Brisbane to come to Melbourne, which meant he virtually had to start again. The job was offered to Rhonda by her professor in Brisbane, who had been Rhonda's mentor and friend, and had moved to Melbourne a few years earlier. James' sacrifice further convinced Rhonda of his commitment to her and the family.

James, an extremely handsome man, was obviously terrified that he was on the brink of losing his family. He freely talked of his guilt and risking his marriage by his betrayal, and talked of the shame he felt as a man who had violated the vow of fidelity that he had made to himself and to Rhonda. He would do anything Rhonda wanted in order to reassure her that he was truly committed to her. He acknowledged the hurt and pain he had caused by his betrayal. At her insistence, he moved out to give her the space she needed to assess the situation, but was still taking the boys to their sports commitments, and was visiting daily. His older boy was angry and distant from him, the younger one clung to him whenever James left, and James would cry on the way back to his motel, and was emotionally a mess.

In counselling, James sat with his head bowed as Rhonda talked and raged and cried about the impact on her, and her fury with him. She needed to make sense of why he had allowed the affair to happen, and wanted to hear every detail of the relationship and the sex. We talked about the grief process, and the need for her to make sense of and accept the experience. We also talked about how vulnerable she felt about her desirability, and her ability to trust anything about him. She hated how she was behaving, and hated that she was putting James down to the boys. We talked about balancing the need to express and process her feelings, and the need to contain them and maintain damage control for both her own sake and for the boys, who had a right to love their father and who needed the ongoing security of seeing him without having to take sides in the parents' dispute.

James knew he had to weather the storm, but both knew that there were limits to his emotional capacity to cope with her anger. He knew that if he wanted the chance to win back his wife, he had to end the affair. He would answer questions about the other woman, but we discussed how becoming obsessed with sexual details was not going to be helpful, and how it had to be contained.

After several visits, emotions had settled enough that we could discuss how the affair had come about. Life had been very busy for them both. Rhonda was extremely busy with work, and had become the main provider for the family. She was often late at work, and had to work at home as well. She was extremely efficient, and the home ran like "clockwork", with jobs allocated to all family members. James was the one to pick the boys up from school, and to run the "family taxi service", which was difficult as he was still trying to build up his designer furniture business. The couple had little time together, and James admitted that he felt lonely at times, and also had difficulty coping with the "gender stretch" of not being the main provider. He tried to listen to Rhonda's issues at work, but she would become impatient with him, dismissive of his comments, and tended to visit her friend and mentor to talk through any issues of consequence. His work and concerns seemed to be of little interest to her. Any spare time was spent with the boys.

James had recently hired a receptionist at work. She was a single mum, and was struggling with her life and her emotions. She loved the furniture James designed, and was managing the job of talking to clients, and keeping accounts that he had been struggling with. She valued his allowing family-friendly hours, listening to her story, and advising her about her struggles with the family and finances. He knew this interest was an ego boost for him, and that he was an important support for her. He felt valued and desirable. The affair was a natural progression.

Rhonda was completely absorbed as James' story unfolded. When he spoke of how he thought she was dismissive and impatient with her communications with him, she looked down and nodded, admitting that she could understand how "insulting" she must have seemed and how rejected he must have felt. This was a turning point for the couple. It didn't excuse his infidelity, but it explained how it could have happened. It also became clear to Rhonda that James' agreement to end his relationship with the other woman and insisting that she find a new job, was a sacrifice he was making in the hope that his family could be re-united.

Over the next few months, the couple worked patiently and carefully to get their relationship back on track. James understood that, at times, Rhonda wanted to be close, and she allowed him to comfort her. Then something would trigger a memory, and her trust would evaporate and her anger erupt. They started "dating", and had even attempted sex, but knew that although this level of intimacy would help "heal" the relationship, it was more difficult to re-establish because of the memories of the infidelity it evoked.

The boys also came for counselling. They needed an opportunity to talk through their experiences, and free themselves from being caught in the middle of their parents' dispute. The older boy needed reassurance from his mother that he didn't need to be angry with his father on her behalf, and that it was OK to love him. The younger boy needed to be reassured that his father would not be driven away.

The change in appearance of both Rhonda and James over time was marked. Rhonda had her hair cut, bought new clothes and relaxed. James contributed more to conversations, and obviously felt more confident. He moved back in to the family home. They made time to spend together as a couple and as a family, and felt more confident about their future.

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