

Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness among Young Adults

Katrina Chettri^{1*}, D.P Deepthi²

ABSTRACT

Forgiveness, a crucial element in nurturing positive social relationships and ensuring mental well-being, has been the subject of extensive research. This study aimed to investigate potential gender disparities in Emotional and Decisional Forgiveness among men and women. The sample size included 66 participants, comprising 30 males and 36 females. The study assessed Emotional and Decisional Forgiveness using a self-report questionnaire and applied the Mann-Whitney U test to find the gender difference. The results unveiled a noteworthy gender-based difference in Emotional Forgiveness, with women reporting lower levels than men. However, there was no significant difference in Decisional Forgiveness. The research highlights the crucial significance of recognizing gender differences when devising forgiveness interventions and underscores the need for gender-specific approaches.

Keywords: *Forgiveness, Emotional Forgiveness, Decisional Forgiveness, Gender*

The concept of forgiveness has been studied and discussed extensively in various fields, including psychology, philosophy, and religion. Despite this attention, forgiveness remains a complex and multifaceted topic that generates interest and debate. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between an individual and their transgressor, several critical questions need to be explored.

To begin, it is crucial to establish a clear definition of forgiveness. While numerous interpretations of forgiveness exist, it can generally be defined as relinquishing anger, resentment, or vengeance towards a person or group who has inflicted harm. However, it is equally important to recognize what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness does not minimize or belittle the severity of the wrongdoing committed against an individual. Furthermore, forgiveness does not imply forgetting, justifying, or excusing transgressions. Although forgiving someone may assist in repairing a strained relationship, it does not mandate an individual to reconcile or exonerate the transgressor of legal responsibility.

Forgiveness is connected to physical and mental health, making it a crucial element in healthcare. With regard to its psychological benefits, research has shown that forgiveness is

¹Student, Dept. of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru

*Corresponding Author

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associated with a reduction in negative emotions. For instance, Coyle and Enright (1997) found that a forgiveness intervention decreased anxiety, rage, and grief among post-abortion men. Similarly, Freedman and Enright (1996) reported that the anxiety and sadness levels of incest survivors were reduced after participating in a forgiveness intervention. Furthermore, Lin et al. (2004) discovered that forgiveness treatment reduced rage, anxiety, and despair among drug-dependent patients in their study. Emotionally abused women demonstrated more significant improvement in depression, trait anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms in the forgiveness therapy group than in alternative therapy groups (which included anger validation with mourning, assertiveness strategies, and interpersonal skills) (Reed & Enright, 2006). Furthermore, forgiveness was found to be a mediator of the link between interpersonal aggression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by Orcutt et al. (2005).

Physiological benefits of forgiveness have also been demonstrated, with forgiveness being associated with fewer physiological stress reactions and better health outcomes compared to being unforgiving, which can increase skin conductance, heart rate, and blood pressure. Carson et al. (2005) found that emotions positively correlate with forgiveness and persistent low back pain. Specifically, individuals with chronic low back pain reported lower levels of sensory pain when they were more forgiving. They reported that anger mediated the association between forgiveness and sensory pain. Forgiveness on a social level increases the possibility of repairing the relationship as it fosters prosocial emotions in both the victim and the transgressor (McCullough & Michael, 2000).

This leads to two types of forgiveness: Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness. Decisional Forgiveness is the intention to behave more benevolently towards the transgressor to the degree that it is safe to do so (DiBlasio, 1998; Exline et al., 2003). It can include eliminating negative behavior in non-continuous relationships (McCullough et al., 2003) and restoring positive behavior in continuing close connections (Finkel et al., 2002). Whereas Decisional Forgiveness has a behavioral purpose, Emotional Forgiveness entails effective transformation. In Emotional Forgiveness, the forgiver's negative, unforgiving emotions are replaced with positive, other-oriented emotions such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love toward the offender (Exline et al., 2003). Several additional models of forgiveness also emphasize the importance of emotion. For instance, Fitzgibbons (1986) proposed that a client's decision to forgive is followed by an emotional act of forgiveness or when the offender deserves a pardon. Additionally, Enright (2004) and the Human Development Study Group suggested that the process of forgiveness includes a cognitive decision to forgive the offender and an emotional component, which is the reduction of negative affect and the increase of positive affect. Theoretically, forgiving on a decisional level and forgiving on an emotional level are two distinct but linked processes that are easy to discern in one's own experience.

The present study examines the difference between Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness among young adults in males and females. Not many research studies have explored this topic, so the present study was done to add a little more information regarding this topic and the desire to understand which gender has which type of forgiveness. Forgiveness can affect our social life as holding onto grudges can make conflicts in our relationship with others. This study aims to demonstrate how people react after a fight or conflict and what type of forgiveness they use to solve the issue. Hence, the current study is exploring the gender difference in Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are some studies done on the topic to further understand forgiveness.

Lichtenfeld et al., (2015) conducted a study on the topic *Forgive and Forget Differences between Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness*. The researchers investigated the differences between Emotional and Decisional Forgiveness or forgetting. The study provided the first concrete evidence that Decisional Forgiveness strongly affects subsequent accidental forgetfulness. The researchers used Eprime software, version 2.0, to experiment (Psychology Software Tools, Inc., Pittsburgh, PA). The participants were instructed to follow the directions on the computer screen. At the beginning of the experiment, participants were given a description and image of one of two scenarios (counterbalanced across participants). After reading the scenario, participants were informed that they would see a number of the person's traits. In the findings, it was shown that, in comparison to both Decisional Forgiveness and no forgiveness, Emotional Forgiveness causes much higher levels of forgetting regarding offense-relevant attributes. This supported the hypothesis that only those who have emotionally forgiven a transgression, as opposed to those who have simply resolved to forgive, then forget the offense-related characteristics attributed to the transgressor.

Wu et al. (2020) conducted a study on the topic *Gratitude and Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships: Roles of Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness*. They found that gratitude is the underlying factor for relationship satisfaction. However, little is known about the mechanism behind this connection. From a stress and coping perspective, the current study explored the functions of Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness to investigate this process further. Online questionnaires were distributed to Chinese college students. The data gathered from a sample of 103 participants in dating relationships were examined using structural equation modeling. The results revealed two indirect paths by which gratitude was linked to relationship satisfaction: one through Emotional Forgiveness and the other through Decisional Forgiveness followed by Emotional Forgiveness, with Decisional Forgiveness influencing Emotional Forgiveness. These results suggest that gratitude, Decisional Forgiveness, and Emotional Forgiveness between partners could be potential intervention points for treating emotional injuries and facets of focus for educational programs to enhance relationship satisfaction.

Rao et al. (2022) conducted a study on the topic *Brain Structures Associated with Individual Differences in Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness*. The researchers aimed at understanding the individual differences in brain structures associated with Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness. The Decisional Forgiveness Scale (DFS) and Emotional Forgiveness Scale (EFS) were completed by the 85 men and 210 women who participated in this voxel-based morphometry study, along with an anatomical magnetic resonance imaging scan. A cluster that includes regions of the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) showed a correlation between higher DFS scores and larger gray matter volumes. Higher EFS scores were associated with greater gray matter volumes in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and superior frontal gyrus (SFG), but less gray matter in the left inferior parietal lobule (IPL) cluster. The cross-validation test confirmed the correlations between the identified regions and DFS and EFS scores. Furthermore, the gray matter volumes of OFC, mPFC, and SFG partially moderated the connection between DFS and EFS. These findings provide direct neuroanatomical evidence for a link between decisional and affective forgiveness and brain regions involved in cognitive control, theory of mind, and moral judgment.

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Lichtenfeld et al. (2019) conducted a study on the topic *Influence of Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness on Attribution*. The researchers investigated the antecedents of forgiveness and empirical studies that propose attributions influence forgiveness. The large-scale study (n = 969) attempted to provide the first empirical evidence that Emotional Forgiveness has a major influence on later attributions. Individuals who have emotionally forgiven a transgression, in particular, hold the transgressor less liable for the offense than those in Decisional Forgiveness and control conditions. Furthermore, the findings conceptually replicate earlier research by revealing that emotional but not Decisional Forgiveness affects cognition, suggesting that Emotional and Decisional Forgiveness should be viewed as separate aspects of the forgiveness process. The study examined the implications of these findings for clinical and health psychology.

Cook et al. (2022) conducted a study on the topic *Differential Effects of Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness on Distress and Well-Being: A Three-Wave Study of Indonesian Adults*. It explored the independent contributions of Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness to reducing different forms of distress and improving multidimensional well-being. The study investigated the correlations of decisional and Emotional Forgiveness with three indices of distress and ten components of well-being in this three-wave (T1: December 2020; T2: January 2021; T3: February 2021) prospective study of mostly young Indonesian people (n = 595). The primary analysis involved using the outcome-wide analytic template for longitudinal designs to estimate two sets of linear regression models (one set for Decisional Forgiveness and one for Emotional Forgiveness), in which the outcomes were regressed on each interpersonal forgiveness process (one outcome at a time). Decisional Forgiveness measured at T2 was associated with an increase in seven aspects of well-being measured approximately one month later at T3, after controlling for a variety of covariates (including prior values of Decisional Forgiveness, Emotional Forgiveness, and all 13 outcomes) assessed at T1. These covariates included prior values of life satisfaction, physical health, a sense of purpose, promoting good, delayed gratification, being content with relationships, and satisfying relationships.

On the other hand, Emotional Forgiveness, as measured at T2, was linked to an increase in a specific aspect of well-being as measured at T3 (i.e., satisfying relationships). No relationships between decisional or Emotional Forgiveness measured at T2 and any later distress indicators measured at T3 were found. Findings suggest that Decisional Forgiveness following a transgression may have stronger short-term advantages for well-being than Emotional Forgiveness, at least within a collectivistic cultural context like Indonesia. The study highlights implications for future research and treatment strategies.

Mroz et al. (2020) conducted a study on the topic *Decision to Forgive Scale and Emotional Forgiveness Scale in a Polish Sample*. The researchers utilized the Decision to Forgive Scale (DTFS) and Emotional Forgiveness Scale (EFS) in a Polish sample to examine the concept of Emotional and Decisional Forgiveness as proposed by Worthington et al. (2007) in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. Both scales are designed to measure episodic forgiveness, which involves pardoning a single violation. Emotional Forgiveness refers to a change of heart, while Decisional Forgiveness is a declaration of forgiveness.

This literature review was conducted to gain more insight into the research topic and its impact on an individual's physiological aspects. It also aimed to comprehend the brain structure responsible for Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness. The information gathered through this literature review has benefited the current research study.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the study

- To assess the level of Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness among young adults.
- To find the gender difference in Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness among young adults.

Hypothesis

H₁: There is a significant gender difference in Emotional Forgiveness among young adults.

H₂: There is a significant gender difference in Decisional Forgiveness among young adults.

Research Design

The present study used a correlational research design.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The present study employed a convenience sampling method to collect data from a sample of 66 young adults, consisting of 30 males and 36 females. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting individuals who are readily available or easily accessible. This method is often utilized in pilot testing to gather preliminary data. The use of convenience sampling in this study facilitated the recruitment of participants from the nearest population, making it a practical and cost-effective approach.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion: This study is exclusively open to individuals who are between the ages of 18 and 25 and who met the required qualifications. Specifically, only college students who satisfied these criteria were eligible to participate in this research.

Exclusion: Individuals with Psychological Disorders

Tools

The Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness Scale were the tools used in the present study to measure decisional and Emotional Forgiveness, respectively. Each scale consists of eight questions, resulting in 16 measures for both scales. The scale was developed by Worthington, Hook, Utsey, Williams, & Neil, (2007) to assess different aspects of forgiveness. It has been determined that the DFS and EFS both have good internal consistency, which is a measurement of how closely the items on the scales are related to one another. The EFS has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, suggesting very strong reliability, compared to the DFS's 0.84, which indicates good dependability.

It has been determined that the DFS and EFS both have strong construct validity, which is a measurement of how well the scales capture what they are meant to capture. Studies have discovered a positive correlation between the DFS and EFS scores and results from other forgiveness tests, indicating that these tests are measuring forgiveness as a construct.

Procedure

The current study's primary objective was to obtain valuable insights on a particular topic. To achieve this objective, a group of 66 undergraduate and postgraduate students was provided with a questionnaire in the form of Google Forms. Prior to administering the questionnaire, informed consent was obtained from all participants as per the ethical guidelines. Additionally, the participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study, ensuring that they were aware that the collected data would be used solely for

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educational purposes and that their responses would remain confidential. This approach not only adhered to ethical principles but also ensured that the participants felt comfortable and informed, which is crucial in any research study.

RESULTS

Table 1: Gender Differences of Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness

Variable	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	Mann Whitney U	Z	Sig
Emotional Forgiveness	M	30	41.72	1251.50	293.5	3.18	.001
	F	36	26.65	959.50			
Decisional Forgiveness	M	30	32.65	979.50	514.5	.330	.742
	F	36	34.21	1231.50			

The total number of participants was 66 young adults, of whom 30 were males and 36 were females. In Emotional Forgiveness, the mean rank in males is 41.72, and in females, it is 26.65. In the sum of rank the males is 1251.50, and in females it is 959.50. Z value is 3.18. In the Mann-Whitney U value is 293.5, $p < 0.001$ which indicates that there is a significant difference between Emotional Forgiveness in males and females. Compared to the female participant, the male participant is showing a higher level of Emotional Forgiveness.

Whereas, in Decisional Forgiveness, the mean rank of males is 32.65, and that of females is 34.21. The sum of ranks in males is 979.50, and in females is 1231.50. Mann-Whitney U value is 514.5, $p > 0.001$ in Decisional Forgiveness. The Z value is 3.18. There is no significant difference between Decisional Forgiveness in males and females.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the study indicate a significant gender difference in Emotional Forgiveness. The mean rank for males was found to be significantly higher than that of females, indicating that men tend to outperform women in terms of Emotional Forgiveness and willingness to move past unforgiveness. Kaleta and Mroz (2021) found in their research that men showed a higher level of general forgiveness and a greater willingness to overcome unforgiveness than women. The underlying reasons for this gender difference could be multifaceted, including the ability of males to forget the harm inflicted on them or their perception that holding onto a grudge is not important enough to break relationships or negatively impact social relationships.

On the other hand, the results related to Decisional Forgiveness imply no significant difference in Decisional Forgiveness between genders. In a study on forgiveness in romantic relationships by Philip and Sharma (2021), it was found that there was no significant difference in forgiveness between genders. However, this research did not specifically focus on Decisional Forgiveness. One cannot fully say how and what makes people forgive the way they want to but from what it can be assumed in this research both males and females appear to want to forgive to maintain amicable relationships while being reluctant to entirely forget the harm inflicted on them. Consequently, the relationship may remain intact, but the closeness and bond that existed before the harm may not be the same quality. Both parties may be content with maintaining the relationship as it is.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate the gender differences in Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness among young adults. The study's findings reveal that males tend to exhibit higher levels of Emotional Forgiveness than females, while no significant difference was observed in Decisional Forgiveness. The potential reasons for this gender difference in forgiveness could be attributed to various factors, such as cultural and ethnic backgrounds, upbringing, and personal experiences. However, due to the quantitative nature of this study, these factors could not be explored in depth. Therefore, future research, especially qualitative studies, is needed to better understand the gender differences in forgiveness among young adults.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study found that males have higher scores in Emotional Forgiveness than females. This requires further exploration. Future studies could investigate the possible reasons behind this trend. Finally, it is worth noting that there are relatively few studies on the topic of gender variations in forgiveness, making this challenging to contextualize and compare findings. Thus, further research is crucial to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the topic and explore the potential interactions between forgiveness and other variables.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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