
DYADIC FORGIVENESS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to study dyadic forgiveness through a quantitative study of change in VOD participants and a qualitative study of energy shifts in the accounts of victim participants who engaged in a VOD with their offenders. Most studies of forgiveness have focused on forgiveness as an individual phenomenon that occurs outside the context of the victim–offender relationship. The change process is done solo and involves cultivating an empathic perspective that results in changes in the victim’s perception of the offender. The vast majority of the studies are experimental rather than applied or address the impact of interventions to promote forgiveness on victim change. In those studies, forgiveness may be decisional or emotional (Worthington *et al.*, 2007). Decisional forgiveness is focused on the victim’s intent to respond differently to an offender. Emotional forgiveness is considered as the replacement of negative emotions (i.e. anger, vengefulness) with positive other-oriented emotions such as empathy. There is sparse literature on dyadic forgiveness. Studies have concentrated on offended relationship partners in ongoing, committed relationships and the restoration of interpersonal closeness (McCullough *et al.*, 1998). Most of these studies again are experimental rather than qualitative, have focused solely on the person offended, the quality of the pre-existing relationship, shared history, and the variables principally of rumination, empathy, and apology.

This project proposes that dyadic forgiveness is a product of the interaction between victim and offender. It occurs in the context of the dyadic relationship. The word “dyadic” refers to two elements: the structure of the relationship and a bilateral process where both parties give something to the other and receive something from the other. Hence, they need each

other's presence and participation to achieve the forgiveness experience. The relationship, though created by crime, therefore, is needed paradoxically for resolution of the negatively charged energy associated with the crime.

MUTUAL AID: GIVING AND RECEIVING

The bilateral process in dyadic forgiveness stimulates change, in part, because of the dependence and impact each person has on the other. Victims need information about the crime from offenders in order to complete the story. No one else knows better what happened than the offender. Offenders need to tell the truth about what happened. In effect, offenders need "to confess" to the person specifically harmed for the confession to be complete. This accounting includes the offenders' feelings about what they have done. Indeed, offenders need opportunities to demonstrate human qualities such as pain and remorse. The victim's presence is a necessary component to the "confession." This mutual aid or need for each other is symbiotic. Each party leans on the other. Each party gives. Each party receives.

In relating the truth, the full story, to the victim, the offender gives. In hearing the victim's account of the impact of the crime and feeling remorse for what he did, the offender gives again. Specifically, the offender takes on the pain for the crime and its devastating impact, a reality that only the victim could know and a reality that has, up to this point, been carried alone by the victim.

In a victim's desire and willingness to meet with the offender, there is some acknowledgment of the offender's existence. The victim gives, as well, in their humanization of the offender, which, in effect, is an acceptance of the offender as other than a monster. The victim's listening and response to the offender's truthfulness is also a giving. It allows the offender to unburden themselves of the shame and guilt they may carry from committing the crime and knowing the wrong that they did. Often their self-hatred and loathing appears as well but is harder to release.

Alongside their shared giving is their mutual receiving. The person harmed receives the offender's remorse. Not only do victims feel that what happened to them and their lives matters to the person responsible for the harm, but the offenders' remorse is also expressive of their humanity toward the person harmed. Indeed, victimization is deeply dehumanizing. Remorse transforms victims as objects to victims as human.

The offender receives the victim's humanity as well. It may show as a shift in the victim's attitude toward the offender, in an expression of empathy for the pain embedded in the offender's background, in the provision of parental guiding and advice, and in a hug or taking of the offender's hand.

Dyadic forgiveness, therefore, requires victim and offender to be emotionally available to each other. Otherwise the giving and receiving will not occur and the healing will be reduced. Because both people are necessary to this process, the forgiveness that occurs, consequently, is co-created. Moreover, both victim and offender are involved in a bilateral process where they mutually impact each other. The interchange may set off a change reaction of influence with feedback loops that energizes and possibly accelerates movement.

SHIFTS IN ENERGY

Dyadic forgiveness is implicit and a part of the interaction. It is not dependent on a verbally explicit claim of “having forgiven” or the occurrence of particular behaviors. It can happen subliminally, that is, a person is influenced by another but the influence is not recognized or understood consciously. It can consciously occur but not be claimed or asserted by the victim. Consequently, dyadic forgiveness cannot be examined directly but through shifts in emotional energy as revealed, in this project, through victims’ accounts. Indeed, energy shifts in the movement from negatively to positively charged emotional energy is the language of dyadic forgiveness. This project, therefore, focused on the flow and course of emotional energy. It used victims’ reports of their own and offenders’ emotional energy shifts during the dyadic dialogue as the medium for examining forgiveness in a dyadic context. These shifts in dyadic forgiveness were voluntary and helped change the direction and quality of the energy.

Dyadic forgiveness is a process rather than an event, as shown by the series of graduated energy shifts reported by victims. Indeed, they described shifts in motivation, attitudes toward the offenders, responses to the dyadic encounter and engagement, and post-dialogue outcomes. Many of these shifts were additive. They built on each other and built over time. For example, many victims did not humanize offenders until they experienced offenders’ remorse or the taking ownership of what they did in their story of the crime. The core shift, therefore, frequently emerged out of victims gently moving themselves forward first through more minor shifts.

The findings from the qualitative study support the quantitative findings and vice versa. Specifically, the only outcome for VOD offenders that showed a significant change over time was gratitude. This variable contained two statements that offenders rated based on their level of agreement: (1) “I accept myself as a human being like the victim.” (2) “I have so much in life to be thankful for.” This finding arguably demonstrates an energy shift for offenders. It likely reflects the offender’s emotional response to

feeling accepted by the victim and facilitator, having engaged in a process of accountability, remorse, and reparation, and being symbolically reinstated by the victim as a moral citizen.

Similarly, the quantitative study showed energy shifts for the victim as demonstrated by an increase over four time periods in empathy, forgiveness, physical functioning, physical role, general health, vitality, emotional role, and mental health. Positive changes in these variables are a likely reflection of the victim's positive shift in negatively charged emotional energy related to the crime and its impact and the release of bitterness and vengeance during and after the dialogue.

Finally, the quantitative findings provide some support for dyadic forgiveness specific to the positive influence that each party has on the other, which helps shift the negatively charged emotional energy. In that regard, it is notable that the mediator's rating of the offender's readiness for the dialogue was a predictor of the victim's rating of success. This finding suggests that the overall success of the dialogue occurred in the context of the dyadic process and that the process was additive, that is, each part built on the other. The readiness of the offender for the meeting likely meant that he was open to sharing information, receptive to hearing the impact of what he did, and willing to express some level of remorse, regret, and sorrow.

MOVEMENT IN NEGATIVELY TO POSITIVELY CHARGED ENERGY

The movement in shifting from negatively to positively charged emotional energy as a result of the VOD is somewhat linear. It begins with the crime, its impact, and the residue of negatively charged emotional energy. Victims are traumatized by the crime and then held in a suspended state by the criminal justice system. There is no viable or constructive outlet for their intense emotions. Consequently, the negatively charged energy is *blocked*. For most victims, this phase reinforces their powerlessness and sense of being stuck.

At some point, VOD victim participants make attempts to resolve the horrific pain and discomfort they live with. This negatively charged energy is commonly referenced as a state of "unforgiveness" (Worthington and Wade, 1999). The decision to pursue the VOD option may be activated by the offender's pending release, the desperate need for information, and answers to unresolvable why-related questions, the toxicity of anger, or concern for and curiosity about the offender. At this point, the energy, although still blocked, is *directed* toward a goal. Indeed, there is the possibility that meeting with the offender will relieve some of the victim's ongoing torment.

During this time there are also sporadic energy shifts because of new insights or personal decisions made by victims about how they will face the future.

Victims' preparation for the VOD may be formal and/or informal. Regardless of the methods used to ensure readiness, the negatively charged energy is now *channeled* in the direction of the upcoming dialogue. Depending on the facilitator and procedures followed in different states that have VOD programs, victim and offender may exchange letters, pictures, and video-taped interviews with the facilitator about the future meeting. Facilitators may also carry information about each person back and forth to the other as they prepare for the dialogue. In some instances, victims' responses to the offender may begin to be somewhat less negative. In the cultivation of greater openness, they begin to consider aspects of the offender or that person's response that they previously would have disregarded or written off. As such, there may be some mixture of negatively and positively charged energy that starts to emerge. This phase may also include some sporadic energy shifts based on new information or personal decisions made by victims about going forward.

The dyadic dialogue brings together victim and offender. This actualization of all the pre-work and the interplay between participants allows for the possibility of negatively charged energy to be *released*. Indeed, the sharing of the pain through expressions of remorse, anger, and deep sorrow as well as the stories of the crime and its impact provides the outlet that was never available during the first phase of the crime's aftermath. Although there may be numerous small energy shifts throughout the dialogue, a pivotal or *core energy shift* occurs as the pain caused by the crime is transformed for the victim. This usually occurs after the offender has taken some measure of affective accountability for the crime.

The core energy shift is also called "pivotal" because it allows the blocked energy to flow again. The victim's sense of being unburdened refers to the release of negatively charged energy. The offender too likely feels unburdened because his actions helped relieve some of the pain he caused the victim and he, too, has had the opportunity, through his truth-telling, to release the negatively charged energy he too carries as a result of the crime he committed. The critical dynamic, however, for the offender is his shift in status from monster to human being in the eyes of the victim. The victim's reinstatement of the offender as a moral citizen in the same realm as the victim is "pivotal" because it releases the offender also to move forward. Hence, for both parties the sense of resolution and post-dialogue re-engagement in the world reflects that the *energy is flowing* again.

Behaviorally, the shift is reflected in the quality of the interaction between victim and offender. Specifically, there is a dyadic exchange of

information related to the pain differential and pain transfer. Both victim and offender may be open to giving and receiving but there is limited back and forth movement between them. After the pain transformation, however, the interaction changes. Victim and offender feel safer, more available, and even closer to each other. There is space, now, for a more conversational process. The quality of the flow is more open, spontaneous, and triggering of each other's responses. Pearle's story about her rage, wanting to beat the dog she loved and flogging the tree instead triggered Hal's love for dogs. "...[D]ogs are my love. I couldn't imagine being without one. So we went back and forth revealing ourselves to each other with lots and lots of tears."

ROLE OF DISSONANCE IN ENERGY MOVEMENT

Dissonance refers to discomfort associated with holding two or more contradictory beliefs that conflict with a person's existing beliefs, ideas, or values (Festinger, 1957). Dissonance creates a field of energy due to the tension of opposing forces. The energy provokes movement to reduce the opposition created by contradictory elements. In dyadic forgiveness specific to VOD, there was pre-dialogue dissonance that propelled victims' efforts to resolve negatively charged energy by electing to pursue a VOD. The decision to move forward resolved some of the dissonance associated with feeling blocked but also generated new pre-dialogue dissonance because of the requirement for greater openness to the offender. Indeed, this dissonance did not resolve for many of the victim participants until they actually saw and could assess, for themselves, the offender's authenticity.

Once in the meeting, victim participants were faced with additional dissonance-generating experiences caused by the dialogue. For example, they received new information from the offender that conflicted with their prior understanding of the crime-specific details. They also experienced the offender differently than they had during the trial. What they expected and what actually happened frequently threw them. For example, Keisha never expected that Adam would be kind and generous toward her. Likewise, Monique never expected that Manny felt bad because he had known her brother and liked him. Victims also experienced dissonance between their commitment to the past and the pull of the future. Micaela felt that she wanted to express gratitude to Ronald for the meeting but felt that doing so would betray Joel, her deceased partner. Maya wanted to close the door on the unresolvedness of her daughter's murder but could not do that if she continued to join Duncan in meeting frequently with Gregory. Victims had to make decisions about these opposing pulls in order to resolve the immensity of their discomfort. For the most part, their choices reflected

decisions to move forward. These decisions about what to believe, what to honor within themselves, and who to trust played a powerful role in their energy shifts during the dialogue. Indeed, it is hypothesized that as participants shift in response to the dissonance-generating discomfort, what victims felt or believed previously dissipates because it is absorbed by the new attitude or understanding.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN DYADIC FORGIVENESS

The essential component in dyadic forgiveness is the offender's accountability to the victim. The offender's willingness to accept responsibility and account for his or her actions is, without question, the core factor that generates movement. As it relates to dissonance, the offender's apology, sorrow, and regret contradict the victim's belief that the offender is evil or a monster, which pushes the victim to see the offender anew. The exchange of accountability statements and humanization or empathy-building statements is at the heart of what disarms the power of the past and allows both victim and offender to move toward a different future.

According to the model advanced by this project, the victim, prior to meeting with the offender, unilaterally carries the pain caused by the offender (e.g. pain differential). That differential is sustained by unshared stories or experience and intensified by the victim's ongoing discomfort, which creates a highly charged energy imbalance. During the VOD, wrongdoers authentically accept responsibility for what they did and, consequently, transfer the pain from the victim to themselves (e.g. pain transfer). Many of the participants in the study reported that even before the dialogue began, the offender was steeped in remorse. Indeed, the offender's pain from the onset of the meeting set the tone for the VOD and was responsible for the initial energy shift in the victim. For the most part, participants' shifts in attitude toward the offender occurred after there was some expression of accountability, some shouldering of the pain that began to rebalance the inequity or pain differential between them. These victim shifts humanized the offender and allowed a stronger connection between the parties.

Although victim participants shared their pain in telling the offender about the impact of the crime on their lives and the lives of their families, the remorse of the offender frequently occurred independently of the victim's story. It was as if the offender already knew the horror they had caused and was anxious to show and express how sorry they were to the victim. In many of the cases, the offender demonstrated the extent of their accountability by sharing the entirety of the crime they committed with the victim. The offender's accountability, therefore, might reflect their feelings

about the damage they did, a recounting of exactly what happened, their decisions and their actions in committing of the crime, and their response to learning what the victim endured as a result.

Participants' responses were heavily dependent on the authenticity of the offender's story and feelings. Indeed, it was the genuineness of the offender that touched the humanity of the victim and helped open them up to a different experience of the offender. Accountability that was believable also made the experience of being with the offender safer. The offender did not just give them information about the crime. Rather, the story was expressed honestly and with regret and sorrow. Moreover, the sharing was done in the context of a relationship that was, in fact, formed by the crime and both the victim and offender's connection to the person who was murdered. The offender's accountability in the context of such intense history and engagement also made it more viable and trustworthy. Consequently, how the information was given was as important as the information itself. Truth-telling was raw, naked, honest, and conveyed with integrity.

DYADIC FORGIVENESS AND MEANING-MAKING

The pain transfer, as reflected in the offender's accountability, shifts the pain differential for the victim. Indeed, as the offender acts on the victim through taking on the pain, it elicits a different and humanizing response from the victim. This movement by the offender actually begins to transform the victim's pain. The victim's humanizing of and response to the offender is one manifestation of the beginning transformation. Humanizing refers to how people use their own basic humanity, their essential strength, decency, and compassion as a human being to identify, bond, and join out of sameness with others. This movement by the victim is recognition of the offender's humanity and, in effect, is a refusal to demonize him any longer. The pain transformation also elicits the forgiveness response, verbally or behaviorally, from the victim.

All of these shifts in attitude and position between victim and offender reconfigure the meaning of the crime. Indeed, the narrative about the crime has a different ending because of the VOD. It moves the grammatical "period" about the horrific event to a new place. The future is no longer defined by the negatively charged emotional energy but, rather, is defined or influenced by the transformation of negative to positive energy. This shift creates a changed openness to what is possible.

As victims learn the true story of what happened to their loved one or receive knowledge about the background or motivation of offenders, they have the missing puzzle pieces and are finally able to put the puzzle together.

They now can “make sense” out of what happened. The new information allows victims to have some measure of internal resolution. Moreover, the dialogue itself is a meaning-making venture between the two parties about the crime, its aftermath in both their lives, and who they become to each other as a result of the meeting. Based on the victim participants’ accounts, offenders too went through a transformation as a result of the interaction with the victim. Victims often worked to positively guide offenders, offering advice and showing concern for their wellbeing. Consequently, the meaning made during their encounter is a product of this shared process between them.

Based on the findings in the qualitative study, the new meaning is powerful in that it sustained itself even when participants had post-dialogue experiences with the offender that were disappointing. Kalicia, for example, discovered that Ahmad would likely not keep the commitments he made to her during their meeting. Micaela discovered that Ronald had reoffended and had badly distorted the reality about their VOD meeting. In both cases, the victims maintained the positiveness they received from the VOD and did not question the offender’s authenticity as human or the viability of what happened in the meeting.

DYADIC FORGIVENESS AND LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Victims and offenders varied in the quality of the dyadic engagement during the VOD. Based on the openness continuum, some victims were more guarded than others. Some offenders were more emotionally expressive than others. In some of the VOD meetings, victims worked to pull out offenders. In other cases, victims were less active. Across the board, victims and offenders make choices about how much of themselves to give to the other.

These dynamics affect the quality of the dyadic engagement and, perhaps, the degree of satisfaction felt by each of the parties. Roughly half of the victims in the qualitative study had some ongoing contact with the offender after the dialogue was completed. This post-dialogue outcome is notable because engagement with the offender, in some instances, becomes voluntary. Although heavily informed by the crime, the ongoing nature of the relationship is forward looking and both parties are electing to play some ongoing role in each other’s lives.

Indeed, a number of victim participants formed parenting type relationships with the offender. Adam, for example, became a type of father figure to Keisha. Donny became like a son to Maria. Lizette watched over Gamal’s wellbeing. Tamara expected that James would join her family when

he was released. In these cases, the dyadic forgiveness took on a quality of unconditional acceptance. Victim participants did not minimize or forget what the offender did to their loved ones or their own lives. Rather, with the shift in meaning about both the crime and the offender, victim participants carved out a new place in their lives for the offender and for the meaningfulness of their relationship.

DYADIC FORGIVENESS AND THE SENSE OF INJUSTICE

Wenzel and Okimoto (2010) assert that the sense of injustice experienced by victims of crime refers to the fact that societal values presumed to be shared have been profoundly violated. Those values are personified by the concern for the welfare of others, a communally understood moral standard that tempers self-centeredness and instills safety. Wenzel and Okimoto maintain that any response to crime, such as a VOD, must restore those values through re-establishing the social consensus with the offender about the values violated. In dyadic forgiveness, the social consensus is restored by the offender's behavior and the victim's experience of the offender during the dialogue. Again, the offender's verbal and affective expression of accountability to the victim for what the offender did and took from the victim helps show the victim that the offender genuinely regrets his behavior. In many cases, the victim may even be able to forgive the offender explicitly or implicitly but the offender cannot forgive himself for the violation.

Wenzel and Okimoto (2010) hypothesize that forgiveness is motivated by more than a decision or an emotional response but is also an attempt to restore a sense of justice based on trust in a consensus with the offender about shared values. Victim participants saw that offenders were remorseful, shared information fully in an effort to help the victim, gave credible explanations for their behavior, wanted to give and repair what they could, cared about them, heard them fully, responded to their needs, and took accountability for the pain they caused. Although this study did not address directly the issue of justice, victim participants' responses to offenders who fully held themselves responsible for the crime suggest that victims felt that they were closer to being on the same page with offenders morally. Their anger receded and even disappeared. They felt safe again. Indeed, they responded to offenders as human beings rather than monsters but, more importantly, victim participants reinstated offenders as moral citizens in a variety of different ways. Offenders moved from being "other" in victim participants' eyes to human beings who had worth, who, like themselves, had made bad mistakes and for whom they wanted a better future.

THE PROJECT'S LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this project was to explicate dyadic forgiveness in victim offender dialogue (VOD), also called victim offender mediated dialogue (VOMD), by studying behaviorally implicit forgiveness and the process of victim and offender shifts in energy from the time of the crime through the restorative dialogue. Because dyadic forgiveness is a bilateral process that creates change in both victim and offender as a result of their impact on each other (Umbreit and Armour, 2010), the findings from the qualitative study are limited. They reflect only the voice of victim participants. Consequently, information about energy shifts in offenders is incomplete and available only through participants' reports about offenders. Likewise, the facilitator's voice as observer and witness to the dyadic engagement between victim and offender, their shifts, and the pain transformation is missing. Over 85 percent of the victim participants were White/Caucasian. Moreover, the accounts of what happened in the dialogue process are retrospective. In some cases, the dialogues happened years ago. Indeed, 30 percent of dialogues occurred before 2000. Consequently, the accuracy and completeness of the accounts are open to question. Finally, there was no member checking of the researchers' interpretations of victim participants' stories or the researchers' analysis of the cases.

There are some similar limitations in the quantitative study. For example, 75 percent of the victim participants were White. The scope of the study was regional, which, along with the issue of random sampling, raises questions about representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the results. Moreover there was no control group.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Dyadic forgiveness as a bilateral process is an important addition to the field of forgiveness research. Heretofore, studies have concentrated on close relationships and the victim's unitary decision to forgive. Interaction between the person responsible for the harm and the person harmed has not been the focus of inquiries. Although it might be ideal, in addition to interviews, to observe victim-offender interaction directly, this project contributed beginning theory about the process of dyadic forgiveness, particularly in restorative justice practices. A major part of the contribution was the focus on emotional energy shifts as manifestations of movement from negatively to positively charged energy. Making energy shifts instead of verbally explicit claims (e.g. "I forgave him"), the language for dyadic forgiveness recognizes its reality yet respects the out-of-the-way status of forgiveness in restorative justice. It also allows its implicit nature to be identified and examined.

Besides its contribution to forgiveness research, dyadic forgiveness has application to many other areas. For example, mental health providers commonly work with clients who struggle with accumulated injuries, or with couples or family relationships where harm and wrongdoing remain unresolved and stuck. Restorative justice interventions have appeal beyond the criminal justice context and could be used to help generate energy shifts as documented in the qualitative study. Besides possible micro-level use, dyadic forgiveness has much to offer international conflict, which is frequently plagued by monsterizing the “other,” strong feelings of vengefulness, massive mistrust, and a lack of openness to seeing and hearing something different from what is believed. The same dynamics color relationships between community members and law enforcement in the United States. Interventions such as VOD that foster, as shown in this project, the conditions for dyadic forgiveness might provide possible avenues for moving or even transforming energy that is stuck or blocked.

Future research should focus on testing the theoretical model of dyadic forgiveness in a variety of different contexts. It should also include the voices of offenders and facilitators. Indeed, the shifts in energy for offenders may be quite different than for victims. Including the facilitator’s perspective would provide eye-witness accounts about what occurs between parties, which would help validate or propose changes to the process documented by the qualitative study.

CONCLUSION

This project proposed and tested a model of dyadic forgiveness by studying VOD, a restorative justice program for victims and offenders of severely violent crime. Guided by forgiveness theory, as proposed by Worthington and Wade (1999), the project examined victim participants’ movement in the aftermath of crime from “unforgiveness” as manifested by negatively charged energy to feeling unburdened as manifested by positively charged energy. The movement involved a series of phases that included blocked energy as a result of the crime’s impact, directed energy after a decision to pursue a VOD, channeled energy during preparation, and changed energy after engagement in a dyadic dialogue with the offender.

Strong energy shifts were evident for both victim and offender in the quantitative study results and clearly and specifically identified by victims in the quantitative study. A beginning model of dyadic forgiveness was proposed after a review of archival materials and applied in analyzing victim participant stories in the qualitative study. Findings from a cross-case analysis of the victim participant stories and analyses were used to

rework and dimensionalize the original model. Although many of the concepts identified for the beginning model were substantiated by the victim participant accounts, their narratives helped refine the model and added depth and understanding. The narratives also gave meaning to the construct of dyadic forgiveness so that its dimensions could become more visible.

Dyadic forgiveness is a much needed construct in a world rocked by trauma, victimization, gross inequities, and violence. Most of the available interventions for healing are focused on the individual and intrapsychic change, which does little to repair the violations to relationships and the glue that holds us together in ways that redeem our belonging to and need for each other. Attention to dyadic forgiveness and the bilateral process it requires is an antidote to the historically individualized focus on forgiveness. It also offers victims and offenders, persons hurt by wrongdoing and those responsible for the wrongdoing, a courageous challenge, a promising opportunity, and a way beyond the pain and torment that distorts our love for each other, diminishes our hope, destroys our vital connections with one another, and erodes the trust in relationships that are necessary for our mutual survival. The journey back truly can only be done together.

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