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Forgiveness of Adult Children Toward Their Alcoholic Parents

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Children raised in homes with alcohol dependence often experience relational transgressions at the hands of their alcoholic parents. While much research has been dedicated to the exploration of the lasting effects of parental alcoholism on children into adulthood, little focus has been given to the presence of forgiveness in these relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations for (un)forgiveness, communication of forgiveness, and relational consequences of (un)forgiveness of adult children toward their alcoholic parents. Twenty participants shared their stories of growing up with an alcoholic parent and described their experiences with (un)forgiveness. Findings show that participants were motivated to forgive their parents as a result of reframing, desire for personal well-being, faith, and the recovery of the alcoholic. The most common strategy for forgiveness expression was indirect tactics, followed by direct and semi-direct expression. Findings and implications for practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: ACOAs; Adult Children of Alcoholics; Forgiveness

According to recent estimates, there were approximately 7.3 million children under the age of 18 living with an alcoholic parent between 2002 and 2007 (Office of Applied Studies, 2009). Alcoholic family functioning is exceedingly negative compared to nonalcoholic families, characterized by negative communication, confrontational anger expression, and less direct communication (Johnson, 2001; Sheridan & Green, 1993). Children in alcoholic homes are more likely to experience traumatic childhood events (Anda et al., 2002) and are at greater risk for physical, emotional, and sexual abuse than children raised with non-alcoholics (Harter, 2000). These families respond to their situations primarily through avoidance and escape, often coping with the stress passively (Easley & Epstein, 1991). Adult children

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of alcoholics (ACOAs) experience more anger than national norms (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1991) and tend to exhibit potentially unhealthy anger suppression compared to adults who were not exposed to an alcoholic environment during childhood (Hart & McAleer, 1997).

It has been argued that forgiveness therapy may help ACOAs overcome the negative effects of parental alcoholism (Osterndorf, Enright, Holter, & Klatt, 2011), though little research has investigated the forgiveness children experience without this intervention. The purpose of the current study is to explore forgiveness in ACOAs, and provide practitioners with insights that can aid clients in overcoming their difficult past.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is “a motivational transformation that inclines people to inhibit relationship-destructive responses and to behave constructively toward someone who has behaved destructively toward them” (McCullough, Worthington, Jr., & Rachal, 1997, p. 321). Though forgiveness is a well-established area of research, spanning many disciplines, studies focused on the communication aspects of forgiveness remain few (Kelley, 1998). Even fewer are the studies examining forgiveness communication within familial relationships (Carr & Wang, 2012).

Kelley (1998) identified five types of forgiveness motivation: love, well-being, restoring the relationship, result of the offender’s strategy to gain forgiveness, and reframing or claiming to understand why the offender engaged in that behavior. Three general strategies used to express forgiveness emerged from his study. Through *direct strategies*, the forgiver explicitly addresses the transgression with the offender. *Indirect strategies* include nonverbal expressions of forgiveness such as hugging or returning to normal relational behavior. Finally, *conditional strategies* involve forgiveness with conditions or stipulations. In Kelley’s study, participants were more likely to use direct strategies when communicating forgiveness to their transgressors.

Waldron and Kelley (2005) further explored forgiveness communication strategies, resulting in five types of forgiveness behaviors: *nonverbal displays*, including positive behavior toward the transgressor, and/or discontinuing negative behavior; *conditional responses*, including forgiveness contingent upon changes in the transgressor’s behavior; *minimizing strategies*, downplaying the importance of the transgression; *discussion strategies*, exploring motives, emotions, and solutions regarding the transgression; and *explicit strategies*, including direct communication to the transgressor that s/he is forgiven. In this study, the severity of the transgression influenced the forgiveness strategy. Severe transgressions, for example, were typically met with conditional forgiveness strategies. One goal in the current study was to understand the strategies utilized by ACOAs to communicate forgiveness to their alcoholic parents, particularly given the lack of direct communication characteristic of alcoholic families (Johnson, 2001; Sheridan & Green, 1993).

To understand the experiences of forgiveness among ACOAs, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What motivated the adult children to forgive (or not forgive) their alcoholic parents?

RQ2: How, if at all, did the adult children communicate their forgiveness to their alcoholic parents?

Method

Participants in the study were ACOAs who lived with one or both alcoholic parent(s) during their childhood. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Convenience sampling included sending the call for participants through professional networks and to online support groups for ACOAs. Twenty ACOAs were included in this study, ranging in age from 18 to 54 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.3$), including 16 women and 4 men, primarily White/Caucasian (85%). The length of time that had passed since the participants lived with their alcoholic parents ranged from 5 months to 40 years ($M_{\text{years passed}} = 16$). Three participants were still living with the alcoholic parents at the time of the study.

Data were obtained from the participants, via email, in the form of open-ended surveys. Questions elicited general reflections about their experiences living with an alcoholic parent. Participants were then asked to describe their motivation to forgive or not forgive, as well as the communication (if any) of their forgiveness. Data analysis was completed using Smith's (1995) five-step model. First, transcripts were read for familiarization. Second, transcripts were reread and significant statements were noted. Third, a list of all emerging themes was created and refined. Fourth, a master list of themes and categories was produced. Finally, exemplars for each theme were added to the master list. To ensure validity of findings, the data and themes were peer-reviewed by a researcher with expertise in qualitative research methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Motivation for Forgiveness

Participants were asked to explain what influenced their forgiveness if they had begun the forgiveness process at the time of the study. Three themes regarding motivation emerged from the narratives (See Table 1 for themes and exemplars).

Reframing

The dominant motivation for forgiveness was reframing, which is claiming to understand why the offender behaved in a hurtful way, viewing the offender as not responsible for the behavior, viewing the offense as unintentional, or minimizing perceptions of the effect of the offense (Kelley, 1998). Participants moved the focus of the alcoholism away from the parent by conceptualizing it as a disease or by discussing external factors that contributed to the alcoholism. For many, placing blame outside of the alcoholic enables them to look upon the alcoholic parents without experiencing constant hatred and anger. Reframing as the dominant motivation

Table 1 Motivation for Forgiveness

Theme	Exemplars
Reframing	I realize that my dad has a disease and that is what causes some of his behavior. [IV 13] I could see how they were molded as children, became full of hate, and it relieved some pressure. [IV 7]
Well-being	I just got tired of hating him. Forgiving him was not for his benefit, it was to save myself. [IV 6] I've decided to look at this as an opportunity to improve myself as a man and show myself that I can overcome any situation. [IV 14]
Recovery of alcoholic	My motivation was him giving up alcohol and the extreme change in his attitude. [IV 11]

for forgiveness agrees with Kelley's (1998) finding that family members are most likely to forgive through reframing.

Well-being

Participants reported that only through forgiveness were they able to live healthy lives. Personal well-being as motivation for forgiveness is consistent with previous studies (Kelley, 1998; Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004). It is noteworthy that participants were motivated to forgive for the sake of personal well-being rather than for the well-being of the alcoholic parent, similar to Younger et al.'s (2004) finding that individuals forgive to rid themselves of the stress caused by the transgressions.

Recovery of alcoholic

The final motivation for forgiveness was the sobriety of the alcoholic parents. The change in the alcoholics' behavior and their efforts to better themselves influenced the forgiveness processes. This finding is similar to Kelley's (1998) description of the other's behavior as a motivation for forgiveness.

Motivation for Unforgiveness

Eight participants in this study had not forgiven or only partially forgave their parents, indicating that complete (or in some instances, even partial) forgiveness is not possible. These participants identified two reasons for withholding forgiveness (Table 2). The dominant motivation for unforgiveness was the ongoing transgressions of the alcoholic parents. For many of these participants, the transgressions they continue to face bring them back to the beginning of the forgiveness process, needing to forgive. Participants also identified transgression severity as a barrier to

Table 2 Motivations for Unforgiveness

Theme	Exemplars
Ongoing transgressions	What's holding me back from completely forgiving her is the fact that she still acts and reacts with the "dry-drunk" behavior and continues to try to manipulate me. [IV 9]
Lasting effects of transgressions	What makes this even more difficult is that there are still open wounds that haven't fully healed where I haven't yet been able to forgive her. [IV 20] It's hard to forgive because the memories and emotional scars are still there and will always be a part of who I am. [IV 18]

forgiveness. The transgressions experienced by these participants continue to be hurtful, impeding their attempts at complete forgiveness.

Communicating Forgiveness

Participants who reported forgiving their alcoholic parents or beginning the forgiveness process were asked to describe their forgiveness expression. Three communication strategies emerged from the data: indirect, direct, and semi-direct expression (Table 3).

Indirect strategies

The most common approach to communicating forgiveness was indirect (nonverbal) expression, including spending time with the alcoholic parents, phone calls to the

Table 3 Communication Strategies

Theme	Exemplar
Indirect strategies	I have never in words told him that I forgive him, not verbally. I have bought him books, mostly history of sports books ... but that's all. [IV 10] I haven't expressed my forgiveness to him verbally, that would be pointless and would only start another fight. He does not feel that he has done anything to require forgiveness. [IV 6]
Direct strategies	There was an argument between my dad and my fiancé ... The rift between the two of them prompted a heartfelt conversation between me and my dad ... I explained to my dad how I have emotional problems because of the way that I grew up. [IV 1]
Semi-direct strategies	I wrote my Mom a really long letter. In it I explained that things happened in the past that could not be changed but could only be worked with and through, toward a future that benefited us both. [IV 9]

parents, buying gifts, and offering encouragement. Some participants attributed the lack of direct forgiveness expression to fear of further conflict or discomfort that may result. This finding contrasts with Kelley's (1998) study, which found that individuals are more likely to forgive the offenders directly. Indirect strategies may be the dominant form of forgiveness expression for ACOAs because they are often taught to ignore the alcoholism and remain silent about it (Black, 2003; Grant, Rosenfeld, & Cissna, 2004). This finding may also be attributed to the distance and subsequent independence that the participants may have experienced after leaving the family home.

Direct strategies

Some participants reported expressing their forgiveness to the alcoholics orally, either face to face or through phone conversations. Participants shared their feelings about growing up in an alcoholic family context and told the parents that they forgive them. These strategies allowed for explicit communication of forgiveness and provided the opportunity for the alcoholic parents to participate in the forgiveness conversation.

Semi-direct strategies

Finally, participants communicated their forgiveness by writing letters to their alcoholic parents. This type of expression is direct in being verbal, but indirect because the child was not there when the parent received the letter. This strategy allows participants to explicitly state their forgiveness but maintain distance as a form of self-protection.

Implications for Practitioners

Researchers have encouraged the use of forgiveness strategies in therapy sessions with ACOAs (Osterndorf et al., 2011), especially as forgiveness benefits individuals' physical and mental well-being (Witvliet & McCullough, 2007). Many participants in the current study reported benefiting from their forgiveness processes. Recent research suggests, however, that the physical and mental benefits associated with forgiveness may not be the result of creating positive emotional responses toward the transgressor, but rather through reducing unforgiveness (Harris & Thoresen, 2005). As in the current study, many ACOAs do not see complete (or even partial) forgiveness as possible. In these instances, a better approach for practitioners may be to focus on ways ACOAs can reduce unforgiveness, rather than guiding clients to a state of forgiveness. Thus, practitioners can help clients overcome the negative effects of resentment without requiring forgiveness.

Some participants in this study reported communicating forgiveness through letter writing, which allowed them to express their forgiveness while distancing themselves as a form of self-protection. Practitioners recognize the usefulness of

letter writing to help clients process experiences and engage in self-healing (Rasmussen & Tomm, 1992). Practitioners working with ACOAs may find this strategy useful in helping their clients reduce unforgiveness. Writing letters could provide their clients with a way to communicate their feelings (and even forgiveness) to the alcoholic parent without face-to-face confrontation. Further, letter writing could provide an avenue of expression for ACOAs who have begun the forgiveness process but for whom communication of this forgiveness to their parents is not possible or desirable. That is, ACOAs may engage in therapeutic letter-writing without sending the letters to their parents.

Limitations

There were two major limitations to the current study. First, of the 20 participants, only four were men, and all but three participants identified as White. While the remaining demographic aspects were fairly diverse (i.e., age and education), the lack of gender and racial diversity may influence the study's findings. Gender differences of forgiveness among ACOAs, in particular, merit further exploration, as women are shown to forgive more than men, while men are shown to be more vengeful than women (Miller, Worthington, Jr., & McDaniel, 2008), and effects of parental alcoholism may differ for men and women (Morgan, Desai, & Potenza, 2010). Second, participants were largely recruited from online ACOA groups, indicating that they were seeking support to overcome their childhood experiences. It is possible that (un)forgiveness experiences may be different for people who have not begun to process their experiences with their parents' alcoholism.

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