

Childhood Abuse, Empathy, and Forgiveness in Young Adults

Ramla Tariq* & Afifa Anjum

Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between young adults' empathy, forgiveness, and childhood abuse. The association among childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young people was predicted to be significant. The variables were analyzed cross-sectionally using a quantitative correlational research approach. Young adults with a mean age of 21.34 years ($SD = 2.54$) were recruited for the sample ($N = 119$; $n = 58$ boys, $n = 61$ girls) using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. Data were gathered from a university. To evaluate the research variables, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998), the Empathy Quotient (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004), the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005), and a demographics sheet were employed. The study's findings showed a significant positive correlation between the forgiveness of young adults and their experiences of emotional and childhood maltreatment. Additionally, sexual abuse was positively correlated with empathy. However, empathy was not a significant predictor of forgiveness. The findings have been discussed in the context of the Pakistani setting and relevant scientific literature.

Keywords: childhood abuse, empathy, forgiveness

Introduction

Social environment and social relations are undoubtedly the most important childhood experiences and are pivotal in early development and later adult attachments. Poor social environment, maltreatment or abuse during the early years of life affects one's personality and life in various ways (Arnou, 2004; Teicher et al., 2022). The present study focuses on how the experience of sexual abuse influences one's ability to be empathetic and forgiving. The child welfare information gateway (2016) identifies three categories of abuse: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Physical abuse is "any non-accidental physical injury to a child, such as striking, kicking, burning, or biting, or any action that results in the child's physical impairment". Furthermore, emotional abuse is defined as "damage to the child's psychological capability or emotional stability as indicated by an observable or significant change in behavior, emotional reaction, or cognition, as well as injury as evidenced by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or violent behavior" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). These early negative life experiences, including maltreatment and abuse, significantly impair the development of empathy (Berzenski & Yates, 2022; Horwitz et al., 2001). Empathy is the ability to comprehend and react suitably to the thoughts and emotions of another individual. Empathy can be divided into two components such as cognitive and affective. The ability to

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ms. Ramla Tariq, Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan
Email: ramlahsherazi@gmail.com

put oneself in another person's position, picture their mental and emotional states, and forecast their behavior based on these states is known as cognitive empathy. The desire to respond to other people's mental states emotionally is known as affective empathy (Decety & Jackson, 2004). The attachment theory, first proposed by Bowlby (1982; as cited in Flaherty & Sadler, 2011) in the mid-20th century, can be used to explain the relationship between childhood experiences and empathy. This theory suggests that early interactions with caregivers shape a child's internal model of relationships, influencing their ability to form and maintain connections in adulthood. Children who experience abuse or neglect may develop problems in close relationships such as insecure attachment styles, resulting in difficulties with the process of emotional regulation and empathy later in life. The lack of essential emotional support and understanding from caregivers often results in feelings of mistrust and insecurity, thereby, diminishing the capacity for emotional control and empathetic responses (Ainsworth et al., 2015).

Over the past years, a lot of research on forgiveness has been conducted within the context of early interpersonal transgressions (Toussaint et al., 2015). Numerous self-report measures of forgiveness have been developed as this field of study has expanded. Some of these measures concentrate on non-dispositional forgiveness, such as (a) forgiving someone else for a specific wrongdoing (McCullough et al., 1997), (b) forgiving someone else for multiple offences or maltreatments (Hargrave & Sells, 1997), or (c) forgiving someone within one's own family. Forgiveness is a psychological process of changing cognitions, emotions and attitudes (such as anger or resentment) towards an offender and overcoming the effects of the offensive act (Brady et al., 2023). A natural consequence of a traumatic or abusive experience is anger and hostility towards the abuser. Studies have shown that forgiveness is pivotal to mitigate the short-term as well as long-term consequences of trauma and to attain well-being later in life, thus, forgiveness has been utilized as a therapeutic strategy for trauma-related issues and other related problems (Reed & Enright, 2006; Vismaya et al., 2024; Wade et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Ghahari et al. (2019) explored the effects of the forgiveness skill on worry and pessimism in women who had experienced sexual abuse as children were examined in a study using a pretest-posttest design. The research was conducted on 30 women suffering from depressive symptoms who claimed that a relative had sexually assaulted them and who were sent to several psychological facilities in Tehran. The study sample was randomly assigned to either one of two 15-person experimental or control groups. Over the course of 12 sessions, each member of the test group received individualized care utilizing a forgiving approach, while members of the control group were put on a waiting list. At the beginning and conclusion of the session, both groups completed the worry and hopelessness scale. The findings of the study indicated that, following forgiveness training, women who had experienced sexual abuse exhibited varying degrees of depressive symptoms in both the control and experimental groups. However, the ability to forgive helps reduce stress and hopelessness in women who have endured childhood sexual assault (Ghahari et al., 2019). Childhood is a critical time for the development of empathy, or the ability to feel and comprehend the feelings of another person. Empathy is necessary for the formation and maintenance of strong social ties. Empathy is likely to be impaired in cases of child maltreatment because it depends on parental socialization for development (Berzenski & Yates, 2022). However, little study has been done to examine how

maltreatment affects the growth of empathy, and even less research has been done to examine how different maltreatment subtypes have distinct effects on this process. Given that, it can be concluded that various forms of maltreatment result in experiences that are qualitatively diverse, with unique impacts and underlying mechanisms.

Rationale of the Study

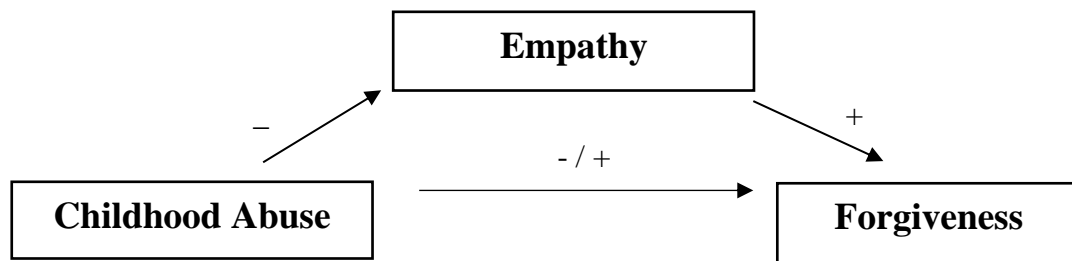
Childhood abuse is an important issue with long-term implications that can manifest in adulthood. Numerous studies have found a link between childhood abuse and adult levels of empathy, or the lack thereof. This means that those who have been through an abusive experience as children are more prone to struggle with empathy as they get older (Berzenski & Yates, 2022). Similarly, multiple studies have shown that adults who were abused as children felt anger, shame and remorse, and found it difficult to forgive themselves, others, and events. These people frequently carry the burden of their past abuse throughout their lives, making it difficult to move on and find peace (Orcutt et al., 2008). For the challenges faced by survivors of childhood abuse, several interventions have been developed to aid them in their journey toward rehabilitation. These interventions are intended to assist survivors in developing empathy and forgiveness skills, helping them find the peace and closure they deserve (Vismaya et al., 2024; Wade et al., 2014). Despite the advances made in this subject, there is still much opportunity for inquiry and experimentation. The impact of childhood abuse on empathy and forgiving capacity is important issue that needs to be investigated further. This study seeks to fill a knowledge gap by exploring how childhood abuse affects adult empathy and forgiving capacity. Individuals who have experienced childhood maltreatment are more likely to have low levels of empathy and forgiveness, according to this study. This is a critical assumption to evaluate because it has major implications for how we understand the impact of childhood abuse on the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals. Although childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young people are not new concepts in Pakistan, there has been very little study linking these characteristics. As a result, this research has the potential to considerably advance the corpus of knowledge on this subject. The study can assist in informing therapies aimed to support survivors of childhood abuse as they move towards healing and finding peace by shedding light on the complex relationship between childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness.

Hypotheses

H1: There is likely to be a significant relationship between childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young adults.

H2: Childhood abuse and empathy are likely to predict forgiveness in young adults.

H3: Empathy is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between childhood abuse and forgiveness in young adults.

Figure 1*Proposed Meditation Model of the Study***Method****Research Design**

This research used a correlational research design. A cross-sectional analysis of the variables was conducted. Responses from participants were gathered to see how childhood abuse affected the study variables.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

The participants in this study were chosen using a non-probability convenient sampling strategy. The total sample size was 119, with an age range of 18-35 ($M_{age} = 21.34$; $SD = 2.55$). The sample included 58 boys (48.7%) and 61 girls (51.3%). The sample was recruited for data collection according to the following specified inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

- Young adults only between the ages of 18 and 35.
- Young adults who came from intact households.

Exclusion Criteria

- This study did not include anyone with diagnosed psychopathology, as assessed through screening questions.
- Young adults who came from single-parent families.
- Young adults who lived with a guardian but without parents.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 119)*

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Men	58	48.7
Women	61	51.3
Birth Order		
First Born	37	31.09
Middle Born	45	37.82
Last Born	33	27.73
Only Child	4	3.36

Family System		
Nuclear	90	75.6
Joint	29	24.4

Assessment Measures

Demographic Information Sheet

The demographic sheet was the first questionnaire. Gender, age, number of siblings, birth order, monthly income, employment, residency, presence of physical and mental illness, family system, and participant's living arrangements were all considered. The demographic sheet was essential in this research because it provided us with important information about the participants. A consent form was also included.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998)

The Short Form of Childhood Trauma Questionnaire was used in the current research (CTQ-SF; Bernstein & Fink, 1998). It consists of 28 items, 25 of which assess general maltreatment experienced during childhood. The questionnaire is divided into five sub-scales, each with five items: emotional neglect (EN), physical neglect (PN), sexual abuse (SA), physical abuse (PA), and emotional abuse (EA). Three items are used to measure minimization/denial (M/D), also used as a validity measure. The first sentence of each of the 28 items is followed by the words "When I was growing up...". All five abuse and neglect subscales can have a range of 5 to 25 because they are all sums of values ranging from "never true" (scored 1) to "very often true" (scored 5). Good internal consistency scores demonstrate the CTQ's high level of reliability. The reported coefficients for sexual, physical and emotional abuse, emotional and physical neglect, range from .93 to .95, demonstrating their consistency (Hagborg et al., 2022).

Empathy Quotient (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004)

The Empathy Quotient (EQ) is a 60-item survey (also offered in 40-item and 10-item variants) used to measure an individual's levels of empathy. In the current study, 10 item version was used. If individuals strongly support the empathetic response, they will get a score of 2; a score of 1 for partial support, and a score of 0 for anything else. Clinically, mental health practitioners evaluate the degree of social impairment in conditions like autism using the empathy evaluations offered by the EQ. However, because empathy levels vary widely across people, even those who do not have any mental health conditions, it is also acceptable for use by the general public as a characteristic term indicating temperamental empathy. Across investigations, the EQ's overall Cronbach's alpha has been reported by the authors from 0.78 to 0.92. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of empathy. The scale has been used with nonclinical and community samples and yielded good psychometrics (Lawrence et al., 2004).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005)

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) was used to assess the level of forgiveness in the participants. This scale is an 18-item questionnaire that assesses tendency of forgiveness

(dispositional forgiveness) through self-report, rather than the ability to forgive an individual for a specific act or person. The HFS consists of three subscales, each having six items (“Forgiveness of Self”, “Forgiveness of Others”, and “Situational Forgiveness”) and the Total HFS. An excellent total internal consistency of 0.81 is achieved by the HFS, as reported by the authors. Additionally, the reliability of each subscale examined using Cronbach's alpha, produced the following results: 0.70 for self-forgiveness, 0.67 for others-forgiveness, and 0.79 for forgiveness of the given situations. The validity of the scale for young adult samples has been verified by earlier studies (e.g. Shepherd & Belicki, 2008). In the current study, overall scale score was used for analysis, indicating forgiveness as a trait. Higher score indicated higher levels of forgiveness.

Procedure

The study proposal was approved by the Board of Studies of Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Scales were administered after getting permission from the authors. Participants were thoroughly briefed regarding the nature, objectives, and potential risks before obtaining informed consent. The research data collection process emphasized the consent of the participants, voluntary nature of their participation and the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Participants were recruited from a major public university of Lahore. In order to mitigate psychological harm, various measures were implemented. The study used validated instruments, including, the childhood trauma questionnaire, empathy quotient and heartland forgiveness scales to reduce the risk of triggering or distressing questions. Furthermore, the participants with a history of any psychopathology or who came from single parent families were excluded to reduce the effect of existing vulnerabilities. All the participants were informed about the psychological support services that was available for them in case they experience any distress. Data collection was done individually in a confidential setting to ensure privacy. After the participants completed their questionnaires, they were debriefed about the study, addressing any issue experienced and provided contact for counselling services if required.

Ethical Considerations

- Consent was obtained from all participants to demonstrate their willingness to participate in the research.
- In addition, the participant information sheet was distributed to them in order to familiarize them with the research.
- It was ensured that no physical or psychological harm/disturbance was caused to the participants during the study.
- The participant's autonomy and the confidentiality of the data were preserved. It was not used for any other purpose than this research.
- Participants had the right to withdraw from research at any point.
- The accuracy of the results was guaranteed.

Results

This research examined the connection among childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young adults. Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis for scales and subscales was

done. Descriptive Analysis was used along with determining the reliabilities of the measures for the current sample. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to explore the relationship among childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young adults. Hierarchical regression analysis was used for prediction and mediation of empathy between childhood abuse and forgiveness. Independent sample t-test was used to analyze gender differences.

Table 2*Descriptive Characteristics and Reliability Analysis of the Study Variables (N = 119)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>A</i>
Childhood Abuse Subscales				
Emotional Abuse	10.46	5.33	5-25	.87
Physical Abuse	7.63	4.04	5-25	.86
Sexual Abuse	7.73	4.60	5-25	.90
Emotional Neglect	11.34	4.99	5-24	.86
Physical Neglect	7.28	3.12	5-21	.76
Minimization/Denial	0.52	.81	0-3	.53
Childhood Abuse (<i>Total</i>)	44.96	17.61	25-118	.93
Empathy	9.79	3.63	3-20	.66
Forgiveness	79.34	12.97	43-116	.69

Table 2 shows the Cronbach Alpha reliability values of scales and subscales used in the current study. The reliability of the Emotional Abuse Subscale (EA) was .87. The reliability of Physical Abuse Subscale (PA) was .86. The reliability of Sexual Abuse Subscale (SA) was .90. The reliability of Emotional Neglect Subscale (EN) was .86. The reliability of Physical Neglect (PN) was .76. The reliability of Minimization/Denial Subscale (MD) was slightly lower than the acceptable value of .60 (.53). The reliability of total Childhood Trauma Questionnaire was very high (.93). The reliability of Empathy Quotient was acceptable .66. The reliability of Heartland Forgiveness Scale was .69. Most of the measures had very good Cronbach alpha reliability, while Cronbach alpha reliability of the Empathy Quotient, Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and Minimization/Denial Subscale was just good for the current study.

Table 3*Correlations between Study Variables in Young Adults (N= 119)*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	21.34	2.55	-									
2. CA	44.96	17.61	.06	-								
3. EA	10.46	5.33	.08	.85***	-							
4. PA	7.63	4.04	.01	.79***	.60***	-.01						
5. SA	7.73	4.60	.07	.62***	.40***	.36***	-					
6. EN	11.34	4.99	-.01	.84***	.70***	.56***	.31***	-				
7. PN	7.28	3.12	.05	.79***	.52***	.66***	.34***	.70***	-.01			
8. MD	0.52	.81	.02	.31***	.25***	.17	.23*	.15	.28**	-		
9. Empathy	9.79	3.63	.09	-.01	.13	-.12	-.18*	-.16	-.17	.08	-	
10. Forgiveness	79.34	12.97	.06	.19*	.22*	.16	.08	.17	.09	.04	.13	-.01

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; CA= Childhood Abuse, EA_{SS}= Emotional Abuse Sub-scale, PA_{SS}= Physical Abuse Subscale, SA_{SS}=Sexual Abuse Sub-scale, EN_{SS}= Emotional Neglect Sub-scale, PN_{SS}= Physical Neglect Sub-scale, MD= Minimization/Denial Sub-scale.

A bivariate Pearson product moment correlation was run to find the relationship between childhood trauma, and its subscales i.e. emotional neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, minimization/denial, physical neglect, empathy quotient, and forgiveness. Results (reported in table 3 above) indicated that childhood trauma scale was positively correlated with forgiveness and the subscale emotional abuse was found to be positively correlated with forgiveness. The subscale sexual abuse was found to be negatively correlated with empathy. Overall, the strongest relationship was of childhood trauma with emotional abuse ($r = .85$).

Table 4

Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Mediation of Empathy between Childhood Abuse and Forgiveness (N=119)

Predictor	B	95 % CI		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2	Criterion
		LL	UL					
<i>Analysis 1</i>								
Childhood Abuse	.19*	.01	.28	.08	.14	.04*	.04*	Forgiveness
<i>Analysis 2</i>								
Childhood Abuse	-.01	-.04	.03	.02	-.00	.00	.00	Empathy
<i>Analysis 3</i>								
Empathy	.13	-.17	1.13	.33	.49	.02	.02	Forgiveness
<i>Analysis 4</i>								
Step 1						.04	.04	Forgiveness
Childhood Abuse	.19*	.01	.28	.08	.14			
Step 2						.06*	.02*	
Childhood Abuse	.20*	.01	.28	.07	.14			
Empathy	.14	-.15	1.13	.34	.48			

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

A multiple hierarchical regression analysis was run to find the predictors of forgiveness from childhood trauma and the possible mediation effects of empathy in the relation between childhood trauma and forgiveness. Table 4 presents the steps of Baron and Kenny mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In the first step, childhood abuse was taken as the predictor/independent variable while forgiveness was taken as the criterion/dependent variable. The first regression analysis explained a 4% variance in forgiveness with $p < .05$ which means childhood abuse was a significant and positive predictor of forgiveness. In the second regression analysis, empathy was taken as the dependent variable and childhood abuse was taken as the independent variable. The regression analysis model was non-significant which means that childhood abuse was not a significant predictor of empathy. In the third step, empathy was taken as the independent variable and forgiveness was taken as the dependent variable. The regression analysis model was non-significant which means empathy did not

predict forgiveness. In the fourth step, childhood abuse was taken as independent variable and empathy was taken as a mediator while forgiveness was taken as the dependent variable. This regression analysis explained a 2% variance, $p < .05$ which explains that both childhood abuse is a predictor of forgiveness while empathy is not a predictor of forgiveness. The overall results showed that mediation did not occur. However, the results confirmed a direct relationship between experience of abuse and forgiveness.

Table 5

An Independent Samples t-Test to Compare Gender Differences in Study Variables (N=119)

Variable	Men (n= 58)		Women (n= 61)		<i>t</i> (117)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
EA	9.43	4.44	11.44	5.95	-2.10	.03	.38
PA	7.76	4.01	7.51	4.10	.337	.73	.06
SA	6.67	2.96	8.74	5.59	-2.53	.01	.46
EN	11.21	4.97	11.46	5.05	-.27	.78	1.24
PN	7.38	2.99	7.18	3.26	-.35	.72	.06
MD	.50	.80	.54	.82	-.27	.78	.04
CA	42.95	14.24	46.87	20.23	-1.23	.22	.22
Empathy	9.17	3.41	10.38	3.75	-1.83	.07	.33
Forgiveness	79.98	12.90	78.74	13.12	.52	.60	.09

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; EA_{SS}= Emotional Abuse Sub-scale, PA_{SS}= Physical Abuse Sub-scale, SA_{SS}= Sexual Abuse Sub-scale, EN_{SS}= Emotional Neglect Sub-scale, PN_{SS}= Physical Neglect Sub-scale, MD_{SS}= Minimization/Denial Sub-scale, CA = Childhood abuse.

An independent samples t-test was run to find if there are any gender differences in childhood abuse, its subscales (emotional neglect, physical abuse, minimization/denial, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and sexual abuse), empathy, and forgiveness. Results indicated a significant difference in variables of emotional abuse and sexual abuse. Women reported higher levels of both emotional and sexual abuse. No significant differences were found in physical abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, minimization/denial, childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness. The differences between participants at different birth orders and belonging to different family systems on all the study variables were found to be non-significant.

Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the relationship between childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young adults, and to examine if childhood abuse and empathy predict forgiveness in young adults. The hypothesis posited a correlation between childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness. The results indicate that the scale measuring childhood abuse exhibited a positive correlation with forgiveness, and the emotional abuse subscale displayed a similar positive correlation with forgiveness. Furthermore, the subscale related to sexual abuse demonstrated a positive correlation with empathy. The current study predicted that young individuals who experienced more childhood abuse would be less able to forgive. However, the findings revealed a strong positive association between childhood abuse and forgiveness,

which is quite surprising and somewhat contrary to much of the existing literature that generally suggests a negative correlation between these variables (Ghahari et al., 2019). Several factors might explain this interesting finding. One possible explanation is the resilience and coping strategies developed by individuals with the experience of childhood maltreatment. Resilience factors, including social support systems, religious beliefs, and community resources may play a crucial role in enhancing the capacity for forgiveness despite experiences of maltreatment (Meng et al., 2018).

Moreover, the finding of the present study highlights the intricate relationship between childhood abuse and forgiveness. While many studies report a negative correlation, it is also important to consider studies that highlight the multifaceted nature of this relationship. For example, research suggests that the ability to forgive might be influenced by specific psychological interventions or therapeutic processes aimed at addressing trauma (Ghahari et al., 2019). Moreover, Erzar et al. (2019) investigated the connection between emotional dysregulation, coping mechanisms, and childhood victimization. They explored the function of forgiveness as a coping mechanism and the links between offense-specific hurt, persistent rage, and childhood victimization. The findings revealed that offenders use forgiveness as a coping mechanism to deal with childhood victimization and hurt caused by it. Taylor (2020) conducted research on the effects of forgiveness on the adult mental health of abuse victims while controlling for personality factors, the frequency of abuse, and gender. The findings suggested that forgiveness was linked to reduced overall emotional distress, highlighting the potential role of forgiveness in reducing the negative psychological consequences of childhood abuse. The hypothesis also suggested that childhood abuse might lead to decreased levels of empathy. The research results indicated a positive connection between sexual abuse and empathy, with no observed relationships with other variables. Michael (2022) discovered that children who had faced challenging mother-child relationships displayed greater levels of both affective and cognitive empathy.

Empathy was hypothesized to act as a mediating factor in the association between young adult's ability to forgive and the abuse they experienced as children. The results revealed that although empathy was negatively associated with one subscale of abuse but it was not a mediator between childhood and forgiveness, but childhood abuse did predict forgiveness levels. Based on research conducted by Paivio and Laurent (2001), although empathy is commonly seen as a crucial element in the forgiveness process, some studies have proposed that it may not act as a significant mediator in the context of childhood abuse and forgiveness. Instead, other psychological factors, such as emotion regulation, self-compassion, and cognitive coping strategies, have been found in certain studies to have a more notable influence on shaping forgiveness responses in individuals who have experienced childhood abuse. Nonetheless, the study findings support the impact of childhood traumatic experiences on empathy, in other words, presence of hostility. Significant gender differences in emotional and sexual abuse are also supported by the previous research. Many studies have documented reporting of higher levels of emotional and sexual abuse by girl participants. A large-scale meta-analysis study (Pereda et al., 2009) covering data from 22 countries concluded that women reported threefold higher levels of childhood sexual abuse (before the age of 18) as compared to men. In conclusion, while our findings add to the body of knowledge by presenting a different perspective, they also call for further investigation into the underlying mechanisms

that could explain the positive correlation between childhood maltreatment and forgiveness in young adults. Future research should aim to explore these mediating factors more thoroughly and consider longitudinal studies to better understand the dynamics of forgiveness and empathy development over time. Additionally, cross-cultural studies could provide deeper insights into how different cultural contexts impact these relationships.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the relationships between young adult's empathy, forgiveness, and childhood abuse. The study uncovered a significant positive association between childhood abuse and forgiveness in young adults, as well as a positive correlation between sexual abuse and empathy. These findings suggest that the capacity for forgiveness and empathy may increase as a response to any form of childhood abuse due to trauma. Only sexual and emotional abuse showed a positive correlation with gender. Additionally, the study revealed that while empathy was not found to mediate forgiveness, childhood abuse was identified as a significant factor.

Limitations and Suggestions

- The tools used in this research were developed based on Western culture.
- The research data were collected from 119 participants primarily residing in Lahore. Therefore, we cannot generalize the research findings to young adults from other areas of Pakistan with significantly different cultures, more specifically those belonging to lower socioeconomic status, remote rural areas, etc.
- The sample size for the current study was relatively smaller ($N=119$). A larger sample size representing more diversity in demographics and experiences of childhood abuse would provide more generalizable, reliable and accurate results.
- It is suggested that further extensive research be conducted to explore the factors influencing the relationship between childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness.

Implications

By identifying the connection between childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness in young adulthood, the current study has contributed to the body of existing literature. Utilizing either the same or different sets of data, this study aims to establish a framework for future research on these variables. Forgiveness is positively correlated with childhood abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect, as indicated by the study's findings. The study also revealed a significant gender difference concerning elements such as emotional and sexual abuse. Moreover, there were no discernible differences in outcomes regarding physical neglect, emotional neglect, physical abuse, minimization/denial, childhood abuse, empathy, and forgiveness. The study further identified a 6% correlation between childhood abuse and forgiveness, although it was not mediated by empathy. Childhood abuse alone accounted for 4% of the variance in forgiveness in the initial stage, while childhood abuse in conjunction with empathy accounted for 6% of the variability in forgiveness. The findings reveal the presence of forgiveness capacity in non-clinical community sample of the study, indicating that the forgiveness has possibly played a role in managing wellbeing.

References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (2015). *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (Classic edition). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Arnou B. A. (2004). Relationships between childhood maltreatment, adult health and psychiatric outcomes, and medical utilization. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, *65*(12), 10–15.
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 1173-1182.
- Baron-Cohen, S., & Wheelwright, S. (2004). The empathy quotient: an investigation of adults with Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism, and normal sex differences. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *34*(2), 163–175. <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:jadd.0000022607.19833.00>
- Bernstein, D.P., & Fink, L. (1998). *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire: A retrospective self-report manual* San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation.
- Berzenski, S. R., & Yates, T. M. (2022). The development of empathy in child maltreatment contexts. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *133*, 105827. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2022.105827>
- Brady, D. L., Saldanha, M. F., & Barclay, L. J. (2023). Conceptualizing forgiveness: A review and path forward. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *44*(2), 261–296. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2632>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Definitions of child abuse and neglect*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/can/related/>
- Decety, J., & Jackson, P. L. (2004). The functional architecture of human empathy. *Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews*, *3*(2), 71-100.
- Erzar, T., Yu, L., Enright, R. D., & Erzar, K. (2019). Childhood Victimization, Recent Injustice, Anger, and Forgiveness in a Sample of Imprisoned Male Offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *63*(1), 18-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18781782>
- Flaherty, S. C., & Sadler, L. S. (2011). A review of attachment theory in the context of adolescent parenting. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, *25*(2), 114-121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedhc.2010.02.005>
- Ghahari, S., Naeimi, N., Azemia, Z., Mazlounirad, M., Salari, S., Piraghon, N. G., Asadollahinia, M., & Talemi, A. N. (2019). Effectiveness of forgiveness skill on worry and hopelessness in women victims of sexual abuse in childhood. *Journal of Pharmaceutical Research International*, *27*(4)1- 6. <https://doi.org/10.9734/jpri/2019/v27i430175>
- Hagborg, J. M., Kalin, T., & Gerdner, A. (2022). The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire—short form (CTQ-SF) used with adolescents – methodological report from clinical and community samples. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *15*(4), 1199–1213. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-022-00443-8>

- Hargrave, T. D., & Sells, J. N. (1997). The development of a forgiveness scale. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 23(1), 41-62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.1997.tb00230.x>
- Horwitz, A. V., Widom, C. S., McLaughlin, J., & White, H. R. (2001). The impact of childhood abuse and neglect on adult mental health: A prospective study. *Journal of Health And Social Behavior*, 42(2), 184–201. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11467252/>
- Lawrence, E. J., Shaw, P., Baker, D., Baron-Cohen, S., & David, A. S. (2004). Measuring empathy: reliability and validity of the Empathy Quotient. *Psychological Medicine*, 34(5), 911-920. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291703001624>
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(2), 321-336. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.2.321>
- Meng, X., Fleury, M. J., Xiang, Y. T., Li, M., D'Arcy, C. (2018). Resilience and protective factors among people with a history of child maltreatment: a systematic review. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 53, 453–475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-018-1485-2>
- Michael, S. (2022, September 27). Empath or trauma response? Michael Swerdloff; Providence Holistic Counselor, Coach and Reiki. <https://www.michaelswerdloff.com/empath-or-trauma-response>
- Orcutt, H. K., Pickett, S. M., & Pope, E. B. (2008). The relationship of offense-specific forgiveness to posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in college students. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, and Trauma*, 16(1), 72–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926770801920776>
- Paivio, S. C., & Laurent, C. (2001). Empathy and emotion regulation: Reprocessing memories of childhood abuse. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 57(2), 213–226. <https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679>
- Pereda, N., Guilera, G., Forns, M., & Gómez-Benito, J. (2009). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in community and student samples: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(4), 328-338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.02.007>.
- Reed, G. L. & Enright, R. D. (2006). The Effects of Forgiveness Therapy on Depression, Anxiety, and Posttraumatic Stress for Women After Spousal Emotional Abuse. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 74 (5), 920-929.
- Shepherd, S. & Belicki, K (2008). Trait forgiveness and traitedness within the HEXACO model of personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 45(5), 389-394. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2008.05.011>.
- Taylor, K. M. (2020). *The role of forgiveness and personality on outcomes of childhood maltreatment* [Mater's dissertation, Western Carolina University]. <https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/wcu/listing.aspx?id=32862>
- Teicher, M. H., Gordon, J. B. & Nemeroff, C. B. (2022). Recognizing the importance of childhood maltreatment as a critical factor in psychiatric diagnoses, treatment, research, prevention, and education. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 27, 1331–1338. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-021-01367-9>
- Thompson, L. Y., Snyder, C. R., Hoffman, L., Michael, S. T., Rasmussen, H. N., Billings, L. S., Heinze, L., Neufeld, J. E., Shorey, H. S., Roberts, J. C., & Roberts, D. E.

- (2005). *Dispositional forgiveness of self, others and situations*. *Journal of Personality*, 73, 313-359.
- Toussaint, L. L., Worthington, E. L. J. & Williams, D. R. (2015). *Forgiveness and Health*. Springer.
- Vismaya, A., Gopi, A., Romate, J., & Rajkumar, E. (2024). Psychological interventions to promote self-forgiveness: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology*, 12(1), 258. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01671-3>
- Wade, N. G., Hoyt, W. T., Kidwell, J. E., & Worthington, E. L. (2014). Efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions to promote forgiveness: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 82(1), 154. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035268>