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FROM TRANSGRESSIONS TO RECONCILIATION

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REVIEW BASED BOOK CHAPTER**FROM TRANSGRESSIONS TO RECONCILIATION**

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This paper examines the ecology of conflict and pathways to reconciliation for both individual and inter-group relationships. The paper starts with transgressions and conflicts arising from them then examines interrelated factors and actions that can open pathways to reconciliation. Conflict, trust, dialogue, fact-finding, justice, peace-making, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, peacebuilding - are all elements in restoring harmony and rebuilding relationships. Conflict is not a problem to be solved, it is an intricate and complex process resolved through transformations inherent in the process of reconciliation.

Keywords

Transgression, Conflict, Reconciliation, Trust, Forgiveness, Peace-Making

1. Background

Today's society seems to be fractured with polarizations, an info-flood of unresolved criticism, and allegations. Individuals, families, communities, citizen groups, institutions, and nations express concern about existential threat based in loss of cultural cohesion and shared vision. What are the factors at play, and what is the way forward?

Transgressions, offending and being offended, whether intentional or unintentional, are common occurrences in human interactions. They range from minor disagreements to grave betrayals, causing emotional pain, harm, and reflective counter-actions in individuals and communities. The impact of transgressions can be nullified with forbearance [1] result in intractable estrangement and conflict. There exist pathways toward reconciliation and peace building which can ameliorate, remediate, and remedy the impacts of unjust transgressions. This paper explores these pathways, shedding light on how various elements contribute to the transformative process of healing in personal relationships as well as in larger societal structures.

1.1. **Conflict and Transgressions**

Conflict in human relationships is inevitable. Conflict can serve to identify and energize reconciliation, or it can escalate and result in enduring hurts, relationship disruption, and prolonged embittered animosity.

Since the earliest recorded human history [2] conflict has been a characteristic of human relationships and the subject of conversation, gossip, and scholarship. Entering "conflict and reconciliation" into the Google Scholar search engine produces about 1,500,000 references. Marital adjustment depends on reconciliation of multiple points of conflict; currently the divorce rate in the US is about 52% for first marriage, and higher for those who re-marry [3]. Entering "marriage and conflict" to PsycInfo the search engine of the American Psychological Association shows 11, 407 entries between 2018 – 2023.

War is the most onerous form of human conflict. The goal of the Correlates of War Project [4] is to accumulate scientific knowledge about war. Their database includes approximately 630 wars worldwide between 1816 – 2007.

Conflict is the result of real, perceived, or anticipated transgressions. Transgressions are the violation of individual, group, state, or national boundaries (physical, psychological, and moral) resulting in the perception of unjust hurt by the offended person and possibly by the offender as well [5]. Transgressions injuries can harm status and power,

shared values, security, and esteem [6, 7]. The range of transgressions extends from the trivial (not saying please or thank you), to grievous injuries (infidelity), and the horrific (genocide).

The perceived impact of a transgression is related to multiple factors: was the transgression avoidable or deliberate; mild or severe; recent, historic, or on-going [8]. In close relationships there is an increased likelihood that a transgression will be experienced as consequential and needing to be addressed [1, 5].

A robust body of literature has identified predictable cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences to substantive transgressions. Characteristic negative cognitions include stereotyping of the offender, rumination about the injustice of the offense, and blameful attributions about what happened and why. Negative emotions include anger, resentment, bitterness, hostility, and hatred. Negative behaviors including avoidance of the perpetrator, holding a grudge, vengeance seeking, and demands for atonement or retribution [1, 5]. The negative effects of transgressions can result in unforgiveness - angry rumination, bitterness, relationship avoidance, and anxiety over being hurt or offended again [9 - 11]. Unforgiveness can be dissipated quickly with a timely apology or lead to conflict escalation and intractable conflict.

International peace scholars Guy and Heidi Burgess (Beyond Intractability Consortium) propose a model by which intractable conflict develops [12]. In the course of events a dispute emerges. If the dispute is not successfully negotiated disputants become defensive, and skeptical of their ability to work together. Communication becomes formal, restricted, and negative. Reduced dialogue makes understanding each other's behaviors and points of view more difficult. As tensions build, communications are riddled with threats, allegations, and blame, each constituting another transgression). The history of transgressions builds, issues accumulate, overlap, and become more complex. The psychological consequences of exposure to repeated deeply felt transgression emerge - polarized thinking, difficulty assessing truth and blame, and deep resentment [13]. As the conflict becomes more layered and complex, the likelihood increases that third parties will be pulled into the conflict - friends, extended

family, professionals, governmental agents. Third parties may be helpful or may multiply the intensity of the conflict.

Eventually the toll on the financial, social, and emotional resources of the disputants become unsustainable and they enter into a hurting stalemate [12]. In a stalemate neither side seems able to win but neither side wants to back down fearing that their opponent is not trustworthy and doubting that reconciliation is possible. Hurting stalemates can endure, for example, the family conflict between the Hatfield's and the McCoy's, or the protracted conflict between Israel and Palestine. Often the stalemate is broken by the actions of a third party, a family member who stops funding a divorce conflict, a negotiator or diplomat, a judge, or a governing leader who initiates a peace process. A famous quote by Chief Joseph of the Pez Perce Indian Nation expresses the hurting stalemate of this people [14]:

Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before, I have it in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our Chiefs are killed; Looking Glass is dead, Ta Hool Shute is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led on the young men is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets; the little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my Chiefs! I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.

2. Pathways from Escalated Conflict to Reconciliation

As the stalemate softens, the parties can begin the long and often difficult path from conflict escalation to reconciliation.

Figure One presents pathways from transgression and conflict, through multiple factors that can lead to conflict resolution and reconciliation.

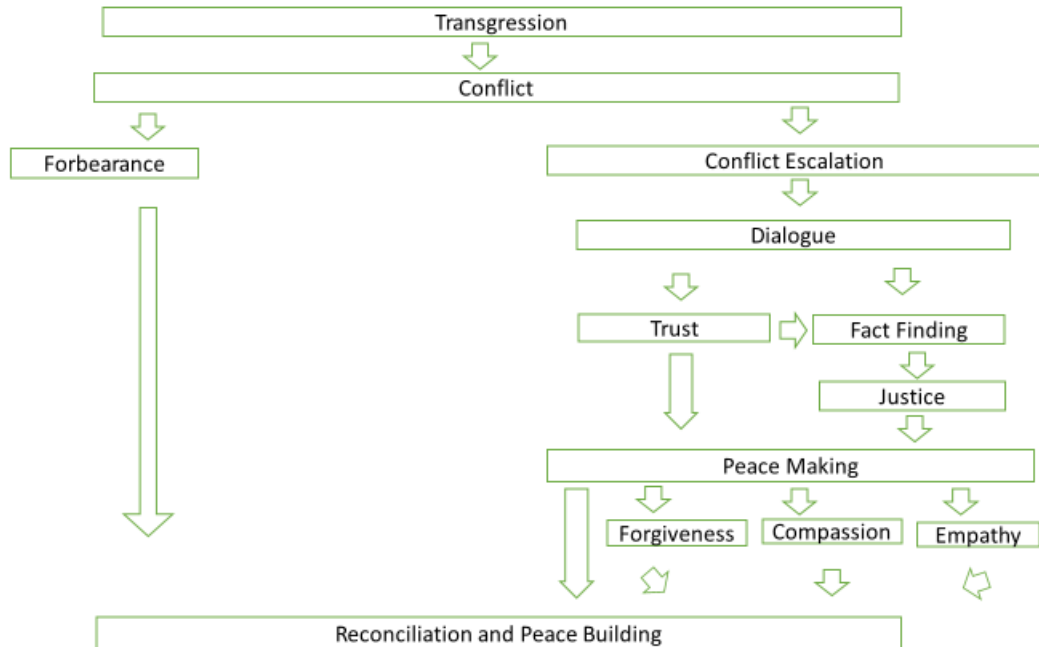


Figure 1. Possible pathways from conflict-to-conflict resolution and reconciliation

2.1. The Passage of Time and Forbearance

The idea that “Time heals all wounds” has anecdotal and intuitive support. Research has shown that for individuals the simple passage of time is related to increased forgiveness [15]. It is not clear how the passage of time is related to healing interpersonal wounds [2]. The emotional sting of a transgression might be reduced over time, or events might occur which result in reassessing the offender’s actions [1].

Often the passage of time is negatively related to reconciliation. For example, with inter-group conflicts apologies offered after a prolonged periods of silence tend to be viewed as insincere [16]. When the time between the transgression and movement towards reconciliation spans generations, descendent of the offending group may be less able to understand the nature of the conflict, how they have responsibility for it, and consequently be less motivated to take steps needed for inter-group reconciliation.

2.2. Dialogue

Reconciliation requires a complex exploratory and explanatory dialogical process oriented towards restorative justice. At the core of the dialogue [6] is "striving for consensus (on harm, responsibility, and values) as necessary to restore justice. The seeking of consensus implies a dialogical morality, where all the affected parties have a voice in an open dialogue that is geared toward reaffirming what are considered shared and identify-defining values of their community."

Reconciliation between groups is a complex and invariably challenging process. Inter-group dialogue can be underpinned by multiple and sometimes competing issues: security, justice, power, identity, belonging, truth, and meaning; needs for status, respect, moral integrity, belonging and identity [6, 16].

2.3. Fact-Finding

Establishing the truth of the events and contexts of transgressions is fundamental to reconciliation. There is a robust body of psychological research demonstrating the healing effects "telling one's story" including: allowing victims to set the record straight; regain a sense of agency; receive validation that the emotional turmoil they experienced was realistic; and release of adverse emotional residuals from transgressions. Following divorce, it is not uncommon for a former spouse to worry that they are burdening their friends with their ruminations about what happened, is happening, and the difficulty they have coping with it.

2.4. Justice

Transgressions can result in an injustice gap [17, 18], the difference between the way things are and how they would be if they were fair. The greater the injustice gap, the more difficult it is for the wronged person or group to experience forgiveness [19] and effect reconciliation.

Transgressions deprive victims of something due to them (life, property, respect, education, healthcare, due process, etc.), and violate an entitlement contained in

rules, laws, or norms [6]. Repairing justice may involve retribution [20] - punishments such as disempowering or lowering the status of offenders, incarceration, financial fines, property restoration, or financial reparations. Repairing justice can concurrently involve moral transformation [21, 22], accepting responsibility, expressing remorse, making reparations through personal change, and re-commitment to violated values.

John-Paul Lederach [23], a highly regarded international peace scholar, notes that reconciliation occurs at the intersection of truth, justice, mercy (forgiveness) and peace, and that the relationship among truth, justice, forgiveness, and peace can be strained. Might the pursuit of truth and justice be truncated by forgiveness? Might harshness in pursuit of truth and application of justice forestall forgiveness and peace?

2.5. **Trust**

Essential components of reconciliation are trust and commitment [5, 7]. Trust refers to strength in the conviction that the other can be relied upon to not re-transgress, to follow negotiated agreements, and to offer and accept conciliations and compromises. Commitment means mutual investment in sustaining the relationship through the often-difficult progression of reconciliation.

Trust means believing in the integrity and reliability of the offender to change their behavior. Apology is a process often used to initiate trust re-building.

Tyler Okimoto, a psychologist and apology researcher [24, 25] notes, "There's really two aspects to the reconciliation process. There's the backward-looking, trying to make sense and come to a shared understanding about what happened, trying to understand the other person's perspective on what happens, trying to share your own perspective on what happened and come to some agreement about what the offense was itself and what my responsibility was in that. Then the other half of it is the forward-thinking, the future-focused aspect of the apology, which is, really, what's going to happen from now on. What people are often looking for is a promise of

future behavior and some action that begins to evidence your willingness to move towards that future behavior.”

Making an apology is not simple or straightforward following terrible transgressions. The elements of apology successful might include [26]: (a) Communicating understanding of allegations; (b) communicating understanding of full range of impacts; (c) expressing guilt and remorse (self and other); (d) reporting actions taken as reparation; (e) stating recommitment to violated rules, laws, norms, values; (f) stating intent to not repeat transgressions; and (g) presenting plan to ensure against re-transgressing.

On January 30th, 1972, British paratroopers opened fire on protestors in Northern Ireland and they killed 13 protestors. The event came to be known as Bloody Sunday. Thirty-eight years later, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, offered an apology which is widely regarded as an exemplar of governmental apology [27]:

“I never want to believe anything bad about our country. I never want to call into question the behavior of our soldiers and our army, who I believe to be the finest in the world. But the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong. I know that some people wonder whether nearly 40 years on from an event, a prime minister needs to issue an apology. For someone of my generation, Bloody Sunday and the early 1970s are something we feel we have learned about rather than lived through, but what happened should never, ever have happened. The families of those who died should not have had to live with the pain and the hurt of that day and with a lifetime of loss. The government is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces and for that, on behalf of the government, indeed, on behalf of our country, I am deeply sorry.”

2.6. Forgiveness, Empathy, Compassion

Transforming anger, and resentment towards a transgressor and replacing it with motivation for conciliation and goodwill for the offender despite the offender's hurtful

actions are component of psychological forgiveness [28]. As such, forgiveness would seem to be a precondition for meaningful reconciliation [29]. As Enright [30] observed, "Reconciliation without forgiveness is often no more than an armed truce in which each side patrols the demilitarized zone looking for incursions by the other and waiting to resume hostilities."

A robust body of scientific research has demonstrated the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy in ameliorating the adverse impacts transgressions on individual, interpersonal, and inter-group health and well-being [19, 31, 32] across a spectrum of problems, populations, and cultures [33].

The distinction between decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness is generally accepted among forgiveness scholars [1, 19]. Decisional forgiveness is renouncing hostility against the offender, not seeking revenge or punishment, not ruminating about the injustice of the offense(s) and placing blame; giving up an entitlement to hold resentment. Decisional forgiveness is primarily cognitive. It entails self-interrupting ruminative cognitions which increase personal discomfort and non-contributory to moving towards a future that may or may not include reconciliation. Emotional forgiveness is giving out undeserved compassion and generosity, feeling that your emotions have become less negative and more positive toward the person who offended or harmed you [19].

Elements shared among empirically-support psychological models for promoting forgiveness include: close examination of the history and broad impact of transgressions on victims; identification of psychological injuries to victims; offenders accepting responsibility and expressing remorse for wrongdoing; reducing anger towards offenders; and, gradually replacing negative emotions towards offenders with compassion, empathy, and positive regard. More than 70 clinical studies have reported on the efficacy of forgiveness interventions.

Decisional forgiveness typically precedes emotional forgiveness. Forgiveness is generally a slow [32], and personally challenging process [33, 34]. The challenge to emotional forgiveness is accepting the offender's actions as horrible, perhaps even unforgivable,

but occurring within the broad context of the human condition. Maria Cantacuzino's [35] book *Forgiveness: An Exploration* contains accounts from parents of murdered children, survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and victims of political violence and atrocities who describe how forgiveness freed them from corrosive resentment and anger. For example, the parent of a daughter killed by her friend's reckless driving states, "At first it was very difficult to forgive Nick but then I realized it was not about forgiving the man but about forgiving his stupidity" [36].

Compassion and empathy both refer to a caring response to someone else's distress. While empathy refers to an active sharing in the emotional experience of the other person, compassion is "empathy with boots" [19], it adds to empathy a desire to alleviate the person's distress. For example, one might wish that an offender has beneficent experiences which lead them out of their personal darkness.

Forgiveness may be regarded as the ultimate goal of reconciliation process. It involves letting go of resentment, anger and the desire for revenge. Forgiveness is not synonymous with condoning or forgetting the transgression. It is a conscious decision to release the emotional burden associated with the harm done. Both the victim and the transgressor can benefit from forgiveness, as it paves the way to healing, closure and the possibility of renewed relationship.

2.7. Peace Making, Reconciliation and Peace Building

Reconciliation is the process of restoring harmony, understanding, or agreement between parties that have experienced conflict or historical grievances [37]. Oftentimes, before the process of restoring harmony can begin, hostilities must be ended. The United Nations whose purpose is "to save the people from the scourge of war" [38] identifies a spectrum of activity related to peace [39].

These steps involve the Prevention of Conflict; Peacemaking – addressing conflict in progress and bringing hostile parties to a negotiated agreement; Peacekeeping – coordinating actions among several parties to develop a basis for sustainable peace;

Peacebuilding – a long term comprehensive process of addressing core issues related to conflict.

As the international peace scholars Michelle Maise and Heidi Burgess [39] observed:

“The shift from escalation to de-escalation is not a single event, but rather a process that advances in a broad step-by-step fashion and is produced by pressures that build over time. This process includes trying to get adversaries to the negotiating table, forming agreements about peripheral issues, and moving towards resolution of the basic issues. All of this is typically accompanied by a reduction in hostility and mistrust between the adversaries.”

The process by which the United States has addressed racism against African Americans illustrates the difficult path to reconciliation. Pressures between the states lead to the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation eradicated slavery, but it took more than a century of on-going racial transgression, suffering, political action, and social attitude transformation before the process advanced to address the unjust educational, income, and health consequences of systematic racial transgressions.

The same principles apply to small as well as large scale conflicts. For instance, with a married couple, harmony will not be restored until the raised voices are quelled and sullen withdrawal is exhausted. After that they may be able to address the specific issues that ignited the conflict. If they are able to sort through what happened and what needs to be done to avoid a repeat, they may draw from the instance of conflict learnings which address deeper, more fundamental dynamics in their relationship which they need to govern better.

3. Conclusion

Transgressions and conflict are an inherent part of human interaction but they need not result in rupture of relationships. Pathways to reconciliation built upon notions/pillars of dialogue, trust, fact finding, justice, peacemaking, empathy, compassion and forgiveness offer the possibility of healing and transformation. These elements are not

isolated but interconnected, working in tandem to mend relationships and restore harmony. There can be other steps specific to different contexts. (For instance, when dealing with museums, repatriation and focus on social actions that promote inclusion and diversity would be included in peace making steps, etc.).

Ways of measuring process of reconciliation should also be developed. That entails setting clear objectives, identifying key indicators as well as tangible results and conducting a baseline assessment. Continuous monitoring and feedback are also important for understanding the process and its subtleties. Flexibility and better understanding of each context and what reconciled individual or larger societal structures really mean would be beneficial.

Understanding the roles of each factor and fostering their development is essential for personal, interpersonal and societal growth, ultimately leading to a more compassionate and reconciled world where social harmony, cultural membership, and peace prosper.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing-review and editing, and visualization; J.A.M and V.V.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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