

The Process of Forgiving: psychological aspects

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*“Perhaps
remembering is
the most
excruciating
way of
forgetting and
perhaps it's the
most agreeable
way of soothing
this torment”
(E. Fried, 1988)*

Introduction

Man is a relational being and interacts with the world around him from birth. Wallon, observing that a newborn baby needs assistance every moment, states that he is essentially “social”: all his reactions need to be completed, compensated, interpreted; incapable of doing anything alone, he is manipulated by others and it is in others’ movements that his first behaviors will take shape. For man, therefore, being “social” is a deep-seated necessity, a genetic condition.

Human beings spend much of their lives involved in significant relationships, interacting with people they care about. During social interactions, they inevitably perform actions that hurt others. The opportunities to hurt and be hurt are numerous, from the least to the most serious, but their impact varies considerably from person to person and from relationship to relationship.

Interpersonal relations satisfy the deepest human needs of affiliation, but are also the source of the most painful wounds. When an offence occurs, negative emotions like anger and resentment are rather common reactions which create a potential breakdown of the relationship itself (Fincham, Paleari & Regalia, 2000).

What creates further distress is the natural need to respond, through revenge, to the offence suffered, to get even for the insult. This feeling of revenge can degenerate into rancour: it is no longer the simple reparation of a violated right that is sought, but the harm that one can visit upon the offender in exchange for the offence suffered. Rancour is a passion that, on top of the suffering for the offence, accentuates its alienating character (Scabini & Rossi, 2000).

A significant factor that can help to cope adaptively with the inevitable daily relational breakdowns, is the capacity to forgive. The willingness to forgive has important implications not only for the health of the relationship, but also for personal well-being.

Forgiveness therefore represents a means that is available to man to safeguard a threatened relationship and to respond with trust and acceptance to a hurt inflicted on him.

Ide (1997), quoting St. Thomas, writes: “Man is by nature inclined to harmony and to unity among men, forgiveness re-establishes the lost bond, the disturbed communion, there is a natural predisposition for forgiveness in the heart of every man”.

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Forgiving in psychology

Forgiveness has only become an object of interest for psychology in the last few years. For a long time people practised and studied forgiveness above all in the religious and philosophical context. Its scientific study, on the other hand, has begun only in recent years, with the greater interest and communication between the disciplines and the theoretical debate over this construct (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor & Wade, 2001). The concept of forgiveness therefore has a rich history in philosophy and in the Judaic-Christian religious tradition, while psychological studies about it were very rare until a few years ago (McCullough, Sandage & Worthington, 1997).

Looking at the ways the study of forgiveness has developed and been consolidated in the psychological domain, it can be seen that most of the work published on this issue consists of reflections of a theoretical nature. Until the mid-Eighties these reflections were mainly put forward by theologians and spiritual consultants, in order to underline the usefulness of applying theological categories to the understanding and solution of psychic disorders. Forgiveness, in this context, was seen as one of the most effective means available to the individual to overcome resentment, anxiety and guilt feelings deriving from sin, and therefore an essential ingredient in a person's psychic well-being (Scabini & Rossi, 2000).

From the mid-Eighties onwards, there was a considerable increase in the number of theoretical works published by psychotherapists, psychiatrists and psychological consultants (Fincham, 2000; Scabini & Rossi, 2000; Worthington, E.L. 1998; Worthington, E. Jr., 1998). These works agree in judging forgiveness a valid therapeutic tool for the treatment of particular groups of disturbed subjects (women who have had abortions, individuals who are victims of sexual abuse, families of alcoholics or disabled persons, couples in crisis or separated, the terminally ill).

The last ten years has been marked by a growing number of empirical research projects (Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister 1997; McCullough et al., 1998) conducted on forgiveness, specifically in close relationships.

Defining forgiveness

The definition that is often quoted by authors dealing with this subject is that of the English philosopher Joanna North (1987): "To forgive, we must overcome resentment, not by denying ourselves the right to feel resentment, but by forcing ourselves to see the culprit with compassion, benevolence and love, even while knowing that he has voluntarily relinquished his right to these". The author assigns forgiveness the role of healing damaged relationships and underlines that the change in one's attitude to the offender is necessary, but that such change must be expressed through positive actions towards the person who offended. Forgiveness can take place on different levels: when it happens between people considered as such, in this case between the victim and the person guilty of offending, then the term used is interpersonal forgiveness. When the person responsible for an offence decides to forgive himself, one talks about intrapsychic forgiveness, although in this case it would be more appropriate to talk about self-acceptance. When, on the other hand, forgiveness is granted to social groups, the term used is intergroup forgiveness.

The definitions of forgiveness elaborated by psychology refer mainly to interpersonal forgiveness.

Worthington (2001) proposes the following definition: "forgiveness is defined as the emotive substitution of the hot negative emotions, anger and fear, that follow a wrong or a perceived offence, or of the cold negative emotions, unforgiveness and indifference, that follow rumination about a transgression, with positive emotions like disinterested love, empathy,

compassion, or even romantic love". Forgiveness, according to Worthington, does not cancel the wrong suffered and does not change the nature of the transgression, but modifies the emotive effect connected to the transgression.

McCullough & Worthington (1995) define forgiveness as: "a set of psychological changes through which the wronged individual becomes less and less motivated to get revenge, to get his own back on whoever wronged him and to physically and psychologically estrange himself from that person. Instead, the victim feels more and more motivated to make peace and to be benevolent towards the offender, despite being hurt by his behavior. Forgiveness is a complex affective, cognitive and behavioral phenomenon, in which negative emotions and judgement towards the guilty party are reduced, without denying the right to feel them, but looking at the offender with compassion, benevolence and love".

Rye and Pargament (2002) define forgiveness as: "letting go of negative emotions (hostility), negative thoughts (thoughts of revenge) and negative behaviors (verbal aggression) in response to the considerable injustice suffered, and getting ready to be merciful towards the guilty person".

Considered overall, the definitions just recalled enable us to reflect on the main characteristics of forgiveness. First of all, it should be noticed that forgiveness is necessarily bound to a psychological, physical and/or moral offence (Murphy & Hampton, 1988; Smedes, 1984). In order to forgive, a subject must first have suffered a profound wound from an acquaintance or a stranger. It is also necessary for the victim to consciously acknowledge this offence and judge it intentional (Heider, 1958). If the victim is not aware of the offence suffered or does not consider it intentional, forgiveness would be pointless and impracticable. In fact, the person offended would have no reason to feel resentful about the event, and nor would the presumed offender deserve to be deprived of the victim's affection and trust (Fincham, 2000).

As soon as the victim perceives he has suffered an intentional offence, he reacts by feeling anger, desire to get revenge, and trying to avoid personal and psychological contact with the person responsible for the offence (McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister, 1997).

For these initial reactions, forgiveness assumes a cathartic role and value: in other words, it makes it easier to relinquish negative feelings and resentment, thus facilitating the fading of the memory of the wrong suffered.

Properly speaking, this forgiveness must then be an intentional act, in virtue of which the person who was hurt voluntarily gives up the right to feel resentful towards his offender. Forgiving does not simply mean denying or forgetting the wrong suffered, refraining from getting revenge and behaving as if nothing had happened. If this were so, forgiveness would favour the re-creation of the same conditions in which the offence was generated and would facilitate its repetition.

One can recognise in forgiveness an act of courage that "asks the victim to re-admit into his heart the person who was responsible for his suffering. Forgiving, therefore, means risking one's own trust and affection without having any guarantee that this will be returned in the future" (North, 1987).

Forgiving is therefore an unconditional personal choice: it is a path that the subject can decide to take independently both of possible reactions of repentance and contrition manifested by the offender (who might confess and admit his guilt and responsibility, giving explanations...) and of pressures exerted from outside. While on the one hand the offender's behavior and what happens in the surrounding environment can facilitate forgiveness, on the other hand, neither of the two represent a necessary condition for its coming about (Fincham, 2000).

In this sense forgiveness is a free gift (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Worthington, 1998). "Being free is a quality in acting in which and for which a subject gives the other person something of himself or all of himself, without expecting anything back. The gift really is free because the giver does not ask himself whether or not the receiver deserves it. The lack of any expectation other than the benefit for the other person is what distinguishes a free gift" (Scabini & Rossi, 2000). The gift cannot be reduced to a mercantile type of exchange, as is

underlined by Godbout (1992), since it is specifically characterised by its free nature, that is, by its absence of obligation, of contract, of constriction (contract and constriction have the same etymological root) towards the giver and, equally, by the absence of obligation for the receiver to repay it. The gift therefore presupposes trust in others, that is, in relationships, since it is trust in others alone that can ensure the circulation of the gift.

Forgiveness is often seen also as an agent of change, since it introduces a new way of seeing and experiencing painful events of the past (Hope, 1987), without by this diminishing their seriousness. It also enables the person who is guilty of the offence to be seen in more positive terms, judging him a fallible, limited human being just like the person who was offended by him.

According to some authors, forgiveness constitutes a change also in the sense that it determines a new subdivision of power within the relationship between the victim and the offender. In fact, the event of an offence generally creates a situation of imbalance that causes the transfer of power away from the one who held it initially and who inflicted the offence on the victim. It therefore becomes the main force determining the future of the relationship: it is up to the victim to decide whether to make up the relationship by forgiving or to further damage it by adopting retaliatory behavior or by avoiding the offender. This decision can also be influenced by the possible advantages that might derive from the situation created due to the offence. In fact, the victim could exploit the offender's desire to please him and repay the wrong committed, so as to benefit from it. If the victim decides to forgive, at the same time he relinquishes the moral high ground and restores a distribution of power between himself and the offender that is close to the original situation. In doing so, he returns to the offender the power to make decisions in the relationship that he had originally.

Forgiveness is not only an inner process, but also concerns the relationship with the offender. He is initially dehumanised and identified with the bad act he committed: what the offender did ends up becoming what the offender is. The process leading to forgiveness starts when the victim begins to consider the person responsible for the offence not simply and solely as a wicked creature that has wronged him, but as a weak and fallible creature, a human being not totally different from himself (Smedes, 1997). This way of seeing things could make the victim realise that in the past he himself has been responsible for unjust acts and needs to be forgiven (Enright & Coyle, 1998). By adopting this way of seeing things, the victim may become more inclined to take the road leading to forgiveness.

According to Enright & The Human Development Study Group (1991), moreover, forgiveness is the outcome of complex cognitive, emotive and behavioral processes. The emotional components concern the different positive and negative reactions experienced both by the victim and by the person who inflicted the offence. For example, the anger, the desire to get even, the empathy and compassion felt by the victim towards the offender. Or the shame, the sense of guilt or relief at being forgiven experienced by the offender. The cognitive components acquire greater importance in the victim, since he is called on to re-elaborate the event, assessing the offence suffered and its gravity, identifying the responsibility, weighing up the costs and benefits that resulted from it. This re-elaboration will lead the victim to opt for forgiveness or otherwise to ruminate repeatedly about the offence, which will foment the initial attitudes of vindictiveness and/or avoidance. Lastly, the behavioral components are manifested in the victim with the need for explanations and the adoption of more conciliating behavior, while in the offender with apologising and asking forgiveness, at times carrying out a series of symbolic rituals.

In more general terms, it is therefore possible to identify two dimensions in forgiveness: one intrapsychic and the other interpersonal (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). The intrapsychic dimension refers to what happens in the mind and heart of the victim, therefore to the emotive and cognitive states that the person hurt develops when he decides to react positively to the offence suffered. The interpersonal dimension focuses instead on the behavior between the victim and the offender and the social actions entailed in forgiveness and on the acts protecting the relationship involved. In this sense forgiveness is considered to be a powerful pro-social phenomenon, a strategy that facilitates the maintenance and

restoration of interpersonal relations, offering the possibility of a new beginning, which is not simply a return to the past, but that includes the awareness of what has happened (Scobie & Scobie, 1998).

Smedes (1997) describes forgiveness as a journey whose final destination is the hope of being reconciled with the person who committed the offence. The breakdown, the severance caused by the offence is the opportunity for the journey. The victim perceives the offence suffered like a moral offence, a violation of a right, the awareness of having been wounded makes it impossible to continue to have faith in the other person and in the relationship with him. The victim would like, would even be happy, to see the other person feeling a pain at least as great as what he himself experienced. So the cycle of revenge can begin, with the initial roles inverted: the victim becomes, in turn, the one who inflicts the offence. This cycle can be broken by a change of route, which occurs when the victim decides not to get revenge on his offender, but to forgive him.

Once he has decided to take the path towards forgiveness, according to Smedes, there are three basic steps to reach it. Firstly, the victim must be able to rediscover the humanity of the person who was responsible for the offence, so that the thirst for revenge can be mitigated. The next step is to abandon the idea of getting revenge even though one has good reasons for doing so. Lastly, the victim must change his feelings towards the offender, for example by passing from rancour to benevolence.

This must all be conditional because forgiving does not necessarily mean being reconciled. Forgiveness can come about without reconciliation, but reconciliation cannot take place without forgiveness. In other words, forgiving is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for reconciliation between the victim and the offender to be brought about (Smedes, 1997).

The process of forgiving

Besides defining the nature of forgiveness, clinicians and researchers have been working hard to describe the process that leads to forgiveness and its consequences at a personal and relational level.

The metaphor of forgiveness as a journey, used by Smedes (1997), brings to light, in fact, a fundamental characteristic of this construct: that of not being a finished act, but a process. Forgiveness is not an immediate act, but the outcome of long, and often painful, psychological work. The decision to forgive triggers a difficult inner process entailing the overcoming of negative feelings and the adoption of a positive attitude towards the person who hurt us (Fincham, 2000). Forgiveness is an effort, a choice that necessarily involves an act of willpower and at the same time a creative act, a spiral through which one reaches one's memories, one's psychological and relational sources (Napolitani, 1987), it is something new, a revelation in the chronological present (Jankelevitch, 1967), which at the very moment when it is unveiled, is revealed.

Forgiveness is a principle of mobility and fluidity, unlike rancour which is a principle of staticity and rigidity (characteristics that often accompany psychic suffering), and a process of humanization, since it pushes one to face up to one's limits and vulnerability, it is a principle of freedom that presents some characteristics that need to be specified.

It may take a very long time to forgive because it is a slow process; the more serious the wrong suffered, the longer it will take to forgive. Sometimes months or years go by before one is able to forgive completely, although the passing of time in itself does not guarantee advances in the process of forgiveness.

Moreover, to forgive it is necessary to develop at least a partial understanding of the motives of the person who hurt us, but also of ourselves, that is, of the aspects and the characteristics of one's own wound and of the relationship with the person who wounded us. During this process of understanding it is possible to feel that one is a victim of confusion; often it is not clear exactly what happened. In every offence there is someone who wronged someone else, but often around this simple core of unjust suffering, there is a tangle of

wrongs and of hatred that is almost impossible to unravel. At times one must arrive at forgiveness by passing through the knot of feelings and the obstacles of incomprehension. Very often, after having granted forgiveness, there remains a little anger; one cannot in fact cancel the past, but only heal the suffering that it caused. Forgiveness cures the hatred for the person that caused the situation, but does not change the facts and does not eliminate the consequences. However it is possible to feel anger without hatred. When forgiveness starts its liberating effect, rancour withers but the anger remains. If the rancour is not alleviated little by little it suffocates us, while anger can push us to avoid the repetition of the wrong. Rancour is an affliction that can be cured, anger is energy that can be channelled. The process that leads to forgiveness can never be a duty, one cannot be forced to forgive; one cannot forgive without exercising one's freedom of choice. In order to liberate, forgiveness must be granted freely. One fundamental requisite for a free forgiveness is the respect for the person forgiven, which means allowing the person forgiven to do what he likes with our forgiveness, otherwise forgiveness becomes an attempt to control the other person, a mere power game in name, for example, of a presumed moral superiority ("I forgive you because I am good"). Forgiveness is sincere only if it has such respect for others that it allows them to take responsibility for what they intend to do with it. Forgiveness often requires us to be able to convert our intelligence and identify with the offender, the person that is more than the finiteness of the offence. Forgiveness also expects one to extricate oneself from the wound inflicted or suffered and that both offender and sufferer should be reintegrated in a story that on the one hand keeps in mind the past so as to forgive, and on the other opens to the promise of a future of hope (Smedes, 1984).

The models of forgiveness

As well as defining the nature and the process of forgiveness, psychological literature has also tried to describe the process, the phases of development and the consequences of forgiveness at a personal and relational level.

For this purpose various models have been developed. They can be grouped into three different types:

- a) *Cognitive-developmental models*: describe the development of thought and reasoning on forgiveness from within the individual, from the angle of his growth and maturation over time;
- b) *Process models*: identify and define the phases or stages that the subject who has suffered the offence passes through before reaching the decision to forgive;
- c) *Psycho-social models*: describe the main factors that, at the psycho-social level, determine and/or achieve the granting of forgiveness.

a) Cognitive-developmental models

Among the models classified as cognitive-developmental, the scientific community has given special importance to the model developed by Enright and The Human Development Study Group (1991), which says that the conception people have of forgiveness and the consequent reasoning followed to decide whether or not to forgive become more morally elevated as the subject grows up and develops his mental powers.

Specifically, the thinking related to forgiveness supposedly matures in successive stages parallel to the phases through which, according to Kohlberg (1984), moral judgement develops. In fact Kohlberg, taking up Piaget's conception, outlined a series of stages in the development of moral judgement from childhood to adulthood. In the first stage (*reward-punishment orientation*) dominant below nine to ten years of age, the child considers the norms that can entail a physical punishment or require obedience. In the second stage

(*individualistic-instrumental orientation*) the child recognises that people's needs and interests can be different and one of the criteria of evaluation is that many interests should be considered, starting from his own. The third and fourth stage go from pre-adolescence to late adolescence. One case (*the "good boy" orientation*) highlights the respect for the norms designed to correspond to the positive expectations of the community whose values they share; in the other case (*oriented to maintaining social order*) the moral commitment is connected to one's own role in society, whose laws must be respected since they ensure social order. Finally, the last two levels are tied to a system of abstract principles and universal values. Specifically, in the penultimate stage, (*social contract orientation*), the individual believes that the laws must be regulated so as to allow for the rights of all to be respected, and when this does not happen, they can be changed. In the final stage, (*orientation of conscience and of universal principles*) the subject expects that universal ethical principles not written in the laws can be followed, each of which responds to one's own conscience. Some of these principles may not be in accordance with the laws since they depend neither on them nor on the social consensus.

From a deeper analysis of the various stages, it can be seen that at the first level, Enright places a forgiveness defined vindictive, that is, that the individual decides to grant only after the person responsible for the offence has been punished and has suffered. In a later stage we find forgiveness as compensation and restitution, which, in the individual's view, must be granted when the offender has given back what he took away from the victim or when he feels a profound sense of guilt deriving from the temporary withholding of forgiveness. Going up a level, we find a kind of forgiveness that the subject believes is dictated by the expectations of his own peer group which exerts pressure, or a forgiveness simply expected due to the victim's social role. Similar to the previous one is the forgiveness that the person thinks he must grant due to an expectation determined by moral and religious laws, that is, when ethical convictions and religious beliefs push in that direction. At the penultimate level of moral development, forgiveness is linked to social harmony, that is, the subject thinks it must be granted so as to return to positive, peaceful relations, levelling divergences and conflicts and restoring harmony to society. Lastly, we find unconditional forgiveness, which the individual judges dictated by authentic love that cannot be damaged or diminished by an offence.

Based on what has just been said, the development of forgiveness comes through a sequence of predictable, universally valid stages. It should, however, be specified that the succession of stages, as it has been identified and described, must not be interpreted rigidly since in reality the reasoning used by subjects that forgive can often be linked simultaneously to two or more levels.

b) Process models

The model described below outlines the process nature of forgiveness actually granted and analyses the dynamic that develops in the victim. The process model was put forward by Enright & The Human Development Study Group (1991) and is based on the statement that forgiveness simultaneously involves a person's cognitive, emotive and behavioral systems. Enright concentrates above all on the dynamic of forgiveness as it happens inside the person hurt and describes how, starting from an unjustly inflicted offence, the person can manage to grant forgiveness, passing through a process that develops over time and involves cognitive, emotive and behavioral strategies.

According to this model, the offensive act initially determines in the victim a set of negative emotive reactions such as anger, shame and insecurity, which cause psychological suffering. The offended person, under emotional stress, finds himself continually brooding in his mind over the events that have happened. Insofar as the person becomes aware of his own suffering, he also feels the need to soothe it, by choosing the path of justice, thus resorting to legal sanctions or to personal revenge, or by opting for mercy, that is, deciding not to punish the other person.

Choosing this second strategy makes the victim's motivation to forgive even stronger. This motivation can be conditioned, according to Enright, by seven categories of variables: the stage of cognitive development in which the subject finds himself, his cultural background, the social group he belongs to (family, friends, society), his religious upbringing, the time that has passed since he suffered the offence, the seriousness of the offence, and the conversion, seen as a "change of heart".

The subject that is motivated to forgive in general decides to do so. This decision is considered by Enright as a precise commitment chosen and consciously adopted by the victim. The decision to forgive stimulates the subject taking such a decision to abandon resentment and the desire for revenge and promotes a series of cognitive-affective strategies that help the victim to perceive the other person as a vulnerable human being, for whom it is possible to feel empathy and compassion. These strategies lead to a re-reading of the offence in the context in which it took place and a less negative re-interpretation, without distorting the reality of the facts. This re-reading of the events makes it easier to accept the pain experienced and gives a new, more positive meaning to the offence itself.

The victim can also understand that he is not the only one to suffer and that in the past he has had to be forgiven. This new awareness comes through remembering episodes in which he, now the victim of the offence, offended someone and had to be forgiven.

Viewing the person responsible for one's suffering in a different, more positive way stimulates in the victim the need to act and induces the subject to find solutions that can change the situation.

At this point in the process, the victim is faced with two options. He can adopt behavioral strategies designed for reconciliation which, however, also require the active participation of the person who inflicted the offence (this would be about a shift from the level of decisions and inner change on the part of the victim alone, to that of interaction between victim and offender). Otherwise, not being able to take the path of reconciliation, since it is unfeasible or unwise, the victim can opt directly to forgive the offence, which means a reduction in negative emotions and an increase in positive feelings towards the person who committed the offence.

At the end of his presentation of his process model, Enright points out that the various phases in this process follow a logical sequence which, however, is not "psychologically unchanging". This means that it is not necessary to pass through all the phases of the process to achieve forgiveness.

c) Psycho-social models

The psycho-social models are distinguished by their solid theoretical and empirical foundations. These models pay particular attention to the analysis of what helps, on a psycho-social plane, to promote or inhibit the granting of forgiveness. One of the most important psycho-social models is presented in the works of McCullough et al. (1998). This model was elaborated for the purpose of determining the effects of the granting of forgiveness in close relationships and of analysing the numerous social and psychological variables that, in turn, affect the capacity to forgive.

The theoretical and empirical foundations underlying this model are made up of a series of research projects conducted in the 1980s and '90s on pro-social behaviors (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Darby & Schlenker, 1982) and on forgiveness. Based on this research, McCullough et al. (1998) re-read and interpret forgiveness as a particular form of pro-social behavior that comes very close to variables which also have a pro-social value, such as cooperation, altruism, willingness to make sacrifices and to be accommodating. What these variables share is the capacity to abstain from adopting behavior that, though initially designed to protect the person who suffered an offence, in the end prove to be destructive for the relationship itself. To this is added the choice of a commitment towards actions that promote relational well-being.

Starting from these initial considerations, McCullough & al. (1998) observe that forgiveness can be favoured by four categories of determinants, each of which differs from the others according to the degree of proximity and immediacy with which it promotes or inhibits forgiveness. It is therefore possible to talk about more proximal or moderately proximal determinants and about more distal or moderately distal determinants.

The more proximal determinants are made up of *socio-cognitive variables*, which refer to what the victim thinks and feels in relation to the offence suffered and the person who inflicted it. It is possible to include among the socio-cognitive variables the *attributive processes*, i.e. the way in which one explains the offensive event by attributing it to specific causes, responsibilities or faults (Girard & Mullet, 1997); *rumination*, that is, brooding and obsessively and repeatedly thinking over what happened, thus increasing the desire both to avoid contact with the offender and to seek revenge (Caprara, 1986; Collins & Bell, 1997; Greenberg, 1995); *empathy*, that is, the capacity to put oneself in the offender's place and have benevolent feelings towards him.

The moderately proximal determinants cover the *variables associated with the offensive act*, including both the characteristics of the offence itself – such as the *seriousness* and the *long term consequences* – and the reactions manifested by the offender after committing the offence – for example the *accounts* or explanations offered (Girard & Mullet, 1997). It is easier for the offended person to grant his forgiveness when he considers the offence suffered not serious and when the person responsible shows that he is sorry and offers sincere apologies.

The moderately distal determinants refer essentially to the *interpersonal relational context* in which the offence took place. Since forgiveness expresses the desire to protect the relationship with the person responsible for the offence, the higher the level of *satisfaction, closeness and commitment* marking the relationship between the two parties before the offence, the more likely it is that forgiveness will be granted (Nelson, 1993; Rackley, 1993). On this point, it should be noticed that the relational quality can affect the forgiveness in various ways. For example, in a case where the subjects are involved in a qualitatively satisfying relationship, there is a greater likelihood that they will make long-term plans and that they are motivated to make their relationship last. This pushes them to overcome discord and offences suffered so as to safeguard their bond with the other person.

In the same way, the degree of intimacy and knowledge that one has of the other person can be useful in developing empathy towards him and in trying to understand his thoughts and feelings, as well as the reasons that led him to behave in such a way. In the relationship, as well as the degree of satisfaction and intimacy, an important role is played by the extent to which the subjects have committed themselves and have invested in their relationship. The one who committed the offence may therefore show a greater tendency to feel remorse, to give explanations and to ask for forgiveness (Hodgins, Liebeskind & Schwartz, 1996).

Lastly, the most distal determinants consist of personality traits distinguishing the subject in a relatively stable way (for example, *attitudes towards revenge, submissiveness, way of reacting to anger, ethical principles and religious beliefs*). These personal characteristics influence the granting of forgiveness in a mainly indirect way. Within a relationship, the combination of all four of these classes of determinants leads to forgiveness being granted after an offence.

Some studies have shown that empathy is one of the most influential variables in determinants the capacity to forgive others (McCullough, Sandage & Worthington 1997). In turn, it is facilitated by the level of intimacy before the offence and by the apologies offered by the offender. Experiencing a satisfying relationship that is committed and close enables on the one hand those guilty of offending to be more willing to show their displeasure for what they have done and to ask for forgiveness (Tagny, Miller, Flicker & Barlow, 1996) and on the other hand, makes it more likely that the victims will want to put themselves in the others' shoes and forgive them. A second important result concerns *rumination*, or the intrusive thoughts, images and feelings aroused by the offence received. Those who experience high levels of *rumination* prove incapable of eliminating intrusive thoughts and

feelings from their minds and are more likely to adopt aggressive and vindictive behaviour towards the person responsible for the offence. From this one deduces that *ruminatio*n plays an important role in perpetuating the difficulties and psychological problems following an offence (Greenberg, 1995) and in preventing the adoption of a conciliating attitude.

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