

Forgiveness as a Mediator for the Relationship between Spirituality and Posttraumatic Growth in Aceh Conflict Victims, Indonesia

Hafnidar, L. Chang, and H. Lin

Abstract—People in Aceh are still suffering from a highly traumatic experience of Aceh conflict. As a religious community, Acehese people believe that forgiveness is righteous. The purpose of the present study was to examine the mediational role of forgiveness on the relationship between spirituality and posttraumatic growth (PTG). Two hundred sixty-eight participants were recruited to complete the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), and the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS). Results based on Sobel analyses revealed that forgiveness mediated the relationship between spirituality and PTG. Implications of these findings for future research on PTG and forgiveness are discussed.

Index Terms—posttraumatic growth, forgiveness, spirituality.

I. INTRODUCTION

For many people, forgiveness is a deeply spiritual theme [1]. The Al-Quran cites many passages concerning forgiveness, for example, the Al-Quran (22:24) says, “and let them pardon and overlook, would you not like that Allah should forgive you? and Allah is Forgiving and Merciful” [2]. According to the Al-Qu’ran (42:43), individuals should acquire to be patient in adversity and forgive [2]. Therefore, the Muslim people who did not follow the teachings of the Al-Quran will be difficult to forgive. Beside, according to Hadist Bukhari and Muslim riwayat, prophet Muhammad says that Allah will raise the glory of individuals who are able to forgive, in other words the people who are willing to forgive would be given power by God to transform into a higher level of man or having growth in their life [3].

Emmons suggested that forgivingness may be a component of spiritual intelligence because many of these personality and behavioral qualities are conceptually [4]. Consistent with some views of spirituality. Lois found that who reported more spirituality and more self-forgiving attitude reported less mood disturbance and a better quality of life, in contrast, participants who reported more self-blame reported more mood disturbance and poorer quality of life [5].

A recent study considered the benefit finding of forgiveness. McCullough et al asked college students to think

of the most recent time they were hurt in a relationship and to then participate in one of three writing conditions: writing about traumatic aspects of the experience, writing about positive aspects or benefits of the experience, or writing about an unrelated topic. Individuals in the benefit finding condition demonstrated significantly higher levels of forgiveness than those in the control and traumatic features conditions. This study suggests that cognitive processing may explain the role of benefit finding as facilitating forgiveness in an experimental environment, consistent with the conceptual links between the constructs described in both domains of theoretical literature [6].

Several study examined spirituality and several religious variables have been linked to increased PTG, including existential openness, intrinsic religiousness, religious participation and religious coping [7]-[9]. Spirituality is also an indicator of personal growth in person-centered counseling with Malay clients [10]. PTG has been defined as a positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances [11]. It may include a perception of increased personal strength, changing one’s views about life, and feeling closer to others [12]. While spirituality as a motivational trait perspective that conceptualizes spirituality as a quality that originates within the body itself and that propels the organism [13]. This theme called as spiritual transcendence, refers to the capacity of individual to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place to view life from a larger, more objective perspective [13].

Previous empirical research found that PTG involves alterations in self (such as new directions or enhanced spirituality and religiosity) and changes in relationships with others, forgiveness as the release of negative feelings toward another and the adoption of positive attitudes might form a causal link between the offense and later growth, in fact, a prominent model of forgiveness suggests that individuals find an altered sense of purpose, one component of posttraumatic growth, through engaging in forgiveness [9].

Therefore, the relation between spirituality and PTG seems not to be direct: higher level on PTG are interrelated with spirituality, such that spirituality predict forgiveness to have PTG. These findings support the notion that whereas spirituality are related to PTG, other variables more related to forgiveness may play an important role in the spirituality – PTG relationship. It is plausible that spirituality variables might lead people to have forgiveness and then to have some degree to increase their level of PTG.

In fact, there are also some reasons to consider a mediation model in which spirituality influences PTG through forgiveness. First, forgiveness have been found to be associated to spirituality [14]-[19]. Second, forgiveness have

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shown to be a significant predictor of PTG [9], [21]. So, these findings are according to the criterion necessary for forgiveness to be considered a potential mediator. Third, there is accumulative evidence to suggest that people with higher spirituality higher levels of PTG [22]-[26]. Hence, analyzing this hypothesis is important in understanding why some conflict victims have long-lasting PTG while others do not. Therefore, the present study has two objectives. First, we sought to examine the relations among spirituality, forgiveness and PTG. Secondly, consistent with the proposed mediation model, we examine the extent to which forgiveness might mediate the influence of spirituality variables on PTG with conflict victims in religious communities.

II. METHOD

A. Participant

Two hundred sixty-eight Aceh conflict victims completed questionnaires for this study. Sixty-seven point five percent of the final sample were women, 32.5% were men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 60 years ($M=34.81$, $SD=10.45$). Fourteen point six percent participants were single, 72.8% were married and 12.7% were widow/widower. The number of participants who drop out from Elementary School were 42.2%, 1.1% were graduated from Elementary School, 28% were graduated from Junior High School, 18.3% were graduated from Senior High School, 1.9% were graduated from College and 8.6% were uneducated. All participants declared themselves as Muslim as well as Acehnese. Thirty-four point three percent participants reported themselves as primary victims (direct) and 65.7% as secondary victims (indirect).

B. Material

All of measures are described below:

Demographic/background information. The Basic Demographic Questionnaire was developed by the researcher and included questions regarding age, gender, educational level, religious affiliation.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) is a 21-item self-report measure of positive outcomes following traumatic experiences. Each item is rated using a 6-point Likert scale. The total score can range from 0 to 105, with higher scores indicating greater growth. The five PTGI subscales were developed using principal components analysis on data from 604 college students [12]. Internal consistency alpha were found for relating to others ($\alpha=.85$), new possibilities ($\alpha=.84$), personal strength ($\alpha=.72$), spiritual change ($\alpha=.85$), appreciation of life ($\alpha=.67$) and for PTGI overall ($\alpha=.90$). The test-retest reliability ($\alpha=.71$) over 2 months has also been reported based on the sample of university students in the original study [12]. Cronbach's alpha of the PTGI subscale in the present sample were acceptable in reliability: personal strength ($\alpha=.74$), new possibilities ($\alpha=.77$), appreciation of life ($\alpha=.66$), relating to others ($\alpha=.71$), spiritual change ($\alpha=.73$) and for PTGI overall ($\alpha=.85$).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) was developed by Thompson et al to measure one's forgiveness level with 18 items [27]. HFS is a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "almost always false than true"(1) to "almost always true of me"(7). The HFS total scale and subscale scores are calculated by summing the items on each scale, with the nine negatively worded items (2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, and 17) being reverse-scored. Higher scores on each subscale reflect a higher level of forgiveness in each domain. The HFS has been reported to have adequate psychometric properties in previous studies [27]. Internal consistency alpha were found for forgiveness of self ($\alpha=.75$), for forgiveness of others ($\alpha=.78$), for forgiveness of situation ($\alpha=.77$). Cronbach's alpha for all subscales are satisfactory ($\alpha=.86$), and re-retest reliability for all subscales are acceptable ($\alpha=.67$). Cronbach's alpha of the HFS subscale in the present sample were acceptable in reliability: forgiveness of self ($\alpha=.82$), forgiveness of others ($\alpha=.84$), forgiveness of situations ($\alpha=.85$) and for HFS overall ($\alpha=.29$).

Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS). The Spiritual Transcendence Scale is a 24-item scale consisting of three subscales [13]. Each item is rated using a 5-point Likert scale with rating ranging from 1 to 5. Internal consistency for the three subscales of the STS were .97, .97, and .94 for connectedness, universality, and prayer fulfillment scales, and the test-retest reliability (.91) were reported by Piedmont (1999). Cronbach's alpha of the STS subscale in the present sample were were acceptable in reliability: .84, .78, .77 for connectedness, universality, prayer fulfillment and .88 for STS overall.

III. RESULT

A. Descriptive Analyses

Pearson correlations, means, and standard deviations of the different scales used are presented in table 1, revealed that spirituality was significantly positively related with both forgiveness ($r=.218$, $p<.001$) and PTG ($r=.773$, $p<.001$). Forgiveness also significantly positively related with PTG ($r=.155$, $p<.005$).

B. Test of Mediation

A mediator model of the relation between spirituality and PTG is proposed according to Baron and Kenny [28]. The mediator model implies that forgiveness mediated the association between spirituality and PTG. Preliminary analyses indicated spirituality and PTG met the criteria for mediational analysis.

To determine whether forgiveness were a mediator, the following steps identified were completed: First, the predictor variable (spirituality) must be related to the mediator variable (forgiveness). Second, the predictor variable must be related to the outcome variable (PTG). Third, the mediator variable must be related to the outcome variable. Fourth, after controlling for the effects of the mediator on the outcome, the relation between the predictor and the outcome must be significantly decreased. To determine whether the reduction could be considered significant, the Sobel test was used [29]. We conducted a series of three regressions to test

for a mediation effect of forgiveness on the relationship between spirituality and PTG. First, forgiveness were regressed on spirituality ($b = .218, p < .001$). Second, the predictors, spirituality, were regressed on PTG ($b = .77, p < .001$). Spirituality contributed a significant amount of variance to PTG. Third, forgiveness was simultaneously regressed on spirituality ($b = .19, p < .001$). Finally, the regression model contributed a significant amount of variance to PTG (59%). The mediational role of forgiveness on the relationship among spirituality and PTG are represented in Figs.1.

As shown in Fig. 1, the beta weight when spirituality was regressed alone on posttraumatic growth was .77. When forgiveness were entered into the equation, the beta weight dropped from .77 to .74. Sobel test was significant ($z = 2.53, p < .01$) indicating that forgiveness only partially mediated the relationship between spirituality and PTG.

TABLE I: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT MEASURES

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PTG	1					
2. Forgiveness	.195**	1				
3. Forgiveness of self	.175**	.882**	1			
4. Forgiveness of others	.208**	.926**	.742**	1		
5. Forgiveness of situations	.155*	.917**	.683**	.801**	1	
6. Spirituality	.773**	.218**	.166**	.208**	.218**	1
M	93.21	115.65	38.42	38.45	45.17	99.43
SD	8.81	8.12	2.8	3.09	3.50	10.57

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

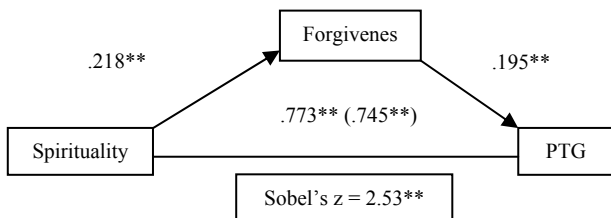


Fig. 1. Mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between spirituality and PTG. Numbers outside parentheses refer to simple correlations. Numbers within parentheses refer to standardized path coefficients.

IV. DISCUSSION

The primary aim of our study was to analyze the relationship among spirituality, forgiveness and PTG. Besides, we sought to determine whether forgiveness mediate the relationship between spirituality and PTG. Consistent with findings obtained in previous studies, results of this study indicated that greater spirituality were significantly associated with higher PTG [22]-[26]. Milam et al found a positive correlation between religiosity (defined by the authors as participation in organized religion) and PTG within their sample (although the religiosity-PTG relation was non-significant after controlling for other variables – i.e., age, elapsed time since event, depression, and substance abuse – in a regression model) [23]. In a later study, Milam et al found that youth who identified with a religion were more

likely to report higher levels of PTG [24]. Additionally, Vaughn et al. discovered that all three subscales of the SRGS-A (cognitive/affective, social, and religious) were significantly positively associated with the use of religious coping [26]. Laufer and Solomon examined PTG among Jewish Israeli youth and split the youth into groups based on their level of religiosity [22]. In general, the authors concluded that youth who identified as religious reported more PTG than those who identified as secular or traditional in their beliefs and practices. Specifically examining PTGI subscales, the authors found that spiritual change and appreciation of life were the highest among religious compared to traditional youth (who were higher than secular youth), religious and traditional youth were higher than secular youth on relating to others, and traditional were higher than religious and secular youth on new possibilities and personal strength. In addition, religious youth reported higher subjective exposure (i.e., fear) and were exposed to fewer negative life events than secular youth. Our result support this point suggesting that people should be encouraged to develop their spirituality to find growth after traumatic event in their life. Similarly, the people who tended to have higher forgiveness experienced higher levels of PTG. Several study found that forgiveness has positive and significant associations with PTG [9], [21]. Previous empirical research found that PTG involves alterations in self (such as new directions or enhanced spirituality and religiosity) and changes in relationships with others, forgiveness as the release of negative feelings toward another and the adoption of positive attitudes might form a causal link between the offense and later growth, in fact, a prominent model of forgiveness suggests that individuals find an altered sense of purpose, one component of posttraumatic growth, through engaging in forgiveness [9]. Beside, several research has shown that religiosity is related to trait forgivingness [14]- [16], [30]. Tsang et al suggested that religion might be used to either encourage forgiveness or justify holding grudges, depending on the nature of one’s religion [16]. Several study found that religious individuals are more likely to value forgiveness than those who are not religious [17]-[20], [31]-[32]. Our findings also support this argument in Aceh conflict victims sample.

Mediational analysis result supported that forgiveness as a mediator for the relationship between spirituality and PTG. Our findings suggest that people who higher level on spirituality are more likely to forgive others, self and situations which in turn contributes to PTG. Furthermore, whereas educational and therapeutic effort to increase spirituality may increase PTG in conflict victims. Spirituality will drive people to love forgiveness and then to have PTG. The relationship between spirituality and forgiveness is evident in that forgiveness is heavily rooted in many theologies. As a Muslim religious community, Acehese people believe that forgiveness would bring them to PTG after traumatic experience. The relationship between religion and forgiveness is evident in that forgiveness is heavily rooted in many theologies. The Al-Quran cites many passages concerning forgiveness, for example, the Al-Quran (22:24) says, “and let them pardon and overlook. Would you not like that Allah should forgive you? And Allah is

Forgiving and Merciful". According to the Al-Qur'an 42:43, individuals should acquire to be patient in adversity and forgive [2]. Therefore, the Muslim people who did not follow the teachings of the Quran will difficult to forgive. Our results suggest that spirituality alone is not key factors in relationship of religious community such as aceh conflict victims, another avenue of interventions might be to increase the forgiveness. In this line, Harris and Thoresen; Toussaint and Webb found that forgiveness contributed to increased mental and physical health [33]-[34]. PTG and PTG related constructs were found to be positively related to a wide range of such positive mental health resources: positive affect, optimism, hope, self-esteem, competency beliefs, and quality of life (only after controlling for posttraumatic stress reactions [35].

Several limitations of this study are acknowledged. First, this study only examined the role of forgiveness rather than the role of forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations. The use of a correlational design in this research also limits the interpretations so that we cannot know for certain the direction of causality of the variables under research. Despite these limitations, our study provides some empirical support for the mediating influence of forgiveness on the relation between spirituality and PTG. It seems likely that PTG is enhanced by some combination of forgiveness and spirituality that yield personal benefit at a later point. In this sense, this research lends credence to those clinical interventions to increase PTG that focus in improving both aspects in conflict victims. Future research should thus aim to assess the potential benefits, other than PTG, gained by engaging in forgiveness, for example mental health; examine the differences between victims who did versus did not meet diagnostic criteria for PTSD, those with versus without comorbid diagnoses (e.g., personality disorders).

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