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Review

Forgiveness as Socio-Psychological Repair and Mutual Recognition, Its Positive and Negative Effects in Intergroup, Interpersonal and Intra-Personal Relationships: Narrative Review of 26 Years of Research

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Abstract

Background: Forgiveness has traditionally been studied across psychological, relational, and sociopolitical domains, often emphasizing either its therapeutic benefits or moral complexities. However, this fragmented literature has limited the development of a unified understanding of forgiveness as a broader psychosocial phenomenon. Objective: This narrative review critically synthesizes 26 years of theoretical, empirical, and applied research to conceptualize forgiveness as a multidimensional framework of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition across intrapersonal, interpersonal, developmental, organizational, and intergroup contexts. Methods: A systematic review approach was employed to integrate findings from experimental, longitudinal, clinical, and organizational studies selected for their theoretical and empirical relevance. Results: Findings indicate that forgiveness facilitates emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, identity restoration, relational resilience, organizational functioning, and political reconciliation by transforming moral injury and social disruption into opportunities for healing and restored legitimacy. Across domains, forgiveness promotes emotional recovery, self-respect, social learning, institutional trust, and reconciliation when embedded in justice, accountability, and recognition processes. However, forgiveness is ethically and functionally conditional. In contexts of chronic abuse, coercion, structural inequality, or absent accountability, it may reinforce maladaptive dynamics or perpetuate injustice. Conclusions: Forgiveness is best understood not as an unconditional virtue, but as a context-sensitive, multilevel mechanism of socio-psychological restoration whose benefits depend on voluntariness, justice, accountability, and reciprocal recognition. This framework advances forgiveness scholarship by integrating moral repair with justice-sensitive reconciliation.

Keywords: forgiveness; socio-psychological repair; mutual recognition; interpersonal relationships; intergroup reconciliation; justice and accountability; psychological well-being

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Academic Editor: Marianna Mazza

Received: 13 April 2026
Revised: 1 May 2026
Accepted: 4 May 2026
Published: 10 May 2026

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1. Introduction

This introduction draws on the reviewed literature to comprehensively, critically, and narratively conceptualize forgiveness as a multidimensional mechanism of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition. The first part synthesizes major definitions, theoretical perspectives, typologies, and explanatory models addressing when, why, and how forgiveness occurs, integrating these diverse approaches into a coherent conceptual framework. The second part introduces the contexts in which forgiveness occur—intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, political, and spiritual—, further situating forgiveness within its broader function as a process of psychological restoration, relational regulation, social repair, and reciprocal recognition. The third and final part presents the principal assessment tools developed to measure forgiveness across its various conceptualizations, thereby supporting a comprehensive understanding of forgiveness as a complex socio-psychological construct.

In this narrative review, socio-psychological repair through forgiveness is defined as the restorative process by which emotional wounds, damaged relationships, and disrupted social recognition are transformed into renewed psychological well-being, relational stability, and cooperative coexistence. Mutual recognition is defined as the relational process through which individuals or groups acknowledge one another as morally valuable agents entitled to dignity, voice, and legitimate claims (* Honneth, 1995; * Ricoeur, 2005). Together, these concepts provide the central theoretical lens through which forgiveness is examined throughout this review.

1.1. Definitions, Theoretical Perspectives, Typologies, and Models on When, Why and How

1.1.1. Definitions of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is broadly understood as a multidimensional socio-psychological process involving cognitive, emotional, motivational, and relational transformation (McCullough et al., 2000; Mullet et al., 2004; Worthington, 2020b; Worthington & Wade, 2020a). Across theoretical traditions, forgiveness is not merely the suppression of anger or the passive dismissal of wrongdoing; rather, it functions as a mechanism of relational regulation that enables individuals and groups to respond adaptively to moral injury. In this sense, forgiveness serves a central regulatory role in human social life by transforming destructive responses to harm into processes that may restore emotional equilibrium, preserve valuable relationships, and support broader social cohesion.

R. D. Enright and Song (2020) define forgiveness as the voluntary willingness to relinquish resentment and retaliation while cultivating more benevolent cognitions and emotions toward an offender. This perspective emphasizes forgiveness as a moral and emotional transformation that does not require reconciliation but may create the psychological conditions for it. Similarly, McCullough (2008) conceptualizes forgiveness as a motivational shift in which negative emotions, hostile cognitions, and revenge-related motivations are reduced, thereby distinguishing forgiveness from condoning, excusing, or denying harm. Worthington and Wade (2020a) further extend this framework by emphasizing forgiveness as the intentional replacement of anger, bitterness, and hostility with empathy, compassion, or prosocial concern, while also situating forgiveness within a broader social-relational context. From this perspective, forgiveness contributes not only to personal well-being but also to the repair of damaged social bonds and the restoration of mutual recognition between persons or groups. S. B. Wade (2024) expands this view by highlighting forgiveness as an intrapsychic process that promotes inner freedom, resilience, and peace, thereby underscoring its role in both personal healing and social functioning.

1.1.2. Theoretical Perspectives on Forgiveness

Forgiveness in the Developmental Perspective: From Revengefulness to Compassionate Love

Developmental research has examined how the capacity to forgive emerges, matures, and becomes integrated into moral, relational, and social functioning across the lifespan. Developmental perspectives suggest that forgiveness is not a static trait, but rather a progressively elaborated human capacity shaped by cognitive maturation, moral reasoning, emotional regulation, socialization, and cultural or spiritual norms.

First, they found that forgiveness is deeply rooted in moral life because it involves a voluntary response to wrongdoing grounded in values such as compassion, justice, and human dignity (* R. D. Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1996; * Worthington, 1998; Bassett et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2012). Forgiveness, from this perspective, does not negate harm nor excuse injustice; instead, it reflects the capacity to balance accountability with mercy, retaliation with restoration, and personal suffering with broader social goods. As individuals mature morally, forgiveness increasingly functions not merely as personal emotional relief, but as a relational strategy that preserves social bonds, reinforces ethical norms, and promotes communal cohesion. Thus, developmental scholarship positions forgiveness as central to both personal moral growth and the maintenance of prosocial social systems.

Second, building on broader theories of cognitive and moral development (* Piaget, 1932; * Kohlberg, 1976, 1984; * Leon, 1982), researchers have proposed that forgiveness reasoning itself develops through identifiable stages. R. D. Enright (1991) conceptualized forgiveness as a developmental construct progressing from self-protective or externally regulated forms toward more socially integrated and morally mature expressions (* R. D. Enright, 1991; R. D. Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; R. D. Enright & Song, 2020). These stages range from revenge-based or compensatory forgiveness to increasingly principled forms grounded in social harmony, moral duty, and ultimately unconditional concern for human flourishing: *revengeful forgiveness* (forgiveness contingent on revenge or equivalent punishment), *restitutional/compensational forgiveness* (contingent on compensation or restoration), *expectational forgiveness* (forgiveness due to social or familial expectations), *lawful/obligatory forgiveness* (motivated by moral or religious duty), *forgiveness as social harmony* (aimed at restoring relationships and community peace), and *forgiveness as love* (unconditional forgiveness promoting well-being for both victim and offender). At higher developmental levels, forgiveness becomes more fully aligned with mutual recognition, transcending personal grievance in favor of restoring dignity, preserving social relationships, and promoting collective well-being. Subsequent empirical studies on forgiveness developmental schema (Neng Lin et al., 2011; Girard & Mullet, 2012; Garthe & Guz, 2020; Mullet, 2023; Rogé & Mullet, 2011; Vera Cruz et al., 2024) showed that children often exhibit early-stage forgiveness reasoning (levels 1–2), adolescents tend toward level 3, and most adults operate at level 4–5, with few achieving unconditional forgiveness (level 6).

Importantly, developmental perspectives also suggest that forgiveness capacities emerge through the interaction of neurocognitive maturation, empathy development, social learning, cultural institutions, and in many contexts, spiritual or religious teachings. Religious and moral traditions often accelerate or reinforce higher-order forgiveness reasoning by framing forgiveness as both a moral obligation and a pathway to social harmony, thereby linking developmental and spiritual dimensions.

Forgiveness in the Evolutionary Perspective: When Future Cooperation Outweighs the Benefits of Retaliation

While developmental models explain how forgiveness matures within individuals, evolutionary perspectives address why such a capacity emerged in the first place. From this standpoint, forgiveness is understood as an adaptive regulatory mechanism shaped by natural selection to manage the social risks of conflict while preserving beneficial long-term relationships.

McCullough (2008) argues that forgiveness evolved because human survival depended heavily on maintaining valuable cooperative alliances despite inevitable interpersonal harms. Rather than being solely a moral virtue, forgiveness represents a strategic recalibration of revenge, avoidance, and reconciliation systems that enables individuals to preserve socially advantageous relationships when future cooperation outweighs the benefits of retaliation. This adaptive framework positions forgiveness as a biologically grounded form of relational regulation.

Subsequent refinements (McCullough et al., 2013; Billingsley et al., 2020) emphasize forgiveness as part of an evolved motivational architecture balancing deterrence against exploitation with opportunities for restored cooperation. In this model, forgiveness functions when offenders are judged to possess high relational value and low future threat, thereby preserving alliances, group cohesion, and social stability. This perspective aligns closely with this narrative review's broader conception of forgiveness as a mechanism of social repair, demonstrating that forgiveness contributes not only to personal well-being but also to the evolutionary maintenance of cooperative systems.

De Waal and Pokorny's (2005) observations of reconciliation behaviors in nonhuman primates further suggest that forgiveness-like processes are deeply rooted in evolutionary mechanisms promoting conflict reduction, relationship preservation, and group survival. These findings imply that the foundations of forgiveness predate formal moral systems and may constitute a biologically conserved strategy for sustaining social living.

Forgiveness in the Neuroscience Perspective: Adaptive Process That Transforms Threat Responses into Opportunities

Neuroscientific research provides an additional level of integration by identifying the neural systems that operationalize forgiveness as a biologically embodied process of emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and relational repair.

Studies in the neuroscience of forgiveness (* Billingsley & Losin, 2017; * Ricciardi et al., 2013; Fourie et al., 2020) indicate that forgiveness recruits interconnected neural systems associated with empathy, perspective-taking, executive control, and value-based decision-making. These systems allow individuals to reinterpret offenses, regulate retaliatory impulses, and align responses with long-term social, moral, or spiritual goals.

Specifically, forgiveness activates neural pathways involved in:

(1) Empathy and perspective-taking, which facilitate recognition of the offender's humanity and circumstances;
(2) Cognitive control and emotional regulation, which inhibit revenge and reduce physiological stress;
(3) Decision-making and moral valuation, which support choices favoring healing, cooperation, or restorative justice over continued hostility.

Through these mechanisms, forgiveness functions neurologically as an adaptive process that transforms threat responses into opportunities for socio-emotional recovery. In this way, neuroscientific findings support developmental and evolutionary models by demonstrating that forgiveness is both biologically scaffolded and psychologically cultivated.

1.1.3. Different Types of Forgiveness Within a Unified Framework of Socio-Psychological Repair and Mutual Recognition

Although forgiveness is often described through distinct subtypes, these variations can be more coherently understood as interconnected expressions of a broader socio-psychological mechanism of repair, relational regulation, and mutual recognition. Across individual, interpersonal, collective, political, and spiritual domains, forgiveness functions to restore psychological equilibrium, regulate social bonds disrupted by transgression, and re-establish recognition of moral worth between self, others, communities, or transcendent authorities. Thus, the diversity of forgiveness forms does not indicate conceptual fragmentation, but rather reflects the operation of a common restorative process across multiple levels of human social organization.

Dispositional and Situational Forgiveness: Individual Foundations of Relational Repair

At the individual level, dispositional forgiveness (trait forgiveness) reflects a stable psychological orientation toward socio-emotional repair across contexts (Thompson et al., 2005; McCullough et al., 2007; Mullet et al., 2003). It represents an enduring tendency to regulate resentment, inhibit retaliatory impulses, and preserve cooperative social functioning through benevolence (Braithwaite et al., 2016; Berry et al., 2005). This reflects in the fact that (a) individuals high in trait forgiveness are more likely to sustain long-term relational stability because they possess enduring capacities for emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict de-escalation and in the fact that (b) having such disposition is positively associated with agreeableness, empathy, extraversion, psychological well-being, and better work outcomes, while negatively associated with neuroticism, hostility, insecure attachment, narcissism, and paranoid personality features (Berry et al., 2005 Burnette et al., 2009; Fatfouta et al., 2015; Li et al., 2020; Muñoz Sastre et al., 2005; Stackhouse, 2019). In this sense, we can posit that dispositional forgiveness serves as a personality-based infrastructure for repeated socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition.

Situational forgiveness, by contrast, reflects the context-sensitive activation of forgiveness processes in response to specific offenses (Fehr et al., 2010). It depends on factors such as offender intent, apology, relationship value, and cultural norms. Situational forgiveness illustrates how forgiveness dynamically regulates social relationships in real time, recalibrating responses to harm according to contextual assessments. Fehr et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis demonstrates that situational variables often outweigh dispositional traits in predicting forgiveness, underscoring that forgiveness as socio-psychological repair is not static but adaptively responsive to social environments.

Together, dispositional and situational forgiveness might represent micro-level mechanisms through which individuals maintain emotional health, preserve valuable relationships, and promote mutual recognition in everyday life.

Political Forgiveness: Macro-Social Repair and Collective Recognition

Political forgiveness extends forgiveness processes beyond interpersonal dynamics into macro-social systems of regulation, particularly in contexts of historical violence, oppression, or transitional justice (Ayee, 2016; Misztal, 2016). Its inclusion within forgiveness thypologies is essential because societies, like individuals, require mechanisms to repair ruptured relationships, regulate collective hostility, and restore conditions for coexistence.

Political forgiveness operates through public acknowledgment, institutional reforms, restorative justice processes, and symbolic gestures such as truth commissions or political apologies. Examples such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) or Rwanda's reconciliation initiatives demonstrate that forgiveness can function as a collective

socio-political strategy for repairing damaged civic relationships while re-establishing mutual recognition among formerly antagonistic groups (Ayee, 2016).

Unlike interpersonal forgiveness, political forgiveness is not primarily emotional but institutional and normative. It regulates collective memory, moral accountability, and social reintegration. Its broader function is to interrupt cycles of revenge, promote post-conflict societal healing, and reconstruct shared moral communities. Therefore, political forgiveness is appropriately included because it represents forgiveness processes operating at the societal level, where socio-psychological repair becomes social reconstruction.

Divine Forgiveness: Transcendent Regulation of Moral Identity and Psychological Repair

Divine forgiveness extends forgiveness into transcendent systems of moral regulation, where perceived forgiveness by a higher power influences self-concept, guilt regulation, and moral renewal (F. Fincham, 2025). Its inclusion among forgiveness typologies is theoretically justified because religious systems historically function as major frameworks for regulating human behavior, social cohesion, existential meaning, reciprocal recognition and coexistence.

Divine forgiveness provides individuals with perceived restoration of moral worth beyond human judgment, thereby facilitating intrapsychic repair, self-forgiveness, and resilience (F. D. Fincham, 2022). Interestingly, psychological evidence suggests that perceived divine forgiveness is associated with lower depressive symptoms, increased flourishing, and greater self-forgiveness (F. Fincham, 2025; F. D. Fincham & May, 2021; Ludwig et al., 2025). It can also influence interpersonal behaviors by fostering humility, gratitude, and, in some cases, forgiveness toward others.

However, divine forgiveness may also produce complex social effects, including reduced accountability when forgiveness is perceived as unconditional (Ludwig et al., 2025). Additionally, spiritual interpretations of illness as punishment may impede care and reinforce stigma (* Baskind & Birbeck, 2005; Parsons et al., 2006; * Subu et al., 2022). Thus, divine forgiveness represents both the potential and risks of forgiveness when embedded in transcendent social systems.

Its relevance lies in demonstrating that forgiveness mechanisms can operate not only within human relational systems but also within spiritually mediated structures that regulate identity, morality, and social behavior.

1.1.4. When, Why, and How We Forgive?

Comprehensive understanding of forgiveness relies on the responses to the question of when, why, and how we forgive. In this respect, several theoretical perspectives were elaborate.

One of the earliest theoretical formulations suggests that empathy constitutes a fundamental underlying mechanism of forgiveness. It is known as the *Empathy Model of Forgiveness* (Donovan & Priester, 2017; * McCullough et al., 1998), which posits that forgiveness arises primarily from empathic concern for the offender. When a transgression occurs, victims who are able to perspective-take and feel compassion toward the wrongdoer experience reduced anger and resentment. This empathic shift fosters prosocial motivations, such as benevolence and reconciliation, which in turn promote forgiveness. Thus, forgiveness is understood as an affective transformation grounded in empathy, whereby understanding the offender's feelings and circumstances softens negative responses and facilitates relational repair.

Another perspective suggests that motivated reasoning drives forgiveness. It is known as the *Motivated Interpersonal Forgiveness Model* (Donovan & Priester, 2017, 2020), which synthesizes prior research on motivated reasoning. The model proposes that relation-

ship closeness fosters a desire to maintain the relationship; this desire, in turn, activates motivated reasoning processes that ultimately promote forgiveness after transgressions.

Donovan and Priester (2017, 2020) tested the two models described above, one against the other. When both models were estimated simultaneously, motivated reasoning significantly predicted forgiveness, whereas empathy did not. Across three studies, the motivated interpersonal forgiveness model consistently outperformed the empathy-based account, providing robust support for the view that forgiveness in close relationships is primarily driven by relationship maintenance motives rather than empathic responding (Donovan & Priester, 2017, 2020). However, potential sample bias, socio-cultural and the specific experimental context may have influenced the results to some extent, and should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution and nuance.

In addition to the formulations mentioned above, there is the *Need-based Model of Forgiveness*, derived from the *Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation* (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), which posits that interpersonal and intergroup conflicts threaten distinct psychological needs of victims and perpetrators, thereby sustaining hostility. Specifically, victimization undermines individuals' sense of power, status, and agency, whereas perpetration threatens one's moral image and social acceptability. According to the model, reconciliation requires addressing these asymmetric needs: victims seek empowerment and acknowledgment, while perpetrators seek moral acceptance and restoration of their social image. The authors (Shnabel & Nadler, 2010) argue that reconciliation is facilitated through reciprocal social exchanges in which perpetrators acknowledge responsibility and affirm victims' status, and victims offer moral acceptance (mutual recognition). Evidence from four empirical studies (* Nadler & Shnabel, 2017; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015; * Shnabel et al., 2021) on interpersonal reconciliation supports this framework, demonstrating that satisfaction of these group-specific needs increases willingness to forgive and reconcile.

Worthington and Scherer (2004) proposed the *Stress-Coping Model of Forgiveness* which understanding forgiveness as a way of managing emotional stress. According to this model, when someone is hurt or treated unfairly, they often experience unforgiveness. Unforgiveness is not simply a moral stance; it is described as a stress reaction including negative emotions such as anger, resentment, hostility, and rumination. These reactions can place psychological and physiological strain on the body. Forgiveness, in contrast, is presented as one possible strategy for coping with this stress. It is considered an emotion-focused coping strategy, meaning that it helps people regulate their emotional response rather than directly change the situation. Specifically, this model envisions forgiveness as involving replacement of negative emotions with more positive, other-oriented emotions such as empathy, compassion, sympathy, or even love. This shift in emotional experience reduces the intensity of the stress reaction triggered by the offense. Experimental studies support this view (* Strelan, 2020). Research shows that recalling an offense while holding onto anger increases stress-related physiological responses, such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure (* Strelan, 2020). In contrast, adopting a forgiving attitude is associated with calmer physiological reactions (* Strelan, 2020). In this way, forgiveness appears to reduce stress and may protect long-term health. The model also proposes indirect pathways linking forgiveness and health. For example, forgiving people may maintain stronger relationships, experience greater social support, and engage more deeply in religious or spiritual practices (* Strelan, 2020). These factors are themselves associated with better mental and physical health. Overall, the coping model frames forgiveness not only as a moral or relational process but also as a psychologically adaptive strategy that can reduce stress and promote resilience.

Finally, some religious individuals may functionally practice forgiveness following God's example, a kind of *After God's Forgiveness Model*. First, psychological models are

explicitly modeled after God's forgiveness as a separate dimension (Walker & Gorsuch, 2004). For example, Worthington et al. (2019) proposes a Christian model integrating divine, self-, and interpersonal forgiveness within coping theory. Second, empirically, studies show that receiving God's forgiveness can precede or shape other forgiveness processes (Skalski-Bednarz, 2024). In the first models of forgiveness described earlier in this subsection, "receiving God's forgiveness" predicts emotional forgiveness and later empathy and reconciliation—suggesting empathy is not always the starting point. Moreover, there is evidence that perceived divine forgiveness influences self-forgiveness and well-being, sometimes even moderating its effects (Skalski-Bednarz, 2024). Other findings show that divine forgiveness can operate through multiple pathways (e.g., increasing self-forgiveness, gratitude, or humility), not only empathy (Skalski-Bednarz, 2024).

While these models account for a substantial range of forgiveness types and contextual dynamics, we contend that a literature review adopting a comprehensive approach and a unified objective—such as the current one—can further enrich this body of work by incorporating a broader diversity of perspectives into a more integrated conceptual framework.

1.1.5. Forgiveness as a Multilevel Framework

The broader forgiveness framework we are critically proposing through this narrative review situates forgiveness as a central regulatory process linking emotional healing with social reconstruction, within the context of individuals, groups, and societies.

Forgiveness in Traditional and Modern Social Systems: Cultural Structures of Social Repair

In many traditional societies, forgiveness occupies a structurally central role because social survival depends on durable relational networks, kinship systems, and communal interdependence (* Anusiem, 2012; Mullet & Neto, 2014, 2016, 2020; Paz et al., 2008). Within such systems, unresolved grievances threaten not only individual relationships but broader communal stability (* Anusiem, 2012; Billingsley et al., 2020; * Vera Cruz, 2015). Consequently, forgiveness functions as a culturally institutionalized process of socio-psychological repair, integrating apology, compensation, restitution, and moral reaffirmation into mechanisms that restore social trust and prevent cycles of retaliation (* Worthington, 1998; Worthington & Wade, 2020b; S. B. Wade, 2024).

These systems often embed forgiveness within religious, moral, and customary frameworks, thereby reinforcing collective norms of solidarity, restraint, and reconciliation (* Anusiem, 2012; Mullet et al., 2003; * Worthington, 1998). Justice processes are frequently restorative rather than adversarial, emphasizing accountability alongside relational reintegration (Kohen, 2009; * Omowon & Kunlere, 2024; * Van Ness, 2005; * Vera Cruz & Mullet, 2019a, 2019b). Thus, forgiveness operates not simply as private emotional release but as a communal regulatory system essential to maintaining social cohesion.

In transitional or post-conflict societies, forgiveness becomes especially critical for rebuilding civic order and restoring collective recognition after large-scale violence (Bayer et al., 2007; * Bešić & Džuverović, 2020; * Bueno, 2024; * Cairns, 2005; De Tezano-Pinto et al., 2017; Huyse et al., 2003; * Mengstie et al., 2026; Neto et al., 2013; Staub et al., 2005; * Tutu, 1999; White & Ntlapo, 2022; Worchel & Coutant, 2008). Processes such as truth commissions, amnesty, reparations, and public acknowledgment transform forgiveness into institutionalized social repair. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Rwanda's Gacaca courts, and reconciliation initiatives in Northern Ireland, Colombia, Combodia and post-war Europe illustrate forgiveness as a macro-social mechanism that restores dignity, reintegrates former adversaries, and reconstructs moral communities (Doxtader & Salazar, 2007; * Craig, 2025; * Gellman, 2008; * Haberstock, 2014; Hanke et al., 2013; * Kung, 2012; López López et al., 2018; Martínez-Bernal et al., 2024; White & Ntlapo, 2022).

By contrast, modern individualistic societies rely more heavily on legal systems and formalized dispute resolution, reducing forgiveness's structural necessity while preserving its personal and relational importance (Ballester et al., 2011; Kadiangandu et al., 2001; Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Misztal, 2011; Neto & Pinto, 2010; * Odak, 2025; Oettler et al., 2025). Here, forgiveness increasingly functions as an individualized moral choice, though the studies we reviewed (see Section 3) show that its socio-psychological benefits remain substantial.

Interpersonal and Intergroup Forgiveness: Repairing Relationships and Collective Identities

At the interpersonal level, forgiveness serves as a direct mechanism for regulating emotional injury and restoring damaged social bonds (R. D. Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; McCullough, 2008). Through reductions in resentment, anger, and retaliatory motivation, individuals can re-establish trust, empathy, and relational stability (Rani & Kumar, 2020; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023). Interpersonal forgiveness thus constitutes a form of socio-psychological repair in which intrapsychic transformation facilitates healthier social functioning.

This process relies on cognitive reappraisal, emotional regulation, empathy enhancement, and physiological stress reduction (McCullough, 2008; S. B. Wade, 2024). Importantly, interpersonal forgiveness often extends beyond dyadic relationships, reinforcing broader familial and communal cohesion (Vera Cruz & Mullet, 2019a; White & Ntlapo, 2022). In this sense, interpersonal forgiveness links personal healing with wider social regulation.

Intergroup forgiveness extends these mechanisms to collective contexts marked by historical trauma, systemic injustice, or political violence (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Noor et al., 2008). Here, forgiveness regulates not only individual emotions but also group identities, historical narratives, and social boundaries (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Davis et al., 2015a). By reducing collective resentment and facilitating coexistence, intergroup forgiveness can promote long-term social stability while preserving demands for justice and recognition (* Shnabel & Nadler, 2008).

Examples such as post-apartheid South Africa, Northern Ireland, and gender-based justice contexts illustrate how forgiveness can facilitate intergroup repair when accompanied by acknowledgment, accountability, and structural reforms (* Gibson, 2004; Hewstone et al., 2006; Lamb, 2006).

Self-Forgiveness: Intra-Personal Repair and Identity Restoration

Self-forgiveness extends socio-psychological repair inward, addressing fractures within the self-caused by personal wrongdoing, guilt, or shame (R. D. Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1996; Hall & Fincham, 2005). Genuine self-forgiveness requires acknowledgment of responsibility, emotional processing, self-compassion, and renewed commitment to moral values.

Rather than excusing harmful behavior, self-forgiveness restores intrapsychic coherence by repairing damaged self-recognition. It allows individuals to reconcile moral failure with continued self-worth, thereby reducing depression, anxiety, and maladaptive shame while promoting constructive behavioral change (Davis et al., 2015b; M. J. A. Wohl et al., 2008).

1.1.6. Forgiveness Measurement Tools

The scientific study of forgiveness has required the development of psychometrically sound instruments capable of operationalizing forgiveness across its multiple dimensions—cognitive, emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, intrapersonal, social, and spiritual. Viewed collectively, forgiveness assessment tools do more than quantify isolated attitudes or responses; they reflect distinct methodological approaches to measuring

forgiveness as a broader framework of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition. Each instrument captures specific mechanisms through which individuals or groups regulate harm, restore damaged relationships, reconstruct moral identity, and promote psychological or social healing. Thus, forgiveness measurement itself mirrors the multidimensionality of forgiveness as a restorative process operating across personal, relational, and societal systems.

The Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI): Measuring Offense-Specific Relational Repair

The Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; R. Enright et al., 2022) is among the most comprehensive instruments for assessing forgiveness toward a specific offender. Its 60-item structure evaluates forgiveness through three core domains—affect, behavior, and cognition—thereby directly measuring the extent to which individuals have transformed resentment, retaliatory intentions, and hostile beliefs into more adaptive relational orientations.

Within the broader socio-psychological framework, the EFI is particularly valuable because it captures forgiveness as a targeted process of interpersonal repair. By assessing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral change, it operationalizes forgiveness as a mechanism through which individuals restore internal equilibrium and potentially re-establish healthier social interactions. This aligns strongly with conceptualizations of forgiveness as relational regulation and moral reconstruction.

However, the EFI's offense-specific design may limit its utility for broader analyses of dispositional forgiveness or macro-social forgiveness processes. It primarily focuses on dyadic repair rather than structural or collective dimensions.

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS): Measuring Intra- and Interpersonal Repair Capacities

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005) broadens forgiveness assessment by conceptualizing forgiveness as a dispositional capacity across three domains: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. This multidimensional approach reflects forgiveness as a generalized psychological orientation toward managing harm, adversity, and moral injury.

The HFS is especially important for understanding forgiveness as a psychosocial regulatory system because it integrates both intrapersonal and interpersonal repair mechanisms. By including self-forgiveness and situational forgiveness, the scale recognizes that forgiveness extends beyond interpersonal transgressions into broader domains of identity regulation, resilience, and adaptation to uncontrollable life events.

This broader scope makes the HFS particularly relevant for conceptualizing forgiveness as an enduring resource for psychological well-being and social functioning. Nonetheless, because it emphasizes general tendencies, it may be less sensitive to contextual nuances or structural power dynamics involved in specific forgiveness processes.

Mullet's Forgiveness Questionnaire: Assessing Moral Flexibility and Conditionality

Mullet's Forgiveness Questionnaire (Mullet et al., 2003; Paz et al., 2008) contributes a distinct perspective by emphasizing enduring resentment, sensitivity to contextual variables, and unconditional forgiveness. Its structure captures not only whether individuals forgive, but also how forgiveness is conditioned by moral reasoning, social expectations, and contextual complexity.

This instrument is particularly useful within a socio-psychological repair framework because it highlights the variability of forgiveness across circumstances and moral schemas. By measuring conditionality, it acknowledges that forgiveness is not inherently universal or

uniformly adaptive. Rather, forgiveness can be influenced by social norms, developmental maturity, and moral frameworks.

Such an approach allows for more critical analysis of forgiveness, including recognition of when forgiveness may be withheld to preserve justice, self-protection, or social accountability. Thus, Mullet's scale contributes to a more nuanced understanding of forgiveness as both restorative and potentially constrained by legitimate ethical considerations.

Toussaint's Forgiveness Scale: Integrating Spiritual and Existential Dimensions

The McNultyForgiveness Scale (Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2025a; L. L. Toussaint et al., 2023), often embedded within broader religiousness/spirituality measures, expands forgiveness assessment into transcendent and existential domains by measuring forgiveness of self, others, and perceived divine forgiveness.

This instrument is particularly significant because it operationalizes forgiveness within spiritual systems of moral regulation and psychosocial repair. By incorporating divine forgiveness, it acknowledges that many individuals experience forgiveness not solely as interpersonal or psychological transformation, but also as restoration of existential meaning, spiritual identity, and perceived moral standing before transcendent authorities.

This inclusion is theoretically important because spiritual frameworks often shape moral behavior, emotional healing, and community integration. At the same time, reliance on divine forgiveness may produce both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes, depending on whether it promotes humility and accountability or facilitates moral disengagement. Thus, the scale supports critical examination of forgiveness across transcendent dimensions while revealing its broader role in psychosocial regulation.

Other specific forgiveness tools have been developed, such as the Collectivist-Sensitive Trait Forgivingness Scale (Cowden et al., 2019c) which measures individuals' dispositional tendency to forgive within collectivist cultural contexts, emphasizing harmony, interpersonal obligations, social relationships, and culturally shaped responses to interpersonal offenses and reconciliation.

1.1.7. A Case for an Integrative Forgiveness Framework

The multiple definitions of forgiveness outlined at the beginning of this introduction can be synthesized into a comprehensive and integrative conceptualization. Combined with the theoretical perspectives and typologies reviewed, these approaches converge in suggesting that forgiveness is a multidimensional process—biologically grounded, developmentally cultivated, and socially regulated—through which individuals and groups transform experiences of harm into psychological healing, relational repair, and renewed mutual recognition. Across self, interpersonal, intergroup, political, and spiritual domains, forgiveness functions as a comprehensive socio-psychological mechanism that regulates resentment, restores dignity, reconstructs trust, and promotes cooperative coexistence. Developmental, evolutionary, and neuroscientific perspectives converge in showing forgiveness as an adaptive system for emotional regulation, moral maturity, and social stability. Its diverse forms—dispositional, situational, political, and divine—represent context-specific extensions of this broader restorative framework across personal, collective, institutional, and transcendent systems. Although forgiveness can foster resilience, reconciliation, and flourishing, it may also be harmful when coerced, premature, or disconnected from justice. Thus, forgiveness can be best understood as a dynamic framework of psychosocial repair and mutual recognition, whose effectiveness depends on accountability, moral acknowledgment, and contextual sensitivity across the full spectrum of human social life.

Now, it remains to see to what extent the empirical studies conducted during the past 26 years support our critical proposition that forgiveness can be understood and practiced as an integrative framework for psychosocial restoration and the reestablishment of mutual recognition.

1.2. Problematic and the Present Review Objectives

Over the past two decades, numerous literature reviews on forgiveness have been conducted. However, most of these syntheses have focused on specific predictor or outcome variables. Such a fragmented approach constrains a comprehensive understanding of forgiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon that operates simultaneously as a personal psychological resource, mutual recognition process, a mechanism of relational repair, and a societal instrument for reconciliation.

The main objective of the present review is to offer a comprehensive narrative review of the relevant empirical findings from studies conducted since 2000. By integrating insights across levels of analysis, this review seeks to advance a more coherent and encompassing understanding of the pivotal role forgiveness plays at the intra-individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and broader societal levels, which, as emphasized throughout this introduction, is primarily conceptualized as a socio-psychological mechanism/process of repair and reciprocal recognition.

1.2.1. Study Aims

Particularly, this review aimed at:

(a) Synthesize definitions, theoretical approaches (including developmental, evolutionary, and neurobiological perspectives), and typologies (e.g., dispositional, situational, and related forms), while demonstrating how, across the diverse contexts in which forgiveness operates—namely intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup domains—these perspectives converge toward a comprehensive conceptualization of forgiveness as a framework for psychosocial repair and reciprocal recognition.

(b) Examine empirical studies for evidence supporting forgiveness as a mechanism of mutual recognition and social as well as psychological repair, with particular attention to post-conflict and transitional justice contexts, where intergroup forgiveness is especially salient.

(c) Identify psychological and social benefits, mechanisms, and limitations of forgiveness, including conditions under which it may fail or backfire (benefits and drawbacks of interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness).

Highlight avenues for research and intervention, particularly in cross-cultural, restorative justice, and Positive Psychology frameworks.

1.2.2. Significance

By offering a holistic, multi-level perspective on forgiveness, this review proposes to bridge the gaps between psychological theory, developmental models, and societal applications. It informs scholarship and practice, providing insights for therapists, educators, policymakers, and community leaders. Forgiveness is framed not only as a personal virtue but also as a strategic tool for mutual recognition, social cohesion, reconciliation, and post-conflict recovery, emphasizing accountability, justice, and cultural sensitivity. This framework establishes a foundation for interventions that foster well-being, moral development, and societal resilience.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

This article employs a systematic and integrative review design to synthesize theoretical, empirical, and applied research on forgiveness across developmental, interpersonal, community, and self-directed domains. By integrating findings from the social and human sciences, across traditional and modern societies, as well as stable, unstable, and post-conflict transitional justice contexts, the study seeks to develop a comprehensive framework linking the individual and societal dimensions of forgiveness. This approach enables the examination of multiple levels of analysis, including cognitive-emotional processes, relational functioning, and societal mechanisms of socio-psychological restoration, reconciliation, and mutual recognition at both interindividual and intergroup levels.

2.2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PsycINFO, PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and PhD thesis dissertations. Search terms included:

(a) "forgiveness AND theory";
(b) "forgiveness AND interpersonal relationships";
(c) "forgiveness AND intergroup relationships";
(d) "forgiveness AND intergroup relations";
(e) "forgiveness AND community";
(f) "forgiveness AND self-forgiveness";
(g) "forgiveness AND post-conflict";
(h) "forgiveness AND restorative justice";
(i) "forgiveness AND reconciliation";
(j) "forgiveness AND truth and reconciliation";
(k) "forgiveness AND work relationships";
(l) "forgiveness AND professional relationships";
(m) "forgiveness AND positive effects";
(n) "forgiveness AND negative effects";
(o) "forgiveness AND interventions or therapy or treatment".

Inclusion criteria:

(a) Peer-reviewed articles (or evidence-based book chapters and PhD thesis dissertations) presenting forgiveness theoretical perspectives grounded in direct or indirect empirical evidence and published between 2000 and 2026.
(b) Peer-reviewed articles (or evidence-based book chapters and PhD thesis dissertations) presenting empirical studies, meta-analyses and review articles published between 2000 and 2026.
(c) Peer-reviewed articles (or evidence-based book chapters and PhD thesis dissertations) presenting studies addressing forgiveness at intra-individual, inter-individual, intergroup, or societal/community levels; published between 2000 and 2026.
(d) Peer-reviewed articles (or evidence-based book chapters and PhD thesis dissertations) presenting studies addressing post-conflict, transitional justice, or culturally embedded forgiveness processes.

Exclusion criteria:

(a) Articles, books or book chapters, or PhD thesis dissertations published before 2000.
(b) Articles, books or book chapters that explored the forgiveness issue but did not report a theoretical evidence-based view and/or empirical study on mechanisms; or that

did not report effects (positive or negative) of forgiveness on mental health, physical health, well-being, or reconciliation.

(c) Opinion articles or non-peer-reviewed articles, books or book chapters without evidence-based, empirical, or theoretical grounding.

(d) Articles, books or book chapters presenting content focused exclusively on general moral reasoning without reference to forgiveness.

The systematic search yielded 35,781 records, including duplication of same documents from different databases. The first author (GVC) reduplicate the references retrieved from the various databases using EndNote 20 (Clarivate Analytics, Alexandria, VA, USA). Following deduplication, a total of 7265 records remained. Of these, an additional 1917 records were excluded through EndNote's automated ineligibility screening tools, resulting in 5348 records eligible for further review. These records underwent a two-phase screening process. In the first phase, titles and abstracts of all 5348 records were screened for eligibility using Rayyan, a web-based platform specifically designed to support systematic review screening. This initial phase yielded 467 records for full-text retrieval and assessment. The second phase involved a full-text review of the 467 records based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, followed by data extraction. This process was conducted by GVC, CDR, and four university students employed as research assistants. Three reviewers (GVC, CDR, and one research assistant) independently assessed all 467 full-text records during this phase. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Upon completion of the screening process, 190 sources met the eligibility criteria and were retained for inclusion in the integrative narrative synthesis. A detailed overview of the reference identification and selection process is provided in the PRISMA diagram (Figure 1).

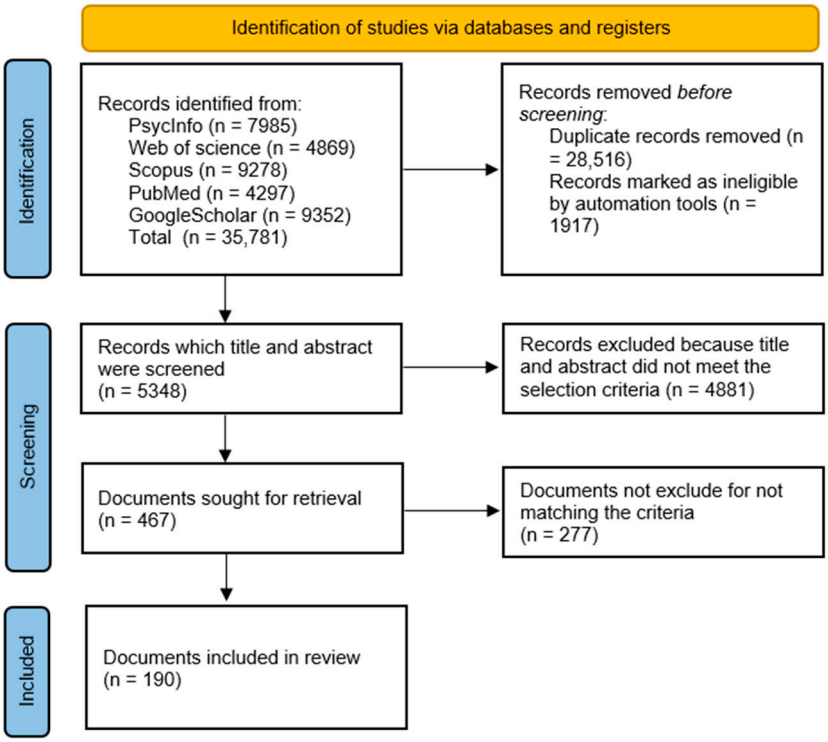

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram of the process used to identify references for the review.

In addition to the systematic review described above, we reviewed 47 articles, books, and book chapters (documents marked with an asterisk [*], in the article body citations) that address both theoretical and empirical perspectives on forgiveness, but either were published prior to 2000 or where outside the chosen criteria. The aim of this supplementary

review was to provide (a) a historical account of the conceptual and methodological evolution of forgiveness research and (b) elaborate on the findings of some studies within the review scope. By incorporating foundational and contextual contributions, the review of these 47 sources meant mainly to enriches the present narrative review introduction and discussion sections.

2.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted according to the following dimensions:

(a) Population/context: age group, cultural context, or societal setting.
(b) Forgiveness type: intergroup, interpersonal, self-directed.
(c) Methods: Quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, systematic reviewers/meta-analysis, longitudinal designs, experimental interventions.
(d) Outcomes: mental health, physical health, psychological well-being, relational functioning, community cohesion, post-conflict reconciliation, work outcomes.
(e) Mechanisms: rumination, anger reduction, empathy, prosocial behavior, structural and cultural mediators.

Data were synthesized, with an emphasis on identifying themes (dimension: intergroup, interpersonal, self-directed; type: dispositional/trait forgiveness, situational forgiveness; effects: positive [mental health, physical health, psychological well-being, etc.], negative [elements indicating failing to address or worsen given problem, etc.]; mechanisms of effect and conditions under which forgiveness promotes or fails to promote social and psychological repair).

2.4. Study Variables

(a) Intergroup forgiveness: reduction of negative affect and retaliation toward members of opposing groups (ethnic, political, religious, gender, etc., based groups); enhancement of relational trust and communication between given social groups.
(b) Interpersonal forgiveness: reduction of negative affect and retaliation toward transgressors; enhancement of relational trust and communication.
(c) Self-forgiveness: processes including self-condemnation, self-compassion, pseudo-forgiveness, and esteem restoration.
(d) Community/Societal forgiveness: Mechanisms such as ritual apology, restitution, truth-telling, and reconciliation programs embedded in social and cultural norms.
(e) Outcomes of interest: psychological well-being, relational satisfaction, social cohesion, community trust, reintegration of perpetrators, and reconciliation effectiveness; or the contrary.

2.5. Analytical Approach

A thematic analysis framework was applied to organize findings across four levels: intergroup, interpersonal, and self-directed. Patterns were identified regarding:

(a) Mechanisms linking forgiveness to well-being (cognitive, emotional, relational).
(b) Contextual factors influencing forgiveness processes (culture, post-conflict environment, justice system practices).
(c) Potential limitations and pitfalls, including pseudo-forgiveness and accountability deficits.
(d) Findings were synthesized to propose an integrative framework for forgiveness as a mechanism of mutual recognition, both social and psychological repair, and societal optimal functioning.

2.6. Participants

The review included studies comprising approximately 300,000 participants across 190 studies. Samples ranged from adolescents to older adults, with ages between 4 and 93 years. Participants were drawn from diverse contexts, including general population, community, student, and clinical populations across multiple countries.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

As a review study using publicly available data and literature, this study did not require formal ethical approval. However, all included studies adhered to ethical guide lines for human research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants.

3. Results

This section is structured as follows: (a) benefits and drawbacks of forgiveness in intergroup relationships; (b) benefits and drawbacks of forgiveness in interpersonal relationships; (c) benefits and drawbacks of forgiveness in professional relationships; (d) benefits and drawbacks of self-forgiveness; (e) trauma and forgiveness; (f) forgiveness-based interventions.

3.1. Evidence-Based Benefits and Drawbacks of Forgiveness in Intergroup Relationships

Research on forgiveness in intergroup contexts indicates that it is a multidimensional process shaped by historical narratives, power relations, and institutional responses. A meta-analysis (Van Tongeren et al., 2014) study on predictors of intergroup forgiveness revealed that collective guilt and trust were the strongest facilitators, whereas negative emotions and in-group identity were the strongest barriers to intergroup forgiveness.

3.1.1. Effects of Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Relationships

In post-conflict settings such as South Africa, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland intergroup forgiveness has been linked to reduced intergroup hostility and greater support for reconciliation when accompanied by truth-telling and accountability mechanisms (Gibson, 2004; Hewstone et al., 2006; Kaminer et al., 2001; Myers et al., 2009; Staub et al., 2005). In these three countries, intergroup forgiveness was shown to be associated with better individual mental health.

Particularly, in South Africa, a study by Kaminer et al. (2001) indicated that among survivors of human-rights abuses in relation with the apartheid regime, low forgiveness was associated with poorer psychiatric health, although participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) itself was not significantly linked to psychiatric outcomes. Also, in South Africa, Stein et al. (2008) examined psychological and attitudinal outcomes related to the TRC using a nationally representative survey (number of participants [*N*] = 4351) conducted 6–8 years after the commission began. The study assessed participants' exposure to and involvement in the TRC, as well as their views of survivors' and perpetrators' testimonies. Distress was higher among women, individuals with lower levels of education, those who had personal TRC-related experiences to report, and those holding negative views of survivors' testimonies. Anger showed similar associations and was additionally linked to younger age. Forgiveness was positively associated with older age, higher education, Coloured identity, and favorable evaluations of perpetrators' testimonies, but negatively associated with having a personal TRC experience to share. Distress and anger were inversely related to forgiveness. Overall, perceptions of the TRC were moderately positive across most demographic groups.

A post-genocide intervention study conducted in Rwanda (Staub et al., 2005) showed that forgiveness was associated with reduced trauma symptoms and a more positive orientation toward members of the other group, both over time (from before the treatment to two months afterwards) and in comparison to control groups. Several other studies conducted in this same country (Heim & Schaal, 2014; * Mukashema & Mullet, 2010, 2013; Pham et al., 2004) showed that intergroup forgiveness was statistically linked to better scores of individual reconciliation sentiment and individual mental health. In addition, these studies revealed that high levels of dispositional forgiveness (or trait forgiveness) and divine forgiveness were much stronger predictors of better mental health and reconciliation sentiment than situational forgiveness.

In post-conflict Northern Ireland, Myers et al. (2009) examined the psychological mechanisms linking experiences of ethno-political conflict to mental health outcomes. Their findings indicated that intergroup forgiveness mediated the associations between perceived victimhood and strength of group identification, on the one hand, and mild psychiatric morbidity, on the other. In parallel, collective guilt mediated the relationships between exposure to violence and group identification, as antecedent variables, and intergroup forgiveness. Taken together, these results suggest that forgiveness and collective guilt function as key mediating processes connecting the impact of ethno-political conflict to mental health at the group level. By shaping how collective experiences of harm are interpreted and emotionally processed, these constructs play a central role in psychological adjustment and contribute significantly to the broader process of intergroup reconciliation and mutual recognition. Another study (Hewstone et al., 2006) examined the "contact hypothesis" alongside intergroup forgiveness among Catholic and Protestant communities. Their findings showed that greater intergroup contact was associated with more positive attitudes toward denominational mixing, improved outgroup attitudes, increased perspective-taking, and higher levels of trust. Notably, these beneficial effects of forgiving contacts were observed even among individuals who had experienced more severe sectarian conflict, underscoring the robustness of intergroup contact in promoting reconciliation-related and reciprocal recognition attitudes.

3.1.2. Effects of Forgiveness in Inter-Ethnic Group Relationships

Research on inter-ethnic and intergroup forgiveness consistently highlights its positive effects on psychological well-being and social relations. Forgiveness has been associated with reductions in negative emotions such as anger and hostility following group-based offenses, and with increased perceptions of mutual value (mutual recognition) and reduced threat between formerly antagonistic groups, suggesting improvements in relational quality across ethnically divided populations (Davis et al., 2015a). Longitudinal research further indicates that greater intergroup forgiveness predicts stronger support for peace processes by fostering outgroup trust and constructive attitudes toward reconciliation, particularly in post-conflict settings such as Northern Ireland (Taylor et al., 2022). Experimental and conceptual work shows that intergroup apologies accompanied by expressions of remorse enhance forgiveness and decrease desires for retribution, thereby facilitating emotional regulation that supports reconciliation (Leonard et al., 2011). Additionally, forgiveness at the group level has been linked to increased cooperation and collective action through enhanced group cohesiveness, illustrating benefits beyond individual outcomes to broader social dynamics (Irwin et al., 2014). Collectively, these studies suggest that inter-ethnic group forgiveness contributes to improved psychological health, reduced intergroup animosity, and strengthened foundations for peaceful coexistence. A study by Leach et al. (2010) examining the influence of Black racial identity on the forgiveness of White Americans found that dispositional forgiveness, along with broader personality

characteristics, was positively associated with intergroup forgiveness. The findings suggest that relatively stable individual differences—such as a general tendency to forgive and adaptive personality traits—may facilitate forgiveness across racial group boundaries. In turn, this disposition toward intergroup forgiveness appears to reflect a greater openness to constructive and cooperative intergroup engagement, thereby highlighting the role of individual-level psychological resources in fostering positive intergroup relationships. In sum, these findings indicate that interethnic forgiveness enhances well-being, reduces hostility, fosters trust, cooperation, reconciliation, and supports peaceful coexistence across ethnic boundaries.

3.1.3. Effects of Forgiveness in Intra and Intergender Relationships

Research on forgiveness within and across gender indicates that intergender forgiveness contributes to healthier interpersonal dynamics and individual well-being. Studies comparing men and women have found that dispositional forgiveness is positively associated with affective well-being—such as positive emotions and reduced anxiety—across genders, highlighting forgiveness as a correlate of psychological health in both men and women, even though patterns may differ slightly by affective traits (e.g., positive affect relates to greater forgiveness) and emotional control (negative affect and anxiety tend to suppress forgiveness) (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022). In romantic and close relationships, forgiveness has been linked to greater happiness and relationship restoration for both male and female partners, suggesting it facilitates emotional reconciliation and greater relational satisfaction without strong gender disparities in overall forgiveness levels (Kaur, 2023). Additionally, research on health outcomes of forgiveness shows that it positively predicts post-traumatic growth and psychological adjustment--improved well-being (mediated by cognitive processes like rumination and reflection), more frequently among women than among men (Mróz & Kaleta, 2023). Collectively, these findings underscore that intergender forgiveness supports emotional well-being, enhanced relationship functioning, and adaptive psychosocial outcomes across contexts.

3.1.4. Predictors of Intergroup Forgiveness

Now, what are the most important predictors of intergroup forgiveness? A meta-analysis (Van Tongeren et al., 2014) study on predictors of intergroup forgiveness revealed that collective guilt and trust were the strongest facilitators, whereas negative emotions and ingroup identity were the strongest barriers to intergroup forgiveness. The intergroup meaningful contact is the main venue through which trust can be built; several empirical studies showing that intergroup contact plays a crucial role in the pursuit of forgiveness and reconciliation, this can occur through general contact, interactions with members of other groups—particularly friendships, which are the most effective—or even through indirect forms of engagement (Hewstone & Hughes, 2015). In fact, the referred meta-analysis suggests that in the context of post-conflict intergroup relations, forgiveness and pro-reconciliation attitudes and actions come mainly from trusting the outgroup. In line with these findings, Tam et al. (2009) have shown that outgroup trust mediates the impact of intergroup contact on behavioral tendencies toward the outgroup, and trusting the outgroup is more important than simply liking the outgroup: trust is a stronger predictor of behavioral tendencies toward the outgroup than positive attitudes are. Also, in interethnic and interracial relations, perspective-taking, trust, and positive intergroup contact predict greater willingness to forgive historical harms (Tam et al., 2009; Hewstone et al., 2006). All these studies demonstrated two mechanisms for increasing outgroup trust (thus forgiveness and reconciliation)—through both direct and extended intergroup contact.

3.1.5. When Forgiveness in Intergroup Relationships Fail Short

Forgiveness in intergroup relations has its limitation. Although the literature overwhelmingly indicates that intergroup forgiveness plays a pivotal role in post-conflict reconciliation by enabling formerly opposed groups to move beyond past atrocities, findings by Tam et al. (2007) moderate this view. Their study demonstrated that specific intergroup emotions—particularly anger—and infrahumanization (i.e., the tendency to attribute more uniquely human emotions to the ingroup than to the outgroup) significantly predicted lower levels of intergroup forgiveness. These results underscore the importance of affective and dehumanizing processes in hindering forgiveness and, consequently, in obstructing reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Moreover, research underscores the moderating role of power asymmetries: disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups may experience normative pressure to forgive, potentially undermining collective action for justice (Davis et al., 2015b; Taylor et al., 2022; Misztal, 2016). Finally, in most cases, intergroup forgiveness is part of political forgiveness (Ayee, 2016; Misztal, 2016). As stressed in the introduction section, this type of forgiveness tends to emerge when perpetrators acknowledge wrongdoing and when institutions signal procedural and distributive justice (Forster, 2018; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; * Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Without such conditions, forgiveness appeals may be perceived as illegitimate or as reinforcing structural inequalities (Forster, 2018; Hanke et al., 2013; Misztal, 2011, 2016; M. J. A. Wohl et al., 2012). In intergender contexts—particularly regarding gender-based violence—researchers caution that forgiveness should not replace accountability, as premature forgiveness may perpetuate unequal gender norms in terms of social roles, activities, social/moral requirements, personal value, etc. (Lamb, 2006). At the interpersonal level, however, forgiveness interventions have demonstrated benefits for psychological well-being and reductions in anger across group lines (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Finally, it is often assumed that official apologies for past injustices help promote forgiveness between groups. Empirical research, however, show a complex picture (M. J. A. Wohl et al., 2012). In fact, research does not consistently show a clear cause-and-effect link between apologies and intergroup forgiveness (M. J. A. Wohl et al., 2012). Indeed, some studies suggest that apologies do not always have the expected positive impact (M. J. A. Wohl et al., 2012). Drawing on the theory of infrahumanization, M. J. A. Wohl et al. (2012) offered a possible explanation. As a reminder, infrahumanization refers to the tendency to see members of other groups as less fully human, especially by denying them the capacity to experience complex, uniquely human emotions such as remorse, guilt, or anguish. If people believe that members of an outgroup are not capable of such emotions, they may doubt the sincerity of their apologies. In M. J. A. Wohl et al. (2012) study, Canadians were more likely to forgive Afghans for a friendly fire incident when they perceived Afghans as capable of experiencing uniquely human (secondary) emotions, such as anguish. However, the findings also showed that when a transgressor group explicitly expressed secondary emotions in an apology, forgiveness decreased compared to when they expressed primary emotions (such as fear), or even when they offered no emotional expression at all. In fact, apologies expressing complex emotions led to no more forgiveness than offering no apology, and less forgiveness than a neutral apology. This effect was explained by reduced trust in the sincerity of the apology. Importantly, these patterns appeared only when the apology came directly from an outgroup and only among individuals who tended to deny uniquely human qualities to that outgroup. The effects did not appear when the wrongdoing was committed by one's own group, or when an outgroup apology was delivered through a member of the ingroup. Overall, these findings suggest that apologies between groups are not automatically effective. Their impact depends on how the apologizing group is perceived and whether its members are

seen as fully human. This has important implications for efforts toward reconciliation after intergroup conflict.

In sum, overwhelming evidence suggests that intergroup forgiveness can foster social cohesion and democratic stability when embedded within broader frameworks of mutual recognition, justice, and structural reform. It is most constructive when voluntary, supported by acknowledgment and reparative efforts, and aligned with transformation of the conditions that produced harm. When processes of forgiveness fail to materialize, more specifically when reciprocal recognition does not underline forgiveness, the consequences may include the persistence of intergroup hostility, the entrenchment of grievances, and the escalation of conflict across group boundaries.

3.2. Evidence-Based Benefits and Drawbacks of Forgiveness in Interpersonal Relationships

Forgiveness in interpersonal contexts improves mental health, psychological well-being, subjective well-being, relational satisfaction, and social functioning (Gao et al., 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Rani & Kumar, 2020; Riek & Mania, 2012). Mechanisms include reduction of rumination, anger, and hostility, along with enhanced empathy and prosocial motivation (Mróz & Kaleta, 2023).

3.2.1. Forgiveness Positive Effects Among Adolescents

Several studies (e.g., Christensen et al., 2011; Kumar & Dixit, 2014; Rani & Kumar, 2020; Liu & Lu, 2023; Toiu-Ruiu & Stănculescu, 2026) have shown that adolescents who engaged in forgiving practices reported significantly better mental health and psychological well-being. A study by Kumar and Dixit (2014) found that forgiveness predicted adolescents' well-being, mediated by reductions in rumination and hostile cognition; similar findings were reported in a study by Wulandari and Megawati (2020) as well as a study by Toiu-Ruiu and Stănculescu (2026).

Quintana-Orts and Rey (2018) investigated whether forgiveness and cybervictimization predict cyberbullying perpetration in a sample of 1650 Spanish secondary school students (50.5% girls). The study results indicated that among adolescents who had experienced cybervictimization, those reporting higher levels of forgiveness engaged in significantly fewer cyberbullying behaviors than those with lower forgiveness, regardless of sex and grade level. In addition, the study findings suggested that in the social context of the school environment, forgiveness functioned as a protective factor, attenuating the likelihood that victimized adolescents will retaliate cybervictimization through cyberbullying.

3.2.2. Forgiveness Positive Effects Among Adults

In adults, several studies (Brito et al., 2025; Kaleta & Mroz, 2018; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023; Riek & Mania, 2012; Rey & Extremera, 2014) indicate that interpersonal forgiveness was strongly associated with life satisfaction; specifically, dispositional interpersonal forgiveness improves emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and relationship stability.

The findings of a recent study on forgiveness (Cowden et al., 2026) are consistent with and extend the central conclusions drawn from empirical research conducted over the past 26 years. Indeed, Cowden et al. (2026) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study using nationally representative samples (N = 207,919) from 23 countries to investigate the associations between dispositional forgiveness and 56 multidimensional well-being outcomes measured approximately one year later. These outcomes spanned psychological, social, physical, volitional, and material domains. Results indicated that higher levels of forgivingness were significantly associated with greater overall well-being, as reflected in both composite indices and numerous domain-specific indicators. The associations were generally stronger and more consistent within certain domains—particularly psychological well-being—than in others, such as physical health and health-related behaviors.

3.2.3. Forgiveness Positive Effects in Parent–Child Relationship

Research consistently shows positive effects of forgiveness in parent–child relationships for emotional, relational, and psychological well-being. For example, a large study found that higher levels of parents' self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others significantly weakened the link between parents' and children's adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), suggesting forgiveness can buffer intergenerational transmission of trauma and foster healthier family dynamics (Skolnick et al., 2023).

Intervention studies also offer concrete insights: in one parent-led forgiveness program, parents who taught forgiveness to their children showed increases in interpersonal forgiveness (Magnuson, 2009). Meta-analytic evidence further supports that teaching young people about forgiveness increases their forgiveness tendencies and reduces anger, which can improve interactions within families (Rapp et al., 2022).

Observational research suggests modeling forgiveness matters: parents who are forgiving are more likely to be forgiven by their children over time, indicating reciprocal emotional regulation and stronger bonds (McLaughlin et al., 2025). Additionally, studies link children's capacity to forgive with improved social functioning, lower anxiety, and better psychological adjustment, outcomes relevant to parent–child connectedness (Van Der Wal et al., 2016).

Finally, qualitative work in adults raised in care shows that forgiving parents relates to greater relational satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, underscoring long-term relational impacts of forgiveness stemming from family contexts (Cmurová & Záhorcová, 2023).

3.2.4. Forgiveness Positive Effects in Intimate Relationship

Research on forgiveness in intimate relationships consistently finds it fosters healthier, more satisfying, and more stable partnerships. Forgiveness—in this case defined as a reduction in negative motivation (e.g., retaliation, resentment) and, often, an increase in positive regard toward a partner (mutual recognition)—is linked with better relational outcomes across romantic, dating, and marital contexts (Chung, 2014; F. D. Fincham et al., 2002, 2006; * McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; McLaughlin et al., 2025; Paleari et al., 2005). Particularly, the dynamic between empathy and forgiveness tips the balance towards more frequent and more satisfactory common leisure activities and sexual intercourses (Vera Cruz, 2018, 2019; Vera Cruz & Mullet, 2019a).

In romantic relationships, forgiving a partner's transgressions predicts higher relationship satisfaction and lower conflict over time. Studies show that individuals who forgive experience fewer negative conflict and invest more in relational effort, which mediates the association between forgiveness and satisfaction (Braithwaite et al., 2011). Longitudinal evidence indicates that greater benevolence and lower unforgivingness toward a partner reduce the risk of break-ups among dating couples (Kato, 2016). Research also highlights intrapersonal factors, such as humility and self-forgiveness, which increase prosocial responses and relationship satisfaction in emerging adult romantic relationships (Bell & Fincham, 2019).

Within dating dyads, the ability to forgive contributes to relationship maintenance. Forgiveness corresponds with increased trust and reduces the likelihood that conflicts escalate into dissolution (Kato, 2016). Additionally, individuals with secure attachment styles tend to forgive more readily and be forgiven, supporting constructive conflict resolution and relational functioning (Körner et al., 2022).

In the context of marriage, forgiveness remains a powerful predictor of long-term satisfaction and stability. Couples who practice forgiveness demonstrate reduced negative communication patterns and stronger relational bonds (Braithwaite et al., 2011). Interventions that include forgiveness components (e.g., prayer or spiritual practice) have been

linked to lower aggression and enhanced forgiveness among spouses (F. D. Fincham et al., 2006; F. D. Fincham & May, 2017). Marital research also documents that the general tendency to forgive, as shaped by attachment perceptions, mediates links between relational models and satisfaction in both dating and married samples (Kachadourian et al., 2004; Paleari et al., 2005).

Overall, forgiveness in intimate relationships supports emotional well-being, conflict de-escalation, and relational resilience through psychosocial repair.

3.2.5. When Forgiveness in Interpersonal Relationships Fail Short

Research on drawbacks of forgiveness in interpersonal relationships highlights that forgiveness is not universally beneficial, and in some contexts can have adverse emotional, cognitive, and relational consequences (F. D. Fincham et al., 2006). One key concern is that forgiveness may undermine accountability when offenders do not accept responsibility. Pseudo-forgiveness—forgiving without acknowledgment of harm—has been shown to reduce motivation for behavior change and can inadvertently perpetuate unhealthy dynamics, particularly when individuals excuse or rationalize harmful acts without confronting them. (Hall & Fincham, 2005).

In romantic and close relationships, forgiveness has been found to correlate with reduced vigilance regarding future harm when forgiveness is granted prematurely. For example, unforgiving partners demonstrate higher sensitivity to harmful cues, which can be adaptive in preventing repeated transgressions; in contrast, overly rapid forgiveness may diminish protective awareness. (* McCullough et al., 1998).

Studies also report that forgiveness can be psychologically costly when it is pressured rather than chosen. Individuals who forgive to maintain a relationship (obligatory forgiveness) may experience rumination, suppressed anger, and emotional dissonance, which are linked to increased distress and lower relational satisfaction. (Karremans et al., 2005) In cases of severe or recurring abuse, forgiving without appropriate boundaries has been associated with greater vulnerability to revictimization and poorer mental health outcomes. (McNulty, 2010; Cowden et al., 2019a, 2023).

Another documented drawback is that forgiveness can sometimes perpetuate power imbalances. For example, forgiving an abusive partner may reinforce abusive patterns if the offender interprets forgiveness as tolerance for misconduct (F. D. Fincham et al., 2006).

Overall, evidence suggests that while forgiveness often promotes healing, its benefits depend on context, offender accountability, and individual readiness. When these are lacking, forgiveness may carry emotional or relational costs.

3.3. Evidence-Based Benefits and Drawbacks of Forgiveness in Professional Relationships

Research in organizational and work psychology shows that forgiveness in professional relationships can yield measurable benefits but also carries nuanced drawbacks depending on how it is conceived and enacted.

Forgiveness after interpersonal offenses at work (e.g., conflicts with coworkers) predicts better work outcomes over time, including higher job satisfaction, greater work engagement, and lower burnout, even when controlling for offense severity (Cao et al., 2021). Empirical studies suggest a causal role for forgiveness in enhancing well-being and occupational functioning rather than simply reflecting pre-existing good conditions (Cao et al., 2021).

Specifically, higher forgiveness is linked to healthier emotional responses to psychological contract breaches (when expectations about the employment relationship are violated), buffering the impact on emotional exhaustion and downstream performance and citizenship behaviors (Costa & Neves, 2017). A forgiveness climate—where reconciliation

and understanding are organizational norms—can reduce the negative impact of abusive supervision on relational attachment and promote prosocial behaviors such as knowledge sharing with supervisors (Shen et al., 2025). Furthermore, forgiveness climates can indirectly support performance through enhanced psychological safety and perceptions of fairness, creating a work climate in which employees feel secure to recover service and cooperate (Guchait et al., 2019). Examples in real work settings include a team resolving a conflict by expressing forgiveness, leading to renewed engagement with tasks, or an employee who lets go of resentment after a perceived broken promise from management and experiences less burnout and greater commitment.

While scientific literature reports significant benefits of forgiveness in work settings, some studies suggest that fostering "behavioral forgiveness" without authentic reconciliatory attitudes can create a facade of harmony where employees suppress negative feelings (desire for revenge may linger) while lacking genuine trust needed for deep cooperation (Okimoto et al., 2025). Forgiveness may be less effective in contexts where relationships were low quality to begin with—the benefits on job outcomes tend to be more robust when pre-offense relationship quality is relatively high (Cao, 2022). Pressuring employees to forgive for the sake of climate can risk minimizing legitimate grievances, which may undermine justice perceptions, an important component of work engagement and fairness in organizational life (indirectly inferred from discussions on fairness and controlled forgiveness motivations; Okimoto et al., 2025).

Overall, evidence supports that forgiveness can improve work climate, engagement, and psychological health when it fosters genuine reconciliation, mutual recognition between colleagues, psychological safety, and fairness. However, superficial or coerced forgiveness may mask unresolved tensions and reduce trust in professional relationships.

3.4. Evidence-Based Benefits and Drawbacks of Self-Forgiveness

Research consistently shows that self-forgiveness benefits both the self and others. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that higher self-forgiveness is positively correlated with better physical and mental health (e.g., lower anxiety, depression, and stress) and greater psychological well-being across diverse samples (Cook et al., 2023; Flaherty et al., 2025; Khlongkhlaeo & Wongpinpech, 2023). In a meta-analysis spanning 65 samples, self-forgiveness was moderately associated with well-being and life satisfaction, indicating robust positive effects on personal health and affective outcomes (Davis et al., 2015b). Self-forgiveness also predicts better perceived physical health, beyond other forms of forgiveness (Wilson et al., 2008).

Here are several examples from scientific research illustrating how self-forgiveness is associated with better physical and mental health and psychological well-being:

(a) Chronic illness management—Individuals with chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes or heart disease) who practice self-forgiveness for lapses in adherence to treatment report lower stress, reduced depressive symptoms, and better self-care behaviors, supporting improved physical health (L. L. Toussaint et al., 2012).

(b) HIV infection—People living with HIV infection who score higher in self-forgiveness report to be healthier and happier than those who have low self-forgiving scores (L. L. Toussaint et al., 2023).

(c) Substance use recovery—People in recovery from substance abuse who forgive themselves for past relapses show higher self-esteem, reduced guilt and shame, and greater likelihood of sustained abstinence, demonstrating both psychological and behavioral benefits (Exline et al., 2008). Moreover, self-forgiveness combined with gratitude contributes to long-term recovery and stronger social relationships (Chen, 2025).

(d) Everyday stress and coping—College students who engage in self-forgiveness for minor personal failures (e.g., academic mistakes or interpersonal conflicts) report lower anxiety and depression, higher life satisfaction, and increased resilience, suggesting enhanced emotional regulation (M. J. Wohl et al., 2010).

(e) Post-traumatic growth—Trauma survivors who forgive themselves for perceived personal responsibility in adverse events often experience less post-traumatic stress, improved mood, and higher well-being, facilitating psychological growth and recovery. (* Freedman & Enright, 1996).

(f) Interpersonal relationships—Individuals who forgive themselves for past relational transgressions (e.g., neglecting a partner or child) demonstrate better social functioning, higher empathy, and more satisfying relationships, which in turn positively impact mental health (L. Toussaint et al., 2016).

In all these cases, self-forgiveness serves as a mechanism to reduce negative affect, alleviate guilt and shame, and enhance adaptive coping, producing measurable benefits for both mental and physical health as well as overall well-being (Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2025a; Miyagawa & Taniguchi, 2022; Mróz, 2022).

Moreover, self-forgiveness fosters adaptive emotion regulation and reduces self-criticism, guilt, and shame, thereby promoting positive self-regard and flourishing. Indeed, recent research suggests self-forgiveness interrelates with self-compassion and mindfulness, which in turn enhance emotional regulation and resilience in the face of daily adversities (Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2025b; Miyagawa & Taniguchi, 2022; Mróz, 2022). In therapeutic settings, self-forgiveness interventions have demonstrated increases in self-esteem, hope, meaning in life, post-traumatic growth, happiness, and reduced anger and grief, underscoring its utility in clinical and non-clinical populations (Vismaya et al., 2024).

Importantly, self-forgiveness can also benefit relationships with others: individuals who forgive themselves tend to experience increased empathy, reduced defensiveness, and healthier interpersonal functioning. Self-forgiveness is associated with greater altruistic behavior, which mediates higher subjective well-being and potentially enhances social bonds (Hale & Durmuş, 2024).

However, research also cautions that pseudo-self-forgiveness—forgiving oneself without taking responsibility—can undermine behavioral change (Hall & Fincham, 2005). For instance, M. J. A. Wohl and Thompson (2011) demonstrated that, contrary to conventional assumptions and much of the existing literature, self-forgiveness can sometimes have detrimental effects, particularly when it is applied to chronic unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking. In their study of 181 smokers, higher levels of self-forgiveness specific to smoking were associated with a reduced likelihood of progressing through the stages of behavioral change toward action. Furthermore, self-forgiveness was found to mediate the relationship between movement from the pre-contemplation to contemplation stage and both perceived smoking-related cons and experiential processes, suggesting that self-forgiveness may, in certain contexts, inadvertently diminish motivation for behavior modification.

Nevertheless, the predominant scientific evidence supports self-forgiveness as a positive intrapersonal process that improves well-being and facilitates prosocial engagement with others.

3.5. Trauma and Forgiveness

Whether in intergroup or in interpersonal relationships, research consistently shows a negative association between traumatic stress (including post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] symptoms) and forgiveness: higher levels of forgiveness tend to relate to lower trauma symptoms and stress, while greater unresolved trauma and hostility are linked with lower forgiveness (Colucci & Cerci, 2018).

Empirical studies indicate that trauma survivors who were more able to forgive (others, themselves, or circumstances) often report fewer PTSD symptoms, less anger, and reduced negative affect, suggesting forgiveness can buffer the psychological impact of trauma. For example, systematic reviews find that most studies show higher forgiveness is associated with lower PTSD severity, although individual differences and trauma context matter (Colucci & Cerci, 2018). In military veteran samples, difficulty forgiving self and others strongly correlates with greater PTSD symptom severity, depression, and anxiety (Witvliet et al., 2004). In the post-civil war context, the level of forgiveness is strongly and positively related to the level of trauma (Doran et al., 2012); this link is greater among women compared to men.

Forgiveness may also mediate the relationship between trauma and distress. In survivors of childhood abuse, forgiveness was shown to reduce the link between PTSD and hostility (Snyder & Heinze, 2005). Another study with terror-injured individuals found that a tendency to forgive and problem-focused coping were associated with lower PTSD symptom severity (Weinberg et al., 2014).

However, research studies also note that forgiveness is not universally beneficial for all trauma survivors: its effects can vary by trauma type, context, and personal readiness, and forced forgiveness may be counterproductive (Kanter & Wortham, 2026).

3.5.1. Forgiveness in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence

Research on forgiveness in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) reveals multifaceted findings. Quantitative research indicates that the strongest predictors of the forgiveness in intimate partner violence is the level of commitment (being married and the number of children with the offender), religiosity, and socio-economic dependence vis-a-vis the offender (Gilbert & Gordon, 2016). Quantitative work shows that women who have experienced IPV often exhibit lower levels of forgiveness, increased avoidance and revenge motivations, and reduced benevolence toward their partners, especially when IPV is more severe. IPV survivors also report reduced self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others compared to women without such histories (Davidson et al., 2015). Cross-cultural studies show qualitative and quantitative cultural variations on forgiveness in the context of IPV (Davidson et al., 2015; * Vera Cruz et al., 2014).

Qualitative studies with female survivors highlight that forgiveness can be an unintended and personal recovery process characterized by emotional reframing and letting go of grudges rather than reconciling with the abuser. Establishing clear boundaries is described as a prerequisite for forgiveness after abuse has ended (Wu et al., 2020). Another grounded-theory study describes forgiveness as involving empowerment, transformation, and integration phases, underscoring psychological repair and growth following IPV (Wu et al., 2022).

In addition, recent study (Golden et al., 2025) showed that the reasons for forgiving matter: women who forgive for their own well-being or religious reasons may not intend to return to their abusers, whereas forgiveness motivated by the desire to preserve the relationship is linked to higher intent to return, highlighting potential risks of certain forgiveness motivations.

Earlier work examining couples with court-ordered intervention found that victims' level of empathy and dispositional factors (e.g., religiousness) influence forgiveness of abusive partners, and characteristics of the offender (e.g., dominance) also affect victims' forgiveness levels (Tsang & Stanford, 2007).

Examples of forgiveness include survivors describing cognitive and emotional reframing of their former partners without reconciliation. These accounts emphasize that

forgiveness in IPV varies widely and can be part of recovery when it supports self-healing and safety, not reinstatement of harmful relationships (Tsang & Stanford, 2007).

3.5.2. Forgiveness Among Victims of Sexual Violence

Research on forgiveness among survivors of sexual violence shows complex psychological patterns rather than simple gender differences. One quantitative study with 503 college women found that greater experiences of sexual violence were associated with lower forgiveness of self, others, and uncontrollable situations, alongside higher revenge and avoidance tendencies—suggesting that high level of trauma may reduce forgiveness inclinations in female survivors (Davidson et al., 2013).

Gender comparisons in broader forgiveness research suggest mixed evidence: some studies indicate that women may report more empathy and dispositional forgiveness than men, though findings are variable and context-dependent (L. Toussaint & Webb, 2005). However, specific research on male victims of sexual violence and forgiveness is scarce, reflecting underrepresentation of male survivors in the literature.

Qualitative and restorative justice scholarship indicates that forgiveness processes can emerge in some survivors' recovery trajectories. For example, memoirs such as Thordis Elva's South of Forgiveness (Elva, 2017), describe a survivor engaging in dialogue and forgiveness with her perpetrator years after rape, highlighting how some individuals find meaning, accountability, and emotional resolution through structured encounters and reflection. Similarly, restorative justice research notes that some survivors gain perspective and forgiveness through mediated post-assault interactions with offenders, though this varies widely and remains individualized experiences (Shepp et al., 2019).

Overall, studies indicate sexual trauma often impairs forgiveness tendencies, especially for women reporting greater victimization; but forgiveness can develop in specific contexts (e.g., narrative reconciliation or restorative justice) when survivors feel empowered rather than pressured. Research on male survivors' forgiveness patterns remains limited, pointing to a need for more gender-inclusive studies (Davidson et al., 2013; Shepp et al., 2019).

3.6. Forgiveness-Based Interventions

Forgiveness-based therapies and forgiveness-based psychosocial interventions are structured interventions designed to reduce persistent resentment and promote emotional, cognitive, and relational healing following interpersonal transgressions or intergroup conflicts (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Cornish & Wade, 2015; Fife et al., 2013; Malcom & Greenberg, 2000; Sandage & Worthington, 2010; N. G. Wade & Tittler, 2020; Worthington et al., 2010a). They differ in objectives, intensity, and methods, but converge on facilitating a shift from unforgiveness (anger, rumination, avoidance) toward benevolence or emotional neutrality. Meta-analyses indicate moderate to large effects on anger/rumination and small to moderate effects on depression, anxiety, and distress (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016; Vismaya et al., 2024; N. G. Wade et al., 2014). Below a brief description of the most used forgiveness-based therapies/interventions, according to the literature.

3.6.1. Process-Based Forgiveness Therapy

Enright's Process Model of Forgiveness (R. D. Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Objective: deep emotional transformation and meaning reconstruction after severe injustice (e.g., abuse, betrayal). Method: a structured, multi-phase model (Uncovering, Decision, Work, Deepening phases) involving detailed narrative exploration, cognitive reframing, empathy development, and meaning-making. Typically delivered over 12–20 sessions. Evidence: randomized trials with incest survivors and cardiac patients show significant reductions in depression, anxiety, anger, and post-traumatic symptoms, alongside increased hope

and self-esteem (R. D. Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Effects tend to be stronger in longer, process-oriented interventions.

3.6.2. Psychoeducational and Decision-Based Models

REACH Forgiveness Model (Worthington et al., 2010b; Worthington, 2020a). Objective: facilitate decisional and emotional forgiveness in shorter formats (individual, group, online). Method: five structured steps (Recall, Empathize, Altruistic gift, Commit, Hold). Combines guided imagery, perspective-taking, and written commitment exercises. Often delivered in 6–8 h or brief workshops. Evidence: demonstrated increases in forgiveness and reductions in unforgiveness, depression, and stress across community and student samples. Effective in both face-to-face and self-help formats (N. G. Wade et al., 2014).

Forgiveness Letter Interventions (Kent et al., 2013). Objective: initiate emotional release and cognitive restructuring. Method: participants write (but may not send) a detailed forgiveness letter to the offender. Evidence: even single-session writing exercises reduce anger and rumination and increase emotional relief compared with control writing tasks.

Bibliotherapy and Self-Help Programs (Hawker, 2009). Objective: increase accessibility and scalability. Method: structured reading materials with reflection exercises over several weeks. Example: a controlled trial among nursing students showed increased forgiveness and self-esteem and decreased depression relative to controls.

3.6.3. Group-Based and Experiential Interventions

Psychodrama-Oriented Forgiveness Groups (Parlak & Oksuz Gul, 2021). Objective: emotional processing and relational flexibility. Method: role reversal, reenactment of offenses, and perspective-taking within a supportive group. Evidence: participants show increases in "forgiveness flexibility" and emotional regulation.

Couples and Family Forgiveness Interventions (Worthington et al., 2010a). Objective: repair trust and improve relational functioning after betrayal or conflict. Method: integration of forgiveness exercises within couples' therapy (e.g., structured disclosure, empathy building). Outcomes: improved marital satisfaction and reduced hostility in distressed couples.

3.6.4. Main Positive Effects Across Interventions

Meta-analytic findings (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016 Vismaya et al., 2024; N. G. Wade et al., 2014) indicate that: (a) increased forgiveness (moderate to large effects); (b) reduced depression, anxiety, anger, hostility, and stress; (c) decreased rumination and revenge motivations; (d) improved hope, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being; (e) longer, process-based therapies tend to produce stronger emotional change, whereas brief psychoeducational formats are efficient and scalable.

4. Discussion

A central objective of this narrative review was to critically conceptualize forgiveness not simply as an isolated emotional shift, but as a multidimensional framework of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition operating across intra-personal, interpersonal, organizational, and intergroup levels. This section critically examine the findings presented in the results section to demonstrate how they support the central argument of this narrative review. It explores forgiveness across intra-personal, interpersonal, developmental, organizational, and intergroup domains, while also addressing its ethical boundaries, conditional effectiveness, and broader theoretical implications for mutual recognition and restorative justice.

4.1. Forgiveness as Intra-Personal Socio-Psychological Repair: Emotional Regulation, Identity Reconstruction, and Moral Realignment

At the intra-personal level, the reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that forgiveness functions as a mechanism of emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, identity reconstruction, and moral realignment following moral, relational, or psychological injury. In this sense, forgiveness contributes not only to symptom reduction but also to the restoration of internal coherence, self-respect, and psychological equilibrium.

4.1.1. Emotional and Mental Health Outcomes: Forgiveness as Stress Regulation and Internal Repair

The large majority of the reviewed literature indicated that forgiveness is primarily associated with positive emotional and mental health outcomes (Cowden et al., 2026; Gao et al., 2021; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Rani & Kumar, 2020; Riek & Mania, 2012). Meta-analytic evidence indicates moderate effect sizes linking forgiveness interventions to reductions in depression, anxiety, anger, and stress (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016; Vismaya et al., 2024; N. G. Wade et al., 2014). Dispositional forgiveness is similarly associated with lower psychological distress and greater life satisfaction and well-being (Cowden et al., 2026; Gao et al., 2021; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Rani & Kumar, 2020; Riek & Mania, 2012).

These findings strongly support the stress-and-coping framework of forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), positioning forgiveness as a core mechanism of internal socio-psychological repair. Across the reviewed literature, unforgiveness is conceptualized as a chronic stress response characterized by rumination, hostility, avoidance, and sustained physiological arousal. Such processes maintain sympathetic nervous system activation, increase allostatic load, and may partially explain associations between chronic resentment and cardiovascular risk (* Bogle, 2004; * Friedberg et al., 2007, 2009; * Lawler et al., 2003). Forgiveness, by contrast, appears to attenuate stress reactivity, reduce maladaptive emotional activation, and facilitate parasympathetic recovery (* Lawler et al., 2003; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Epidemiological findings further suggest that individuals high in dispositional forgiveness exhibit lower blood pressure, reduced inflammatory markers, and improved health outcomes (L. Toussaint et al., 2015). Although causal pathways remain under investigation, the convergence of psychological and physiological evidence supports the conceptualization of forgiveness as an adaptive stress-regulatory process contributing to internal repair and emotional restoration.

4.1.2. Cognitive–Motivational Transformation: From Revenge to Meaning-Making

The reviewed scientific literature further indicates that forgiveness is associated with significant reductions in resentment, revenge motivations, and avoidance tendencies (Cowden et al., 2026; Gao et al., 2021; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Rani & Kumar, 2020; Riek & Mania, 2012). This is consistent with the motivational model of forgiveness, which proposes that forgiveness involves decreasing revenge and avoidance motivations while increasing benevolence (Donovan & Priester, 2017; * McCullough et al., 1998).

Cognitive reappraisal appears central to this transformation. Through forgiveness, harmful actions are reinterpreted within broader developmental, contextual, or situational frameworks, thereby reducing hostile attributions and enabling psychological restructuring. Rumination reduction is particularly critical, as persistent rumination sustains anger, depressive symptoms, and identity fixation around injury. Forgiveness disrupts this maladaptive cycle by shifting cognitive focus from grievance maintenance toward meaning-making and psychological integration.

In this sense, forgiveness may be understood as a mechanism of autobiographical restructuring through which individuals integrate experiences of harm without allowing those experiences to dominate self-concept or future orientation. This cognitive–motivational shift reinforces the broader framework of forgiveness as socio-psychological repair by transforming cycles of revenge and victimhood into processes of growth, resilience, and restored agency.

4.1.3. Self-Forgiveness as Moral Repair: Restoring Self-Respect and Ethical Identity

Reviewed literature indicates that self-forgiveness addresses forms of moral injury directed inward. Authentic self-forgiveness requires acknowledgment of wrongdoing, acceptance of responsibility, reparative intention, and the restoration of self-respect (Hall & Fincham, 2005). When enacted adaptively, self-forgiveness predicts lower shame and greater self-compassion (Davis et al., 2015b). However, pseudo-self-forgiveness—characterized by denial, minimization, or moral disengagement—undermines accountability and ethical repair (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Thus, adaptive self-forgiveness transforms guilt into moral growth rather than avoidance (M. J. A. Wohl & Thompson, 2011).

These findings align with what may be conceptualized as a *Self-Respect and Self-Esteem Model of Forgiveness*, in which self-forgiveness operates as a moral self-regulatory process restoring internal dignity while preserving accountability. Moral transgressions create cognitive dissonance by disrupting congruence between behavior and moral identity, thereby threatening both self-respect and self-esteem. Authentic self-forgiveness functions by resolving this dissonance through responsibility-taking, reparative action, and moral realignment rather than defensive denial. This process allows individuals to reconstruct ethical identity while preserving enduring self-worth.

In contrast, pseudo-self-forgiveness may defensively preserve fragile self-esteem while undermining genuine moral repair. Sustainable self-forgiveness therefore requires restoring self-respect without sacrificing responsibility, thereby positioning forgiveness as a mechanism of intra-personal socio-psychological repair grounded in moral recognition of the self.

However, despite substantial advances, significant conceptual, methodological, developmental, cultural, clinical, and ethical questions remain unresolved. Future research must clarify distinctions between genuine and defensive self-forgiveness, identify underlying cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms, examine lifespan development, and assess cultural variability. Addressing these gaps is essential for the development of a more integrative, ethically grounded, and culturally sensitive model of self-forgiveness as socio-psychological repair.

4.2. Interpersonal Forgiveness: Relational Resilience and Boundary Conditions

4.2.1. Romantic and Family Relationships

Reviewed studies consistently highlight that, within intimate and family relationships, forgiveness predicts higher marital satisfaction, more constructive communication, and reduced hostility (F. D. Fincham et al., 2006; Vera Cruz, 2018; Vera Cruz & Mullet, 2019a). Longitudinal research further demonstrates that forgiveness contributes to relational stability by interrupting retaliatory cycles that would otherwise escalate conflict (Chung, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2025). When individuals respond to relational transgressions with empathy rather than vengeance, forgiveness functions as a mechanism of socio-psychological repair by reducing escalation, restoring trust, and facilitating relational continuity.

Forgiveness also interacts significantly with attachment styles (Körner et al., 2022). Securely attached individuals are more likely to engage in constructive forgiveness processes that promote mutual recognition and adaptive repair, whereas anxious or avoidant attach-

ment patterns may complicate or distort forgiveness by intensifying fear, mistrust, or withdrawal. These findings underscore that interpersonal forgiveness is not a uniform process but one shaped by individual relational histories and psychological regulatory capacities.

The reviewed findings align with what we conceptualize as a *Resilience Model of Forgiveness.* Within this framework, forgiveness operates as a dynamic regulatory process that enables couples and family members to adapt constructively to relational injury. Forgiveness serves as both a protective and restorative mechanism that mitigates the destabilizing effects of betrayal or conflict. By promoting empathy over retaliation (e.g., F. D. Fincham et al., 2006), forgiveness interrupts cycles of negative reciprocity and fosters long-term relational resilience (e.g., Chung, 2014). Importantly, resilience here is not defined by the absence of conflict, but by the capacity to recover, reorganize, and preserve relational functioning following injury. Thus, interpersonal forgiveness emerges as a central mechanism of socio-psychological repair, relational resilience, and mutual recognition in close relationships.

4.2.2. When Forgiveness Becomes Maladaptive

Despite its significant relational benefits, forgiveness may also have detrimental consequences under certain conditions. McNulty (2008, 2010) and Cowden et al. (2019a, 2019b) demonstrated that in marriages characterized by severe, repeated, or chronic negative behaviors, forgiveness predicted declines in marital satisfaction over time. In such cases, forgiving partners were less likely to demand behavioral change, thereby unintentionally reinforcing harmful patterns.

These findings underscore a crucial principle central to this narrative review: forgiveness is adaptive when wrongdoing is infrequent, responsibility is acknowledged, and reparative efforts are present; however, forgiveness may become maladaptive when offenses are chronic, coercive, or structurally embedded. In contexts such as intimate partner violence, coercive control, or persistent emotional abuse, encouraging forgiveness without substantive structural change may perpetuate victimization rather than promote repair.

Thus, forgiveness should not be universally prescribed as a moral virtue in interpersonal contexts. Instead, its role as socio-psychological repair must be critically bounded by justice, accountability, and the preservation of personal safety. This reinforces the broader framework of forgiveness as a conditional rather than inherently beneficial process.

4.3. Social Learning and Developmental Considerations

Research on forgiveness in parent–child relationships indicates that children who develop constructive forgiveness capacities tend to exhibit better emotional regulation, healthier peer relationships, and stronger interpersonal adjustment (Magnuson, 2009; Cmurová & Záhorcová, 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2025). These findings suggest that forgiveness can be socially transmitted as a developmental mechanism that fosters psychological resilience and relational competence.

However, premature or coercive pressure on children to forgive may suppress legitimate emotional responses, undermine boundary formation, and impair the healthy development of self-protective capacities. Developmentally sensitive approaches are therefore essential to ensure that forgiveness functions as adaptive socio-psychological repair rather than emotional suppression.

These findings can be interpreted through what we conceptualize as a *Social Learning Model of Forgiveness*. Within this framework, forgiveness is understood as an acquired and reinforced relational skill shaped by repeated interpersonal experiences, modeled behaviors, and developmental socialization processes. Constructive forgiveness is strengthened when it produces positive relational outcomes, such as improved communication, reduced

hostility, and greater emotional security. Over time, individuals internalize forgiveness scripts that shape future responses to transgression. Secure attachment and positive relational modeling promote adaptive forgiveness, whereas maladaptive socialization may distort or inhibit this process. Forgiveness therefore emerges as both a developmental and socially learned mechanism for maintaining relational equilibrium, emotional maturity, and mutual recognition.

4.4. Organizational Forgiveness and Professional Contexts

Forgiveness in professional environments has received increasing scholarly attention as an important dimension of organizational functioning. Organizational forgiveness refers to shared norms, climates, and practices that promote constructive responses to workplace transgressions (Fehr et al., 2010; Cao, 2022). Forgiving organizational climates are associated with enhanced psychological safety, greater cooperation, and stronger organizational citizenship behaviors (Cao et al., 2021; Cao, 2022).

Leaders who model both accountability and forgiveness foster learning-oriented cultures rather than blame-oriented climates (Okimoto et al., 2025). In such contexts, forgiveness contributes to conflict resolution, reduces turnover intentions, and mitigates burnout by decreasing interpersonal hostility (Costa & Neves, 2017; Guchait et al., 2019). These findings suggest that forgiveness may serve as a mechanism of socio-psychological repair not only at the interpersonal level but also within broader institutional systems.

However, hierarchical power dynamics complicate forgiveness processes (Cao et al., 2021). In workplaces characterized by injustice, exploitation, or systemic inequity, promoting forgiveness without addressing structural harm may silence dissent and reinforce oppressive systems. Thus, organizational forgiveness must be situated within procedural justice frameworks to ensure that forgiveness promotes genuine repair rather than institutional suppression.

Restorative justice models within professional contexts offer particularly promising integrative approaches by combining acknowledgment, accountability, dialogue, and reparative action.

These findings support what we conceptualize as a *Functional Workplace Model of Forgiveness.* This model frames forgiveness as a multilevel organizational process embedded within cultural norms, leadership behaviors, and justice structures. At the organizational level, forgiving climates enhance psychological safety and cooperation; at the leadership level, accountability-centered forgiveness promotes learning and resilience; and at the structural level, justice safeguards forgiveness from becoming a tool of exploitation. This model reinforces forgiveness as a framework for institutional socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition.

Future research should examine the longitudinal effects of forgiving climates on psychological safety and performance, the role of leadership accountability in fostering learning-oriented cultures, and the conditions under which power asymmetries undermine functional forgiveness. Cross-cultural and multilevel research designs are particularly necessary to clarify the broader applicability and ethical limits of the Functional Workplace Model of Forgiveness.

4.5. Intergroup Forgiveness and Political Reconciliation

4.5.1. Psychological Processes

At the collective level, forgiveness intersects with social identity, historical memory, and political legitimacy. Intergroup forgiveness reduces prejudice, collective anger, and perceived threat while increasing support for reconciliation policies and cooperative initiatives

(Tam et al., 2007). Within this context, forgiveness functions as a socio-political mechanism of repair capable of transforming historical hostility into cooperative coexistence.

The needs-based model of forgiveness and reconciliation (* Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) provides a critical framework for understanding this process. Victimized groups primarily seek empowerment and recognition of suffering, whereas perpetrator groups seek moral acceptance and restoration of legitimacy. Effective reconciliation therefore requires addressing both psychological needs through acknowledgment, apology, and restorative action.

Collective guilt also serves as a key mediating mechanism. When perpetrator groups acknowledge wrongdoing, victims demonstrate greater willingness to forgive (M. J. A. Wohl et al., 2012). Conversely, denial of responsibility perpetuates hostility, distrust, and identity threat. Thus, intergroup forgiveness depends fundamentally on mutual recognition and moral repair.

4.5.2. Transitional Justice Contexts

Truth and reconciliation commissions provide important examples of how forgiveness interacts with institutional justice mechanisms (Doxtader & Salazar, 2007; Misztal, 2016). Across such contexts, forgiveness is most constructive when embedded within truth-telling, reparations, and structural justice processes. Without justice, calls for forgiveness risk appearing politically manipulative or morally coercive.

Importantly, intergroup forgiveness should not be conflated with forgetting. Constructive forgiveness allows for the preservation of historical memory while reducing retaliatory motivations. This distinction is essential, as sustainable reconciliation requires acknowledgment of past harm rather than erasure.

Thus, political forgiveness functions most effectively as a process of collective socio-psychological repair when it integrates justice, recognition, and structural transformation.

4.6. Conditionality and Ethical Tensions

The reviewed literature consistently reveals that forgiveness is context-dependent. Its positive outcomes depend on:

(a) Voluntariness;
(b) Offender accountability;
(c) Behavioral change;
(d) Structural fairness;
(e) Absence of coercion.

When these conditions are absent, forgiveness may:

(a) Reinforce abusive dynamics (McNulty, 2008, 2010);
(b) Reduce motivation for justice;
(c) Silence marginalized voices;
(d) Mask unresolved trauma.

Ethically, practitioners must avoid imposing forgiveness as a moral obligation. Autonomy is central.

From the literature we reviewed, we can conclude that, if not carefully tailored, forgiveness may enable ongoing abuse by signaling tolerance of harmful behavior, reducing accountability, and normalizing mistreatment. For example, in family or intimate relationships, a partner who repeatedly engages in emotional, physical, or financial abuse may be continually forgiven without consequences, allowing the cycle of harm to persist. Historical examples, such as critiques of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), illustrate similar risks at the societal level: emphasizing forgiveness without structural justice—like economic redistribution or legal redress—left many victims feeling

marginalized. When amnesty is granted without comprehensive reparations, survivors may perceive reconciliation as superficial, undermining trust and emotional recovery. In these cases, forgiveness risks perpetuating harm rather than promoting genuine restoration and safety.

In sum, forgiveness is not universally beneficial. Potential drawbacks include: (a) forgiveness without accountability may perpetuate injustice; (b) pseudo-forgiveness may reduce moral responsibility; (c) excessive focus on individual forgiveness may diminish societal obligations for repair (Kaminer et al., 2001; Cornish & Wade, 2015).

5. Conclusions: Emerging Integrative Perspective

The present narrative review synthesized 26 years of theoretical and empirical research on forgiveness across intra-personal, interpersonal, organizational, and intergroup domains. This comprehensive analysis enabled the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence into a broader framework conceptualizing forgiveness as a multidimensional mechanism of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition.

5.1. Theoretical Integration

Four major existing frameworks structure much of the forgiveness literature:

(a) Empathy Model of Forgiveness (* McCullough et al., 1998; Donovan & Priester, 2017, 2020);
(b) Motivational Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness (* McCullough et al., 1998; Donovan & Priester, 2017, 2020);
(c) Stress-and-Coping Model of Forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004);
(d) Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation/Forgiveness (Shnabel & Nadler, 2010; * Shnabel et al., 2021).

Building on this literature, the present review further proposes four complementary frameworks:

(a) Self-Respect and Self-Esteem Model of Forgiveness;
(b) Resilience Model of Forgiveness;
(c) Social Learning Model of Forgiveness;
(d) Workplace Model of Forgiveness.

Together, these frameworks conceptualize forgiveness as a complex psychosocial process involving emotional regulation, social learning, motivational transformation, identity repair, resilience, reconciliation, and mutual moral recognition. This integrative perspective expands forgiveness beyond a singular emotional act, positioning it as a multilevel process that restores psychological balance, relational functioning, and social legitimacy. Table 1 summaries this theoretical integration.

Table 1. Forgiveness: Integrative (complementary) frameworks to understand its predictors and potential effects.

Framework (Model)	References	Conceptualization	Examples	Main Domains of Application
Existing frameworks based on which the findings from the 26 years of forgiveness research can be comprehended				
Empathy Model of Forgiveness.	(* McCullough et al., 1998; Donovan & Priester, 2017, 2020)	Forgiveness arising primarily from empathic concern for the offender.	(1) When a transgression occurs, victims who are able to perspective-take and feel compassion toward the wrongdoer experience reduced anger and resentment. (2) The empathic shift fosters prosocial motivations, such as benevolence and reconciliation, which in turn promote forgiveness. (3) Forgiveness as an affective transformation grounded in empathy, whereby understanding the offender's feelings and circumstances softens negative responses and facilitates relational repair.	(1) In close relationships (family relationships, friendship relationships, intimate relationships)
Motivational Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness.	(* McCullough et al., 1998; Donovan & Priester, 2017, 2020)	Forgiveness arising primarily from relationship-maintenance motives.	(1) In certain interpersonal relationships, closeness fosters a desire to maintain the relationship. (2) This desire, in turn, activates motivated reasoning processes that ultimately promote forgiveness after transgressions.	(1) In close relationships; (2) In professional relationships.
Stress-and-Coping Model of Forgiveness.	(Worthington & Scherer, 2004)	Forgiveness primarily as a way of managing emotional stress.	(3) Unforgiveness is stress reaction. It includes negative emotions such as anger, resentment, hostility, and rumination. These reactions can place psychological and physiological strain on the body. Forgiveness is one possible strategy for coping with this stress. (4) Forgiveness is emotion-focused coping strategy, meaning that it helps people regulate their emotional response rather than directly change the situation. (5) Forgiveness involves replacement of negative emotions with more positive, other-oriented emotions such as empathy, compassion, sympathy, or even love.	(1) In close relationships; (2) In professional relationships; (3) In community relationships.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Framework (Model)	References	Conceptualization	Examples	Main Domains of Application
Existing frameworks based on which the findings from the 26 years of forgiveness research can be comprehended				
Needs-Based Model of Forgiveness/Reconciliation	(* Shnabel & Nadler, 2008)	Forgiveness as a requirement to address both victims and perpetrators psychological and moral needs.	(1) Interpersonal and intergroup conflicts threaten distinct psychological needs of victims and perpetrators, thereby sustaining hostility. (2) Victimization undermines individuals' sense of power, status, and agency, whereas perpetration threatens one's moral image and social acceptability. (3) Reconciliation requires addressing these asymmetric needs: victims seek empowerment and acknowledgment, while perpetrators seek moral acceptance and restoration of their social image.	(1) In intergroup relationships; (2) In community relationships.
From our literature review, proposed additional frameworks based on which the findings from the 26 years of forgiveness research can be comprehended				
Self-Respect and Self-Esteem Model of Forgiveness.	Proposed based on this literature review.	Self-forgiveness as a moral self-regulatory process through which individuals restore personal worth while maintaining accountability.	(1) When individuals commit a moral transgression, or self-inflicted harm, they experience a discrepancy between their moral identity (or self-esteem) and their behavior, generating cognitive dissonance—a psychologically aversive state arising from inconsistency between self-concept and action. (2) This dissonance threatens both self-respect, grounded in adherence to internalized moral standards, and self-esteem, reflecting global self-evaluation. (3) Moral injury directed inward therefore destabilizes the moral self and elicits guilt and shame. (4) Authentic self-forgiveness operates as a mechanism for reducing this dissonance in an adaptive manner: individuals acknowledge wrongdoing, accept responsibility, and form reparative intentions, thereby realigning behavior with moral identity and self-esteem.	(1) In intra-individual relationship.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Framework (Model)	References	Conceptualization	Examples	Main Domains of Application
Existing frameworks based on which the findings from the 26 years of forgiveness research can be comprehended				
Resilience Model of Forgiveness.	Proposed based on this literature review.	Forgiveness (in interpersonal relationships) as a dynamic regulatory process that enables people to adapt constructively to relational stressors.	(1) Forgiveness functions as a protective and restorative mechanism that mitigates the destabilizing effects of transgressions. (2) By promoting empathy over retaliation, forgiveness interrupts negative reciprocity cycles and reduces hostility, thereby preserving relational stability over time. (3) Resilience here is not the absence of conflict but the capacity to recover, reorganize, and maintain relational functioning following injury. (4) "Resilience" emphasizes adaptive emotion regulation, relational repair, and moderated vulnerability in the face of interpersonal threat.	(1) In close relationships.
Social Learning Model of Forgiveness.	Proposed based on this literature review.	Forgiveness as an acquired, reinforced relational skill, shaped through repeated interpersonal experiences.	(1) Constructive responses to transgressions are strengthened when they yield positive outcomes, such as increased marital satisfaction, improved communication, and reduced hostility. (2) In family or in intimate relationships, for instance, partners learn, over time, that empathetic rather than vengeful responses stabilize relationships. (3) Attachment styles further reflect internalized relational learning histories, with secure attachment supporting more adaptive forgiveness scripts. (4) Forgiveness emerges as a socially learned, reinforced strategy for maintaining relational equilibrium.	(1) In close relationships (specifically in parent–child and in couple relationships).

Table 1. *Cont.*

Framework (Model)	References	Conceptualization	Examples	Main Domains of Application
Existing frameworks based on which the findings from the 26 years of forgiveness research can be comprehended				
Workplace Model of Forgiveness.	Proposed based on this literature review.	Forgiveness as a multilevel organizational process embedded in shared norms, leadership practices, and justice structures.	(1) At the cultural level, forgiving climates promote psychological safety, cooperation, and organizational citizenship. (2) At the leadership level, modeling accountability and forgiveness fosters learning-oriented rather than blame-oriented environments, supporting conflict resolution and reducing burnout and turnover. (3) Forgiveness must be grounded in procedural justice; without addressing systemic inequities, it risks reinforcing power imbalances.	(1) In professional relationships

5.2. Integrating Forgiveness in a Psychosocial Repair Process: The Core Healing Mechanism

Consistent with the overarching objective of this review, forgiveness was critically examined not merely as an individual emotional response, but as a comprehensive multilevel framework of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition. Across the reviewed literature, forgiveness emerged as a dynamic process through which moral injury, relational disruption, identity threat, and social fragmentation may be addressed through emotional regulation, moral reaffirmation, relational recalibration, and the restoration of dignity.

Rather than reducing forgiveness to personal catharsis or unilateral absolution, this review demonstrates that wrongdoing—whether directed toward the self, intimate relationships, professional contexts, or broader social groups—produces disruptions that threaten psychological equilibrium, social trust, belonging, and moral legitimacy. Under appropriate conditions, forgiveness may therefore function as a mechanism for transforming these disruptions into opportunities for psychological healing, relational resilience, and social reconstruction.

The reviewed literature suggested that across intra-personal, interpersonal, organizational, and intergroup domains, wrongdoing generates moral asymmetry. Victims often experience humiliation, powerlessness, and identity threat, while perpetrators experience guilt, moral contamination, or threats to legitimacy. When authentically enacted, forgiveness functions as a process of restoring moral equality and facilitating mutual recognition.

This integrative conceptualization synthesizes stress regulation (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), motivational transformation (* McCullough et al., 1998), and identity restoration (* Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Forgiveness becomes transformative when accompanied by acknowledgment, empathy, accountability, and voluntary engagement. In this sense, forgiveness serves not simply as emotional release, but as a comprehensive framework of socio-psychological repair that restores dignity, relational equilibrium, and moral legitimacy across multiple social levels.

5.3. Integrating Forgiveness in a Mutual Recognition Process: The Core Restorative Mechanism

Mutual recognition provides the conceptual foundation unifying forgiveness across interpersonal, intergroup, and societal domains (* Honneth, 1995; * Ricoeur, 2005). Wrongdoing often produces not only material or emotional harm but also moral injury through denial of dignity, voice, and equal standing. Forgiveness, within this framework, becomes a relational process through which damaged recognition is repaired.

The needs-based model of reconciliation/forgiveness (* Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) clarifies this process by showing that victims primarily seek empowerment and validation, whereas perpetrators seek restoration of moral identity. Through apology, acknowledgment, reparative action, and moral accountability, forgiveness can restore symmetrical recognition, enabling social repair without denying injustice (Govier, 2002).

This perspective is particularly valuable because it prevents forgiveness from being reduced to mere emotional suppression or unilateral accommodation. Instead, forgiveness becomes a dialogical mechanism that renegotiates moral status, restores dignity, and reaffirms shared humanity. At its best, forgiveness transforms injury into renewed coexistence grounded in justice-sensitive recognition.

The present literature review shows that without mutual recognition, forgiveness risks devolving into suppression, denial, or coerced reconciliation. Genuine forgiveness therefore requires the integration of justice and compassion, positioning forgiveness as a pathway to moral repair and reciprocal recognition.

At the same time, the cumulative literature clearly indicates that forgiveness is neither inherently nor universally beneficial. Its psychological, relational, and societal outcomes remain highly contingent upon contextual factors, including power asymmetries, volun-

tariness, justice processes, offender accountability, and the recurrence of harm. Forgiveness must therefore be understood not as unconditional reconciliation, but as a context-sensitive, ethically bounded, and conditional process of socio-psychological repair. This integrative framework positions forgiveness as both a potential source of healing and a process vulnerable to misuse when detached from justice, structural fairness, and authentic recognition.

5.4. Contribution to the Literature

This narrative review makes a major contribution to forgiveness scholarship by offering, to our knowledge, the first comprehensive integrative frameworks positioning forgiveness as a multilevel process of socio-psychological repair and mutual recognition, fundamentally redefining forgiveness beyond emotional coping toward relational, moral, and societal transformation.

5.5. Future Research Directions

While forgiveness and its effects were extensively studied in the past 26 years, the present review study shows that certain topics need to be further explored:

(a) Cross-cultural expansion of studies on work/professional relationships environment forgiveness beyond Western samples;
(b) Organizational restorative justice interventions;
(c) Quantitative and longitudinal studies of forgiveness interventions among sexual violence victims; predictors;
(d) The relationship and/or the effects of self-forgiveness on offense recidivism, health risk taking/relapse or health risk reduction, work engagement and performance;
(e) Longitudinal designs examining causal pathways;
(f) Ways to distinguish between genuine and pseudo-forgiveness and prediction of their occurrence as well as the individual characteristics associated with each of them.

5.6. Limitations

Although the screening procedures and final document selection adhered to the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), the possibility of residual selection bias cannot be entirely excluded. In addition, the heterogeneity of operational definitions related to the variables of interest, which guided the content extraction process, constitutes a further limitation. Nevertheless, the integrative scope of the review enables cross-level theorizing and the development of a more comprehensive conceptual synthesis. Finally, narrative reviews have typical limitations that include potential author bias, lack of systematic methodology on reporting the findings, limited reproducibility, and reduced capacity to establish causal conclusions compared to systematic reviews or meta-analyses.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.V.C.; methodology, G.V.C., C.D.R. and Y.K.; search and screening, G.V.C., C.D.R. and E.G.-N.; writing—original draft preparation, G.V.C. and J.-P.L.; writing—review and editing, Y.K.; supervision, G.V.C. and J.-P.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the students who worked on extracting relevant information from the documents (articles, thesis, book chapters).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
International IDEA	The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder

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