
Differentiation of Self and the Process of Forgiveness: A Clinical Perspective for Couple and Family Therapy

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In this article we explore the role of differentiation of self in facilitating forgiveness in the context of couple and family relationships. Differentiation is defined from the Bowen perspective as the ability to connect with others without being excessively emotionally reactive to the ebb and flow inherent in all significant relationships (being able to connect to others yet also being able to self-regulate). Forgiveness is described as the releasing of an emotional injury via a complex psychological and relational process that is less an act of will than a discovery or possibility through understanding and empathy. Differentiation of self is related to emotional intelligence and empathy. The developmental and relational benefits of such are illustrated and discussed. A rationale for viewing differentiation and forgiveness in a contextual, historical, and relational attachment paradigm is suggested. Relevant clinical cases illustrate the dynamics of differentiation and forgiveness as discovery in the context of an understanding and empathic relational environment.

Keywords: differentiation, forgiveness, empathy, emotional intelligence, attachment theory, couple and family therapy

In an *Esquire* magazine interview with Michelle Obama's brother, college basketball coach Craig Robinson shared this story. Twenty years ago his sister asked Robinson to play a game of pickup basketball with Barack Obama. Michelle Robinson had recently begun to date Obama and wanted her brother's assessment of him. Robinson reported that he learned a great deal about Obama from their first game together. He stated that Obama was a quietly confident team player. He passed the

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ball when he should have passed, and he took the shot when he should have taken it. Obama did not try to impress Robinson by constantly passing the ball to him just because he was dating his sister. Robinson reported that he gave his sister a favorable review of Obama's character (Klosterman, 2009).

Robinson's impressions of Obama from that pickup basketball game provide a constructive and practical illustration for understanding the concept of differentiation of self. Differentiation involves managing anxiety and retaining one's individuality while remaining in a significant and effectual relationship with others.

The role of differentiation in understanding system dynamics and family relationships has been well documented by the seminal work of Murray Bowen (1978). The concept of differentiation was a cornerstone of his theory. Bowen advocated that the degree of anxiety along with the degree of integration of the self were crucial aspects in understanding family relationships.

The essence of differentiation is the ability to connect with others without being excessively emotionally reactive to the ebb and flow inherent in all significant relationships. The more highly differentiated person stays connected without overly accommodating significant others or abandoning them when relational tensions arise. The more differentiated person does not deny authentic dependency needs, but does not depend excessively on others for acceptance and approval or solicit dependency from others. The less differentiated person seeks either to please or unduly accommodate significant others or to distance from them emotionally. The more highly differentiated individual can be both autonomous and relationally connected without being overwhelmed by emotion when relationships become strained.

Feminists have critiqued the split between autonomy and dependency that is often fostered via gender bias in our culture. Lerner (1988), for example, states:

Dependency needs are a universal aspect of human experience. The struggle to achieve a healthy integration of passive-dependency longings and active autonomous strivings constitutes a life-long developmental task for both men and women. Yet despite such universality, the very word *dependency* is more frequently associated with the female sex. Indeed, dependency, like passivity, has been considered the very hallmark of femininity (p. 156).

Lerner implies that differentiation should not be identified solely with autonomy for either sex, but with a balanced view of self that allows for a context of appropriate expression of dependency and autonomy without undue anxiety.

Kerr and Bowen (1988) suggest that individuality and togetherness are biologically rooted counterbalancing life forces. There is a clear equilibrium between autonomy and connectedness analogous to what Angyal (1965) referred to as autonomy (self-regulation, governing and expansion) interacting with homonomy (being connected to and perceived as significant to others). The individuated autonomous person still needs 'to mean something to someone else' (Angyal, 1965, p. 18). In other words, the more highly differentiated person maintains his or her autonomy while also being appreciably connected to others.

According to Bowen (1978), the more highly differentiated person has the ability to separate emotion from cognition — feelings from thinking. This allows the person to stay connected without being reactive. Friedman (1985) suggests that

such separation is about being able to remain playful versus being overly serious or anxiously helpful. Schnarch (1991) contends that it is about remaining in emotional contact with significant others while retaining the ability to function autonomously. Highly differentiated individuals possess what has been called emotional intelligence, which involves inner knowledge and appreciation of one's own emotions, while simultaneously recognising and empathising with the emotions of others. (Goleman, 1995).

Highly differentiated individuals understand that human behaviour is complex and results from many variables rather than one single cause. They have learned not to take human frailty and inappropriate human behaviour personally. This helps to insulate them from emotional reactivity and to avoid detrimental conformity, upheaval, control struggles, or emotional estrangement (Beavers, 1985).

Empirical findings demonstrate support for Bowen's theoretical concept differentiation of self. For example, Skowron & Friedlander (1998) reported that 609 adults participated in a series of three studies, in which higher levels of differentiation — reflecting less emotional reactivity, emotional cut-off, and fusion with others — predicted lower chronic anxiety, better psychological adjustment, and greater marital satisfaction. In addition, Skowron, Wester and Azen (2004) found that for college students differentiation of self partially mediated the effects of academic and financial stress and exerted a direct influence on their adjustment.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods a 5-year longitudinal study conducted by Klever (2003) found that higher levels of intergenerational fusion correlated with higher levels of nuclear family symptomology. Congruent with Klever's findings a study reported by Murray, Daniels, and Murray (2006) found that more severe symptoms of fibromyalgia were significantly associated with higher levels of perceived stress, lower levels of differentiation of self and higher levels of emotional cut-off.

According to a review by Solomon, Dekel, Zerach, and Horesh (2009), empirical findings also indicated that more highly differentiated individuals experience lower levels of avoidant and intrusive thoughts, general psychiatric distress, behavioural dysfunctions, trait anxiety, and depression than are experienced by those who are not highly differentiated. They suggest that these findings support Bowen's claim of an inverse relationship between chronic anxiety and differentiation. Elevated levels of anxiety inhibit poorly differentiated persons from effectively coping with stressful events and render them more at risk for psychological and relational problems. It appears that less differentiated individuals have difficulty tolerating the anxiety of ambivalence, which is inherent in all significant relationships. This would inevitably impede the forgiveness process.

Beavers (1985) suggests that because human beings are limited and finite, a social role of either absolute power or helplessness prohibits many of the needed satisfactions to be found in human encounters. Highly differentiated persons do not take a one up or one down position with those with whom they interact. They recognise that human perception and discernment are subjective and that no person possesses the unchallengeable truth. Such individuals, according to Beavers (1985), possess an 'abiding uncertainty' that allows them to doubt, pose questions, and seek solutions rather than cast blame. Higher levels of differentiation, therefore, involve

the ability to tolerate ambivalence with an understanding that human differences, frailty, weakness and imperfection need not be viewed as evil or perversity.

Given such an understanding of differentiation, it is plausible that the forgiveness process would be enhanced in significant relationships where a higher degree of differentiation is evident and impeded when differentiation is weaker. We view differentiation of self as a fluid concept that has plasticity, much as the brain possesses plasticity and is thus pliable, variable or adaptable. We believe that differentiation of self is not stagnant, inert or static but open to growth, maturation and further development when growth conditions are prevalent, which is a divergence from Bowen who saw that functional differentiation is plastic and can shift temporarily in response to the emotional climate while basic differentiation is more embedded in intergenerational biological patterns and is thus more difficult to shift. We concur with Bowen that differentiation of self can never be fully or completely achieved for any individual, however higher levels of differentiation clearly allow more self and other acceptance, which encompasses the heart of a forgiveness process. We hold the view that forgiveness can be enhanced when differentiation is ameliorated via a therapeutic clinical context of corrective emotional/relational experiences. In the following we introduce clinical cases in which forgiveness was enhanced by therapeutically augmenting weaker levels of differentiation and clearly impeded when differentiation was not improved.

The Significance of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the act of releasing a perceived wrongdoing, mistake or oversight. It overcomes hostilities and resentments through a process of personal and relational healing that enhances differentiation and intimacy. Walrond-Skinner (1998) suggested that forgiveness enables conflicted intimate relationships to be renewed because the process itself has a restorative and salutary impact. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1998) declared that 'forgiveness is an absolute necessity for continued human existence' (p. xiii). Martin Luther King Jr. (2010) echoed this sentiment when he declared, 'He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love ... Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning' (pp.44-45).

Hargrave and Sells (1997) and Sells and Hargrave (1998), as well as McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen (2000), found evidence for the salutary effects of forgiveness for difficulties that originate from anger, anxiety, depression, family-of-origin issues, sexual abuse and compulsions, personality disorders, guilt, drug abuse, broken marital relationships, and mental health in general.

Some earlier studies cited by McCullough et al. (2000) linked forgiveness and moral development. More recent studies have found significant positive effects of forgiveness training for a variety of psychosocial factors. These effects include less anger, fewer feelings of hurt, malice, and estrangement, reduced hypertension, and reduced physical symptoms of stress. These studies suggest that skills-based forgiveness training may prove effective in reducing anger as a coping style and in reducing perceived stress and physical symptoms. This benefit would assist immune and cardiovascular functioning in daily living and reinforce the *bodymind* connection.

(Harris, Luskin, Benisovich, Standard, Bruning, Evans & Thoresen, 2006; Luskin, Ginzburg, & Thoresen, 2005; Tibbits, Ellis, Piramelli, Luskin, & Lukman, 2006).

In a recent review of the forgiveness literature, Legaree, Turner and Lollis (2007) propose three primary dimensions through which therapists might understand forgiveness. The first dimension considers whether forgiveness is *essential*, and thus helpful. The second dimension asks whether forgiveness is an *intentional* (willed) decision, and the third dimension examines the *benefits* of forgiveness. In their concluding comments they raise an important ethical question: How can the therapist be responsible (differentiated) to his or her own position on forgiveness, yet also be sensitive to the client's values, ideals and ethics regarding forgiveness?

Even well differentiated persons are imperfect human beings. The reality is that every individual faces the need to be forgiven and to forgive. Thus therapists and clients alike must determine their own position on forgiveness. We believe and propose that when individuals can respond to the inevitable ups and downs of relationship with a greater degree of differentiation between thoughts and feelings, between self and other, and are able to manage anxiety and retain their individuality, they will in essence be better able to forgive and accept forgiveness.

Differentiation and Forgiveness as Process

Hargrave (1994) referenced the work of Boszormenyi-Nagy in conceptualising forgiveness from a relational/contextual perspective. From such a perspective, issues of trust and justice are believed to be critical concepts of a 'relational ethic' that allows family members to experience relationships as reciprocal, balanced, and trustworthy. When justice and trust issues are violated in families, the victims are left with the painful realisation that the persons on whom they are most dependent cannot be fully trusted. Such experiences lead to feelings of rage and shame, which in turn lead to behaviours of over-control or chaos. The work of forgiveness offers an opportunity to restore balance, release blame, and promote reconciliation.

An injury that stimulates a high reaction often has reference points in the person's history. As therapists we seek to uncover and reveal the real and imagined injuries, as well as the key reference points for those injuries in the injured person's history.

The process of forgiveness includes a willingness to explore and embrace the negative emotions that invariably are involved in our relational wounds and wounding, particularly the emotion of shame. Karen (2001) described this process poignantly in the context of a parent-child relationship:

The child does something that irks the parent. He may be fussing or tantrummy or just extremely annoying, as children can be; often it's the child's anger that the parent cannot tolerate. But whatever the cause, the parent loses his temper, goes into a rage, perhaps becomes physically violent. Now the parent feels guilty. He wants to erase what's just happened. He wants to be forgiven. But he cannot accept responsibility or blame. It will make him too *ashamed*, too terrible about himself. So he doesn't fully soften; he doesn't relocate his love. He doesn't say to himself, 'Oh my God, I've been a monster to this little person I love, and now I want to do everything I can — own up, apologise, soothe — to nurse this sobbing child back to repair. This avenue feels closed to him. (pp. 84–85)

Such shame and guilt may prompt parents towards less differentiation with their children, thus revealing the fusion in their relationship, where they struggle to separate their emotional distress from their values as a parent. A cycle can occur in which the parent attempts to repair the relationship by giving into demands until the parent is pushed to breaking point and repeats the original injury. This is an example of fusion or the lack of differentiation.

Hill (2010) references the clinical scenario of a male client who struggled for years with alcoholism and reported how difficult it was for him to ask for his wife's forgiveness, even when he wanted to do so and strongly believed that forgiveness would be granted. When the client spoke of the detrimental consequences of his drinking and his guilt for disappointing and hurting his wife, he reported strong feelings of shame. It became increasingly clear that his difficulty was not in asking for forgiveness per se, but in reawakening and re-experiencing the shame that the request for forgiveness invariably triggered. Relational healing came when he became able to acknowledge his shame via increased functional differentiation (an enhanced ability to separate the emotion of shame from his thinking/being and subsequent behaviour). With the help of his therapist he discovered that he did not have to be ontologically defined or controlled by the emotion of shame. The therapist sought to ask him critical existential questions to help him separate his emotions from his principles and thus think about what he truly wished to do about the different messages of each. This realisation allowed him to ask directly for his wife's forgiveness. This uncomfortable yet necessary process allowed him to rediscover and reestablish relational trust and reciprocity with his wife.

The move toward asking for forgiveness requires the courage to re-experience the shame, in a context where the process is healing and beneficial rather than toxic. The inability to acknowledge shame or to differentiate the emotion from the person is what makes the shame toxic. Shame that is openly expressed facilitates the discovery of wholeness and relational healing, which is the embodiment of forgiveness. Transparent vulnerability enhanced by differentiation frees people to share more deeply. This is true not only for intimate partners, but also for parents who have said or done hurtful things to their children.

Acknowledging the wrong and facing the shame may be agonising, but the benefits are life giving. Those who are courageous enough to engage deeply in the process of forgiveness discover the agony and the ecstasy of more intimate relationships. Appropriate vulnerability is an asset to establishing intimacy, not a liability.

Writing from a sociological perspective, Tavuchis (1991) advanced this observation. He suggested that apology is always laborious and painful, yet when accomplished it becomes a transforming miraculous gift and 'the more so because the gesture itself reiterates the reality of the offense while superseding it' (p. 8). This is a wonderful example of the well differentiated, forgiving and forgiven individual.

Forgiveness/Differentiation as Discovery via Empathy

Regardless of how forgiveness is defined, it is a concept that conveys complex cognitive, emotional, and relational processes. Karen (2001) suggests that one critical element is that of agency. Does an individual possess authority over his or her actions

related to the ability to forgive? One's capacity or ability to forgive may reveal one's willingness or ability to recognise and accept one's own broken humanity and the broken humanity of another. The better differentiated individual embraces his or her own vulnerabilities as well as those of others. However, to suggest that one can simply will oneself to forgive another does not do justice to the complexities of human beings and to the relationships or differentiation of self. Karen (2001) declares, 'When forgiveness becomes the battle cry of moral and emotional health, we are no longer respectful of people's wounds and people's struggles' (p. 14).

Patton (1985) embraces the complexity of forgiveness by suggesting that forgiveness is not an act but a process of discovery. Patton declared, 'human forgiveness is not doing something but discovering something — that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them' (p. 16). The process of forgiveness, as Worthington (1998) suggests, requires the humility to see oneself as equally as fallible and needy as one's offender. Such cognitive and affective empathy, which were central to differentiation, form the core wisdom needed to embrace and discover both our shared humanity and forgiveness.

A male client reported being angry when his wife got a speeding ticket as she raced to get a babysitter less than a mile from their home. They had been hanging wallpaper and their toddler needed attention while they were trying to finish what had become a frustrating project. When the therapist confirmed the hypothesis that her rush to get back was an effort to assist him, he became much more empathic and understanding. She became more empathic of his anger when she realised that he became anxious because her late return ignited a fear that she had been in an accident. Understanding the origin and context of each other's distress, which Bowen theory stresses through seeing one's own part in the emotional upset via cognitive and affective empathy (differentiation) thus fostered relational healing (Hill, 2010).

An underlying understanding and affirmation of differentiation is echoed in Kurtz and Kercham (1992) when they declared:

Uniting these experiences is the discovery of commonality — the sense of having rejoined the human community — for both revelations involve finding a new relationship with 'other'. Our need for forgiveness is thus profound, for it is the experience of being forgiven that pulls us out of the stagnating mire of self-centered focus on our own pain and pushes us back into the not-necessarily-pure but at least circulating stream of community and commonality (pp. 218–219).

A powerful connection appears to exist between the experience of being forgiven and one's capacity to forgive. Patton (1985) embraced this view when he proposed:

... forgiveness is discovered not in trying to forgive, or in being instructed about the process of forgiveness, but in the larger process of reconciliation which is concretely expressed in human life through overcoming one's shame and discovering who one is beyond the experience of injury and brokenness. The person who concentrates on whether he or she can forgive is unlikely to do so (p. 148).

Without the ability to comprehend or recognise emotional needs in others, which is the essence of empathy and differentiation, caring and compassion become thwarted or stalled. Indeed, Goleman (1995) asserted that the root of emotional intelligence lies in one's empathic ability. Empathy involves the ability to read

another's feelings via non-verbal cues: tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, posture, and the like. Goleman cites research that reported the benefits of being able to read accurately the feelings of others via non-verbal channels. These benefits included better emotional adjustment and stability, more popularity, more sociability, and more sensitivity.

Empathy requires and develops self-awareness and lies at the heart of higher levels of differentiation. The more aware and discerning one is toward his or her personal emotions, the more skilled one is in reading and responding to the emotions of another. Goleman (1995) declared that 'failure to register another's feelings is a major deficit in emotional intelligence, and a tragic failing in what it means to be human. For all rapport, the root of caring, stems from emotional attunement, from the capacity for empathy' (p. 96).

This perspective is also supported by the work of Gottman and DeClaire (1998), who assert that emotional intelligence is important to a child's overall development. Indeed, they suggest that emotional intelligence is a better predictor of how children will do in life than almost anything else. They found evidence that emotionally intelligent children can soothe and calm themselves more effectively, have higher academic achievement scores in math and reading, have fewer behaviour problems, and have better physical health and more meaningful relationships with people in general. They also report that emotional intelligence appears to be a buffer against certain types of stress. Parental empathy and attunement (emotional synchronicity/differentiation) play an essential role in a child's learning to monitor his or her emotions and to recognise and respond to the emotions of others.

From a therapeutic standpoint, empathic attachment processes can help to facilitate healing in adult relationships. For example, Kohut (1984) spoke of the need for 'corrective emotional experiences' in the therapy context where empathic mirroring is experienced, barriers of shame are diminished, self-soothing is increased, and healing begins to occur. A more accurate description would be 'corrective *relational* experiences' that have emotional, cognitive, and relational consequences. Healing in each dimension would thus promote increased differentiation and the corresponding empathic capacity to discover forgiveness as given and received. Empathy increases differentiation thus providing the catalyst for experiencing forgiveness as discovery.

Worthington (1998) references an incident in the life of Corrie Ten Boom that aptly illustrates this dynamic. Ten Boom and her family experienced the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. She was the sole survivor from her family, and following the war toured the world sharing a message of forgiveness. On one occasion, following her lecture on forgiveness, she encountered an old man who confessed to being a guard in one of the prison camps. He extended his hand and asked Ten Boom for forgiveness on behalf of those he had harmed. She recognised the man as one of the guards where she had been a prisoner.

Ten Boom's first reaction was rage and resentment. She thought of her sister who had died in the camp. How could she dismiss Betsie's slow horrible death with a mere handshake? Ten Boom then had a different reaction, prompted by a reflective and empathic internal dialogue. This differentiation process prompted her to recognise and acknowledge her own humanity and need for forgiveness, which she had refer-

enced in her lecture. She reported that she could not in good conscience withhold her forgiveness. She took his extended hand and said in complete sincerity, 'I forgive you, brother, with all my heart' (Ten Boom & Buckingham, 1974, p. 57). Via empathy and humility, which is at the heart of differentiation, Ten Boom was able to extend forgiveness to the former prison guard.

Karen (2001) reminds us that the need to forgive is an authentic aspect of being human, but we are not always willing to forgive because doing so requires feeling painful emotions or uncovering painful memories. There may be complicated connections with other painful emotions and events. In the previous example, Ten Boom had to separate (differentiate) forgiveness from the fear of betraying her sister by forgiving.

We may need to be reminded of the importance and benefits of forgiveness. To provide corrective relational and emotional experiences would likely provide the renewed relational and empathic context for anxiety reduction and the unfolding discovery of forgiveness for self and other. However, from a clinical perspective, to focus on forgiveness as the most critical issue or to push family members to adopt an intentional or immediate forgiveness stance would meet with resistance at their initial level of emotional functioning/differentiation.

This is congruent with Bowen's idea of differentiation of self, which he suggested was related to emotional functioning and maturity. In fact, Bowen (1978) believed that parents can project their emotional immaturity onto their children and that 'the child who is the object of the projection is the one most emotionally attached to the parent, and the one who ends up with a lower level of differentiation' (p. 477). Thus, the issue is not emotional attachment per se but the nature or quality of that attachment. As Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) have advocated, healthy or secure parent/child attachment does not promote dependency, but autonomy, which is also critical for increased differentiation of self.

Ambivalence and Empathy in Relationship to Forgiveness and Differentiation

For persons who have become estranged, forgiveness is one of the most critical processes for facilitating restored relational and emotional well-being. Yet forgiveness is not a simple issue of 'will power' or merely 'letting go' but a complex process that can usher in a deep healing process within and among persons.

Bringing awareness of the forgiveness process into the therapeutic environment is part of the therapeutic process in general. Forgiveness is an essential element in human relationships regardless of context. In addressing the attributes of healthy couples, Beavers (1985) suggested that when relational mistakes are inevitably made, healthy couples do not translate obvious human frailty and imperfections into evil and perversity. This allows couples to disagree and blunder without fear of isolation or abandonment.

More highly differentiated individuals understand that human beings make mistakes. The truly important issue is not whether errors will be made, but how families cope with them when they occur. The issue of emotional intelligence and the ability to bring an empathic understanding are critical and, as Beavers (1985) suggested, a tolerance for ambivalence is essential. He asserted that respect for

ambivalence in family members is foundational for understanding and resolving intimate relationship conflicts. Beavers (1985) declared:

It is both useful and reassuring to know that people are indeed ambivalent about anything that is finite and yet needed — such as loved ones, jobs, support systems. Ambivalence can be resolved but not eliminated. Healthy couples know this and tolerate outbursts of bad feelings from spouse and children without using such negative experiences to 'prove' evil intent. (p. 71)

Since human imperfection is a given, the experience of ambivalence is normal and expected in intimate relationships. With this understanding, empathy and differentiation become essential for facilitating a process of forgiveness. Thus, therapists who work with family members to facilitate a more well differentiated and empathic relational environment in which ambivalence is openly acknowledged and respected will more likely enhance the discovery of forgiveness (Hill, 2001).

Empathy, Differentiation and Forgiveness as Process

In addressing the issue of forgiveness as process in marital and family therapy, Coleman (1998) and Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder (2000) suggested two different yet similar models for facilitating forgiveness. The importance of attending to and enhancing differentiation and empathic relational experiences and understandings were implied in both models.

Coleman (1998) declared that all hurts involve loss and described three types of loss: (1) loss of love by death or breakup, (2) loss of self-esteem, and (3) loss of control or influence. The forgiveness process begins when the person is able to identify the specific loss that has occurred. The second phase of this process of forgiveness involves confronting the one who injured you in order 'to confirm that you were deeply hurt and to make clear that the offense cannot be ignored' (p. 89). Thus, the process of forgiveness will be different for each person all starting from a different place on the differentiation-of-self continuum.

Colman (1998) described the third phase as wrestling with the question 'why' in order to make sense of the suffering. This often encompasses a dialogue between the offending party and the injured party. It is in this dialogue that critical differentiated empathic experiences can be facilitated to augment the forgiveness as discovery process. Note the implications for differentiation of self in Coleman's comments:

The dialogue to understanding sometimes reveals to the injured person that he or she too was hurtful and played a role in the relationship problem that led to his or her being deeply hurt by the other family member. Such a discovery does not excuse the behaviour of the injurer, however. But it might make the injured party a bit more understanding and lead to a better idea of what changes each party needs to make to heal the relationship. (p. 91)

The fourth phase in Coleman's (1998) model was forgiving, which he described as renewing trust in the relationship. The final phase, letting go of the pain of resentment, he described as an arduous process that will eventually lead to discovering new possibilities for the relationship as a direct result of the suffering.

In a similar vein, Gordon et al. (2000) conceptualised forgiveness as a response to interpersonal trauma. They viewed forgiveness as emerging in stages in the context of dealing with the trauma. Stage one concerned the impact or consequences of the trauma. Stage two encompassed the search for meaning and new understanding of self and other in relationship. Stage three involved progressing with one's life with a renewed set of relationship beliefs.

Embedded in both of these models is an implicit understanding and appreciation of the necessity for the grief and loss created by injury or trauma to be confronted if forgiveness is to be discovered. In addition, a corrective and more differentiated empathic relational experience between the injured parties is crucial for facilitating relational healing and forgiveness. This process can only be facilitated in a therapeutic context where the parties feel safe and secure enough to explore their relationship amid the grief and loss created by the violation (Hill, 2010).

Enhancing Forgiveness via Differentiation

Providing a therapeutic environment where personal histories can be explored, injuries and wounds shared, and differentiation and empathy enhanced can usher in a resolution process that facilitates forgiveness. Hearing the *experience* of the offending person is as important as hearing the story of the offended person. Hurts and injuries on both sides need to be shared and heard in an empathic context that focuses on the themes of common humanity that emerge in the sharing. Only in this way can reciprocal emotional attunement and enhanced differentiation be fostered and experienced. The therapist provides a holding environment for the intensity of the injury, assisting the person who is injured to reformulate that experience within a more differentiated internal dialogue, thus ushering in a greater chance of justly hearing the other as well as being heard.

For example, Hill (2001) references a female client who forgot to feed the dogs one morning and called her husband during his rather rushed lunch hour for his assistance in feeding them. When her husband responded to her request with obvious irritation, she was hurt. The therapist, seeking to enhance differentiation, suggested that perhaps the husband examine his irritation in the context of the overall situation, which led the husband to acknowledge that his irritation was more about his unexpected inconvenience than frustration with her. In the context of recognising her husband's individuality and empathising with his inconvenience, she was able to further differentiate, and thus let it go and forgive. Her husband was also assisted with his own empathic response when he was able to acknowledge directly to her that he understood how his comments made in frustration were deemed hurtful by his wife, who already felt annoyed with herself for forgetting to feed the dogs and disliked having to call her husband. When each spouse had an opportunity to touch the other's common humanity (via enhanced differentiation), both were more open to relational healing and forgiveness.

An additional clinical case further illustrates how enhanced differentiation can foster the forgiveness process. A middle-aged man came home stressed by work-related issues and sought comfort in a cold glass of milk. He discovered that only about an ounce of milk was left in the milk container. He became angry and threw

the container across the kitchen, spilling the milk onto the floor. His wife walked into the kitchen, curious about the upheaval. He promptly scolded her for not purchasing an adequate supply of milk. Normally this interaction would have escalated into an all-out uproar. She would have been incensed by his behaviour and accusation and defended herself. However, their previous work in therapy yielded a much more differentiated alternative response on her part, which enabled them to discover a deeper understanding and respect for self and other.

Rather than defend herself, his wife responded with an observation/inquiry, 'It seems to me that there is something else going on that doesn't have to do with "Got milk"? What's bothering you? Did something happen at work?' He was startled by her clearly differentiated and caring response and began to share with her about his day. An unpleasant encounter with his supervisor had left him feeling frustrated, devalued, and angry. His misplaced projection and indignation regarding the milk was the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back. He subsequently acknowledged and apologised for his tantrum and asked for her forgiveness while cleaning up the spilled milk.

As a result, they had a helpful and meaningful conversation that was mutually and relationally beneficial. She felt satisfaction in her differentiated response by staying calm under attack, thus separating thinking and feeling. As she came to understand his day and to empathise with his distress, she became more amenable to forgiving his tantrum. He found her clearly differentiated empathy and understanding inviting, allowing him to be more authentic and open in sharing his feelings created by the distressing work experience. Thus, they discovered in each other's differentiated responses a genuinely human connection that strengthened their bond and enhanced their level of intimacy (Hill, 2010).

Part of the work of differentiation requires identifying the driving forces in one's behaviour through reflection, rather than acting out the emotional residue from other events. The wife's differentiation may invite the husband to engage his 'observing ego' to modulate his emotional reactivity before he acts out in another sequence of events.

Of course, facilitating forgiveness is much easier when the hurts are not overwhelming or deep. The scenario of a husband who has an affair with his wife's best friend is more problematic. Some hurts run so deep that healing and forgiveness take much more time, effort, and patience. The process may have some similarities, but the intensity and the outcome may be radically different.

Hill (2010) reported consulting on a case in which a middle-aged husband, when confronted by his wife about an unexplained hotel charge on their credit card, acknowledged that he had been having an affair. He had never had an affair in the 20 years of their marriage. His father had died six months prior to the affair. He felt noxious shame and expressed deep regret. Her pain, loss, and sense of betrayal were acute and understandable. He asked her to forgive him, but it was not an easy process for either of them.

It was only when she heard the context of her husband's grief in light of his family history that she was able to move toward the forgiveness process. She learned that when his father died unexpectedly (his first major family loss), he felt emotionally abandoned. He sought comfort for his grief outside his marriage, as he had

often done when he felt hurt or abandoned as a child. In the context of his family of origin, he had learned that comfort is not found within the family. When his wife saw his sense of shame and his pain related to his unresolved grief in this context, she was able to empathise with him in a new way. Subsequently, she was comforted by understanding that what had happened was more about him and his history than about her failure as a wife. Thus, she was able to embrace his humanity and move toward forgiveness. Her insight and forgiving stance reflected an enhanced/higher level of differentiation of self.

He was able to acknowledge his shame and empathise with her pain. He came to understand how she had experienced the hurt as a statement about her worth and value as a person and as a wife. Consequently, they touched each other's shared humanity (via increased differentiation) in ways that enhanced their empathy as well as intimacy, facilitating forgiveness.

Common sense humanity is at the heart of differentiation of self where mutual respect seems warranted. The word 'respect' implies a re-visioning process — to see someone in a different (more differentiated) light and gain a new perspective. This occurred for a client who discovered forgiveness by taking such a differentiated view, awakening empathy even though the offending party was not available for reconciliation. In this case, a woman in her late thirties was distraught by the sudden death of her mother. She had been alienated from her mother for many years and had always hoped there would be reconciliation in their future. The woman's mother had been an alcoholic who neglected and eventually abandoned her 8-year-old daughter. The daughter grew up believing that her abandonment was because she was not lovable. Now, the hope of any measure of reconciliation had died with her mother.

Upon the suggestion of her therapist, the daughter began to investigate the details of her mother's life from childhood. Her grief was ameliorated after discovering from relatives the hardships that her mother had endured during her childhood and early adult years. Slowly, through empathy with her mother's life circumstances, the young woman began to respect (the re-visioning of improved differentiation), to understand and to accept her mother. She came to realise that her mother had probably done the best she could, given her own horrific history of abuse and neglect. Her mother had not fully understood the depth of her own pain or the pain she had caused her daughter. The daughter realised that her mother had not neglected or abandoned her because of some innate flaw or inadequacy in her. Through increased differentiation, understanding, and empathy, she was able to embrace their common humanity and begin the forgiveness/healing process.

The authors of this article suggest that the concept of differentiation of self implies that relational healing and forgiveness emerge on the common ground of shared and flawed human experiences. One cannot rationalise behaviours that violate important intimate boundaries or intentionally injure with harsh words or hurtful deeds. However, family therapists and mental health providers who stress an empathic and more differentiated understanding of the historical context of persons can enhance a shared human connection within relationship systems. From this humane and enhanced differentiated perspective, forgiveness can be more readily discovered within and between persons.

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