# A Sociology of Forgiveness in Relationships: Why the Sociology of Personal Life Should be Interested in Forgiveness


## Abstract

Abundant research in adjacent disciplines shows forgiveness (including forgiving, not forgiving, being forgiven, and not being forgiven) to be an ordinary feature of how personal relationships are maintained, repaired, and rescinded. Sociologists, however, have scarcely considered forgiveness at all. This paper shows why sociologists of personal life *should* be interested in forgiveness, and how this contributes to sociological interpretations of conflict and repair in relationships. Indeed, it is argued that sociologists of personal life should be interested in forgiveness because it seems to be part of the ordinary vernacular through which relationships are made sense of. It is also argued that sociologists of personal life can deliver a perspective on forgiveness in relationships that is missing from existing forgiveness research agendas.



## Keywords

Forgiveness; Conflict and Repair; Personal Relationships; Sociology of Personal Life; Everyday Lives.


## Introduction

Have you ever forgiven or been forgiven by a partner, a friend, or a family member? Have you forgiven something in the last year? Is there something in your life that you have not forgiven, or have struggled to forgive? Extensive research in psychology and communications studies shows that most of us would be able to answer at least some of these questions affirmatively (Worthington and Wade, 2019). At the turn of the 21st Century, Frank Fincham (2000: 1), one of the founders of psychological work on forgiveness, noted that social 'scientists know very little about forgiveness'. Since then, psychological work into forgiveness has exploded, with thousands of empirical studies into forgiveness conducted in little over 20 years (Worthington & Wade, 2019). Forgiveness literatures have also flourished in communication studies in this period. Philosophy and theology, the disciplines most concerned with forgiveness prior to this recent expansion, have similarly witnessed a renaissance of inquiry into forgiveness in response to cross-disciplinary developments in forgiveness research (Nussbaum, 2016).

The socio-cultural, interactional, and relational nature of forgiveness implies that it is prime territory for sociological research and theorising. Current research shows forgiveness[1] to be cross-cultural, but shaped in relation to cultural and situational context (Zhang et al., 2015). Forgiveness is something that happens between people, meaning that forgiveness is generally undertaken through interaction, often in relation to similar interactional processes such as apology, argument, and reconciliation. Even when undertaken in absence of the

[1] As in existing literature, "forgiveness" will be used as an umbrella term to encompass forgiving, being forgiven, not forgiving and not being forgiven.

offending party, forgiveness, including self-forgiveness, nearly always follows a social act of transgression, or at least an interpretation of transgression. Dispositions towards forgivingness and how forgiveness is practiced have also been tied to social factors such as gender, religiosity, and age (Escher, 2013; Miller et al., 2008). The nature of forgiveness means that it has been shown to be an integral part of human relationships, which becomes particularly significant at important junctures in social life: around the dissolution and reconciliation of relationships, around death, after traumas, and amongst social conflicts (Battle and Miller, 2005; Brewer, 2018). The personal and social repair involved in forgiveness, and the disaffection and rupture associated with not forgiving, means such experiences are deeply meaningful to the individuals involved, with notions of forgiveness providing the vernacular through which experiences of conflict and hurt are made sense of (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Most current definitions also recognise forgiveness as a relational emotional process, which chimes with contemporary sociological emphasis on the affective features of social practice (Wetherell, 2012).

Forgiveness is thus a fundamentally *social* phenomenon. Yet, sociological consideration of forgiveness is virtually non-existent. On the rare occasions where the significance of forgiveness has been recognised by sociologists, it has been in analysis of forgiveness at the level of the extraordinary: the significance of instances of political forgiveness or the possibility of forgiveness for historical crimes (Finnegan, 2010; Oliner, 2009; Trimikliniotis, 2013), and the potential role of forgiveness to peacebuilding (Brewer, 2018). What sociologists are yet to consider at all is forgiveness at the level it is most commonly experienced: namely in personal relationships. Indeed, as the abundance of recent psychological and communication studies research into forgiveness shows, far from being a rare virtue or an extraordinary undertaking, forgiveness is 'woven into the fabric of human existence', primarily because forgiveness is an ordinary and integral feature of how personal relationships are maintained and repaired (Fincham, 2000: 4; Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

This paper principally aims to set out why sociologists of personal life *should* be interested in forgiveness. The first section sets out existing academic research into forgiveness, focusing mostly on the recent development of extensive empirical research from psychology and communications studies into forgiveness in relationships. While the overwhelmingly quantitative nature of existing research has limitations for capturing experiences of forgiveness, it is argued that it does nonetheless compellingly show that sociologists of personal life should be interested in forgiveness as a topic. Section two thus explores the curious absence of sociological interest in forgiveness in personal relationships. Section three then sets out what the study of forgiveness can bring to sociologies of personal life. Finally, section four briefly argues that sociologists are well place to contribute a research agenda on forgiveness that is missing from current dominant forgiveness literatures. It is argued throughout that sociological consideration of forgiveness is not just an abstract academic exercise, but rather is necessary for understanding important facets of people's relationships (including experiences of hurts, managing conflicts, maintaining and repairing relationships) in the terms that people ordinarily understand and make sense of these experiences in their everyday lives.

Existing Research into Forgiveness

This section briefly explores the main disciplines through which forgiveness has so far been researched. This firstly helps to illuminate why forgiveness is a significant topic for sociological research. But it also highlights the contribution that sociology is able to make to understanding forgiveness over and against current research.

Prior to the recent explosion of psychological interest in forgiveness, academic consideration of forgiveness was almost entirely restricted to theology and philosophy. The prominence of forgiveness (or similar notions) in all major world religions means theological interpretation provides the most historically sustained academic engagement with the topic, principally via expositions of the meaning of forgiveness across religions and scripture (Waldron and Kelley, 2008). More recently, in relation to the contemporary vogue of forgiveness both within and beyond academia, theological perspectives have reiterated how the languages and meanings associated with forgiveness are religious in their roots, and how studies of religious interpretations can inform conceptualisations of what forgiveness is (Rye *et al.*, 2000).

Along with theology, the other traditional domain of academic consideration of forgiveness is philosophy. Western philosophic exploration of forgiveness has a long history, which traces its lineage through Augustine and Aquinas to Arendt and Derrida, among many others (Nussbaum, 2016). Philosophic accounts have predominantly been concerned with the nature and meaning of forgiveness, the phenomenological experience of forgiveness, forgiveness as a virtue, the criteria of genuine forgiveness, and the circumstances under which forgiveness (or not forgiving) can be justified (Caze, 2018; Hallich, 2013; Nussbaum, 2016). Recently, philosophic work has set itself against contemporary conceptions of forgiveness given in psychology. A number of philosophic critiques, for example, have delivered important challenges to the assumptions that underpin "forgiveness therapies" for improving wellbeing after experiences of various transgressions and abuses. As Hallich (2013: 1008) argues, '[t]he *mere* fact that a certain practice increases someone's well-being does nothing to show that it is morally right'.

Empirical research into forgiveness, however, only began to develop in any significant form in the 1990s. This research was driven by psychologists, who noted that theological and philosophic conceptions tend to present forgiveness as somewhere between divine and extraordinarily virtuous (Fincham, 2000). But as Wainryb et al. (2020: 510) summarise:

> imagine what our interpersonal interactions would be like if we lacked the capacity to forgive those who hurt us. Rather than divine, forgiveness is an essential and deeply human component of our everyday lives—one that makes it possible for us to move past injuries and slights and allows our relationships and ourselves to grow.

Identifying forgiveness as an "ordinary" phenomenon was thus a key driver in the development of empirical psychological studies of forgiveness. From the 1990s, a handful of scholars began to identify the prevalence of forgiveness in human life, providing evidence of

forgiveness as being something that most people have experience of (Fincham, 2000), as being a regular feature of couple and family relationships (Hargrave, 1994), as being a significant feature in childhood development (Park and Enright, 1997), and as being prevalent across cultures (McCullough, 2001). These early studies acted as a launchpad for the explosion of psychological studies of forgiveness since the turn of the 21st Century.

Such research takes forgiveness to be a fundamentally psychological phenomenon, and therefore focuses on psychological processes involved in forgiveness. Current research, for example, studies the emotional states that produce or inhibit forgiveness (Kaleta and Mróz, 2021), the role of psychological dispositions or personality traits in forgivingness (Ysseldyk et al., 2007), and the effects of "priming" on forgiveness outcomes (Lucas et al., 2022).

While much of the emphasis on psychological research has been on the *intra*personal processes of the forgiver, few psychologists see forgiveness as being simply an internal process. Indeed, the expansion of psychological interest in forgiveness was driven to a large extent by psychologists of personal relationships, who came to recognise forgiving and not forgiving as significant and common relationship experiences (Fincham, 2000). As with psychological research into forgiveness in general, the major thrust of research into forgiveness in relationships has been quantitative. Such research often involves quantitative evaluation of, for example, how frequently forgiveness occurs in relationships, gendered differences in forgiving, the significance of personality traits and factors such as relationship length and relationship satisfaction in how likely forgiveness is to occur, and the kind of transgressions that are likely to be considered unforgivable (Worthington and Wade, 2019).

Psychological literature on forgiveness has been subject to several lines of critique, however. Firstly, although the interpersonal nature of forgiveness is nearly always recognised in psychology, overwhelming priority continues to be given to the internal processes through which forgiveness occurs, meaning the intersubjectivity involved in forgiveness is often not well conceptualised or well-integrated with the advances made by psychology (DiDonato et al., 2015). A second more occasional critique is that psychological scholarship on forgiveness is so 'dominated by quantitative and statistical inquiry' that consideration of the qualitative meanings and experiences of forgiveness in psychology is meagre at best (Goman, 2017: 165).

Communication studies scholars, the next biggest contributors to contemporary scholarship on forgiveness, have sought to address some of these issues. Whereas psychologists take forgiveness to be an ultimately psychological phenomenon, communications scholars study forgiveness primarily as a communicative phenomenon that commonly occurs in an intersubjective process between offender and forgiver, with the success or failure of forgiveness processes being tied to how interactions between parties unfold. As such, elements and strategies of the communicative process of forgiveness have been well conceptualised.

Much of the communication studies research into forgiveness has developed from the landmark studies of Waldron & Kelley (2008). This work was groundbreaking in its use of qualitative methods in studying forgiveness in marriages, arguing that qualitative methods

are necessary to capture the meaningful experience of forgiveness in relationships. However, despite their critiques of relying on purely quantitative methods to understand forgiveness, the qualitative thrust of Waldron & Kelley's research has remained peripheral. As with psychology, forgiveness research in communications studies is overwhelmingly quantitative (Goman, 2017).

Several notable exceptions notwithstanding, communications research has focused on patterns of likelihood of forgiveness occurring or not, or offers quantitative investigation of how strategies of communicating forgiveness are undertaken and how the use of strategy varies according to relationship type and the severity of transgression (e.g. Morse and Metts, 2011; Antony and Sheldon, 2019). But the limitations of the commonly employed survey methods in such studies mean that their capacity to contextualise the circumstances and relationship histories in which an instance of forgiveness occurs are limited. Even amongst communications research that does attempt to integrate qualitative elements (e.g. Antony & Sheldon, 2019), the predominant focus on preferences of forgiveness strategies or the likelihood of forgiveness occurring in certain situations looks past the meaningful experience of forgiving or not forgiving, the narratives and relational histories which forgiveness upholds or undermines, and how experiences of forgiveness are used to make sense of relationships and the transgressions experienced within them.

As will be argued below, the sociology of personal life is well place to overcome limitations of existing forgiveness research.

## The Curious Absence of Forgiveness from Sociologies of Personal Life

Methodological limitations notwithstanding, existing research positions some degree of forgiveness as a common feature of personal relationships, which plays an important role in how relationships are maintained in "ordinary" circumstances, and how relationships are repaired or not repaired at significant junctures. This abundance of evidence suggests that sociologists of personal life *should* be interested in forgiveness as a feature of relationships.

Indeed, the sociology of personal life's regular engagement with experiences of relationship conflict means it has come remarkably close to the territory of forgiveness. In fact, direct references to forgiveness appear explicitly (albeit occasionally) in personal life literatures without being made into an object of study in themselves. Interestingly, mentions of forgiveness mostly arise in the verbatim reporting of research participants' own accounts. For example, in Ribbens McCarthy et al's (2003: 39) famous study into moral narratives of parenting and step-parenting, a participant discusses how the enduring nature of family relationships is predicated on some degree of forgiveness:

> 'you can be forgiven all these horrendous things you put them through and you can expect it all back from them too'

Likewise, examples can be found in Björnberg's (2004: 41) study into how dual-earning couples manage conflicts over domestic labour:

> ‘We get extremely angry but he always takes the initiative to ask for forgiveness. For him it is much easier to do so than for me.’

Also in the accounts given by several participants in van Hooff's (2017) excellent research into perceptions and experiences of infidelity:

> ‘The thing that I couldn’t forgive is that it’s playing by different rules’ (p.856)
>
> ‘I think I’d want to forgive, but it would be the lying rather than the sex’ (p.856)
>
> ‘I think I could maybe forgive a drunken one night stand, but not one of those affairs you hear about that goes on for years’ (p.860).

And again in Moore's (2012: 354) research into marriage and divorce:

> ‘I still would find it difficult to forgive the way he did it because his son was four-and-a-half’.

Similar direct quotes from participants mentioning forgiveness can be found in Holland and Crowley's (2013: 61) study into attitudes of looked-after children towards birth parents, and also in Madziva's (2016: 239) research into the damage done to personal relationships by asylum restrictions. Elsewhere, in Silvén Hagström’s (2017: 1088) arresting research into the experiences of children whose parents had committed suicide, a participant’s remark that ‘you need to forgive him’ is taken to be indicative of wider attitudes in the sample.

But if forgiving and not forgiving is as ubiquitous to relationships as psychologists and communications scholars purport it to be, and if sociological research into personal relationships engages extensively with themes to which forgiveness emerges, we might ask why forgiveness has so far been overlooked by sociologists of personal life. In my view, the main reason for this is that the *extraordinary* terms in which forgiveness is generally associated means its *ordinary* role in relationships is particularly liable to be overlooked by sociologists.

Firstly, as Waldron and Kelley (2008: 4) argue, the religious and often mystical connotations associated with forgiveness means the topic is likely to be received with some scepticism among scholars, ‘because the concept strikes them as “fuzzy”, unrealistically optimistic, or better suited to theological rather than scientific methods of study’. But as well as the religious and divine connotations associated with forgiveness, Western philosophy has often conceptualised of forgiveness with a purity that seems unattainable. As MacLachlan (2009: 185-186) (herself a philosopher) notes, ‘philosophers have tended to reinforce everyday concepts of forgiveness with strict sets of conditions, creating ideals or paradigms of forgiveness’ in which ‘either forgiveness matches—or at least resembles—a philosophical paradigm and is therefore genuine and praiseworthy, or it is imperfect, immoral, or even “pseudoforgiveness”’. The association of forgiveness with theological constructs and abstract philosophising likely explains some sociological aversions towards the topic.

The fluffy, overly-optimistic, and quasi-mystical associations of forgiveness are perhaps not helped by the degree of contemporary vogue forgiveness has accrued in pop-psychology and wellbeing literature. This growth has been fuelled by postulations of the seemingly

unbridled virtues of forgiveness reported by much of the early psychological literature, leading to forgiveness being purported as a catch-all cure in popular literatures (Murphy, 2003). Additionally, as recent philosophic critiques argue (Nussbaum, 2016), the translation of psychological research about forgiveness into "forgiveness therapies" tends to present forgiveness as a process that people *should* undertake (under therapeutic instruction) to improve their wellbeing, even in circumstances where there are very good reasons not to forgive. Cases in point might include the development of forgiveness interventions by psychologists to aid the recovery of women who have suffered partner abuse or been the victims of incestual sexual abuse (see Freedman and Enright, 2017).

Well-justified sociological aversions to the abundance of quick-fix wellbeing literatures (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019) may contribute to forgiveness being unappealing as a topic of sociological research. But the therapeutic prescriptiveness of forgiveness presents an additional problem from a sociological perspective. Sociology has stood as a bastion of research into issues like gendered violence and oppression, regularly calling for radical social change and raised consciousness of structures and behaviours that have been tolerated for too long (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). The presentation of forgiveness as a remedy for the victims of specific experiences of systemic abuse thus stands to provoke sociological antipathy to the topic as a whole. There are, after all, very good reasons why people should not forgive, and a willingness to forgive has been shown to be associated with people remaining in abusive relationships (Gilbert and Gordon, 2017).

As will be discussed below, sociologists need not look at forgiveness prescriptively. Instead, the key point for sociologists of personal life to draw from existing research is that there is strong evidence for forgiveness (including forgiving, being forgiven, not forgiving and not being forgiven) being a common feature of personal relationships, which provides an ordinary means through which people describe and articulate experiences in relationships (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). And it is perhaps the ordinariness of forgiveness in relationships (combined with its extraordinary associations) that most explains why it has been overlooked by sociologists.

Sociological research into personal relationships is often undertaken from an "everyday life" perspective. Such perspectives aim to illuminate the significant features of social existence that are regularly rendered unnoticeable by lay people and sociologists alike precisely because of their familiarity (Neal & Murji, 2015). In so doing, everyday life perspectives indicate why a familiar experience such as forgiveness may have been bypassed by sociologists: whereas rare instances of forgiveness in remarkable circumstances (e.g. forgiveness in post-conflict societies (Brewer, 2018)) have become occasional objects of sociological study, the familiarity of everyday forms of forgiveness leads to its place and significance in ordinary relationships being overlooked.

Indeed, everyday forms of forgiveness are perhaps especially liable to be passed over because, as Gabb and Fink (2017) argue, sociological attention has commonly focused more on how and why relationships fail and the consequences of this, rather than on how relationships are mended and made to endure. Consequently, as will be seen in the next section, sociological understandings of the practices through which relationships are

maintained and repaired remain in their infancy (Chonody and Gabb, 2019). Perhaps, then, it is the combination of the extraordinary connotations of forgiveness on the one hand, with its ordinariness as a feature of relationship experience and repair on the other, which has resulted in forgiveness not yet being subjected to the kind of sociological 'defamiliarising [of] the familiar' that allows important but unnoticed facets of our social existence to be revealed (Neal & Murji, 2015: 813).

## Conflict and Repair in the Sociology of Personal Life

As noted, references to forgiveness appear in sociological accounts of conflict and repair in relationships. But if forgiveness has been overlooked, what phenomena and processes have sociologists looked at when investigating relationship conflicts and repair? And where does forgiveness figure in relation to adjacent phenomena that have been looked at?

Although sociology of personal life considerations of how relationships repair are in their infancy, a specifically designated 'sociology of repair' outside of the context of personal relationships has an established history (Henke, 1999: 55). This traces its origins back at least as far as Goffman and early ethnomethodologists' studies of interactional repair. Interactional processes of repair in the wake of disruptions to orderly relations continue to feature heavily in contemporary sociological work in the Goffmanian and conversation analysis traditions, with a number of works using exchanges between couples, family members, and friends to analyse the structures of interactional 'remedial work' (Goffman, 1972: 108). Heritage et al. (2019), for example, used exchanges in personal relationships to analyse the significance of the proportionality of an offense to the remedial action taken (e.g. apology). Sterponi (2003) applies Goffman's concepts of remedial work to conversation analysis of disagreements in families. This insightfully illuminates the orderings of challenges to potentially transgressive behaviours, subsequent justifications, and the interactional repair undertaken through excusing and apologising. Cavanagh et al.'s (2001) remarkable paper also applies Goffman's concept of remedial work to show how men convicted of intimate partner violence strategically construct narrative accounts of the violence they inflicted in order to mitigate and obfuscate culpability through apologies, redirecting blame, and the minimisation of consequences.

This body of work provides important insights into interactional practices that would be integral to the sociological study of forgiveness. However, Tavuchis (1991) argues that the focus on strategic behaviours in Goffman's conceptualisation of remedial work, while vital, tends to undermine the emotional force and senses of responsibility that often accompany sincere remedial practices. Tavuchis (1991) thus sought to produce a "sociology of apology" that also includes exchanges of feelings, responsibilities, and reconciliation. Although constituent features of many apologies, Tavuchis (1991) differentiates apology from strategic accounts, excuses, and justifications that seek to shift blame. Apologies, at least when done well and undertaken sincerely, entail 'acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the violated rule, admissions of fault and responsibility for its violation, and the expression of genuine regret and remorse for the harm done' (Tavuchis, 1991: 3). Tavuchis's focus was on

conceptualising apologies in general, rather than exploring their role in personal relationships. And the purity of his definition perhaps reflects the fact that his work draws on literary and newspaper examples of apology as its basis. However, it remains true that moving notions of apology and repair beyond strategic accounts is surely necessary to capture intersubjective feelings of hurt, guilt, and regret involved in repairing personal relationships. Yet, importantly for the topic at hand, whilst Tavuchis (1991: 27) mentions forgiveness regularly and indeed conceptualises 'apology [as] the speech act that seeks forgiveness', it is at the apology that his analysis stops.

This is true also of more recent attempts to integrate repair into sociological accounts of personal relationships. Following Gabb and Fink's (2017) call for a greater focus on how relationships endure, a burgeoning literature on the maintenance and repair of relationships has begun to develop that goes beyond interactional repair (Chonody and Gabb, 2019; Gabb et al., 2020; McDermott et al., 2021). As with Tavuchis, research in this area recognises the need to encompass emotional flows into relationship repair practices. Such practices are thus often conceptualised as part of the 'emotional work' undertaken within relationships (McDermott *et al.*, 2021: 177). Gabb and Fink's (2017) own masterful *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century* discusses at length couples' experiences of conflict (which are often coloured by vivid senses of guilt and regret among participants) and the various practices through which conflicts are managed and moved on from. The role of humour, 'reflexive bickering', and apologies are illuminated as means through which couples seek to ameliorate or work out conflicts, with these practices supported by reflexive understandings of one's partner and their relative ways of dealing with certain issues (Gabb and Fink, 2017: 66).

Conflict management and repair has also been explored in the context of familial relationships. For example, Gabb *et al.* (2020), McDermott *et al.* (2021) and Bosley-Smith and Reczek (2022) each highlight the practices and emotional work through which young LGBTQ+ people seek to sustain, repair, challenge, and withdraw from family relationships, as well as more and less successful (and sincere) attempts by parents to make amends. For many (although by no means all) participants in these studies, this included a desire and willingness to move on from hurts caused by clumsy and insensitive behaviours of family members, often in relation to deep understandings of the wrongdoer's "actual" attitudes, intentions, and feelings. The significance of forgiveness to such processes is mentioned by Bosley-Smith and Reczek (2022), but is not taken to be an object of analysis in itself.

Sociological literatures on friendships also discuss experiences of falling out with friends, the managing of "difficult" friendships, and friendships being brought to an end (Eramian and Mallory, 2021; Smart et al., 2012). Within this, instances and practices of apology and reconciliation appear, including the exchange of letters resulting in reaffirmations of friendships, and attempts to reconcile through messages and meeting up after arguments (Eramian and Mallory, 2021; Smart et al., 2012). Smart et al. (2012: 92) recognise that friendships often involve intense 'emotional work in relation to the other and the self', especially when friendships become "difficult". However, as the authors stress, processes of negotiating conflict and repair in friendships are not well understood.

Sociology of personal life literatures have thus begun to document practices through which conflicts in relationships are managed and recovered from (such as humour, avoidance, withdrawal, and apology). However, although such accounts have recently sought to recognise the emotional work involved within these practices, it remains true that sociological analysis has mostly focused on interactional practices. In terms of repair, for example, sociological analysis has only gone as far as examining various practices of apologies, even where issues of forgiveness are alluded to within accounts of these practices (e.g. Smart et al., 2012). It is true that apologies, expressions of regret, and other actions to make amends are often part-and-parcel of forgiveness, and the absence of these may facilitate not forgiving. Indeed, communications research shows that forgiveness is usually an interactional, intersubjective process that mostly happens in relation to remedial practices (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). But forgiveness adds an extra dimension beyond these practices that is so far missing from sociological analysis. This is because forgiveness is also an affective experience. People feel that they have forgiven something or not, they feel forgiven or not forgiven, in much the same way as people feel respected or let down: these are vocabularies through which intersubjective emotional experience is felt and interpreted. As will be argued next, vocabularies and experiences of forgiveness are an integral part of how people feel and make sense of transgressions and hurts in relationships, and sociologists need to understand forgiveness to understand a vital aspect of relationship experience.

## What can Forgiveness add to Sociologies of Personal Life?

Here I limit myself to briefly setting out three general contributions that the study of forgiveness can bring to the sociology of personal life, although there are surely many more. I propose firstly that studying forgiveness allows sociologists to examine moments of conflict and repair in the terms that they are regularly experienced and interpreted by people in their everyday lives. Existing research positions some degree of forgiveness as a relatively ordinary relationship maintenance practice, and as being of great significance to the repairing or not repairing of relationships at significant junctures (Battle and Miller, 2005). Studying forgiveness thus contributes to sociological understandings of these processes.

But more importantly, it seems that forgiveness (including forgiving, not forgiving, struggling to forgive, feeling forgiven) is an ordinary means through which such experiences are approached and articulated. This is alluded to in the above-mentioned sociological studies in which participants mention (apparently unprompted) forgiving and not forgiving in relation to conflicts and divisions in relationships. In these instances, and in extensive existing research on forgiveness in personal relationships (e.g. Waldron and Kelley, 2008), whether or not a significant transgression is or is not forgiven seems to be part of the vernacular of how conflicts and transgressions are thought about. The language of forgiveness is used to articulate whether a transgression is something that has been or could be moved on from, or whether it still provokes hurt and anger (or guilt and shame), whilst acts that are seen as unforgivable are associated with the termination of a relationship or a relationship

becoming irredeemable. The key point is that, rather than being an abstract sociological concept, the very notion of forgiveness provides an integral part of people's ordinary conceptual repertoires for thinking through significant experiences in their lives and relationships. Sociologists of personal life thus should be concerned with forgiveness because forgiveness is part of the everyday vocabularies through which people make sense of moments of division and repair in their lived experience.

Secondly, I argue that forgiveness then provides sociologists with an additional avenue through which emotional experiences and affective practices in relationships can be explored. For some years, sociologists of personal life have sought to "de-flatten" their analysis to include emotional experiences that are so integral to how relationships are felt and interpreted (Gabb, 2009). This reflects broader movements within sociology to account for the significance of emotions to social practice and experience (Sayer, 2011; Wetherell, 2012; Abbott & Burkitt, 2023). As Sayer (2011: 146) illuminates, emotions are not just visceral responses; they flood our experience with meanings that we take towards ourselves and towards others, and thereby are integral to our qualitative interpretations of ourselves, situations, and relationships, and also how we assess what we should do: 'my guilt *informs* me that I have hurt someone needlessly; it makes me *feel* bad; and it *motivates* me to find some way of repairing the damage'.

Recognising emotions as informing our evaluative interpretations then further illuminates the role of forgiveness in meaning-making, as feelings of how deeply we were hurt, questions of whether we think we can move on from something, whether we think the person's regret is sincere, or how awful we feel for our misdeeds become connected with feelings of wanting to forgive, to be forgiven, and consideration of the consequences of not forgiving or not being forgiven. Entwined as it is with experiences of hurt, issues of trust, and desires for restitution and resolution, the meaning-making that is undertaken through forgiveness is likely to have a particular significance to how people understand and interpret their relationships. Understood in this way, forgiveness could thus be seen from a sociological perspective as the kind of 'telling moments' in relationships through which a great deal of sense- and meaning-making is channelled (Gabb & Fink, 2015: 970).

Thirdly, as well as understanding experiences in relationships at a micro scale, the notion of forgiveness also provides sociologists with an additional means of examining experiences and interrogating broader normative parameters through which relationships are experienced. With experiences that engender processes of forgiving, the things that hurt us emotionally or that lead us to feel regret are not simply internal features of our psychological experience, but also reflect socio-culturally moulded patterns of relations that imbue issues with meaning (Wetherell, 2012). For example, social attitude surveys in the UK indicate that infidelity in monogamous couple relationships is mostly considered as both always wrong and as a relationship-ending transgression (van Hooff, 2017). Research into forgiveness thus frequently registers infidelity as something that has not or would not be forgiven (Battle and Miller, 2005). As noted above, this is alluded to in van Hooff's work, in which several participants discuss infidelity as being unforgivable.

Communications research illuminates how the kinds of transgressions that are taken to be forgivable or not varies considerably across different types of relationships (e.g. friendships, familial relationships, dating couples, and long-term couples). This literature also highlights how expectations for forgiveness to be pursued may vary according to the type of relationship (Antony and Sheldon, 2019; Morse and Metts, 2011). There seems to be less of an imperative to address fallings out in friendships compared to couple relationships. Likewise, compared to couple and friendships, the "non-voluntary" nature of familial relationships means a relationship may continue even when behaviour is perceived as unforgivable (Antony and Sheldon, 2019; Carr and Wang, 2012). Exploring forgiveness consequently provides sociologists with an additional means for understanding variations in the normative contexts of personal relationships, in how transgressions in these relationships are experienced, and in how different types of relationships are repaired or rescinded.

Additionally, factors such as gender, socio-economic class, sexuality, religiosity, and cultural context have been shown to have some bearing on how forgiveness is understood, and on how forgivable certain transgressions are taken to be (Miller et al., 2008). Forgiveness thus provides sociologists with an additional avenue for exploring the role of such factors in how transgressions in relationships are approached, and for broader explorations of inequalities in expectations of forgiveness. Notably, Miller et al.'s (2008) meta-analysis of research into gendered differences in forgiveness indicates that women tend to be more forgiving than men. As MacLachlan (2009: 193) argues, [i]t makes sense that an inclination to forgive—or a sense of its expectation'—may be more prevalent in women given that 'women are more likely to be socialized to cultivate empathy and care, to sublimate their needs and rights to those of an ongoing relationship, and to reject negative emotions of anger and resentment'.

The significance of these points is brought home by psychological research that has illuminated a relationship between forgivingness and violence against women. Although this body of research remains in its infancy, it is argued that the documented willingness of women in abusive relationships to forgive partners can be seen as reflecting gendered expectations of women to be forgiving and for the sanctity of the relationship to be prioritised. Significantly, this research shows that women who are more forgiving of their partners are more likely to return to an abusive relationship (Gilbert and Gordon, 2017). Alongside investigations into the role of forgiveness in maintaining and repairing relationships, a sociological approach can and should investigate the role of power in forgiveness, instances of "problematic" forgivingness, and the role forgiveness can play in allowing abusive circumstances to continue. Sociology's foundational concern with power relations deems it especially well-placed to undertake this work.

## What can the Sociology of Personal Life Bring to Forgiveness Research?

Despite the extensive study of forgiveness in adjacent disciplines, sociologists of personal life are able to develop a research agenda on forgiveness in relationships that is missing from current empirical research. This is because sociologies of personal life, as they have

developed over the last twenty years or so, have sought to capture the complex entwinements, meanings, and emotional nuances of relationship experiences that are regularly washed from social scientific analysis (Mason, 2006).

Personal life sociologies invite us to contemplate the often taken-for-granted experiences that comprise relationships. However, this does not imply that relationships and the experiences of them are straightforward. Attempts to integrate complex felt features of social experience into the sociological purview has resulted in sociologists of personal life applying theoretical perspectives and developing modes of research that would allow forgiveness to be explored in ways that are mostly missing from current studies. For example, sociologists of personal life regularly apply practice theories to describe the simultaneously ordered yet idiosyncratic and emergent nature of personal relationships. Practice theories argue that social action is orientated by social meanings and interaction orders, but nevertheless occurs between differently disposed and complicated people in circumstances that are often "messy", meaning that such action often resists being neatly formulated into rules or models (Morgan, 2011). Recognition of this problematises attempts within psychology to model forgiveness and the steps through which it occurs. But the complexities of intersubjective experience and practice also implies that studying forgiveness primarily through quantification of psychological processes is liable to miss the entangled and unfolding nature of how transgressions are experienced and how forgiving or not forgiving occurs, as it ebbs and flows between actors, becomes re-enlivened by subsequent events, as others intercede, or as entwinements of relationships mean that resolving to forgive seems like the easiest course.

Whilst communications scholars focus specifically on interactional practice, the quantification of practices in order to identify trends and predict forgiveness strategies means that much of this research also struggles to register the complexity of situations within which instances of forgiveness are embroiled. Moments of forgiveness are often emotionally tumultuous, occurring within complexly entangled relationships, and unfolding over time within an amalgam of emergent circumstances, assessments of responsibility, and feelings of personal worth. This "messiness" represents key aspects of the qualitative experience of forgiveness that are not captured well by the kind of methods generally applied in forgiveness research.

This is not to imply the sociology of personal life is, or should be, an exclusively qualitative endeavour. However, the thorough dominance of quantitative methods in existing research opens an opportunity for the sociology of personal life to make a unique contribution to understanding forgiveness via its ample repertoire of qualitative methods. As Mason (2006: 11) argues, if we are

> to understand how relationships work and are done, what they mean, how and why they endure or do not, how they are remembered, emulated or reacted against and in general what matters in and about them, we need a methodology and methods that open our perspective to the multi-dimensionality of lived experience.

Achieving this in the sociology of personal life has often been undertaken by combining methods and exploring several domains in which different facets of a phenomenon are likely to arise (Gabb, 2009). Gabb (2009: 37), for example, reports how augmenting interview and observational methods with diaries, vignettes, photograph elicitation, and participant drawing of family relationships and maps of where affective behaviour occur, 'can generate multidimensional material on where, when and how […] relationships are experienced and why interactions take on particular forms, values and understandings', thus producing a dynamic account of 'sensual, emotional and embodied interactions […while] retain[ing] the emotional messiness, uncertainties and fluidity which constitute relational experience'. Sociologists have the opportunity to apply similar stances to researching forgiveness. This will allow the complexities of circumstance, relationship histories, emotional upheavals, and interactional exchanges through which forgiving does or does not occur to be illuminated in ways that much better reflect how forgiveness is experienced and how it becomes significant to supporting and undoing relationships.

## Conclusion

Current research into forgiveness from adjacent disciplines shows forgiveness to be part of the fabric of personal relationships. I have thus argued sociologists of personal life should be interested in forgiveness, and that they are well placed to build a research agenda that allows integral aspects of experiences of forgiveness to be explored in ways that are mostly missing in existing literatures. Especially via the qualitative approaches they have developed, sociologists of personal life have the capacity to capture the meaningfulness, complexity, and emotional force of forgiveness in ways that better reflect how forgiveness is experienced by people in relationship contexts. This requires the use of methods and analysis that allow the complexities and emotion-laden experiences of forgiveness narratives to shine through. It can then be asked how sociologists should begin to explore forgiveness. Holmes (2015) and May & Lewis (2019) argue that because meaningful experiences are often recounted in relation to the circumstances in which they are situated and the emotions they provoke, semi-structured interviews remain an ideal starting point for exploring phenomena that involve relational histories and emotional reflexivity, as is the case with forgiveness. Capturing the multidimensional nature of forgiveness could subsequently be extended by augmenting of interviews via similar methods suggested by Gabb (2009), discussed in the previous section. As a so far untapped area of sociological research, such methods can then generate additional lines of enquiry and directions of study. Because questions of forgiveness are particularly meaningful ways in which experiences in relationships are made sense of, narrative analysis thus may be especially apposite for bringing the meaning-making involved in forgiveness to the fore (Griffin & May, 2012).

But as well as sociologists of personal life being able to make an important contribution to studies of forgiveness, the study of forgiveness can bring something important to sociologies of personal life. Existing research positions forgiveness as an ordinary means through which people think about experiences in relationships. Exploring forgiveness thus

does not entail the imposition of abstract academic concepts on to everyday lives. Rather, forgiving, not forgiving, being forgiven, or not being forgiven are part of the vocabularies through which people reflect on hurts, feel redeemed or not, consider their treatment of others and how they have been treated by others, and decide what to do. Studying forgiveness opens an additional means with which sociologists can explore how relationships are maintained, repaired, and rescinded, which can be explored in relation to existing research into relationship conflict, apology, and repair. But a focus on forgiveness also provides sociologists with a fresh means to explore how relationships and transgressions within these relationships are made sense of in the terms through which these experiences are ordinarily understood by laypeople. Forgiveness seems to be an ordinary and integral part of personal relationships, and sociologists need to be able to account for forgiveness if they are to understand important moments of division and repair within those relationships.

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