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प्रकाशित रचनाओं के अभिमत से डॉक्टर हरीसिंह गौर विश्वविद्यालय, सागर या सम्पादकों की सहमति अनिवार्य नहीं है, तथा यहाँ प्रकाशित आलेखों 'प्लेजियरिज्म' (Plagiarism) सम्बन्धी शुचिता की जिम्मेदारी लेखकों की है।

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Understanding the relationship between unforgiveness and well-being among Indian adults: A thematic analysis

Ajit Kumar Singh, Gyanesh Kumar Tiwari and Pramod Kumar Rai

Background

In the face of a transgression, people make several reactions to counter its negative impacts and the most desirable is forgiveness. Forgiveness occurs when people let go of their negative emotions toward the transgressors and avoid seeking revenge against them. (Pandey et al., 2020). The practice of forgiveness dates back to ancient times when religious teachers promoted it as a method of reducing interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts. In certain situations, extending forgiveness is not possible due to various reasons. Unforgiveness is defined by Stackhouse et al (2018) as an internal state in which one's experiences in the aftermath of a transgression vary along with one or more of the following dimensions: negative emotions with rumination, unforgiving cognitions, and/or an altered perception of the offender.

Although forgiveness is the most desirable way to respond to wrongdoings, it is not always possible in many situations to grant forgiveness due to deleterious consequences it may have for victims. Earlier studies examined unforgiveness using the conceptual framework of forgiveness and suggested these constructs carry differences with some interdependence. (Wade & Worthington, 2003; Worthington & Wade, 1999) Recently, unforgiveness is being studied with other variables such as personality traits and self-concept. (Fatfouta et al., 2015; Worthington & Wade, 1999)

Contrary to earlier positions that emphasized unforgiveness to lead to only negative consequences for people, studies suggested certain benefits of holding forgiveness too. (Rapske et al., 2010; Stackhouse et al., 2018) Thus, wholesome studies showed unforgiveness to be appropriate, justifiable and morally legitimate in the face of some severe types of offences such as brutal murder, burglary and sexual abuse (Macaskill, 2005) and even for some small transgressions, (Rapske et al., 2010), others reported it to lead to some negative consequences that may contribute to the negative emotionality and to lower self-respect and self-concept. (Luchies et al., 2010).

The current study

It is noticeable that there are contradictions regarding the consequences it may have for people, as some studies suggest certain benefits of unforgiveness related to health, well-being and interpersonal relationships (Bono et al., 2008) while others find

it to be maladaptive (Wade & Worthington, 2003; Worthington & Wade, 1999). Also, there is little research available to establish whether unforgiveness carries positive or negative consequences for individuals. Moreover, much of unforgiveness literature is theoretical and its tenets have yet to be tested empirically (Stackhouse et al., 2018; Worthington, 2006). There is much scope to carry out its scientific study on samples of diverse cultural groups since there are cultural differences in the meaning of transgressions and the self-construal of individuals from individualist and collectivist societies (Pandey et al., 2021). Also, there is limited research on the relationship between unforgiveness and well-being outcomes. Well-being comprises emotional, psychological and social well-being that captures all the relevant aspects of human functioning (Keyes, 2005). Given the universal prevalence and unavoidability of transgression experiences, ranging from low to high in severity, in the day-to-day life of the majority of the people and limited research on unforgiveness, the present study aims to understand the relationship between unforgiveness and well-being outcomes of an Indian adults' sample.

Methods and procedure

Design and participants

A qualitative research design was employed to meet the study objectives. Twenty-three university students pursuing their graduate and postgraduate programmes at the various departments of Doctor Harisingh Gour University, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India (*Age Range* = 20-27 years, *Mean* = 23.09, *SD* = 1.78) were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Out of these, 12 were males (*Age Range* = 20-27 years, *Mean* = 23, *SD* = 2.22) and 11 were females (*Age Range* = 21-25 years, *Mean* = 23.18, *SD* = 1.25). The majority of them belonged to lower-middle-class Hindu families with apparent normal physical and mental health.

Interview process and data analysis

Based on pertinent unforgiveness studies, (Ballester et al., 2011; Fanner, 2004; Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Jones Ross et al., 2018; Lozano, 2018; Rapske et al., 2010; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Worthington & Wade, 1999), a semi-structured interview protocol was developed. Participants were debriefed about the study objectives and written consent was taken. After making proper rapport, the researchers instructed participants to remember any experience/s in which someone harmed/upset/angered them and they did not forgive them. To clarify the situation explained by the participants, some probe questions were also asked. Interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participants. Twelve male and thirteen female participants were interviewed. Out of these, two females could not recall any unforgivable experiences so they were excluded from the study. Thus, the final data were collected from 23 participants.

The interview contents were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis method involves familiarization with data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To generate the themes and sub-themes, a conference of the three researchers was organised where differences and disagreements were resolved. A written handbook was used to manage

the data collection and analysis process. An iterative approach was used to analyse the data. Saturation was reached after collecting the data on 19 participants. Four more data were collected to check the saturation. The inter-rater agreement for the codes was .81. Integrity and dependability of the analysis were maintained through regular discussion, inter-rated agreements, reading-rereading transcripts and using a realist approach to the data analysis process (Guest et al., 2012)

Results

The data analysis showed that unforgiveness was not a rare experience for the participants and it carried positive as well as negative implications for their well-being. Two major themes with multiple subthemes were generated: positive and negative implications of unforgiveness for mental health and well-being.

Theme 1: positive implications of unforgiveness for the well-being outcomes

Participants described many positive consequences of holding forgiveness that may be assumed to promote their well-being outcomes. The positive implications of unforgiveness for their mental health were reflected in four subthemes: enhanced happiness/satisfaction, adaptation, self-worth and safety feeling.

Subtheme 1: enhanced happiness/satisfaction

Participants described that holding forgiveness helped them to make the transgressors and their pain-causing behaviours distant that, in turn, may have caused them to feel happy and satisfied. These reflections appeared in the following quotes:

I am feeling good now since I don't have to face him anymore. (F_1)

I will not forgive him. It satisfies me because he had broken my trust. (F_11)

I am feeling far better now since he is realising that what he has done was not appropriate. (M_12)

Subtheme 2: enhanced adaptation

The majority of the participants reported that holding forgiveness enhanced their adaptability. They reported learning significant lessons of life from their transgression encounters. These were reflected in the following quotes:

I have learned many things from this incident. I can now deal more effectively with this and other similar kinds of future events. (F_9)

When we forgive others, we forget what they did, but when we don't, we remember everything that they have done to us. It enhances our adaptation. (F_8)

Subtheme 3: improved self-worth

The participants expressed that holding forgiveness helped them to reduce mental burden, increase meaningfulness, spare more time for self-care and lesser interference in their day-to-day life. These were reflected in the following quotes:

Now I don't have to do any formality. I don't care what he is doing. Now I can devote more time to fulfilling personal growth and important life goals. (M_5)

Now I remain inclined to my useful activities. It is time-saving for me. (M_10)

We don't interact with each other. So, he doesn't interfere in my life which is good for me. (F_7)

Subtheme 4: an enhanced sense of security

Unforgiveness helped them to make a proper distance with the transgressors, develop appropriate strategies to deal with this and similar transgressions and motivate the transgressors to think over their negative behaviours that have caused transgressions. These may have caused them to feel safer than before. These appeared in the following excerpts:

I will not have to face any transgression again if I am not forgiving her. (F_4)

If I am not forgiving him then I will be cautious and remain alert. Even if he tries to commit anything wrong, it can be prevented easily. (M_6)

Theme 2: negative implications of unforgiveness for the well-being outcomes

In addition to certain benefits of holding forgiveness, the participants also described some negative consequences that bear direct implications for their well-being. Feeling of betrayal, personal threats, relational threats and perceived harassment were subthemes that reflected negative consequences of unforgiveness relevant to their well-being.

Subtheme 1: a feeling of betrayal

Many participants described that the offenders have done something that resulted in the breaching of their (victims) trust towards them (offenders). It was reflected in the following quotes:

I trusted him a lot but he misused me. So, I decided not to forgive him in my lifetime. (F_3)

I had a girl friend who betrayed me when I need her most. She didn't call me. She didn't message me for a long time. (M_3)

Subtheme 2: personal threats

Some participants reported that the transgression experiences posed threats to their regard and were unforgivable because of their impacts on personal life. These were reflected in the following quotes:

My mother is very strict. She always imposes her decision and refuses to listen to my perspective. It is very upsetting to me. (F_5)

When I was graduating my roommate mentally harassed me. He tortured me for petty things that were unbearable to me. (M_8).

Subtheme 3: relational threats

Some of the participants reflected that holding forgiveness caused them to face relational threats. The representative quotes describing these experiences are presented below:

I have a cousin. One day he came up with an argument with my parents and started verbally abusing them. I was deeply hurt and decided not to forgive him for insulting my parents. (F_2)

My uncle verbally abused my father which was extremely hurtful to me and I will never forgive him for that. (M_7)

Subtheme 4: harassment

Some of the participants also reported different types of harassment experiences that resulted in their unforgiveness to offenders. These are reflected in the following quotes:

While travelling on a bus during my school days, a stranger came to me and showed me some nude pictures. He asked me to touch his private part. Since I

was very young, I didn't understand how to react to the situation. I did nothing. This was the worst experience of my life. I will never forgive him in my life. (F_6)

There was a boy in our school. He tried to molest me. At that time, I was very distressed and worried. (F_10)

Discussion

The study findings proved the contention that unforgiveness experiences lead to a variety of positive and negative consequences that may have significant implications for the well-being outcomes of the adult participants. The data analysis led to the development of two major themes. Contrary to some previous findings that reported only negative outcomes (Worthington & Wade, 1999), Theme 1 denotes that holding forgiveness may lead to many positive outcomes that may have a direct and significant bearing on the well-being of the participants. Theme 2 reflects that unforgiveness experiences cause many negative outcomes that may pose challenges to their well-being outcomes.

Contrary to previous findings which suggest that holding forgiveness acts as a precursor that leads to undesirable and inappropriate life outcomes (Rapske et al., 2010b; Worthington & Wade, 1999), the current study findings posit that it may have certain positive implications that may closely shape the well-being of people. For example, when the nature of the offence is severe, unethical and immoral and creates serious threats to the very existence of life of individuals, extending forgiveness may be fatal and thus, unforgiveness may prove to be a useful strategy to maintain well-being and to remain meaningful. Likewise, some transgressions pose serious threats to the personal, social, and/or relational life of victims and thus, granting forgiveness may cause serious harm to their mental health and well-being. For example, it may cause threats to their self-worth, and decrease self-esteem which may result in decreased adaptation. It may also increase the chances of revictimization that inadvertently leads to a lowered sense of security.

Unforgiveness, in many situations, may have some positive implications to maintain good mental health and well-being. For example, holding forgiveness decreases the chance of revictimization and helps to maintain a proper distance from the transgressor which bears a significant adaptive value. Unforgiveness also helps people to bring positive growth in the victim in some cases. It helps victims to learn life lessons and to prevent repeating the mistakes in future. The present study findings lend partial support to the previous research that suggests unforgiveness to preserve self-worth (Rapske et al., 2010). According to grudge theory (Exline & Baumeister, 2000), holding unforgiveness confers a measure of protection against future victimization and makes victims morally superior to offenders. It also helps victims to justify their expressions of anger and other negative emotions toward the offenders. These benefits may directly help victims to enhance their self-worth, to achieve happiness and satisfaction, and to develop a sense of security on one hand and may ensure better adaptation on the other (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, to some extent, unforgiveness not only improves the emotional well-being (happiness, satisfaction) of victims but also consolidates their psychological (self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy and purpose in life) and social well-being (social actualization and social acceptance) aspects.

The study findings also suggest that unforgiveness causes a feeling of betrayal, induces personal and relational threats and leads to a feeling of harassment in victims. These study findings have been mirrored in previous studies too. For example, studies suggest that holding grudges negatively impacts well-being (Rye et al., 2004) and relationships (Bono et al., 2008). These may be assumed to denote challenges before the well-being outcomes of people.

The study findings may have significant theory and practice implications. It is noticeable that unforgiveness bears positive and negative consequences for victims and thus, it suggests that promoting forgiveness is not appropriate in all life situations. Understanding the role of unforgiveness in well-being may be of help in clinical and counselling situations. These new findings may act as a background to understand the constructs of self-development and well-being in the light of current findings of unforgiveness.

It may be concluded that unforgiveness was described to extend benefit to the victims on one hand and to pose some challenges to their well-being on the other. Enhanced happiness/satisfaction, adaptation, self-worth, and an enhanced sense of security were described as the major facilitators of well-being while the feeling of betrayal, personal threats, relational threats and harassment were reported as some obstacles.

Limitations and future directions

This study is not without limitations. Unforgiveness is related to the life experiences of people and it is assumed that the older we get the more experiences we gather. Thus, the recruitment of the participants with a young age range (20-36 yrs.) is the first limitation. The majority of the participants belong to the Hindu community which is another limitation, as each religion has its perspective of forgiveness and unforgiveness. There is a significant gender difference in the level of forgiveness and thus, gender differences in unforgiveness experiences of the participants may be examined in future studies. Future studies may also investigate unforgiveness concerning other religions such as Jainism, Buddhism etc.

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