

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

Aditi Nigam^{1*}, Dr. Chhaya Gupta²

ABSTRACT

Healthy relationships, emotional well-being and social cohesion are supported by the psychological traits of prosocial behaviour and forgiveness. This study explored prosocial behaviour and forgiveness and their impact on various adult age groups. A mixed-method approach was employed and 75 adult participants from India, with 25 participants from each age group: young adults (18 to 40), middle-aged adults (41 to 60) and older adults (61 to 80) were assessed. The Prosociality scale for adults (PSA) was used to quantify prosocial behaviour and the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) was used for measuring forgiveness. The participants were also asked to answer open-ended questions about their experiences with helping and forgiveness. Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant and positive correlation between forgiveness and prosocial behaviour with prosocial behaviour predicting forgiveness and accounting for 16% of the variance. There were no notable differences in the three age groups and age failed to significantly predict either variable, indicating that the given qualities remain constant in adulthood. Thematic analysis of responses from 10 participants in each age group revealed developmental differences in motivation, emotional outcomes, types of helping and attitude towards forgiveness. It was observed that emotional reactions and personal distress were the main factors that motivated young adults to engage in prosocial behaviour. Middle-aged participants tended to frame their actions in terms of duty and the maintenance of social relationships whereas older aged participants tended to frame their actions in terms of love, religion and achieving a state of inner peace. The study found that while forgiveness and prosocial behaviour were generally similar across the three age groups, there were some different dynamics at play.

Keywords: *Prosocial Behaviour, Helping, Forgiveness, Age Groups, Mixed-Method Research, Lived Experiences, Thematic Analysis*

Human beings, as a species, are inherently social, and cannot truly exist without social relationships. We connect with people through various means such as life experiences, feelings of empathy, sharing and other forms of social interaction that help strengthen bonds within families and society. The development of prosocial values and forgiveness is significant not only for our own well-being but also for broader society in which we live. Many models and theories in psychology emphasize the importance of

¹Student, M.A. Clinical Psychology, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, Uttar Pradesh, India.

²Assistant Professor, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, Uttar Pradesh, India.

*Corresponding Author

Received: March 07, 2026; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

human relationships. For instance, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, love, belongingness, and intimate relationships are fundamental human needs to our psychological development and wellbeing. Furthermore, in this fast-paced, highly competitive and increasingly stressful society, where issues such as violence and psychological strains are commonplace, acts of helping and forgiveness are vital for our psychological well-being and social relationships. Moreover, international institutions have also highlighted this importance. The World Health Organization released a report in 2022 on mental health which discussed social relationships in respect of mental health. In it, WHO stated that good social relationships and a network of people to turn to and support us help us to have good mental health throughout our lifespan. The American Psychological Association conducted a survey in 2023 and found that teaching students about empathy and forgiveness reduces a host of other social and psychological problems arising from interpersonal conflict and helps individuals manage their feelings.

Prosocial behaviour is defined as voluntary social actions which are performed by an individual with the intention of increasing the well-being of other individuals. Such actions range from helping and sharing to cooperation and social support behaviour. Forgiveness is defined as the process of letting go of feelings of anger, resentment, and wish for retribution after being offended. Although the two concepts are not similar, they are also closely related. Batson's Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis suggested that people help others because they feel empathetic towards their condition. When people forgive, they tend to decrease hostility and open doors for reconciliation which enhances social relationships. Forgiveness can repair damaged social relationship by reducing anger and other hostile feelings and therefore restoring trust and promoting more supportive interactions. Individuals who display prosocial behaviour may be more empathetic and understanding toward others which enables them to display more forgiveness towards others. Therefore, forgiveness and prosocial behaviour enhance each other, and in turn create healthier social relationships. This paper approaches prosocial behaviour and forgiveness from a developmental perspective. The lifespan classification proposed by Elizabeth B. Hurlock (1980) was used to guide the categorization of participants. According to Hurlock, adulthood can be divided into three stages: young adulthood, middle adulthood and old age. Young adulthood typically includes individuals between 18 to 40 years of age, middle adulthood covers the age range of 41 to 60 years, and old age refers to individuals aged 61 to 80 years. Based on this classification, the participants in the present study were divided into three groups: young adults, middle-aged adults and older adults. Bandura (1977), in his Social Learning Theory, describes how people can learn to behave in a helpful and forgiving way through the process of observing and modelling such behaviour and receiving reinforcement for it. This learning and modifying of behaviour can occur at any age in our lives, and is influenced by our families, schools and communities. In addition, psychosocial theory as proposed by Erik Erikson suggests that individuals have particular psychosocial tasks to achieve at different stages of life. For example, as we grow and mature, we gain more control over our emotional reactions to life situations, we may become more aware of and able to tolerate the feelings of others and may even learn to accept certain circumstances in our lives. Recent research suggests that prosocial behaviour and forgiveness differ at various stages of life. Young adults tend to emphasize personal achievement and competitiveness, middle-aged adults tend to display more obligation-based helping behaviour, and older adults tend to emphasize more forgiveness based on their increased age and life experience. There are very few studies in India on comparing prosocial behaviour and forgiveness across various stages of adulthood. Today we are more prone to stress, competition and emotional isolation. Thus

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

it is essential for the psychologists, educators and policymakers to have an understanding of prosocial behaviour and forgiveness at various stages of life so that they can undertake programmes for the improvement of society. The understanding of the differences between young adults, middle-aged adults and older adults in relation to prosocial behaviour and forgiveness will help in the understanding of the evolution of these characteristics across various life stages.

As of now the research studies on prosocial behaviour and forgiveness have been carried out extensively with the help of quantitative analysis. Although quantitative analysis throws light upon the relationships between variables and gives a deeper understanding about the aspects of forgiveness and prosocial behaviour, they do not fully capture the qualitative aspects. They show the outer aspects rather than describing the inner aspects or the actual scenario. Qualitative aspects of behaviour or relationships are better described with the help of lived experiences of the participants. That is why the proposed study combines quantitative analysis with qualitative thematic analysis in which the lived experiences of participants play a pivotal role. This combination helps in going beyond the numbers in relation to prosocial behaviour and forgiveness. It provides an understanding of participants' perspectives regarding their behavioural responses towards prosocial behaviour and forgiveness. Hence, the proposed study goes beyond the numbers as it captures various understandings of prosocial behaviour and forgiveness across different age groups of Indians.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prosocial behaviour is defined as actions that are performed with the intention of bringing benefit to others, such as sharing, collaborating or providing care. Many researchers from psychology, human development and neuroscience have worked on the topic from different angles. Labroo et al. (2023) explained that there is a large body of research that explores helping behaviour in various contexts. They also give the following three reasons that are most commonly mentioned in the literature for engaging in prosocial behaviour: empathy (putting oneself in the other person's shoes), reciprocity (we help others because others have already helped us) and reputation (we want others to appreciate us as good people). Helping others is considered a fundamental moral value and a key social skill that people learn in society. Pfattheicher et al. (2021) distinguish between prosocial behaviour and altruism. Prosocial behaviour is directed towards others, has positive consequences and generally conforms to social norms. By looking at biological mechanisms of helping behaviour, Marsh et al. (2020) discovered that oxytocin is associated with empathy, trust and helpful behaviour. However, as with all things in life, context and relationship are key, and so the effect of oxytocin can vary depending on the circumstances of the time and between people. Batson et al. (2003) suggested that helping others can benefit not only the recipient but also the actor. For instance, a person might help others for personal gains, but others might help others based on the feelings of compassion they experience. Based on their study, the authors found that people will even help out others at a cost to themselves, such as suffering from harm or financial loss. Forgiveness is the choice to let go of anger or the desire for revenge against someone who has caused harm. It does not mean that the person forgets what happened or accepts the wrong behaviour. Instead forgiveness helps a person deal with negative emotions and restore emotional balance in relationships. In a study on aging, Krause (2018) explains that forgiveness in later life is linked with qualities such as humility, spirituality, and overall well-being. His research points to forgiveness as not only a moral virtue, but also a psychological coping resource that is good for our health and that can

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

enhance our sense of life meaning. In an earlier paper, Karremans et al. (2003) investigated the effects of forgiveness on people's relational cognitions. Their research revealed that forgiveness entails a shift from an individualistic to a more collectivistic or interdependent orientation. In other words, forgiveness promotes the "we" instead of the "I", which can have a beneficial impact on people's social relationships. The work in this area implies that forgiveness is a highly emotional as well as social process, necessary to the maintenance of our interpersonal ties and to our own psychological well-being. Karremans et al. (2003) reported that when individuals forgave a partner after a serious conflict, they gradually began to think in a more collective way about their relationship. Instead of focusing mainly on their own perspective, they began to adopt a more shared or "we-centred" view. People who practiced forgiveness were also more helpful and cooperative with others than those who held grudges. Even when disagreements were serious, forgiving individuals remember the conflict in a less negative way, focusing less on the hurtful parts. In this way, forgiveness seemed to bring back people's natural ability to feel empathy and work well with others. Regulating emotions and maintaining positive attitudes are important to enhancing prosocial behaviour. Hui et al. (2020) examined the relationship between prosocial behaviour and well-being. They discovered a positive, strong and stable relationship between prosocial behaviour and well-being. They believed that people with prosocial attitudes tend to have a higher sense of meaning in life and better mental health. Chang et al. (2017) carried out a study of stress caused to the mental health of young adults due to academic pressure. They found that students with high levels of optimism tend to have less adverse impact from the stress they experience. Carver (2010) discovered that having an optimistic attitude allowed people to be more adaptive in their coping styles and to also lead healthier lifestyles in the long term. Scheier et al. (2001) reported that optimists tended to cope better for serious health conditions and maintain a higher level of physical health. Also, Robinson-Whelen et al. (1997) supported the idea that optimism reduced stress and depression in caregivers of people with chronic illness. And Carver et al. (1993) reported that there was a positive relationship between optimism and coping behaviour following stress. Therefore, the evidence for the role of optimism in forgiveness, psychological resilience and prosocial behaviour is substantial. Empathy, prosocial behaviour and forgiveness are constructs present across the entire life span. Early emerging prosocial behaviour has been demonstrated in infants as young as eighteen months of age through empathy-based helping behaviour by Klein et al. (2020). Conversely, later in life, engaging with a faith community such as through practices of prayer is related to increased feelings of humility and forgiveness for older adults and this predicts better physical health and psychological meaning in life according to Krause (2018). Conversely, adolescence can also be a period in life in which prosocial behaviour including kindness and altruism has positive implications including greater self-esteem and psychological adjustment as demonstrated by Caprara et al. (2005). In summary, the presence of empathy, prosocial behaviour and forgiveness are important dimensions of human life throughout all life periods.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Purpose

The present study aims to examine differences in prosocial behaviour and forgiveness among young, middle-aged and older adults and to determine whether age predicts these traits. Additionally, the study provides a detailed account of participants' lived experiences relating to helping and forgiveness.

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

Objectives

- To assess the level of prosocial behaviour among young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults.
- To assess the level of forgiveness among young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults.
- To examine age-related differences in prosocial behaviour across the three age groups.
- To examine age-related differences in forgiveness across the three age groups.
- To study the relationship between prosocial behaviour and forgiveness.
- To determine whether age predicts prosocial behaviour.
- To determine whether age predicts forgiveness.
- To explore the lived experiences of individuals related to prosocial behaviour and forgiveness.

Hypotheses of the Study

- **H1:** There will be a significant difference in prosocial behaviour among young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults.
- **H2:** There will be a significant difference in forgiveness among young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults.
- **H3:** Prosocial behaviour will be significantly positively related to forgiveness.
- **H4:** Age (in years) will significantly predict prosocial behaviour.
- **H5:** Age (in years) will significantly predict forgiveness.

Variables

- **Age:** Age was considered both as a categorical and continuous variable. As a categorical variable, participants were divided into three groups: Young adults (18–40 years), middle-aged adults (41–60 years) and older adults (61–80 years). As a continuous variable, age was measured in years and used in regression analysis to examine its predictive effect on prosocial behaviour and forgiveness.
- **Prosocial Behaviour:** Prosocial behaviour is defined as actions that are provided voluntarily by an individual to benefit others in the form of helping, sharing, supporting or providing aid without expectation of personal reward. In this study, it is considered in relation to everyday acts of psychological, physical or material support in various social situations.
- **Forgiveness:** The term forgiveness, as it is used in this study, means that one's feelings, thoughts, and behaviour of vengeance and retaliation against the offender are reduced or mitigated, and replaced by more neutral and less unpleasant reactions. This definition of forgiveness involves the abandonment of feelings of resentment and forgiveness does not imply a restoration of the victim-offender relationship.

Research Design

The present study adopted a cross-sectional mixed-method research design incorporating comparative, correlational, and predictive components. The quantitative component examined differences in prosocial behaviour and forgiveness across three age groups and assessed the relationship between these variables. The qualitative component explored participants' lived experiences related to helping and forgiving through thematic analysis. The study was cross-sectional in nature, as data were collected from participants belonging to different age groups at a single point in time. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between prosocial behaviour and forgiveness. Pearson's

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

correlation was also used to examine the relationship between age and the study variables. Linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether age predicts prosocial behaviour and forgiveness. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the three adult groups (young, middle-aged and older adults) on the variables of prosocial behaviour and forgiveness towards victim and transgressor. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis in order to understand the themes inherent within the experiences of participants.

Sample

The sample consisted of 75 participants from India. Participants were equally divided into three age groups:

1. Young Adults (18–40 years): 25 participants
2. Middle-aged Adults (41–60 years): 25 participants
3. Older Adults (61–80 years): 25 participants

Equal group sizes were maintained to allow accurate comparison using one-way ANOVA. For the qualitative analysis, a subset of 30 participants was selected from the total sample, with 10 participants from each age group (young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults). These participants provided detailed responses to the open-ended questions, which were used for thematic analysis to explore lived experiences related to prosocial behaviour and forgiveness.

Sampling Technique

The sampling method employed for this study is Purposive sampling was used, where participants were selected on the basis of their age and also who were available and willing to participate for the study. This helped in achieving an equal representation from all three generations and provided scope for cross-generational comparison.

Inclusion Criteria

- Adults aged 18 to 80 years
- Residents of India
- Individuals able to read and understand Hindi or English
- Individuals who provided informed consent
- Individuals capable of completing self-report questionnaires independently

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with diagnosed severe psychiatric disorders that may impair judgment or comprehension
- Individuals with significant neurological or cognitive impairments affecting response accuracy
- Individuals unable to understand the questionnaire instructions
- Individuals unwilling to participate or who withdrew consent

Measuring Tools

(a) Prosociality Scale for Adults (PSA)

The Prosociality Scale for Adults was introduced by Gian Vittorio Caprara and colleagues in 2005. This scale is a self-report questionnaire that evaluates the degree of prosocial behaviour exhibited by adults. The items included in the scale pertain to helping, sharing, caring, and other types of behaviours that are empathetically oriented toward others. The scale uses a Likert type format, where ratings are given on a scale of 1 to 5 and the higher

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

score of each item is retained for analysis. Caprara and colleagues found that the scale yields high reliability (alpha coefficients generally exceeding .80). The scale has also yielded adequate evidence of construct validity and has been employed frequently in studies of adult prosocial behaviour.

(b) Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS)

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) was introduced by Loren Toussaint, and was published in 2005. It measures the individual's likelihood of pardoning others, themselves, and situations that are considered beyond their control. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale has been shown to have high reliability with Cronbach's alpha ranging from about .72 to about .87 in different studies. The scale has also shown to have strong construct validity. This has led to the HFS being used in a number of psychological studies about the role of forgiveness to health and wellbeing.

(c) Open-Ended Experience Questions

Participants completed a series of open-ended questions regarding their everyday experiences of helping others and forgiveness. Responses to these open-ended questions were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis.

Procedure

For the present study, a total of 75 participants were chosen by means of purposeful sampling and were sorted into three equal age groups. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and maintaining the principle of confidentiality; informed consent form were filled from the participants before the implementation of the research activities. All participants filled out the Prosociality Scale for Adults (PSA) and Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) for this study, and additional open-ended questions were asked related to the experiences of participants in helping and forgiveness behaviours in their daily life. Necessary clarifications were explained to participants, and they were asked to answer questions honestly. Responses were reviewed and scored according to the scori. The quantitative data was entered and analysed using SPSS version 25. The qualitative information was reviewed and analysed thematically to identify patterns of response between the different age groups. Only 10 responses from each age group that contained sufficient detail for analysis were used in the qualitative component of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Participation was voluntary.
- Participants had the right to withdraw at any time.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.
- No identifying information was recorded.
- The study followed standard ethical guidelines for psychological research

RESULT

The data collected was subjected to statistical analysis, including correlation analysis, simple linear regression, and one-way ANOVA to examine the relationships among forgiveness, prosocial behaviour, and age.

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

Table 1: Correlation Analysis of Forgiveness, Prosocial Behaviour and Age

		Forgiveness	Prosocial Behaviour	Age
Forgiveness	Pearson Correlation	1	.400**	-.187
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.108
	N	75	75	75
Prosocial Behaviour	Pearson Correlation	.400**	1	-.109
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.350
	N	75	75	75
Age	Pearson Correlation	-.187	-.109	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.108	.350	
	N	75	75	75

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

The correlation analysis showed a moderate positive and significant relationship between forgiveness and prosocial behaviour. However, age was not significantly related to forgiveness or prosocial behaviour.

Table 2: Simple Linear Regression Predicting Prosocial Behaviour from Forgiveness

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	df	P
1	.40	.16	.15	13.90	1.73	< .001

a. Predictor: Forgiveness

b. Dependent variable: Prosocial Behaviour

Regression analysis indicated that forgiveness significantly predicts prosocial behaviour and explains about 16% of the variance in prosocial behaviour.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA for Differences in Forgiveness Across Age Groups

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	p
Between Groups	307.95	2	153.97	0.80	.45
Within Groups	13790.40	72	191.53		
Total	14098.35	74			

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in forgiveness across age groups (18–40, 41–60, and 61–80 years). The results showed that the difference was not statistically significant, indicating that forgiveness levels did not significantly differ across age groups.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Theme 1: From Relief to Responsibility: Motivational Shifts

A developmental shift emerged in what drives helping and forgiveness. Among young adults, helping was mainly triggered by the perception of vulnerability and lack of support. As one participant stated, “In situations where I feel the person in need has not received the support and care that they needed due to which they are suffering, then I try to do my best to fill that gap.” Helping also reduced their own emotional discomfort, reflecting both empathic concern and personal distress as described by C. Daniel Batson. Forgiveness among young adults was largely guided by the evaluation of intent. Participants reported forgiving “if the other person realizes their mistake” or when the mistake was “unintentional,” indicating that forgiveness depended on how the offence was interpreted. In middle adulthood, helping was guided mainly by responsibility and moral duty rather than emotional reactions. Participants described helping people who were genuinely vulnerable, especially those who were ill. One participant shared, “If someone is ill, then I feel I should not burden them with too much

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

work... for example, I give my household maid frequent leaves when she is sick,” showing a sense of everyday responsibility. Similarly, forgiveness in middle adulthood was guided by compassion but also personal limits. Participants reported forgiving when they felt the other person was struggling. Forgiveness in middle adulthood seemed to be rooted in kindness and moral values, while also shaped by experience and self-protection. In older adulthood, helping and forgiveness were shaped by life experience, compassion, and personal values. Forgiveness was offered when the mistake was seen as genuine and when it did not harm one’s self-respect. As one participant shared, “I feel if the other person has genuinely made a mistake, then forgive them. I don’t keep grudges in my heart for anyone because humans do make mistakes, so forgive them.” This reflects a tolerant and understanding outlook developed through life experience. Participants described helping people who were truly in need, such as those who were sick or helpless, while also remaining aware of possible exploitation. Research also suggests that older adults often show stronger concern for others’ welfare and meaningful relationships (Sze et al., 2012).

Theme 2: Emotional Regulation and Well-Being Outcomes

Young adults helped and forgave primarily to reduce emotional discomfort: “Many young adults reported feeling “relieved” and “lighter” after forgiving. Forgiveness helped the young adult regulate their emotions and use cognitive reframing as a strategy. Young adults experienced strong positive emotions after helping. Most of the participants reported feeling “pleased.” “happy” and “relaxed” after acts of helping. Middle-aged adults reported emotional outcomes such as happiness, pleasant feelings, contentment, and relief and a sense of achievement. Prosocial behaviour brought them a sense of usefulness and purpose. The findings also reflect the psychosocial theory of Erikson, especially the Generativity vs Stagnation phase. In this phase, people are concerned about helping others and focusing on the next generation. Middle-aged adults forgave to alleviate emotional stress and increase their emotional stability. Witvliet et al (2001) shows that the act of forgiving reduces emotional and psychological stress. Forgiveness, for older adults, was characterized as a prerequisite for inner peace and moral well-being. One participant stated, “*People sometimes make mistakes. I forgive them because God resides in humans.*” This response suggests older individuals tend to forgive primarily due to spiritual beliefs and moral standards. These findings align with research showing that forgiveness and altruistic behaviour are associated with psychological well-being, particularly in later adulthood (Rani & Kumar, 2020).

Theme 3: Situational Contexts of Prosocial Behaviour

Helping behaviour differed in the situations that triggered it across the three age groups. Young adults mostly helped in peer-related situations such as extending academic support and assisting in personal issues or unforeseen events. Participants described helping friends, juniors, or classmates when they were struggling with studies or emotional difficulties. In middle adulthood, helping was more strongly associated with caregiving roles, social responsibility, and practical assistance in daily life. Participants described helping family members, neighbours, students, and economically disadvantaged individuals. Most of the responses reflected concern for people facing financial or health-related difficulties. For example, one participant shared, “A few months ago at a chemist shop, I helped by paying the bill of someone who was taking a lower dose of medicine due to money issues. I heard their conversation while I was waiting to buy medicines.” This indicates that middle-aged adults often step in when they notice genuine need in their surroundings. Among older adults, helping behaviour was often directed towards serious life situations that required

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

practical or financial support. Participants described helping family members, friends, or neighbours during circumstances such as illness, accidents, or financial difficulties. Helping frequently involved offering monetary assistance or other tangible resources when someone was unable to handle a crisis on their own. One participant stated, "Someone was really struggling with money for his son's admission and I helped him. It gave me immense pleasure." These responses suggest that helping in older adulthood is shaped by compassion, life experience, and a willingness to support others during critical moments. These differences reflect increasing resources and social responsibility with age (Fowler, 2006). Overall, the themes suggest that prosocial behaviour and forgiveness evolve across adulthood.

DISCUSSION

The present study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the correlates of prosocial behaviour and forgiveness among young, middle-aged, and older adults. Forgiveness was positively related to prosocial behaviour. In accordance with empathy-based models of altruism (Batson, 1991), reduced anger and increased feelings of compassion toward others may serve to enhance prosocial behaviour. The more one forgives others, the more cooperative and helpful one is likely to be (Karremans et al., 2003). Surprisingly, there were no significant differences observed between the three age groups. Consequently, it may be that individual personality variables have a more important impact on relationships between prosocial behaviour and forgiveness than age. As we mentioned previously, prosocial behaviour can be predicted on the basis of such factors as the individual's degree of empathy, their personal moral code and past socialisation experiences (Caprara et al., 1995). Similarly, dispositional forgiveness refers to a person's tendency to respond to interpersonal harm in a forgiving manner and is influenced by personality, as well as factors such as religiosity or past life experience (Witvliet et al., 2001). This explanation is in accordance with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which affirms that helping and forgiving behaviours are acquired through observation and reinforcement. The individual repeats the behaviours that they like or of which they feel proud, and acts they disapprove of are avoided. Over time, behaviours that seem to be socially and culturally acceptable become internalized as part of the individual's personality.

This paper examines helping and forgiveness in India across three age groups. Social learning models of helping argue that these behaviours are developed through prior exposure to similar acts in one's social environment. Collectivist societies like India, where values of cooperation, family interdependence and social harmony are emphasized, may reinforce these behaviours across the adult lifespan. Quantitative data revealed similar patterns of prosocial behaviour and forgiveness for all three age groups while the qualitative analysis showed differing reasons. Young adults helped and forgave because they felt that these acts triggered within them such emotions as sympathy, guilt and personal distress. For the middle-aged adults helping and forgiveness was viewed as part of their family roles and social responsibilities. For the old, their acts of helping and forgiveness appeared to have a transcendent character, embodying such values as compassion and religious beliefs that acquire increasing salience later in life. Combining the quantitative and qualitative findings the study indicates that prosocial behaviour and forgiveness remain important strengths throughout adulthood. In addition, the motivation behind the prosocial behaviour and forgiveness changes over the years of the adult life. From an emotive driven reaction in younger adults to a more goal-oriented and value-based reaction in the older adults. Thus,

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

when examining prosocial behaviour and forgiveness, it is important to look at both the actions themselves as well as at the developmental phase of the adult.

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness shows a positive relationship with prosocial behaviour. Individuals who report higher forgiveness tend to engage more in helping and supportive actions. Age does not significantly influence levels of forgiveness or prosocial behaviour. Qualitative findings indicate that individual experience positive emotions such as happiness, peace and relief after engaging in forgiveness and prosocial acts. These behaviours support emotional well-being and healthy social relationships. Overall, forgiveness and prosocial behaviour emerge as important human strengths that promote social connection and psychological well-being across adulthood.

Limitations

- The size of the sample was relatively small (N = 75), with only 25 participants in each of the three age groups.
- The use of a purposive sampling may limit the generalizability of the research findings.
- The study was cross-sectional and participants were studied at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies are needed to study change within individuals across the lifespan.
- The study relied on self-report data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias.
- Situational factors such as the severity of the offence and the closeness of relationships were not considered in the study.

REFERENCES

- Arican, H. O. B. (n.d.). The effect of altruistic behaviors of sports sciences faculty students on the decision of forgiveness: A structural equality model investigation. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1331123>
- Batson, C. (2024). The empathy–altruism hypothesis: What it is and why it is important. In *Handbook of prosocial behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119771418.ch2>
- Booth, J. E., Park, T., Zhu, L. L., Beauregard, T. A., Gu, F., & Emery, C. (2018). Prosocial response to client-instigated victimization: The roles of forgiveness and workgroup conflict. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103(5), 513–536. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000286>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chen, X., Zhao, H., & Zhang, D. (2022). Forgiveness as a mediator between psychological suzhi and prosocial behaviour in Chinese adolescents. *Behavioural Sciences*, 12(9), 330. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12090330>
- Cheung, F. C., & Halpern, D. H. (2020). *The Cambridge handbook of the international psychology of women* (1st ed., Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108561716>
- Fallgatter, A. J. (2021, October 28). The role of cognitive control in prosocial behaviour – Investigating the neural foundations of retribution and forgiveness. <https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/handle/10900/95590>

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

- García-Vázquez, F. I., Valdés-Cuervo, A. A., Martínez-Ferrer, B., & Parra-Pérez, L. G. (2020). Forgiveness, gratitude, happiness, and prosocial bystander behaviour in bullying. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2827. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02827>
- Gouveia, V. V., De Oliveira, I. C. V., De Moura Grangeiro, A. S., Monteiro, R. P., & De Holanda Coelho, G. L. (2020). The bright side of the human personality: Evidence of a measure of prosocial traits. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 22(3), 1459–1480. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00280-2>
- Han, S. (2015). Effects of adolescent self-conscious emotion, empathy, and forgiveness on prosocial behaviour by gender and age. *Journal of Korean Home Management Association*, 33(5), 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.7466/jkhma.2015.33.5.117>
- Karremans, J. C., Van Lange, P. A. M., & Holland, R. W. (2005). Forgiveness and its associations with prosocial thinking, feeling, and doing beyond the relationship with the offender. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(10), 1315–1326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205274892>
- Ma, L., & Jiang, Y. (2020). Empathy mediates the relationship between motivations after transgression and forgiveness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1466. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01466>
- McLeod, S. (2025). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- McLeod, S. (2025, October 15). Erikson's stages of development. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/erik-erikson.html>
- McLeod, S. (2025, October 16). Albert Bandura's social learning theory in psychology. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html>
- Mesurado, B., & Resett, S. (2023). Growth patterns of ingroup and outgroup prosocial behaviour in Colombian and Uruguayan adolescents: Examining gratitude and forgiveness as predictors of change. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 34(2), 490–506. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12905>
- Nadeem, A. N., & Gillani, S. (2015). Forgiveness and optimism as predictors of happiness, life satisfaction, and prosocial behaviour among bank employees. *Research Journal of Psychology*, 9(2), 45–54.
- Rafiq, N. N., Sarwart, N. Y., Mehmood, N. S., & Fatima, N. M. (2025). Examining relationship of personality traits, altruism, and justice with forgiveness. *Journal of Health, Wellness and Community Research*, e97. <https://doi.org/10.61919/8v1jt025>
- Rani, S., & Kumar, R. (2020). Forgiveness and altruism as predictors of psychological well-being. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(1), 9947–9958. <https://doi.org/10.61841/j0900p44>
- Riek, B. M., & DeWit, C. C. (2018). Differences and similarities in forgiveness seeking across childhood and adolescence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(8), 1119–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218760797>
- Strelan, P. (2007). The prosocial, adaptive qualities of just world beliefs: Implications for the relationship between justice and forgiveness. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(4), 881–890. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.02.015>
- World Health Organization. (2025, June 30). Social connection linked to improved health and reduced risk of early death. <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-06-2025-social-connection-linked-to-improved-health-and-reduced-risk-of-early-death>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Nigam, A. & Gupta, C. (2026). Intergenerational Perspectives on Prosociality and Forgiveness Across Adulthood: A Mixed-Method Study. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 2464-2476. DIP:18.01.247.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.247