NARRATIVES ABOUT FORGIVENESS
ACROSS INDIAN MIDDLE AGED AND OLDER ADULTS

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Forgiveness begins as a thought process that helps us to be content with ourselves, our interactions with others, and the circumstances of our lives. Narrative thematic analysis was conducted with 39 Indian men and women across middle age (40-65 years) and old age (65 years and above) on their perception and pattern of forgiveness. The analysis revealed a strong influence of gender on forgiveness, with reflections over self- and other- forgiveness that change with age. Men and women across both age groups shared their willingness and ability to forgive and the reasoning involved therein. Examining the deficits in literature on gendered aspect of forgiveness across middle aged and adults in old age, the study also highlights implications for further research and counselling.

Keywords: midlife, old age, self-forgiveness, other-forgiveness, gender, culture

Forgiveness occurs when a person lets go of emotionally backed judgments, grievances, attack thoughts and beliefs toward themselves and others. This helps them perceive the goodness, worth, magnificence, innocence, love, and peace in both themselves and the other person simultaneously (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). This positive individual trait, largely studied in the western countries, reverberates in positive psychology as an intentional and voluntary process that involves a change in emotion and attitude regarding an offender (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989). With the focus mainly on the lay conceptualizations of forgiveness and its benefits for the individual/s directly involved in the transgression (i.e., victim and perpetrator, or married couple) (DiDonato, McIlwee, & Carlucci, 2015; Mellor, Fung, & Binti Mamat, 2012), research work in the west and non-western context has been

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deficit on the gendered notion of forgiveness. In fact, few studies which investigated forgiveness in non-western samples (Sandage & Williamson, 2005) have focused on the adolescents (Pareek, Mathur, & Mangnani, 2016), college students (Suchday, Friedberg, & Almeida, 2006; Tripathi & Mullet, 2010), and role of religion in forgiveness (Duggi & Kamble, 2014; Toussaint, Kamble, Marschall, & Duggi, 2015). Especially in the Indian scenario, where population is both multi-faith (consists of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, and practitioners of tribal religions) and multi-lingual, different religious doctrines resonate forgiveness. For example, in *Bhagwad Gita,[3]* a central tenet is forgiveness (*kshama* in Sanskrit), which has been defined as an unaffected condition of mind of a person even while being reviled or chastised; it implies lack of emotional upset or impassivity and tolerance (*Titiksha)* under difficult circumstances (Kodandaramayya, 2004; Temoshok & Chandra, 2000). Similar qualities are praised in Buddhism in the form of striving for a state of non-anger (*akrodah*). In Islam, forgiveness finds expression in three terms mentioned in Qur'an: '*afw* (pardon, to excuse an offence); *safhn* (to turn away from sin or misdeed); *ghafara* (to cover, to forgive, and to remit), and in Christianity, words such as *eleao* (show mercy) and *ephiemi* (release, discharge, or put away) denote similar meaning (Pargament & Rye, 1998). In all the religions, it is more important for people to choose behaviours like giving up and letting go rather than controlling and holding on, in order to feel fully alive, competent, and creative – a concept similar to *sreyas* in the *Bhagwad Gita*, where *tusti*, contentment, is more important than *tripti*, pleasure and *sukha*, happiness. Even if most faiths encourage forgiveness, the exact circumstances under which forgiveness must be granted can vary from one person to the other (Mullet & Azar, 2009).

Researchers have also pointed towards the cultural differences (Hui & Chau, 2009; Kadiangandu, Mullet, & Vinsonneau, 2001) in forgiveness patterns among those who belong to collectivistic and individualistic cultures. In the collectivistic culture such as India, motivation to forgive is triggered by the aim to maintain group harmony, conform to the social norms, and adjust rather than confront the person or the situation. This aspect, according to Hook, Worthington Jr., and Utsey (2009) was termed as *collectivistic forgiveness*, "where a decision to forgive is (a) motivated primarily by social harmony

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[3] The dating of Hindu scriptures, as of pre-medieval South Asian history, is generally uncertain and controversial. A conventional consensus would put the final forms of the *Upanishads* and *Bhagwad Gita* at around 400 to 200 BCE. See translation and commentary by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1972), Manila: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.

and (b) occurs within a context that values reconciliation and relational repair" (p. 325). The influence of culture and religion on forgiveness cannot be avoided but the individual experience and the lay understandings of forgiveness (Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004) among older age groups and across genders maybe quite different from theoretical conceptualizations (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Whereas only few studies have actually examined the correlates of forgiveness, including gender, the present study aims to bring forth the processes involved in forgiveness across middle and old age as well as between genders in an Indian context through the analysis of narratives shared by both age groups.

Theoretical Perspectives on Forgiveness

The Kinds of Forgiveness

Different theoretical views on forgiveness overlap in the same way as the teachings in religious doctrines. The classic evolutionary view assumes the role of forgiveness as linked to increasing the survival chances of the larger group (Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, & Jackson, 1998; Komorita, Hilty, & Parks, 1991), whereas the grudge theory (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1999) conceptualizes forgiveness in both intrapsychic and interpersonal process (Misztal, 2011). In contemporary times, two theories of forgiveness dominate the research. First, the multi-level model by McCullough (2000) where forgiveness is seen as providing an alternative to maladaptive psychological responses such as rumination and suppression (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Second, the three dimensional model of dispositional forgiveness by Thompson et al. (2005) where forgiveness is seen as freeing from a negative attachment to the source that has transgressed against a person. The source of transgression can be *oneself* (that is, releasing resentment-shame, guilt, or regret towards oneself for the perceived transgression or wrongdoing) (DeShea & Wahkinney, 2003), *another person* (marital infidelity and betrayal in relationships), or *a situation* (natural disasters, road accidents, examination related suicides) viewed as out of one's control. The present study utilizes the second model in order to understand forgiveness towards self and others.

Research has also shown that both lowered self- and other-forgiveness has given rise to different styles of functioning. An 'intrapunitive' style was associated with lack of self-forgiveness, where the person often sees himself

or herself as damaged, unworthy of acceptance, and internalize blame, and an 'extra punitive' style represented lower other-forgiveness constituting of revenge, holding grudges, and blaming others for apparent transgressions (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001). In many instances, 'unilateral forgiveness'[4] where a victim forgives an unrepentant perpetrator (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) has facilitated the other kinds of forgiveness to unfold. According to Worthington and Scherer (2004), decisional forgiveness might happen based on one's beliefs about future interactions with a transgressor and it may go hand-in-hand or diverge in interesting ways with emotional forgiveness, which is rooted in a subset of negative emotions. Although views on the exact nature of forgiveness vary, the consensus is that it is beneficial to people (McCullough, 2000). Each kind of forgiveness has its own pertinent role in influencing the journey of individuals over time, contributing to their emotional, physical, and mental health.

Across Ages

Aging is a universal experience for humans with diversity in meaning and interpretation (Prakash, 2003). The capacity to react constructively when faced with interpersonal conflicts might be associated with successful aging (Bono & McCullough, 2004; Mullet & Girard, 2000). In the present study, the theoretical underpinnings for age range of middle and old aged participants are based on Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stage theory. Middle adulthood (40-65 years), the seventh psychosocial stage amongst the eight lifespan stages, is a time of competition between the demands of work and family (Havighurst, 1972). The complexity of multiple roles and relationships become dominant (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Merline, 2001) and inability to manage both effectively can give rise to lack of resolve for the issue of 'stagnation versus generativity' resulting in feelings of regret and a sense of purposelessness in adults. During this time, forgiveness tends to get associated with one of the most common fallacies, which is pity, in relation to a spouse or children. It happens on the grounds of duty or sympathy or appeal to duty, where behaviour is based on 'I must do this,' 'I should feel that,' and 'they should do this' (Sternberg & Jordon, 2005). In a Hong Kong based study, 71 middle and older men and women of different socioeconomic levels talked about younger generations and the society (Cheng, Chan, & Chan, 2008). Many

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[4] This includes 'trend forgiveness,' 'temporary forgiveness' (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), decisional and emotional forgiveness.

commented on how their attempts to help were often brushed aside or even criticized by their own offspring who were accustomed to different lifestyles and ways of doing things. To avoid conflict and to preserve harmony, they withdrew to more passive and minor generative roles.

The final psychosocial stage of 'ego integrity verses despair' related to identity of old people (65 and above), who go through the developmental task of retrospection. This process starts around 60 years and abate around 70 or 80 years (Butler, 1963), where the life lived is reintegrated and analyzed either through regret or fulfillment. People face their own mortality as the end of life nears, resulting in higher 'pro-social' interpersonal orientation - to maintain a core network of close, emotionally satisfying relationships (Van Lange et al., 1997). This was well supported with Carstensen's (1991) socio-emotional selectivity theory, which highlights that the salience of social goals changes as one age due the perception of time as closed ended. A French study on 18-90 years adults where people in the older category tend to forgive more readily (Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998) also confirmed these theoretical assertions.

Across Gender

Western studies in the past have found that women forgive more than men as it is their expected mode of behaviour (Harris, 2002; Mellor, Fung, & Binti Mamat, 2012; Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008) but such gender differences may also be attributed to the differences in socialization. Women are usually socialized to place more emphasis on emotions (e.g., expressive) and relationships (e.g., nurturing) (Bakan, 1966; Taylor et al., 2000) resulting in identity becoming closely tied to social roles and commitments during midlife. In an Indian collectivistic culture, for a married woman, the concept of *Jōdi* (as a couple) is of prime importance within a matrimony, which is still considered a sacred institution connecting not just two individuals but two families (Sandilya & Shahnawaz, 2014). This societal concept is believed to be the reason behind why many women, despite their economic independence, choose to suffer in a bad marriage (Kakar & Kakar, 2007) and why forgiveness becomes the key to sustain their relationship. On the contrary, for men, who are socialized to emphasize agency, action, and problem solving (Baron-Cohen, 2002), thoughts of forgiveness or empathy may represent a major perspective shift, one in which attention is transferred from agency and justice

concerns to relational concerns (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Therefore, until about 40, men and women have concentrated on obligations to family and society, and have developed those aspects to personality that helped them reach external goals. It is only around late midlife, they both seek a 'union of opposites' by expressing their previously 'disowned aspects' and shift their preoccupation to their inner, spiritual selves (Jung, 1933). For example, men at this age show interiority (Neugarten, 1977) and tend to become more nurturing and expressive and less obsessed with personal achievement (Vaillant, 2000). Eventually, both begin to display higher levels of identity certainty, power, and a leveling off of generativity in their 60s (Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004). Gilligan's (1982) approach to morality is yet another theoretical possibility, which the present study utilizes to examine the male and female notions of morality and their association with forgiveness.

Shaping Forgiveness: Influencing Factors

Earlier, in 1988, Fridja's twelve laws of emotions facilitated the understanding between predominance of certain emotions and the resultant forgiveness. The present study utilizes two of these laws namely, *law of concern,* where a close relationship with a person or an event aids in forgiveness; and *law of comparative feeling,* where intensity of emotion depends on the relationship between an event and some frame of reference against which the event is evaluated. In line with Fridja's laws, studies have shown that closeness, commitment, and satisfaction *as relationship qualities* enable the couples to forgive offenses of their partner more quickly (McCullough, 2000; Sandilya & Shahnawaz, 2014). In 1997, McCullough and his colleagues included the factors such as *proximal* (the way the victims think and feel about the offender and the offense, for example, attributions, ruminative thoughts, and empathetic concerns) and *distal* (e.g., the relationship qualities of intimacy, closeness, satisfaction, and commitment) as determinants of forgiveness. Other variables that gained equal impetus around early 20th century were *careworthiness* (when the victim perceives that the transgressor is an appropriate target for moral concern), *expected value* (when a victim anticipates that the relationship will have future utility), and concern for *safety* (transgressors seem safe when they seem unwilling or unable to harm their victims again) (Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Knutson & Wimmer, 2006; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). In addition, both the warmth-based virtues such as compassion, empathy, and altruism (Berry & Worthington, 2001), which complement the conscientiousness based

virtues (e.g., responsibility, honesty, duty, and accountability) were assigned higher value in forgiveness studies. For example, Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross (2005) found that people high on warmth based virtues tend to feel more positively toward transgressors and are more likely to forgive.

A further review of literature has revealed *cognitive and emotional processes* such as rumination, suppression, or empathy, being related to person's ability to forgive (Worthington, 2005). On other occasions, *situational factors* such as apology (Berry & Worthington, 2001) may be held as a basic requirement for forgiveness (Mullet & Azar, 2009). Finally, a discussion on influencing factors would be incomplete without a reference to time. 'Time is a great healer' is a statement spoken and heard much too frequently. People will perceive themselves to make relatively large strides in forgiveness early in the process (Wixted, 2004; Wohl & McGrath, 2007) but still can take a long time to forgive completely (North, 1998). The phase of life, age, and gender of the person can play a pertinent role in forgiveness process.

Methodology

The Research Questions

The motivation to conduct this study came from the first author's difficulty to forgive self and others at a certain period in her life's journey. Hence, the research questions were largely exploratory and descriptive in nature (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and sought to understand the story behind forgiveness process in men and women of different age groups. They were:

(a) How is forgiveness of self and other perceived across Indian men and women?

(b) What are the similarities and the differences in forgiveness patterns of middle and old aged adults?

These questions were explored under an interpretivist paradigm which attempts neither to uncover a single truth from the experiential accounts of participants nor tries to achieve external verification of the analysis (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the design for the study enabled interactive researcher–participant dialogue to develop, which was achieved through enabling participants to share their experiences in their own way and at their own pace. Furthermore, an internally consistent and meaningful qualitative research is

built on three philosophical assumptions, namely ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Creswell, 2003; Drisko, 1997). The ontological assumption was one of constructivism, where experientially diverse realities were taken into account as constructed by the participants themselves, who experienced, processed, and labeled the reality of their forgiveness process as they lived it day to day (Schwandt, 2000). Aligning with this ontological consideration is an epistemological position that aims to understand participants' lived experiences through the person-in-context (van Manen, 1997). An empathic stance was taken by the first author[5] during the in-depth interviews with the participants. This is similar to empathic understanding under interpretative paradigm. Therefore, the role of the first author as a researcher was similar to that of a *person-centered counselor*, who, in order to understand the experiential world of the participants, listened to their experiences empathically and neither judged nor questioned the external validity of what was shared (Willig, 2012). Lastly, the methodology utilized in the study was descriptive narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1988) that seeks to describe the individual narratives of particular life episodes and the function that particular life episodes serve in the plot of individual's life (Budziszewska & Dryll, 2013; Sandelowski, 1991). Hence, retrospective oral narrative accounts (Pólya, Kis, Naszódi, & László, 2007) of the participants were considered, which helped us to focus on the "organisational scheme expressed in story form" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13). This choice of methodology was based on the belief that individuals live their lives in storied narratives where "narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative" (Bruner, 1987, p. 12; László, 2008).

Participants

Convenience sampling was used in the study. With 19 adults in middle age (8 females and 11 males) and 20 adults in old age (11 females and 9 males), 39 adults were studied. Though two age groups of this sample were based on divisions used in lifespan development literature by Erikson (1968) — middle adulthood (40-65 years) and old age (65 years plus) — the participants in the older adulthood were under the age of 80 years. The sample included graduate adults belonging to any community and religious faith and from middle socio-economic status from the union territory of New Delhi. The basic information pertaining to composition of the family, work, lifestyle,

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[5] The first author collected the data and completed the analysis, which was rechecked by the second author. This process aided in establishing inter-rater reliability.

and other socio-demographic questions of age, place of stay (Hornberger, Zabriskie, & Freeman, 2010), were also covered through the demographic sheet. The data was collected with the help of home visits as well as contacting different yoga and walking groups within the demographic. Participants were not compensated for their time.

A semi-structured interview schedule comprising three questions was prepared and pilot tested. The interview allowed the participants to reflect deeply on their own forgiveness process and these retrospective accounts were grouped under several sub-plots with the help of narrative analysis (see section on analysis). During the process of interviews, a technique called creative interviewing was used. Here, researcher communicated her own feelings and thoughts that assured the participants that they can, in turn, share the same (Douglas, 1985). This technique facilitated mutual disclosure between the researcher and the participants for deeper reflections and sharing on the part of the participants. For example, one of the female middle-aged participants was hesitant to share her story and gave more abstract perspective than the specific circumstances related to forgiving process. Then I [first author] responded, "*You know many times, I myself find it hard to forgive some people who I share a close relationship with me…I don't know what I am supposed to do.*" This sharing from my side helped the participant to begin sharing the specificities of her story and she responded, "…*exactly same I feel and then I need to come up with the ways to forgive because one cannot leave these relationships, they are meaningful to me. I have come up with my own philosophy of forgiveness.*" This creative interviewing became the part of reflexivity[6] and guided the research process.

Informed consent, confidentiality, and dealing with vulnerability of the participants and sensitive interview topics were an integral part of the ethical approval process (Palmer, forthcoming). In this process, it was recognized that participants might feel vulnerable during the interview process, and anxious while sharing their conflicting emotions over betrayal and forgiveness. Hence, steps were taken to provide participants with a support structure by sharing the area of inquiry of the research beforehand with the participants, and to ask non-probing questions during the interview process that would allow them to share what they feel they want to share.

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[6] Self-awareness of the relationship between the researcher, the researched, and the context (Mann, 2016)

Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed by the first author. The transcripts (conventionally referred to as 'protocols') were reviewed by the second author by listening to the recorded interviews and simultaneously checking for errors or missing information. This added to inter-rater reliability and enhanced the descriptive validity too. Among the many models available for conducting narrative analysis (Riessman, 2003), narrative thematic analysis was chosen for this study. This kind of analysis focuses "on the content of a text, 'what' is said more than 'how' it is said" (Riessman, 2003, p. 2). In analyzing the stories of the participants, the ideas of Polkinghorne (1988) and Mishler (1986) were followed. The steps are detailed below and the table showing the core stories (Table 1) is provided for the reader's reference.

(a) As the transcripts were read, re-read, and analysed for several weeks, various sub-plots were identified. These sub-plots, according to Polkinghorne (1988), can be developed by the researcher's own course of action by looking into how a plot weaves different events together including the *treatment of characters* (narrator's egocentric perspective only vs. the perspective of other people as well—a de-centered one) and *the setting*, the most important of which is story time (awareness of change, reaching into the past and future) (Habermas & De Silveira, 2008; Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2002).

(b) In these sub-plots (as part of emplotment process: see Emden, 1998), we looked for the ways participants sorted their life events to create differently formed narratives, for example, a story once told as tolerating a relationship became the story of forgiveness in another telling. These various sub-plots garnered from the interviews pointed towards the core stories shared by the participants, which highlighted the core-themes in the process of analyses. The core-themes that were chosen were common to all the participants' plots.

(c) The core stories were categorized under three main themes (Table 1) and for the purpose of categorization, abbreviations for the following terms were used: self-forgiveness as SF and other-forgiveness as OF.

Table 1.

Showing the three main themes and their sub-themes based on the narrative thematic analysis.

MAIN THEMES (or Core Stories)	GENDER / AGE	SUB-THEMES (or Sub-plots)	
		Middle Age	*Old Age*
Self-forgiveness (SF) & Other-forgiveness (OF)	Women	Tolerance (OF) Care (OF) High on guilt (SF)	Commitment (SF) Concern (OF)
	Men	Regret & self-blame (SF) Letting go difficult (SF) Justice perspective (OF) High involvement in family Compensation	Pity (OF) Time as limited (OF) Self as limited Tolerance (OF)
Forgiveness as foolishness	Women	Unilateral forgiveness (OF) Tolerance Apology not significant (OF)	Reflection Balance of self and others (SF & OF)
	Men	Decisional forgiveness (OF) Higher reliance on self (SF)	Decentered view Belief in higher power (SF & OF)
Forgiveness as coping and healing	Women	Distal factors Commitment	Empathy
	Men	Proximal factors Timing of transgression	Less rumination Forgive and forget Empathy

These themes will be discussed in the following section presenting diverse reasoning given by adults when they choose to forgive or compromise with a situation without forgiveness.

Perception of Self- and Other-Forgiveness Across Gender and Ages

Men and women in middle adulthood saw forgiveness as a way to be in the relationship, adjust and tolerate small things – a way of life similar to Titiksha (tolerance or forbearance) as preached in Bhagwad Gīta and Buddhism. Tolerance while representing an egocentric narrative (Habermas & De Silveira, 2008) was a significant sub-theme in the narratives of females. The relational factors such as commitment, closeness, and concern (McCullough, 2000) became the basis of tolerating a relationship, which they valued. This increased the likelihood of middle aged females to forgive others or the situations easily, for example, one of whom who reported, "*I do feel hurt sometimes by what my husband or my grown up children say but staying together means adjusting to each other and letting go simultaneously.*" In the same line, another female participant shared, "*forgiving the close ones becomes important as there is no way out, and you've to be with them.*" This thought process of linking care component with forgiveness also parallels Fridja's (1988) law of concern and Gilligan's (1982) second level of moral reasoning, that is, the conventional stage where blaming others could be a threat to their relationship. Given the fact that in collectivistic culture such as India, women are entrusted with 'responsibility orientation' (Gilligan, 1982), they tend to compromise in order to maintain peace and harmony in relationships (Hook et al., 2009). For example, a middle aged woman shared, "*be good to others, it's your duty*" and in same line, another woman reflected, "*once you care for a person, anger disappears after a while.*" Most of the women in this age group found themselves in excessive rumination about an event or relationship resulting in feeling guilty. This whole cultural socialization on giving more importance to others' desires resulted in low self- forgiveness responses. As one of them stated, "*only if I had been at home and not at my sister's place when he had that argument with my son, things would not have gone that far. This happened because of me.*" Another one shared, "*I should not have brought up that issue at that time. Probably he was not in a good mood and he got very angry…screamed at me due to which I got hurt.*" This depicted an intra-punitive style of functioning (Maltby et al., 2001), which helped them to safeguard relationships by compromising, holding themselves responsible for various things they confront in life, and balancing out things with respect to others.

Middle aged men's narratives, on the other hand, depicted much lower self- and other-forgiveness. This can be explained as until 40, those aspects of personality have been concentrated that has helped men reach external goals. At midlife, the focus turns towards their inner selves and they seek, what Jung (1933) called 'union of opposites,' where previously disowned parts of personality such as nurturance for children and care for spouse are expressed, for example, "*I wanted to do really well in my job, now I'm at such top position which I earned with my hard work but yes I missed out on many things at my family front.*" As they tend to blame themselves for not being there so much for their children's upbringing (e.g., "*one does what one thinks is right but I took many things for granted and I don't feel right about it*"), it results in disappointments and then a planning to be more involved in relationships and family matters (e.g.,"*I like to help my wife to pick up groceries or my children in the decisions related to career and jobs but I don't think so they need my help....they have a life of their own just like I did*"). As greater reflection and introspection with stocktaking of roles and relationships becomes the essence for men at midlife (Jung, 1933), men begin to invest more in relationships. In this process of dealing with grown up children who have a mind, life, and priorities of their own, and a spouse who is more deeply involved with her children by this time, men tend to get hurt repeatedly (e.g., "*It's hurting when children start arguing with you a lot*"), and have greater difficulty letting go of hurt (e.g., "*Times are such...children these days are more independent and self-focused. They don't want to listen to anybody. I don't know what will happen to future generations*"). This makes them less forgiving towards the other. With a justice orientation (Gilligan, 1982) in their reasoning behind dealing with relationships, for example, "*be cautious when forgive*"; "*once done bad, square it up there and then,*" an extra-punitive style (Maltby et al., 2001) becomes a dominant way to see forgiveness. As a result, others are blamed (e.g., "*Well, you see, you can't disown your family if they hurt you*") and one tends to hold grudges which leads to frustration, anger, disappointment, and hurt feelings owing to unmet expectations (e.g., "*maybe one day they will change").* The realities of their relationships and disappointments with self, make them difficult to forgive amidst the socialization of childhood, which has taught them to be tough rather than to be tolerant (e.g. "*You must forgive, no matter what*"). Therefore, for middle aged men and women, forgiveness happens when there is no other choice, which largely falls within the domain of identified motivation – where one has to act due to the necessity even if one does not enjoy it (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). This made forgiveness difficult to practice for both men and women at midlife and to free oneself of negativity.

In old age, higher numbers of forgiveness responses were witnessed towards self and others and these were defined as freedom from anger and movement towards contentment (Kumar, 2006). There were gender differences in the reasoning behind forgiveness where the narratives of women reflected being less critical and more accepting of themselves, greater expression of their thoughts and feelings, such as, *"I have done my duty and did it very well to take care of others, now I have to do certain things for myself and I am very vocal about it."* Only when women enter the stage of post-conventional morality, according to Gilligan (1982), around late midlife or old age, they begin to realize the compromises they have made and try to find a balance to express their desires. As a result, higher self- and other-forgiveness was observed in older women with greater rationalization and justification for their feelings of being hurt – *"if there are some people that hurt you, there are some other people also who always give you happiness."* This becomes easier for them as through the process of child-rearing and negotiating discrepant situations, their identity and intimacy develop together (Erikson, 1968) enabling them to maintain meaningful relationships. For example, *"I've been a wife and a mother and I've balanced my role well enough"*; *"there is a time when we have to let go our children and believe in decisions they've made."* Forgiveness in old age for both men and women was defined a deliberate attempt with justification for each situation or person. Furthermore, aspects such as closeness, value of relationship with acceptance of one's life (whether good or bad), made both old men and women forgive either because of pity (Sternberg & Jordan, 2005) or due to the perception of time as limited (as one is nearing end of life) (Abramowitz, 1992; Cartensen, 1991). Analysis pointed out to numbers of emotion-focused coping responses too (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) ranging from keeping themselves *"busy with grandchildren"* or *"praying"* to distracting oneself by *"joining old members' club"* and *"going for walks."* The present-oriented goals and emotional aspirations became predominant, which helped them perform generativity related tasks (Erikson, 1968) such as *"taking care of grandchildren"* and *"helping in household chores."* Though many of them also reported *"unhappiness or disappointments"* with the way their children behaved with them or neglected them, and that they *"still feel hurt too"*; there was an acceptance of this reality, and *"still a willingness and desire to forgive."* Therefore, irrespective of gender, *"an apology"* or *"acknowledgement of wrong-doing"* by the transgressor helped reduce negativity and made forgiveness easier.

Forgiveness, across ages and gender, was described as a way to live life and to maintain those relationships, which were need-based and significant. The process of forgiving oneself, another, or a situation was strongly associated by participants with how one's relationship or a situation, the past experiences, and attitudes, were perceived coupled with the present-oriented demands of work and family.

Is Forgiveness Foolishness?

A general consensus was observed in middle and old aged participants about forgiveness bordering on foolishness if it is repeated for the same person or situation. During middle adulthood, the narratives of men showed a greater difficulty forgiving and they admitted that forgiveness happened only due to the idea of interacting with the perpetrator in future at workplace or in community. This was more in line with decisional forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), which helped men to get the work done while tolerating the transgressor. Women's narratives, on the other hand, showed either one of the two different kinds of reasoning. One group of women defined themselves as "emotional fools" by not seeking an apology. This made them very high on unilateral forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) where they hoped that things would change for the better. As one of the female participants shared, "*I forgive everyone without taking much time. What else can I do? If ultimately there's no other option, why waste time.*" Other group of women saw forgiveness itself as foolishness if it was done out of pity or in the absence of proper reasoning/justification or an apology; for example, one of them shared, *"saying that you forgive someone because you pity him or because you think he can't do any better, are not reasons enough to forgive."* Women in both groups agreed that only when one has accepted oneself, the others, and the reality of their relationships (abusive or compassionate), the disappointments transform into forgiving oneself and others/situations. Research suggests that in many ways, women self-deceive themselves, and develop the tendency to use their hopes, needs, and desires to construct the way they see the world (Triandis, 2009), and hence, forgive eventually. Hence, forgiveness, for men and women at midlife, was an inevitable thing which happened with greater difficulty. There was remarkable shift in worldview at old age, a greater decentration in view was evident where both of them saw forgiveness as a way of life, and did not equate with foolishness. Forgiveness was valued as a virtue in old age. As a male participant stated, "*forgiveness is essential for smooth sailing,*" while another

female participant added, "*it is a virtue to forgive.*" For them, irrespective of their religious faith, life itself happened in the context of a higher power, which is fair and knows the purpose in everything.

The Intensity of Forgiveness and its Relation to Coping and Healing

Concern and care for another person as distal factors (McCullough et al., 1997) form the basis and intensity of forgiveness, which further gets strengthened with commitment to that relationship (spouse, children, or friends). This adds to the process of coping in middle aged men and women, who saw forgiveness as "*a means to be in a relationship one values*" but also "*to be cautious and maintain distance as forgiveness doesn't equate to taking the other person back.*" Certain proximal factors such as "*less rumination,*" "*belief in forgive and forget*" also played an essential role in coping with the situation, but empathy for the transgressor (Eaton & Struthers, 2006) was the most significant aspect in forgiveness process. As a middle aged man reported, "*I tend to place myself in another person's situation and then I feel less hurt and also that I might have reacted as he did.*" Middle aged adults believed that to cope with stressful situations/people in life, forgiveness was important. On the other hand, during old age, aspects such as care worthiness (e.g., "*forgiveness depends on the kind of relation I share with other person, and it is easier for family members*"), expected value (e.g., "*I need to forgive my closed ones, I need their support*"), and safety (e.g., "*I live with my children, what's the point in remaining angry with them*") were strongly associated with the healing aspect of forgiveness (Knutson & Wimmer, 2006). Forgiveness was defined as "*a virtue to be practiced* "; as "*a medicine that heals you,*" and as "*an act that reduces the bitterness.*"

Moreover, the intensity of forgiveness also depended on timing of the transgression for both men and women across ages. For example, an old man stated, "*If I'm going through a bad phase in life and the other person knowing so cheats me or harms me, then it's very difficult to forgive him/her.*" Also, there was a greater belief that if forgiveness can happen in one situation and towards one person then it can be generalized to other situations and persons as well. This reasoning equates with Fridja's (1988) law of comparative feeling, where most participants compared forgiveness to a standard which they had achieved in the past so it was easier to achieve in future as well. For example, a middle-aged man reported, "*Forgiveness means forget otherwise one is still full of pride and ego*"; and in the same line, an old woman shared, "*I give my best, then I'm not*

responsible if the other person is still not ok." With all these aspects intensifying the forgiveness process, some warmth based virtues such as compassion and altruism (e.g., "*ultimately one has to forgive*"; "*other person is there in your destiny to teach you something*") (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, & O'Connor, 2001) also played a crucial role.

In addition, coping and healing which came through forgiveness were significantly related to the 'aspect of time' where greater lapse of time facilitated the reduction of negativity towards the transgressed person / situation. With the time factor playing its part, narratives of forgiveness across age and gender also included the faith in forgiving due to the belief in different religious scriptures which facilitated the attitude that "*there is a higher power*" due to which "*justice and fairness will be done to all in due course of time*" and "*there is no point in holding on to the negative feelings as even God doesn't want so.*" Especially, in old age, forgiveness was found equivalent to intrinsic motivation (see Deci & Ryan, 2000), for example, as reflected by an old man, "*one cannot live life with anger, how far can I be angry at this stage of my life….forgiveness answers all.*" While forgiveness was linked to the spiritual, psychological, and physical wellbeing (similar to *sreyas* in Bhagwad Gīta) (Hunter, 2007), it was also believed to "*give true peace of mind otherwise there is constant struggle with oneself*" and be "*the only way a life could be lived.*" As different factors contributed towards forgiveness, it also depended on the person's ability and capacity to forgive under different circumstances and for various people who came across in one's life.

Discussion

"Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness makes you grow beyond what you were" - a quote by Cherie Carter Scott (1999) reflects very simply the scope and profundity of the phenomenon called forgiveness in human life. While hurt and forgiveness are regular features of human experience, there is no single definition of forgiveness (Jeffress, 2001). However, the predominant narrative across both ages and gender was the belief of the participants that forgiveness reduces anger and negativity caused by the transgressor. Yet, it was perceived differently when an analysis was made for self- and other-forgiveness where females depicted greater guilt and less self-forgiveness in comparison to males in middle age. On the contrary, a greater number of female narratives in old age highlighted self-forgiveness in comparison to old aged males. Still, forgiveness can be a problem for many

people simply because they are not clear about what forgiveness actually is. All too often, forgiveness narratives get confused with reconciliation, the larger process of which forgiveness is but one part. The study provides different reasoning on forgiveness amidst the theoretically rich perspectives drawn from the fields of gender, morality, and psychosocial development. These perspectives guide the narrative thematic analysis especially to understand various themes related to compromise, tolerance, and care and its relation to forgiveness as well as when forgiveness is equated with foolishness. Hence, narrative thematic analysis facilitated to explore the intention of how and why forgiveness happens and thereby, allowing to communicate the meanings to the reader from the perspective of the participants. These meanings further clarified that forgiveness, as a process progressing with age and with evolving roles and relationships in one's life, contributed to the differences in narratives of males and females across ages. Moreover, the themes analyzed have implications for research and counselling, as discussed below.

For Research

The study is limited in the domain of small sample size and the results can be viewed as the stories of selected group in a given time and location. Hence, large scale studies can be designed including people from different socio-economic status and professions to examine the forgiveness patterns. In addition, the sample of the study had too narrow geographic range— that is, taken from a single location, Delhi, to achieve rich data and depth in the study. Therefore, an inter-state analysis or a comparison of rural-urban middle and old aged population could be considered to make the results more generalizable. Additionally, future research can also focus on role of childhood experiences in forgiveness patterns; and personality traits and its relationship to forgiveness.

For Counselling

The study has laid the groundwork to look into the cultural and the gendered aspects of reasoning behind forgiveness. This can further facilitate to design therapeutic work with the two age groups by helping them to work through their feelings and reconcile with self and others (Hong & Jacinto, 2012). Additionally, to make individuals aware of development of self-empathy is an essential component (Kurtz & Ketchum, 1993), which will help them understand that certain situations in life are beyond their control and they did

everything what was in their capacity. Hong & Jacinto (2012) have suggested the use of journal methods such as the experience inventory, unsent letter, and artwork to create awareness about client's feelings, thoughts, and reflections about the relationship with the person chosen to be forgiven or in forgiving the self. These practices would help to deepen emotional process and find a connection between past and future. Furthermore, group and community interventions can assist people in midlife and older age group to overcome the sense of guilt in their close and distant relationships, be more accepting towards themselves and in turn accept the changing others and situations as they arise in one's life.

Conclusion

Forgiveness takes different forms and meanings for different people and matures with each stage of life. The study is embedded in a non-western socio-cultural context of urban India. The differences seen in the narratives of middle and old aged men and women not only reflect differences in how one is socialized but also how one accepts oneself over a period of time. The study has filled a significant gap in literature by presenting gendered perspective on forgiveness. It has set the stage for further research in the area as well as in the related fields. It has also offered recommendations for the guided therapy work that can enhance the process of forgiveness among middle aged and older adults.

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