UNDERSTANDING FORGIVENESS AS DISCOVERY: IMPLICATIONS FOR MARITAL AND FAMILY THERAPY

E. Wayne Hill

ABSTRACT: This article explores the concept of forgiveness in relationship systems and examines various conceptualizations and definitions found in the literature. Forgiveness is described as a complex psychological and relational process that is more a discovery than an act of will. A rationale for viewing forgiveness in a contextual, historical, and relational attachment paradigm is presented, and the association of forgiveness with empathy and emotional intelligence is discussed. Marital and family therapists are encouraged to attend to contextual family of origin issues and to facilitate an empathic relational environment where ambivalence is expected and tolerated for enhancing the process of forgiveness. Relevant clinical cases are shared to illustrate the process of forgiveness as discovery.

KEY WORDS: forgiveness; marital and family therapy; discovery; family of origin.

Forgiveness may well be one of the most important psychological and relational processes for promoting healing within and among persons who have become alienated and estranged. Although a complex process, forgiveness stands at the forefront of human relational, emotional, spiritual, and physical development. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1998) has suggested, “forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence” (p. xiii). He emphasized that forgiveness is neither cheap nor does it mean amnesia. Forgiveness “is facing the ghastliness of what has happened and giving the other person the opportunity of coming out of that ghastly situation” (p. xiii). “We must
forgive,” continued Tutu, “but almost always we should not forget that there were atrocities, because if we do, we are then likely to repeat those atrocities. Those who forgive and those who accept forgiveness must not forget in their reconciling. If we don’t deal with our past adequately, it will return to haunt us” (Tutu, 1998, p. xiii).

In the religious community the concept of forgiveness has been used since antiquity to reflect an essential component in the reconciliation and healing of broken relationships. Nevertheless, it is only recently that interest in the concept of forgiveness in particular has grown in the psychotherapy literature as an intervention for helping couples, families, and individuals bridge gaps created by imperfect relational processes (Hargrave & Sells, 1997).

Although many theoretical frameworks and presuppositions related to the concept of forgiveness can be found in the literature, Enright and North (1998) and Hargrave and Sells (1997) suggested from their reviews that there has been little empirical research. McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000) also acknowledged the paucity of research in the social sciences particularly prior to 1980. Two periods in the history of forgiveness in the social sciences were noted. The first period was from 1932 to 1980 reflecting various theoretical discussions and modest empirical investigations designed to shed light on certain aspects of forgiveness as a concept. The second period, from 1980 to the present, has shown “more intense and serious consideration of the concept of forgiveness” (McCullough et al., 2000, p. 3).

In their review of the forgiveness literature Hargrave and Sells (1997) as well as McCullough and associates (2000) found evidence for the salutary effects of forgiveness for difficulties originating from anger and depression, family-of-origin issues, sexual abuse and compulsions, personality disorders, guilt, drug abuse, broken marital relationships, and mental health in general. They also found studies that linked forgiveness and moral development.

CONCEPTUALIZING FORGIVENESS

One of the most difficult issues facing scientific research on forgiveness is the lack of consensus in defining forgiveness. McCullough and colleagues (2000) suggested that currently there is no consensual definition of forgiveness. They point out that researchers have sought to differentiate it from concepts such as pardoning, condoning, forgetting, denying, or even reconciling. They view forgiveness as a psychological