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To study the difference between Seeking Forgiveness and Apologising

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ABSTRACT

We say, "I apologise" or hear and read these words so often in our daily lives. Is apologising and seeking forgiveness the same? This study aimed at exploring if seeking forgiveness and apologising are perceived as being the same or different. Data was methodologically gathered by interviewing people who had lived through a seeking forgiveness experience in order to gain insight into their perspectives regarding the question in hand. Thematic analysis of the data suggested that there is a difference between seeking forgiveness and apologising.

Introduction

Apologies are the world's most fundamental and prevalent conflict resolution technique. Peter H. Kim et al., defined an apology "as a statement that acknowledges both responsibility and regret for a trust violation" (2004, p. 7).

Several studies have been directed on apology over the last several years on how apologising helps the offender experience relief from shame, guilt and lingering emotional burdens (Wang, 2020); positive correlation between apologising behaviour and guilt dispositions (Chrdileli et al., 2018); gender differences in apologising behaviour with women apologising more than men as they have a lower threshold to perceiving offensive behaviour (Schumann et al., 2010).

Thompson et al., (2005, p. 318) defined forgiveness as "the framing of a perceived transgression such that one's responses to the transgressor, transgression, and sequelae of the transgression are transformed from negative to neutral or positive. The source of a transgression, and therefore the object of forgiveness, may be oneself, another person or persons, or a situation that one views as being beyond anyone's control (e.g., an illness, fate, or a natural disaster)."

There are two sides of forgiveness, one focusses on the perspective of the person who was offended and the other on the wrong doer's perspective, one who seeks and one who grants forgiveness. Scientific studies on forgiveness have advanced since the 80's (Worthington et al., 2005) with a lot of research on interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997); (Karremans et al., 2010); (Wieselquist, 2009); self-forgiveness (Snow, 1993) ; (Mullet et al., 2005); granting forgiveness (Witvliet et al., 2001); and benefits of forgiveness (Sapmaz et al., 2016).

Review of literature shows that the perspective and standpoint of the wrong doer needs more exploration, its concept as well as benefits (Sandage et al., 2000). A look at the handbook of forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2005) that consolidates a wide range of research and reviews on the science of forgiveness shows how sparse the work on seeking of forgiveness has been in contrast to granting of forgiveness.

Seeking forgiveness has a remarkable role to play in interpersonal relationships between couples (Kelley et al., 2005) and inter-country relationships from a socio-political angle (Neto et al., 2007) as it leads to re-union between the conflicting parties involved and restoration of damaged relationship. Witvliet, Ludwig & Bauer (2002) found that being forgiven after seeking forgiveness, led to increase in basic and moral emotions. According to Sandage et al., (2000) those who don't seek forgiveness may feel distress and low self-esteem as they lack the skills to maintain relationships in a health manner, may experience social isolation and inability to relate to others. Anger, resentment, lack of agreeableness and openness were linked to inability to seek forgiveness (Chiaramello et al., 2008); on the other hand, seeking forgiveness reduces anger and leads to forgiveness (Stouten et al., 2009).

The main objective of the current study was to define seeking forgiveness and to explore if there is a difference between seeking forgiveness and apologising and how people who have gone through a seeking forgiveness experience, perceive and comprehend them.

Method and Procedure
Design
This was an exploratory research design; wherein qualitative study was used to understand and explore the experiences of people who have sought forgiveness and to get insightful information into the participant's thoughts and feelings.

Sampling Technique
Primarily purposive sampling was used in this study, wherein participants who have gone through a seeking forgiveness experience were selected. The size of the sample was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation, with no further interviews from participants were found to emerge aspects and properties of a concept (Glaser et al., 1967).

Participants
37 adults ranging from age 23 years to 52 years participated in the study. All the participants had gone through a lived experience of seeking forgiveness from the one they had hurt intentionally or unintentionally and had vivid memories of the same. Participants who sought forgiveness were recovered alcoholic; recovered from coma; went through a rough divorce; those grieving the loss of a loved one. Participants had

sought forgiveness for various intense and impactful reasons: for plagiarism, infidelity, for being physically and verbally abusive, for being accused of molestation, for breaking long-term relationships.

Study Procedure

Following informed consent participants were interviewed on a call due to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic. All the interviews were recorded by using mobile phone recording device, the interviews were transcribed which were thereafter approved by the respective participants. The approved transcripts were used for further analysis inductively by identifying and reporting patterns with respect to the aim of the study and codes were created by using thematic analysis method. In addition, following initial assimilation and familiarisation with the transcripts the NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) was also used for browsing coding and interpreting data by summarizing phrases and sentences. These codes were then plotted in the form of a thematic chart and thereafter placed under relevant potential themes leading to the development of a thematic map wherein similarities and differences of basic themes were logically structured by reviewing and refining them.

Result

34 out of 37 participants expressed there was a difference between seeking forgiveness and apologising, 2 expressed the difference is in intent and approach and it does not matter whether the word apologising is used or seeking forgiveness and 1 expressed that there is no difference between them at all.

The properties of the data were sorted systematically and plotted in the form of a thematic map shown in figure 1:

Figure 1: Thematic map- Difference between Seeking Forgiveness and Apologising
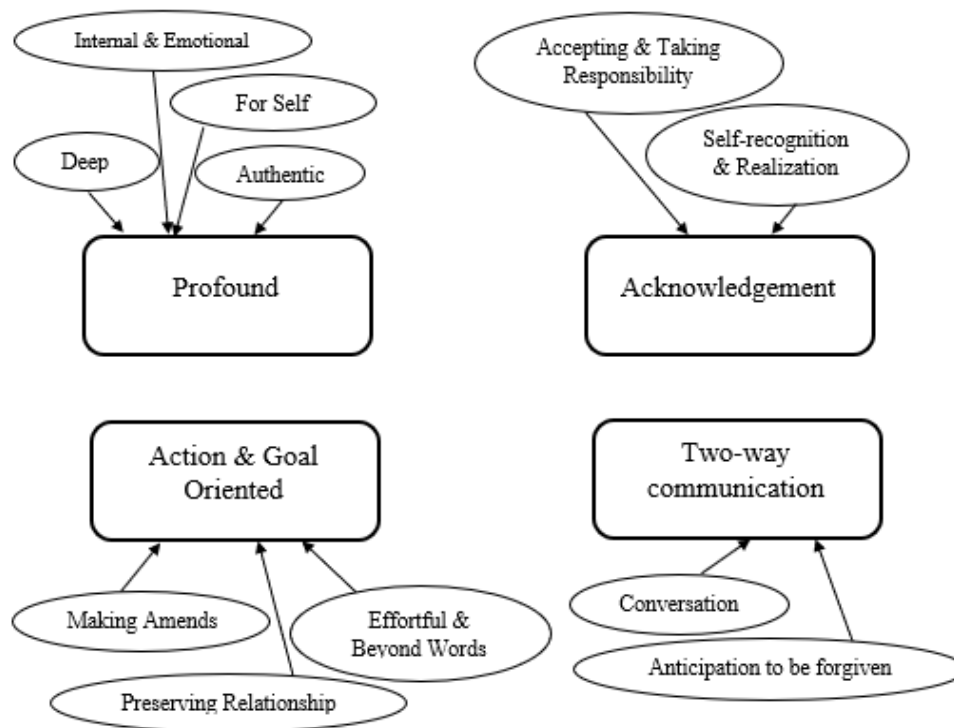
Indicators of the difference between Seeking forgiveness and Apologizing
Participants shared during the interview the various ways in which they perceived seeking forgiveness to be different from apologising. Some of the extracts from the interview are mentioned below under relevant themes and sub-themes that emerged after thematic analysis of the responses.

1. Theme: Seeking forgiveness is Profound
The data of this theme was assembled in 4 sub- themes as participants expressed that seeking forgiveness is deeper, genuine, an internal and emotional process and is done for self in comparison to apologising.

Sub-theme 1: Deep
The participants in majority verbalised that seeking forgiveness was far deeper and intense than apologising with the former being a larger dimension backed up with change in behaviour and attitude. For instance, (P{Participant}6) said, *"Oh yes absolutely I am sorry just a couple words three words, but it doesn't mean a thing, it's like love, love is an action word you know, I love you is not good enough there has to be something backing it up similarly forgiveness is am sorry means nothing if it doesn't change behaviour and attitude and perspective it means nothing forgiveness is far deeper than just in apology."*

Sub-theme 2: Authentic
Seeking forgiveness as shared by the participants is genuine and one means it, originates from literally within the heart, it is for a life time in contrast to apologising which is momentary. For instance, P20 conveyed, *Forgiveness is from my heart, apologising is just I apologise I am really sorry, you are making a mistake and you are saying sorry and then again and again you're making the same mistake and again*

and again saying sorry and you are not asking for forgiveness. Because forgiveness literally comes from heart.

Sub-theme 3: Internal and Emotional Process
Seeking forgiveness is emotional and internal in nature, it is an internal process that takes a lot of courage whereas apology is more of an etiquette and formality: *"Yes, seeking forgiveness is more of, apologising can be a very detached process apologising is something that I can apologise but I don't expect you to, I can apologise but I don't expect you to respond or I don't care that you respond or maybe it's just apology is more like, how you use language to pacify people but forgiveness is a more emotional, more it's a more human act in that sense it is less of a mechanical act forgiveness more deeper apology is a mechanical act it's an etiquette."* (P36).

Sub-theme 4: Seeking forgiveness is for own self
Seeking of forgiveness is for one's own well-being, it has an important role to play in the healing process of the offender, whereas apologising is for the other and from the periphery: *"Yes, apologising is something that you do for the other person and seeking forgiveness is something that you do for yourself"* (P7).

2. Theme: Seeking forgiveness is Action and Goal Oriented
Participants communicated seeking forgiveness is beyond words, backed up by action and there is intent to make amends and preserve the relationship. The data of this theme was organised into 3 subthemes and has been explained further in detail.

Sub-theme 1: Effortful and beyond words
Seeking forgiveness is indirect through gestures and effort in comparison to apologising, seeking forgiveness is beyond words and may even involve prayers and good wishes for the offended, as expressed by P14: *"Yes definitely because I guess when you seek forgiveness like I said it may not be direct but when you apologise it has to be a direct sort of a communication, forgiveness, there are so many forgiveness prayers online also and a lot of spiritual leaders have been practicing forgiveness. I think apology is a very formal word for me if not for anybody else."* (P14).

Sub-theme 2: Making amends
Seeking forgiveness involves altering the hurtful behaviour in future and making a conscious effort to not repeat it. *"I have never thought of the difference in these two terms but there is definitely a difference between just saying I am sorry and the other person saying yes it's ok that, and accepting responsibility for very specific parts and wanting to know how you can make up for the hurt or what you can do to avoid the hurt in the future."* (P8).

Sub-theme 3: Preserving relationship
Seeking forgiveness aims at taking care of the relationship in the long run unlike apologising which is done with random people and is mechanical. *"Yes, so you can apologise to some random person as well whom you may not even able to meet the next time or something but when you seek forgiveness you put more effort so that the*

relationship stays intact in the long-term" (P10).

3. Theme: Seeking forgiveness involves two-way communication

Participants expressed that in seeking forgiveness there is exchange of thoughts and feelings between two people with the anticipation to be forgiven. The data of this theme has been organized into 2 sub-themes that has been explained below.

Sub-theme 1: Conversation
Seeking forgiveness is participatory in nature and dependant on the other person that is the offended as well, it involves a two-party communication and is not one sided, as is the case while apologising: *"Ya, well a small difference that apologising can just be a brush under the carpet for me and without an acknowledgement from the other person and seeking forgiveness could be more a participation of the other person. The difference between seeking forgiveness and apologising, ya, I feel like apologising is less of a conversation than seeking forgiveness is, less participatory."* (P1).

Sub-theme 2: Anticipation to be forgiven
The offender expects and desires to be forgiven after seeking forgiveness unlike in apologising. P17, for instance shared, *"Yes I think there is a difference, in apologising we just go and say sorry and that's closed but in seeking forgiveness I would say that we want that the other person should forgive us. In apologising we only say that, we are sorry and we don't clear if the other person apologies or not but in seeking forgiveness we do care about the apology of the other person."* (P17).

4. Theme: Seeking forgiveness is acknowledging the wrong done

Participants conveyed that seeking forgiveness is realizing, accepting, acknowledging and taking responsibility for the wrong done which is not the case in apologising. The data of this theme was assembled in 2 sub- themes that has been further described.

Sub-theme 1: Self-recognition and realization
Seeking forgiveness entails being aware and conscious of the wrong done, it is letting go of control with an attempt to initiate and undo the wrong done: *"Yes absolutely, apologising could be superficial by definition. Forgiveness begins with an acknowledgement and self-recognition of the damage you have done and expressing it, an apology could be superficial without realising the extent of harm you have caused."* (P21).

Sub-theme 2: Accepting and taking responsibility
Seeking forgiveness means accepting the wrong done towards the offended and taking responsibility for that action and not just saying sorry. P15 shared in the interview; *"So seeking is perhaps seeking is more towards asking the other person that I accept and acknowledge and I'm asking you to forgive me and apology is more along I did something wrong, you not necessarily seeking forgiveness for that you just acknowledging that something was a miss. Perhaps when you apologise does not necessarily mean that you are seeking forgiveness."* (P15).

Discussion

Based on the information the participants shared to it is clear that, there are factors that contribute to the difference between seeking forgiveness and apologising; four themes were identified that distinctly state the difference:

Seeking forgiveness is *profound,* it is deeper than apologising entailing authenticity, it is an internal and emotional process. Apology, one may or may not mean it, it is superficial and from the periphery whereas seeking forgiveness is an in-depth experience, it is genuine, deeply connected to the heart and soul. Apology is more at the surface level and momentary, perceived to be a part of seeking forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness takes a lot of courage, wherein one, off guards themselves and are vulnerable, it facilitates relieving of mental and emotional blockages and is carried out for self; apology on the other hand is perceived as a formality, an etiquette that exists at surface level.

Seeking forgiveness is *action and goal oriented* with effort and intent to make amends and preserve the relationship. The action is sometimes indirect, beyond words in the form of gestures, it is standing and facing the issue, making a constant endeavour through actions to conserve the relationship that is at stake due to the hurtful act. There is conscious effort to avoid the hurt in the future by changing one's attitude and behaviour, while apologising happens often with people for small and trivial reasons.

Seeking forgiveness is a *two-way communication* where both the offended and offender participate and there is an anticipation for the former to forgive the latter. Both parties have a conversation by exchanging their thoughts and feelings in seeking forgiveness whereas apologising is a one-way communication. Seeking forgiveness is dependent on the other person as there is an underlying desire and expectation to be forgiven as that is of importance to the offender.

Seeking forgiveness is *acknowledgement* of the wrong done by the offender. It is the first step to undo the damage done in the past by self-recognizing and realizing it. Seeking forgiveness entails owning one's mistake, letting go of control and completely accepting as well as taking responsibility for the hurt caused by expressing it. Apologising on the other hand is just saying sorry and moving on for minor things that don't matter much. Seeking forgiveness is perceived and processed as a much more intense experience to go through than apologising. It is deeper with intent attached and is accompanied by action of making amends to alter the hurtful behaviour in the future.

Strengths and Limitations

To the authors knowledge, this is the first study to explore and understand the perspective of those who have gone through a seeking forgiveness experience; if in their viewpoint, there is a difference between seeking forgiveness and apologising. The use of qualitative approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of relevant factors that contributed to the difference in the two aspects: seeking forgiveness and apologising.

A second strength of this study is the use of purposive sampling as a technique in selecting participants which enabled a diverse sample with a range of rich experiences and viewpoints on the lived seeking forgiveness experience and how seeking forgiveness is recognized differently from apologising. They were able to explicitly and without any vagueness express the difference between the two aspects.

A limitation in the study is that since the participants were self- selected, to be aware

that perhaps all relevant factors contributing to the differentiation between seeking forgiveness and apologising may not have been identified.

Another limitation of this study was that due to the running COVID19 pandemic, face to face interviews could not be taken and hence the body language and other non-verbal communication of the participants could not be observed during the interview which could have contributed to the analysis of the result.

Implications

The themes identified in the research could be further explored and studied in-depth by using focussed qualitative methods like case study with one or two subjects or using unstructured interviews.

The findings of this study could be the base for quantitative research where in the future researchers could, on the basis of the themes and sub-themes, construct an objective questionnaire and run a survey with a large sample.

Having identified through this study, those who have lived through a seeking forgiveness experience, perceive it to be different from apologising, there is a huge scope to explore and investigate seeking forgiveness in depth and develop a theory on it.

Conclusion

The present study produced unique and novel insights into the factors that differentiate seeking forgiveness from apologising as an experience, with the former being profound, an internal as well as an emotional process, a two-way communication, action and goal oriented in comparison to the latter. The findings are likely to be valuable for researching and exploring the subject of seeking forgiveness and will stimulate additional theoretical and empirical research.

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