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Recommended Citation

Bush, Perdeta (2014). "The Developmental Processes of Forgiveness in Adults Learners," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/roundtables/6>

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The Developmental Processes of Forgiveness in Adults Learners

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Keywords: Transformative learning, forgiveness, models

Abstract: Models of forgiveness give insight into the development of the adult learner as they make meaning of an offense as well as the value they place on the forgiving process. Two models that explore the processes and establish the conditions in which adults learn to forgive are discussed. Both models allow for the learner to navigate their experience according to their own personal development and the context of the offense.

Forgiveness is a process that results in change. Change in one's personal narrative, attitude, worldview and emotional responses towards an offense are components in processes that facilitate forgiveness. Models of forgiveness provide insight into how someone deeply hurt moves through the forgiving process. Understanding how adults make meaning in and of the process of forgiveness could give some indication of the learning that takes place in order for someone to progress from one stage to another; thus achieving genuine forgiveness. These models are grounded in various aspects of human development including but not limited to emotion, behavior, and cognition. Being both interdisciplinary and multidimensional in their approach; these process models could have the potential to capture the essence of understanding forgiveness as a tool that facilitates transformative learning. The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to examine developmental models of forgiveness as methods that help frame the process as well as inform transformative learning.

Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness

Forgiveness facilitates personal development by providing the injured party with new ways of viewing the world and the transgression committed against them (Enright, 1994). Robert Enright's model is a developmental progression in understanding forgiveness. It is based on the premise that forgiveness brings healing to families, relationships, marriages, and hinders generational pain and wounds (Coyle & Enright, 1998) and that those who are unwilling to forgive hurt themselves. Coyle and Enright (1998) situate forgiveness as "an internal process that transforms the forgiver and also may transform the one forgiven, if the offender is able to receive forgiveness as a gift" (p.220). This potential for transformation could act as an agent that stimulates learning as a person moves through the forgiving process. They cite some of the benefits of forgiveness as freedom from guilt, and preventing the misdirection of anger in future relationships (p. 222). As a person moves through the forgiving process they may find meaning in their pain and/or the hurtful event (p.223). Making meaning of one's pain leads to healing that could potentially transform pain into knowledge from which the injured person can grow emotionally and spiritually. Andrews (2000) describes the stages in Enright's model as styles that build upon each other—requiring a more complex social understanding of the process at each level. This model focuses on structures of reasoning that assume the ability to critically reflect throughout the process.

Worthington's Pyramid Model of Forgiveness (REACH)

Worthington's model evolved from interventions designed with empathy at the core of promoting forgiveness. The Pyramid Model of Forgiveness is "an intervention program that promotes forgiveness in people that have experienced hurt" (Worthington, 1998, p. 107). It differs from an empathy-based intervention in that it is more comprehensive in content and structure. The purpose of this model is to induce states of empathy and humility. REACH, the acronym that describes the process of forgiveness in this model, encompasses: *Recalling the Hurt*—encourages participants to recall the hurt in order to heal, *Empathize with the One Who Hurt You*—defines empathy as seeing things from another person's perspective and to try to feel what the wrongdoer felt during the hurtful act, *Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness*—asks the hurt person to recall a time when they hurt someone and the guilt that was attached to that feeling and how it felt to be forgiven thus hoping that the offended person would want to extend that same gift to their offender, *Commitment to Forgive*—theorizes that if one's act of forgiveness is made public through a letter or by telling someone else that a person is less likely to later doubt that it is actually real if old feelings return, and *Hold Onto Forgiveness*—if a person does begin to doubt their experience with forgiveness there are suggested ways to keep from retreating back into unforgiveness. These steps are fluid and don't require the participant to follow them in order.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is a developmental process that progresses over the lifespan of the adult learner. The process requires a level of maturity and an understanding of the benefits for the individual, their relationships and the maintenance of social order. 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. How adults learn to forgive, make meaning of transgressions, as well as the actual process of forgiveness is an area of research worth further consideration within the field of adult education.

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