

Self-Compassion, Forgiveness and Flourishing Among Older Adults

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to analyse differences in self-compassion, forgiveness, and flourishing among three age groups of older adults, as well as the relationship between them. A sample of 100 older adults categorized into young-old (n = 49), middle-old (n = 37), and oldest-old (n = 14) were selected for the study through purposive sampling. A quantitative research design was employed utilizing Self-Compassion Scale, Heartland Forgiveness Scale and Flourishing Scale. Kruskal-wallis test was used to determine significant difference in self-compassion, forgiveness, and flourishing among older adults based on age and spearman correlation was used to determine relationship among three variables. Mann-Whitney U test was used for post hoc pairwise comparison. The findings revealed that self-compassion has significant differences across these groups while forgiveness and flourishing doesn't have statistically significant differences. And also, there is a moderate positive relationship between the variables indicating that individuals with higher self-compassion exhibited flourishing and a stronger capacity for forgiveness. The findings have implications for mental health interventions, emphasizing the need for age-specific approaches to enhance well-being and promote positive aging.

Keywords: *Self-compassion, Flourishing, Forgiveness, Older adults*

As the global population is aging rapidly, it is expected to reach the number of people above the age of 60 to 2.1 billion by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2021). This demographic shift can contribute to significant challenges as aging is often accompanied by physical, emotional, and social changes that can affect individuals' well-being. In India, this trend is especially significant. By 2050, the old age population is considered to rise approximately from 138 million in 2021 to 319 million, which may comprise nearly 20% of India's total population (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2021). As the country's aging index keeps rising, it is crucial to explore ways for improving the psychological well-being of older adults and promoting successful aging. Significant transitions such as physical decline, bereavement, social withdrawal, and existential concerns regarding purpose and death are often accompanied with aging and can challenge mental health (Wong, 2000). These factors may lead to

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increased vulnerability to depression, loneliness, and lower quality of life. Although, deficit-focused approach of aging has been replaced with a perspective that emphasizes strengths, growth, and resilience as positive psychology has been developed recently (Seligman, 2011; Ryff, 2014).

Self-Compassion can be explained as how one relates themselves in the face of inadequacy or suffering (Neff,2003). An individual can be said to be self-compassionate when the person can accept their discomfort or suffering and acts in a nurturing way toward themselves. Neff organized self-compassion into three domains; Self kindness versus Self-Judgment, Common Humanity Versus Isolation, Mindfulness Versus Over identification. The first domain is how an individual respond to suffering emotionally, whether it is with warmth or harsh self-criticism; the second is how it is understood cognitively and emphasizes recognizing suffering as part of shared human experience; and the last is how one attends to their suffering, whether mindfully or over identified(Neff,2003).For older adults, self-compassion may be particularly important, as it helps them cope with the various physical, emotional, and social challenges that arise with aging. Older adults who practice self-compassion experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, and greater life satisfaction and well-being (Phillips & Ferguson, 2013). Older adults who scored higher on self-compassion reported better affect regulation and greater life satisfaction, suggesting that self-compassion may help individuals process life's difficulties with equanimity (Allen et al., 2012). High levels of self-compassion among old age have shown better coping with chronic illness and reduced psychological distress (Brown et al.,2019). It has been demonstrated that self-compassion among older women was positively correlated with health-promoting behaviours and emotional well-being (Homan & Sirois ,2017). In the Indian context, where aging often involves navigating changing intergenerational dynamics and the loss of active social roles, self-compassion may provide a culturally congruent form of inner support. However, Indian cultural norms, which emphasize duty, modesty, and self-sacrifice, may also complicate the internalization of self-compassion as it is traditionally framed (Singh & Misra, 2020). More culturally adapted studies are needed to investigate how Indian elders interpret and practice self-compassion within their socio-spiritual worldview.

Forgiveness can be described as liberating avoidant or antagonistic attachment towards the source that transgressed a person. And when came to forgiveness the aim may be self or another person or a situation that is out of control (Thompson et al.,2005). According to McCullough and Colleagues forgiveness can be explained in prosocial terms, that is, there will be positive attitude toward the transgressing person and also less intention to avoid or harm that person. Self-forgiveness can be defined as “a process of releasing resentment toward oneself for a perceived transgression or wrongdoing” (DeShea & Wahkinney, 2003). Forgiving to another is “the process of reducing negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviours toward an offender and replacing them with positive thoughts, emotions, and behaviours such as compassion, empathy, or love” (Worthington,2006). Forgiving a situation means an Individual modify a transgressed situation in a neutral or positive way. Other researchers founded that longevity and satisfaction within relationship are also associated with forgiving (Toussaint et.al,2012; Braithwaite et.al,2011). When comes to Older adults, the tendency to forgive will be more as an individual ages and also this becomes more dispositional. This shows that there may be differences in forgiveness across life span (Steiner, Allemand, & McCullough, 2012). Forgiveness can be particularly therapeutic during the life review process that often characterizes older adulthood (Butler, 1963). This period of reflection may bring to the surface past transgressions, regrets, or

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unresolved relational tensions. Forgiveness, especially, self-forgiveness can have a great role in emotional resolution and promote psychological healing (Toussaint et al., 2015). Older adults who practiced forgiveness had lower levels of anger and physical symptoms, and higher levels of purpose in life and social connectedness (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006). Forgiveness becomes more central, as people seek closure and emotional peace, with advancing age (Subkoviak et al., 1995). Older adults who were more forgiving experienced lower blood pressure and reduced symptoms of chronic illness, indicating somatic benefits (Toussaint et al., 2001). Forgiveness interventions effectively boosted forgiveness among older adults and are associated with reduced depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and anger (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018). In collectivist cultures like India, where relationships and interdependence are integral, forgiveness may be both a moral and spiritual imperative. Forgiveness among Indian elders was positively linked with spiritual well-being and peace of mind, suggesting culturally embedded motivations for forgiving (Ramachandran & Varghese, 2017).

Flourishing refers to a person's optimal functioning in various domains of life such as emotional, social and psychological well-being. It also includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Flourishing can be said as a state of thriving where individuals experience a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Flourishing among older adults can be characterized as the ability to find purpose despite physical decline, holding relationships, and engage in life with optimism and gratitude (Toner et al., 2013). Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of psychological well-being, which includes dimensions such as autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth, is closely related with the concept of flourishing. personal strengths such as optimism, gratitude, and self-compassion can influence flourishing. older adults with higher self-compassion and forgiveness have been reported significantly greater flourishing (Yang & Kim, 2016). Older adults who engaged in reflective practices such as mindfulness and gratitude journaling exhibited higher levels of flourishing over time (Grossman et al., 2019). Older adults with a sense of purpose exhibited improved cognitive functioning, reduced mortality risk, and higher levels of psychological well-being (Hill & Turiano, 2014). Strong social support, network and a sense of gratitude significantly contribute to the well-being and life satisfaction among the elderly (Kim & Park, 2022). The majority of research on flourishing has been conducted in high-income countries, with limited exploration in South Asian settings. In India, Factors such as spiritual growth, family peace, and acceptance of life's impermanence are considered as aspects of flourishing (Rao, 2018). Flourishing among older adults in urban India was found to be associated with social engagement, religious practices, and maintaining a sense of contribution to family or community life (Kiran & Khanna, 2019).

Majority of research on these variables has focused on younger or middle-aged Western populations, and there is only limited exploration has been done regarding their relevance in non-Western, collectivist countries like India, especially among older adults. There is a need to better understand how these psychological variables contribute in later life, especially in the Indian sociocultural context, as the population ages rapidly and interest in strengths-based models of positive aging has been increasing. Previous research has shown the importance of these constructs, but there exists a lack of data specifically related to older adults in India, and it is also relatively unexplored how these psychological traits differ across age-related subgroups among older adults. The present study aims to analyse differences in self-compassion, forgiveness, and flourishing among three age groups of older adults. Consistent with classifications used by the National Institute on Aging (He et al.,

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2016), World Health Organization research reports (WHO, 2015), and widely adopted in gerontological literature (Quadagno, 2014), the present study categorizes older adults into; young-old (65–74 years), middle-old (75–84 years), and oldest-old (85 years and above). The study also aims to determine relationship between those variables among older adults. The current research contributes to the growing body of literature on positive aging and aims to provide psychosocial interventions that enhance quality of life for India's aging population.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To examine the levels of self-compassion, forgiveness, and flourishing among older adults based on age.
- To examine the relationship between self-compassion, forgiveness, and flourishing among older adults.

Hypotheses

- H01: There is no significant difference in Flourishing among older adults based on age.
- H02: There is no significant difference in Forgiveness among older adults based on age.
- H03: There is no significant difference in Self-compassion among older adults based on age.
- H04: There is no significant relationship between self-compassion, forgiveness and flourishing among older adults

Sample

The sample comprised of 100 older adults aged 65 and above. Purposive sampling method was used to select participants. Individuals diagnosed with severe mental health disorders are excluded from the current study.

Instruments used

1. **Self-Compassion Scale (SCS):** It is a self-administered questionnaire developed by Neff K.D in 2003 which measures self-compassion, focusing on how individuals relate to themselves in times of difficulty or suffering. The scale consists of 26 items, under six subscales; Self-Kindness (5, 12, 19, 23, 26,), Self-Judgment (reverse scored: 1, 8, 11, 16, 21,) Common Humanity (3, 7, 10, 15,) Isolation (reverse scored: 4, 13, 18, 25), Mindfulness (9, 14, 17, 22,) and Over-Identification (reverse scored: 2, 6, 20, 24). The scale's Cronbach's alpha is 0.92 for the overall scale and subscale reliabilities ranges between 0.77 and 0.81.
2. **The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS):** which measures dispositional forgiveness of self, others and situation was developed by Thompson et al. (2005). It is an 18 item self-report questionnaire which consists of three subscales; forgiveness of self (1-6), forgiveness of others (7-12) and forgiveness of situations (13-18). The scale demonstrates strong reliability with, high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70).
3. **The Flourishing Scale (FS):** It is a self-report measure developed by Diener et al. (2010), which assess psychological well-being and success across key domains such as meaning, relationships, self-esteem, and competence. It consists of 8 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), provides a

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total score ranging from 8 to 56, with higher scores indicating greater flourishing. The scale's Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranges from 0.87 to 0.93.

Procedure

The participants selected for the study included 100 older adults aged above 65. They were categorized into three subgroups as young old (65-74), middle old (75-84) and oldest old (85 & above). The required data were collected from different districts of Kerala. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was taken. The data was administered using google forms, ensuring anonymity and comfort. The participants were assured that the information will be kept confidential and only be used for research purpose. The data was analysed using SPSS exploring differences and relationships between given variables.

RESULTS

Table 1. Mean rank, Kruskal-wallis chi-square of Flourishing, Forgiveness and Self-compassion among Older adults

Variable	Young(n=49) Mean Rank	Middle(n=37)	Oldest(n=14)	$H\chi^2$	Df	Sig
Flourishing	47.42	50.38	61.61	2.611	2	0.271
Forgiveness	43.78	54.89	62.43	5.865	2	0.053
Self-compassion	48.10	46.97	68.21	6.118	2	0.047

Table 1 indicates the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test which examines the significant differences in flourishing, forgiveness, and self-compassion among young old (n = 49), middle old (n = 37), and oldest old (n = 14). For flourishing, the oldest participants had the highest mean rank (M = 61.61), followed by middle-old (M= 50.38) and young old (M = 47.42). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($H\chi^2= 2.611$, $p = 0.271$). Similarly, for forgiveness the oldest old had the highest mean rank (M = 62.43), followed by middle old (M = 54.89) and young old (M = 43.78). The difference in Forgiveness scores among the three age groups was close to but did not reach the conventional threshold for statistical significance ($H\chi^2 = 5.865$, $p = 0.053$). Finally, for self-compassion the mean rank for young old, middle old and oldest old were 48.10,46.97 and 68.21 respectively. And a significant difference was observed among the older adults based on age ($H\chi^2 = 6.118$, $p = 0.047$) with the oldest participants reporting the highest mean rank.

Table2.Post-hoc pairwise comparison using Mann- Whitney U test

Group	U	p	Bonferroni corrected sig.
Young old-Middle old	876.5	0.793	2.379
Young old-Oldest old	195.5	0.015	0.045
Middle old-Oldest old	158.5	0.034	0.102

Note: Significant if the p -value $<0.05/3$, i.e.,0.017, according to Bonferroni correction (n=3)

Table 2 shows the results of Post hoc pairwise comparisons using the Mann-Whitney U test which examines the differences in self-compassion between the three age groups: young-old, middle-old, and oldest-old. There is a significant difference between young-old and oldest-old participants ($U = 195.5$, $p = .015$, Bonferroni-corrected $p = .045$), indicating that self-compassion was significantly higher among the Oldest--old. However, this difference did not remain significant after applying the Bonferroni correction. There is no significant

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difference between young-old and middle-old ($p = .793$) and middle-old and oldest-old ($p = .034$) after Bonferroni correction.

Table 3. Correlation matrix for flourishing, forgiveness and self-compassion

Variable	1	2	3
Flourishing	1	-	-
Forgiveness	.430**	1	-
Self-compassion	.274**	.378**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the Spearman's correlation matrix for variables under the study; Flourishing, Forgiveness, and Self-Compassion. The correlation coefficients provide the strength and direction of relationships between these variables. Flourishing demonstrated a significant positive correlation with Forgiveness ($\rho = .430$, $p < .01$) and Self-Compassion ($\rho = .274$, $p < .01$). Forgiveness was positively correlated with Self-Compassion ($\rho = .378$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher levels of Flourishing was found to have a significant positive correlation with forgiveness ($r = .430$, $p < .01$) and self-compassion ($r = .274$, $p < .01$). Similarly, forgiveness and self-compassion had a significant positive correlation ($r = .378$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of forgiveness are associated with greater self-compassion.

DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to investigate differences in flourishing, forgiveness, and self-compassion among older adults across three age groups. The findings revealed that there are no significant differences in flourishing among older adults based on age, which indicates that psychological and social factors may influence flourishing rather than by age itself. Previous research and theories highlights that in order to foster wellbeing in old age, social engagement, purpose, emotional regulation, and meaningful relationships may have greater roles (Keyes, 2002; Ryff, 1989, 2014; Carstensen, 1999; Jeste et al., 2013).

The findings indicate that forgiveness is more likely to increase with age, though the differences were not statistically significant. Older adults are more forgiving than younger individuals (Allemand & Hill, 2016). Higher forgiveness scores can be explained as the older adults often focus on maintaining social harmony and letting go of past conflicts (Knight & Robinson, 2019). The lack of statistical significance indicates that other factors such as personality traits, culture, and life circumstances may also influence forgiveness. Religiosity and spirituality have been found to significantly contribute to forgiveness which are more prevalent in later life (Krause & Ellison, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001).

The findings exhibit that self-compassion has significant differences across age groups. Post hoc results indicate that self-compassion is likely to increase with age, especially among the oldest-old. The significant difference between the young-old and oldest-old is consistent with prior research that self-compassion increases with age as a result of greater emotional regulation, self-acceptance, and wisdom (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Homan, 2016). Self-compassion tends to increase with age due to accumulated life experiences, enhanced emotional regulation, and a shift in priorities toward well-being and self-acceptance. One possible explanation for the observed trend is that older adults, particularly those in the oldest-old category, may have developed coping mechanisms that emphasize self-acceptance and forgiveness. Additionally, Erikson's psychosocial theory (1959) posits that older adults

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engage in reflection and integration, leading to higher levels of self-acceptance, which may explain why the oldest-old group scored the highest. Contrary findings also exist that older adults are more vulnerable to negative self-perceptions and weaker emotional coping skills (Allen et al., 2012; Phillips & Ferguson, 2013). Older adults may diminish their ability to exhibit self-kindness and self-reassurance as they age, as a result of physical health issues, lack of social support, and increased dependence over others (Neff & Germer, 2013). While these studies do not explicitly compare self-compassion across the young-old, middle-old, and oldest-old categories, they collectively suggest that self-compassion remains a significant factor in promoting well-being throughout older adulthood. These findings highlight the importance of fostering self-compassion, particularly among the young-old and middle-old populations, to enhance psychological well-being during aging.

Results suggest that forgiveness and self-compassion both play a role in flourishing among older adults, with forgiveness showing a stronger association. The positive correlation between flourishing and forgiveness is consistent with prior research suggesting that forgiveness contributes to overall psychological well-being by fostering positive emotions, reducing resentment, and improving interpersonal relationships (Toussaint et al., 2012). Forgiveness in older adults may be particularly significant as it facilitates emotional healing and enhances life satisfaction (Krause & Ellison, 2003). The positive correlation between self-compassion and flourishing aligns with findings by Neff and Pommier (2013), who highlight that self-compassion fosters emotional resilience, reducing distress and promoting well-being. However, the weaker correlation suggests that while self-compassion is beneficial, it may not be the primary force of flourishing compared to forgiveness. The moderate correlation between self-compassion and forgiveness supports previous studies showing that self-compassion promotes emotional regulation, reduces harsh self-judgment, and makes it easier to extend compassion to others (Neff, 2003; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Understanding how self-compassion, flourishing, and forgiveness differ among older adults can help in developing targeted interventions that improve overall well-being. Compassion-based practices, such as mindfulness exercises and self-kindness techniques, have greater roles in fostering emotional well-being (Germer & Neff, 2013). Cultural sensitive interventions can be designed by understanding how these constructs manifest in different cultural contexts. Mental health professionals and caregivers can enhance life satisfaction among older adults by creating supportive environments which promote self-forgiveness and positive psychological growth. Therapists can apply these findings to develop strategies that cultivate self-compassion and forgiveness. Educating families and caregivers about the role of forgiveness and self-compassion can lead to more empathetic caregiving, improving the quality of life for older adults. The current study paves the way for future studies to explore longitudinal shifts in these constructs, giving us a deeper understanding of how older adults emotionally and psychologically adapt in later life.

Limitations of the Study

The small and unequal sample size, particularly the underrepresentation of the oldest old group, may affect the generalizability of the findings. The cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of participant's psychological states, limiting the ability to observe changes over time. The findings may be culture-specific, limiting their applicability to diverse populations.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings highlight the importance of forgiveness and self-compassion in promoting well-being during aging. While flourishing remains stable, the observed trends suggest that older adults develop greater forgiveness and lower self-compassion over time, likely due to emotional regulation, shifting priorities, and accumulated life experiences. These results emphasize the need to promote self-compassion and forgiveness interventions for older adults, to foster flourishing in later life.

Future research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal or experimental designs would provide deeper insights into these relationships and their impact on aging well-being. Random sampling of population can yield a better result. Intervention-based studies could assess the effectiveness of programs designed to enhance these traits. Examining the connection between these psychological constructs and physical health outcomes, such as stress-related illnesses or cardiovascular well-being, could provide holistic approach regarding aging. Exploring the influence of spirituality, social relationships, and family dynamics may help identify key factors that enhance emotional adaptation in later life. Future studies could also consider gender differences and other socio-demographic factors which might contribute to more personalized approaches to mental health support for older adults.

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Conflict of Interest

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