

Qualitative Understanding of Unforgiveness among Indian Adults: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Unforgiveness is an internal state of a person in face of a transgression where they hold negative emotions and rumination towards the transgressor. Although there are studies that have shown its positive and negative consequences, there is still a lack of studies explaining the full complexity of unforgiveness. Researchers have suggested that there is a strong need to explore the construct through further studies. **Objective:** The present study aims to explore the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness among Indian adults through a qualitative study. **Method:** Thirty-eight participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interview contents were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the thematic analysis method. **Results:** Three themes were identified: costs of unforgiveness, benefits of unforgiveness, and lowering strategies of unforgiveness. The costs associated with unforgiveness reported by participants were loneliness, diminished support, fear of re-victimization, guilt, and negative emotions etc. Whereas, increased happiness and satisfaction, increased adaptability, increased self-worth, and a sense of security were described as benefits of unforgiveness. Participants also described some strategies that can act as strategies to reduce unforgiveness. Seeking forgiveness by the offender, apology by the offender, positive change in the offender, and considering ill-conditions of the offender were some of the mechanisms highlighted by participants to reduce unforgiveness. **Conclusions:** Thus, unforgiveness is a complex psychological phenomenon which exerts certain positive and negative impacts on its adherents.

Keywords: *Apology; Forgiveness; Thematic Analysis; Transgression; Unforgiveness; Well-Being.*

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Forgiveness is a conscious and deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or a desire for revenge against the offender. It has been found to be positively associated with mental health (Toussaint & Webb, 2005), physical health (Toussaint et al., 2020), and well-being (Bono et al., 2008). The scientific study of forgiveness on an individual, interpersonal, organizational, and collective level has increased recently (Pandey et al., 2020; Worthington & Wade, 2020). Contrarily, unforgiveness is an internal state in which one's experiences in the aftermath of a transgression vary along with one or more of the following dimensions: negative emotions with rumination, unforgiving cognitions, and/or an altered perception of the offender (Stackhouse et al., 2018).

Withholding or low forgiveness is linked with a variety of negative consequences (Rapske et al., 2010a; Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b). Initially it was believed that forgiveness and unforgiveness are regulated by the same mechanisms and unforgiveness is the opposite of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). Worthington & Wade (1999) firstly suggested that forgiveness and unforgiveness are distinct construct with some interdependence.

They suggested that forgiveness is one way to reduce unforgiveness and that there are several other ways to reduce unforgiveness. They suggested that unforgiveness may be significantly influenced by certain personality traits like agreeability, emotional intelligence, interpersonal sensitivity, neuroticism, pride, religion, shame-proneness, perception, and emotional responses to life events (Worthington & Wade, 1999). Researchers suggested that although studies have been conducted to understand the consequences of withholding forgiveness the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness left untouched and thus unforgiveness research is in its infancy (Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b; Stackhouse et al., 2018).

Current study

The scientific study of forgiveness has witnessed momentum ensuing the establishment of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Since then a significant amount of research has been conducted that showed significant benefits of practicing forgiveness for people of all age groups and cultural backgrounds (Worthington & Wade, 2020). Previously unforgiveness was considered as the opposite end of forgiveness but studies have shown that forgiveness and unforgiveness are not the same (Ross et al., 2018a; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Worthington & Wade, 1999). Furthermore, rather than being opposites of a single continuum, they are distinct but interconnected constructs. Therefore, in order to understand and highlight their correlates, inherent psychological mechanisms, and associations with different life outcomes, both the constructs require separate attention and investigation.

Although certain studies have empirically examined unforgiveness (Ross, 2013; Ross et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b; Stackhouse et al., 2018), there is still more to know about the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness. The study of unforgiveness can have significant implications in clinical, counselling, and psychoeducational interventions. Gaining a deeper understanding of its nature and dynamics may assist practitioners in weakening the chain of negative thoughts and emotions and assisting individuals in avoiding maladaptive behaviour patterns (Worthington and Wade, 1999). Unforgiveness is not always harmful for its adherents, in many cases it may serve as an adoptive process. Withholding forgiveness may strengthen a sense of security, enhanced self-worth, and a sense of protecting one's values, whereas granting forgiveness may result in negative consequences (such as repeated offenses and immoral behaviours) (Rapske et al., 2010a; Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b). These findings seems to be contradictory and thus, keeping in mind these research gaps, the present

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study aimed to explore the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness among Indian adults through a qualitative study.

METHODS

Study design

A qualitative research design was used to meet the objectives of the study. The phenomenological framework was adopted as the guiding framework. Participants were recruited through an advertisement through online and offline modes and they were interviewed through a semi-structured interview protocol. The whole procedure was approved by the institutional ethics committee of the university (Approval no: DHSGV/IEC/2022/04).

Participants and their recruitment

Thirty-eight participants (Mean=19.76, SD=1.32), 22 males (Mean=19.59, SD=1.44) and 16 females (Mean=20, SD=1.41) were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques with the help of an advertisement circulated through online and offline modes. The demographic information is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Demographical Information of the Participants (N = 38)

Variables	Total (%)
Gender	
Male	22 (57.89)
Female	16 (42.11)
Education	
Undergraduate	17 (44.74)
Postgraduate	21 (55.26)
Family type	
Joint family*	28 (73.68)
Nuclear family**	10 (26.32)
Socioeconomic status***	
Higher middle-class	26 (68.42)
Lower middle-class	12 (31.58)
Marital status	
Married	07 (18.42)
Unmarried	31 (81.58)
Domicile	
Rural	11 (28.95)
Urban	09 (23.68)
Semi-urban	18 (47.37)

Note 1. *Joint family comprises members of three or more generations.

Note 2. **Nuclear family comprises only parents and their children.

Note 3. ***Socioeconomic status was determined by the annual income reported by the participants.

Interview protocol

The interview questions were framed on the basis of unforgiveness literature (Ballester et al., 2011; Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Jones Ross, 2013; Jones Ross et al., 2018; Rapske et al., 2010; Stackhouse et al., 2018). Guidelines for qualitative research and development of interview protocol was also consulted (Harper & Thompson, 2011; Seale et al., 2004). The purpose of the semi-structured interview protocol was to obtain information about the

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transgression/s faced by the participants and processes linked with them. The interview schedule is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Interview schedule

Interview schedule

साक्षात्कार अनुसूची

1. What do you mean by forgiveness?
(क्षमा से आप क्या समझते हैं?)
2. Describe any event/episode in which someone harmed, upset, angered, or/and offended you and you decided/deciding to forgive him/her/them.
(किसी ऐसी घटना/एपिसोड का वर्णन करें जिसमें किसी ने आपको नुकसान पहुंचाया, परेशान किया, या/और क्रोधित किया और आपने उसे/उन्हें क्षमा करने का निर्णय लिया या क्षमा कर दिया)
3. What do you mean by unforgiveness?
(क्षमा न करने से आप क्या समझते हैं?)
4. Describe any event/episode in which someone harmed, upset, angered, or/and offended you and you decided/deciding to not to forgive him/her/them.
(किसी ऐसी घटना/एपिसोड का वर्णन करें जिसमें किसी ने आपको नुकसान पहुंचाया, परेशान किया, या/और क्रोधित किया और आपने उसे/उन्हें क्षमा न करने का निर्णय लिया या क्षमा नहीं किया)
5. How much time had been passed to this event/episode/offense?
(इस घटना/एपिसोड/अपराध को कितना समय बीत चुका है?)
6. How exactly do you remember the event/episode/offense?
(यह घटना आपको कितनी स्पष्टता से याद है?)
7. How long do you know the offender when the offense occurred?
(जिस समय यह घटना हुई उस समय आप अपराधी को कितने दिनों से जानते थे?)
8. Does the offender currently involve in your life?
(क्या अपराधी वर्तमान में आपके जीवन में शामिल है?)
9. What is your relationship with the offender?
Parents, Sibling (Male or Female), Partner (Romantic or Life-partner), Close friend (Male or Female), Friend (Male or Female), Close relative (Male or Female), Relative (Male or Female), Teacher (Male or Female), Colleague (Male or Female), Religious teacher (Male or Female), Neighbor (Male or Female), Stranger (Male or Female).
अपराधी के साथ आपका क्या संबंध है?
(माता-पिता, भाई-बहन, साथी), प्रेमी या जीवनसाथी (करीबी दोस्त) पुरुष या महिला, दोस्त, पुरुष या महिला (करीबी रिश्तेदार) पुरुष या महिला (रिश्तेदार) पुरुष या महिला (शिक्षक) पुरुष या महिला (सहकर्मी) पुरुष या महिला (धार्मिक शिक्षक/धर्मगुरु) पुरुष या महिला (पड़ोसी) पुरुष या महिला (अजनबी) पुरुष या महिला।
10. Why have you decided or deciding not to forgive him/her/them?
(आपने उसे/उन्हें क्षमा न करने का निर्णय क्यों लिया?)
11. How do you feel by not forgiving him/her/them?
(उसे/उन्हें क्षमा न करके आप कैसा महसूस कर रहे हैं?)
12. What are the advantages of not forgiving the offender?
(अपराधी को क्षमा न करने के क्या फायदे हैं?)
13. What are the disadvantages of not forgiving the offender?
(अपराधी को क्षमा न करने के क्या नुकसान हैं?)
14. What may be the situations in which you will try to or think about forgiving the offender?

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- (ऐसी कौन सी परिस्थितियाँ हो सकती हैं जिनमें आप अपराधी को क्षमा करने का प्रयास करेंगे या उसके बारे में सोचेंगे?)
15. How hurtful the offense had been for you?
(अपराध आपके लिए कितना असहज/हानिकारक था?)
 16. How do you feel about this event/episode/offense today?
(आज इस घटना/एपिसोड/अपराध के बारे में आप कैसा महसूस करते हैं?)
 17. How often do you think/remember about this event/episode/offense in your daily life?
(आप अपने दैनिक जीवन में कितनी बार इस घटना/एपिसोड/अपराध के बारे में सोचते/याद करते हैं?)
 18. Do you think you will be harmed, upset, angered, and/or offended again in the future by the offender?
(क्या आपको लगता है कि अपराधी द्वारा भविष्य में आपको फिर से नुकसान, परेशान, क्रोधित, और/या आहत किया जाएगा?)
 19. What kind of event/episode/offence you are unable to forgive?
(आप किस तरह की घटना/एपिसोड/अपराध को माफ नहीं कर सकते? /करने में असमर्थ/हैं।)
 20. What kind of event/episode/offence you are unwilling to forgive?
(आप किस प्रकार की घटना /एपिसोड/ अपराध को क्षमा करने को तैयार नहीं हैं?)
 21. Anything else you want to add or say related to forgiveness and unforgiveness?
(क्षमा करने या क्षमा न करने से सम्बंधित और कुछ कहना चाहेंगे आप?)
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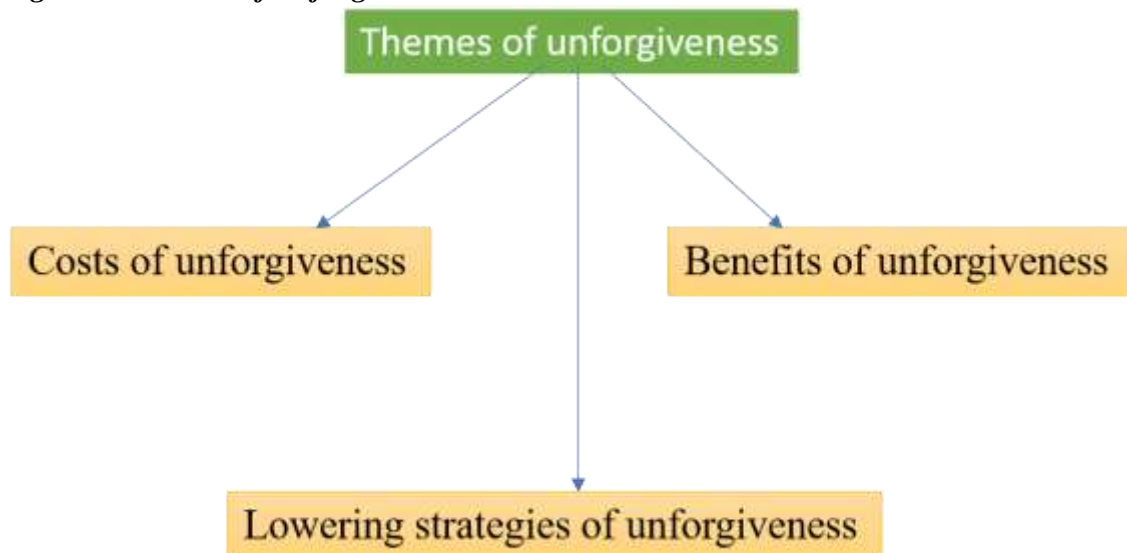
Data analysis

The interview contents were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and analysed through the thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to generate themes and subthemes of unforgiveness. The study data are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF). The link is: https://osf.io/2qak5/?view_only=3b6f4c8250e844f4a788abd2a7c0934b.

RESULTS

Data analysis revealed that unforgiveness is a complex and multifaceted psychological process that occurs in the wake of transgressions. The study findings highlighted three themes. Costs of unforgiveness, benefits of unforgiveness, and lowering strategies of unforgiveness. The themes are presented in Figure 1. The following are their descriptions with illustrative quotes:

Figure 1. Themes of unforgiveness



Theme 1: costs of unforgiveness

Participants reported that holding on to forgiveness is harmful for them in many ways. Loneliness, diminished support, fear of re-victimization, guilt, and negative emotions were the major costs associated with unforgiveness.

Loneliness was reflected in the following descriptions of the participants.

I feel very lonely. I don't have many friends, I broke up with him now too (M_3).

It seems like I am all alone, nobody is there for me (F_8)

Broken relationships and diminished support were also reported by the participants in the following way as a result of unforgiveness:

I lost a good friend, that is the downside of unforgiveness (M_5)

He broke my trust and I broke the relationship with him (F_6)

There are problems in my relationship because of my unforgiveness (F_11)

Some participants also described fear of re-victimization as they do not forgive the offender. These were reflected in the following quotes:

I am not forgiving him so it is also possible that he may try to harm me again (M_8)

I don't want to forgive her, what she did was unforgivable. And because I don't forgive her, she is trying to defame me again (F_9)

Unforgiveness also led to feelings of guilt and negative emotions in some participants. Following are the representative quotes:

I remember everything that generates hate and anger in me (M_7)

Thinking of him makes me sad and frustrated (F_10)

Theme 2: benefits of unforgiveness

Apart from some disadvantages participants also described being unforgiving has many advantages. Increased happiness and satisfaction, increased adaptability, increased self-worth, and a sense of security were described by the participants as the benefits of unforgiveness.

Increased happiness and satisfaction reflected in the following quotes:

I feel good about not forgiving him (M_4)

I am not willing to forgive him and it gives me the satisfaction (M_11)

I will not forgive him for what he did and I am happy by not forgiving him (F_1)

Participants also described that their adaptability has been increased by experiencing unforgiveness. These were reflected in the following quotes:

I now have enough time for myself and that is the main benefit for me (M_17)

I am not forgiving him willingly and this unforgiveness helps me to work on myself (F_5)

Increased self-worth, and a sense of security were described by the participants as a result of unforgiveness in the following excerpts:

My self-worth increased after this incident I gave time to myself and I started being happy... (M_13)

After this incident, I can give more time to self-care.... (F_8)

Theme 3: lowering strategies of unforgiveness

Although participants described various costs and benefits associated with unforgiveness, they also described some possible strategies that may act as possible mechanisms to reduce

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their unforgiveness. Seeking forgiveness by the offender, apology by the offender, positive change in the offender, and considering ill-conditions of the offender were some of the mechanisms highlighted by participants to reduce their unforgiveness.

Seeking forgiveness by the offender as a possible mechanism to reduce their unforgiveness was reflected in the following quotes:

If he apologizes for his mistakes and accepts that whatever happened was his fault, then I will forgive him... (M_14)

If he apologizes and wants to settle down and forget the past, maybe I can forgive him... (F_10)

Positive change in the offender as a possible mechanism to reduce unforgiveness was reflected in the following descriptions of the participants:

I am not forgiving her this may motivate her to bring positive changes in herself (M_6)

If he became a normal person and takes care his family, I will try to forgive him (M_9)

If she brings positive changes in herself and stop doing those activities, there may be some possibilities that I will forgive her (F_6)

Participants also described that considering the ill conditions of the offender they may forgive the them. These were reflected in the following quotes:

If he is in the last moment of his life, I will forgive him for whatever he has done (M_2)

There may some such conditions like; if the offender is in the last moment of his life, then I will forgive him (F_4)

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to understand the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness. The study findings showed that unforgiveness is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Analysis of the interview content highlighted that it involves a variety of experiences and carries both positive and negative outcomes for its adherents. A variety of personal, situational, and relational factors lead to unforgiveness. Holding unforgiveness may be harmful in some instances but it may be adaptive and functional in certain other situations. Individuals also employ certain strategies to reduce negative outcomes linked with unforgiveness.

Three themes were generated that demonstrated the complex nature of unforgiveness. Costs of unforgiveness, benefits of unforgiveness, and lowering strategies of unforgiveness. Theme one denotes costs of unforgiveness. Participants described that loneliness, diminished support from the offender, fear of re-victimization, guilt, and negative emotions were some of the costs of unforgiveness. They experienced a variety of negative consequences of holding on to forgiveness. Some of these results have also been reported in previous studies (Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; Rapske et al., 2010; Worthington & Wade, 1999). They reported that holding on to forgiveness may lead to lowered mental and physical health of individuals.

Theme two demonstrates the benefits of unforgiveness. Increased happiness and satisfaction, increased adaptability, increased self-worth, and a sense of security were some of the benefits of unforgiveness reported by participants. Participants also described that being unforgiving can also increase their productivity and well-being by improving their self-worth, and reducing relationship strain. Holding on to forgiveness may also refrain them from further victimization. Some of these findings were similar to previous research

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findings. Previous research suggests that abolishing undesirable consequences for transgressions (e. g., anger, criticism, rejection, loneliness) through frequent forgiveness increases the likelihood of further offences and thus, holding forgiveness may reduce the occurrence of future revictimization (McNulty, 2011). The benefits of holding forgiveness may be explained in terms of Skinner's operant conditioning theory. Operant conditioning theory of Skinner emphasises that existing patterns of behaviour are less likely to be repeated only if they are followed by undesirable outcomes (Skinner, 1969). There are certain other studies that have reported similar results (Rapske et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Theme three revealed strategies used by the participants to reduce their unforgiving behaviours. Participants reported that seeking forgiveness by the offender, apology by the offender, positive change in the offender, and considering ill-conditions of the offender were some of the mechanisms to reduce their unforgiveness. There are only two studies that have shown similar findings (Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Therefore, the present study has provided some important insights into the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness. The study explained the costs and benefits associated with unforgiveness and strategies used by the participants to reduce their unforgiveness. Although, some of the study findings mirrored in previous research, the present study is useful in understanding the nature and dynamics of unforgiveness.

Limitations and future directions

Although the present study has certain strengths, there are also some limitations of the study. The use of the only qualitative method and the small sample size are the first two limitations. Most of the participants were Hindus, which may have limited the inclusion of diverse unforgiveness experiences of individuals of other religions. There may be gender difference in unforgiveness which has also not been investigated in the present study. Future studies may address these research gaps.

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Conflict of Interest

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