# FORGIVENESS IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

Forgiveness, defined as the process of forgiving others' mistakes in order to achieve internal peace or correction of the guilty person's performance, is considered to be one of the important subjects in interpersonal relationships. Since determining the boundaries of forgiveness significantly contributes to the psychological well-being of the society members, studying this matter from different views can provide a basis for presenting a balanced model. The aim of this research was to explain Islam's perspective on these components as well as the boundaries of forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. This study was a qualitative research in which after explaining the conceptual scope of forgiveness according to psychologists, some Quranic verses and words of Islamic leaders about forgiveness were analysed. At the end of the study, it was concluded that although Islamic and Western teachings for identifying factors affecting forgiveness are similar in the perspective, but Islamic references have drawn more distinct boundaries for forgiveness.

*Keywords:* forgiveness, interpersonal, relationships, boundaries, Quran

## 1. Introduction

‘Forgiveness’ is an important principle in interpersonal relationships. In the last two decades, psychologists have been interested in examining this subject to use it as an important and effective factor in improving human relationships [1].

Forgiveness is an intrapersonal characteristic performed by the forgiving person in order to react to human and environmental mistakes in a positive and socially appropriate way [2]. Through it, the tendency to avoid and seek revenge from the wrongdoer is reduced, bringing about enhanced mental well-being and contributing to healing the resent, which is the necessity of communicational, emotional, spiritual and physical growth. Mc Cullough, Fincham, and Tesang identify forgiveness as an act done freely by the forgiver, and consider it as a set

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of mental-social changes whose main necessity is passage of time. In studying the process of forgiveness, several models have been proposed by researchers [3]. Forgiveness has a relationship with psychological well-being, while refusing to not forgive has a positive relationship with mental pressure and psychological pathology [4]. Also, there is a significant negative relationship between forgiving oneself as well as others and depression [5].

Answering the following question will be very beneficial in methodical usage of this principle: is it basically possible to imagine some boundaries for forgiveness in interpersonal relationships?

With regards to the important role that forgiveness plays in social life and for reducing many conflicts and tensions between people, the main question which is answered in this research is how to examine 'forgiveness in interpersonal relationships' from the perspective of Islamic doctrines.

## 2. Research methodology

This research is conducted through a qualitative method. Initially, the viewpoints of psychologists on attitudinal and behavioural components have been categorized. Then, some verses of Quran and Hadiths from religious leaders which are about forgiveness in interpersonal relationship have been gathered. Next, the Islamic perspective has been categorized with regards to the research question through analytical examination of data.

## 3. The conceptualization of forgiveness in interpersonal relationships

There have been many discussions on the concept of forgiveness [6]. Toussaint and Webb believe that forgiveness should be defined as a multidimensional structure including emotions, behaviour, cognition, and conceptualization [7]. The definition of Enright is of great importance. He defines forgiveness as the process of forgiving others' mistakes with the aim of achieving internal peace, or improving the relationship with the wrongdoer, overcoming the annoyance resulting from evil and avoiding anger, distance and vengefulness towards the wrongdoer [8]. The processes of reduction of anger, reduction of dissatisfaction or hatred towards others, freedom from past judgements and cognitions, freedom from previously learnt and normal responses towards situations and trying to heal the old wounds are some of the definitions of forgiveness [9]. Throughout the process of forgiveness, the cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of the person towards the mistake and the wrongdoer undergo some changes.

The definition which is more agreed upon is a motivation resulting in reduction of resent, anger and vengefulness towards the wrongdoer, which increases the positive emotions and replaces the negative ones [10]. The cognitive part of forgiving involves evaluating the situation realistically. The emotional part of forgiving includes high self-esteem, low negative emotions, remorse for what happens, sympathy with the other person and his/her

conditions, beginning the process of resolving the loss and pain, and eventually resolving done hurt and damage incurred. The behavioural part of the forgiving includes verbal and non-verbal behaviours such as apologizing for the hurts, to ask forgiveness or compensating the mistake through symbolic and religious acts, expressing interest in making the required changes in behaviour and providing the ground for restoration of relationship [11].

The concept of forgiveness is expressed in Quran by the word 'Afv' (remission). Afv originally means disappearance and annihilation [12], leaving behind and ignoring [13], and is used in the Holy Quran with the meaning of not seeking revenge from the wrongdoer. This means that remission is a subset of kindness and gift that the forgiver grants the wrongdoer. Forgiveness is the result of grace and virtue [14]. Remission means not seeking revenge in a situation where there is the right and power to do it [*Quran*, AL-MAEDA, verse 95; ASH-ORA, verse 40; Al-BAQARAH, verse 149].

Another word which represents the concept of forgiveness in Quran and Islamic references is 'Safh' which means rejecting and turning one's face from something, and forgiving the sin and mistake of someone without rebuking them [*Quran*, AL-HEJR, verse 95]. In this regard, the interpreters have said that Allah has ordered the Prophet (PBUH) to ignore the sins of people and forgive them in a kind way, so that the sinners will not even feel rebuked and reprimanded [15].

The word 'Qofr' also means concealing the behavioural flaws of others in Quran [*Quran*, AL-NOOR, verse 23; AL-TAGABON, verse 14]. Even so, there are higher degrees of forgiveness mentioned in Quran, including responding evil with goodness [*Quran*, Al-MOMENOON, verse 96; AL-FOSSELAT, verse 34], and only those who possess patience and forbearance and enjoy high levels of faith and piety can reach such a high degree [*Quran*, AL-FOSSELAT, verse 35].

## 4. The causes of forgiveness

The individual peace of mind in the society plays an important role in durability of the social life. Vengefulness only makes the life gloomy and endangers the social life. This emotion is usually interrelated with anger. If we want to counteract all bad behaviour of others and alleviate our vengefulness, our whole life will be spent fighting and quarrelling with others.

Forgiveness in proper situations and with necessary conditions results in resolving many the social problems, reducing tension and challenges, and bringing peace and reconciliation leading to the durability of social life. There are very few people whose rights have not been infringed, or other people have not insulted them. Even so, if someone made a mistake, his/her mistake should be ignored, if possible, because forgiveness is an example of good ethics which is learnt from the God [*Quran*, AN-NESSA, verse 149]. God orders everyone to forgive and tolerate others [*Quran*, ALE-EMRAN, verse 159; ALARAF, verse 199], and forgiveness is mentioned as one the virtues of the grandee [16]. Forgiveness and condonation result in physical and mental health, peace and

calm, bliss and increased livelihood, which can also turn hostilities into friendships and affection.

In Islamic doctrines, the advice to forgive involves forgiving the mistakes of all human beings from all ethnicities and nationalities [*Quran*, ALE-EMRAN, verse 134], as Imam Ali has said: "Do not be like a predatory animal who seizes to eat people, because there are two groups of people: some are your religious brothers, and some are your fellowmen, which make mistakes and are prone to problems and pains and do wrong consciously or non-consciously. So, as you request God to forgive your sins and ignore your mistakes, you should also forgive people as well and ignore their mistakes." [17]

Forgiveness in interpersonal relationships is described as a behaviour which prevents revenge-seeking responses and results in peaceful responses and beneficial behaviour. From this perspective, the religious doctrines have paid attention to a set of motivational changes in the annoyed person and prevent him/her from committing revenge-seeking behaviours.

As mentioned earlier, forgiveness is an important factor in strengthening the interpersonal relationships and can enhance the communicational processes for healing annoyances, and results in improved mental health [18]. Also, forgiveness is one of the various ways to confront others' mistakes, through which the person can change his/her negative responses and show a positive response considering forgiving mistakes. Nevertheless, this question is posed: what factors create the background of forgiveness in each person?

The findings of Ripley suggest that forgiveness is related to the improvement of familial relationships and results in improvement of mutual beneficial communicational patterns between the couples, and eventually leads to enhanced quality of marital life [19]. Existence of such positive effects in forgiveness leads to forgiving without any expectations which is valuable in nature and self-directed, and even if the wrongdoer repeats his/her behaviour, forgiving shall continue [20]. Nevertheless, Gorsuh believes that interpersonal, religious, spiritual, motivational and autonomic aspects should be emphasized as well [21]. Pingleton also points out the spiritual aspect of forgiveness as well as its autonomic dimension [22]. Gartner looks at forgiveness from a more realistic viewpoint which includes the good and bad traits of self and others. He believes that in developed, revolutionary, and mature forgiveness, the feeling of hatred and loath towards the annoyer person is not eliminated and is not replaced by love and affection. Rather, the annoyed person does not lose his/her humanistic viewpoint towards the wrongdoer, while also paying attention to the annoyer's evil aspects and feels the wickedness of the done misuse [23]. According to North, when we are hurt unfairly by another person, we have forgiven him/her when we have overcome our anger, not by denying ourselves the right of being angry constantly, but by trying to grant him/her compassion, benevolence, and love. Even so, as the forgiving person, we are aware that the annoyer person is not necessarily worth receiving these gifts [24].

## 5. The position of forgiveness

Revenge is usually more powerful and almost always more tempting [25]. Humans tend to respond to the harms and assaults done by others by causing even more harm and assault. Furthermore, when the victim takes revenge, the main wrongdoer assumes the revenge to be bigger than the original annoyance and may counteract once again, and the vicious cycle of malice may continue forever [26].

In personal aspects, especially in social interactions and coexistence which do not violate others' rights, tolerance and forgiveness are the principles. In Quranic doctrines, forgiving people's mistakes and being good to them is considered to be one kind of piety and prepares the ground for achieving divine forgiveness and affection [*Quran*, ANNOOR, verse 35]. Imam Sadeq has said: "Forgiving and ignoring one's mistakes while having the power to take revenge is the way of prophets and the pious, and remission means whenever someone did something wrong to you, you do not follow him/her and do not express it, and forget it both apparently and in reality, and do good to him/her more than before" [27]. Imam Ali considers forgiveness as one of the best virtues [28] and the perfect example of patience [16]. In his viewpoint, the worst people are those who do not forgive mistakes and not conceal the flaws of others [29]. Accepting others' apology and mistakes and forgiving them make the life pleasurable for the forgiver and, in turn, for the society. Because of this, Imam Ali has considered failure to forgive as the cause of lack of enjoyment in life [16]. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) has said: forgiving others results in mental health and spiritual peacefulness [30]. Forgiving eliminates the grudges [29, p. 385] and makes the life of the person longer [31]. Glorious God forgives people and accepts their repent. Humans also become similar to God in this attribute by forgiving others' mistakes: He is the one who accepts repents from his servants and forgives sins and knows what you do [*Quran*, AN-NOOR, verse 25]. Imam Ali has considered the most forgiving people as the wisest, and has advised to be very forgiving and accept others' apology, and make excuses for them even if they do not have one [32]. He has also said: if your brother parted from you, you connect with him and if he avoided you, be kind to him, and if he committed a sin, accept his apology, as if you are his servant and he is your master [33].

One of the characteristics of forgiveness and accepting the excuse of wrongdoer is that forgiving should not be done in a way that it results in the abjection, humiliation and insulting the forgiven, and no harm or contempt should follow the forgiveness, as these make the forgiveness null and void. According to the Quranic verses, Joseph who was the target of his brothers' hostility and abandoned in his childhood, said to them in his days of powerfulness: Today I forgive you, and do not blame yourselves because God forgives you, because he is the most merciful [*Quran*, YOSOF, verse 92]. Imam Ali has also said: anyone who disgraces people because he/she has done them any good, he/she has not done any goodness [28, p. 340].

Divine forgiveness is contingent upon the existence of some conditions and is not without reason [*Quran*, AL-BAQARAH, verse 187]. God's grace is the cause of His forgiveness. Forgiveness is a subset of grace [*Quran*, ASH-SHORA, verse 40]; one of the causes of having grace and forgiveness is that God is the seer of our acts [*Quran*, AL-BAQARAH, verse 237]. Forgiveness of God is accompanied by His ability, meaning that forgiveness necessitates His ability [*Quran*, ANNESSA, verse 149].

Remission in Holy Quran means not taking revenge from the wrongdoer. In other words, remission is a subset of kindness and gift that the forgiver gives the wrongdoer. Some of the interpreters have considered the cause of forgiveness to be high-mindedness [15, p. 67]. In other words, sometimes people ignore the opportunity of taking revenge while they have the full power in order to wake the wrongdoer's moral conscience.

One of the examples of forgiveness in Quranic viewpoint is when the wrongdoer has not had the power or tolerance to do the work. In this situation, forgiveness is advised [*Quran*, AL-BAQARAH, verse 187; ANNESSA, verse 99; ALE-EMRAN, verse 155, 152]. Another example of forgiveness is when the wrongdoer has not been aware of the wrongness of the act [*Quran*, AL-MAEDA, verse 95].

Sometimes, the mental, psychic, and cultural conditions of the wrongdoer are such that they become more daring if forgiven, and continue making the mistake. In these cases, maintaining the public discipline and preventing from repetition of the mistake requires ignoring the forgiveness and punishing that is done fairly [*Quran*, AL-BAQARAH, verse 194]. This matter is pointed out in Islamic hadiths. Imam Ali says: "forgiveness towards mean people makes them corrupted, as much as it corrects the personable people" [33, p. 270].

According to Quranic verses, considering some mistakes, if the wrongdoer makes them once again after being forgiven, they will not be forgiven once again and God will take revenge on them [*Quran*, AL-MAEDA, verse 95]. So, in Islamic perspective, forgiving the mistakes made in violation of the rules accepted in the norm of societies is prohibited [*Quran*, ALARAF, verse 199].

## 6. Conclusions

Forgiveness in a virtue in confronting others' mistakes which is teachable [34]. Although taking revenge is the human's natural response towards others' mistakes, forgiveness is considered to be the highway to the mental health. In order to measure and study any structure such as forgiveness, it should be first conceptualized. Also, there have been many discussions on how to define the concept of forgiveness as a structure.

In order to have a better understanding of the concept of forgiveness, it is necessarily to examine the concept of mistake. Mistakes are the events that each person sees them as opposing to their own expectations and assumptions of their own, others and the world. When people experience mistakes, they usually grow

negative thoughts and feelings such as anger or behaviours including taking revenge which are related to the wrongdoer, the type of mistake and the type of reflection on their response (cognitive, emotional or behavioural). Thus, the responses of the forgiver originate from a set of thoughts, emotions or behaviours that he/she expresses towards the wrongdoer, mistake and the consequences accompanying the mistake. When people forgive, they emphasize that a mistake has been made and they re-evaluate the wrongdoer and mistake through cognitive, mental or behavioural processing. This means that the forgiver judges the wrongdoer in a new way through re-evaluation.

Several researchers have suggested that the forgiver should increase the feelings of benevolence or even love towards the wrongdoer, although most researchers believe that positive feelings or love towards the wrongdoer are not the necessary components of forgiveness. In studying the process of forgiveness, various models have been suggested by researchers. It's approach defines forgiveness as a psychological reaction which includes six psychological components: apathy, judgement, negative behaviour towards the wrongdoer, sympathy, judgement and positive behaviour towards the same wrongdoer and also its approach defines forgiveness as the replacement of emotions such as hatred, bitterness, grudge, hostility, anger and fear with positive emotions such as love, sympathy, compassion or empathy.

Rye's approach defines forgiveness as releasing the negative emotions (e.g. hostility), negative cognitions (such as thoughts of revenge) and negative behaviour (including verbal aggression) as a response to the cognized injustice [35]. Luskin and other researchers introduce forgiveness as a soothing intrapersonal process causing the person to grow [36]. The forgiver knows that if he/she forgives, he/she will experience less annoyance, will be blamed by others less and can offer peace to the wrongdoer. They identify forgiveness as integration of emotions, cognition, and behavioural approaches, where these aspects altogether lead to a moral response which is forgiveness.

Forgiveness can result in peace and reconciliation, and this peace can play a role in transition of justice. Forgiveness is positive for well-being and mental health and can be used as a means to treating mental disorders. There is a significant relationship between forgiveness, perfectionism, intimacy, and satisfaction with life.

Based on the Quranic verses implying the concept of forgiveness, it can be concluded that in forgiveness two conditions should exist in the forgiver:
a)   he/she has the control and power,
b)   he/she has the right to take revenge but forgives nonetheless.

These two conditions are also included in definition of forgiveness in Psychology. It means that in both Holy Quran and Psychology remission and forgiveness can be defined as not taking revenge from the wrongdoer by someone who is able and has the right to take revenge.

In Quranic perspective, forgiveness is the preliminary step of correcting the wrongdoer [*Quran*, ASH-SHORA, verse 40] and increasing the probability of the gratefulness of the forgiven. Forgiving others prepares the ground for

forgiveness of God and positions the person in the group of benefactors and the pious. In Holy Quran, forgiveness results in reduction of anger, increase in peace, increase in the wrongdoer's gratitude, reduction of difficulty and suffering, which is equivalent to enhanced mental well-being [*Quran*, ANNESSA, verse 148].

The intellectual systems are different in cases and scopes of suitability of forgiveness in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. In Islamic perspective forgiveness is not a general rule and performable in all situations, and in some cases forgiveness is prohibited, firstly because of priority of achieving other values or personal and social benefits, and secondly because of being sure of the wrongdoer repeating his/her mistake [*Quran*, ASH-SHORA, verse 40]. In Quranic perspective, if someone prepares the ground for the behavioural correction of others by forgiving their mistakes will be given the divine reward [*Quran*, ASH-SHORA, verse 25]. In interpreters' opinion, the wrongdoer's regret and apology are a sign of necessity of forgiveness. The Holy Prophet says: accept any apologies whether right or wrong, anyone who does not accept apologies will not achieve my intercession [32, p. 130]. Generally, in Islam, when the mental and cultural situation of the wrongdoer is such that he/she will not be aware of his/her mistake if forgiven and repeats his/her wrongdoing, forgiving him/her is not allowed and has no moral value. So, although forgiveness is of great value in nature, if it leads to normalization and propagation of mistakes and increases the probability of bigger wrongdoings it is not advised.

Also, forgiving each other is fine to the extent it does not lead to violation of moral and religious principles and values. Imam Ali says: reward the goodness and forgive the vices, provided that it does not harm the religion. Thus, if forgiveness results in wrongdoers becoming more daring and rebellious and propagates oppression, one should stand against the oppression and forgiveness has no place [29]. In the perspective of interpreters, one of the ways to understand if forgiveness is correct or not is to see whether he/she repeats his/her mistake after being forgiven. Then, if they do so, it becomes clear that forgiveness has not done in a suitable situation. Imam Ali says: forgiveness is right in the case of someone who confesses to his/her mistake, not in the case of someone who insists on his/her mistake [37].

The Holy Quran lays the greatest emphasis on the hereafter results of forgiveness while introducing the structure, and through this, it invites people to forgive others' mistakes by creating hereafter motivations. Quran puts more emphasis on the social and humanistic aspect of forgiveness by stating the social and humanistic benefits of forgiveness such as: eliminating the betrayal of others, eliminating others' sufferings and preventing others from violation, creating a remedy for the helpless, eliminating the calamity and less impiety.

In this research, forgiveness was comparatively studied from the Quranic-psychological perspective. Nevertheless, the researcher was confronted by several questions which require further research. Each of these research questions can be a research topic for other studies. Comparing the process of

teaching forgiveness according to Quran and Psychology can be one example of these studies.

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