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## Age and Gender on Dispositional Forgiveness in the Aceh Community, Indonesia

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### Abstract

*Prolonged conflict history and tsunami disaster experienced by Acehnese potentially influenced their forgiveness. This study explores the effects of age and gender on Acehnese dispositional forgiveness. The sample consisted of 458 Acehnese (75% female and 25% male) aged 20-60 years living in Aceh province participated in this study. Data was collected using the Indonesian version of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). ANOVA was used to examine the effects of age and gender on dispositional forgiveness. The results showed a statistically significant main effect of age on dispositional forgiveness. Acehnese older adults are more forgiving than younger adults, while gender does not affect dispositional forgiveness. Further analysis on the HFS subscale indicated the effect of age on forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations. This study's findings would be beneficial in serving as a foundation for developing mental health initiatives within the Acehnese community.*

**Keywords:** *Acehnese Community, Conflict, Coping Strategy, Dispositional Forgiveness, Mental Health.*

### Introduction

#### Dispositional Forgiveness

Research on forgiveness mainly focuses on offence-specific or dyadic forgiveness, so it is necessary to research dispositional forgiveness (Emmons, 2000; Mauger et al., 1992; McCullough, 2000; Mullet et al., 1998; Worthington & Wade, 1999). McCullough and Worthington started their study by establishing a connection between forgiveness and personality (McCullough et al., 1998). Subsequently, the topic of forgivingness, which distinguishes between trait and state forgiveness by referring to dispositional or trait forgiveness, piqued the interest of certain scholars. Researchers use the interchangeable terms trait and dispositional (Robert, 1995; Kim & Enright, 2016), and so does this research. Dispositional forgiveness is the tendency or desire to respond to painful interpersonal relationships by managing negative emotions and doing good to the perpetrator (McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Worthington, 1998). Trait Forgiveness is a forgiving nature in individuals to forgive offences committed by others, where forgiveness is a personality trait or characteristic (Berry et al., 2005). Robert (1995) explains that trait

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forgiveness is the capacity of a person who consistently behaves forgivingly. Trait forgiveness is important because it influences a person's tendency to forgive over time and across situations; it is consistently related to health. (Toussaint et al, 2015).

More research on forgiveness associated with mental health (Toussaint et al., 2001; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Seybold et al., 2001) and physiological effects (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Farrow et al., 2001; Lawler et al., 2003; Witvliet et al., 2001). Meanwhile, research on forgiveness associated with age and gender is still being conducted recently (Zmău, 2018; Mahama & Osman, 2024) because the research results on the influence of age and gender vary widely across countries.

### **Age, Gender and Dispositional Forgiveness**

Dispositional forgiveness research has been widely associated with age (Zmău, 2018; Cabras et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2018; Tao et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2011) and gender (Zhang et al., 2020; Ysseldyk et al., 2007) with mixed results. Several studies have found that individual forgiveness differs in certain age groups. Increasing age potentially causes individuals to become more forgiving (Cabras et al., 2022; Ghaemmaghami et al., 2011; Steiner et al., 2011; Toussaint et al., 2001). However, some studies found that the effect of age on forgiveness is negligible because it is not very significant (Fehr et al., 2010); even Orathinkal et al. (2008) found no significant difference in forgiveness at a certain age. Meanwhile, gender may cause differences in forgiveness. A meta-analysis conducted by Miller et al. (2008) found gender differences in forgiveness where women were more forgiving than men; similar results were also found in the research of Orathinkal et al. (2008). Other studies found that men were more forgiving than women (Cabras et al., 2022; Kaleta & Mroz, 2021). In addition, some studies found no significant differences in forgiveness between men and women (Fehr et al., 2010; Toussaint & Webb, 2005).

The results of forgiveness research in cross-cultural contexts over nearly fifteen years have produced similarities and differences in individualistic and collectivist cultures (Sandage et al., 2005). Research that conducts cross-cultural comparative studies of forgiveness includes studies on the differences between Iraq and America (Gardner & Barcella., 2016), New Zealanders and China (Hook et al., 2013), the Netherlands and Turkey. (Shafa et al., 2017). Forgiveness research in Indonesia within the context of collectivist culture was conducted by Kurniati et al. (2020), Cook et al. (2022), Cook et al. (2023), and Nashori et al. (2020) regarding distress and well-being as well as religiosity. The research conducted by Kurniati (2017) focused on Javanese culture by taking samples from adolescents in Yogyakarta. However, the researcher has not yet found any studies on forgiveness within the collectivist culture in the context of Acehese society.

Acehese is a unique society, with the majority of Muslims making the Qur'an and Hadits a guide to life (Khattak et al., 2021). Forgiveness in the context of Islam comes from the Arabic word al-'afw; the word of forgiveness is often found in various verses in the Qur'an, emphasizing humans to forgive. For example, "Be forgiving and enjoin people to do what is right and turn away from those who are foolish" (Q.S. Al-A'raaf, 7:199). Aceh, with a majority Muslim population, strongly believes in Islamic teachings related to forgiveness. In addition, Aceh experienced a long history of conflict that lasted almost 30 years, which brought deep wounds to the survivors of the conflict and the natural disaster of the tsunami. These two important events cannot be forgotten and affect the formation of a forgiving personality in the people of Aceh. Based on this picture, the research conducted is of significant importance as it provides unique

information about age and gender concerning dispositional forgiveness in the context of community life in Aceh.

The first aim of this study is to explore age's influence on dispositional forgiveness. The second objective is to explore the influence of gender on dispositional forgiveness. The hypotheses in this study are:

**Hypothesis 1:** Age has a significant effect on dispositional forgiveness

**Hypothesis 2:** Gender has a significant effect on dispositional forgiveness

## Methods

### Sample and Data Collection

This research was designed using a quantitative design with a survey type. The survey design presents a quantitative description of a population's trends, attitudes, and opinions or tests the relationship between variables in a population by studying a sample (Creswell, 2018). The selection of participants in this study used volunteer sampling, namely determining the sample based on the willingness of participants who fit the sample criteria to become research participants (Agresti, 2018). The characteristics of participants are Acehnese people who live in Aceh aged 20-60 years. Data was collected online from May 12 -July 4, 2022, by distributing a Google form link. Researchers distributed the Google form link through WhatsApp groups and Instagram. Each respondent received a Google form link explaining the research, informed consent, and instructions for completing the survey.

The total number of participants was 530, but only 458 participants met the criteria and could be analyzed.

Dispositional forgiveness was measured using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) developed by Thompson et al (2005). This Likert scale comprises 18 items with seven response options (1 is almost always wrong, 7 is almost always right). This scale has three subscales: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situation. Before gathering the data, this scale was adapted to the Indonesian language and context. The HFS was piloted on 81 respondents, resulting in Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ )= 0.87. Meanwhile, the reliability for the forgiveness of self subscale is  $\alpha = 0.75$ , the forgiveness of others  $\alpha = 0.78$ , and the forgiveness of situations  $\alpha = 0.8$ .

According to the Heartland Forgiveness Scale scoring and interpretation, the respondent's score can be interpreted as an overall score or as a score for each of the three sub-scales: self-forgiveness, the forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of unfavourable situations or events that are out of the respondent's control (forgiveness of situations). The greater score the respondent got, the greater their level of forgiveness; conversely, the lower their score, the less forgiveness they possess. This scoring applies to each subscale score and the overall score. The mean score for each subscale is 31, while the mean for the entire scale is 93.

### Data Analysis

All data in this study were analyzed using JASP 0.16.1.0. Two-way between-groups ANOVA was used in this study to see the main and interaction effects of age and gender on dispositional forgiveness. Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA between groups was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference in age on each HFS sub-scale, namely, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. Post-hoc analysis with Bonferroni correction was used to see the significant differences between groups (Goss-Samson, 2019).

## Ethical Approval

This research has passed the ethical test from the Nusantara Scientific Psychology Consortium (KPIN) no. 021/2022 ethics/KPIN.

## Result

The 458 participants in this study ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old, with a mean age of 31.7 years ( $SD = 10.1$ ), consisting of 114 males (25%) and 344 women (75%). The research sample was categorized into four age groups due to the needs of the study: (1) early adulthood, age 20–30 years old ( $n = 254$ ); (2) adulthood, age 31–40 years old ( $n = 98$ ); (3) middle adulthood, age 41–50 years old ( $n = 90$ ); and (4) late adulthood, age beyond 50 years old ( $n = 16$ ) (Kaleta & Mroz, 2018). Table 1 displays descriptive information about research participants by age and gender.

| Age   | Gender | Mean   | SD     | N   |
|-------|--------|--------|--------|-----|
| 20-30 | Male   | 84.345 | 15.214 | 55  |
|       | Female | 86.231 | 13.624 | 199 |
| 31-40 | Male   | 88.875 | 17.228 | 24  |
|       | Female | 91.824 | 14.510 | 74  |
| 41-50 | Male   | 91.138 | 14.174 | 29  |
|       | Female | 93.098 | 13.379 | 61  |
| 51-60 | Male   | 88.333 | 15.002 | 6   |
|       | Female | 90.200 | 21.877 | 10  |

Table 1. Descriptive Data of Study Participants by Age and Gender

Research results indicated that respondents' forgiveness is in the low category (61.4%). The results obtained in the three subscales of forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations also show that more respondents are in the low category with a percentage of 73.1%, 51.7%, and 52.4%, respectively. In conclusion, most respondents have lower forgiveness of self than forgiveness of situations or others.

| Dispositional Forgiveness         | Categorization |             |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
|                                   | High           | Low         |
| Dispositional forgiveness (Total) | 177 (38,6%)    | 281 (61,4%) |
| <i>Forgiveness of self</i>        | 123 (26,9%)    | 335 (73,1%) |
| <i>Forgiveness of others</i>      | 221 (48,3%)    | 237 (51,7%) |
| <i>Forgiveness of situations</i>  | 218 (47,6%)    | 240 (52,4%) |

Table 2. Categorization Dispositional Forgiveness

Two-way between groups ANOVA test results showed a significant effect of age on dispositional forgiveness [ $F(3,450) = 4.86$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ]. HFS total scores differed significantly among age groups (Table 3). Post-hoc analysis with Bonferonni correction showed

that early adulthood (20-30) was more difficult to forgive than middle adulthood (41-50). Meanwhile, there was no significant effect of gender on dispositional forgiveness [ $F(1,450) = 0.91, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$ ], meaning that the HFS total score was not significantly different in men and women (Table 3). There was no interaction effect between age and gender [ $F(3,450) = 0.025, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.000$ ].

|                | Early adulthood (20-30 years old) | Adulthood (31-40 years old) | Middle Adulthood (41-50 years old) | Late adulthood (>50 years old) | p     | Male          | Female        | p     |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|---------------|---------------|-------|
|                | <i>M (SD)</i>                     | <i>M (SD)</i>               | <i>M (SD)</i>                      | <i>M (SD)</i>                  |       | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> |       |
| Total ScoreHFS | 85,82 (13,9)                      | 91,1 (15,2)                 | 92,48 (13,6)                       | 89,5 (19,05)                   | 0,002 | 87,24 (15,5)  | 88,77 (14,3)  | 0,339 |

Table 3. The Mean and Standard Deviation for HFS Total Score by Age and Gender

Furthermore, a One-Way between-groups ANOVA test was conducted to see the effect of age on each HFS sub-scale, namely forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. The analysis showed that there was no difference in forgiveness of self among the four age groups [ $F(3,454) = 2.05, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ ]. However, there were differences across age groups regarding forgiveness of others [ $F(3,454) = 5.02, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ] and forgiveness of situations [ $F(3,454) = 7.85, p < 0.005, \eta^2 = 0.05$ ]. Post-hoc analysis showed that individuals in middle adulthood (41-50 years old) tend to forgive others and situations beyond their control more easily than in early adulthood (20-30 years old).

|                           | Early Adulthood (20-30 years old) | Adulthood (31-40 years old) | Middle Adulthood (41-50 years old) | Late Adulthood (>50 years old) | p       |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|
|                           | <i>M (SD)</i>                     | <i>M (SD)</i>               | <i>M (SD)</i>                      | <i>M (SD)</i>                  |         |
| Forgiveness of self       | 27,3 (5,07)                       | 28,6 (5,46)                 | 28,3 (5,2)                         | 26,6 (7,23)                    | 0,105   |
| Forgiveness of others     | 29,3 (6,25)                       | 31,07 (6,4)                 | 31,8 (5,7)                         | 32,7 (7,4)                     | *0,002  |
| Forgiveness of situations | 29,2 (5,9)                        | 31,4 (6,1)                  | 32,4 (5,6)                         | 30,1 (7,1)                     | *<0,001 |

\*  $p \leq 0,05$

Table 4. The Mean and Standard Deviation for HFS Subscale Scores by Age Group.

## **Discussion**

The study results found that age significantly influences dispositional forgiveness in Acehnese society. Previous studies also found similar results (Allemand, 2008; Cabras et al., 2022; Ghaemmaghami et al., 2011; Steiner et al., 2011; Toussaint et al., 2001). This study also found that adulthood (31-40 years old) and middle adulthood (41-50 years old) were more forgiving than the early adulthood age group (20-30 years old). The results of this study support research conducted by Lampropoulou et al. (2023), which found that age affected dispositional forgiveness significantly. The forgiveness research conducted by Tao et al. (2021) found that forgiveness increases with age. According to the development of forgiveness theory, forgiveness should be seen as part of moral reasoning (Enright et al., 1989); some research results find a significant relationship between age and the trait of forgivingness (Taysi & Orcan, 2015).

Further analysis found that the Acehnese community, across all age groups, showed no difference in self-forgiveness. Middle-aged adults (41-50) were more forgiving of others and uncontrollable situations than younger adults (20-30). Acehnese, who adhere to a collectivist culture, prioritize the needs and goals of the group as a whole. Forgiveness research in the context of collectivist culture by Fu and Hui (2004), found that offering forgiveness is related to group solidarity, which includes maintaining harmony, tolerance in interpersonal relationships, and the desire to avoid conflict. Fu and Hui (2004) further explained that keeping relationships (harmony) is the most crucial aspect of preserving balance or order in interpersonal relationships within Chinese society. Chinese community believes in the philosophy of Confucianism, which emphasizes the importance of harmony (Fung, 1948), while the Acehnese community adheres to Hadih Madja or Nariet Madja as a way of life, which are wise sayings inherited from ancestors that convey the values and philosophy of Acehnese society concisely, containing advice, prohibitions, and teachings benefit for sustaining life and peace (Bakar in Saputra et al., 2023), for example, one of the teachings in Hadih Madja or Nariet Madja is 'menyoe ka salah meu-ah ta lakee,' which means if you are wrong, ask for forgiveness. Kindness and peace are also taught through cultural arts such as poems and verse, which contain positive meanings in the form of advice and encouragement to do things that are beneficial for oneself and others, for example: "If you make a mistake, you should be ashamed, follow the teachings of your elders, if you make a mistake, apologize, in the afterlife, you will certainly be happy." Traditional teachings or values passed down through generations regarding patience (Ho, 2019), kindness (Patrick et al., 2013), and harmony are highly believed and significantly influence Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Indonesian societies. (Kurniati et al, 2017; Zhang et al, 2006). Forgiveness in the Asian community is influenced by social environment and group norms compared to Western societies (Ho & Fung, 2011). Markus and Kitayama (1991) explain the importance of maintaining harmony and connection with others in collectivist cultures.

This study also found that forgiving situations out of control in middle adulthood (41-50) is more straightforward than in adulthood (20-30). Thompson and Snyder (2003) explained that forgiveness related to situations out of control is an event or situation that humans cannot control (for example, illness, destiny, and natural disasters). In the Acehnese community, the natural disaster of the tsunami is a significant event beyond the ability to control. The subject considers the event to be a significant event that occurred by the will of God, so accepting the event is a destiny that must be believed. Believing in destiny is one of the pillars of faith in Islam that the people of Aceh must believe. One of the pillars of faith is to believe in Qada and Qadar. Qada and Qadar are destiny, which is the decree or decision of Allah, who has the power over his decree (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Believing in Qada

and Qadar is often spoken in verbal form, for example, 'ka tapewoe mandum urusan bak Allah, Allah yang poe urusan' (meaning: all the problems that occur have been handed over to Allah, Allah is the best planner), so there is no desire to remember continuously painful events so that by leaving affairs to Allah, the subject becomes more relieved. Davis et al. (2019) explained that trauma related to natural disasters helps survivors to form a stronger relationship with God (feeling safer forming benevolent traits), which fosters hope and a greater desire to forgive (Ochu et al., 2018), which is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2019) explained that positive religious coping and personality (benevolence) affect the well-being of natural disaster survivors because they will foster positive emotions (gratitude, love, and peace).

Meanwhile, this study found no effect of gender on dispositional forgiveness. This means that men and women are not significantly different regarding dispositional forgiveness. The majority of Acehnese people are Muslims who adhere to Islam. One of the teachings of Islam is about forgiveness, as in Q.S Ali Imran: 134 as for the three ways the attitude of a devoted Muslim facing mistakes made by others is to hold back anger, forgive, and repay bad treatment by continuing to do good (Khasan, 2017). The word forgiveness comes from Arabic (al-afw); the meaning of al-afw is close to al-shafh, which means forgiving, and ghafara, which means ignoring the wrong (Khasan, 2017; Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2013). Abu-Nimer and Nasser further explained that the word forgiveness often appears repeatedly in the Qur'an. Besides in the Qur'an, forgiveness is also taught in Hadith; for example, Rasulullah SAW said: The most important faith is patience and forgiveness or tolerance (HR. Bukhari & Ad Dailami); the best person among you is the one who is willing to forgive even though he can repay it (HR. Al Anshari). Islam teaches its people to forgive rather than take revenge. Forgiveness in Islamic teachings is part of the moral aspect of a Muslim, referred to as morals (Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2013). However, research in the Non-Muslim context found gender differences in trait forgivingness (Miller et al, 2008; Orathinkal et al, 2008; Cabras et al., 2022; Kaleta & Mroz, 2021). Future research should consider forgiveness associated with Islam or in a Muslim context.

This study found that the forgiveness level of the majority of respondents was in the low category. The low level of forgiveness could be due to the conflict experienced by the Acehnese community for almost 30 years (1976-2005). All respondents in this study were born during the conflict period in Aceh, so although they did not experience the conflict directly, stories about the conflict were passed down from parents or relatives to younger family members. The process of passing down stories about traumatic experiences from one generation to another is referred to as transgenerational trauma. Konig and Reimann (2018) explained that transgenerational trauma is trauma experienced by individuals or groups that are then passed down from one generation to the next. Konig and Reimann (2018) further explained that the main characteristics of transgenerational trauma are memories or knowledge of past events that appear in the form of emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, responsibility, and physical reactions. During a hearing conducted by the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (KKR) 2023, some victims and survivors of the conflict said that they were still afraid to meet soldiers and still wanted revenge for the loss of family members. Conflict survivors and victims still harbour anger and resentment because the government and perpetrators of conflict violence have not formally apologized for the many losses and casualties caused by the conflict (male conflict survivors in Aceh KKR, 2023).

Similarly, few survivors in Africa have received apologies from perpetrators of war violence and compensation, resulting in low forgiveness among conflict survivors (Ajdukovic & Biruski,

2008; McLernon et al, 2004; Van Tongeren et al., 2013). In addition, forgiveness may also relate to a region's economic conditions. Forgiveness is higher in countries that focus on post-materialistic values such as altruism, morality, and community than in countries that still focus on economic needs and security (Hanke & Fischer, 2013). In this regard, Aceh is an area still struggling to improve the economic level of its population.

Spielberger et al (1983) explained that the anger or fear trait is a personality trait associated with not apologizing. Individual perceptions of the number of offences committed by the offender, serious offences experienced, and rumination affect individuals giving forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 1999). McCullough et al. (2000) Bono and McCullough (2006) explain that rumination about transgression is one factor that influences forgiveness, namely that individuals continue to remember events that make them hurt and angry. Lyubomirsky et al. (1998) explain that rumination is the continuous recall of unpleasant events in the past that cause hurt, pain, offence, and complicated relationships. Further explained by Lyubomirsky et al, rumination can occur in three ways. First, individuals think that unpleasant events will happen again; second, individuals continuously remember unpleasant events in the past; and third, the number of unpleasant events experienced by individuals in the past (the more hurt, the more difficult it is to forgive). This matter is inseparable from the history of prolonged conflict experienced by the people of Aceh, which also affects forgiveness. Prolonged conflict creates a negative effect, which is a predictor of forgiveness and affects health (Lawler et al, 2005). Individuals who are continuously exposed to high levels of war attacks will develop avoidance behaviour, insecurity, and emotional distress that will affect forgiveness (Korn & Zukerman, 2011; Karairmak & Guloglu, 2014).

This study also found that forgiveness of self has the lowest mean score compared to forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation. Cooley (in Harter 1992) explains that self is what individuals think about themselves (appearance, behaviour, motives, character) based on the views of others. The self is constructed by cognitive processes that evolve throughout a person's life and are distinguished by two traits: integration and differentiation. (Harter, 1992). Differentiation is the individual's ability to create a self-representation influenced by personal beliefs, values, and moral standards that are believed and shaped by experience. Meanwhile, integration is the individual's ability to make high generalizations about the self towards various traits possessed; for example, helping friends or lending money to friends will form a 'good' self-concept, whereas failing to achieve life goals, being unable to care for parents, failing at work, will form a 'bad' self-concept). The number of unpleasant experiences will affect how individuals form self-representation, which will also affect their ability to interpret emotions (for example, I am happy, sad, angry) (Fischer et al, 1984), which will influence and shape the self.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the study's results, age significantly affects dispositional forgiveness, while gender has no effect. There are no differences in forgiveness of self in all age groups, but there are age group differences about forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations. Middle-aged adults (41-50) tend to be more forgiving of others and situations beyond their control than early adults (20-30). Overall, the level of forgiveness in Acehese society is low. Concerning the deep-rooted transgenerational trauma that cannot be eliminated, the memory of the conflict cannot be forgotten for life in the people of Aceh; therefore, the recommendation of this study is to employ health care professionals (clinical psychologists) in primary health services (Puskesmas) so that people can easily access mental health services at the basic level. So far, mental health services in Aceh are only available in hospitals.

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