Original article

Parents' forgiveness and coping styles as predictors of Children's self-esteem

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Abstract

Background: Parental behaviours and personalities leave a very significant impact on every individual's life, including the development of the sense of self that begins in middle childhood. A healthy and highly functional family environment leads to a higher sense of self-esteem which leads to a psychologically healthy life in the future. The purpose of the current study was to determine the role of parents' forgiveness and coping styles as predictors of children's self-esteem.

Methods: From a school in the urban location of Bangalore, India, 100 children (47 boys and 53 girls), between the ages of 8 to 12 years, and their parents (100 mothers and 100 fathers) volunteered to participate in the study (n=300). Responses to the questionnaires were recorded and Pearson's product moment correlation and regression analysis was used to study the significance of the correlation and the impact.

Results: The analysis of responses revealed that mothers' forgiveness and coping styles were found to have a significant correlation and impact on the self-esteem of children (p < .05). No significant correlation or impact was found of fathers' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children.

Conclusion: The study throws light on the importance of parent-child relationships and also focuses on the need for continued research on father-child relationships specifically.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Coping Styles, Self-Esteem, Parents, Children

Introduction

In the current scenario of the world, familial ties were found to be influenced by various factors; the most important being the individuals' personalities, thought processes, value systems and the situations they were exposed to. Although every family member had equal importance, the moment of its creation would be when two individuals choose to become parents. The most predominant consequence of challenges faced within families, was the increase in the number of broken families, as a result of a rise in parents getting divorced. The most devastating impact of these changes was left behind on the children, in terms of severely hampered adjustment and general well being [1]. It was crucial to ensure that children adapted in a gradual and healthy manner to the transition of being in a divorced household while ensuring that their developmental processes were not impacted in the long run [2-8].

Forgiveness was viewed as an integral part of the interpersonal process with the focus on sustaining a relationship after a difficult challenge occurred and to rebuild the quality of the relationship to its prior level, before the challenge occurred. One of the most used definitions of forgiveness is when it is viewed as a positive change in motivation towards anything that might be causing harm to the individual [9]. The most beneficial impact of forgiveness was found to be on both physical and mental health. The areas that are directly and most significantly impacted through forgiveness are lowered blood pressure, improved immune system, lesser amount of stress and anxiety, better interpersonal relationships, increased self-esteem and fewer mental

health disorders, to name a few [10, 11].

People are also influenced by the situations around them and the pattern of relating to challenges that they adopt to deal with these situation. This was also known as coping which was viewed as the behavioural and cognitive efforts employed to bear with, master or reduce conflicts and demands that arose in times of psychological stresses and tensions. The most used definition of psychological stress was found by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) which referred to it as "a relationship with the environment that the person appraises as significant for his or her well being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources" [12]. In congruence with the person – environment relationship, there were three possible strategies that individuals adopt as mediators, when faced with stress. These were: appraisal-focused strategies, problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies. Appraisal-focused strategies aimed at altering the thought processes or cognitions related to stress. People usually adopted this strategy by approaching the problem from a different perspective or by modification of pre-determined values and goals [12]. Problem-focused strategies focused on the cause of the stressor and hence involved strategies like extensive research of the issue in advance or use of management skills to alter or eliminate the source of the stress. On the other hand, emotion-focused strategies targeted the feelings and emotions that accompanied a given stressor. Individuals utilized methods like distraction or managing their mental states in an attempt to change their emotions related to stress perception. Most individuals use a combination of the various strategies of coping, on the basis of the situations they were faced with. Forgiveness was viewed as an emotion-focused style of coping to assist people in reduction of negative or maladaptive emotional and psychological experiences that arose as a result of interpersonal stress or conflict [13, 14].

Although most research showed that people who felt good about their own selves had the ability

to be forgiving, some found that while every human being had a difficulty with being forgiving when they had a negative view of their self; by the same understanding, every individual would also have the capacity to engage in forgiveness when they were encouraged to view their self in a positive manner [15]. Ultimately, growing up in an environment where individuals were exposed to significant family members actively exhibiting a forgiving nature and adequate and adaptive ways of coping when dealing with challenges would help them in learning how to create this balance, at a very young age, as early as their childhood. This in turn would play a very crucial role in helping them develop a good and healthy self-esteem, of which a forgiving ability and adaptable coping mechanisms were an integral part.

The purpose of the current study was to study the impact of parents' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children. To understand the impact of parents, both mothers' and fathers' responses on forgiveness and coping styles were recorded separately and measured in terms of impact on the self-esteem of the children.

The aim of the present study was to study the impact of parents' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children, with the objectives to find the relationship between mothers' forgiveness and coping styles with the self-esteem of children, to find the relationship between fathers' forgiveness and coping styles with the self-esteem of children, to find the impact of mothers' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children and to find the impact of fathers' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children.

Hypotheses

There will be a significant relationship and impact between mothers' forgiveness and coping styles with the self esteem of children and there will be a significant relationship and impact between fathers' forgiveness and coping styles with the self esteem of children.

Methods

Sample and its selection

The convenient sampling technique was used. A total of 100 children (between the ages of 8 and 12 years) and 100 mothers and 100 fathers were included in the study making the overall sample size of 300. The age group of the children was chosen in accordance with the middle childhood phase of development wherein the development of self is initiated. Families coming from an upper middle socioeconomic status from an urban city in the south of India were specifically included due to their fluency and comfort with the English language, ensuring greater understanding of questionnaires and accuracy of responses.

Inclusion criteria-Families from the middle social economic status, fluent in the English language and having children studying in school were included in the study.

Exclusion criteria-Families having a history of mental health issues or wherein children were having academic/behavioural challenges were not chosen to participate in the study. Single parent families and their children were excluded from the study.

Tools

Heartland Forgiveness Scale- A self-report questionnaire developed by Thompson, Snyder and Hoffman (1998) [16]. It measures an individual's dispositional forgiveness (the general tendency to be forgiving). The 18 items were presented on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 'almost always false of me' to 'almost always true of me' (1 – 7 respectively). The scale showed satisfactory internal consistency reliability (0.84 to 0.87), strong test-retest reliability (0.77) and good convergent validity (0.62). It had 3 subscales: Forgiveness of Self; Forgiveness of Others and Forgiveness of Situations**.**

COPE Inventory- A multidimensional coping inventory developed by Carver (2013) to assess the different ways in which people responded to stress [17]. The 60 items were presented on a 4-point rating scale ranging from 'I usually don't do this at all' to 'I usually do this a lot' (1 – 4 respectively). The average reliability was found to be good (0.79) [18]. The subscales include: Problem-Focused Coping; Emotion-Focused Coping and Other coping responses.

Self-Esteem Inventory- A test developed by Coopersmith (1987) to measure children's perspective on themselves [19]. It was a dual choice questionnaire wherein statements that matched the way a child was feeling were ticked as 'like me' and those that didn't match their feeling were ticked as 'unlike me'. The scale had a total of 58 items and a test-retest reliability ranging from 0.88 (over a five week period) to 0.70 (over a three year period).

Procedure

After the tools to conduct the research and the locale of the study were finalized, various schools were contacted to seek permission for collecting data from their students and their families. Ultimately one school, in an urban locality of Bangalore, provided permission to conduct the research. Contact was established with the Principal of the school who was told about the details and the method of the conduction of the study and who decided the children and the parents the researchers were permitted to approach. Based on that, the parents and their children were approached. The researchers clearly mentioned the purpose of the research, the instructions regarding the questionnaires and ensured confidentiality of responses. Voluntary consent from each of the participants was taken before the questionnaires were administered.

The study required children between the ages of 8 to 12 years and thus the researchers were provided with the names of children from the 5th and 6th grades and their parents. Before the data was collected, the researchers administered the questionnaires on a smaller group of the sample

to validate the scales to the population that they were going to use in the study. The test retest reliability and face and content validity was measured and found to be good and in line with the reliability and validity of the scales developed by the original authors. The Self-Esteem questionnaires were administered to the children who took around 15 to 20 minutes of school time to respond to it. All of the children were able to comprehend the items and in some cases when they were unable to do so, the researchers were able to clarify their doubts. The instructions were given clearly and the settings for test administration were good and comfortable.

Scoring

After the data was collected to the satisfaction of the researchers and their study, the scoring process was conducted. The scoring process was conducted in line with the instructions provided in the manual for each of the questionnaires. The scoring process provided results of the mothers and fathers responses on forgiveness (total forgiveness, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations) and coping styles (problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping) and children's responses on self-esteem. On the basis of this, the data was analyzed statistically.

Statistical Analysis

To study the relationship between the parents' forgiveness and coping styles and self-esteem of children Person's Product moment correlation was used. To study the impact of the relationship of forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children, regression analysis was used. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0) was used to assist in statistical analysis of the research study.

Results

Table-1: Showing the results of Correlation between Forgiveness and Coping Styles of Mothers with Self-Esteem of Children

Variables	Self-Esteem	Total Forgiveness	Forgiveness of Self	Forgiveness of Others	Forgiveness of Situations	Problem Focused Coping	Emotion Focused Coping
Self-Esteem	-						
Total Forgiveness	.349**	-					
Forgiveness of Self	.252*	.738**	-				
Forgiveness of Others	.286**	.795**	.355**	-			
Forgiveness of Situations	.285**	.830**	.492**	.457**	-		
Problem- Focused Coping	.240*	.195	.264**	.098	.124	-	
Emotion- Focused Coping	-.006	.090	.126	.111	-.014	.539**	-

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, *at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The table-1 showed the relationship between mothers' forgiveness and coping styles with self-esteem of children. Total Forgiveness (r=0.349), Forgiveness of Others (r=0.286) and Forgiveness of Situations (r=0.285) were found to be significant with the children's self-esteem at the .01 level of significance (p < .01) while Forgiveness of Self (r=0.252) and Problem-Focused Coping (r=0.240) were found to be significant with the children's self-esteem at .05 level of significance (p <.05). The Emotion-Focused Coping (r=-0.006) was not found to be significant, at .05 or .01 levels of significance.

The table- 2 showed the relationship between fathers' forgiveness and coping styles with self-esteem of children. Total Forgiveness (r=.137), Forgiveness of Self (r=.094), Forgiveness of Others (r=.145), Forgiveness of Situations (r=.080), Problem-Focused Coping (r=.155) and Emotion-Focused Coping (r=.188) were not found to be significantly related to the self-esteem of children at .05 or .01 levels of significance.

Table-2: Showing the results of Correlation between Forgiveness and Coping Styles of Fathers with Self-Esteem of Children

Variables	Self-Esteem	Total Forgiveness	Forgiveness of Self	Forgiveness of Others	Forgiveness of Situations	Problem Focused Coping	Emotion Focused Coping
Self-Esteem	-						
Total Forgiveness	.137	-					
Forgiveness of Self	.094	.687**	-				
Forgiveness of Others	.145	.812**	.305**	-			
Forgiveness of Situations	.080	.844**	.428**	.527**	-		
Problem-Focused Coping	.155	.266**	.166	.168	.289**	-	
Emotion-Focused Coping	.188	.026	-.140	.065	.100	.597**	-

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table-3: Showing the results of Regression analysis for Mothers' Forgiveness and Coping Styles on the Self-Esteem of Children

S.N.	Variables	Unstandardized beta coefficient	Standardized beta coefficient	R^2	R^2 Change	F	Sig.
1	Total Forgiveness	.309	.273	.122	.122	13.618	.000
2	Forgiveness of Self	-.088	-.027	.122	.000	6.744	.002
3	Forgiveness of Others	.173	.072	.122	.000	4.455	.006
4	Problem-Focused Coping	.527	.291	.155	.032	4.343	.003
5	Emotion-Focused Coping	-.404	-.193	.180	.026	4.133	.002

The table 3 showed regression analysis for mothers' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children. The F ratio for the following variables was found to be significant, on the self-esteem of children, at the .05 and .01 level: Total Forgiveness (F = 13.62, p < .05);

Forgiveness of Self (F = 6.74, p < .05); Forgiveness of Others (F = 4.46, p < .05); Problem-Focused Coping (F = 4.34, p < .05), and Emotion-Focused Coping (F = 4.13, p < .05).

Table 4: Showing the results of Regression analysis for Fathers' Forgiveness and Coping Styles on the Self-Esteem of Children

S. N.	Variables	Unstandardized beta coefficient	Standardized beta coefficient	R^2	R^2 Change	F	Sig.
1.	Total Forgiveness	-.148	-.125	.019	.019	1.872	.174
2	Forgiveness of Self	.490	.146	.019	.000	.926	.400
3.	Forgiveness of Others	.469	.186	.024	.005	.784	.505
4.	Problem-Focused Coping	.038	.022	.042	.018	1.035	.393
5.	Emotion-Focused Coping	.376	.186	.062	.020	1.242	.296

The table 4 showed regression analysis for fathers' forgiveness and coping styles on the self-esteem of children. The F ratio for Total Forgiveness, Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, Problem-Focused Coping and Emotion-Focused Coping were found to be 1.872, .926, .784, 1.035, and 1.242 respectively. The significance levels for Total Forgiveness, Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, Problem-Focused Coping and Emotion-Focused Coping were found at .174, .40, .505, .393, and .296 respectively. They were not found to be significant at .05 or .01 levels of significance. This shows that none of the variables showed a significant impact on the self-esteem of children, at .05 or .01 levels of significance.

Discussion

The results of the present study are in line with some past literature that have proved that familial relationships have been found to act as models or prototypes for other relationships in every

individual's life which has been showcased through the theories on attachment [20] and the dynamic interaction of personality and close relationships [21]. Maio, Thomas and Fincham (2008) believed that having high levels of forgiveness determine the nature of one's personality traits (which help in determining the coping styles employed by individuals in need) and that has a direct association with their self-esteem in turn as well [22]. However, the pattern of these associations between parents and children become weaker when parents' forgiveness is found to be low.

Another research that investigated the predictive value of mother's brooding rumination and reflection on the emotional symptoms of their children found that there was no significant impact left [23]. The results of these studies are in line with the results of the current study that show that mothers' emotion-focused coping style plays a significant role in the contribution to the development of self-esteem of their children. Parents, and particularly mothers, in the Indian context, spend a great amount of time with their children. This is true particularly in the early phases of their lives, before the child reaches the adolescent stage of development. Thus, it is natural for children to learn a great amount while modeling their mother's behaviours. Mothers have various roles that they play; based on the situations they are in. However, children in middle school are witness to two major roles of their mother; mother-father interaction and mother-child interaction. Children keenly observe the way parents interact with each other and learn a lot of their own behaviours through those interactions which in turn, plays a role in their development of self and personality.

In a study on the survivors of terror attacks and their PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms it was found that there was a significant decrease in the symptom severity of PTSD when the survivors and their spouses had a greater tendency to be forgiving, had a high self-

esteem and good social support [24]. A combination of these characteristics adds on to the personalities of these individuals which get carried on to future generations through their children modeling and inheriting these behaviours. It's crucial for children to learn the adaptive coping strategies for dealing with any kinds of negative experiences since it leads to an increased self-esteem as was found in a study of adolescents who were victims of bullying [25]. Adolescents having a high sense of self-esteem are eventually able to deal with experiences of bullying in better ways that include the employment of adaptive coping strategies and the ability to be forgiving, something that was most likely taught by their parents during their early years of development.

Research on adults today have shown that their tendency towards being forgiving, having a positive sense of their self and improved psychological well-being can be traced back to their early childhood experiences and the influence that their parents had on these specific parts of their lives [26]. The results of past literature stand in line with the results of the present study showing the important role of the parents. In the context of Indian families, mothers play a more important role in the prediction of the self-esteem of their children through their own ability to be forgiving and engaging in adaptive coping strategies.

On comparison, it was found that while mothers' forgiveness and coping styles did have a significant impact on the self-esteem of their children that was not the case when it came to the fathers. One explanation for this could be that from the evolutionary viewpoint, it has been found that fathers detach themselves from their relationship process with their child relatively easily [27, 28]. In the family system, the mothers are generally viewed as the nurturing caregivers and hence the quantity and quality of time they spend with their children is significantly more than fathers. In addition, the age group of the children who were considered for this study was

between the ages of 8 – 12 years, who tend to spend more time with their mothers throughout the week while spending quality time with their fathers mostly on weekends and holidays. To a great extent, fathers are generally found to communicate lesser with their children than mothers do [22]. However, this does not imply that fathers play no significant role in the development of the self-esteem of their children. In a case study conducted on a Bedouin-Arab family wherein the analysis of the family revealed poor parenting skills and low family functioning, the role of forgiveness in a therapeutic context really increased the self-esteem of the adolescent male of the family who had previously faced a great amount of maltreatment at the hands of his father [29].

This study provided an accurate description of family settings in the Indian context. Mothers were found to have a significant impact on the self-esteem of their children as opposed to the fathers. In Indian families, mothers are generally the mediators between their children and the fathers. Hence their role in building a bridge between the fathers and their children plays a significant role in the level and degree of impact the fathers have on their children.

One of the major limitations of the study was the lack of Indian norms for the tools used in the assessment of the variables to obtain the most accurate and culture specific results. The sample size could have been more than 100 families. In some families, the role of siblings, teachers, friends and other important family members such as grandparents of the child is also important and it could have influenced the self-esteem of the child. Age and gender differences of children's self-esteem could have been explored.

To conclude, the development of every individual in society is greatly influenced by the family, particularly by their parents and the behaviours and personalities they exhibit. Parent-child relationships play a crucial role in the determination of the foundation of the child's value system, cognitive process, emotional and social development. In the current scenario of the

world, forgiveness is a concept that has gained popularity by researchers attempting to understand human behaviour better. A number of direct benefits of forgiveness in the development of positive mindset, decreased states of feeling stressed and increased sense of self have been found. Indirect relations were found between the concepts of forgiveness, coping strategies and self-esteem.

The study provides parents an insight into the role their behaviours and personalities play and hence the changes or modifications that they might have to engage in to ensure that the self-esteem of their children develops in healthy, adaptive and appropriate ways at the right age. The study throws light on the importance of high self-esteem on the holistic development of children with lesser incidence of having mental health issues.

The extent of research on father-child interactions in particular are very limited in number or restricted to a single case study, which prevents the development of an accurate or generalized description of the father-child relationship. The role of forgiveness in the lives of children and the impact it leaves on their mental health and well-being, especially in the context of the Indian population is an area that requires further exploration.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

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