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The Human and the Divine - Factors that Mediate Forgiveness Through Sacred Relationships

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Abstract: The purpose of this review is to explore the research literature surrounding forgiveness and its potential contribution to adult learning. The implications could inform new directions of study for transformative learning theory and spirituality in adult education.

Forgiveness is a spiritual practice common to most world religions. While there is a shared belief that the ability to forgive is a virtue, depending on the context, opinions vary on its definition and its contribution to adult learning and well-being. Whether a religious mandate, a spiritual expression, or a factor in maintaining healthy relationships, forgiveness is a way for adults to make meaning of an offense perpetrated against them. Some choose to forgive so that they in turn can receive God's forgiveness. In more secular environments, others choose to forgive as a way of releasing negative emotions and feelings of retaliation. For those researchers who explicitly connect forgiveness with a spiritual underpinning, Alexander Pope's (1727) famous quotation, "to err is human, to forgive is divine", provides some insight into how one's relationship with the sacred factors in the forgiving process. It is that spiritual relationship that possibly frames the forgiving process that takes place for adult learners.

This connection to the sacred holds new possibilities as to how spiritual practice and the process of forgiveness could be viewed as transformative learning. The purpose of this review is to explore the research literature surrounding forgiveness and its potential contribution to adult learning. This review begins with a brief overview of the relationship between transformative learning and spirituality, followed by the methodology of the literature review, and a discussion of the literature. The findings are extracted from the literature and grouped into themes. Lastly, critique and implications are considered in discussing how forgiveness may give new insight into the theory of transformative learning and its role in adult education.

Perspectives on Spirituality and Transformative Learning Theory in Adult Education

Education is a holistic experience that is meant to transform the learner. "Learning is about change. Learning that results from critically examining our taken-for-granted mindsets and expectations resulting in a change of perspective that is more inclusive is the goal of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2000). As a learning theory and pedagogical tool, transformative learning speaks to the significance of educating adults. Transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (2000) is, "the process by which we transform our taken-for-

granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, [and] discriminating...” (p.8). It is about our life experiences and the process of reinterpreting the meaning of those experiences. Transformation can be viewed as a spiritual experience among those who frame their lives from a spiritual perspective.

Over the last ten years, the literature on spirituality in adult education has both increased and gained acceptance as a valid form of inquiry in considering adult development and learning (English & Tisdell, 2010). If we can assume that we are all spiritual beings then it is safe to determine the spirit of the learner should also be engaged in the learning process. There has been some research on the connection between spirituality and the moral dimensions of transformative learning in adult education (Brookfield, 1998; Lauzon, 2001). Forgiveness is a moral value with connections to spirituality (Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2012) yet there is a lack of discussion of forgiveness within both the literature on transformative learning and the broader literature of adult education.

Discussion of Forgiveness Literature

One of the challenges of the literature search was the varied contexts for which forgiveness was discussed and how it was being defined. Areas of concentration ranged from empirical pieces on health and well-being (Worthington, Witvliet, & Miller, 2007), developmental pathways of forgiveness (Knutson, Enright, & Garbers, 2008) to forgiveness as a moral virtue (Chow, 2009). Forgiveness is generally defined as excusing or pardoning someone for an offense. Deeper inquiry reveals that forgiveness requires the victim to release the desire for retaliation and take up more positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors towards the transgressor (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012). Replacing negative feelings with positive ones is only part of the forgiving process. Forgiveness is an act of love (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010), self-caring (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010), and a response of gratitude to an all forgiving God (McMinn et al., 2008). It is a deliberate, willful response to an interpersonal conflict for either repeated offenses or an isolated incident. The interpersonal process of forgiveness influences family, culture, political affiliation as well as religion (Exline, 2008). These factors all contribute to not only the act and process of forgiveness but also to engaging and responding to conflicts in a forgiving manner; one’s worldview is significant to this process.

Methodology of Literature Review

A search was conducted for empirical research articles on the role of spirituality in forgiving or the process of forgiveness for adults. Specific attention was given to literature that provided insight into how one forgives after an offense has been committed against them. In an effort to capture the most recent findings on the subject, only literature published since 2000 was considered. A combination of terms forgive*, forgiven*, spirit*, spiritual* were used in a title search in the ProQuest database. These searches resulted in 31 scholarly journals, 16 trade journals, 6 magazines and 1 dissertation. After removing articles on forgiveness not relating to

my topic, the results were evaluated. Eighteen empirical studies, 6 conceptual articles, 1 meta-analysis, and 1 dissertation were chosen for their contribution on the role of spirituality in the forgiveness process.

Empirical Studies' Methodologies and Themes

Eighteen empirical studies were reviewed; of these 13 were quantitative, 2 were mixed methods, and 2 were surveys. The majority of the literature was quantitative in scope yet it was the mixed methods studies that help to capture the essence of the victim, the offense and the forgiveness process (McMinn et al., 2008; Schultz, Tallman, & Altmaier, 2012). Both surveys used purposeful sampling for investigating specific religious groups and the influence of shared beliefs and values on forgiveness (Toussaint & Williams, 2008; Wuthnow, 2000).

The purposes of the studies researched were similar in scope. All of the empirical literature focused in some form on the influence of spirituality or religiosity on forgiveness. Areas of concentration included praying for an offender (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham & Beach, 2009), mental health (Sanndage & Jankowski, 2010), level of religious commitment as a gage for forgiving attitudes and behaviors (vanOyen Witvliet, Hinze & Worthington, 2008), interventions that cross cultural and professional boundaries towards forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2010), and how the influences of specific religious denominations facilitate forgiveness (Exline, 2008).

Direct influence from religious beliefs indicate that forgiveness is viewed as a mandate from God and viewing unforgiveness as hurting one's relationship with God actually promotes a more rapid positive response to forgive (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren & Worthington, 2012). The sanctification of forgiveness also allows the victim to empathize with offenders they view as spiritually similar. Yet, vanOyen Witvliet, Hinze, and Worthington (2008) would argue that it is trait forgiveness, the ability to forgive over time, and not religious commitment that facilitates notions of forgiveness. Religious people do endorse forgiveness but when the offense is considered a sacred loss they may experience some difficulty in reconciling their beliefs; religious commitment is associated with forgiveness but not all dimensions of forgiveness are equally affected (Toussaint & Williams, 2008). Vasiliauskas and McMinn (2012) argue that trying to separate religion from forgiveness would actually affect or change the nature of forgiveness. How the process of forgiveness and the influence of spirituality promotes or results in transformative experiences in the victim was not discussed in the literature.

Themes of Findings

The two themes that best illustrate the role of spirituality and religiosity in relation to forgiveness is discussed in the following section.

Relationship with the Sacred

One's relationship with the sacred is both a component of spirituality and also foundational for traditional religious practices. These sacred relationships situate forgiveness as a response of gratitude from a forgiving God (McMinn et al., 2008), a factor of personal growth after experiencing trauma (Schultz, Tallman, & Altmaier, 2010), and a way of healing relationships (Wuthnow, 2000). By definition, forgiveness is a response to interpersonal conflict that necessitates reducing or replacing negative emotions with positive ones towards the offender (Sandage & Williamson, 2010). One's relationship with the sacred is both interpersonal—in that it is communicative and fluid, and also intrapersonal—in that it is reflective (Davis et al., 2010).

The literature suggest that accepting forgiveness as a religious mandate may help to promote state forgiveness—forgiveness for one isolated incident but may not necessarily serve as an indicator of dispositional forgiveness—forgiveness for a series of offenses over time. Although greater instances of empathy was documented from those reporting a high level of religious commitment, as a predictor of forgiveness (Davis et al., 2010), findings from a national survey conducted by Toussaint and Williams (2008) on religious and non-religious experiences in forgiveness, report that Christians or those with religious affiliations have more of a forgiving attitude and place more value on forgiveness but not necessarily “foster forgiveness to any greater extent” (p. 121). Meaning that, religious people are more open to forgiving but don't necessarily forgive more than other non-religious people. The survey goes on to reflect that “social desirability” may be the reason some religious people claim to value forgiveness more than what their behavior reflects. Forgiveness appears to be socially acceptable yet at times privately challenging when feelings of anger and revenge are opposite to what is spiritually acceptable.

Vasiliauskas and McMinn (2012) posit that forgiveness is a moral value revered by the devout and that trying to separate forgiveness from its religious roots would change its very nature for those who are religious. For these people, it is religion, that shapes their beliefs and values about what forgiveness is and what it requires (vanOyen Witvliet, Hinze & Worthington, 2008). Both religion and spirituality involve “search for the sacred” and a person's relationship with God or what they consider sacred “can be connected to his or her tendency to forgive” (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Based on the findings of the literature discussed in this review, a conclusion could be drawn that forgiveness is a spiritual practice that is both a personal conviction and a religious mandate.

Mediating Factors Towards Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a response to an interpersonal conflict. It is a reaction to either an internal or external stimuli; that causes the victim to purposely choose to replace negative feelings of anger and revenge with positive feelings of empathy and compassion—often promoting personal growth and leading to greater physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

Reflective factors such as prayer and meditation help to promote and sustain forgiveness as a spiritual and religious practice—together informing and shaping the process of forgiveness.

Both prayer and meditation are ways for one to communicate with whom or what is considered sacred. Both also increase one's willingness to forgive (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham & Beach, 2010; Jankowski & Sandage, 2011). Prayer could be viewed as a selfless act and selfless prayer was shown as a significant mediator of forgiveness (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010). Praying for the well-being of a partner or a friend that has caused harm takes the attention off of the offense and causes one to sacrificially intercede for the person they care for—despite the pain of the offense. Forgiveness then becomes what McMinn et al. (2008) describe as an “altruistic gift to another” (p. 102). Prayer, meditation, and other devotional practices such as Bible study that allows one to see themselves in relation to the sacred or divine lead people toward forgiveness (Wuthnow, 2000; Vasiliauskas & McMinn, 2010). Theoretically, with prayer comes a more secure relationship with God, which then increases hope and in turn should increase a desire to forgive (Jankowski & Sandage, 2011). Prayer and meditation, as spiritual approaches to forgiveness, contribute to a learning process that is reflective in its approach to reconcile the negative feelings associated with an offense.

Critique

There are two major limitations of the literature reviewed. One is that the concepts and dimensions of forgiveness are based solely in Christianity. One study did address culturally how adapting a secular western forgiveness program would affect a Christian intervention in a Philippines (Worthington et al., 2010) but none of the other studies provided any insight into how forgiveness is processed in other cultures and other spiritual practices. Considerations in this area could prove to be beneficial to the study of forgiveness. Finally, the majority of the literature used quantitative methods to examine a phenomena that appears to be anchored in the life essence of a person—their spiritual and religious worldview. The use of a qualitative methodology could add to the richness of the data and provide a more intimate investigation into the process of forgiveness.

Implications

The process of forgiveness indicates a possible connection to transformative learning theory in that the choice to forgive could be prompted by an epochal moment or a series of events that causes one to pause and reflect upon a transgression with new meaning perspective. In their study, Schultz, Tallman, and Altmaier (2010) discuss how post-traumatic growth is a result of a positive psychological change generated from the struggle associated with trauma or a challenging life event. They hypothesized that participants who reported more forgiveness after a trauma would experience more growth. The assumption is that change happens when people experience trauma. Mezirow (2000) may liken the experience of trauma to that of a disorienting dilemma.

At the core of transformative learning theory is the process of perspective transformation, with three dimensions: psychological (changes in understanding the self), convictional

(reconsideration of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle) (Cranton, 2006). Drawing from Mezirow's (2000) definitions of meaning schemes and perspectives, the process of forgiveness could be seen as a meaning perspective in that it has a more global and reflective approach; such as fostering and maintaining healthy relationships or a meaning scheme in that it is specific to the individual and "refers to a particular belief" (p. 296) such as Christianity. Therefore, this tie with the theory supports the possibility of transformation through forgiveness on all three dimensions. This is important for understanding the value and impact of forgiveness and its spiritual implications in the transformative meaning making processes for adults. Forgiveness, framed as a significant spiritual experience, requires what Tisdell (2008) identified as a deep learning that only happens occasionally. Like transformative learning, the process and the phenomena of forgiveness require a level of critical reflection that is purposeful in its attempt to gain a more holistic worldview. This type of learning is important in making meaning of one's own experiences and the experiences of others.

Conclusion

This literature review was conducted in an effort to understand the relationship between forgiveness, spirituality, and religion. While many suggestions were made as to how spirituality and religion help to facilitate forgiveness, what was lacking was how the victim was changed or transformed in the forgiving process. The application of transformative learning theory could add to the growing study of forgiveness providing a more holistic view of forgiving and its effects on the adult learner.

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