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Experience of forgiving in Indian marriages: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: The lack of knowledge about forgiveness in Indian marriages in South Africa creates difficulty in understanding the implications and cultural sensitivity regarding forgiveness between spouses. There is a need to explore the experiences of forgiveness in Indian marital relationships by providing a thorough understanding of the aspects that influence the process of forgiveness to better enhance the knowledge of health promotion interventions and understanding of cultural sensitivity in marriage counselling. This article discusses the understanding of forgiveness in marriages, participant's life experiences, psychosocial and cultural influences of forgiveness and explores ways on how to promote forgiveness in Indian marriages. It presents 8 participants, 4 married men and 4 married women from middle socioeconomic areas in Durban, KwaZulu Natal. The ecological systems theory was utilised as a framework for the study and data collected was evaluated, organised and analysed through thematic analysis. Through focusing on the participants understanding of forgiveness in their marriage, their lived experiences of forgiveness, the psychosocial and cultural influences and how to promote forgiveness in their marriage. The study found that participants experienced forgiveness more positively, allowing trust and harmony to be recreated in both their spousal and/or family systems. Reconciliation in Indian marriages plays a crucial role and affects participants' family system, spousal system, psychological health and well-being. The study also found that personality, cultural and theological influences were the leading motivators of forgiving in Indian marriages. Participants promoted marital counselling and face-to-face conversations about transgressions in their spousal system to assist marital forgiveness in Indian marriages.

Keywords: forgiveness, Indian marriages, spouses, thematic analysis, KwaZulu Natal

Introduction

The idea of forgiveness has existed for thousands of years. Many religions have promoted the act of forgiveness and acknowledged various benefits of forgiveness in their scriptures (Tucker, Bitman, Wade, Cornish, 2015). Forgiveness occurs when an individual logically by right, identifies their mistreatment and forgives another by abandoning all forms of resentment and replacing it with a moral principle of beneficence towards the transgressor (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Kotze, 2006). Forgiveness is viewed as an intrapersonal and interpersonal process that is characterised by a prosocial change towards the transgressor in a particular interpersonal condition (Saunders, 2011; Campbell, 2017). However, a distinction is prominent when forgiveness is defined in Eastern and Western cultures. The Western culture has an understanding that forgiveness is individualistic and emphasises personal well-being, health and the self as independent from other individuals (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Flicker & T Bui, 2018). Forgiveness is viewed as an intrapersonal process that allows the victim to forsake negative emotions such as revenge and anger and establish inner peace and compassion (Flicker & T Bui, 2018). The process of forgiveness can be independent of reconciliation with the transgressor and may be meant to terminate the relationship once the victim abandons negative emotion towards the transgressor (Flicker & T Bui, 2018). In eastern cultures or collectivistic cultures, forgiveness is viewed as a social responsibility and refers to the restoration and maintenance of social harmony through reconciliation (Hook, Worthington, Utsey, Davis & Burnette, 2009; Flicker & T Bui, 2018; Everett et al., 2019).

Indian culture proposes that family plays a vital role in society as it extends from the spouses included in marriage to children to grandparents (Jain, 2019). Jain (2019) states that when a couple divorces, a family deteriorates. The deterioration of family results in the coercion of influence from elders, relatives, social customs, and traditions (Jhamb & Singh, 2018; Jain, 2019). Although this influence may result in a positive effect in preventing a disintegration, it co-exists with the loss of social control between husband and wife and loss of power.

Methods

This qualitative study employed thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore participants' lived experiences and perspectives on forgiveness in Indian marriages (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith & Osburn, 2015). Thematic analysis allowed for reflective engagement with the data, while IPA offered a framework for understanding how participants constructed meaning around their experiences (Smith & Osburn, 2015). Data were collected from eight Indian participants, all residing in middle socio-economic areas of KwaZulu-Natal and married for over ten years, representing Islamic, Hindu, and Christian faiths; six were in arranged marriages and two in love marriages. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, starting with contacts from the researcher's volunteer work. Inclusion criteria required participants to be Indian, over 18, married for over a decade, and living in Durban (Greeff, 2020), while those with cognitive impairments or divorced/married couples were excluded. Consent was obtained digitally due to COVID-19, and interviews were conducted via Zoom, ensuring ethical standards and participant comfort. Semi-structured interviews, based on identified gaps in forgiveness literature, lasted at least 50 minutes and focused on participants' personal understandings and experiences of forgiveness in marriage. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis, with the researcher maintaining reflexivity to acknowledge how her background and biases might influence data interpretation and presentation.

Results

The inductive thematic analysis of the study generated five main themes, eleven sub-themes, and three sub-sub-themes, supported by verbatim quotes from participants. Participants understood forgiveness as both interpersonal and intrapersonal—requiring recognition of wrongdoing and emotional processing, followed by apology and reconciliation. Forgiveness was often influenced by the severity of the transgression, where minor issues were overlooked, especially in arranged marriages, while severe issues (e.g., abuse or infidelity) required direct resolution. Religious and cultural upbringing significantly shaped participants' understanding and practice of forgiveness, with many viewing it as a divine obligation and moral duty. Experiences of forgiveness included rebuilding trust, restoring marital harmony, and the emotional impact of reconciliation. Positive acts following forgiveness improved closeness, while a lack of reconciliation led to helplessness and emotional distress. Psychological and social influences also played a role; personality traits impacted one's ability to forgive, with more empathetic individuals displaying higher forgiveness. Social pressure was largely implicit, driven by the desire to preserve family unity. Religion played a major role, with participants viewing forgiveness as essential for spiritual well-being and marital longevity. Cultural expectations emphasized respect toward elders and in-laws, especially for women, and dictated acceptable spousal behavior. Finally, participants suggested improvements in forgiveness processes through open communication, mutual understanding, and professional support like marriage counselling, especially for severe issues—highlighting a desire for growth in marital dynamics.

Discussion

The strength of this research involves the exploration of Indian, married individuals perspectives. The influence of forgiveness is strongly associated with psychological, cultural and theological elements. There were slight marked differences in social influences of forgiveness between participants. Congruent with Fincham (2006), Saunders (2011) and Campbell (2017), forgiveness was viewed as an interpersonal process between both spouses which resulted in the intrapersonal process of abandoning all forms of resentment, bitterness and anger through the transgressing spouse's proposed apology, to the victim spouse's acceptance or rejection of the apology, which then contributes to the changed or bettered behaviour of the transgressing spouse. The interpersonal process possesses a collectivist nature seen in Asian cultures that contributes to the need to maintain a relationship (Everett et al., 2019; Joo et al., 2019). Significantly, transgression severity had influenced the willingness to forgive or not, causing the victim spouse to create a negative impression of the transgression in a cognitive sense (Fehr et al., 2010).

Mild transgressions in Indian marriages were ignored, overlooked or forgivable. Severe transgressions included domestic abuse, disrespect to in-laws or spouses, inappropriate dressing of females and infidelity. It had been viewed as negligence of care, respect and love in both marital and family systems (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021). Consistent to the study by Morse and Metts (2011), a high correlation between severe transgressions and

less probability of forgiveness was stated. Severe transgressions required the transgressing spouse to engage in a higher level of repair and changing behaviour. Some participants had directly linked their understanding of forgiveness to the teachings and scriptures of their religion (Tucker et al., 2015). Muslim participants and Christian participants encouraged forgiveness in their marriage despite interpersonal elements such as an apology and advocate the need for forgiveness despite transgression, degree of repentance or consequences of transgressions (Rye et al., 2000; Tucker et al., 2015).

The study found that through forgiveness, individuals experienced the establishment and re-establishment of trust in their relationship. Spouses had to examine the level of transgression created by the transgressor. Consistent to Fehr et al. (2010), forgiveness is produced through the victim's perception that the transgressor and the transgression are disengaged, perceiving that the transgression occurred through circumstance. These transgressions were viewed as a violation of trust.

Negative emotions that were created through transgressions caused transgressing spouses to realise the consequences of their actions, prompting an apology. Through admission of guilt in their actions, apologising creates a perception of the transgression as worthy of forgiveness. The findings displayed that the negative emotions experienced by both spouses and a hostile environment were released, engaging in a process of re-establishing trust. The transgressing spouse understood the consequences of particular actions, which most spouses reported as transgressions that were not repeated (Fehr et al., 2010). The transgressing spouse was mentioned to recognise the other's point of view by placing a focus on marital goals. This encouraged acts of negotiation such as changed post-transgression behaviour.

Spouses' stated that through communication, it allowed vulnerability in speaking about their pain, anger and needs which contributed to a level of marital adjustment (Fehr et al., (2010). A participant partakes in forgiveness for the "sake of forgiving", which refers to decisional forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Holeman, Dean, DeShea & Duba, 2011). The intentional decision to forgive a spouse did not yield a complete decrease in negative emotion toward the transgressor and led to a level of helplessness or hopelessness (Tucker et al., 2015). Decisional forgiveness is created through the influence of forgiveness due to obligations of religion, culture, family and society (Tucker et al., 2015).

Experiencing forgiveness, it allowed one to create a sense of normalcy, happiness, peace, and harmony and maintain a well-functioning household. Eastern and African studies and cultures have highlighted interdependence, collectivism and family. According to participants, forgiveness played a significant role in maintaining appropriate rules of interactions by disengaging them from negative emotions that create a hostile environment affecting communication and interactions between both family and spousal systems. A disruption in the mentioned elements could create dysfunction in their system and may lead to community gossiping. Creating and maintaining peace and harmony was also seen as an obligation or need for her offspring/ family system (Everett et al., 2019).

The study found that the interrelated presence of reconciliation is crucial in Indian culture and marriages. Participants that experienced forgiveness with and without the reconciliation of spouses presented negative and positive effects on their well-being and marital satisfaction. Spouses accepted their emotional injury and began healing through letting go of negative emotions, re-building trust and reconnecting with their spouses by engaging in a reconciling environment (Mokhtar, 2000; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; Hasan & Tiwari, 2019). The study established spouses experienced reconciliation through portrayal and received a degree of positive action/ feeling toward the spouse (Fehr et al., 2010). Spouses mentioned that through engaging in acts of behaviour that he/she needs at that moment aids the reconciliation process that helps the relationship and increases the likelihood of forgiving in the future. Transgressing spouses mentioned creating an empathetic, loving and compassionate environment to achieve being forgiven (Worthington and Wade, 1999; Exline et al., 2003; Kaleta & Mroz, 2021). Participants stated reconciliation led to an increase in relationship satisfaction, security and closeness. They mentioned the ability to become conscious of one's needs and understanding each other's emotions and behaviour led to relationship closeness (Rusbult et al.,1991). This finding was congruent with the experience of reconciliation in this study, participant's explained that reconciliation established a beneficial environment that eliminates negative emotions and resulted positively in other and future transgressions, creating a 'positive illusion', where one may cognitively transform one's negative actions and portray them positively (Donovan & Priester, 2020).

Participants stated that they experienced forgiveness and reconciliation as a means to enable healthier relationships, improved mental health for both spouses, lesser anxiety, stress and hostility, and improved health and self-esteem due to their need to maintain their marriage. Consistent with the study by Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk and Kluwer (2003), marriages with strong interpersonal commitment were linked with positive emotions and high self-esteem. The experience of forgiveness without reconciliation was seen to have a negative

psychological impact on the individual's marriage and oneself. A sense of superior-inferior complex had been experienced. The spouse had experienced low self-esteem and suffered from an inferiority complex with multiple situations forgiven without changing positive behaviour from the transgressing spouse, giving a sense of powerlessness between spouses that creates difficulty in dealing with challenges (Schnabel & Nadler, 2008; Zheng, Michelle Xue & Fehr, Ryan & Tai, Kenneth & Narayanan, Jayanth & Gelfand, Michele. 2014).

Individuals presented their personality or their spouse's personality as factors that influenced their willingness to forgive (Fehr et al., 2010); Souders, 2021). Participants who displayed difficulty forgiving, describe their personality as difficult to handle betrayal, therefore do not forgive. Congruent to Souders (2021) findings, individuals who have a grudgeful personality may react passively or bitterly. These spouses state that they experienced defensiveness and egotistical behaviour from their transgressors which made it difficult to forsake all resentment. They had mentioned this affected future transgressions. The study found that participants and participant spouses who displayed a calm, empathetic and understanding personality had reported a higher likelihood to forgive (Tucker et al., 2015). Participants reported a degree of perspective-taking, this allowed a cognitive capability of understanding another's perspective, intentions and goals that assisted them to present acts of negotiation and marital adjustment that have been discussed in reconciliation (Fehr et al., 2010). Older couples that were involved in arranged marriages, emphasised respect and trust in their relationship through socio-moral responsibilities. However, these participants' personality traits were seen to display trait forgiveness. These spouses displayed the ability to forgive despite any situation and time (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor & Wade, 2001; Brown, 2003; Fehr et al., 2010).

Some of the participants stated an explicit influence of society on their forgiveness. Spouses that have reported an influence have so through the advice and gossip through colleagues and friends in either motivating each to forgive or not. However, spouses who believed society did not influence forgiveness mentioned the inability of the outside world knowledge of the issues faced behind closed doors or the emotional or physical intensity of a transgression created. There was evidence of a need for a perfect or liked image to be created. Divorce is seen as a collapse in upholding an image. Therefore, a significance is placed on forgiveness in a marriage (Jain, 2019). An advantage of forgiving in marriage was seen as preventing the community from gossiping about his family. Participants mentioned that forgiveness was seen as an act of God and an act loved by God, which they had benefited religiously. This influenced individuals to adopt forgiving behaviour that was deemed likeable and acceptable. God's ability to forgive was seen as a motivation, strength and a model of virtue (Tucker et al., 2015; Islamic Awareness, 2013). A clear goal that was found in this study was the idea of forgiving in order to determine their afterlife. The behaviour and intention toward forgiving and forgetting are favoured in scriptures with the significant religious benefit of a promised afterlife. Spouses also viewed forgiveness as an obligation of religion and a need to maintain a marriage (Islamic Awareness, 2013). Spouses that were able to recognise their divine purpose in marriage were more likely to correlate to preserve a higher level of marital adjustment (Aman et al., 2019). However, spouses believed that their scriptures held that the inability of maintaining a marriage and resulting in divorce as a disliked action redeemable by punishment by God, affecting their afterlife goal (Jain, 2019).

The study established that spouses were brought up in a strict Indian cultural background, highlighting the ability to forgive without apology or need for reconciliation with severe unhealthy transgressions. Forgiveness was highlighted through the fundamental goal of social harmony and peace in communities (Flicker & T Bui, 2018; Everett et al., 2019). Most participants in this study had viewed a sense of strong interpersonal forgiveness. The idea of forgiveness and its importance was emphasised in their upbringing and later brought into their marriages (Lamb, 2002; Paz, Neto & Mullet, 2008; Flicker & T Bui, 2018). It was found that in Indian culture in South Africa, that an elder which may be grandparents or parents who have the authority to make decisions for their offspring. Arranging a marriage requires experience and wisdom that proposes this hierarchy (Jain, 2019; Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). Older spouses married for at least 40 years were seen as more likely to be in arranged marriages. Spouses had categorised these marriages built on trust and respect and mentioned little to no transgressions with their spouse. These spouses mentioned no need for forgiveness in their marriage through the lack of transgressions created by the other spouse.

As per the distinction and hierarchical role of elders, spouses held their elders' advice in high regard (Jain, 2019). Elders had stressed the importance of maintaining the marriage, overlooking conflict and displaying understanding towards their spouse. Their altruism, sacrifice, security, loyalty, community and duty were eminent in their actions and were encouraged to impart such values to their offspring (Jain, 2019). The study found a difference of advice imparted to female and male spouses, consistent with findings of Kaleta and Mroz (2021) and Jain (2019). Indian culture regards marriage and family as a dominant feature in a female's life. Their fundamental duty is to be loyal to their spouse, spouse's family and children (Jain, 2019 Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). Female participants were encouraged to keep quiet, keep their cool, encouraged to forgive despite severity of transgression and

maintain respect toward their spouse or inlaws. Male spouses were advised to encourage divorce or separation when there's an inability to uphold an Indian woman's duties towards family (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). These patriarchal societies hold gender discrimination against powerful and controlling males and submissive and naive females (Jain, 2019).

The findings of this study yielded negative effects on spouses and their marriage when there was an absence of a satisfying reconciliation and an obligation to forgive their spouse. Forgiveness was seen as a collectivistic decision that is facilitated by the elders of the family (Jain, 2019). Spouses stated forgiveness would be improved when spouses have the ability to sit and talk about their issues in a calm and understanding manner. Through weighing the pros and cons of a situation to assist in the forgiving process and how one has been hurt will create an improved sense of control, better communication and an improvement in their conflict resolution skills (Wagner et al., 2012). Through the proper verbalisation of each spouse's feelings, thoughts and experiences, it will allow the necessary information to be transferred between spouses that will enable the spouses to accomplish and harmonise their goals, interests, responsibilities and marital obligations. Participants also encouraged marriage counselling as a means for effective forgiveness and a better marriage.

Conclusion

Indian spouses in this study had characterised forgiveness as an interpersonal and intrapersonal process between spouses. Through apologising, changing and satisfied behaviour of the transgressing spouse, it allows the abandonment of all resentment, bitterness or/and any negative feelings that were created through a transgression, this enabled positive feelings such as empathy, compassion and love to create a sense of normalcy and harmony in their spousal and family system. The study found that much like in other cultures, minor transgressions were overlooked. With a great influence of authority of elders in Indian culture, female spouses were told to overlook severe transgressions for the sake of their family whilst male spouses were encouraged to not forgive these transgressions. Spouses had experienced their severe transgressions in a form of a collectivistic decision made by family and spouses involved. The reconciliation process is significant in understanding and experiencing forgiveness in Indian culture. Social influences were seen as little to nonexistent. The willingness to forgive was seen as influenced by a desired social image. To maintain a positive social image, strong and healthy family and spousal systems were necessary or at least the perception of the outer world. Religion was seen to be another significant influence on the willingness to forgive or not. The inability to forgive was seen as an act redeemable of sin. These were said to impact their experience of an afterlife. Older couples were involved in arranged marriages and had little experience of severe transgressions. Females were seen as a glue in maintaining marriages and families, therefore had to display sacrifice, loyalty, commitment and fulfilment of their duties. Indian culture was found to highlight a sense of patriarchy and masculinity. Male spouses were seen as protectors and enablers of women to make sure their duties were fulfilled. If a female was unable to, this was seen as disrespect and viewed as a severe transgression that may lead to divorce or unforgiveness.

Spouses in the study had highlighted the need to work together in order to improve their forgiveness in their marriage. To assist in healthier communication channels, a need for health programmes, forgiveness and marriage interventions were needed. Spouses also mentioned that couple's counselling or marriage counselling will be highly advantageous for struggling couples.

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