

## Empathy and forgiveness: strengths of character which protect affective bonds

*Empatía y perdón: fortalezas que protegen los vínculos*

*Empatia e perdão: pontos fortes que protegem vínculos*

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**ABSTRACT:** While in the past, the focus on successful aging research was on functional and biological aspects, currently other variables are considered as relevant as the former ones in their effect on good aging. Some of those variables are close and social affective bonds. Creating, managing and optimizing relationships have been proven to provide concrete benefits for the elderly and for their environment. In this context, empathy as a psychological process allows us to understand and experience the thoughts and emotions of others, facilitating and fostering the possibility of interpersonal bonding. However, no interpersonal relationship is free of conflict. That is why the ability to forgive, as a human strength, facilitates the process of restoring relations by stopping negative emotions after an offense. In this paper, we present an integrative theoretical framework to include these two psychological processes and their relationships in the study of optimal aging. Not only theoretical, empirical and methodological backgrounds are outlined, but also future lines for research and intervention are proposed.

**Keywords:** Empathy; Forgiveness; Character of Strength.

**RESUMEN:** *Mientras en el pasado en la investigación del envejecimiento óptimo el foco estaba puesto en aspectos funcionales y biológicos, en la actualidad se involucran otras variables que han mostrado ser tan relevantes como las primeras en sus efectos sobre el buen envejecer. Una de esas variables son los vínculos cercanos y sociales. Generar, mantener y optimizar las relaciones interpersonales ha mostrado traer beneficios concretos tanto para el adulto mayor como para su entorno. En este marco la empatía, como proceso psicológico que permite comprender y experimentar los pensamientos y emociones de otros, es un medio que facilita y promueve la posibilidad de vinculación interpersonal. Sin embargo, ninguna relación interpersonal se encuentra exenta de conflictos. Es por ello que la capacidad para perdonar, como fortaleza humana, facilita el proceso de restitución de relaciones por medio del abandono de emociones negativas luego de una ofensa. En el presente trabajo se presenta un marco teórico integrador que permite incluir estos dos procesos psicológicos y sus relaciones en el estudio del envejecimiento óptimo. Se reseñan antecedentes teóricos, empíricos y metodológicos, al mismo tiempo que se proponen futuras líneas de investigación e intervención.*

**Palabras clave:** *Empatía; Perdón; Fortalezas del Carácter.*

**RESUMO:** *Embora no passado, nas pesquisas sobre um envelhecimento ideal, o foco incidia sobre os aspectos funcionais e biológicos, hoje em dia outras variáveis têm sido mostradas por serem tão relevantes quanto os primeiros que estão envolvidos, por seus efeitos a um bom envelhecer. Uma dessas variáveis é quanto a laços próximos e sociais. Criar, manter e otimizar o relacionamento mostrou trazer benefícios concretos para os idosos e seu ambiente. Nesse contexto a empatia, como um processo psicológico que nos permite compreender e experimentar os pensamentos e as emoções dos outros, é um meio que facilita e promove a possibilidade de ligação interpessoal. No entanto, nenhuma relação interpessoal é sem conflito. É por isso que a capacidade de perdoar, como a força humana, facilita o processo de restabelecimento das relações através do abandono de emoções negativas, após uma ofensa. Neste artigo, um quadro teórico integrativo para incluir estes dois processos psicológicos e suas relações no estudo do envelhecimento óptimo ocorre, com base delineada teórica, empírica e metodológica, enquanto uma futura investigação e intervenção são propostas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Empatia; Perdão; Força de caráter.*

## Introduction

The demographic changes that have occurred in recent decades show a gradual but steady process towards an increased aging population. This trend has been oriented to the study of losses in old age, thus supporting a decremental vision of the last phase of life (Iacub, 2011; Lombardo, 2013). However, this view has found its counterpoint in a recent trend which tries to open a complementary point of view, studying the way older people are able to avoid losses and still accumulate gains. In this framework, Positive Psychology and studies about the strengths and human potential largely converge with the progress of Positive Psychogerontology (Arias, & Iacub, 2013), converging on theoretical and methodological changes in the study of development with a strong empirical basis (Ballesteros, 2007; Baltes, & Freund, 2007; Hill, 2011; Lombardo, 2013).

Bonding is a vital salogenic factor throughout life, but especially in old age. In this paper, two strengths of character that aim to restore, protect and enhance the relationships are presented: Empathy and Forgiveness. At the same time, we introduce the conceptual framework on which these two strengths are based, the salogenic benefits they entail, and the different methodologies and techniques used to approach the research, both locally and internationally, to assess their behavior in old age.

## Strengths of character

In recent decades, the emergence of a new wave of research in psychology, both in a practical and theoretical level, called Positive Psychology has been significant. This "umbrella" research (Gancedo, 2008) has the study of the well-being of individuals as its main objective, what its causes are and how to maintain or enhance them. In order to do so, we propose three major lines of inquiry (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000): the positive subjective experiences, the positive character traits, and the enabling institutions and communities. Park, and Peterson (2009) have proposed that the individual area, namely the study of the positive character traits, takes precedence over the other two because of its effect on them.

The most frequently examined variable, as regards the strengths of character, is life satisfaction. All findings have shown positive relationships between the two constructs (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; West, 2007).

However, many studies suggest that the specific strengths of curiosity, gratitude, hope, love and vitality, significantly and especially contribute in people's well-being (Berman, 2007; Park, & Peterson, 2006). Positive psychologists informally categorized them as "Key Strengths" since these five strengths of character were consistently associated with life satisfaction in different studies (Shimai, *et al.*, 2006).

As shown above, the development of strengths of character has a fundamental role in life satisfaction; understanding its change in a lifespan will help to conceptualize the process of successful aging (Arias, Soliveres, Morales, & Dottori, 2014; Morales, 2014b). By focusing in particular on old age, two conceptual converging lines allow us to reflect on the potential benefits of this research. On the one hand, Robert Hill (2005) from the model of "Positive Aging" claims that the aim is to identify the strengths of character acquired by life experiences throughout the lifespan, which would highlight proper mechanisms against the process of aging. On the other hand, Feliciano Villar (2013) provides a model of "Generativity in Aging" in which two types of developments are described, the individual and the social ones, allowing a social and community capital on individual strengths in old age.

### **The value of affective bonds**

From birth to the last stage of life affective bonds play a key role in the well-being and development of the individual. At each stage, different bonds generate different effects on the evolution of personality, identity and well-being.

Early studies on differences between age groups, understood as social processes, found that older people have lower social networks (Cumming, & Henry, 1961). The explanation seemed obvious at the time, seniors are the ones who are more likely to be widowed, to experience the death of their friends and family, and thus to live alone.

However, Laura Carstensen from the Stanford Center of Longevity (Carstensen, 1992) found that although their social networks are smaller, older people reported greater satisfaction with their affective bonds than younger people (Landsford, Sherman & Antonucci, 1998). Also, older people show more positive emotions as they interact more with their bonds than youngsters do (Charles, & Piazza, 2007).

It has also been found that the elderly continue incorporating bonds, as in other stages of life (Arias, 2014). Generally speaking, seniors have much more positive and less ambivalent bonding (Fingerman, 2004) than middle-aged adults and young people (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Rook, 2003). Even in situations of interpersonal conflict, seniors tend to express more positive emotions and affection (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). In addition, they strongly perceive their positive emotions and behaviors more than others do.

Loung, Charles, and Fingerman (2011) argue that these positive changes occur in old age due to two related processes: 1) Older adults develop strategies that optimize positive interpersonal relationships and minimize the negative ones. 2) People around the elderly reciprocally treat each other in a more positive way and with greater sensitivity than young adults do.

This paper seeks to explain the resources that seniors put into practice to improve their affective bonds. Carstensen and his research group argue that older adults are more concerned with emotional goals and also with the acquisition of positive emotional experiences than in goals related to the search for information (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). That is why they are naturally motivated to prioritize emotionally significant aspects of life, while young people are more motivated to acquire new information, expand horizons and achieve goals (Fredrickson, & Carstensen, 1990). At the same time, and consistent with this, seniors show a perceptual-attention bias toward positive stimuli in old age (Carstensen, & Mikels, 2005).

Research shows not only that older people report greater social expertise than young adults (Hess, 2005) but also a better ability to judge the people they connect with (Hess, Bolstad, Woodburn, & Auman, 1999). In this sense, older people gain experience with problematic relationships and learn to identify and avoid those bonds that regulate their social-emotional experiences (Hess, Osowski, & Leclerc, 2005; Lombardo, Sabatini, Morales, & Jensen, 2013).

This research explains why even in the face of conflictive situations, which are part of any interpersonal relationship, the elderly tend not only to see their own positive aspects but also the ones in the person with whom they interact.

Having reviewed the actual evidence, we will pay attention to two specific strategies that have shown positive correlations, both at an interpersonal and intrapersonal level: Empathy and Forgiveness (Morales, & Arias, 2014a).

## **Empathy**

For most of the twentieth century, Empathy theorists have focused their interest on cognitive and affective aspects in different ways; until the 80s, theoretical approaches were based on these two lines. Currently it is agreed that both aspects are integrated as a whole. A definition of empathy explains it as an ability to experience others thoughts and emotions better than one's own (Decety, & Lamm, 2006).

Mark Davis (1980) sustains that empathy is a multidimensional construct; with respect to the cognitive aspect, he says that there would be two large dimensions, "Perspective-taking" and "Fantasy". The former would be the one that attempts to adopt the perspectives of other people and see things from their point of view; the latter one refers to the tendency to identify oneself with characters in movies, novels, plays and other fictional situation. Regarding the emotional aspect, Davis makes a distinction between "Empathic Concern" and "Personal Distress". The first one refers to the tendency to feel compassion, tenderness and concern for others experiencing negative situations; and the second one relates to the tendency to feel discomfort and personal feeling of anxiety that result from observing another's negative experience.

Scientists have made great efforts to research the positive correlates of this construct, both with oneself as well as with others. For example, those with high levels of empathy also recorded high levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem and emotional intelligence (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). As far as the interpersonal aspect, people who have richer social networks, report lower levels of aggression and higher levels of volunteering work, charity work and more helpful behavior (Wilhelm, & Bekkers, 2010). The current research suggests that the empathic and prosocial responses are associated with both psychological and physical benefits (Konrath, & Brown, 2012; Morales, 2013).

## Forgiveness

One might think that wounds are an inherent part of human relationships. Everyday life situations mean facing constant aggression, abuse, deceit, infidelity or other offenses. One of the possible reactions to these mistreatments - though not the only one - is forgiveness.

The author who has done most in research on Forgiveness is Robert Enright. He defines it as the intention of waiving one's own right to be resentful, to have negative judgment and indifferent behavior towards the person who unduly hurt us, while the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and love to others are fostered. (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998). For this theorist, it is fundamental that the forgiver develop a benevolent view towards the offender; his perspective is focused on the change of feelings, thoughts and behavior towards the wrongdoer.

Ultimately, through behavioral changes, Enright's model attempts to describe and explain the observed reduction in negative affect and the increase in the positive ones. It also introduces an interventional line in which the person can find relief and peace, as this behavior is supposed to shape her/his thoughts and feelings (Enright, 2001).

Michael McCullough, a researcher of the Department of Evolutionary Psychology at the University of Miami, understands that forgiveness reflects an increase in prosocial attitudes towards another person.

He conceptualizes it as a set of motivational changes provided by an empathic predisposition where the person who forgives: a) reduces his interest in retaliating, b) maximizes the levels of estrangement with the offender, c) increases the motivation to reconcile with the offender (McCullough, & Hoyt, 2002).

McCullough, and colleagues (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) argue that empathy toward the offender is central to facilitate the conditions that lead to forgiveness. This concept is placed in a variety of prosocial phenomena such as cooperation, altruism and inhibition of aggression, which require empathy to develop.

This author is also concerned about evaluating the emotional characteristics associated with forgiveness (McCullough, 2000). He and his colleagues have assumed that the two negative emotional states that characterize interpersonal relationships after being injured are: 1) the feelings of perceived damage and its corresponding motivation to avoid any personal or psychological contact with the offender; 2) the feelings of indignation and its corresponding motivation to seek revenge or to observe the wrongdoer being offended. In this sense, the author states that when an injured person does not forgive his offender, even a close relationship, these two negative affects increase with their behavioral correlates (avoidance or revenge), thus stimulating destructive behavior toward the offender. However when the victim has forgiven his perceptions of the offense and the offender, he will not look for motivations to avoid or seek revenge, but on the contrary he/she will turn the offense into constructive mode.

### **The problem of evaluation**

The instrumental approach to empathy shows the difficulty in its study because of the heterogeneity of theoretical models that conceptualize it. The first scales that have been generated for the measurement of empathy are those of Dyamond (1949) and Hogan (1969) with a cognitive empathy perspective. Merhabian and Epstein (1972) and later on Mayer and Caruso (1998) created different scales from the emotional empathy viewpoint.

Since the 80s, simultaneously with the development of these scales, work has begun on the creation and standardization of empathy measurement from an integrated point of view; examples of such efforts are the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI) (Davis, 1980), the empathy quotient (EQ) (Baron-Cohen, & Wheelwright, 2004) and the test of cognitive and affective empathy (TECA) (López-Pérez, Fernandez-Pinto, & Abbot, 2008).

They have also designed tools to assess situational empathy (Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1990; Igartua, & Paez, 1998). In recent decades, performance testing (Performance-based tasks) have been conducted to assess the real capacity to generate effective empathy (Richter, & Kunzmann, 2011).



These techniques generally attempt to measure: 1) the ability to perceive the emotion and /or intention of another person; 2) the ability to share emotions with others; and 3) the ability to express empathy in a particular situation. Even when these studies show a higher ecological validity, they are by far different from what it is traditionally conceptualized as empathy, namely, a personality disposition.

McCullough, Hoyt, and Rachal (2000) classified the different techniques to assess forgiveness in taxonomy of 3 x 2 x 4. The first level of the taxonomy implies the specificity of the measurement, namely, forgiveness when facing a specific offense, dyadic forgiveness or dispositional forgiveness. The second level includes the taxonomy of forgiveness direction, i.e., if the offender or the offended is evaluated. Finally, forgiveness can be evaluated using a number of methods ordered through the notions of self-report, pair report, an outside observer report and review of the constructive and destructive behavior toward the offender.

In this sense, concerning forgiveness and empathy, we are faced with a variety of operations and evaluation techniques, which in turn, are not adequately adapted to the local environment (Morales, 2014a).

### **How these constructs manifest themselves in old age**

Different authors from the Developmental Psychology field have studied empathy in children and adolescents, recording in particular the large increase in children's and adolescent's capacity for empathy (Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1990). From the life cycle perspective, some authors have argued that empathy increases in adulthood and even in old age, though it does not follow the same linear pattern as in young people (McAdams, & Olson, 2010).

Evaluating differences between unlike lifespan stages, Gilet, Mella, Studer, Gruhn, and Labouvie-Vief (2013) found that young adults have higher levels of empathy in fantasy dimensions and personal discomfort than seniors. Perez, and Fernandez (2010) found that affective components of empathy are not influenced by age. However, the elderly cognitive components, whose levels are lower than in those of youngsters, are affected. Sze, Gyurak, Goodkind, and Levenson (2012) found a significant age-related increase in the empathic concern dimension, not in the personal discomfort.

Two other linear studies showed that self-report measures remain stable over time (Diehl, Coyle & Labouvie-Vief, 1996; Eysenck, Pearson, Easting & Allsopp, 1985), while others found a decrease in empathic capacity as the aging process occurs (Schiemann, & van Gundy, 2000 Gruhn, Rebucal, Diehl, Lumley, & Labouvie-Vief, 2008).

Studies evaluating empathy with performance tests found a significant decrease in the ability to recognize different emotions in the final lifespan stages (Duval, Piolino, Bejanin, Eustache, & Desgranges, 2010), with the exception of some studies on the recognition of facial expressions of revulsion, annoyance or sadness (Seider, Shiota, Whalen, & Levenson, 2011).

Labouvie-Vief, Gruhn, and Studer (2010) in the Dynamic Integration Theory (DIT), one of the most prominent theories of development throughout the life cycle, define empathy as a complex emotion and as such, show a progressive pattern with a reverse "U" pattern over the life cycle. Labouvie-Vief (2009) suggest that emotional representations are supported on cognitive representations, explaining how in the early stages of the life span there is a progressive growth on the ability to represent other people's emotions, reaching its peak at middle age due to the large number of experiences acquired. In old age, the decline in biological and cognitive functions would challenge the ability to provide adequate emotional representations, providing only simple representations of the mental states of others.

A second relevant theory to explain the differences in empathy according to age groups in old age is the Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory (SST) (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). As mentioned above, this theory highlighted the changes in seniors' priorities with respect to social goals throughout their lifetime in terms of future time perspective, mobilizing older adults to invest more time and energy in the regulation of their emotions and in the optimization of their close social relationships. In this sense, the SST suggests stability and even an increase in empathy, especially in the emotional aspects.

In the city of Mar del Plata we performed two studies in which the scores on empathy were compared in self-report scales with different age groups (Soliveréz, & Morales, 2013; Morales, & Arias, 2014c). Both studies have found no differences in cognitive dimensions of empathy, but we found a difference in one of the affective dimensions in each study.

The first study revealed that young seniors (60-70 years old) scored significantly higher on the scale of empathic concern, i.e., in the tendency to sympathize with others and mobilize to help, being this dimension the more prosocial in empathy. In the second study - a different scale was used but with a similar methodology-, it was found that again young seniors (60-70 years old) have scored higher in another emotional dimension, empathetic joy, which means relating with other people's positive emotions. In both cases, it is the most salogenic correlate of empathy.

With respect to forgiveness, both theories and empirical research indicate that there are differences, according to age, in the tendency to forgive. Older adults are more prone to forgive others than middle-aged adults, young adults, adolescents and children (Allemand, 2008; Girard, & Mullet, 1997). In a study conducted in the United States (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001) senior citizens (65 and older) reported a greater willingness to forgive than middle-aged adults (45-64 years old); the latter also showed better results than young adults (18-44 years old). Lawler-Row and Piferi (2006) also found differences in a study of adults between 50 and 95 years old, where the elderly described themselves as more willing to forgive than middle-aged adults did.

These differences in the ability to forgive according to age states the following question: What psychological phenomena or processes are responsible for these differences? Romero and Mitchell (2008) argue that older adult's beliefs and personal and social values motivate them to forgive more than young adults.

Another possible explanation is the one that refers to differences that arise in terms of age preferences on social goals proposed by the Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). This theory assumes that the regulation of emotions receives a primary priority in the elderly because of the shortening of the lifetime left; therefore, forgiving could become a useful resource and a useful strategy for people in their last years. It also suggests that older adults, in order to improve their positive social experiences and minimize the negative ones, use strategies that aim to avoid conflicts, while young adults behave in a more confrontational manner when they feel anger. Likewise, Cheng and Yim (2008) show that perceiving the future time as a limited resource -given the proximity to death- influences people's willingness to forgive hypothetical interpersonal conflict, explaining some of the differences found by age. Meanwhile, Steiner, Allemand, and McCullough (2012) show that agreeableness and neuroticism as personality traits, partly explain the differences by age group.

Finally, something remarkable on the forgiveness and differences by age research is its relationship with the religious construct; as well as forgiveness, religiosity tends to increase with age. Religious people and /or people with spiritual interests tend to be more likely to forgive and less likely to take revenge than those who are not religious or have a spiritual interest (Bono, 2005). Girard, and Mullet (1997) found that people willing to forgive unconditionally, attached to a personal philosophy closely linked to religious values, are in higher percentage seniors. The study by Maganto, and Garaigordobil (2010) revealed that older people claim more often than youngsters that religious beliefs help them to forgive. These authors also found that a higher percentage of adults considered that a superior being determines what happens to them, while young people, though, report that destiny is going to give everyone what they deserve. This shows a resistance to resignation, understood as an attitude to accept what happened.

In Mar del Plata (Morales, & Arias, 2014b) a self-report scale has been used to research on Casullo, and Liporace (2005), what perceptions people of different age groups have about their ability to forgive themselves, others and some situations. Also, the beliefs that determine forgiveness were examined. The results show differences with the background gathered. Contrary to what was found in many of them (Allemand, 2008; Girard, & Mullet, 1997; Lawler-Row, & Piferi, 2006, Toussaint, Williams, Musicl, & Everson, 2001) in the present study there has been no significant difference, in any of the four groups, in three of the four dimensions in which a person can ask oneself, others or a situation for forgiveness.

However, significant differences have been found on the high scores when referring to the beliefs that determine forgiveness for the two older age groups. These results indicate that locally, this capacity does not seem to increase in the later stages of life and also older adults rely more on their belief systems to forgive than young people do.

### **Relationship between Forgiveness and Empathy**

Beyond the different theoretical positions around both concepts, there is a consensus in literature about the place that empathy has in the process of forgiveness (Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2010).

These theoretical approaches are supported by strong empirical evidence (Moreno, & Fernandez, 2010; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). This relationship has also strong practical implications. In the therapeutic work, empathy has shown to be an unavoidable yet significant variable in the development of forgiveness; its importance has been highlighted when working with close interpersonal relationships, couples and infidelity situations (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2010; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). For example, in Enright and Fitzgibbon's model (2000), empathy is the third step in a model of four, in which perspective taking, empathy and compassion are a necessary link to provide emotional basis for the development of forgiveness.

While there are great advances in the study of the intensity and the way in which both constructs are related, few works explore the relationship of the different age groups. Two local studies (Morales, 2014c; Morales, & Arias, 2014c) show that the relationship between both constructs decreases in as much we evaluate older age groups. In this sense, forgiveness can be thought of as a willingness that starts without the need of empathy to be developed.

These results allow us to think of two consequences, one practical and one theoretical. In practice, many of the approaches related to the development of forgiveness are based on empathy; the results force us to examine these techniques if they are to be adapted to this stage of life. In theory, it would be interesting to have more information about the reasons to forgive, and at the same time, find out what other different resources seniors use to forgive much more than young people do.

## Conclusions

Positive Psychology has provided Gerontology a new line of action and research by providing conceptual categories and technical resources, both to record positive aspects of the aging process and to empower them. Because the affective bonds are one of the greatest sources of satisfaction in old age, we have focused on empathy and forgiveness as specific strengths that protect and enhance relationships. In this sense, both constructs are shown in the last stage of life as a reservoir of human capital for the support and improvement of close, distant and community relationships.

In addressing the analysis of these two strengths of character, we aim at making visible the study of psychological dispositions that are maintained and /or increased in the last stages of human development; thereby, promoting a change in the social representation of aging, promoting a decremental paradigm shift to a broader, complex and contextualized one. Even though some answers are still pending as regards the behavior of these constructs in specific situations and the actual effects on the wellbeing and quality of life of the elderly and their environment, we hope that this work will motivate new developments in this line.

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