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Theorizing Forgiveness



This chapter demonstrates how theories of communication can enrich understanding of forgiveness processes. For traditional social scientists, theories are explanatory frameworks. A given theory offers a logic for understanding how complex social processes work. *Communication* theories are primarily concerned with explaining the role of symbolic behavior, including the tactics relational partners use to seek and grant forgiveness and their effects on relational outcomes. In this sense, theories do more than simply describe the “parts” of a communication process, as we did in Chapter 2. Instead, they make specific claims about how and why communication functions in human relationships. So, in Chapter 2 we simply described the elements of forgiveness episodes, such as relational history, the transgression, and communication processes. But here we consider various theoretical explanations for *why* certain kinds of forgiving communication might be used and *how* they might influence our relationships. As a case in point, identity management theories view transgressions as potential threats to the identities of the offender and the victim. Why are communication strategies more or less successful? Because they vary in the extent to which they protect the identity of the offended party (for example, by making clear that the victim is not to blame). How does forgiving communication influence relationships? From this theoretical perspective, we claim that partners who succeed in supporting mutual

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identity needs are likely to feel more valued, respected, and comfortable as they recover from a transgression.

For traditional social scientists, the ability to produce these kinds of “testable” claims is a crucial contribution of theory. As more studies confirm the theory’s principles, researchers gain confidence in it, apply it to new situations, and seek its limitations. For example, does a theory that explains forgiveness in romantic relationships also apply to families? As confidence in a theory grows, practitioners and clinicians may use the theory to solve practical problems. Marriage counselors may use forgiveness-related theory to design therapies, and human resource professionals may use it in their efforts to mediate workplace grievances.

Only a small portion of what we know about forgiveness comes from this “theory-testing” paradigm. In fact, theory development has been relatively neglected, even as practitioners propose innovative therapies and interventions (e.g., Hargrave, 1994). Given the pressing need for therapists to assist persons who have experienced hurt in their relationships, the focus on intervention is understandable and desirable. But new theorizing is needed to prompt alternative conceptualizations of forgiveness, encourage new kinds of intervention, and generate claims that can be rigorously evaluated.

As is the case with so many complex social processes, our understanding of forgiveness would be quite limited if we relied solely on the traditional theory-testing paradigm. In fact, much of our insight comes from researchers who operate from a different set of assumptions. From the *interpretative* perspective, a primary purpose of theory is to enrich our understanding of how people experience social life. A good theory provides a language, sometimes one radically different from our existing assumptions, which allows us to reimagine communication in a manner grounded in the lived experiences and interpretations of those we study. New language may liberate researchers (and the rest of us) from dominant but limited assumptions, including the scientific assumptions about the predictability of human behavior.

Guided by the philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), interpretative communication scholar Lesley Baxter and various colleagues offer dialectical theory as one alternative language to traditional ways of thinking about communication in personal relationships (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Traditional views emphasize that relationships progress systematically from low levels of intimacy (acquaintances) to higher levels (romantics). Communication functions to move relationships through the stages and then stabilize the relationship at a given point of development, to maintain *stasis*. In contrast, from the dialectical point of view, relationships are always in flux. Partners use communication to

manage a series of “contradictory motivations” that arise *inevitably* when the needs and values of two or more individuals are merged in a relationship. For example, most romantic partners express a motivation to be emotionally close to their partners. They use communication (e.g., self-disclosures) to move the relationship toward intimacy. But the same partners may be motivated to create emotional distance when they feel vulnerable or emotionally exhausted. Again, discourse is the means by which partners manage these contradicting desires, for example by changing the topic to something lighthearted to avoid a “heart-to-heart” talk.

It is quite possible, in fact likely, that multiple theories are “right” in explaining forgiveness behavior. Both of the theoretical positions mentioned thus far, identity management and dialectical, as well as other frameworks, can be useful in understanding the communication of forgiveness. Because forgiveness processes are complex, a given theory will focus on some factors while deemphasizing others. In this chapter, we apply three existing theoretical frameworks that highlight *communicative* aspects of forgiveness and use them to generate research questions for students and scholars. These three have been particularly *useful* in helping us understand our interview data and self-reported forgiveness narratives. We then turn our attention to the task of developing a new theory of forgiving communication, one indebted to existing approaches but responsive to our research findings over the years. We call this a *Negotiated Morality Theory* (NMT) of forgiveness.

❖ DIALECTICAL THEORY

Dialectical theory has been useful in generating a rich understanding of how meaning is created in human relationships. We have found it particularly helpful in understanding the complex and often conflicting discourses that develop around forgiveness episodes.

Theoretical Principles

According to Baxter’s (2003) recounting of the dialectical framework’s development from its roots in the philosophical work of Bakhtin (1981), its central themes are contradiction and dialogue. *Contradiction* emerges from the merging of two or more individual identities and the inevitable co-occurrence of relational phenomena that are opposites, such as closedness/openness, interdependence/autonomy, or novelty/predictability. Relationships are in constant flux, as partners give voice to these contradictory but essential qualities (Baxter & Montgomery,

1996). A related dialectical construct is the “unity of opposites,” the idea that relationships are the loci for the integration or coexistence of these opposing relational forces. Baxter (2003) notes that unique dialectical contradictions should emerge as new relational contexts and practices are studied closely. Forgiveness may be one such practice, involving at its core a fundamental contradiction between a partner’s legitimate right to seek revenge and other conflicting motivations, such as the desire to preserve a loving relationship.

For theorists such as Baxter who study *relational* dialectics, contradictions are not found in the minds of individuals; rather, they are located in the discourse that expresses and manages contradiction. Discourse is the means by which individual and relational identities are conceived and enacted. For that reason, we consider the theory to be a communicative framework, one well suited to understanding the processes by which persons *negotiate* forgiveness. As a practical matter, partners manage contradictions by engaging in concrete conversational practices such as negotiating time apart, enacting familiar rituals (such as talking over dinner every night), or increasing the intimacy of self-disclosures. Yet, as Baxter and West (2003) note in reference to the study of similarities within couples, “understudied is dyadic meaning-making in which parties come to perceive their similarity and the sense that they jointly make of their commonalities and differences” (p. 493).

Baxter and colleagues (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & West, 2003) discuss multiple communicative methods of managing dialectical tensions, several of which are paraphrased here. One approach is to separate or *sequence* the opposing concepts, so each is expressed at different points in time or in different contexts. For example, partners can manage the tension between autonomy and interdependence by sharing some decision-making responsibilities (e.g., childcare, family budgeting) and entrusting others to individual members (home maintenance decisions, managing in-law relationships).

Another approach is to simply *embrace* one dimension while actively suppressing the other. This can be observed when an employee chooses to remain silent rather than express bad news to a supervisor as protection against a “blame-the-messenger” response. A third approach requires a creative *integration* of the opposites, expressing both simultaneously. In this sense, families may gain predictability through rituals such as talking at the dinner table every day and novelty by assuring that conversation includes a range of topics and dinner guests. Finally, couples may *reframe* an apparent contradiction by redefining it. For example, parents and teenagers sometimes experience tensions around decision-making autonomy when considering college choices. Does the child decide for himself or herself? How much influence should the

parents seek? Rather than label this a struggle between autonomy and interdependence, the family members might reframe it as a “period of growth” in the parent-child relationship. This kind of reframing moves the discussion away from issues of control and toward discussion of maturity, mutual learning, and change.

Application to Forgiveness

The process by which persons negotiate forgiveness of a serious transgression is a potentially rich example of the dyadic meaning-making referenced by Baxter and West (2003). Forgiveness is a process that raises any number of contradictions. In our research, understanding dialectics has been useful to us and our students, as we pored over the tapes and transcripts, looking for a language to capture what is a complex, “fuzzy,” and still-open process of relational sense-making. Here are some of the primary dialectical tensions expressed as romantic partners, coworkers, and families discuss their reactions to the most trying events in their relationships.

Mercy versus justice

Perhaps the most fundamental dialectical tension involves mercy and justice. In many accounts, forgiveness is complicated by a motivation to “let go” of hostile feelings on one hand and the desire to seek retribution on the other. This tension is enacted in expressions of compassion, empathy, and acceptance *and/or* hostility, resentment, and verbal aggression. Some wounded partners mutually embrace *vengeance* in the aftermath of a transgression. One young woman described an angry episode with her then-boyfriend: “We hurt each other so bad, that we never recovered.” She ended up dating one of his friends as a kind of revenge. As she said, “It was kind of stupid, but I did it to get back at him.” The boyfriend responded by “spreading nasty rumors about me.” The former partners still don’t talk. Other couples describe the “silent treatment” as the preferred response to a transgression. For them, extended silence is a form of punishment, and it also precludes the possibility of forgiveness negotiations.

In contrast, some couples actively suppress their desire for revenge by embracing *mercy*. Some of our older couples use phrases such as “just get over it” when describing their reactions to transgressions. They may express compassion and understanding, even as they contemplate the possibility of vengeance. One of our middle-aged students described interactions with her husband: “I know he gets moody when my mother visits. But I have realized that she can be a real pain. I just cut him some slack, even though I want to smack him.” Some choose a

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merciful response because of expediency or efficiency. "It's not worth fighting when you have been together this long," said one husband of 47 years. "You just end up hurting each other and not solving the problem." He recommended "just letting it go."

The mercy/justice dialectic can be more complicated, as indicated by the words of Justin, a young man who is "trying" to forgive his parents even as he continues to "throw the situation in their faces":

Last Christmas I went to visit my dad, who lives in another state for the holidays. While I was gone, my mom and stepdad took my car without permission and got into an accident. It supposedly was not their fault. I went crazy when I found out. I was not as mad that the car was wrecked but furious that they took the car without asking. I did not forgive them until about a month later because they did not want to take responsibility for their actions. They broke down one day and said how sorry they were and I forgave them. I have a tendency to throw the situation in their faces because they were so *wrong*. In a way I do not think I can completely forgive them, but I'm trying.

This situation highlights the highly contextualized nature of forgiveness, which for Justin may be complicated by his youth and a strained relationship with his stepfather. Yet, we see in this account a struggle to unify his desires to express mercy and restore justice.

When asked, most people initially agree that forgiveness is a merciful response to a transgression. However, the theme of relational justice looms large in many forgiveness narratives, including Justin's. He seems unable to *completely* forgive because his mother and stepfather "were so wrong" and were reluctant "to take responsibility for their actions." For Justin, the desire to show mercy (forgive) is impeded by his sense that relational justice has yet to prevail. In his mind at least, the parents have failed to sufficiently acknowledge their lack of respect for him and his property. By framing the situation as one of injustice, Justin creates a rationale for enacting partial forgiveness while retaining his right to seek vengeance. A mere apology, especially a delayed one, is insufficient acknowledgment of wrongdoing and undeserving of complete forgiveness. Apparently in Justin's mind, for justice to be fully served, forgiveness (if only partial) must be supplemented by continued reminders of the wrongdoing. Although complicated by any number of relational factors, Justin's account illustrates that justice can be a pivotal concept as families, friends, and lovers weigh the competing impulses of forgiveness and revenge. It also demonstrates that

dialectical theory allows apparently opposite concepts, such as mercy and justice, to be co-present in human relationships.

We have argued elsewhere that relational justice and mercy are both important components of the forgiveness process (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). The sufficient *acknowledgment* of wrongdoing is a necessary part of reasserting relational justice. As a communication process, forgiveness expresses, changes, or reinforces the moral order of our relationships. It is this process of recognizing injustice that allows one to act mercifully by forgiving. In some cases, offenders are forgiven unconditionally. Admitting wrongdoing, taking responsibility for transgressions, is often enough to assure our partners that commonly agreed-on values will be respected in the future—that “justice will prevail.” Other times, forgiveness is offered with conditions—a kind of “probationary response,” which allows the offending partner a period of time to demonstrate “good behavior.” When these processes are deemed unlikely to succeed or when partners subscribe to extreme standards of justice (e.g., “an eye for an eye”), they seek justice through retribution or simply terminate the relationship.

Remembering versus forgetting

Couples frequently verbalize tension between remembering and forgetting relational transgressions. Of course, partners are motivated to recall positive shared experiences as a means of reinforcing their bond and generating positive emotions. Remembering unpleasant experiences is also necessary if mistakes of the past are to be avoided in the present. At the same time, partners may wish to forget or suppress negative experiences and the emotions that accompany them. *Intentional forgetting* of the past may be necessary if partners are to remain focused on the relational present. This tension between remembering and forgetting appears frequently in discourse about forgiveness, as indicated by the often-invoked phrase “forgive and forget.”

Some of the long-term married couples we interviewed embraced the forgetting side of this dialectical tension, as indicated by such statements as “You just forget about it,” “Put it in the past,” and literally “Forgive and forget.” For these couples, the conversation is firmly focused on present practices and future plans. Discussion of hurtful past events is censored by topic changes (“Let’s not relive that disaster!”). Clichéd speech and ritualistic conversation create distance from the emotional trauma of the past. This is a kind of active forgetting as expressed in phrases such as “No use kicking a dead horse,” “You can’t hold a grudge,” and “We’ve moved on.” By embracing the forgetting side of the contradiction, these couples indicate that forgiveness was complete or not worth continued communicative effort.

Other couples manage this dialectic with what might be called a *forgive and remember* approach. Mike, married to Darlene for 36 years, had three different times steered his family into deep financial trouble with bad investment decisions and ill-fated businesses. During the early years, Darlene entrusted financial decisions to Mike. Out of pride or unrealistic optimism, he hid the problems from Darlene. Mike was always convinced that things would “turn around soon.” However, the couple indicated that their past financial difficulties are now a frequent topic of discussion. Mike says they need to relive the past so he doesn’t “hurt us again.” Darlene realized that she needed to provide “reality checks” for Mike’s well-intended but sometimes unrealistic financial schemes. She has forgiven her husband and is proud that their marriage survived very trying times. She believes they are now more honest and emotionally close. Mike and Darlene forgive but don’t forget.

Forgiveness discourse is sometimes used to integrate the processes of remembering and forgetting. Ray recalled an incident in which he got into an altercation with some teenage “punks,” publicly embarrassing himself and his wife Doris, who had to bail him out of their small town jail. Today he recalls the incident to illustrate his stubbornness and insensitivity as a young husband (he described himself as a “jerk”). Ray valorizes his wife, whom he said could have left him over the incident, but stood by his side. In this way, Ray recalls the past as a way of affirming his wife’s forgiving nature, then and now.

But Ray and Doris also reveal how individual memories are both merged and disentangled via ongoing forgiveness discourse. As they talked, it became evident that Doris remembered the event well, but interpreted it differently. She is still emotionally upset by the memory of the embarrassing incident, and only recently (16 years later) had she fully shared with Ray the resentment she harbored. As it turns out, Ray may have overestimated his wife’s willingness to forgive him those many years ago. Even as our interview progressed, the couple came to a new understanding of the event. It may be only now that Doris has fully “let go” of the resentment she felt toward her husband. In that sense, the forgiveness has been a lengthy relational process of forgetting *and* remembering.

Partners sometimes express marked ambivalence about forgiving and forgetting. Recall Judy and Dion from Chapter 2, the couple that quarreled over a move to Alabama. “I don’t think I’ve *ever* forgiven him,” Judy commented. “You know, I’ve *forgotten* about it.” She still doesn’t understand why Dion made the relocation decision without her. “I will probably always kind of hold that against him. I don’t know that I can really fully forgive.” Yet, “it’s like, now, we just kind of *kid*

about it. So maybe in my heart I *have* forgiven." Judy's comments also remind us that contradiction between cognition and emotion appears in the dialogues of many long-term couples.

Heart versus mind

Serious transgressions elicit intense emotional responses, including shock, anger, and fear. In their discourse, couples often contrast these emotions with their cognitive/intellectual reactions. They identify tensions between "heart" and "head." Frequently the emotional dimension is given more credence. Thus, an apology "from the heart" may have deeper significance than simply saying "I am sorry." The expression of emotion seems to "authenticate" the apology and signal that the offender "really means it."

In contrast, after her husband's affair, Sally described an intellectual *decision* to communicate forgiveness before she *felt* forgiving:

Therapists say you don't have to forgive in the beginning; you have to work at it. Well, I learned you could forgive in the beginning. Even if you just mouth it in your heart. Because there is something to saying, "I forgive you . . ." And then you start building on that.

As Sally indicates, using forgiveness discourse, saying "I forgive you" or similar words, is one way to manage the dialectic of heart and mind. For her, these words initiated a process that would eventually allow her emotions to catch up to her intellectual commitments. This conversational move may exploit the inherent ambiguity of the forgiveness concept. Someone in Sally's position may be signaling a decision to forgo revenge and a commitment (or at least an openness) to rehabilitate the relationship. At the same time, she withholds comment on her emotions, which remain unsettled. Sally wondered out loud if she would ever *really* love her husband again. Yet, she initiated what turned out to be an extended emotional journey that continues to this day, through which she has gradually come to feel loving toward her once-unfaithful husband.

For one of our anonymous survey respondents, this emotional journey never really began. He described being terribly embarrassed by a coworker in the presence of peers. When the coworker apologized, "I said I forgave him. But we no longer work with each other and, deep down, I never *really* forgave him." In this case, the communication of (false) forgiveness may simply relieve relational awkwardness. In work relationships, role requirements may prescribe such pseudo-forgiveness

("Don't worry about it"). Aware of these expectations, our respondent manages the heart/mind dialectic by creating the expected appearance of equanimity and hiding his "deep down" feelings. If the relationship had persisted, communicative opportunities for integrating cognitive and emotional dimensions of forgiveness eventually may have presented themselves. Perhaps the offended employee would have admitted his continued hard feelings. Or, the offender may have offered a heartfelt apology and pledged to rectify the situation. However, in this instance, forgiveness discourse simply functioned as a delaying tactic until the relationship could be terminated.

In another example, Betty described forgiveness as a kind of ongoing struggle between heart and mind as she and her husband recovered from an affair. Betty knew things were better when she could curtail her obsessive thinking and start feeling again:

I would say in the past month, we've made giant strides. Or *I've* made giant strides. I don't know if he's felt it as I have, but my mind doesn't dwell on it all the time and I can truly love him again. And um, I really want it to work, not just an act of my will but really in my heart. You know?

For Betty, the early stages of forgiveness apparently required considerable cognitive effort, an "act of will" as she describes it. The emergence of positive emotions seems to signal an important turning point, where heart and mind are aligned.

Trust versus risk

Transgressions degrade trust. Forgiveness is sometimes described as a process of rebuilding trust while reducing the risk of future harm. Karla doesn't know if she and her previously unfaithful husband will ever experience 100% trust because she is "afraid to be vulnerable." At the same time, she wants "a real marriage," one that presumably includes high levels of trust and safety:

I'm still working through the forgiveness . . . and I think I'm getting there. I know we're going to stay married. There's no question in my mind and I know we're going to have a good marriage. And I don't know if there'll be 100% trust ever again. I don't know. Right now, I don't feel trust. But, I think you can forgive and still have to . . . hopefully we can get to that point again. You know, I'm afraid to be vulnerable, but at the same time, I don't want

a marriage where we're just going through the motions so that we stayed married. I want a marriage, I mean a real marriage.

As we discuss in Chapter 4, partners sometimes "hedge their bets" by offering conditional forgiveness. They manage the trust/risk dialectic by offering forgiveness with qualifications designed to protect themselves and reduce relational risk. This approach is evident in discourse of the type "I will forgive you but don't ever do that to me again" or the institution of new rules: "From now on, you call me if you are going to be late more than 10 minutes." Increased monitoring of the offender's compliance with relational rules may gradually lead to the conclusion that he or she can be trusted again.

As Lisa and her husband recovered from recurring financial crises, she realized that she had undermined trust by seeking safety. She wanted to protect herself and her husband from bad financial news and avoid the conflicts that they experienced over money. "I didn't discuss it. It was silly on my part, but I was trying to protect him." By hiding their financial problems, Lisa bought temporary safety at the cost of trust. A new communication practice emerged from their efforts to negotiate forgiveness. Lisa learned to initiate discussion as soon as she saw financial problems starting. As she said, "I got a little more mature. I learned to say, 'wait a minute, before I get to that point, let's discuss this . . . and see if I can't diffuse it before it gets out of hand.'" For his part, Samuel agreed to encourage such discussions and not overreact when Lisa brought up bad news. These communication practices enhanced trust and reduced the relational risk associated with financial discussions.

Questions Raised by Dialectical Theory

The primary issues raised by dialectical theory concern types of dialectics and the means by which they are managed (see Table 3.1 for other questions). As Baxter (2003) notes, the dialectics identified in earlier work, such as autonomy/interdependence, were not exhaustive. New contradictions emerge as people participate in different kinds of relationships and confront different relational circumstances. We have identified several that emerge as couples discuss transgressions and forgiveness. But students and researchers should question whether new dialectics emerge in such discourse. From our experience, several possibilities emerge. For example, there may be inherent tensions between concepts such as *exoneration and blame* or *mercy and punishment*. Relationships are characterized by obligation and altruism. Are these potentially oppositional forces expressed in forgiveness discourse? How?

Table 3.1 Dialectical Theory: Questions for Students and Researchers

1. What other dialectics emerge in discussions about forgiveness? Consider such possibilities as exoneration/blame or obligation/altruism.
2. How is forgiveness practiced differently in nonromantic relationships? What factors make forgiveness different in family and extended family relationships?
3. What about work relationships? Are certain kinds of organizational cultures experienced as more forgiving? Which communication practices and organizational values would help employees negotiate forgiveness rather than enact vengeance?
4. What forms of discourse allow opposing forces to coexist as the forgiveness process proceeds? Consider such conversational devices as hedges, delays, questions, reasons, self-disclosures, recollections, and humorous comments. How is nonverbal behavior incorporated in these forms?
5. How are religious and secular approaches to forgiveness similar and different? What kinds of language reveal these differences?

As we discussed in Chapter 1, the notion of forgiveness has both secular and religious roots. Some couples find motivation to repair damaged relationships in religious teachings about the sacredness of marriage and the forgiving nature of God. Others derive motivation from secular sources, such as the power of romantic love or the need to preserve family ties. At the same time, religious sanctions make some acts (e.g., infidelity) seem unforgivable and some secular practices (e.g., adversarial divorce proceedings) discourage forgiving behavior. Students and scholars should examine the role of forgiving discourse in light of the *secular/sacred* dynamic.

Dialectical theory assumes that contradiction arises inevitably from merging of individual identities and motivations in the context of a relationship. Yet, most of the work to date has been limited to dyadic personal relationships (Baxter, 2003). What kinds of dialectics emerge in the discourse of families as they collectively recover from transgressions committed by one or more members? One of our long-married couples told us that the bride's parents refused to attend the wedding because of religious differences with the groom's family. Later, the parents regretted the decision and sought to rebuild ties with the young couple. How is forgiveness negotiated in such situations? Organizations are characterized by formal and informal relational

networks, and define such factors as power, quality of communication, and geographic distance. How is forgiveness interpreted, negotiated, and communicated across a network? How do the mission and culture of an organization create or manage contradictions in forgiveness practices? Thus far, only a handful of researchers have considered forgiveness in work contexts (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Metts et al., 2006).

Finally, the role of speech behavior in expressing dialectics of forgiveness requires study in more detail. We have seen that participants use communication *tactics* to manage oppositional forces, for example by offering conditional forgiveness to build trust and protect against additional hurt. However, by looking more closely and simultaneously at the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of forgiveness dialogue, we appreciate the subtleties of this process. Consider this exchange between two friends:

Friend #1: Listen, I really am sorry. I had *no idea* you would be so hurt when I told about your break-up with Eric.

Friend #2: No, it's OK. It's just that I *trusted* you to keep it secret. I am not ready to talk to others about it yet.

These utterances enact forgiveness quite differently, depending on the elements emphasized by the speakers. Friend #1 emphasizes that she had *no idea*. She may be saying that although she is sorry for the hurt that was experienced, the situation was accidental, and thus not really requiring of forgiveness. In fact, she may be implying that her friend is being unreasonably extreme in her sensitivity. Friend #2 chooses not to emphasize her releasing of the friend, as she might have by saying "No, *really*, it's *ok*." Instead she emphasizes the violation of trust. Presumably, future exchanges will address this relational issue before forgiveness is fully granted.

❖ UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORKS

Uncertainty has been a central construct in communication theory since the introduction of uncertainty reduction theory in the 1970s (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This early work hypothesized that relational partners were motivated to reduce uncertainty so they could make informed choices about potential mates and predict reactions to communication behaviors. Questions, self-disclosures, and consultations with third

parties are among the communication tools used to reduce uncertainty and increase social knowledge (Berger & Kellermann, 1994). In subsequent decades, scholars have offered a host of alternative theories, including most recently problematic integration theory (Babrow, 2001), uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001), and the theory of motivated information management (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). The new formulations have addressed limitations of the earlier work, including (1) recognition that uncertainty is an inevitable and sometimes positive condition rather than simply a negative motivator of communication behavior, (2) increased interest in how uncertainty is managed and sustained through communication, and (3) acknowledgment of the role played by information *providers* as well as seekers.

In this section, we draw most heavily on the theory of motivated information management (Afifi & Weiner, 2004) because it is recent, compatible with most other uncertainty-related frameworks, and useful in discussing some aspects of forgiveness negotiations.

Theoretical Principles

The theory assumes that information management proceeds through stages of *interpretation*, *evaluation*, and *decision*. As indicated in Figure 3.1, the process starts when a discrepancy between desired and experienced levels of uncertainty is detected and interpreted. This discrepancy may trigger anxiety, although as others have noted (e.g., Brashers, 2001), elevated levels of uncertainty can be perceived positively. Uncertainty may alleviate boredom and create the possibility for novelty in an otherwise predictable relationship. In a chronically troubled relationship, increased uncertainty about the future may be a hopeful sign that the relationship could improve rather than continue along a certain path toward dissolution. In either case, the communicators may feel motivated to increase or decrease the size of the discrepancy.

During the evaluation stage, communicators consider the potential *outcomes* of information management behaviors. What are the likely costs and benefits of seeking information? Is the information obtained likely to be worth the effort expended? Will it be negative or positive in nature? For example, is the process of “checking up” with third parties on the sexual fidelity of one’s mate worth the damaged relational trust potentially wrought by such inquiries?

Efficacy is also considered during the evaluation stage. Do the communicators possess the competencies needed to decrease or increase uncertainty? For example, can they be tactful enough to extract delicate information from a reluctant source? Are they capable of withholding

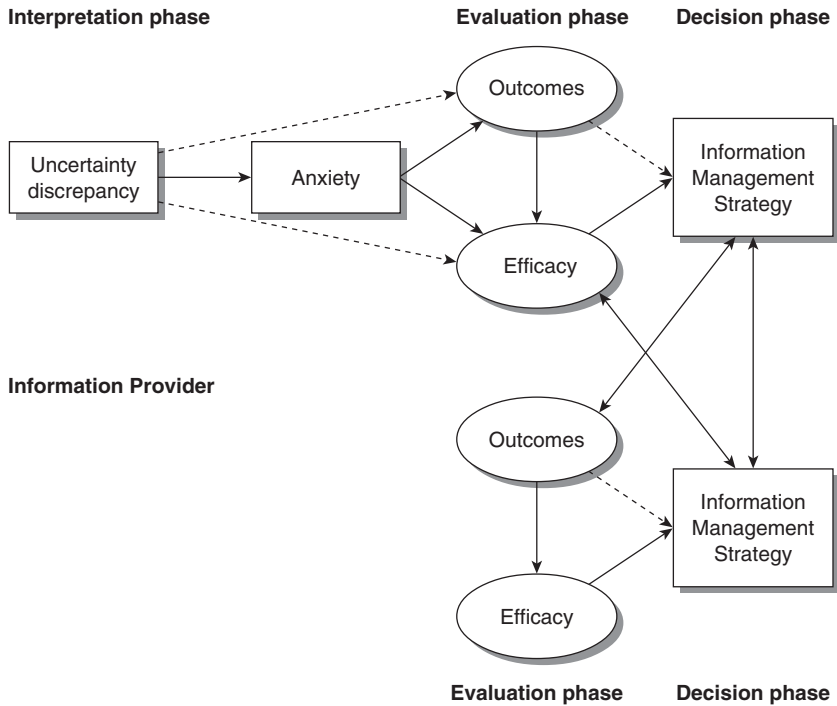
Information Seeker

Figure 3.1 The Information Management Process as Proposed in the Theory of Motivated Information Management

SOURCE: From Afifi, W. A., & Weiner, J. L. (2004). Toward a theory of motivated information management. *Communication Theory*, 14, 167–190. Figure 1 reprinted with permission of Blackwell Publishing.

information when questioned aggressively? According to Afifi and Weiner (2004), the information seeker's ability to *cope* with negative information and the likelihood that a source can provide the needed information are other efficacy factors. Ultimately, the third stage (decision) involves the selection of an information management strategy that is responsive to these interpretation and evaluation factors.

Application to Forgiveness

The construct of uncertainty has received some attention from forgiveness researchers. An indirect example comes from a study reported by Emmers and Canary (1996), who adapted uncertainty

reduction theory (Berger & Calebrese, 1975) to study the relationship-repair tactics young couples use. They theorized that transgressions in romantic relationships heightened uncertainty and that efforts to repair romantic relationships could be conceptualized as uncertainty management tactics. Although not a primary focus of this research, “forgiveness” emerged in participant reports as one means of managing the uncertainty associated with broken relationships. We see this in our own research when participants describe forgiveness as a means of bringing closure to an argument or reducing relational doubt. However, as indicated in the example below, the relationship between forgiveness and uncertainty is not always straightforward.

Shana worked as an assistant youth minister in a large church, but her relationship with the youth minister (Y.M.) was complicated because the pair had dated briefly in the past. Y.M. had “trouble letting go” of his feelings for Shana. Over time she grew weary and resentful of his “inappropriate comments.” These frustrations were a contributing factor in her decision to leave the job. Shana explains what happened about one month later:

Y.M. set a date to have lunch with me and we talked. At this time he apologized and explained that he felt responsible for my leaving. Because I hadn’t given it much thought at the time, I told him, “No problem. No, you weren’t the cause.” But after doing some soul searching and trying to address the roots of some of my anger, I realize he did owe me an apology. At the time of the lunch I forgave him but not with much thought. For him this settled it. He felt better knowing that I forgave him. But now I feel like I need to forgive him *again*. Because I hadn’t really come to terms for why I was forgiving him then. I still have doubts about him—and our relationship has not grown or gotten stronger.

By offering superficial forgiveness, Shana relieved her boss of uncertainty. For him, the matter was “settled.” But for Shana, this forgiveness episode prolonged uncertainty and maybe even increased it. She still has “doubts about him” and needs to “forgive him again” now that she has sifted through the reasons for her anger. Perhaps this second interaction will bring clarity and closure to her relationship with Y.M.

Severe transgressions heighten relational uncertainty. They raise questions about the partner’s motives and the degree of concordance in partner expectations (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). This uncertainty complicates predictions about the future of the relationship, so the offended party may monitor communication more closely, looking

for clues. The sincerity of an apology may be gauged carefully for sincerity; ambivalence may signal to the victim that a “repeat performance” is possible. The result may be continued efforts to reduce uncertainty (“How do I *know* this won’t happen again?”). In contrast, offers of conditional forgiveness (e.g., “I will forgive you, but only if you promise to do [not do] X”) may add predictability to the relationship. One form of forgiveness-seeking discourse, the set of behaviors we previously labeled “explanations,” seems particularly well suited to information management (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Explanations provide information about the circumstances surrounding a transgression; they are frequently provided in response to requests from the wounded party. Request-explanation sequences are part of the “sense-making” step of the forgiveness process (see Chapter 4; see also Gordon et al., 2000).

We see other forgiveness-related applications of Afifi and Weiner’s (2004) theory of motivated information management. The theory posits that larger discrepancies yield more motivated information seeking. In fact, as we noted in Chapter 2, severe transgressions do seem to result in heightened communicative activity. Consistent with Weick’s seminal (1969) observations on organizational sense-making, we would expect more “cycles” of sense-making communication to follow serious transgressions. The theory leads to more subtle predictions as well, because it acknowledges two additional factors: (1) the importance of managing/ reducing uncertainty and (2) the communicative effort required in the process. A given transgression (e.g., sexual infidelity) will create considerable uncertainty about the offender’s motives and the circumstances surrounding the offense. Nonetheless, reducing this uncertainty may be unimportant if the victimized partner believes that infidelity is an unforgivable offense under *any* circumstance. Too, the costs of managing this uncertainty (hours of counseling, emotional pain, awkward discussions with mutual friends) may outweigh the perceived benefits. In such cases, severe transgressions may lead *directly* to relationship termination, with no real effort to manage uncertainty or explore possibilities for forgiveness. Alternatively, partners may view infidelity as potentially forgivable under certain circumstances. In response, they may use communication that sustains uncertainty about the future of the relationship in the hope that continued discussion will reveal mitigating factors and possible paths to reconciliation.

The uncertainty management framework is also useful in prompting us to think more concretely about the forms of communication used during forgiveness negotiations. Afifi and Weiner (2004) discuss three strategies. The first, *seeking relevant information*, corresponds to

the transgression detection/presentation strategies discussed in Chapter 4, including questioning the offender, consulting third parties, hinting, and self-disclosure. *Avoiding relevant information* is a second strategy, one that might reveal itself when partners use delay, deception, editing, and diversion tactics (e.g., humor) when communicating about transgressions. A third strategy is *cognitive appraisal*, or what we earlier called *reframing*. Here the partners redefine uncertainty. In the case of forgiveness episodes, we have heard partners describe their now-uncertain future as a “new journey,” a “test of faith,” and “throwing out the rule book and starting over.”

Questions Raised by Uncertainty Management Theories

As with any conceptual framework, uncertainty management approaches direct our attention to only selected aspects of the communication process. They underplay other potentially important elements, such as the role of individual and relational identity in shaping reactions to transgressions. Nonetheless, we are convinced that forgiveness is in part a process in which people manage uncertainty about their shared expectations, values, and relational plans. This approach yields a rich set of research and discussion questions, some of which are presented in Table 3.2. Perhaps most important are those that address our assumption that uncertainty “drives” the production of some forgiveness-seeking and -granting behavior. Do partners report higher levels of relational uncertainty after transgressions, as we assume? If so, what are they uncertain *about*? Is it the intent of the violator, circumstances surrounding the transgression, the victim’s values related to the act, responsibility for the transgression, or perceptions of third parties who witness the act? How do forgiveness negotiations vary in light of these different objects of uncertainty? For example, if third-party perceptions are at issue, an unfaithful spouse may offer explanations not just to the victimized partner but also to family members and mutual friends.

From the theory of motivated information management (Afifi & Weiner, 2004), we also draw questions about efficacy. Which forgiveness-seeking behaviors reduce uncertainty most effectively? Is uncertainty management behavior associated with more forgiving partner responses? Is the ability of a wounded partner to predict a reoccurrence of the transgression important in the decision to forgive? To reconcile? Do partners feel confident that they can make such predictions based on current behavior (e.g., forgiveness-seeking behaviors)? If so, what verbal and nonverbal cues do they use?

Table 3.2 Uncertainty Management Theories: Questions for Students and Researchers

1. Do transgressions raise levels of uncertainty?
2. Does the amount of uncertainty predict forgiveness behavior?
3. Does the amount of uncertainty predict the outcome of forgiveness processes?
4. Which forgiveness-seeking behaviors function to reduce or increase uncertainty?
5. Which forgiveness-granting behaviors function to reduce or increase uncertainty?
6. Does the object of the uncertainty alter the communicative response?
7. How do couples manage this uncertainty?
8. Is the ability of a wounded partner to predict a reoccurrence of the transgression important in shaping forgiving communication?
9. Do wounded partners predict the future on the basis of forgiveness-seeking behaviors?
10. What verbal and nonverbal behaviors increase confidence in such predictions?
11. What uncertainty management patterns develop under conditions of sustained uncertainty?

❖ IDENTITY MANAGEMENT THEORIES

This theoretical approach links forgiveness to the face-management activities of relational partners (e.g., Afifi et al., 2001). Central to the seminal work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1955, 1959), “face” refers to the identity we create and sustain through our social interactions. For Goffman, face is not merely a dispassionate public performance. People value their self-perceptions as competent, compassionate, humorous, and so forth. They count on others to show support through displays of deference or by laughing appropriately at jokes. In this way, face management is a cooperative social process, not merely an individual production. We feel defensive when our face is ignored, threatened, or attacked. These *face-threatening acts* require a response, from either the offenders who must make amends (e.g., through apology) or the offended parties who reassert their desirable qualities or mount a counterattack. Goffman further observed that social actors feel *out of face*, that is, embarrassed and out-of-sorts, when their behavior is revealed to be

inconsistent with their public identity, as when an apparently honest person is caught in a deception, a calm person loses his or her temper, or an otherwise savvy person is snared by a practical joke.

Identity management theories are clearly communicative in that face is presented, sustained, and threatened through symbolic action. This approach has spawned countless studies of the communicative acts that threaten or protect face, a good deal of which can be traced to the writings of Brown and Levinson (1978). These linguists proposed *politeness theory* as an extension of Goffman's work. They refined the face concept by arguing that it included positive and negative dimensions. *Positive* face refers to the need for approval—our desire that others accept and reinforce our self-definition. *Negative* face is our desire to be unimpeded in self-presentation. According to Brown and Levinson, social actors require autonomy if they are to create their own identities; acts that restrict that autonomy are face threatening. For example, closed questions (“Yes or no?”) and threats (“Do what I say or you will be punished.”) limit response options to those created by the interrogator.

Theoretical Principles

Forgiving communication can be conceptualized as a process of managing self-presentation in the presence of face-threatening relational transgressions. For example, when discovered, the act of adultery threatens the reputation of the adulterer. As well, a victim of adultery may feel embarrassment, shame, or anger in part because his or her positive face (e.g., I am a valued and exclusive mate) is threatened. Recall that Lisa (introduced in Chapter 2) interpreted her financial missteps in face-management terms: “It was mostly that I was ashamed of getting into my own trouble—that I was incompetent.” To sustain her image as a competent spouse, she avoided discussing the problem with her husband.

Researchers adopting this theoretical perspective describe the behaviors that mitigate or redress face threats. For example, a private confession and earnest request for forgiveness would be less face-threatening to the victim of adultery than an approach that implied shared blame. In fact, Afifi and colleagues (2001) found that such forgiveness-seeking behavior could have ameliorating effects on the partner's perceptions of the affair (but perhaps not on relational outcomes). Cindy recalled a face-threatening incident in high school, when “four of my girl friends came over to my house and told me that they didn't want to be friends anymore.” She was hurt and angry and

the girls "all exchanged words." Over time however, "one-by-one, all of them made an attempt to be chummy with me." The girls didn't apologize outright but they were "meek and careful with what they said at first." These girls were using what Brown and Levinson (1978) call "tact." They avoided calling attention to their own face-threatening rejection of Cindy. At the same time, they allowed her to signal whether she would again accept them as friends.

Unlike Cindy's friends, most social actors feel pressure to *account for* inappropriate behavior. *Account-making* is the communicative process by which social failures are managed between actors (Antaki, 1994; Cody & McLaughlin, 1988). The accounting process begins with the experience of a failure event, which could be a transgression (excessive speeding by a driver) or an omission (failing to remember a spouse's birthday). The offender is then asked to account for this failure (by a judge or the neglected spouse). Accounts take a variety of forms, including excuses ("The speed limit sign was too small to read."), justifications ("Driving slower would have caused traffic congestion."), and concessions ("Sorry. I was wrong to forget your birthday."). The offender then evaluates the credibility of the account and decides how to proceed. Some research has evaluated the effectiveness of various kinds of accounts in such settings as traffic court (Cody & McLaughlin, 1988). In general, the research suggests that excuses are relatively ineffective in such settings, perhaps because they attempt to side-step the system of rules and laws that regulate human conduct. Judges (and other evaluators) have a vested interest in making sure these rules are upheld. Accounts that explicitly acknowledge violations and pledge compliance are sometimes treated more sympathetically.

Application to Forgiveness

It can be fruitful to conceive forgiveness as a process of managing identity. Clearly, the relational transgressions that trigger the forgiveness process can be conceptualized as potentially face-threatening acts. We can see that the employee who chooses to "go over the head" of a supervisor questions that person's authority and competence (threat to positive face) while potentially risking some aspects of their own identity (e.g., as a loyal subordinate). Parents who make threats are attempting to restrict the autonomy of their children (threat to negative face). From this point of view, a primary task of forgiving communication may be the restoration of face for both parties. Forgiveness-seeking tactics discussed in Chapter 4, such as "explicit acknowledgement" and "compensation," may function to mitigate face threat. In the first instance, the offender

makes clear that he or she, not the victim, is at fault. This move affirms the victim's identity as an innocent party. In the second case, reparations are offered to "make up for" for the identity loss.

Afifi et al. (2001) argued for the link between identity management and forgiveness in an article on infidelity in young romantic pairs. The authors studied how the "method of discovery" shaped partners' reactions to infidelity and their perceptions of relational damage. Was it best to learn about a partner's infidelity through a direct confession, reports from a third party, accidental discovery, or through some other method? The authors reasoned that prospects for forgiveness and possible reconciliation would be lessened when identity threats to the "innocent" partner were maximized. For example, any suggestion that blame for the affair was shared would add to the already substantial face threat inherent in infidelity. As well, discovery through third parties should be more face-threatening than private confession. The task of face restoration is more onerous when multiple parties witness the face threat. As might be expected, responses to infidelity were uniformly negative, as most romantic relationships were seriously damaged. However, the authors found some evidence that face-protective discovery methods may have mitigated the damage.

The account-making literature provides fertile ground for forgiveness research. The nature of the account offered by the transgressor may advance or impede progress toward forgiveness. For example, Metts (1994) argues that acknowledging the harm caused by one's behavior (and offering an apology) potentially transforms the emotional tone of an encounter. When the offender takes responsibility, it is easier for the victimized party to release feelings of hostility and contemplate reconciliation (see Enright et al., 1991). In contrast are discourses that minimize the offense, defend it, or avoid it. Victims are more likely to reject these, and the relationship may trend toward increased conflict (Schonbach & Kleibaumhuter, 1990). In presenting his forgiveness model, Hargrave (1994) suggested that apology, one kind of account, is a necessary prelude to relationship renegotiation. In fact, the relationship between apology and forgiveness has been well established (McCullough et al., 1997). All of this research supports the idea that forgiveness is fostered by communication that helps the partners sustain valued aspects of their identities despite the occurrence of serious transgressions.

Questions Raised by Identity Management Theories

Identity management theories raise unexplored questions about the forgiveness processes. Table 3.3 lists some of these. We wonder if

(and how) identity protection functions as a *motivator* for forgiving communication. Does the desire for identity affirmation motivate individuals to seek or grant forgiveness? Consider the otherwise honest person who confesses to telling a lie and is forgiven by a friend. Is the granting of forgiveness essential to restoring the offender's sense of an honest self? Does the forgiveness-granter find identity gratification as well, by appearing to be compassionate, reasonable, or generous? If so, forgiveness episodes should be studied more closely as social sites for the production and reinforcement of individual identities.

If we assume that forgiveness transactions have the potential to threaten and restore identity, then we should ask what kinds of communication behaviors serve this purpose. What kinds of forgiveness-seeking behaviors are most responsive to identity concerns? What about forgiveness-granting behaviors? Several of the behaviors discussed in Chapter 4, such as hinting (about a transgression) and offering assurance (when granting forgiveness), seem well suited to ward off threats to identity or to reaffirm it.

In addition to examining identities of *individuals*, researchers should examine the role of forgiveness in forging *relational* identity. The fact that partners have forgiven past transgressions (or chosen not to) may be an important element in their shared identity ("the kind of couple we are"). Forgiveness may be implicit in some couples' definition of "real" marriage (Waldron & Kelley, 2005), particularly if they practice marriage within the definitions of some Christian churches.

Table 3.3 Identity Management Theories: Questions for Students and Researchers

1. Is the need to protect identity a motivator for forgiveness seeking and forgiveness granting?
2. What kinds of behaviors function to manage identity during forgiveness episodes?
3. How does forgiveness shape relational identity?
4. How is forgiveness referenced in relational narratives?
5. Is forgiveness a core element in the definition of marriage for some couples? Does this influence their use of forgiveness behaviors?
6. For what goals do people use "strategic forgiveness"? What forms does it take? What are the effects of this kind of communication on granters and receivers?

Analysis of individual and jointly told relational narratives may reveal the role of forgiveness in the construction of couple identity.

Another set of questions concerns the *strategic* use of forgiving communication for identity management purposes. Strategic forgiveness, the kind Shana initially practiced in the earlier example, divorces the verbal act of granting forgiveness from the more complicated and comprehensive process described throughout this book. In our view, genuine forgiveness is characterized by efforts to acknowledge harm, release hostility, and forgo retaliation. In contrast, strategic forgiveness is directed to the relatively narrow, but often noble, goal of assuaging identity concerns. Some examples from our data include a young woman who verbally forgave her neglectful father because "he needed it to feel better about himself." Others describe forgiving "out of pity" for the offender or to help the offender "clear his conscience." Forgiving communication may be used to meet a duty or role obligation. One daughter told us that she was "ordered to apologize" by her mother, who then "forgave her" for an insulting comment. Presumably, this kind of coerced forgiveness reinforces parental identity, but fails to address the underlying relational issues. Students and researchers may find it useful to identify other examples of "forced forgiveness." What identity management functions does it serve? Presumably these kinds of behavior allow partners to finesse problematic situations at least for the short term. Do they have long-term positive or negative effects on relationships? What are the emotional implications for the forgiver?

❖ TOWARD A NEGOTIATED MORALITY THEORY (NMT) OF FORGIVENESS

The theories we have reviewed thus far provide useful and very different ways of thinking about the communication of forgiveness. They all demonstrate how aspects of the forgiveness process might be *enacted* through communication, as partners negotiate contradictions, manage uncertainties, and protect identities. In proposing the beginnings of a new communicative theory of forgiveness, we are indebted to all three (and many others). Yet we find that existing communicative theories overlook some elements of the "lived experience" of forgiveness, at least as articulated so richly by participants in our interview and questionnaire studies. Perhaps most neglected are the issues that most *energize* forgiveness episodes and make them *matter* so much. At its core, forgiveness is fundamentally about issues of *morality*—questions of right and wrong, relational justice, and human dignity.

Morality and forgiveness have been linked in psychological (Enright et al., 1992) and theological treatments of forgiveness (Kirkup, 1993). NMT draws attention to the means by which moral standards are expressed, questioned, reinforced, and reevaluated as forgiveness is negotiated.

Theoretical Principles

We start with some core assumptions and principles (see Table 3.4). First, we assume that *human relationships are interpreted with reference to a system of implicit or explicit values*. Values are the standards that define conduct as right or wrong, better or worse, just or unjust, respectful or disrespectful. Examples include honesty, respect for free choice (over coercion), equity, and loyalty. We don't mean that values are always conceived as simple bipolar constructs, although some persons may experience them that way. They are often complicated, conflicting, and subject to reinterpretation as relational circumstances change. As a case in point, honesty can be conceived along a right/wrong continuum, with some behavior being judged "too honest" or "not honest enough." Honesty may be in tension with other values (as when value of honest criticism conflicts with the value of loyalty to one's partner). Dishonest behavior may be reinterpreted, as when deception is rationalized as a "just a white lie." Drawing from dialectical theory, we assume that forgiveness discourse enacts the tensions that inevitably emerge as the value systems of individuals and are merged with those of work groups, families, friends, and romantic partners.

Second, we assume that *values are derived from three sources*. (1) *Community* values are the normative standards shared by large social groups, including subcultures, religious groups, and organizations. Members are socialized to the importance of education, elders, marriage and other community values. (2) *Personal* values are based on individual decisions to accept, modify, reject, or replace social values. Personal values are inherent to the identity of an individual. They define the person *across* relationships and situations. An individual may decide, for example, that he or she will be forgiving, honest, or deserving of respect regardless of the relationship context or situation. (3) *Relational* values define family, romantic, friend, coworker, and other close relationships. They are negotiated implicitly or explicitly and may concern such factors as openness of communication, privacy, sexual fidelity, or equality in decision making. Relational values are shared (at least in part) by those participating in a relationship. They are negotiated, not merely inherited through

Table 3.4 Theoretical Assumptions of the Negotiated Morality Theory (NMT) of Forgiveness

1. Human relationships are interpreted with reference to a system of implicit or explicit values.
2. Forgiveness-related values are derived from community, personal, and relational sources.
3. The desire to preserve moral codes motivates forgiving (and unforgiving) behavior.
4. Values that are socially sanctioned, individually internalized, and relationally shared are most motivating of forgiving and unforgiving behavior.
5. Values with long relational histories are more motivating than those with short histories.
6. Behavior that threatens important values provokes emotional responses in those with a vested interest in maintaining those values.
7. The processes of forgiving communication are a primary means by which moral codes are expressed, negotiated, and restored in human relationships.
8. The process of forgiveness influences the quality of post-transgression relationships, including the extent to which it is experienced as trustworthy, intimate, and just.

SOURCE: From Afifi, W. A., & Weiner, J. L. (2004). Toward a theory of motivated information management. *Communication Theory*, 14, 167–190. Figure reprinted with permission of Blackwell Publishing.

community membership. When key values cease to be shared, relationships are redefined and, sometimes, ended. In keeping with early versions of uncertainty management theory (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975), we assume that relationship partners integrate their social and personal values as part of a larger process of developing idiosyncratic relational understandings. In this sense, relationships are primary sites for the negotiation of moral codes.

Third, we assume that *the desire to preserve moral codes is what motivates forgiving (and unforgiving) behavior*. Value importance, the degree to which persons are *committed to* or *invested in* values, also stems from multiple sources. Social values shape acceptance in a culture or an organization; they are important because they lead to rewards or negative sanctions. For example, positive evaluations at work may depend in part on acceptance of an organization's core values, such as

respect for authority. Personal values are important because they are linked to identity, dignity, and, ultimately, ego. They define who we are and how we expect to be treated by others. As Goffman (1955) did with his notion of face, we assume that individuals feel emotionally invested in their personal values and are motivated to display, affirm, and protect them in their interactions with others. Finally, relational values are important because they provide predictability, assurance, safety, and a shared identity. For example, a daughter's acceptance of a family's values related to marriage and children may help her parents predict the future of the relationship ("She is likely to marry. We are likely to be grandparents to her children."). A tardy employee who apologizes to a supervisor offers assurance that shared values regarding timeliness are respected. Romantic partners find emotional safety and reduced risk when they negotiate shared commitments to values such as sexual fidelity or fiscal responsibility. Moreover, relational identities can be nested in protective and beneficial social structures—a reason some gay couples desire the relational identity associated with marriage.

Fourth, we further assume that values vary in importance. *Those which are socially sanctioned, individually internalized, and relationally shared are considered more important* than those which are endorsed at just one or two of these levels. Thus, a person who belongs to a church that values traditional marriage, identifies himself or herself in terms of traditional gender roles, and negotiates traditional ways of relating with a spouse, will weight this value more heavily than a person who belongs to the same church but chooses not to internalize this value or practice it in romantic relationship. Fifth, we assume *that history is associated with importance*: values that have been held for long periods of time are more important than those with short histories.

A sixth principle is that because values are important, *behavior that threatens important values provokes emotional responses in those with a vested interest in maintaining those values*. Forgiveness is most challenging and most called for when highly important values are involved in this inconsistency. Inconsistency takes multiple forms. Individuals can behave in a manner inconsistent with their personal values, as when a normally honest child lies to a parent. On discovery of the lie, the child may feel guilt or shame (his or her identity as an honest person is called into question), the parent may feel threatened (his or her identity as a good parent is less assured), and both may experience uncertainty about the relationship's future given that a shared value (trustworthiness) has been violated. In addition, consistent with Goffman (1955) and Brown and Levinson (1978), certain behaviors performed by others may be interpreted as

direct attacks on values. This is the case when a worker questions a peer's task competence or a parent accuses a child of selfishness.

The seventh principle is this: *The processes of forgiving communication (e.g., forgiveness seeking) are a primary means by which moral codes are expressed and negotiated in human relationships.* We discuss the moral functions of forgiving communication below.

Finally, we propose that *the extent to which values are successfully negotiated through forgiveness can determine the quality of post-transgression relationships, including the extent to which the relationship is experienced as trustworthy, intimate, and just.*

Moral Functions of Forgiveness Negotiations

Earlier, we described forgiveness as a negotiation enacted through the communication processes of transgression presentation/detection, emotion management, sense-making, forgiveness-seeking, forgiveness-granting, and relationship negotiation. Each of these processes is enacted through the symbolic behavior of multiple parties, such as members of a work team, family, or romantic relationship. This relational focus is central to our Negotiated Morality Theory of forgiveness, in that relationships are assumed to be the sites where value inconsistencies are "worked out." As noted in Table 3.5, episodes of forgiving communication serve a number of moral functions in personal and work relationships.

Table 3.5 Moral Functions of Forgiving Communication

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defining moral standards 2. Establishing accountability 3. Engaging moral tensions 4. Restoring relational justice through atonement 5. Hope: (Re)imagining a moral future 6. Honoring the self 7. Redirecting hostility 8. Increasing safety and certainty 9. Finding closure 10. Possible reconciliation |
|--|

Defining moral standards

Forgiveness episodes typically begin when an important moral assumption has been called into question. When a young student confesses cheating on an exam, the behaviors of the student and the teacher assert and reinforce a moral standard. They make moral *meaning*. Has a wrong been committed? The teacher might use a sense-making question (“Did you *know* you were cheating when you asked Molly for the answer?”) to determine if the student intentionally broke the standard. Fully informed, intentional cheating may be “more wrong” than unintentional cheating. If the cheating was intentional, she may decide that conditional forgiveness is the best way to clarify the standard (“I am glad you told me about this. During recess, why don’t you write about why cheating is wrong, so it won’t happen again.”). In addition to clarifying the standard, the teacher implicitly communicates conditional forgiveness (“It is OK if you don’t do it again.”) and simultaneously praises the child for enacting another value (honestly admitting mistakes).

Consider another example, this time from the workplace. A worker accuses a team leader of favoritism in the distribution of work tasks. The accusation has the effect of highlighting a presumed value (equitable treatment). The team leader’s response may clarify the underlying value. For example, the leader may indicate that task assignments are based on seniority—those with the longest tenure are allowed to choose tasks first. Alternatively, the team leader may offer to discuss the task assignment process, only to discover that the employee has in fact been treated wrongly given the equity standards of their community.

In some cases, the applicable moral standards may be easily determined. In others, the parties may *disagree* about the standards or one party may choose to *deny* them. In an example of the latter, former President Bill Clinton famously held that his intimate relations with White House intern Monica Lewinsky did not count as an extramarital affair, because the pair never engaged in sexual intercourse. Most of the public, and his spouse, disagreed. In yet another variation, the relevant relational standards may be *unarticulated* or ambiguous. In such cases, a goal of forgiveness negotiations may be to reduce uncertainty about the shared standards. For example, teenaged couples frequently report negative incidents in which one partner initiates sexual behavior considered off-limits by the other. Part of the forgiveness process would involve clarifying sexual values and the degree to which they are truly shared.

Establishing accountability

Another moral task is to determine responsibility for wrongful acts. Communication is the means by which responsibility is claimed, denied, or shared. Accountability can be communicated straightforwardly. Jan reported (discussed in Chapter 4) that her unfaithful husband admitted to being “100% wrong.” However, establishing accountability can also be a contentious and protracted process. Jill (also discussed in Chapter 4) reported that her boyfriend failed to recognize the seriousness of his drunken behavior. She chose not to accept his “insincere” apology and waited several days until he accepted full responsibility for his actions. Of course, many relational transgressions involve shared responsibility to some degree. In such cases, forgiveness is characterized by behavior sequences such as mutual confessions or joint pledges of forgiveness.

Engaging moral tensions

Almost inevitably, forgiveness situations involve multiple values, some of which are brought into a state of contradiction or tension. In the workplace situation above, the values of equity and seniority are in tension. Team member and leader may acknowledge that both values define their relationship. Drawing in part from Baxter’s evolving discussion of relational dialectics (Baxter, 2003), we conceptualize forgiving communication as a primary means by which these tensions are engaged and managed. Several approaches are obvious in our data.

First, communication can be used to *prioritize* values. One version of this involves context shifting—a process of determining whether social, relational, or personal values receive primacy in a given forgiveness episode. When one partner commits adultery, a couple may be forced to discuss how their shared value commitments (“Sexual infidelity is unforgivable in this marriage.”) should be weighed against the values of the communities to which they belong. For example, Marta, a Mexican American woman, told us that she was bothered by her husband’s womanizing earlier in their marriage. However, she cited her church and her own mother as sources for her motivation to forgive Alejandro when he asked for it. (Her mother told her that men become more domesticated as they age.) In her talks with Alejandro, Marta prioritized longevity of marriage over his sexual fidelity, explaining that she could forgive his infidelity only if he pledged to remain an otherwise responsible husband. As we sat in their living room, Alejandro recounted his early transgressions with regret and tenderly described her repeated willingness to forgive him until he “learned the error of my ways.”

In contrast to Marta, others might choose personal values over relational and cultural values as they practice forgiveness. For

example, one's personal commitment to relational fidelity may trump relational commitments to marriage or religious dictates. In such instances, forgiveness discourse may be a matter of affirming that wrongdoing has occurred and seeking apology as a way to affirm one's personal dignity. An apology may be accepted and forgiveness may be granted, but the relationship may be terminated to protect the self from future violations.

Personal commitments are sometimes prioritized over community commitments. Mason is a young homosexual who believes that gay people should have the right to marry. He rejects his church's teaching on homosexuality because it conflicts with his sense that all human beings, including himself, were created equal under God. Mason had a blow-up with his father over this issue, after his father criticized his "gay lifestyle." He insisted that his father apologize and called him a "bigot." After the pair cooled down, a discussion of values ensued. Mason explained that denying his identity was out of the question and that his relationship with his father (and his church) would always be strained if he were asked to do so. It took several years of uncomfortable family gatherings before Mason's father came to prioritize his relationship with Mason over this particular religious teaching. He eventually apologized to his son. Mason had negotiated a kind of uneasy peace with his father long before the apology, but it was only then that he really "let go of the anger I felt toward him."

Values in tension are sometimes *reframed*, as Kelley (1998) suggested in his article on the communication of forgiveness. Reframing can be accomplished by invoking a superordinate value that allows the conflicting values to coexist in relative harmony. In the preceding leader-member example, the tension between equity and seniority may be resolved by invoking the value of fairness. Perhaps they can agree that the member has been wronged according to the standard of fairness. After all, employees have not been treated the same. Yet the leader has been wrongly accused, in the sense that the seniority system is fair. Those who have invested the most time receive the most benefit. In this case, the forgiveness negotiation proceeds from a mutual recognition of violated values and (perhaps) mutual efforts to seek forgiveness through apology ("Sorry, I should not have accused you of unfairness.") and explanation ("I should have let you know about the seniority rule."). In each of these statements, the use of the word "should" is recognition of the moral code.

Finally, we should note that the commitment to forgiveness as a community, personal, and relational value is itself an important factor in values negotiation. Psychologists have long considered forgiveness to be a motivating construct (e.g., Hargrave, 1994) more than

a communication process. People who are committed to forgiveness as a core value are presumed to be more likely to seek and grant forgiveness.

Restoring relational justice through atonement

Justice is the sense that people are treated fairly and that a shared set of moral values will prevail. As we view it, forgiving communication is an informal means of deriving justice in personal relationships. Atonement is the making of amends for violations of relational justice. One option is to offer restitution by offering compensation for losses, as when a teenager offers to pay for repairs after damaging the family car. Self-criticism is a form of atonement (“I really don’t deserve to keep my job after that bone-headed mistake.”). Requests for, and pledges of, improved behavior may be enough to make amends (“I promise to never hurt you again.”), as are sustained efforts to comply with relational standards. We notice that parent-child discourse reveals positive responses to such atonement efforts (“I appreciate how you have been working on calling me if you are going to be late.”). Accepting punishment may also function as atonement (“I don’t blame you for giving me the silent treatment.”), as are efforts to “do penance.”

In Catholic theology, penance involves repetitive, ritualistic behavior performed as a way to prompt thinking about an offense, purify the soul, and make amends with God. “Say ten ‘Hail Marys,’” was the instruction a priest delivered to one of us (Vince) in his youth, an instruction he received all too often! Penance rituals may be seen in informal forgiveness discourse. A parent may tell a misbehaving child “go to your room and think about what you have done,” and a teacher requires a tardy student to write “I will not be late” repeatedly on the blackboard.

Whereas penance is a type of compensation for harm done to the moral order, other approaches to atonement are closer to purification rituals. These erase the stain of hurtful behavior, often by removing the offender from the community and requiring a kind of sacrifice.

In the highly popular fictional novel *The Da Vinci Code*, author Dan Brown (2003) concocts a shocking, if historically suspect, account of a group of religious zealots who commit heinous crimes in the name of God. A central character retreats to his isolated lodgings to engage in self-flagellation, harming himself with a kind of whip before and after his evil deeds. The infliction of pain apparently atones for the pain he causes others and God.

Sacrifice may have atoning effects in interpersonal relationships as well. As one spouse told us about her abusive husband, "He had to give up the booze if he wanted to prove himself worthy of a wife and kids. He had a choice to make, and he did." She forgave him once he began regularly attending AA meetings and she was certain he had given up his favorite drug. In the work setting, the stain of bad behavior may be (partially) removed by atonement, when a misbehaving employee accepts leave without pay or an insensitive supervisor assents to diversity training.

Hope: (Re)imagining a hopeful future

By restoring the partners' shared understanding of relational morality, forgiving communication creates hope for the future. Confidence in relational rules can be rebuilt. Accountability is reestablished. Defensiveness, guilt, and the desire for revenge may recede. Feelings of fairness and equity may return. When forgiveness has run its course, key questions raised by the transgression will be largely resolved. Who is at fault? What did they do wrong? How can things be made right? What does the future hold for this relationship? The upset and uncertainty created by transgressions are placed more firmly in the past and the groundwork for the relational future is laid. Ultimately, forgiveness makes it possible for wounded people to imagine a future in which their individual dignity is honored and relational justice prevails (even if justice comes to be defined by an altered set of relational values). Given these positive prospects, feelings of hostility and the desire for revenge may be replaced by hope and even positive regard for those who have participated in this trying process.

Honoring the self

The forgiveness process calls attention to core values of the self and insists that these values be respected. Behavior disrespectful of core values, whether committed by the self or another, must be acknowledged and rectified before forgiveness can proceed. Thus, we would expect that forgiveness ultimately leads to an invigorated understanding of one's values and a renewed respect for self.

Redirecting hostility

The forgiveness process can provide a mechanism for persons to express negative emotion rather than retaining it or ruminating over its causes. As we conceive of the process, communication expresses and acknowledges the intense emotion that inevitably follows a transgression. Emotion is "released" in the sense that it no longer serves a purpose

Table 3.6 Selected Research Questions Raised by NMT

1. Forgiveness discourse: How are moral standards invoked? Infractions identified? Injustices claimed? Community, personal, and relational standards balanced?
2. Do cultural or religious differences influence the quality of moral discourse in forgiveness episodes? Do they make people more or less forgiving?
3. Does forgiveness spur changes in relational values or is value maintenance a more common outcome? Under what relational conditions is value transformation more likely?
4. Are such practices as self-criticism, offers of restitution, pledges of improved behavior, and penance expected by wounded partners? Perceived positively?
5. Which kinds of moral discourse lead to a restored sense of relational trust, fairness, or intimacy? Which do not? Why?
6. Should certain acts (e.g., physical abuse) remain unforgiven by the larger collective (families, organizations, societies) even when individual victims are forgiving?
7. What are the moral implications when victims (e.g., the parents of a murdered child) offer forgiveness to a perpetrator who is unrepentant or deceased?
8. Can entities (e.g., the Catholic church) request forgiveness for the immoral behavior of individual members (e.g., abusive priests?). Does doing so facilitate or impede the moral functions of forgiving communication?

once it is legitimized. Forgiveness is an alternative to the conflict that might be driven by unregulated emotion and long-held grudges.

Increasing certainty and safety

The forgiveness process may yield new relational rules or moral guidelines that make the future of the relationship more predictable and safe.

Finding closure

We have established that forgiveness can take a very long time. But the granting of forgiveness, especially the explicit kind, clearly signals a commitment to put the transgression in the past. The communicative energy expended on such moral tasks as establishing accountability now becomes available for investment in other activities, such as planning for the future.

Possible reconciliation

As we have noted, forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. One might release hostile feelings and the desire for revenge but decide not to reconcile with the offender for any number of reasons, including protecting the self from further harm. However, we believe that the negotiation of forgiveness, the restoration of a mutually acceptable moral code, is a prerequisite for full reconciliation.

Questions Raised by NMT

We end this chapter with a brief discussion of the questions raised by our Negotiated Morality Theory of forgiveness. Table 3.6 summarizes some of these. We start with questions about discourse. How are moral concerns manifested in forgiveness discourse? Aside from the examples presented in this chapter, the nature of forgiveness discourse is rarely shared in the research literature. In forgiveness episodes, how do partners invoke moral standards? Call attention to moral infractions? Claim relational justice? Balance community, personal, and relational standards? Next, individual differences come to mind. Do cultural or religious differences influence the quality of moral discourse in forgiveness episodes? Do they make people more or less forgiving? We also wonder about the transformational effects of forgiveness episodes. Do they spur changes in relational values, or is value maintenance a more common outcome? Under what relational conditions is value transformation more likely? The connection between values-related discourse and relational outcomes is another rich area of inquiry. Are such practices as self-criticism, offers of restitution, pledges of improved behavior, and penance perceived positively? Do they in fact lead to a restored sense of relational trust, fairness, or intimacy? Finally, we call attention to situations in which the practice of forgiveness in the short term may be morally damaging in the long run. Should certain acts (e.g., physical abuse) not be forgiven by the larger collective (families, organizations, societies) even when individual victims are forgiving? What does it mean for our shared moral code when victims (e.g., the parents of a murdered child) offer forgiveness to a perpetrator who is unrepentant or deceased? Can entities (e.g., the Catholic Church) request forgiveness for the immoral behavior of individual members (e.g., abusive priests?). Does doing so facilitate or impede the moral functions of forgiving communication?