

Is Posttraumatic Growth Benefited from Dispositional Forgiveness? A Correlational Study among Covid-19 Bereaved Individuals

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Abstract: The experience of losing loved ones due to COVID-19 pandemic may be considered different and harder, thus can be perceived as traumatic and cause prolonged grief disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder among bereaved individuals. Considering another path of the effect of trauma, previous study showed that posttraumatic growth was associated with forgiveness. This study examined the relationship between forgiveness and posttraumatic growth among COVID-19 bereaved individuals. Participants were 40 bereaved individuals who lost their parents, children, siblings, or spouses in the COVID-19 pandemic, selected using convenience sampling technique. Participants' age ranged from 18-57 years ($M = 27.98$; $SD = 9.934$) and mostly female ($M = 7.5\%$). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (21 items; $\alpha = .920$) was used to measure posttraumatic growth, whereas forgiveness was measured by the Forgiveness Scale (48 items; $\alpha = .920$). Data were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation. The results showed that forgiveness was positively related to posttraumatic growth among COVID-19 bereaved individuals ($r_{xy} = .317$; $p = .046$) with only self-forgiveness dimension correlated significantly with posttraumatic growth ($r_{xy} = .335$; $p = .034$). Implication of this study is discussed.

Keywords: forgiveness, posttraumatic growth, covid-19, bereaved individuals

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused a devastating impact all over the world. As of December 7th, 2021, more than 5 million deaths were recorded globally, leaving deep grief among the family. The COVID-19 loss experience is seen



as different and harder from other grieving experiences because the deaths often occur rapidly and unexpectedly, and bereaved individuals often only have a little chance to say goodbye, or to practice religious mourning rituals for the deceased. Funerals are also held under restrictions, with only a few people allowed to attend (Stroebe & Schut, 2021). The bereavement situations placed COVID-19 bereaved individuals at a greater risk to develop adverse mental health outcomes including Prolonged Grief Disorder (Djelantik, Smid, Mroz, Kleber, & Boelen, 2020) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Atwoli et al, 2017), considering the fact that bereavement due to COVID-19 may also be perceived as a traumatic event.

Although posttraumatic stress is very common among trauma survivors, personal growth and positive change may also be developed by those who have experienced traumatic events such as bereavement (Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010). Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun (2018) called the experience as posttraumatic growth (PTG). Experiencing PTG means that bereaved individuals feel more resilient and stronger after facing a negative or traumatic event in life (Záhorcová & Prielomková, 2020). Despite the availability of many studies explaining PTG correlates, exploration of the relationship between PTG and spirituality-based dispositional factors like forgiveness was still limited, especially in the context of bereavement. Thus, this study was aimed to examine the association between forgiveness and PTG, particularly among COVID-19 bereaved individuals.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Posttraumatic Growth among Bereaved Individuals

PTG proposes that along with an effort to cope after a traumatic event, and in addition to experiencing negative outcomes, positive psychological changes are possible. It is theorized that PTG can manifest over five domains; personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual and existential change (Tedeschi et al, 2018). Regarding the model of PTG, Tedeschi et al (2018), explained that PTG can occur when an individual is experiencing a sufficiently traumatic event that causes extreme distress and challenges his or her fundamental understanding of the self, the world and one's place in it. PTG has been studied in many populations of individuals who have experienced a traumatic event, such as the loss of the loved one (Michael & Cooper, 2013), due to the fact that bereavement process involves one's internal psychological process and alterations in living arrangements, relationships, adaptation of family members, as well as grief experience itself, can be resulted into highly traumatic outcomes (Murphy, Johnson & Logan, 2002).

2.2. Forgiveness and Posttraumatic Growth

Pathways to PTG can occur in many ways, including events that involve a significant transgression. Schultz, Tallman, and Altmaier (2010) explained that forgiveness was positively associated with PTG after a significant interpersonal transgression—making forgiveness as one of the strategies and pathways to PTG. Forgiveness can be conceptualized as a way for people in responding to transgression (self, others, situations), changing negative reactions and resolving the dissonance and suffering associated with such negative life events (Thompson et al, 2005). From Islamic perspective, the word forgiveness is repeated approximately 12 times in the Qur'an, which makes forgiveness an important concept commanded by Allah SWT (Warsah, 2020). Islam talks about two aspects of forgiveness. a) Forgiveness of Allah. b) Human forgiveness (others and self), and *istigfar* (seeking forgiveness from Allah) become one of the strategies according to Islam. Because PTG involves alterations in self (such as personal strength, enhanced spirituality) and changes in relationships with others, forgiveness as a work in purpose to reframe the transgression so that it is no longer impact themselves negatively, might form a causal link between the transgression and later growth.

Despite the conceptual link between forgiveness and PTG, only little empirical research was found which measured the association between these two constructs. In the context of bereavement, the relationship between forgiveness and PTG can only be found among bereaved mothers (Martincekova & Klatt, 2016), which resulted in a strong positive association, and suicide loss survivors (Gilo, Feigelman, & Levi-Belz, 2020), but the latter only measure self-forgiveness. Based on the theoretical explanation, it is then hypothesized that forgiveness is positively related to PTG among COVID-19 bereaved individuals.

3. Method

This was a cross-sectional study to examine the correlation between forgiveness, both in general and each of its dimensions, and PTG. This study adhered with the Declaration of Helsinki in 1975 as revised in 2000, in this case by providing research explanation, the participants' criteria, and written informed consent for participants to be agreed voluntarily.

3.1. Sample

Convenience sampling technique was used to obtain participants through online form dissemination on social media. The sample were 40 bereaved individuals from Indonesia who have lost their relatives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (age range from 18 to 57 years old; $M = 27.98$; $SD = 9.934$; 92.5% were female). The majority of participants lived on the Java Island (95%), were Javanese (52%), Muslim (82.5%), unmarried (70%), and unemployed, student, or retired (45%). Due to Covid-19, they lost their parents (72.5%), children (12.5%), siblings (10%), and partners (5%).

3.2. Measurement Tools

A number of demographic information was questioned. Forgiveness was measured using the Forgiveness Scale by Rahmandani, La Kahija, and Salma (2016) based on the concept by Thompson et al. (2005), containing the dimensions of forgiveness towards oneself, others, and situations, with Cronbach’s Alpha of .920 in this study. PTG was measured using the Indonesian version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), including five domains i.e., relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life after the death of a family member due to COVID-19, with Cronbach’s Alpha of .920 in this study.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation to examine the hypothesis. The data set met all assumptions required for the statistical test, including data normality and linear correlation between variables.

4. Results and Discussion

The results showed that mean scores of forgiveness and PTG among subjects were 57.10 ($SD = 2.274$) and 56.53 ($SD = 3.144$) respectively. Table 1 showed that there was a significant positive correlation between forgiveness in general and PTG among COVID-19 bereaved individuals ($r_{xy} = .317$; $p = .046$) with an R^2 of .1 and between self-forgiveness and PTG ($r_{xy} = .335$; $p = .034$) with an R^2 of .112 (contribution of self-forgiveness as much as 11.2% to PTG). The correlations on the forgiveness of others ($r_{xy} = .280$; $p = .080$) and situations ($r_{xy} = .189$; $p = .242$) were not significant. As additional results based on descriptive statistics, it was obtained that although participants had a higher tendency to forgive others, this did not guarantee a significant positive correlation with PTG.

Table 1: Correlations among measures and descriptive statistics

No	Measures	Correlations				
		1	1a	1b	1c	2
1	Forgiveness	1				
1a	Self-Forgiveness	.844**	1			
1b	Forgiveness of Others	.714**	.363*	1		
1c	Forgiveness of Situations	.892**	.803**	.396*	1	
2	Posttraumatic Growth	.317*	.335*	.280	.189	1

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The finding that forgiveness in general is correlated with PTG is in line with the results of previous studies focusing on different bereaved populations who experience loss (Currier, Mallot, Martinez, Sandy, & Neimeyer, 2013; Martincekova & Klatt, 2016). Among the explanations

of the relationship between the two variables is forgiveness changes perception and emotion through framing and transformation of an individual's responses to events as being more neutral or even positive (Thompson et al., 2005). These changes then help the bereaved individuals to be able to reconstruct meaning from their experience of loss, appreciate life, feel peace, continue bonds after the loss, and experience personal growth (Záhorcová et al., 2019). Another explanation is the role of forgiveness that encourages adaptive coping and therefore becomes a way to achieve growth. Adaptive coping strategies are found to be predicted by all-three dimensions of forgiveness (Hasan & Tiwari, 2018), which can further reduce common mental health problems and promote overall emotional wellbeing (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018). In line with this, adaptive coping strategies to traumatic experiences are associated with higher PTG (Cao, Qi, Cai, & Han, 2017).

Further analysis in this study resulted that self-forgiveness dimension had a significant positive correlation with PTG, in line with previous studies in the context of losing a loved one due to various reasons (Gilo, Feigelman, & Levi-Belz, 2020; Martincekova & Klatt, 2016). Feelings of guilt and remorse among bereaved individuals towards family members who died indicate the need to be forgiven (Barr & Cacciatore, 2008) which is more challenging because people tend to be more critical of themselves, are in constant contact with themselves, and may be more continuously confronted with the disadvantages they have caused (Enright, 2015). Once self-forgiveness among bereaved individuals is high, it serves as a basis for promoting adaptive internal processes and personal growth (Gilo et al., 2020).

This current study also found that forgiveness of others and situations were not correlated with PTG. The context of losing a loved one as the result of Covid-19 has no specific transgressor, making forgiveness of others might be insignificant—different from the context of post-abortion bereavement in men (Coyle & Enright, 1997) and bereaved parents due to the child murder (Oglesby, 2013) which potentially possess specific transgressors. In addition, the finding that forgiveness of situations was not correlated with PTG resembles those of studies conducted by Martincekova and Klatt (2017) and Záhorcová et al. (2019) that forgiveness of fate or God's provisions tended to have less significant correlations than self-forgiveness when it was applied to a broader context of loss, not specifically due to human wrongdoing. However, the contribution of forgiveness dimensions in the experience of loss due to and not due to human wrongdoing, such as disasters, still needs to be examined in further study.

Apart from all the explanations, the limitations in this study relate to the small number of samples that may affect the statistical significance (Kühberger, Fritz, & Scherndl, 2014). Further study is recommended to target a larger number of participants, or in participants with certain characteristics such as the presence of another family member(s) in bereaved individuals, or in participants who are not bereaved COVID-19 survivors. Further study is also recommended to investigate the causal relationship between the two variables.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that there was a positive correlation between forgiveness and PTG, but among all forgiveness dimensions, only self-forgiveness was positively correlated

with PTG among bereaved individuals due to COVID-19. Further studies are encouraged to be conducted with a larger sample, more diverse characteristics (e.g. various areas of difficulty caused, family members living after the loss), as well as investigating the causal relationship between variables by developing forgiveness-based intervention, especially self-forgiveness to promote forgiveness and PTG among COVID-19 bereaved individuals.

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