Description of Forgiveness Among Teenagers Victims of Bullying

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Abstract: This study aims to determine the description of forgiveness by bullying victims in terms of three aspects of forgiveness, namely Avoidance Motivation, Revenge Motivation, and Benevolence Motivation. There were two adolescent participants in this study who had experienced bullying in junior high school and were selected using purposive sampling. This study is a qualitative research using a phenomenological analysis method with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The results show the diversity of responses and the time needed by victims to forgive the perpetrators. Additionally, this study also shows that forgiveness helps reduce negative feelings, supports psychological well-being, and contributes to post-traumatic healing, although the process differs for each individual.

1 INTRODUCTION

Bullying is defined as verbal, physical, or emotional attacks on a person or group of people who are vulnerable and unable to defend themselves (Goldbaum et al., 2003; Feliana et al., 2023). Based on a survey by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the rate of bullying in Indonesian schools ranks fifth highest in the world (Medkom.id, 2022). According to UNICEF, data on bullying in Indonesia in 2023 shows that 36.31% of students are potentially experiencing bullying (UNICEF, 2023). In addition, the commissioner of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) stated that KPAI complaint data showed that child abuse in early 2024 reached 141 cases (Tempo, 2024). Of all these complaints, 35% occurred in schools or educational institutions.

Based on data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), adolescents aged 12-17 years are potentially victims of bullying (NCHS Data Brief, 2024). The majority of them have experienced intimidation, with 38.4% of adolescents aged 12-14 years and 29.7% of those aged 15-17 years. The bullying actions experienced by victims are not only physical activities, but also threats, sarcasm, labeling, and exclusion (Olweus, 2013; Nastiti Wahyuningtyas & Siti Fitriana, 2024). Of the various forms of bullying, Caloroso (2010) categorizes bullying behavior into four types, namely physical bullying (slapping, hitting, kicking), verbal bullying (belittling, threatening, mocking), relational bullying (ignoring, ostracizing, avoiding), and cyberbullying (spreading false rumors, threatening messages). In particular, bullying behavior has a negative impact on victims, including increased emotional symptoms,

such as feeling unhappy, depressed, very sad, and depressed (Wahyuni & Asra, 2014; Fitriani & Widiningsih, 2020). The more often someone is bullied, the higher their level of depression, lower self-esteem, and increased stress.

Adolescents or individuals who frequently experience bullying are unable to understand and manage the negative feelings they experience, and will behave vengefully and avoid others (Feliana et al., 2023). Some painful behaviors will leave a mark and cause deep wounds in victims of bullying (Hanifah et al., 2022). Individuals who choose not to forgive may be influenced by factors such as blame, feelings of helplessness, and a desire for revenge. This is supported by König et al. (2010), who found that victims of bullying tend to seek revenge on the perpetrators to cope with the stress and negative emotions caused by bullying (Feliana et al., 2023). Therefore, effective ways to overcome the negative impacts of bullying are urgently needed, one of which is through forgiveness (Camelia Wahida Syauqi, 2023).

Victims of bullying who forgive do not necessarily condone the bullying that happened to them. The forgiveness process still allows victims to hold perpetrators accountable for their violations, without involving denial, neglect, reduction, excuse, acquiescence, or absolution of the perpetrators (Fitriani & Widiningsih, 2020). Forgiveness is a motivation that encourages a person not to seek revenge, reduces the urge to harbor hatred towards those who have hurt them, and even encourages them to reestablish good relationships with those who have hurt them (McCullough et al., 1997; Munalisa & Agung, 2023). Simply put, forgiveness is more than just letting go of negative things; forgiveness is the process of releasing the pain, anger, and resentment caused by the perpetrator (Haerul Gani, 2011; Fitriani & Widiningsih, 2020). There are three important components in forgiveness according to (Mccullough, 2000), namely Avoidance Motivation, Revenge Motivation, and Benevolence Motivation. Avoidance Motivation is a decrease in motivation to avoid the perpetrator, Revenge Motivation is a decrease in motivation to seek revenge, and Benevolence Motivation is the desire to make peace with the perpetrator (Varadifta & Paryontri, 2024).

The factors that influence a person to forgive, according to McCullough (1998), are empathy, attribution to the perpetrator, the level of hurt, personality characteristics, and the quality of the relationship (Kusprayogi, 2024). Forgiveness has many positive effects, especially for an individual's inner peace (Helmut & Nancy, 2021). Findings presented in a research report published by the American Psychological Association explain that the benefits of forgiveness include the ability to heal psychological wounds, reduce heartache and resentment, improve one's quality of life, foster empathy for others, and improve one's emotional and physical well-being (Zuroida et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the victim's inability to forgive causes them to withdraw from the perpetrator who hurt them, and even think about revenge (Juwita & Kustanti, 2020). Not forgiving can also cause an individual to become stressed, anxious, and depressed, which can interfere with mental health (Helmut & Nancy, 2021).

Bullying behavior has negative effects such as stress, depression, insecurity, and trauma (Armitage, 2021). If these negative emotions are not resolved, victims tend to avoid others, hold grudges, or experience social relationship disorders (Feliana et

al., 2023). Forgiveness was chosen as the focus of this study because bullying not only causes physical harm but also leaves deep psychological wounds, such as feelings of anger, resentment, low self-esteem, and even depression (Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Ihsana et al., 2020). By forgiving, victims can reduce their emotional burden without having to justify the perpetrator's behavior. This focus is relevant because forgiveness has been proven to be one way to restore the psychological well-being of bullying victims (Fitriani & Widiningsih, 2020). Thus, forgiveness helps victims alleviate psychological pressure, improve self-esteem, and pave the way for post-traumatic growth (Feigelman & Belz, 2020).

2 METHOD

The research method used in this study was a qualitative research method with a phenomenological study approach. The qualitative research method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the data provided by the participants and to get to know the participants better. The phenomenological study in this research was useful for understanding how individuals consciously understand an event they have experienced (Hadi & Rusman, 2021). The research participants were selected using purposive sampling. Two participants were found in the study who were aged between 19 and 25 years old and had experienced bullying. Subject 1 (NA) was a student who had experienced bullying in junior high school by her peers, and

Subject 2 (SI) was a student who had also experienced bullying by her senior in junior high school.

Table 1: Subject identity table

Identity	Subject 1	Subject 2
Initials	NA	SI
Age	19 yo	20 yo
Gender	Female	Female
Education	Student	Student

Data collection techniques in this study were conducted using semi-structured interviews to obtain information from participants using an interview guide. The interview guide was designed to explore participants' experiences and feelings about the bullying they had experienced. Each interview session lasted 25-30 minutes. The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify important patterns in the participants' experiences for interpretation. This analysis aimed to determine the participants' forgiveness of the bullying behavior they had experienced.

3 RESULT

The findings were obtained from the interviews conducted by the researcher with the participants. The interview findings were identified with sub-themes that described three main dimensions to illustrate the forgiveness of bullying victims towards the perpetrators.

Table 2: Table of interview findings

Dimension	Theme	Subject 1 (NA)	Subject 2 (SI)
Avoidant Motivation	Decrease in an individual's desire to maintain distance	Keeping distance from the perpetrator	Not yet able to interact with the perpetrator again
	Beginning to open up to mutual communication	Not wanting to communicate again	There is a desire to communicate again
Revenge Motivation	Decreased motivation for revenge	Choosing to make peace with oneself	Trying to forget the incident
	Minimizing feelings of anger, hurt, and frustration	Still feeling resentful	Regretting one's past weakness
Benevolence Motivation	Having empathy	No longer caring about the perpetrator	Happy to hear news about the perpetrator
	Beginning to make peace	No desire to reconcile	No opportunity for reconciliation

According to McCullough, Root, and Cohen (2006), forgiveness is a process of changing three motivations within an individual toward the perpetrator who hurt them. These three motivations are avoidance motivation, revenge motivation, and benevolence motivation.

Aspect 1: Avoidance Motivation

Changes in avoidance motivation are characterized by a decreased desire to maintain distance and an openness to resume communication. To determine the avoidance motivation of NA and SI, the researcher asked participants to describe their interactions and openness to communication with the current perpetrator of bullying. NA tended to choose to maintain distance from the perpetrator and claimed to have no desire to interact with the perpetrator again.

NA: *"For example, if I had the opportunity to not meet her, not interact with her and my friends who were involved at that time, I wouldn't want to. And even now, I still keep my distance from my junior high school friends. I don't find it difficult to communicate with them anymore, but from the beginning, I just didn't want to interact with them anymore."*

SI admitted that she was not yet able to interact with the perpetrators again, because the bullying had left her traumatized. However, on the other hand, SI still hoped that one day she would be able to reestablish better communication with the perpetrators.

SI: *"I can't interact with them again yet, because it was my first time, and it traumatized me until now, but actually, I do want to communicate with them again like before."*

Aspect 2: Revenge Motivation

A decrease in the motivation for revenge is one of the processes of forgiveness, which is characterized by a decrease in the motivation for revenge and can minimize feelings of anger, hurt, and resentment towards the perpetrators of bullying. From the interviews conducted with NA and SI, NA had no intention of taking revenge on the perpetrators of bullying, but NA still felt disappointment towards the bullying that was done to her.

NA: "*Actually, I don't feel like I want revenge, but I am disappointed why they did something like bullying. Besides, I'm tired and don't feel like it. If I take revenge on her, it won't make my bad times go back to the way they were, it won't make everything good again, but I still have a responsibility to make peace with myself.*"

SI also admitted that she had no desire to take revenge on the perpetrator, but the bullying incident had an impact on her daily life, causing her to worry that her peers would avoid her and making her feel dependent.

SI: *"I don't want revenge, but when I remember it, I want to cry. So now, if I have a friend and they avoid me, I ask myself what I did wrong and feel dependent."*

Although it is known that NA and SI have no desire to take revenge on the perpetrators of bullying, there are still feelings of disappointment, annoyance, or anger, and the ways of minimizing these feelings differ between NA and SI. NA admitted that the last time she met the perpetrator, she still felt angry and disappointed, which is also the reason why NA still keeps her distance from the perpetrator of bullying. However, NA is able to minimize her feelings of anger by being more grateful for the good things that are happening now.

NA: *"The last time I still felt regret, like why did they do that to me, like I'm still angry even though I haven't seen them again. I feel it's unfair because they shut me down, they took away my freedom, my peace."*

NA: *"For example, if I focus more on the good things I've gained from new experiences, God will give me other good things. I'm grateful for the small things or the many things I can do now because I believe in that, so I rarely overthink things."*

Regarding the bullying that occurred to SI, she admitted that she still felt angry about the bullying she had experienced. Initially, she was only able to minimize her anger by crying and regretting her helplessness in the past. However, SI admitted that she is now able to strengthen herself and start building trust again with new friends.

SI: *"Yes, when the bullying happened, I wanted to be angry, but I could only cry because I couldn't do anything. Even the person who comforted me when I was crying wasn't my own roommate, but a senior in 9th grade. And I never told my parents. If only I could have been like I am now back then. Someone who could stand up for myself more. Maybe if I could have stood up for myself back then, I still could have, but at that time, I was still just a seventh grader."*

SI: *"I have to prepare mentally first, because I won't be stuck in ther situation forever. There are still many situations ahead that I have to face, so I have to prepare mentally first. Slowly but surely, by rebuilding trust with new friends."*

Aspect 3: Benevolence Motivation

The motivation to reconcile is characterized by empathy and beginning to make peace with the situation and the perpetrator. Findings from interviews with NA and SI show that they have different beliefs about reconciling or empathizing with the perpetrator. NA said that she has no desire to help the perpetrator unless the perpetrator herself asks NA directly.

NA: *"Just let it be, like, don't bother, I don't care anymore. I mean, I'm not their close friend, so I don't have any responsibility to help them, unless they ask me themselves."*

NA also admitted that he has not been able to reconcile or befriend the perpetrators, and there is no situation that requires NA to communicate with the perpetrators again.

NA: *"If it's about making peace in terms of friendship, I don't feel like there's anything that makes me feel ready. Because I don't have any need to keep in touch with them. And I'm not in a situation that requires me to talk to them again. So, I'm not ready for anything because the situation and conditions don't require me to keep talking to them."*

Meanwhile, SI admitted that he was willing to help and empathize if the perpetrator was indeed in difficulty and had forgiven the perpetrator. SI had also made peace with the bullying he had experienced in the past. SI admitted that he did not want to take revenge on the perpetrator and only hated her as much as was reasonable.

SI: *"I forgave her from the start, so if I want to help, I'm willing to do so. After all, humans are created to help one another, so I'm willing to do so. Besides, if I keep those feelings bottled up, it will only make me sick. How should I put it? It's like I want to take revenge on that person, but I've been taught since long ago that if you want to hate someone, just hate them, but within reason."*

4   DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the two participants who had bad experiences as victims of

bullying left varied responses in the forgiveness phase, referring to three components of forgiveness. The three components of forgiveness according to McCullough are avoidance motivation, revenge motivation, and benevolence motivation (McCullough, 2000; Varadifta & Paryontri, 2024). From the results of the study, it is known that both participants expressed their forgiveness by improving their lives after bullying by making peace with their bad experiences and not wanting to take revenge on the perpetrators. This finding confirms other research explaining that forgiveness in victims helps them reduce negative feelings and improve their psychological well-being (Shanti & Susanto, 2020). This is reinforced by other findings that explain that forgiveness can make a person feel peaceful and prosperous, as well as help improve mindset, self-esteem, and more positive emotions to achieve happiness (Laela & Laksmiwati, 2021).

The first aspect of forgiveness is avoidance motivation or a decrease in the motivation to seek revenge. From the interview results, it was found that both participants decided to keep their distance from the perpetrator to avoid the pain caused by the bullying they had experienced. However, there was a difference in response between the two participants regarding openness in communication. Participant 1 explained that they did not want to interact with the perpetrator again, while participant 2 admitted that they hoped one day they could make peace with the perpetrator and start better communication. The process of forgiveness is not the same for each individual; therefore, the process of forgiveness has an adaptive attitude (Safitri, 2020). Forgiveness is also influenced by the quality of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (Iasya, 2024).

The second aspect of forgiveness is revenge motivation or the decline in the desire for revenge. When linked to the results of the interviews with both participants, neither of them had any intention or desire to take revenge on the perpetrator. These findings illustrate the participants' view that revenge is a waste of time and does not improve the situation. The participants revealed that holding on to anger for too long would only cause illness in the heart. This exposure is in line with research (Varadifta & Paryontri, 2024) that when they forgive, it can reduce feelings of resentment and make them feel calmer without having a heavy burden in life. This is in line with research that reveals the need for a process of forgiveness to improve interpersonal relationships and become a source of strength in achieving psychological well-being (Kristanti, 2024).

The last aspect of forgiveness is benevolence motivation, or the motivation to make peace with the perpetrator even though it is painful for the victim. In this case, the participants had different responses regarding making peace with the perpetrator. Participant 1 said that they had no desire to interact again or be ready to make peace with the perpetrator, while participant 2 admitted that they were happy to see good news from the perpetrator, even if it was via social media. Findings from interviews with participants show that each individual needs a different process and time frame to heal their trauma. This is in line with findings that explain that forgiving behavior contributes positively to post-traumatic growth directly through interpersonal and cognitive processes (Feigelman & Belz, 2020). Forgiveness is also a moral act that provides many benefits for a person, including helping them to increase positive emotions, build good and stable

relationships, and be happier and always think positively (Varadifta & Paryontri, 2024).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of this study shows that victims of bullying who forgive their perpetrators have different responses involving three main components of forgiveness, namely avoidance motivation, revenge motivation, and benevolence motivation (McCullough, 2000). The results of this study provide an overview of victims of bullying towards their perpetrators after several years have passed. Both participants expressed forgiveness by reducing negative feelings and choosing to make peace with their bad experiences without the desire for revenge, although they showed differences in their openness towards the perpetrators. Thus, forgiveness not only plays a role in psychological well-being, but also in the post-traumatic healing of victims, providing opportunities to build a better life through adaptive interpersonal and cognitive processes.

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