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WHEN FORGIVENESS IS NOT GENUINE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF PSEUDO-FORGIVENESS

Agata Kasprzak, Karla Gallo-Giunzioni, and Elvira Santiago Serrano

Universidad Francisco de Vitoria

The objective of this paper is to explore the current state of knowledge about pseudo-forgiveness, a complex psychological phenomenon that is clearly distinct from genuine forgiveness. Pseudo-forgiveness is characterized by an attempt to resolve conflicts related to managing an offense without authentic emotional processing, making it an internal and/or relational mechanism where the harm is not genuinely addressed. This phenomenon can manifest through strategies such as justifications, excuses, or minimization of the offense, which shield the offender from negative emotional consequences while perpetuating discomfort in the victim. These dynamics, although providing temporary relief, are detrimental in the long term to interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being. This work constitutes a narrative review and presents an analysis of the psychological variables related to this false form of forgiveness. The clinical relevance of addressing pseudo-forgiveness in therapy is highlighted, emphasizing the need to promote genuine forgiveness processes that foster empathy, acknowledgment of harm, and emotional transformation. It concludes that understanding pseudo-forgiveness can enrich both research and therapeutic interventions aimed at healing damaged relationships.

Keywords: pseudo-forgiveness; forgiveness; practical implications; psychology of forgiveness

Forgiveness has been a subject of interest across various fields, including philosophy, religion, and psychology, due to its impact on emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, and conflict resolution. Within this context,

AGATA KASPRZAK, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1562-3094, KARLA GALLO-GIUNZIONI, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5197-2358, ELVIRA SANTIAGO SERRANO, https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9038-8282. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Agata Kasprzak, Facultad de Educación y Psicología, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Ctra, Pozuelo-Majadahonda Km 1,800, 28223, Pozuelo de Alarcón, Madrid, Spain; e-mail: agata.kasprzak@ufv.es.

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the concept of pseudo-forgiveness emerges as a psychological phenomenon that, while closely related to genuine forgiveness, exhibits unique characteristics requiring specific attention and approaches.

The objective of this work is to review the current state of knowledge on pseudo-forgiveness through a comprehensive narrative review of the scientific literature. The aim is to clarify the differences between pseudo-forgiveness and genuine forgiveness, identify the strategies underlying this phenomenon, and analyze its implications both in relational contexts and therapeutic settings.

While forgiveness has been widely studied and recognized for its positive effects, the phenomenon of pseudo-forgiveness has received considerably less theoretical and empirical attention. Given its potential to mask unresolved emotional dynamics and perpetuate relational discomfort, a focused exploration of pseudo-forgiveness is essential. This construct has clear relevance in clinical and interpersonal contexts, where individuals may believe they have forgiven without experiencing genuine emotional resolution. By clarifying the boundaries and implications of pseudo-forgiveness, this review seeks to contribute to a more accurate understanding of forgiveness processes and their impact on psychological well-being.

Genuine Forgiveness: Keys to Understanding

From a psychological perspective, the systematic study of forgiveness began to develop in the 1980s and 1990s (Enright & Song, 2020; McCullough et al., 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999). However, interest in forgiveness has much older roots in philosophy and religion (Fincham & May, 2019). It was during this period that forgiveness started being conceptualized and empirically studied, supported by positive and clinical psychology. Numerous studies have shown that forgiveness significantly contributes to psychological and physical well-being (Cheadle & Toussaint, 2015; Fincham & May, 2019; Griffin et al., 2015), improves the quality of interpersonal relationships (Gismero-González et al., 2019; Scheffler, 2015), increases life satisfaction (Fincham & May, 2019), and fosters the development and strengthening of resilience (López et al., 2021). Consequently, forgiveness is observed to have positive effects not only on intrapersonal aspects like well-being and resilience but also on interpersonal aspects, promoting healthier and more positive relationships.

In recent years, various theoretical perspectives and definitions have emerged to address questions about forgiveness. One of the most recognized definitions in the field of forgiveness psychology was proposed by Enright et al. (1998, pp. 46–47): "The desire to abandon the right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward someone who has unjustly hurt us, while fostering qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward them." In this sense, forgiveness as proposed by Enright is understood as a free and deliberate act (Baskin & Enright, 2004), in which the forgiving person acknowledges suffering an unjust harm and still chooses to forgive, even unconditionally, without this forgiveness depending on the offender's current attitudes (Enright et al., 1998).

Another highly studied proposal is that of McCullough (2000), who explains forgiveness based on motivational and prosocial aspects, describing it through three dimensions (revenge, avoidance, and benevolence). From this perspective, forgiveness reduces the motivation for revenge and avoidance in the offended person and increases the motivation to show benevolence toward the offender (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; McCullough et al., 2003). It is worth noting that revenge and avoidance responses, according to this approach, serve an adaptive function for the offended party (McCullough et al., 2003).

On the other hand, Worthington (1998, 2003) highlights two dimensions of forgiveness: emotional and decisional. The emotional component involves replacing negative emotions with positive ones, while the decisional component implies a transformation in behavioral intentions toward the person who caused the offense. Worthington (1998, p. 108) defines forgiveness as

> [a] motivation to reduce avoidance or distancing from a person who has hurt us, as well as anger, the desire for revenge, and the urgency to retaliate against them. Forgiveness also increases the desire for reconciliation with that person if moral standards can be re-established to be as good or better than they were before.

Thus, forgiveness emerges as a complex concept (Berry et al., 2005) approached by authors from different perspectives. However, there is consensus that every forgiveness process starts with considering the offense and requires recognition of the injustice experienced and its intentionality by the offended person (Fincham, 2009). Another shared aspect among many authors is that forgiveness is a process involving a transformation in the hurt person's experience post-offense. Worthington and Wade (1999) describe the subjective

experience following an offense as "unforgiveness," manifested in post-offense distress expressed through affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions. Studies suggest that forgiveness mitigates post-offense distress, reducing negative responses (resentment, anger, revenge, avoidance) toward the offender (Allemand et al., 2013; Fincham et al., 2004; Goldman & Wade, 2012; Wade & Meyer, 2009; Watson et al., 2017).

However, it has been found that sometimes the reduction of post-offense distress is not necessarily related to forgiveness (Wade & Worthington, 2003). Some individuals may experience a decrease in negative symptoms (e.g., desires for revenge, rumination) without undergoing a genuine forgiveness process. These findings highlight the importance of investigating the mechanisms that hinder or prevent genuine forgiveness, referred to by some authors as "pseudo-forgiveness."

Before delving into the concept of pseudo-forgiveness and its consequences, it is important to acknowledge that forgiveness itself has also been associated with potentially harmful effects. Despite the documented beneficial effects of forgiveness, some studies have shown that it can also lead to adverse consequences a phenomenon referred to in the literature as the "dark side of forgiveness" (McNulty, 2011), such as reinforcing power imbalances in relationships, neglecting personal boundaries and negatively affecting the self-concept of the forgiver (Prieto-Úrsua, 2017). It is essential to consider that, in cases involving severe transgressions, such as sexual abuse, research has demonstrated that forgiveness, regardless of whether it is genuine or not, may be detrimental to the individual who grants it (Cowden et al., 2019; Tener & Eisikovits, 2017).

METHOD

A narrative review of the existing scientific literature on the concept of pseudo-forgiveness was conducted. This method allowed for a critical and contextualized approach to the phenomenon, facilitating the identification of key areas for future research. This approach was selected due to the scarcity of empirical studies and the limited availability of articles that met the necessary criteria for a systematic review or meta-analysis.

For the preparation of this narrative review, the recommendations of Ferrari (2015) were followed, who emphasizes the importance of clearly and transparently describing the procedure followed, including the search strategy,

the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the process of selection and organization of the reviewed content.

The literature search was carried out in recognized academic databases, including Scopus, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Web of Science, covering the period from 1989 to November 2024. Keywords such as "pseudo-forgiveness," "false forgiveness," "bad forgiveness," and related terms were used, combined with Boolean operators in both English and Spanish. After completing the search, article abstracts were reviewed, and the most relevant works for this study were identified.

The inclusion criteria were:

– theoretical or empirical studies specifically addressing pseudo-forgiveness or closely related concepts;

– publications in English or Spanish.

The exclusion criteria were:

– non-peer-reviewed articles or book chapters;

– studies focusing solely on genuine forgiveness without distinguishing it from pseudo-forgiveness.

The analysis focused on identifying the main definitions, theoretical perspectives, and conceptual proposals related to pseudo-forgiveness, as well as its applications in therapeutic contexts. Special attention was given to gaps in the literature, points of convergence and divergence among authors, and the practical implications derived from these reflections.

RESULTS

Toward a Conceptualization of Pseudo-Forgiveness: Theoretical Foundations

The literature uses various terms to refer to pseudo-forgiveness (Enright & Zell, 1989; Lawler-Row et al., 2007; Sheldon et al., 2018; Quinney et al., 2024). Some authors also refer to it as false forgiveness (Johnson, 1986; Prieto-Ursúa, 2017; Sells & Hardgrave, 1998) or bad forgiveness (Berecz, 2001). However, the term pseudo-forgiveness is the most widely used and is defined as "an external expression of forgiveness but with hidden resentment and a desire for revenge internally" (Enright & Zell, 1989, p. 58).

Johnson (1986) describes this false forgiveness as a denial of the transgression within the relationship, leading to superficial acceptance and external

presentation of relational connection. Other authors seek to define the nuances of this concept, describing it as a new forgiveness strategy where a transgression is acknowledged but not fully resolved (Sheldon et al., 2018). According to these authors, pseudo-forgiveness involves recognizing the conflict but deciding to suppress or ignore post-offense distress to preserve the relationship.

In the same vein, Berecz (2001) uses the concept of bad forgiveness as a variant of "forgiveness" filled with promises that lack authenticity when clinically examined. For instance, if a victim begins a forgiveness process driven by insecurity and codependence, the likelihood of perpetuating harm and maintaining dysfunctional behaviors instead of fostering the healing of the offense is very high, and thus, their process will result in bad forgiveness.

Consequently, and especially in clinical practice, this concept of pseudo-forgiveness alerts therapists to the importance of exploring the emotional and relational dynamics driving patients' forgiveness processes. It implies that therapists must be vigilant for motivations such as the need for approval or the desire to please everyone, which can mask inauthentic forgiveness. Addressing this requires interventions to strengthen the patient's emotional autonomy, helping them set healthy boundaries and develop genuine forgiveness that promotes psychological well-being rather than perpetuating harm.

To date, the scientific literature on the concept of pseudo-forgiveness is scarce and lacks both theoretical and empirical unification. Nevertheless, various authors seem to agree that it represents an incomplete forgiveness process, related to the lack of acknowledgment of the harm caused, whether by the offender or the victim, thereby perpetuating the damage (Carlisle et al., 2012; Enright & Zell, 1989; Gismero-González et al., 2020; Martínez et al., 2021; Vismaya, 2024; Wenzel et al., 2012; Worthington, 2019). Additionally, the lack of recognition of the offense's severity leading to a pseudo-forgiveness process appears to be influenced primarily by the type of relationship with the offender, the offense's severity, and the time elapsed since the harm (Enright et al., 1991; Martínez et al., 2021; Murphy, 1982; Prieto-Ursúa, 2017; Sheldon & Anthony, 2018), which may relate to repair strategies (Carlisle, 2012; Enright & Kittle, 2000; Martínez-Díaz et al., 2021; Woodyatt et al., 2017).

Carlisle et al. (2012) describe how the use of repair strategies can serve as a barometer to assess the value of the relationship, communicating to the victim that the offender values them and that the relationship is worth continuing. These actions carried out by the transgressor entail a genuine transformation in the offender's behavior, motivated by the desire to obtain forgiveness (Martínez-Díaz et al., 2021). Among these strategies, the most studied focus on

corrective behaviors such as apologizing (Fehr et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2015; Martínez-Díaz et al., 2021), which have been shown to restore dignity and respect to the victim previously harmed by the transgression (Carlisle et al., 2012; Martínez-Díaz et al., 2021).

Despite significant recent interest in the scientific literature regarding repair strategies, few studies have delved into those strategies where there is no acknowledgment of harm or responsibility for the offense, and thus no genuine remorse or pursuit of forgiveness. These strategies are known as diversion strategies (Schumann, 2014) or defensive strategies (Woodyatt et al., 2013) and could be related to the process of pseudo-forgiveness. The use of these strategies seems to be linked to protecting self-image from the threat of having caused harm to another person (Martínez et al., 2021; Okimoto et al., 2013; Schumann, 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2013).

Regarding diversion strategies, Okimoto et al. (2013) found that choosing to use these strategies maintains or even increases the sense of power and integrity while rejecting repair strategies that demand vulnerability and acceptance of responsibility for one's actions.

Schumann (2014) identifies five types of diversion strategies: justification, victim-blaming, excuses, minimization, and denial. Justification, by definition, involves reinterpreting the offense to make it seem reasonable or acceptable, aiming for the victim to perceive the transgression as inevitable or even morally valid (Exline et al., 2003). On the other hand, victim-blaming seeks to shift responsibility from the offender to the victim, thereby reducing the threat to the offender's status and minimizing the offense (Martínez et al., 2021; Schumann, 2014). Similarly, the use of excuses seeks to diminish responsibility for the offense by attributing it to external factors (Martínez et al., 2021). Excuses are often accompanied by minimizers, which aim to reduce the importance or impact of the transgression on the victim (Martínez et al., 2021; Woodyatt et al., 2013). Lastly, denial refers to rejecting what occurred and one's responsibility, invalidating the victim's experience (Tangney & Dearing, 2003).

The primary goal of diversion strategies is, ultimately, to protect the offender from the negative consequences of committing an offense (Schumann, 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2013). These strategies, frequently used to minimize responsibility or mitigate the emotional impact of an offense, may appear independently or as part of a flawed attempt at an apology (Schumann, 2014). A typical example of this dynamic is when someone issues an apology that combines elements of remorse, responsibility, excuses, and victim-blaming:

"I'm sorry [remorse] for forgetting your birthday dinner [responsibility]. I've been overwhelmed with work lately [excuse], and honestly, you didn't remind me either [victim-blaming], even though you know how busy I've been these days." This type of expression reflects how diversion strategies can dilute the authenticity of an apology by shifting attention from the offensive act to external factors or the victim's behavior.

Sheldon and Antony (2018) argue that if this type of communication pattern becomes habitual in interpersonal relationships—particularly romantic ones—it can lead to unresolved conflicts, a deterioration of love, and the perpetuation of disrespect. Additionally, there is a consensus among various authors that while defensive strategies may provide short-term relief, they are harmful in the long term for both the offender and the victim (Schumann, 2014; Woodyatt et al., 2013). For the offender, these practices may hinder the development of emotional responsibility and self-awareness, while for the victim, they entail an invalidation of their feelings and needs, contributing to relational breakdown, which could lead to the process of pseudo-forgiveness.

Analysis of Psychological Variables Associated With Pseudo-Forgiveness

Pseudo-forgiveness is a phenomenon often associated with psychological variables such as guilt and shame (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Mróz & Sornat, 2023; Rangganadhan & Todorov, 2010), emotional regulation (Ricciardi et al., 2013), psychological well-being (Enright, 2001; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013), and variables related to the social domain and personal relationships (Sheldon & Antony, 2018; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). The study of pseudo-forgiveness provides a framework for understanding the psychological and social dynamics underlying the management of resentment and guilt in human relationships. Below, we explore in more detail how pseudo-forgiveness relates to the aforementioned variables.

Guilt and Shame

These variables have been extensively studied in relation to psychological well-being and mental health but warrant special attention as they are among the primary processes linked to pseudo-forgiveness. Fisher and Exline (2010) noted that excessive guilt and shame can lead to problematic responses, such

as avoiding responsibility or becoming stuck in negative emotions. This impedes genuine forgiveness, as individuals may seek to alleviate emotional discomfort without addressing the harm caused. Specifically, shame tends to inhibit forgiveness—whether directed at oneself or others—due to its introspective nature and focus on perceived personal flaws. This perpetuates a cycle of non-forgiveness (Rangganadhan & Todorov, 2010), often correlating with social avoidance and aggression, which negatively impacts interpersonal relationships (Konstam et al., 2001). On the other hand, guilt can be adaptive when it motivates reparative behaviors, but when excessive or poorly managed, it reinforces resentment and obstructs authentic forgiveness (Fisher & Exline, 2010).

Emotional Regulation

The inability to adequately process negative emotions can lead to pseudo-forgiveness, where forgiveness is outwardly displayed but lacks true internal resolution (Ricciardi et al., 2013). Some authors describe pseudo-forgiveness as a defense mechanism to avoid intense emotions like shame or anger, temporarily reducing emotional discomfort without addressing the deeper roots of conflict (Chiaramello et al., 2008; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). It appears that pseudo-forgiveness serves as an incomplete form of emotional regulation, providing momentary relief but lacking the profound benefits of authentic forgiveness, which involves empathy, cognitive reevaluation, and effective emotional management.

Psychological Well-Being

Pseudo-forgiveness has been linked to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and guilt (Chiaramello et al., 2008; Enright, 2001; Fisher & Exline, 2010; Norman, 2017; Schumann & Orehek, 2017). Norman (2017) suggests that pseudo-forgiveness sustains ruminative thoughts of resentment and anger, which are associated with negative psychological states like self-punishment and remorse, ultimately detracting from psychological well-being. Pseudo-forgiveness acts as a defensive strategy that may temporarily ease guilt and resentment but hinder profound emotional resolution (Cornish et al., 2018; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

Social Perspective and Personal Relationships

From this angle, pseudo-forgiveness is often tied to power dynamics, hierarchical or dependent relationships, and cultural or familial pressures, which can encourage the appearance of forgiveness as an adaptive or avoidant mechanism (Sheldon & Antony, 2018; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). This process has been identified as a defensive mechanism to avoid social rejection. In situations where belonging is threatened, individuals may downplay harm or deny responsibility to maintain social relationships at the expense of genuine conflict resolution (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Mellor et al. (2012) showed that in collectivist cultures, pressure to maintain social harmony often motivates superficial forgiveness. While empathy plays a role, the need to preserve social cohesion tends to outweigh genuine emotional resolution. Unlike genuine forgiveness, pseudo-forgiveness often lacks empathy for the transgressor, limiting the potential for profound reconciliation and perpetuating unresolved tensions in relationships (Welton et al., 2008). In summary, from this social and interpersonal perspective, pseudo-forgiveness reflects how individuals prioritize superficial social harmony and avoid direct conflict, even at the cost of addressing underlying emotions.

In sum, these variables illustrate how pseudo-forgiveness emerges as an emotional avoidance strategy that, while offering temporary relief, obstructs profound and authentic emotional resolution. Guilt, shame, emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and social relationships intertwine, reinforcing the cycle of pseudo-forgiveness, where individuals seek to alleviate emotional discomfort without confronting or truly resolving internal or interpersonal conflict.

Pseudo-Forgiveness vs. Hollow Forgiveness

It is necessary to distinguish pseudo-forgiveness from hollow forgiveness, a term referenced in some studies. Hollow forgiveness refers to a superficial form of forgiveness where a person verbalizes or expresses forgiveness but does not experience a genuine emotional or attitudinal shift toward the person who caused harm. This form of forgiveness lacks true emotional resolution, leaving underlying emotions such as resentment or pain unprocessed (Takada & Ohbuchi, 2013; Wade & Worthington, 2005).

At first glance, hollow forgiveness may appear similar to traditional pseudo-forgiveness; however, although they are related, they represent distinct processes with significant differences: hollow forgiveness is often a more "empty" or formal act, where the person merely states they forgive without genuine emotional processing. In contrast, pseudo-forgiveness is more of a defensive or avoidant mechanism aimed at reducing emotional discomfort (e.g., guilt or resentment) without addressing the conflict's root causes. Hollow forgiveness is characterized by the absence of emotional change; the person claims to forgive but retains the same negative emotions (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). While pseudo-forgiveness also lacks emotional authenticity, it may involve an intention to forgive that is not accompanied by a genuine emotional process (Chiaramello et al., 2008). Both concepts share a lack of profound emotional resolution: hollow forgiveness is more of an empty act without internal processing, while pseudo-forgiveness involves an attempt to forgive that is not carried out authentically, often due to emotional avoidance or external pressures.

On a practical level, hollow forgiveness can be expressed through the following examples: "I already forgave you for forgetting our anniversary, but I'm not going to plan anything special next year because it doesn't make sense," or "You know I forgave you for sharing my secret, but I don't trust you the same way anymore, and I don't think that will change." Meanwhile, pseudo-forgiveness can be observed in examples like: "I'm sorry I didn't reply to your messages earlier; I had a really busy day. Besides, I didn't think it was as urgent as you're saying now," or "I'm sorry if my comment upset you the other day. I haven't been sleeping well lately, and I said it without thinking much, but you know how I react when I'm like that."

As previously discussed, *hollow forgiveness* manifests as a verbal expression of forgiveness without any genuine internal transformation. In contrast, *pseudo-forgiveness* may take more subtle forms, often driven by emotional avoidance or social motivations. Although these two processes are related, they are conceptually distinct. Both represent what some scholars have described as "cheaper versions of forgiveness," which allow individuals to alleviate personal discomfort without engaging in a meaningful emotional shift (Lawler-Row et al., 2007).

Ultimately, these forms of forgiveness are considered "false" because they do not involve a sincere reconfiguration of the relationship with the harm or the offender. However, they differ in their psychological origins: hollow forgiveness is typically an external performance devoid of emotional depth,

whereas pseudo-forgiveness functions as a psychological defense mechanism aimed at avoiding pain, shame, or social exclusion (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Lawler-Row et al., 2007; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

Pseudo-Forgiveness in Clinical Practice

Up to this point, we have explored the concepts and forms of pseudo-forgiveness, other processes with which it may be confused, and the psychological variables it is primarily associated with. However, this phenomenon also has significant implications in therapeutic contexts, posing risks for the victim, relational dynamics, and overall psychological well-being. These aspects will be examined in greater depth below.

Pseudo-forgiveness can perpetuate patterns of abuse and manipulation, particularly when the offender maintains emotional or psychological control over the victim (Burkman et al., 2018; Freedman & Enright, 2017). The main risks identified include:

According to Prieto-Ursúa et al. (2012), the perpetuation of abusive dynamics is one of the primary risks, as pseudo-forgiveness facilitates the continuation of dysfunctional patterns by avoiding confrontation with the actual harm. Another critical implication is the weakening of self-esteem (Enright, 1996; Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2012). By denying or minimizing experiences of harm, the victim's ability to reaffirm their dignity and autonomy is invalidated. Victim-blaming also emerges as a risk (Burkman et al., 2018; Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2012). In contexts where forgiveness is promoted as a moral or social obligation, victims may feel disproportionate pressure to forgive, perpetuating cycles of self-blame.

In this context, as Prieto-Ursúa et al. (2012) have pointed out, therapy must conceptualize forgiveness as an option, not a moral or social obligation, while providing a space where the victim's experience of harm is validated. To mitigate the risks mentioned above, it is essential to foster self-care and self-reflection, allowing forgiveness, if it occurs, to arise as the result of an authentic emotional process rather than external pressures. This therapeutic approach should include the exploration of the harm suffered, facilitation of emotional expression, and promotion of the patient's dignity and autonomy as central elements in the recovery process (Cordova et al., 2006). Accordingly, therapy should be focused as follows.

Facilitating Deep Emotional Processing

Therapy should recognize that anger, pain, and shame are primary emotions that need to be addressed before moving toward genuine forgiveness. Interventions such as emotional exposure and cognitive reappraisal are fundamental to initiating an authentic process (Greenberg et al., 2010).

Identifying Patterns of Pseudo-Forgiveness

In clinical practice, it is necessary to identify cases where apologies or forgiveness are superficial. Therapists should assess how these dynamics sustain mistrust, resentment, and ineffective communication (Burkman et al., 2018; Cordova et al., 2006).

Promoting Empathy and Emotional Reconciliation

Interventions should include exercises that encourage genuine expressions of remorse and emotional validation between the parties involved. Such efforts can positively impact the quality of bonds and relationships (Cordova et al., 2006; Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2012).

Forgiveness can be conceptualized as a continuum ranging from total aversion (non-forgiveness) to complete acceptance (authentic forgiveness). Pseudo-forgiveness appears to occupy an intermediate position, characterized by the lack of genuine or deep acknowledgment of harm and the absence of emotional confrontation in which the offender is also seen as vulnerable (Cordova et al., 2006). Consequently, some authors (Cordova et al., 2006; Enright et al., 1996) have argued that therapists should help patients progress along this continuum using tools such as reducing experiential avoidance, preventing retaliation and isolation patterns (particularly in cases of betrayal or significant interpersonal harm), promoting self-reflection, and integrating experiences.

In summary, pseudo-forgiveness poses a significant challenge in clinical practice as it can invalidate the patient's pain and perpetuate cycles of victimization or unresolved conflict. Addressing this phenomenon requires profound interventions based on emotional validation, acknowledgment of harm, and the facilitation of authentic forgiveness that promotes emotional relief and personal growth. Therefore, it is crucial for therapists to receive specialized

training in working with forgiveness, particularly to avoid fostering pseudo-forgiveness processes that may cause more harm than benefit.

DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to present the current understanding of pseudo-forgiveness, a psychological phenomenon that, although closely related to genuine forgiveness, exhibits fundamental differences that warrant further investigation. Through a review of existing scientific literature, the characteristics, consequences, and clinical implications of the pseudo-forgiveness process have been explored, highlighting its relevance in both research and clinical interventions.

One of the main challenges in studying pseudo-forgiveness, as discussed in this paper, lies in its superficial similarity to genuine forgiveness. Both practices may involve outward gestures of reconciliation, such as apologies. However, while genuine forgiveness entails a conscious effort to overcome the offense, acknowledge the harm caused, and rebuild trust in the relationship, pseudo-forgiveness lacks this emotional processing. Instead of serving as a healing practice, pseudo-forgiveness functions as a defensive mechanism that avoids confronting the conflict authentically (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

Although the article primarily presents pseudo-forgiveness as a negative mechanism characterized by an apparent resolution of conflict without genuine emotional processing It is worth considering that, in some cases, this type of response may represent an initial stage within a broader and more complex process toward genuine forgiveness.

According to the model proposed by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000), forgiveness is understood as a structured psychological process that unfolds in phases, beginning with the recognition of pain and anger, progressing through the decision to forgive, and culminating in a profound change in how the offender is perceived. In the early stages of this model such as the acknowledgment of anger, the restrained expression of hurt, or even partial denial of the offense it is common to observe emotional responses that might be classified as pseudo-forgiveness. These responses may lack the depth and sincerity required for full forgiveness, yet they can function as temporary coping mechanisms that allow individuals to process harm at their own pace and within their emotional capacity.

Conditional forgiveness further complicates this picture. While Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) argue that true forgiveness must be unconditional and motivated by goodwill, empirical studies show that people frequently engage in conditional forgiveness, which is associated with relational weakening and emotional ambivalence (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Nonetheless, these forms of conditional or pseudo-forgiveness might not be entirely dysfunctional. From a developmental perspective, these forms may be understood as preliminary phases within the broader process of achieving authentic forgiveness transitional responses that signal continued emotional processing rather than a completed act of forgiveness (Merolla, 2014).

Thus, rather than dismissing pseudo-forgiveness outright, it may be important to keep in mind that it may act as an intermediate step, to consider its potential role as a transitional mechanism in the complex emotional, cognitive and interpersonal evolution toward genuine forgiveness. At the same time, it is crucial to remain aware of the potentially harmful consequences of such practice that will be discussed below.

As elaborated in this paper, pseudo-forgiveness may appear to be a step toward forgiveness at a superficial level but lacks the fundamental elements necessary for authentic emotional restoration. This phenomenon often relies on justifications and excuses that displace or minimize the offender's responsibility, thereby avoiding engagement with the genuine pain caused by the offense. While this dynamic may offer short-term resolution of post-offense discomfort, it ultimately perpetuates feelings of resentment and emotional distress for both the victim and the offender. For the victim, pseudo-forgiveness can represent an invalidation of their emotions and a loss of security within the relationship, while for the offender, it reinforces patterns of emotional avoidance and lack of accountability (McNulty, 2011).

Furthermore, the long-term effects of pseudo-forgiveness can be significantly detrimental to interpersonal relationships. As discussed in this article, the repetition of these communicative patterns may foster an atmosphere of distrust, emotional avoidance, and erosion of mutual responsibility (Merolla, 2014).

Although this study has provided an important understanding of pseudo-forgiveness, much remains to be explored. Future research could examine differences in the manifestation of pseudo-forgiveness across cultures, age groups, or contexts, as well as conduct more in-depth analyses comparing pseudo-forgiveness and "hollow forgiveness." Additionally, further studies should

investigate potential therapeutic interventions to promote more authentic and healthy forgiveness processes.

Based on the findings and reflections developed in this work, it is necessary to outline future directions that may contribute to advancing knowledge about the phenomenon of pseudo-forgiveness. The existing literature on this concept remains fragmented and exploratory, underscoring the need to further deepen the field through systematic and empirically grounded approaches. First, it is essential to develop assessment instruments capable of clearly identifying and distinguishing pseudo-forgiveness from genuine forgiveness, from both intrapersonal and relational perspectives. Second, longitudinal studies could provide valuable evidence regarding the emotional and relational trajectories associated with each type of response, as well as their implications for long-term well-being. Likewise, cross-cultural research could offer key insights into how manifestations of pseudo-forgiveness vary across different normative, cultural, and religious contexts. Finally, it is pertinent to explore the clinical management of pseudo-forgiveness, analyzing which interventions may support a transition toward more authentic processes of forgiveness and emotional repair. These prospective lines of inquiry would not only strengthen the theoretical foundation of the construct but also inform its practical application in therapeutic, educational, and community settings.

CRediT Author Statement

AGATA KASPRZAK (40%): conceptualization, methodology, writing (original draft), writing (review and editing), project administration.

KARLA GABRIELA GALLO-GIUNZIONI (30%): conceptualization, methodology, writing (original draft).

ELVIRA SANTIAGO SERRANO (30%): conceptualization, methodology, writing (original draft).

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