



Forgiveness, Revenge and Psychological Well-being among Adolescents: Evidence from Karachi, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Forgiveness helps individuals overcome their desire to take revenge and helps improve physical and mental well-being. This study tends to investigate the relationship between forgiveness, revenge, and well-being. The data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire from 101 participants in Karachi, Pakistan. To analyze the data, correlation & t-test were used, and the result showed no significant relation between forgiveness and well-being. Though, one of the surprising findings of the present study is that it shows a positive association between revenge and well-being. Moreover, no gender difference has been found in forgiveness and vengeance. The present study's findings suggest that educational institutes and media should design programs that teach love, compassion, and empathy. As a result, it would help individuals make their lives better and build a peaceful society.

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INTRODUCTION

Every living creature has emotions, but human beings have more control over them. The intense hurt may lead to severe mental trauma, physical health deterioration, suicidal thoughts, vengeance, and assassination. The most common response against transgression is either the person tends to forgive or show vengeance. Forgiveness is the opposite of vengeance, and it improves well-being (Worthington et al., 2007). When people think of forgiveness or confessions, they step toward the church, mosques, or temples. Forgiveness can induce positive emotions, cognitions, and behaviour in humans. All these negative emotions, cognitive thoughts, and behavioural responses are restrained by forgiving. Not until the last decade have psychologists taken serious empirical attention to forgiveness and well-being (McCullough et al., 1999). The idea of forgiveness provokes spiritual thoughts, emotions, and affect. In religious books such as in Quran, Bible, Bhagavad Gita, and Talmud, forgiveness is preferred over revenge. In Bible, for instance, forgiveness has been given more importance, and the costs of revenge can be traced (Nelson, 1992). In Muslim ideology, forgiveness is an utmost characteristic of God, and forgiving is nearer to God than seeking justice. Muslims believed that those who forgive rather than get revenge could expect special blessings of God (McCullough et al., 1999). It has also been observed that religious people are more forgiving than those less involved in religion (Khosla et al., 2020).

Forgiveness and vindictive behavior are linked to a reduction in psychological well being. It is negatively correlated with life satisfaction and overall well being (Brown, 2004), but in some situations taking revenge is beneficial and can be proved pro-social and constructive (Ysseldyk, 2005). Most research on forgiveness and vengeance has been conducted on adults, and little attention is given to the young population. Further, revenge is still unexplored (Bajwa & Khalid, 2015), especially among adolescents. During adolescence, the behavior learned shapes personality and is essential to inculcate positive behavior among adolescents to grow as healthy individuals (Zohar et al., 2019). Study on children demonstrated the effects of unforgiving attitudes, such as retaliation and aggression, resulting in poor peer relationships Hubbard et al. (2002). In addition, children's mental and physical well-being is related to their ability to forgive offenders (Van Der Wal et al., 2017). With increasing violence globally, studying the desire for revenge and mental well-being among young children is essential. Therefore, this study attempted to fill the gap in the literature by identifying the role of forgiveness and revenge attitude in predicting well-being of adolescents in Karachi, Pakistan.

Adolescence is a period of developing personal and social identity. In this period, adolescents explore different behaviors, roles, and ideologies (Sawyer et al.,

2018). It is the right time to understand their behaviour and design appropriate interventions to help them appropriately. Since most studies on forgiveness and revenge are done in the western part of the world (Strelan et al., 2019). It is vital to understand this topic in the Pakistani context. This study will contribute to understanding the adolescent's behavior and attitude toward vengeance, forgiveness, and their relation to their well-being. So that compassionate youth with a positive mindset can be developed for a healthy society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forgiveness

Forgiveness has been defined as one's motivation to let go of negative emotions so that the person becomes less vengeful towards the transgressor and becomes more distant instead of seeking revenge (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). It is a healthier way of coping with distress. Further, it refers to a process that encourages an individual to overcome resentment, negativity, and hatred towards the perpetrator (Chung, 2016). Forgiveness is associated with happiness, psychological wellbeing, resilience, and positive interpersonal outcomes. It increases positive emotions and empathy and enhances interpersonal relationships (Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2016).

Revenge/Vengeance

Vengeance is the harm caused in return for perceived injury or pain, and it means to take revenge or retaliate for wrongdoing. Revenge is intense emotional arousal that releases when one takes avenged instead of waiting for justice (Ysseldyk, 2005). It usually fulfills multiple goals, including justice being served, maintaining self-worth, and protecting future injustice. In some cases, revenge is also considered a person's right and duty to kill the killer (Scull, 2015).

Forgiveness, Vengeance, and Wellbeing

The empirical research has explained the phenomenon of forgiveness with health outcomes. They have suggested that forgiveness is a way to mediate physiological responses and is used as a coping mechanism (Worthington et al., 2004). Forgiving can be a problem-focused, emotion-focused, or meaning-focused coping strategy. In cases where it affects one's appraisal of the meaning of the situation, it could be a meaning-focused coping strategy. In other cases, when forgiving contributes to solving an interpersonal conflict, it could be a problem-focused coping strategy. Generally, it has been observed that it is usually an emotion-focused coping effort. According to Wade et al. (2019) the

four prepositions of forgiveness are: (a) Not forgiving someone lead to stress; (b) unforgiveness is reduced by using coping mechanism besides forgiveness, (c) forgiving helps in reducing the stress of unforgiveness, (d) forgiveness correlates with health.

Limited research has been conducted on children examining the role of forgiveness in building bonds among them. In research done by [Flanagan et al. \(2012\)](#), it is demonstrated that lower self-esteem and socially anxious children were less forgiving. Moreover, a study conducted among Turkish adolescents and young adults also demonstrated a significant relationship between hope and forgiveness and children's subjective well-being. In addition to this, the research also contributed by showing that forgiving oneself and others increases well-being ([Yalçın & Malkoç, 2015](#)). Many factors contribute to developing forgiveness among children, a few of which are characteristics of children, such as the big five depositions of agreeableness and self-esteem ([Van Der Wal et al., 2017](#)).

Vengeful behavior is linked to a reduction in psychological well-being and negatively correlates with life satisfaction. Moreover, anger has been proposed to be a vital component in vengeance that mediates the relation between the experience of personal offense and the desire to get even more revenge. The research shows that revenge is positively correlated with aggression ([Hahn et al., 2005](#)). Moreover, anger and vengeful behaviors negatively correlate with well-being ([Pronk et al., 2010](#)). Further, research has been conducted to explore the relationship between forgiveness and mental well being. One qualitative study also concluded that forgiveness results in a more favorable outcome, such as peace, contentment, and joy, whereas unforgiveness leads to negative feelings such as depression and anxiety. Thus, it suggested that forgiveness influences an individual positively and improves their relationships ([Akhtar et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, it is concluded that those who forgive might be less depressed as they regain control and restore their self-esteem by letting go. In the light of the previous findings, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being.

Studies have highlighted that where forgiveness generates positive emotions in an individual, vengeance develops negative emotions and anxiety. People think they will feel better after taking revenge, but they feel more anxious and depressed. A study conducted on 247 adults also concluded that taking revenge resulted in negative feelings and impacted an individual's psychological well-being by creating a vicious cycle of overthinking that develops a negative emotional state ([Barcaccia et al., 2020](#)). Thus, based on the findings mentioned above, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: There is a significant negative relationship between vengeance and psychological well-being

Literature on vengeance suggests that men tend to take revenge more than women (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992), especially physical harm or abuse (Bajwa & Khalid, 2015). According to the gender model, social interactions among adolescent boys with their peers are more violent than girls (León-Moreno et al., 2019). Females are generally more forgiving than males Miller et al. (2008), and the urge to maintain relationships is the main force behind forgiving among females (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), as it pushes people for the reconciliation (Wade et al., 2019). Moreover, culture also plays a significant role in the development of self construal. Female self construals are usually more interdependent and connected with other people than males (Agerström et al., 2006). Such cultural differences in defining oneself may be the reason behind the concept of a female being more forgiving. In conclusion, many factors support the idea that females are more tolerant than males based on sociological, cultural, and religious aspects (Miller et al., 2008). Thus, in the light of the above findings following hypothesis has been formulated:

H3: There is a significant gender difference between forgiveness and vengeance.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 101 adolescents who participated were conveniently selected. Participants were approached through social media platforms, visiting schools and community centers in Karachi. Approximately 180 participants were contacted, but only 101 gave their consent for participation in the current study. After getting their verbal consent, participants were invited into a community/social gathering with their parents. All the participants were Muslims, hailing from the upper-middle class and between 13-19 years. Among them, 52 were males, and 49 were females. All the participants could read and write English and fill out the questionnaire.

Instrument

Three scales were used to collect the data, i.e. (i) Heartland Forgiveness Scale, consisting of 18 items. Responses are rated at 7 points rating scale from 1= strongly disagree, and 7= strongly agree. Higher scores displayed more attitudes towards forgiveness, and reliability of this scale is 0.84 (Thompson et al., 2005). (ii) Adolescence Wellbeing Scale, this scale has 18 items to pick up clues for depression in adolescents. The internal consistency of this scale is $\alpha = 0.73$ -

0.90 (Birlleson, 1981) (iii) and Vengeance Scale was used to measure the attitude towards revenge, consisting of 20 items. The instrument is rated at 7 points Likert scale (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). All the instruments used in the present study are valid and reliable tools.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, informed consent was taken from the participants, and they were assured their identities would remain anonymous. After getting their verbal consent, participants were given a demographic sheet and questionnaires. The investigators were there with each participant to clarify their understanding of the questionnaire. After data collection, as a token of thanks, a session was conducted for the participants and their parents to reduce the generation gap and improve interpersonal communication skills. After data collection, the mean scores of total participants were assessed using descriptive statistics via SPSS. The Bivariate relationships between Forgiveness, Vengeance, and Well-being were tested through Correlation, and gender difference was found using an independent t-test.

RESULTS

Table 1.
Alpha reliability of the scales

Scales	No. of Items	Alpha Reliability
Wellbeing	18	0.60
Forgiveness	18	0.67
Vengeance	20	0.67

Table 1 shows the results of alpha reliability of all the scales used in the present study. Alpha reliabilities scores show that forgiveness and vengeance have similar reliability values (0.67), while the well-being scale has a 0.6 reliability coefficient.

Table 2.
Pearson Correlation

	Wellbeing	Vengeance	Forgiveness
Wellbeing	1		
Vengeance	.246*	1	
Forgiveness	.041	-.008	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the correlation between different variables. The result predicts no significant relationship between forgiveness and well-being (0.041). Further, it illustrates no significant relation between forgiveness and vengeance (-0.008). Moreover, vengeance and well-being have a significant positive correlation (0.246) at $p < .05$.

Table 3.

Independent t-test values for Gender difference (N=101)

Variables	Males (n=52)		Females (n=49)				95% CI		
	M	SD	F	SD	t	Mean difference	Std error difference	LL	UL
Forgiveness	79.61	11.96	76.59	11.31	1.303	3.0235	2.3199	-4.316	5.135
Vengeance	82.30	13.44	81.89	10.14	0.172	.4097	2.3817	-1.593	1.136
Wellbeing	22.73	2.88	22.95	3.97	-0.332	-.2284	.6879	-1.579	7.626

Table 3 shows the mean difference between males and females in forgiveness, vengeance, and well being. The result shows no gender difference in all the three variables tested in the present study.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness and revenge in predicting well-being among adolescents in Karachi, Pakistan. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant positive correlation between forgiveness and well-being, but the study results showed no significant relationship between forgiveness and well-being. This finding contrasts with the findings of the previous studies, which indicate that those who forgive easily show better well being than those who rarely forgive, and individuals who forgive themselves and others have better well being (Dyke & Elias, 2007; Hasan & Tiwari, 2019).

No gender difference has been found in the present study, and this hypothesis has also been rejected. Nevertheless, this finding aligns with the studies, which show no significant gender difference in predicting vengeance attitudes (Cota-Mckinley et al., 2001; Toussaint & Webb, 2005), and forgiveness (Brose et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2006).

It was also hypothesized in the present study that there would be a negative correlation between vengeance and well-being. The present study findings are surprisingly different from those found in the literature, suggesting that high

revenge leads to lower life satisfaction and therefore decrease in general well-being (Akin & Akin, 2016).

The possible reason for the present findings could be due to media influence. As media impacts manner of relating and thinking of a society (Settle, 2018), and violence is a common form of entertainment on media (Tompkins, 2003). Pakistani media usually shows vengeance as a last resort to all the suffering. Moreover, violence and revenge as a source of entertainment are common in most cartoons and TV dramas by showing typical in-law's enmities and displaying love trio encounters, impacting the way adolescents perceive the world. In this way, young minds are consciously or unconsciously learning it as youngsters generally learn through role modeling and observation. Moreover, aggressive and belligerent discourse of Pakistani political leader on media fueled the fire. Abuse, slandering, and revenge have become standard practices, and political leaders seek pleasure in promoting it. Young minds are attracted by their charisma and blindly follow them. Besides this, Turkish series "Diriliş Ertuğrul" has taken Pakistani youth by storm. Many people claim that this series is promoted violence (Farooqi, 2020). Although this series has given many lessons that one should not be afraid of anyone except Allah. Further, people should come forward and stand up for themselves and their rights in any situation. Moreover, teach a lesson to your enemies that negative behaviors will not be tolerated, and they will have to bear the consequences. Even though this series gives many valuable lessons, youth is not getting its true essence. They are just considering one aspect, i.e., taking revenge on enemies.

The literature shows that there are situations where taking revenge is beneficial to the well being and can be proved to be pro-social and constructive (Ysseldyk, 2005). Revenge usually fulfills many goals, such as restoring the individual's self-esteem, reducing future injustice, and threatening other offenders so that they do not commit a similar crime (Cota-Mckinley et al., 2001). Another possible goal is the desire to give tit for tat, and it is a symbolic behavior that attempts to convince the offender that particular behavior will not be tolerated (McCullough et al., 2001). However, there is a need to teach youngsters that taking revenge is acceptable in some situations, but not all, and there is a difference between adaptive and maladaptive revenge. Adaptive revenge restores the psychological balance, plays a protective function, maintains self-esteem, and this type of revenge is not damaging. Instead, it permits acceptance and ego-stability, encourages progress, and fades over time. In contrast, maladaptive revenge leads to homicide and mass murder.

The current findings have provided valuable insight regarding Pakistani adolescents' behavior and provided directions to develop interventions to assist youth in understanding the distinction between a healthy and unhealthy way of

dealing with conflict and have contributed to the existing literature.

LIMITATIONS

This study is a self report study, but to ensure validity and remove errors and biases, participants filled the questionnaire in the presence of the researchers. Moreover, self reported studies are essential and the most commonly used methods for adolescents. Also, the sample size is limited, and replication with a larger sample can provide better insight.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown a negative relation between forgiveness and well-being and a positive relationship between vengeance and well-being. If maladaptive behaviors are continuously being encouraged, they can be hazardous in the future and have damaging results. The plausible cause of this behavior is the influence of media promoting revenge as the last resort to deal with any conflicting issue.

To further understand vengeance, experimental and qualitative studies should be conducted in the Pakistani context to understand the adolescent perspective. Besides this, there is an immense need to understand this concept on a broader scale. A better understanding of vengeance leads to improved support for those with feelings and thoughts of revenge. Consequently, it prevents escalations of acting out behavior that may cause homicide or mass murder. Moreover, as an Islamic country, there is an immense need to educate youngsters about Islam. As forgiveness is an essential aspect of Islam, the Mercy of Allah and His forgiveness is mentioned a significant number of times throughout the Holy Quran. Furthermore, Islam describes two types of forgiveness (Allah's forgiveness and human forgiveness). Human beings need both since they make mistakes in their interpersonal relations and their connections to Allah. Therefore, they need to recognize their mistakes or sins, seek forgiveness from Allah and fellow human beings, and try to forgive others. According to Islam, Allah will reward him whoever forgives and Allah's rewards are the best of all. Additionally, consistent awareness programs are required for adolescents to promote a healthy and positive demeanor to improve their well-being. Likewise, various interventions such as play therapy, interactive sessions, and gratitude exercises can be introduced in school and college settings to promote positive aspects of forgiveness. Besides this, it is imperative to introduce family resilience programs, as these programs will improve the well-being of the family and impact overall well being of society (Damani & Hussain, 2021). Also, the media needs to play its sensible role by not portraying violence, as violence and anger

develop vengeance behavior. Last but not least, there should be educational programs or policies for the moral development of political leaders as morally upright political leaders can contribute to maintaining standards of governance and civilized behavior of the nations.

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