



Role of age and gender in forgiveness during student life

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ABSTRACT

The study measured the role of age and gender in forgiveness during student life involving a 2x2 between-group factorial design comprising of a convenience sample of 200 student participants, where 100 (47 girls, 53 boys) were from the age groups of 13 to 15 years and 100 (63 girls, 37 boys) from 18 to 20 years from two leading educational institutions in Hyderabad. The students completed a survey assessing the forgiveness and its three domains—forgiveness of self, others, and situations. The results revealed a significant main effect of age in respect of forgiveness indicating that the older students scored higher in forgiveness compared to their younger counterparts. The older students also scored significantly higher in forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situation in comparison to their younger counterparts. Gender was found to play a significant role in determining neither the level of forgiveness nor its domains during student life.

Indexing terms/Keywords

Forgiveness, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, forgiveness of situations

Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines

Psychology; Education

SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION

Value education

TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

Survey

Council for Innovative Research

Peer Review Research Publishing System

International Journal of Research in Education Methodology

Vol.3, No.2

editor@ijrem.com

www.cirworld.com, www.ijrem.com



INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness is one of the major dimensions of positive health. Every human has a propensity to forgive under certain circumstances. The human tendency to forgive is reliably elicited by social and environmental factors that lead victims to view their transgressors as worthy of care, potentially valuable to the victim in the future, and safe. The victim's personality characteristics may also influence the likelihood of viewing transgressors as forgiving self, forgiving others and forgiving situation. Using these categories, we review recent developments in the scientific study of the role of age and gender to forgiveness. We also reviewed the researches done on operationalization of forgiveness and the links of forgiveness to health and well-being.

Forgiveness is a process (or the result of a process) that involves a change in emotion and attitude regarding an offender. Most researchers view this as an intentional and voluntary process driven by a deliberate decision to forgive (Enright, Santos & Al Mabuk, 1989; Fincham, 2000; North, 1987; Worthington, 2005). This process results in decreased motivation to retaliate or maintain estrangement from an offender despite their actions, and requires letting go of negative emotions toward the offender. Theorists differ in the extent to which forgiveness implies replacing the negative emotions with positive attitudes including compassion and benevolence. In any event, forgiveness occurs with the victim's full recognition that he or she deserves better treatment. Most researchers agree that forgiveness is complex phenomenon involving cognitive, affective, behavioral, decisional and interpersonal aspects (Enright, & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; Gordon et al., 2000; DiBlasio, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997; Flanigan, 1992).

Forgiveness is conceptualized as an emotional contrast of positive emotions (i.e., empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love) against the negative emotions of unforgiveness. Forgiveness can, thus be used as an emotion-focused coping strategy to reduce a stressful reaction to a transgression. After a transgression is committed, there is a re-negotiation of the relationship's meaning. Thus, understanding the role of forgiveness in relation to other responses people have to stressful transgressions will both broaden our understanding of how individuals react to such situations, and will better locate forgiveness research in the larger context of stress and coping research (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

Empirical research suggests that forgiveness is related to health outcomes and to mediating physiological processes in such a way as to support the conceptualization that forgiveness is an emotion focused coping strategy. Indirect mechanisms might also affect the relationship between forgiveness and health. For example, forgiveness might affect health by working through social support, relationship quality, and religion (Worthington, 2006; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). McCullough et al. (1998) assert that forgiveness must include pro-social changes in motivation, and they provide criteria for distinguishing when these changes have occurred. Thus, they consider the important aspect to be forgiveness as a process involving interpersonal relationships. Forgiveness is treated as a quality of social units which can be understood as an attribute that is similar to intimacy, trust, or commitment. Some social structures (e.g., some marriages, families, or communities) are characterized by less forgiveness (e.g., social institutions that hasten to ostracize or retaliate against members who commit transgression).

McCullough, Pargament and Thoresen (2000) defined forgiveness as an intra-individual process that takes place within an interpersonal context. From a communicative perspective, forgiveness is "a relational process whereby harmful conduct is acknowledged by one or both partners; the harmed partner extends undeserved mercy to the perceived transgressor; one or both partners experience a transformation from negative to positive psychological states, and the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, with the possibility of reconciliation" (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). This definition emphasizes that forgiveness is relational based.

According to Thompson et al (2005), forgiveness correlated positively with cognitive flexibility, positive affect, and distraction whereas correlated negatively with rumination, vengeance, and hostility. Forgiveness also correlates with cognitive and emotional processes such as empathy and perspective-taking (Batson, 1991; McCullough et al., 1998), rumination, and suppression (Metts & Cupach, 1998), relationship qualities such as closeness, commitment, and satisfaction (Rackley, 1993), and situational factors such as apology (Derby & Schlenker, 1982).

Hence, the present study has been conceptualized to measure the tendency of forgiveness among students in different age groups across gender. Forgiveness is measured basically in three dimensions, such as forgiveness of self (release of negative affect and self-blame associated with past wrongdoings, mistakes, or regrets), forgiveness of others (forgiving another for some harm done) and forgiveness of situation (understanding circumstances and negative thoughts about bad circumstances).

Objective

The objective of the present study was to investigate role of age and gender in forgiveness during student life.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that there would be a significant role of age and gender in forgiveness during student life.

METHOD

Design

The present study was based on a survey involving a 2 (Age) x 2 (Gender) between-group factorial design having four cells with 200 participants. The first factor was age group having two levels such as age group 1 (13-15 years) and age



group 2 (18-20 years). The second factor was gender having two levels, such as girls and boys. The dependent variables of the study were forgiveness and its three domains.

Participants

There were 200 participants selected from the student population from two well-known academic institutions by means of convenient sampling method. Out of the total 200 participants, 100 (47 girls and 53 boys) were between the ages of 13 and 15 years and 100 (63 girls and 37 boys) were between the ages of 18 and 20 years. Out of 200 participants 38% participants were staying in hostel, 37% in own house and 25 % in rented house. The educational level of participants was also varied, such as 0.5% were from Class VIII, 28% from Class IX, 21.5% from Class X, 20.5 % from First Year of Integrated Masters and 29.5% were from Second Year of Integrated Masters courses. So far as the age of the participants was concerned, 20.5% were from 13 years of age, 21% from 14 years, 8.5% from 15 years, 26.0% from 18 years, 16.0% from 19 years and 8% were from 20 years of age.

Research Instrument

In this study the following instrument was used along with separate sheets containing informed consent form and demographic details of the participants.

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). The HFS, developed by Thompson, Snyder, and Hoffman (2005), consisted of 18 items. It was a self-report questionnaire which measured person's dispositional forgiveness (i.e., the general tendency to be forgiving), rather than forgiveness of a particular event or person. The scale consisted of the three domains, such as forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations, each containing six items. Each of the items was rated in a 7-point scale ranging from 'almost always false of me' to 'almost always true of me'. Scoring was done as per the procedure laid down in the manual. The total score varied from 18 to 136. The internal consistency was found to be between .71 to .82 (Bugay, Demir, & Delevi, 2012).

Procedure

Two leading educational institutions were identified from the nearby vicinity of the investigators. We approached to the heads of the institutions in order to get permission to involve their students in this study. After obtaining the permission, the students who met the criteria were selected randomly from their classes concerned. We established rapport and explained the purpose and relevance of the study to each of the selected participants individually. Then we obtained the consent of the participants of age group 2 whereas for the participants of age group 1, the consent was taken from the institution as well as parents. Then the students were asked to assemble in a quiet classroom batch wise and handed over the HFS with demographic sheet. They were requested to fill the scale honestly and accurately. We communicated in Hindi and English languages whenever necessary. The duration of the administration was approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Debriefing was done by us soon after the participants completed the scale.

RESULTS

The obtained quantitative data were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics, 2X2 ANOVA and histogram using computer software SPSS Statistics 20.0. The histogram was plotted (Figure 1) to explore the distribution of scores across of 200 participants. The M and SD of the total participants were found to be 79.47 and 11.49.

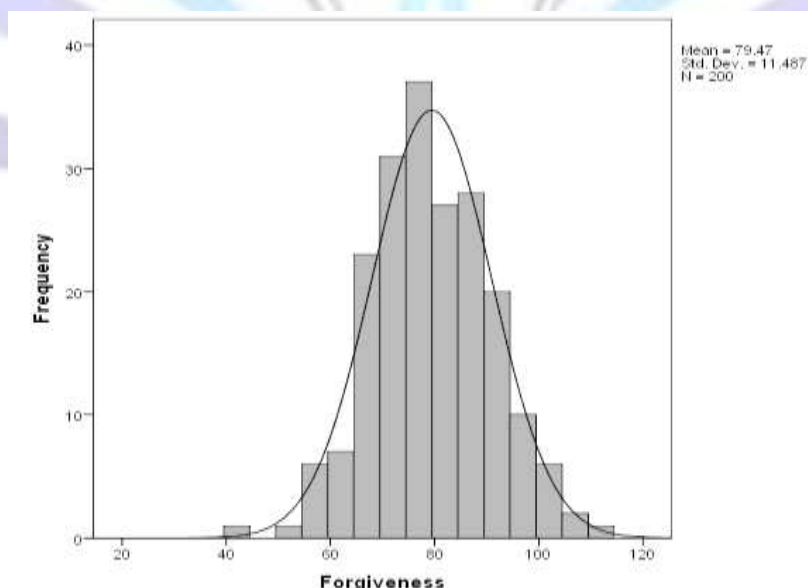


Fig1: Histogram showing the distribution of forgiveness score across the 200 participants



The M, SD and 2X2 Two-way ANOVA done on forgiveness and its domain scores of girls and boys belonging to two age groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. M, SD of forgiveness and its domains, and the results of 2X2 Two-way ANOVA with age and gender as independent variables

Measures	Age Group 1		Age Group 2		Results of 2 X 2 Two-way ANOVA		
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	F-ratio for Age	F-ratio for Gender	F-ratio for AgeXGender
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) (<i>n</i> = 47)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) (<i>n</i> = 53)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) (<i>n</i> = 63)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) (<i>n</i> = 37)			
Forgiveness	78.00	75.77	82.21	81.95	10.28**	<1	<1
	(9.79)	(9.42)	(12.63)	(12.71)			
Self	26.57	24.53	28.32	28.14	16.38**	2.84	1.99
	(4.69)	(4.13)	(5.02)	(4.31)			
Others	29.09	27.55	29.24	28.76	<1	1.29	<1
	(5.72)	(5.82)	(6.38)	(6.82)			
Situation	22.34	23.70	24.65	25.05	6.27*	1.44	<1
	(4.15)	(4.92)	(5.68)	(5.30)			

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

From the table, it is evident that the main effect of age was significant, $F(1,196) = 10.27$, $p < .01$, indicating that the participants of age group 2 significantly better in forgiveness ($M = 82.11$, $SD = 12.59$) than that of the participants of age group 1 ($M = 76.82$, $SD = 9.61$). The error graph was plotted for both the age groups, which is represented in Figures B2. Neither the main effect of gender nor the Age X Gender interaction effect was found to be significant.

The construct of forgiveness consisted of three domains, such as forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation. The results are presented in Table 1.

Forgiveness of self. From the table, it is evident that the main effect of age was significant, $F(1,196) = 16.37$, $p < .01$, indicating that the participants of age group 2 significantly better in forgiveness of self ($M = 28.25$, $SD = 4.74$) than that of their age group 1 counterparts ($M = 25.49$, $SD = 4.49$). Forgiveness of others. From the table, it is evident that the main effect of age was not significant, $F(1,196) < 1$, indicating that the participants of age group 1 ($M = 28.27$, $SD = 5.79$) and age group 2 ($M = 29.06$, $SD = 6.51$) are equal in forgiveness of others. Forgiveness of self. From the table, it is evident that the main effect of age was significant, $F(1,196) = 6.27$, $p < .01$, indicating that the participants of age group 2 significantly better in forgiveness of situation ($M = 24.80$, $SD = 5.52$) than that of their age group 1 participants ($M = 23.06$, $SD = 4.60$). The main effect of gender was not significant, $F(1,196) < 1$, indicating that both girls and boys reported almost equally forgiving. The age X gender interaction was also not significant.

DISCUSSION

The present study discusses the role of age and gender in forgiveness during student life. The analysis of the result revealed that the participants of higher age group were more forgiving than their younger counterparts. It is also evident that both girls and boys show almost equal tendency of forgiveness. Hence, the hypothesis of this study is partially accepted.

Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, and Wade (2001) documented no significant gender differences in dispositional forgiveness. Macaskill, Maltby, and Day (2002) also did not find any significant gender differences in the participant's forgiveness of others. Even when gender differences in forgiveness have emerged in the literature, they have been contextualized by other variables.

The results of the study are also supported by the previous researches (Enright et al., 1989; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998; Park & Enright, 1997; Subkoviak et al., 1995) where it is shown that age does play a role on forgiveness. The present finding provides empirical evidence of age difference in relation to forgiveness. The findings of the study also corroborate with Kohlberg's (1984) model of 'stages of justice and stages of forgiveness development' which emphasizes that as people grow older they develop a greater tendency to forgive.

Since age plays a crucial role in determining the tendency of forgiveness among students, proper intervention is needed during student life as forgiveness helps in promoting positive health of the individual. Forgiveness has been employed as an educational tool with beneficial effects and has also been shown to be beneficial for victims of abuse and unfaithfulness. Thus, forgiveness is a virtue as well as a moral act (lawler, et al., 2005). Considering its importance, life skill training needs to focus on fostering forgiveness in students across the ages.



Implication

The findings would help in promoting Positive Health by inculcating forgiveness in students. The study would show a way to add forgiveness as a part of imparting value education. In addition to these, the findings would show new dimensions to research in the field of Health Psychology primarily in India.

Shortcomings and Future direction

Large number of students across the ages could have been included for better understanding the presence of forgiveness in student population. More independent variables could have been identified and included to increase the scientific vigor of the study. Qualitative method could have been included for in-depth exploration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are thankful to the students who participated in the study with much enthusiasm. We also thank the teachers and parents who encouraged their students and children to participate. We also acknowledge the authors whose research findings helped us accomplish our study.

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