Perceived Forgiveness Experiences of Young Adult University Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The prevailing trend in forgiveness studies predominantly addresses the perspective of the victim forgiving the transgressor, with a notable emphasis on the victim's experiences. However, recognizing the inherent relational dynamics of forgiveness, it becomes pertinent to extend scholarly inquiry towards understanding the experiences of individuals who have transgressed. The present study aimed to discover the experiences of university students at the ages of 21 to 30 who had engaged in transgressions within their interpersonal relationships and subsequently received forgiveness from those they had wronged. Employing a qualitative research design and the phenomenological method, information pertaining to these experiences was systematically collected. The study's sample comprised 15 university students, consisting of 8 women and 7 men. The experiences of the participants regarding perceived forgiveness were manually examined by the researchers using the thematic analysis method, and codes, categories, and themes were formed based on the statements of the participants. The findings yielded four overarching themes in total explaining the forgiveness experiences of the participants, namely 'contact process, 'relational responsibility/decision-making', 'transformative effect of being forgiven', and 'value of being forgiven. These identified themes provide comprehensive insights into the nuanced aspects of forgiveness experiences among the participants.

Keywords: being forgiven, feeling forgiven, forgiveness, perceived forgiveness, thematic analysis

Genç Yetişkin Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Affedildiğini Hissetme Deneyimleri: Nitel Bir Çalışma

Öz

Alanyazında affedicilik konusunda yapılan araştırmaların büyük oranda mağdurun hata yapan kişiyi affetmesi kapsamında olduğu görülmektedir. Ancak affediciliğin ilişkisel boyutu düşünüldüğünde bu süreçte hata yapan kişinin deneyimlerinin de önemli olduğu anlaşılabilir. Buradan hareketle bu çalışmada kişilerarası ilişkilerinde hata yapmış ve hata yaptığı kişi tarafından affedilmeyi deneyimlemiş, 21-30 yaş arasında yer alan üniversite öğrencilerinin deneyimlerini keşfetmek amaçlanmıştır. Bu araştırmada nitel araştırma deseni ve fenomenolojik yöntem kullanılarak katılımcıların deneyimleri alınmıştır. Çalışma kapsamında 15 üniversite öğrencisi ile (8 kadın, 7 erkek) görüşülmüştür. Katılımcıların algılanan affedicilik ile ilgili deneyimleri tematik analiz yolu ile manuel olarak araştırmacılar tarafından incelenmiş, katılımcı ifadelerinden kodlar, kategoriler ve temalara ulaşılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda katılımcıların affedilme deneyimlerini açıklayan 'temas süreci', 'ilişkisel sorumluluk/kararlar alma', 'affedilmenin dönüştürücü etkisi' ve 'affedilmenin değeri' olmak üzere toplamda dört temaya ulaşılmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda elde edilen bu temalar katılımcıların affedilme deneyimleri hakkında kapsayıcı bir bakış açısı getirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: affedildiğini hissetme, affedilme, affetme, algılanan affedicilik, tematik analiz

INTRODUCTION

Although perceived forgiveness has usually been discussed in the context of being forgiven by God (Fincham & May, 2019, 2020; Karause & Ellison, 2003; McConnell & Dixon, 2012), there are also definitions associated with perceived forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. Perceived forgiveness refers to the perceptions of offenders or transgressors regarding the extent to which they are forgiven by the victims of their mistakes or relational transgressions (Evelyn, 2013). According to Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996), transgressors experience forgiveness when they believe that their victims show them compassion, generosity, and love and have diminishing feelings of resentment, condemnation, and desire to get revenge for them. The same study group developed a model defining the characteristics of the forgiveness process as (1) the transgressor accepts and experiences the hurt they caused for the victim and the consequences of this hurt, (2) they feel the need for a change in their relationship with the victim and decide to be forgiven by them, (3) they try to understand the victim and empathize with the victim, and (4) they experience the positive psychological effects of being forgiven by the victim.

In previous studies, perceived forgiveness has been investigated in the context of its relationships to variables such as forgiving oneself and others (Gassin, 1998; Hall & Fincham, 2005; Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2010; Patton, 1985; Rahman, 2013; Rose et al., 2018; Terzino, 2010; Umberson et al., 2010; vanOyen-Witvliet et al., 2002; Worthington, 2009), guilt (Krause & Ellison, 2003; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), shame and fear (Evelyn, 2003), depression (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2010), anger (Gassin, 1998; vanOyen-Witvliet et al., 2002), reparative behaviors (making up for the transgression) (McCullough et al., 1997; Hall & Fincham, 2005), reconciliation (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006), the intensity of the transgression (Evelyn, 2013), happiness (Evelyn, 2013; Gassin, 1998), thankfulness (Evelyn, 2013; vanOyen-Witvliet et al., 2002), repeated offense (Gassin, 1998; McNulty, 2010; Wallace et al., 2008), self-evaluation (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2005), trust (Gassin, 1998; Wieselquist, 2009), gender and age (Hayward & Krause, 2013; Miller & Worthington, 2010), quality of life (Winkelman et al., 2011), bullying (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006), relationship quality and self-blame (Friesen et al., 2005), communication styles (Knight, 2018), hurt and life purposes (Lyons et al., 2011), and personality characteristics (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002).

Perceived forgiveness generally brings about positive outcomes in the context of individual and interpersonal relationships. Hall and Fincham (2008) stated that experiencing being forgiven by their victims may make it easier for transgressors to forgive themselves. In the study investigated the factors effective on the self-forgiveness process, Terzino (2010) determined that those who had the experience of being forgiven following a relational transgression and those who imagined being forgiven in a hypothetical scenario had higher self-forgiveness scores. Perceived forgiveness may facilitate not only the self-forgiveness process of the individual but also their process of forgiving others. Researchers have reported a strong link between the experience of being forgiven and the person's ability to forgive others (Gassin, 1998; Patton, 1985; Worthington, 2009). Ingersoll-Dayton et al. (2010) found a negative relationship between the feeling of being unforgiven by others and the variable of forgiving oneself and others.

It has been observed that there is a reduction in the guilt felt by transgressors when they are forgiven (Bauer et al., 1992; Gassin, 1998; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Witvliet et al., 2002; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). vanOyen-Witvliet et al. (2002) concluded that in scenarios where participants imagined receiving compassionate responses from the victim, there were favorable changes in their basic emotions such as sadness and anger and their moral emotions such as shame, guilt, thankfulness, and hope. In another study conducted with the participation of university students, Evelyn (2013) found that in the case of feeling high levels of being forgiven, there was a positive relationship between the intensity of the transgression and the emotions of guilt and shame. In the same study, it was determined that when the victim forgave the transgressor, the transgressor's expectations of being retaliated against or punished by the victim decreased, and regardless of the intensity of the transgression, this situation was effective in the alleviation of the emotion of fear felt by the transgressor. As a result, it was concluded that the experience of forgiveness faced by the participants was positively associated with their emotions of thankfulness and happiness. Ahmed and Braithwaite (2006) observed that in a scenario in which adolescent participants imagined bullying their partners during a game, their assessment of their parents being more forgiving negatively predicted their stances of shame displacement, which is characterized by victim-blaming and anger against the victim regarding own bullying behaviors, and this resulted in lower levels of bullying behaviors. It was also seen that the effect of a change in shame on bullying took place indirectly via perceived forgiveness and

reconciliation. According to these results, one could state that perceived forgiveness facilitates the reduction of some negative emotions.

Perceived forgiveness also affects emotions such as happiness, joy, relief, and trust. Ingersoll-Dayton et al. (2005) stated that the experience of being forgiven by the victim can lower the negative self-evaluation levels of the transgressor, and this can bring positive psychological outcomes such as relief and joy. Gassin (1998) reported that most young adult participants listed the initial effects of perceived forgiveness as relief, joy, reconciliation, trusting the victim, and the motivation to not hurt them again. The participants also mentioned developments such as refraining from treating the victim insensitively again, self-forgiveness, noticing that people are forgiving, respecting people more, forgiving others more, feeling unconditional love, recognizing own responsibilities, acknowledging the effects of own behaviors on other individuals, feeling safe, treating the forgiving person more respectfully, feeling relationally closer to the person who is the victim of the transgression, and perceiving social support.

It was determined that perceived forgiveness levels in intimate relationships were associated negatively with self-blame and positively with forgiving one's partner and the quality of the relationship (Friesen et al., 2005). Among married university students, Wieselquist (2009) found a positive relationship between perceiving one's spouse as forgiving and one's trust in their spouse. It was also understood that trust, satisfaction, and relationship investment had a mediator role in the relationship between perceived forgiveness.

In line with the available literature, interpersonal relationships can be considered a significant variable in the process of forgiveness. In a sample of university students, Knight (2018) investigated the effect of the style of communication between the transgressor and the victim on perceived forgiveness. As a result, it was revealed that the perceived forgiveness level of the transgressor was positively associated with the appeasement/positivity communication style, which corresponds to compensatory behaviors for the alleviation of the effects of the transgression and the appeasement of the victim, and the apology/concession communication style, which corresponds to privileges for the victim, the acceptance of a mistake, and apology. The avoidance/silence communication style, which is characterized by the avoidance of communicating in relation to the transgression, on the other hand, was found to be negatively associated with perceived forgiveness. In general, the results of previous studies have shown that for the transgressor, the experience of being forgiven has some positive emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes.

Research Problem and Objective

Perceived forgiveness has been identified as a catalyst for positive outcomes within individual and interpersonal relationships. It has been suggested that perceived forgiveness is positively associated with emotions such as happiness, joy, relief, and trust (Gassin, 1998; Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2005), as well as with the development of relationship quality between the victim and the transgressor (Friesen et al., 2005; Wieselquist, 2009). Furthermore, available literature indicates that perceived forgiveness diminishes negative self-appraisal (Friesen et al., 2005) and facilitates self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others (Gassin, 1998; Hall & Fincham, 2008; Patton, 1985; Terzino, 2010; Worthington, 2009). While available literature shows that perceived forgiveness is associated with positive relationships, encompassing positive emotions, self-forgiveness processes, and the development of relationship quality, it is noteworthy that the existing studies on perceived forgiveness are not sufficiently comprehensive because the focus in forgiveness processes predominantly revolves around the experiences of the victim. Nevertheless, recognizing the experiences of the transgressor and their attitudes towards the victim in the aftermath of an offense could contribute significantly to the understanding of the development of interpersonal relationships disrupted by transgressions. In light of these considerations, this study aimed to explore the experiences of young adults who have committed transgressions in their interpersonal relationships and have felt forgiven. Additionally, the study sought to understand the transgressor's views on the effects of the offense on the victim, the relational exchange processes between the transgressor and the victim, factors that positively or negatively influence the forgiveness process, the effects of perceived forgiveness on the transgressor, and changes in the attitudes of the transgressor towards forgiveness following the experience of being forgiven.

METHOD

This study adopted the qualitative research method known as the interpretive phenomenological design, which focuses on the processes in which people make sense of their experiences. Phenomenology aims to understand the actions and experiences of the individual, rather than the objective "reality" of an experience. This form of analysis allows the in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through the detailed explanations of insights by the individuals who have the relevant experience (Creswell et al., 2011).

Participants and Interviews

The data of interpretive phenomenological analysis studies are collected from small samples consisting of individuals who have experienced a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2013). It has been stated in general that six to eight participants are sufficient for qualitative studies (Kuzel, 1992; McCraken, 1988; Morse, 1994). The participants of this study, which aims to examine the perceived forgiveness experiences of young adults, consisted of a total of 15 young adult university students, 8 women and 7 men aged between 21-30, who had experienced being forgiven after their transgressions in their interpersonal relationships. Before collecting data, ethical approval was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publications Ethics Committee of Kahramanmaras Istiklal University. In the context of the research, the criteria for inclusion were established based on Enright and the Human Development Study Group's (1996) forgiveness model. These inclusion criteria encompass the transgressor's recognition of the harm inflicted upon the victim and the awareness of the effects of this harm during the forgiveness process. Furthermore, the responsibility to initiate changes concerning the harm inflicted on the victim and the deteriorated relationship with the victim after the offense were identified as integral components of the inclusion criteria. Volunteers participating in this study were provided with a form generated through the Google Forms platform to assess their demographics and ascertain whether they met the predetermined inclusion criteria. The form included questions on age, sex, education level, the transgression in question, when this transgression was made, the responsibilities and compensatory behaviors regarding the transgression, the level of closeness before the transgression, the change in closeness after the transgression, the degree to which the individual felt forgiven, and the importance of forgiveness. Additionally, to more thoroughly assess whether individuals completing the survey met the inclusion criteria, individual telephone interviews were conducted to gather information about their experiences with forgiveness. A total of 21 individuals who volunteered to participate in the study were reached through the survey. Following the interviews and evaluations, 15 individuals who met the inclusion criteria outlined above were included in the study. However, six individuals who volunteered for the research were not included. These individuals expressed a lack of responsibility for the offense, did not exhibit compensatory behaviors for their mistakes, reported no changes in their relationship with the victim following the offense, and did not perceive themselves as forgiven. Demographic information about the participants in the research is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participants	Sex	Age	Educational Status	Transgression
P1	Female	28	Master	Speaking harshly against a friend's unrealistic expectations
P2	Male	28	Bachelor	Causing the death of a close friend's beloved cat
P3	Female	22	Undergraduate	Making hurtful jokes towards a friend
P4	Male	21	Undergraduate	Speaking negatively about the romantic relationship of someone of interest
P5	Female	30	Bachelor	Withholding important information from a partner
P6	Male	21	Undergraduate	Displaying violence towards a sibling
P7	Female	22	Undergraduate	Misinterpreting and acting hurtful towards a boyfriend
P8	Female	24	Bachelor	Purposefully failing to provide support to a sibling in need
P9	Male	21	Undergraduate	Acquiring a friend's personal information through a fake account
P10	Male	23	Undergraduate	Exploiting a friend for personal needs
P11	Female	27	Undergraduate	Engaging in demeaning actions towards one's father
P12	Male	23	Undergraduate	Making hurtful accusations against a close friend
P13	Male	21	Undergraduate	Reacting harshly towards one's father
P14	Female	27	Master	Using a boyfriend for personal gains
P15	Female	23	Bachelor	Engaging in a dispute due to a friend's not taking sides in an important matter

After this, interviews were held with the volunteer participants who met the inclusion criteria by the two researchers via online platforms (Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp). 11 questions were asked in total (see Appendix A),

and the interviews were recorded. The recordings were kept on hard disk drives that could only be accessed by the researchers and were not connected to the internet. Both researchers have experience in qualitative interview processes. The interviews, which lasted approximately 15-20 minutes for each participant, were held between August and October 2022.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process is a cyclical and repetitive process that involves the reading of the interview transcript multiple times and the creation of codes after the achievement of familiarity with the data. In this study, the approaches of thematic analysis consisting of codes, categories, and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019) were followed. The audio recordings of the interviews held by the two researchers with the participants were transcribed verbatim, the data were coded, categories and themes were created, and the findings were analyzed. The data were analyzed in three steps to reach the findings of the study. In the first step, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Then, each transcript was examined line by line and by highlighting the parts that were especially emphasized by the participants in their responses. Afterwards, codes were placed as keywords in the leftmost column of a table consisting of four columns. In the second step, categories described by the codes were created and placed in the next column to the right, and these were reviewed multiple times. The third column was used to include quotes from the sentences used by the participants that matched the codes. In the third step, themes were created based on the codes and categories, and these were placed in the last column. This step also involved the review of data in the context of the relationships, similarities, differences, and patterns between the themes. The entire process was carried out by the two researchers, who performed the first two steps independently of each other and the third step together to make the data ready for analysis. To present the data in a more accurate and comprehensible manner, the researchers examined the differences in the coding schemes and reached a consensus in the reporting phase.

FINDINGS

In this study, where the forgiveness experiences of young adult university students were investigated, some classifications were made regarding the transgressions reported by the participants. These transgressions were categorized as 'transgressions against one's partner', 'transgressions against one's family members', and 'transgressions against one's friend'. The types of transgressions were determined as lying, violence, exploitation for own interests, ill-advised jokes, blaming, deception, humiliating family due to discipline problems, harming a living being liked by the victim, rudeness, damage to property, inappropriate expression of anger, humiliation, and neglect when being needed. The transgressions were also categorized into those that were made 'once' and those that were made 'repeatedly'. As a result of the thematic analysis, four themes were reached: 'contact process', 'relational responsibility/decision-making', 'transformative effect of being forgiven', and 'value of being forgiven'. The theme map showing the themes and categories regarding the experiences of perceived forgiveness is given in Figure 1 (see Appendix B). The relationships between the themes are shown with arrows in the map. The explanations of these four themes and some quotes from the responses of the participants are given below.

Theme 1: Contact Process

The participants talked about changes in their contact with the victim following a transgression they made in their interpersonal relationships. Some changes in this context were a distance between the transgressor and the victim in their relationship, the sincere approach of the transgressor and their sensitivity towards the needs of the victim, the compensatory behaviors of the transgressor, the realization of the good intentions of the transgressor by the victim, and the readiness of the victim to forgive.

The theme 'contact process' consisted of two categories, namely 'attempts to reach out' and 'factors determining the effects of reaching out'. The participants made statements about the changes in their contact processes in their relationships with the victims after their transgressions. Among the participants, P1 stated the following:

"I mean, we used to be much closer in what we shared with each other. This decreased a lot. Although we were receiving the same education, it was like a place where we treated each other like strangers."

P2 stated that they were more understanding toward the victim and focused on listening to them, with the words, *"Indeed, I tried to approach him [his friend] much more compassionately. That is, I tried to listen to him as much as possible. I expressed that he could share their feelings with me."*

The participants also specified that after their transgressions, they experienced contact-related changes such as reduced communication, lower frequency of private sharing, and unkind conversations. The following was stated by P8:

"First, there appeared a substantial emotional gap between us. We started to talk less frequently. After this event, I felt that I had a smaller part in his [her brother] life. Other than that, he became a little more aggressive towards me."

The participants mentioned some factors that facilitated the contact process or made this process more difficult. The most frequently talked about facilitating factors included taking responsibility for the transgression, apologizing sincerely, being open to communication, the forgiving attitude of the victim and their strong feelings for the transgressor, the belief that the transgression will not happen again, acting in the same pace as the victim, and taking responsibility. Some of the views of the participants on the facilitating factors of forgiveness were as follows:

"I mean, I apologized, but not like… Rather than an apology like 'I apologize', I apologized by saying things like 'I was very angry and tense then, but I still shouldn't have treated you like that'. That is, if it is the wrong thing to do, it sure is." (P11)

"I am a man with a mission, meaning that I do everything to keep a promise if I've made one. As she [his friend] saw that I promised to never do that again she found it appropriate, was accepting of it, and it (the issue) was cleared up." (P10)

"The fact that I didn't pressure him [her boyfriend] was effective. You know, I didn't pressure him like let's make up right away and behave like we used to right away. We talked a bit, and we didn't put a name on the situation right away. It (the process) progressed at his pace. It was effective for me to give him space." (P14)

The most frequently mentioned barriers to forgiveness by the participants included the recurrence of the transgression, the intensity of the transgression, the deliberate nature of the transgression, the prevention of communication, the difficulty of anger management, insistence, blaming, intricacy (lack of boundaries), introversion, and unrealistic expectations. The belief of the victim that the transgression could be repeated, the negative attitudes of people around them, and social representations were also among the factors making forgiveness more difficult. The views of some participants regarding barriers to forgiveness were as follows:

"The fact that I had shown the same mistake before was among the barriers. Such that, when a thing happens once, it is forgiven more easily, but it is more difficult to forgive when it happens multiple times." (P11)

"It (forgiveness) was really made more difficult by the fact that I purposefully made this mistake or transgression, it was not something that happened by accident, it was something I did deliberately and knowingly, that is, there was my agency in the transgression." (P8)

"It was a friendship relationship in which she expected for me to provide excessive support. I mean, she was constantly demanding, I was not willing to meet these demands, or I was unable to set boundaries." (P1)

"He [her boyfriend] had concerns about whether this would happen again, or whether I had really changed. So, after a transgression, after a problem occurred, his trust was betrayed" (P14)

Theme 2: Relational Responsibility/Decision-Making

The theme 'relational responsibility/decision-making' referred to the transgressor and the victim getting closer in the forgiveness process, taking responsibility, their establishment of an understanding, the transformation of their expectations, and the determination of relationship boundaries. This theme consisted of the categories of 'responsibility of trust', 'compassionate approach', and 'reorganization of boundaries'. These categories included codes such as increased fondness, increased responsibility, self-control, transforming expectations, being understanding, determining priorities, reconciliation, and role changes.

"We became closer, more able to talk to each other about anything. [...] because there used to be a problem of hiding things and lying before. We were, in fact, able to have a closer relationship when we talked about and solved the issues causing this problem." (P15)

"This showed me my humanity, and similarly, his humanity. I used to think like we are already in a romantic relationship, he had to listen to whatever I was talking about, he had to support me when I was in a difficult state, he had to bear with me unconditionally. I used to think like this. The process changed such unhealthy thoughts of mine." (P14)

"It allowed me to notice that people can get hurt or offended whatever the reason for me to do this, I should pay attention to certain things, and I should establish my priorities well." (P8)

"We are no longer as close as we used to be, for example, she [her friend] doesn't visit me at home. I don't visit her at home. We used to hang out five days a week. We aren't like that anymore; she is working anyway. I mean, we hang out once a week, sometimes twice [...]. Other than that, there is a distance between us." (P15)

Theme 3: Transformative Effect of Being Forgiven

The theme 'transformative effect of being forgiven' referred to the individual changes in the transgressor after their experience of forgiveness and the changes in the attitudes of the victim towards the transgressor and other people. This theme consisted of the categories of 'awareness' and 'biopsychosocial development'. The codes under these categories included the concepts of noticing the maturity of the victim, noticing that people can be hurt, understanding the value and resilience of the relationship, self-awareness, awareness of personal characteristics, differences in coping styles, differences in criteria for forgiveness, and understanding the importance of boundaries.

"I mean, I used to think she [his sister] wasn't that mature, but I then noticed how mature she actually was, because forgiving is a very difficult act." (P6)

"In general, I noticed some things including how much this person valued me. She [her friend] didn't have to forgive me. That is, the bond between us wasn't something that could be taken lightly, it was something that needed more care." (P3)

"In fact, it made me notice the patterns I was repeating in my life, not just about this relationship, but I became aware that I had a tendency to avoid relationships that suffocate me in many areas of my life." (P1)

"One doesn't really feel forgiven, without talking about what the problem actually is, what the parties feel in detail, thoroughly. So, I have come to believe that one needs to be sincere in the process of being forgiven by someone." (P8)

The participants explained the transformations they felt in their experiences of forgiveness under the category of biopsychosocial development. The most frequently encountered transformations included getting to approach the victim and other individuals with more positive attitudes, the transformation of physical indicators, having a forgiving stance, self-compassion, flexibility in the demand for forgiveness, the development of empathy, and the development of trust. Some participants mentioned feelings of weakness and embarrassment in the first stages following their experience of forgiveness, but it was emphasized these feelings were not long-lasting.

"I tried to have self-regulation in my behaviors and such, because I sit down and question it. Even if I want to do something, I question why." (P10)

"After this, compared to before, I'm now more flexible in terms of accepting my fault and asking for forgiveness or embracing someone if they do the same to me or are in the same position for my future relationships, family relationships, friendships, etc., even though this doesn't work out." (P14)

"I had physical discomfort, including serious problems in my stomach and bowels due to the unilateral relationship and this transgression [...]. I overcame these problems thanks to the comfort I got from being forgiven." (P9)

"As that burden started to lift up, as I saw him [his friend] me, it became easier for me to forgive myself." (P2)

"When I recognized the experience of forgiveness as a more humane concept and understood that it is a part of the human experience, I accepted it as an experience, and I thought I was happier by looking at it more positively." (P13)

"In the beginning, that change took a lot of time. After that, the bond of trust between us became more strong." (P4)

"Being forgiven is a good experience, but I can say that struggling for this, being influenced a lot by what that person [her friend] says, etc. in fact, made me feel weak a little bit. I mean, I could say the experience itself made me feel weak, but as I said, I felt empowered at the end." (P8)

Theme 4: Value of Being Forgiven

Based on the statements of the participants, the theme of "value of being forgiven" consisted of the categories of 'relationship as a source of power', 'understanding the resilience of the relationship', 'not leaving any hurt', and 'common past'. In the scope of these categories, the included concepts were about the value of the victim, secondary gains, less avoidance, being comforted by the request for forgiveness, and positive contributions to self.

"I had secondary gains from the relationship. I mean, he [her father] provided me with things. He would take me places then or pick me up from work." (P11)

"I understood that taking steps to be forgiven, apologizing for example, is not something that would degrade me, or I understood that it isn't something that would allow the other person to have dominance over me. It is simple, actually. I understood that it is something that needs to be done by any transgressor or anyone who expects forgiveness." (P15)

"You know, I think he [his friend] is a good person. It was highly valuable for me to see that I hadn't left any unpleasant effect on him." (P2)

"They (the past experiences) earn a significant place in a person's life. I mean, an effort can be made anyway, but more effort can be made for such a person." (P12).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

As a result of this study, which was conducted to explore the experiences of young adult university students regarding being forgiven after their transgressions, the overarching themes of 'contact process', 'relational responsibility/decision-making', 'transformative effect of being forgiven', and 'value of being forgiven' were obtained.

In the first phases of the forgiveness process, the participants developed an awareness of their fault and empathized with the victim in terms of the effects of the transgression on the victim. In the model they developed to explain forgiveness experiences in interpersonal relationships, Enright et al. (1996) stated that transgressors first notice the effects of their transgressions on the victims, and they experience the outcomes of their transgressions.

In this study, it was understood that the participants experienced some negative changes due to their transgressions such as barriers to communication in their relationships with the victims of their transgressions, the unhealthy expression of anger, and growing apart. It was seen that to repair their relationships with the victim, the participants expressed the guilt about mistake, and through these feelings of guilt, they showed a motivation to make up for their mistakes, become closer again in their relationship with the victim, and strengthen their relationship again. The feeling of guilt leads individuals to perform behaviors such as making up for their negative behaviors, having regret, and apologizing (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Tangney, 1991). McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) reported that compensatory behaviors following a transgression increase the forgiving characteristics of the victim by improving their empathy levels. Similarly, Knight (2018) found that the perceived forgiveness level of the transgressor was positively associated with the appeasement/positivity communication style, which corresponds to compensatory behaviors for the alleviation of the effects of the transgression and the appeasement of the victim, and the apology/concession communication style, which corresponds to privileges for the victim, the acceptance of a mistake, and apology.

The participants reported some factors that facilitated their forgiveness processes. These factors included agreeableness, open communication, and sincere compensation. Some studies in the relevant literature have provided results supportive of those in this study. In their sample of university students, Knight (2018) revealed that the avoidance/silence communication style, which is characterized by the avoidance of communicating in relation to the transgression, was negatively associated with perceived forgiveness. In a study in which the relationships between 5-factor personality traits and perceived forgiveness were investigated in university students, similarly, agreeableness was found to have a positive relationship to perceived forgiveness (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Additionally, the participants talked about some facilitating factors regarding the acceptance of the transformation of the victim in the forgiveness process with insightfulness such as giving the victim some space and progressing at the pace of the victim. Likewise, in the process model they developed regarding the concept of receiving forgiveness, Enright et al. (1996) argued that in the forgiveness process, the transgressor anticipates the transformation of the victim humbly. In addition, the participants listed some factors that made the forgiveness process more difficult as the recurrence and intensity of the transgression, the deliberate nature of the transgression, the prevention of communication, the difficulty of anger management, insistence, blaming, intricacy (lack of boundaries), the negative attitudes of people around them, and unrealistic expectations. Some studies have revealed that the characteristics of a transgression have significant outcomes in the forgiveness process (Hall & Fincham, 2008; Taysi, 2007; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). However, it can be asserted that there is a limited number of studies addressing the factors that positively or negatively influence the process of forgiveness. This indicates a need for further research in this field to comprehensively understand the elements that impact the process of forgiveness.

In this study, the participants stated that the forgiveness process brings about a reconciliation in terms of the reorganization of relationship boundaries and roles. In the case of reconciliation, decisions are made regarding several issues associated with relationship boundaries such as making up or growing apart in the relationship between the transgressor and the victim, as well as the transformation of relational roles and expectations. Some researchers have reported the presence of reconciliation between the victim and the transgressor along with forgiveness (Everett & Worthington, 2005; Gassin, 1998; Swink & Leveille, 1986). Considering the responses of the participants of this study, it may be thought that reconciliation is a part of the forgiveness process, and it emerges as a consequence of forgiveness. However, although reconciliation is seen in a relational sense in the process of forgiveness, it does not always mean that forgiveness takes place. In addition to its relational aspect, forgiveness also has an intrapsychic nature. Moreover, the reconciliation that is seen in interpersonal relationships might not reflect an emotional transformation towards forgiveness.

The participants of this study reported that they showed many positive individual changes following their forgiveness. Such changes included a reduction in negative emotions and stress levels, the development of self-awareness and awareness regarding forgiveness, an increase in positive emotions such as trust and empathy, feeling negative emotions in the first stage. In the context of emotional transformations, reductions in negative emotions such as guilt, anger, and sorrow were frequently reported. Such transformations bring relief in the emotional sense. Likewise, several studies have indicated that there is a reduction in the negative emotions of transgressors when they are forgiven (Gassin, 1998; Krause & Ellison, 2003; vanOyen-Witvliet et al., 2002; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). It was also seen that the transgressors developed a more compassionate approach towards themselves after their experiences of being forgiven, and it became easier for them to forgive themselves for these transgressions. This result was compatible with the results of previous studies showing a positive relationship between the experience of being forgiven and self-forgiveness (Gassin, 1998; Hall & Fincham, 2008; Ingersoll – Dayton et al., 2010; Rahman, 2013; Terzino, 2010). Consistently, in the study in which they examined forgiveness between married couples, Fliesen et al. (2005) found that the perceived forgiveness levels of the partner were negatively associated with self-blame and positively associated with self-forgiveness. It may be considered that along with being forgiven, it becomes easier for transgressors to forgive themselves by their more positive self-evaluation. Being forgiven may reduce the negative self-evaluation of the transgressor and bring about positive psychological outcomes such as relief and comfort (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2005).

In this study, some participants mentioned the development of self-awareness after their forgiveness experiences. The participants stated that they experienced changes such as their awareness of responsibility, their awareness of the ill intent causing the transgression, their awareness of the consequences of their behaviors, and changes in relationship patterns, personality patterns, and coping styles. In agreement with this result, Gassin (1998) found that their participants reported changes such as accepting that they could be at fault, noticing their responsibilities, and recognizing the effects of own behaviors on other people. After forgiveness, there were also some changes in the awareness of the participants towards others. These changes included seeing the maturity of the victim, understanding that people can be hurt, and recognizing forgiving people around oneself. In their study on the effects of being forgiven, Gassin concluded that the participants found others more forgiving after their own experiences of being forgiven. In this study, the participants stated that they noticed their value and the value of their relationship for the victim better. In agreement with this, Gassin stated that in the process of forgiving the transgressor, the victim expressed messages such as 'you are valued' and 'our relationship is valuable for me'.

Some of the participants of this study mentioned some negative emotions that were short-lived for them after their forgiveness, including weakness and embarrassment. There are studies in the literature that support this result. The forgiveness of the transgressor by the victim may be considered prosocial behavior. Fisher et al. (1982) emphasized some conditions in which negative responses to exposure to prosocial behavior, such as the negative evaluation of the person showing the prosocial behavior and experiencing decreases in self-confidence, could be encountered. Droll (1984) stated that perceived forgiveness results in some outcomes such as feeling indebted to the person who forgives and considering oneself in a lower status than them.

In this study, it was understood that after being forgiven, the participants experienced positive changes not only in their relationships with the victim but also in their relationships with other people. It may be argued that among these changes, noticing the maturity of the victim, making a behavioral effort to avoid hurting the victim again, taking relational responsibilities, and treating others in a more forgiving and compassionate matter are significant changes that will contribute to interpersonal functionality levels. In line with these results, Wallace et al. (2008) stated that the perception of forgiveness by individuals provides improvements in their interpersonal functionality levels.

In this study, some participants reported that they started to trust the victim and their relationship more after being forgiven. Gassin (1998) determined that transgressors felt safer in their relationship with the victim after being forgiven by them. In their sample of married university students, Wieselquist (2009) identified positive relationships between the perception of the spouse as a forgiving person and the trust felt towards the spouse. The development of the feeling of empathy was also among the important changes following the experience of being forgiven among the participants of this study. Most participants reported the development of empathy towards the victim both during and after the forgiveness process. In their model explaining the process of forgiveness, Enright et al. (1996) specified a stage in which the transgressor develops empathy for the victim.

Some participants mentioned that they started to have more compassionate and forgiving attitudes toward the victim and other people after their forgiveness by the victim. Similarly, in their study that was carried out to investigate the experiences of transgressors in interpersonal relationships, Gassin (1998) found that after being forgiven, the participants learned more about forgiving and showing unconditional love for others. Ingersoll-Dayton et al. (2010) found a positive relationship between perceived forgiveness and forgiving others. Hayward and Krause (2013), who examined the experience of perceived forgiveness in two cohorts, determined a positive relationship between the participants' feelings of being forgiven and their forgiveness of others. Based on this information, it may be concluded that being forgiven has several positive relational effects on the individual.

The vast majority of the participants in this study talked about changes after their forgiveness such as noticing their responsibilities in their relationship with the victim and showing behavioral effort to not hurt the victim again. Previous studies have also shown that significant proportions of transgressors who reported relational transgressions showed care to not to hurt the other party again after feeling forgiven by them (Gassin, 1998; Wallace et al., 2008). Accordingly, it may be expected that perceived forgiveness will result in positive behavioral changes.

Regarding the importance of being forgiven by one's victim, the participants of this study mentioned some situations such as relational gains, the value and resilience of the relationship, the consideration of the process as an experience, and not leaving the victim hurt. The literature review that was conducted for this study did not reveal any previous study that included the views of individuals on the importance of the concept of being forgiven. Gassin (1998) claimed that topics related to the forgiveness process like apologizing, accepting mistakes, and asking for forgiveness could be discussed at school, and they could be utilized as a part of ethics education. It may be considered that these practices could make the forgiveness process of transgressors easier. However, the perceptions of individuals regarding forgiveness and their attitudes towards the value of being forgiven may determine the extent to which they can utilize such practices. The attitudes of individuals towards the concept of being forgiven may influence their levels of motivation in issues that are among the important components of the forgiveness process such as noticing the transgression, empathizing with the victim, taking responsibility, making up for the transgression, and asking forgiveness from the victim.

Strength, Limitations, and Recommendations

Forgiveness has usually been studied from the perspective of the victim. On the other hand, the experiences of transgressor were the focus of this study. In addition, it is seen that most studies on forgiveness have been carried out using quantitative research methods. In this study, with the help of a qualitative research design, the experiences of the participants in the forgiveness process were uncovered from a qualitative in-depth perspective.

Conducting future studies by focusing on the experiences of transgressors in their processes of being forgiven will be beneficial in terms of increasing the limited literature on this topic. In this study, it was determined that factors such as the repetition of the transgression, its deliberate nature, and its intensity were also important in the forgiveness process. The effects of the characteristics of transgressions on the forgiveness process can be examined in more detail in future studies. The data of this study were collected from university students between the ages of 21 and 30. Further studies to be performed with individuals in different age groups may allow a broader understanding of the dynamics of forgiveness process. The experience of being forgiven could also be investigated in the context of transgressions that are very difficult to atone for or those that are impossible to resolve. The increased intensity of the transgression and the impossibility of its resolution may affect the experiences of transgressors substantially. This study was carried out using data obtained from qualitative interviews. Future studies could utilize multiple data sources using different methodologies.

Statements of Publication Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publications Ethics Committee of Kahramanmaras Istiklal University (25.07.2022-2022/03). The authors of this article declare that this research has not any ethical conflicts or problems that may limit the publication of the article.

Researchers' Contribution Rate

The authors equally contributed to this study.

Authors	Literature review	Method	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Results	Conclusion
Ramazan	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒
Zerrin	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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