

Research Article

## A Comparative Analysis of Forgiveness among Adolescents, Adults and Older People

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### ABSTRACT

The present study focused on people of three different age groups in relation to forgiveness. It was postulated that there would be a significant difference among adolescents, adults and older people in respect to forgiveness, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation. One hundred and fifty (n=150) participants including fifty (n=50) adolescents, fifty (n=50) adults and fifty (n=50) older people were selected through referral and respondent-driven sampling. Demographic Information Form (DIF) and Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005) were used to collect research data. One way ANOVA test results reveal a significant difference among three groups. Older participants reported more forgiveness, forgiveness of self, others and situation than adolescents and adults. The present findings have implications for individual, family and society.

**Keywords:** *Forgiveness, Adolescents, Adults, Older, Situation*

So far scientific studies have brought different dimensions and concepts of forgiveness to surface indicating lack of consensus on a specific definition. However, moral (Murphy, 2003), religious (Rye, 2005) and psychological (Enright & Coyley, 1998; McCullough et al., 1998) perspectives have amplified personal, familial and communal significance of forgiveness. Forgiveness is seen as willingness to foster compassion and love rather than harboring resentment and negative judgment for offenders (Enright & Coyley, 1998). For some, forgiveness is a prosocial change in motivation, from negative to positive, towards offending partner (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006).

According to Thompson et al. (2005), forgiveness is a “framing of a perceived transgression such that one’s responses to the transgressor, transgression, and sequel of the transgression are transformed from negative to neutral or positive. The source of a transgression, and therefore the object of forgiveness, may be oneself, another person, or a situation that one views as being beyond anyone’s control. It can be an illness, fate or a natural disaster”.

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Forgiveness is, either, studied as a whole (Burnette et al., 2013), or as a set of components such as; benevolence, avoidance and revenge (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006), forgiveness of self, others and situation (Thompson et al., 2005). Forgiveness helps in reframing negative thoughts, feelings and emotions associated with offenders. For that reason, it is fairly different from pardoning, forgetting, excusing, condoning and denying (Enright & Coyle, 1998). Negative repercussions (anger, hostility and revenge desires) associated with an offense can be effectively handled with forgiveness (Wade & Worthington 2005). Resultantly, people can re-establish their closeness (McCullough et al., 1998).

A bulk of research evidences has highlighted forgiveness related psychological, social and familial benefits. Literature has shown forgiveness determining psychological well-being (Sadiq, 2013; Akhtar, Dalon & Barbow, 2017). Forgiveness is positively connected with well-being (Sadiq & Ali, 2012), whereas negatively connected with psychological distress (Orcutt, 2006). It also has significant and meaningful association with mental health (Asghari & Roshani, 2013; Saeed, 2014), with relationship satisfaction and commitment (McCullough et al., 1998) and with personality traits (Hampto, 2015). Research also proved an association of self and other forgiveness with psychological distress (Maselko, 1998, as cited in Sadiq, 2013), with depression and anxiety (Hebl & Enright, 1993). Depression (Berry et al., 2005), anger, depression and anxiety (Seybold et al., 2001) get decreased, if level of forgiveness is higher. Restoration of interpersonal relationship and regulation of social connectivity is possible because of forgiving (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). People exhibits less aggression and more sympathy, if they cherish higher forgiveness (Ross, Kendall, Matter, Wrobel & Rye, 2004). Dispositional forgiveness also constitutes self-control (DeWall, Pond, & Bushman, 2010). Marital relations and family functioning depends on forgiveness (Fincham & Beach, 2002). It is an essential part of conflict resolution, well-being, social and intimate relationships (McCullough, Root, Tabak, & Witvliet, 2009; Van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2014).

Literature, covering the role of demographics in forgiveness, documented women reporting more forgiveness than men (Miller et al., 2008). Men harbor more revenge feelings and thoughts than women (Rijavec et al., 2010). Non-working married women were more benevolent towards in-laws than working married women (Sadiq & Ali, 2014). Duration of offense (Ling-hsuan, 2009), apology and confession (McCullough et al, 2003), relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2002) largely contribute to forgiving.

People of all genres believe the significance of forgiveness in everyday life, despite being unforgiving in certain situations. Each domain of life (i.e, family, education, job, community services and religion) demands positivity, tolerance and adaptability. Forgiveness is deemed as a coping method (Rasmussen & Lopez, 2000, as cited in Thompson et al., 2005) and associated with general life adjustment (Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006). In this regard, empirical investigation of forgiveness is the need of time. Like other demographics, age is also imperative in determining forgiveness. Thus, it has been envisioned to explore

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forgiveness and its type in the context of three distinct age groups (adolescents, adults and older people). The present study is novel and will be helpful in gaining insight that how adolescents, adults and older people behave towards self, others and situation.

### ***Objectives***

1. To examine the nature and propensity of forgiveness among general population
2. To compare the propensity of forgiveness among people of three different age groups

### ***Hypotheses***

1. There would be significant difference among adolescents, adults and old people in respect to forgiveness
2. There would be significant difference among adolescents, adults and old people in respect to forgiveness of self
3. There would be significant difference among adolescents, adults and old people in respect to forgiveness of others
4. There would be significant difference among adolescents, adults and old people in respect to forgiveness of situation

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

The present study employed comparative research method whereby one hundred and fifty ( $n=150$ ) participants including fifty ( $n=50$ ) adolescents (12-18 years old), fifty ( $n=50$ ) adults (21-59 years old) and fifty ( $n=50$ ) older people (60 years or above) were required. However, in the presents study, reported age ranges for adolescents were (14-17), for adults were (29-59) and for older people were (60-87). Participants were categorized into three different independent groups while taking into account major age classifications irrespective of its sub-division (i.e, young adolescents, middle adult, young older, etc).

Entire sample was recruited applying referral and respondent-driven sampling. Equal number of male ( $n=75$ ) and female ( $n=75$ ) participants belonging to middle-class families were included in each group. Participants with physical disease (i.e, diabetes mellitus, hepatitis, cardiac problems, infertility, disability, drug addiction), with mental disorder, with the status of divorcee, widow or hailing from broken families were not recruited.

### ***Measures***

Demographic Information Form was utilized to collect basic information from the participants including age, gender, socio-economic status, marital status, educational level, number of family members, etc.

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005) was used to examine forgiveness among participants. It is 18 items scale comprised of three subscales; forgiveness of self (6-items), forgiveness of others (6-items) and forgiveness of situation (6-items). All items of this scale are scored on 7-point of continuum that ranged from (Almost always false than true-1 to

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Almost always true of me-7). Reliability of English Version for the subscale of forgiveness of self is ( $\alpha=.75$ ), for forgiveness of others is ( $\alpha=.78$ ), for forgiveness of situation is ( $\alpha=.77$ ) and full scale is ( $\alpha=.86$ ). Obtained reliability of Urdu version of forgiveness of self is ( $\alpha=.68$ ), forgiveness of others is ( $\alpha=.73$ ), forgiveness of situation is ( $\alpha=.65$ ) and of total forgiveness is ( $\alpha=.71$ ). The scale was found to be correlated ( $r = 0.79$ ) with other measure of forgiveness, Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation (TRIM- 18) indicating good convergent validity.

### Procedure

The present study has been carried out with the approval from affiliated institutions. First of all, required measure (Heartland Forgiveness Scale) was translated with the approval from its authors. The scale was given to three different professionals having expertise in translating the measures in Urdu language. Then, other three experts having command on English language were given Urdu versions for back translation. In last, another seventh professional from the field of psychology, also a bilingual expert, crossed check original and translated version in order to sort out best items for final draft. Then, approved final draft in Urdu language was administered on a group ( $n = 50$ ) to calculate its reliability.

Afterwards, participants were approached and were briefed the purpose of research, risk/benefit ratio, confidentiality of personal information (gathered using demographic information form) and their responsibility to respond to the measures. Their consent for volunteer participation was taken first. Then, participants signed the informed consent form and answered the given measures. Their responses were scored and statistically analyzed using SPSS, Version-23.0.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and one way ANOVA were calculated to test the hypotheses and summary of the results have been described below;

**Table: 1** Descriptive statistics showing mean difference among participants

Variables	Groups					
	Adolescents		Adults		Older	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Forgiveness	65.14	11.73	71.32	9.26	78.88	10.06
Forgiveness of Self	22.20	4.93	23.48	5.85	27.52	4.25
Forgiveness of Others	22.32	5.71	24.82	3.81	26.48	4.99
Forgiveness of Situation	20.62	5.15	23.02	3.59	24.88	5.30

Descriptive statistics (**Table: 1**) reveal mean difference among groups of participants. Mean scores of older people ( $M = 78.88$ ,  $SD = 10.06$ ) are greater than Adults ( $M = 71.32$ ,  $SD = 9.26$ ) and adolescents ( $M = 65.14$ ,  $SD = 11.73$ ) on the variable of forgiveness. Older participants also scored more on the variable of forgiveness of self ( $M = 27.52$ ,  $SD = 4.25$ ) than adults ( $M = 23.48$ ,  $SD = 5.85$ ).

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= 23.48,  $SD= 5.85$ ) and adolescents ( $M = 22.20$ ,  $SD =4.93$ ). In respect to forgiveness of others, mean scores of older participants are more ( $M = 26.48$ ,  $SD= 4.99$ ) as compare to adults ( $M = 24.82$ ,  $SD =3.81$ ) and adolescents ( $M =22.32$ ,  $SD= 5.71$ ). Related to forgiveness of situation, adolescents ( $M =20.62$ ,  $SD =5.15$ ) and adults ( $M =23.02$ ,  $SD =3.59$ ) scored less in comparison to older people ( $M = 24.88$ ,  $SD =5.30$ ).

**Table: 2 Summary of one way ANOVA**

Variables	Groups	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig
Forgiveness	Between groups	4735.560	2	2367.780	21.874	.000
	Within groups	15912.180	147	108.246		
	Total	20647.740	149			
Forgiveness of Self	Between groups	771.040	2	385.520	15.052	.000
	Within groups	3764.960	147	25.612		
	Total	4536.00	149			
Forgiveness of Others	Between groups	438.520	2	219.260	9.129	.000
	Within groups	3530.740	147	24.019		
	Total	3969.260	149			
Forgiveness of Situation	Between groups	456.120	2	228.060	10.104	.000
	Within groups	3318.040	147	22.572		
	Total	3774.160	149			

Results (Table: 2), obtained through one-way ANOVA, have revealed a significant difference among participants of three different aged groups. It has been proved that there is a significant difference among adolescents, adults and older people in respect to forgiveness [ $F(2, 147) = 21.874$ ,  $p = .000$ ], forgiveness of self [ $F(2, 147) = 15.052$ ,  $p = .000$ ], forgiveness of others [ $F(2, 147) = 9.129$ ,  $p = .000$ ] and forgiveness of situation [ $F(2, 147) = 10.104$ ,  $p = .000$ ].

## DISCUSSION

The present study has shown older people reporting more tendency to forgive self, others and situation in comparison to adolescents and adults. Whereas, adolescents seemed less forgiving towards self, other and situation than other two groups. A plausible point in favor of these findings is that adolescents are usually indulged in risk taking experiences (Scott, 2004, as cited in Karaman&Cok,2007). They are also less likely to take adaptive decision than adults because of having less mature capacity to resist social and emotional influences (Karaman & Cok,2007).On the other hand, older people have greater emotional well-being than younger people (Momtaz et al., 2014).Cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social

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changes are driving forces for the facilitation of forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Due to these changes and emotional stability, older people have come up with more forgiving propensity than adolescents and adults. Through forgiving self, others and situation, they got themselves freed from negative thoughts and emotions as well.

Older people are satisfied being surrounded by family, friends, children and grandchildren. People, during this phase of life, spend most of their time in discussing family and social issues. In South Asian culture, older people are the symbol of compassion, generosity, love and affection which entails forgiving in daily life. Compassion and generosity are fostered among forgiving people (Enright, 1996). Older people also play vital role in resolving interpersonal conflicts and family disputes. Even, adolescents and adults are seen to be receiving guidance from them regarding daily issues. Their enormous life experience has meaningful lessons for others. This life style is one reason for avoiding blame, accepting self and showing contentment in life. Forgiving self is the way of restoring self-respect and self-acceptance (Dillon, 2001). It is related with self-esteem and life satisfaction also (Leach & Lark, 2004).

Older participants of the present study scored more on the subscale of forgiveness of others, whereas adolescents scored less than others. In a previous study, older adolescents reported more resentment and willingness to seek revenge (Chiaramello et al, 2005). Among adolescents, forgiveness is conditioned with apology and remorse (Vinsonneau & Mullet, 2001). Adolescents encounter criticism, ridicule, insult and bullying in daily life that cultivate grudge feeling regarding others. Consequently, they are less likely to forgive others. In comparison to them, older people, due to their generosity and compassion, do not wait for apology and remorse. Furthermore, their involvement in social and welfare activities strengthen their tendency to forgive others as compare to adolescents and adults.

Older participants of the present study also reported more forgiveness of situation than adolescents and adults. People, in later life, appraise life events as less stressful (Aldwin, 1991) because of decrease in social roles. Involvement in social roles constitutes hassles in daily life (Lazarus, 1991). Previous researches also have described elderly reporting less negative emotions as compare to younger individuals (Lawton, Kleban, & Dean, 1993). Situation may instigate negative emotions, feelings and behaviors, if it violates positive assumptions pertaining to self and circumstances (Thompsons et al., 2005). When, people are unforgiving towards situation, their positive beliefs and schemas are converted into negative one, as a result, they are overwhelmed with negative emotions and thoughts. It is consistent with previous finding that forgiveness of situation predicted anger, anxiety, depression and satisfaction with life (Thompson et al, 2005). People usually do not forgive situations such as; illnesses or disaster (Enright & Zell, 1989) rather blame Allah (God) or their fate. Perhaps, it is because of their weak religious beliefs.

In young age, people are more involved in worldly matters and avoid religious practices. On the other hand, it is commonly observed that older people are more inclined towards religion. Their religious beliefs help them in accepting the problematic situation. Having faith in Allah

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(God) and His decisions encourage people to show tolerance and patience in front of adversity. Even, natural disaster or illness is perceived as an ultimate decision from Allah (God) and as a trial for humans. For this reason, older people, being indulged in more religious practices, forgive the situation more. It is also evident by previous study that religious forgiveness predicts forgiveness of situation (Amini et al, 2014). Forgiveness is associated with religiousness (Walter, 2013) and religious faith (Edwards et al., 2002). This religiosity may also contribute to forgiveness of self and others.

The present study also has shown that, on the variable of forgiveness, mean scores of adults are more than adolescents but less than older participants. In fact, South Asian adults have more social and family responsibilities such as; bread earner (adult men), home makers (adult women), child rearing, maintaining family status and reputation. Besides, education and marriage of offspring are their sole responsibility. They are expected to take more mature decision and show adaptability to environment than adolescents. They have less social and welfare activities than older people because of being embedded with social responsibilities. Sometimes, they find less time for recreational activities, too. They might have mixed feeling, emotions and thoughts owing to the mixed and multiple responsibilities. It is the probability of reporting more forgiveness than adolescents but less forgiveness than older participants of the present study.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

We humans, despite living in the era of advanced technology, have declined morally and socially. Today, our relationships are on edge owing to intolerance, selfishness and impatience for each other. Resultantly, interpersonal conflicts, family destruction and violence are prevalent all over the world, particularly in South Asia. Even minor conflict has become a headache. Besides, variety of situations/circumstances such as; chronic illnesses, natural disasters and painful incidents have entangled us.

With the help of forgiveness, one can combat these political, social and psychological upheavals. Forgiveness is an effective coping strategy used to deal with interpersonal offenses (Pargament, 1997). It is integral in psychological healing (Hope, 1987). Forgiveness encompasses restructuring of negative thoughts, emotions and feelings into positive one. The present study has pointed out adolescents and adults preferring less forgiveness than older people. It is time to learn from our elders to stand firm against personal and social problems. We cannot move forward if we are stuck with negative, emotions, feelings and thoughts. Adolescents and adults need to incorporate positive attributes (such as; forgiveness, tolerance, compassion) in themselves so that they could move ahead to sustain harmony and peace within family and society.

### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the present study, three different groups were taken considering major age classification. Sub-classification such as; young adolescents, older adolescents, middle adults, oldest adults or older-older were not focused. Role of other demographics such as; gender, education,

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marriage, family system, employment status were ignored while analyzing the results. In future, researchers should focus on sub-classification and other demographics in determining forgiving attitude.

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