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Phases of Forgiveness in Early Adult Women with Parental Infidelity

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ABSTRACT

Infidelity in marital relationships is a pervasive phenomenon with a propensity to increase over time. Infidelity often involves children's awareness, leading to adverse impacts on parent-child relationships, children's self-image and identity, mental health, and their future romantic relationships. Although substantial research has been conducted on the forgiveness process among couples, there remains a need for further exploration into the forgiveness process in children, particularly young adults, who have experienced parental infidelity. This study aims to investigate the stages of forgiveness in young adults who have encountered infidelity by both parents. Employing a phenomenological qualitative approach, this research involved in-depth interviews with two young adult women who experienced parental infidelity. The findings indicate that both participants expressed a willingness to forgive both parents involved in the infidelity. However, the forgiveness process varied between parents. Forgiveness towards the mother advanced to the deepening stage (Participant 1) and the action stage (Participant 2), while forgiveness towards the father was impeded, halting at the disclosure stage. The father's lack of demonstrated change in attitude or remorse following the affair, the absence of the father's alignment with family values, the child's perception of the affair, and the father's overall behavior and attitude were identified as barriers to forgiving the father. This study highlights the complexity of the forgiveness process in young adults dealing with parental infidelity and underscores the need for tailored support mechanisms to facilitate forgiveness and emotional healing.

KEYWORDS: *forgiveness; parental infidelity; early adult female*

INTRODUCTION

Infidelity in marital relationships is considered inevitable and tends to continue increasing (Irawan, 2018). In most cases, couples often intend to exclude their children from the situation. However, previous research indicates that children will inevitably become cognizant of their

parents' infidelity, whether through direct or indirect means, even if parents attempt to shield them from it (Kawar, Coppola, & Gangamma, 2019; Weiser & Weigel, 2017). Parental infidelity often results in dysfunctional family dynamics, causing a marital crisis that leads to family conflict (Schmidt, Green, & Prouty, 2016), guilt, anxiety,

damaged self-identity (Salih & Chaudry, 2023), and a sense of entrapment that affects the well-being of family members (Thorson, 2021).

Generally, Salih and Chaudry (2023) assert that parental infidelity has resulted in children's mental health through parental emotional unavailability, poor self-control of parents, and children's maladaptive coping behaviors (e.g., fear, feelings of rejection, and stress). More to the point, parental infidelity brings about emotional turmoil and long-lasting trauma. In line with this, Weiser and Weigel (2017) indicate that infidelity impacts children by reducing well-being, lowering self-esteem, fostering self-doubt, and inducing anxiety. Furthermore, research over the years has consistently shown that when children become aware of their parent's infidelity, regardless of their age at the time, they are compelled to make decisions on how to cope with the situation (Thorson, 2017) and understand the circumstances (Thorson, 2013). Moreover, parental infidelity also affects parent-child relationships (Thorson, 2013). Children tend to feel hurt and anger toward the cheating parent, be pressured to mediate parental conflicts, and become emotional caretakers for the betrayed parent (Thorson, 2019). Specifically, the impact of parental infidelity on children may vary depending on their age, gender, and cultural background. Unlike children, teenagers may not blame themselves when learning about parental infidelity, but they often feel betrayed, leading them to place responsibility on one parent and adopt a one-way loyalty that creates

a dysfunctional triad that can persist into adulthood (Negash & Morgan, 2016). Salih and Chaudry's study on five adult women who learned about their parents' infidelity revealed that daughters experienced emotional upheaval, including sadness, confusion, rejection, hurt, fear, anger, and neglect, resulting in prolonged emotional pain.

The events and issues arising from parental infidelity underscore the need to improve both intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships between children and parents. Literature studies indicate that forgiveness is a crucial bridge and component for fostering good interpersonal relationships and repairing/building relationships in the future (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; Enright, 2001). Enright (2001) defines forgiveness as the readiness process to relinquish the right to blame, demean, or seek revenge against the perpetrator who has caused harm, while simultaneously developing compassion and empathy towards them. Enright (2001) divides forgiveness into four stages: a) uncovering phase, where individuals identify injustice and painful events, experience layers of pain, undergo temporary or permanent life changes due to the violation, shift their worldview and understanding of justice and God, and realize the relationship between unforgiveness and physical or psychological difficulties caused by anger or vengeance; b) decision phase, involving gaining a true understanding of the meaning of forgiveness and committing to forgive based on this understanding; c) working phase, where individuals reframe by reconsidering the hurtful situation, seeing the offender as a

flawed human rather than a criminal, striving to show realistic empathy and compassion towards the perpetrator, and being willing to bear the psychological burden and forgive them; and d) deepening phase, where individuals find deeper meaning in the painful event, feel more connected to others, experience fewer negative effects, and develop new life goals.

Forgiveness can depend on various factors, such as age and gender. Research finds that willingness to forgive increases with age (Kaleta & Mróz, 2018). Studies on gender differences and forgiveness show lower forgiveness levels among women and difficulties for women in overcoming self-unforgiveness and situations around them, but not towards the unforgiveness of others (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022). Research conducted so far has focused on the forgiveness process in couples, necessitating exploration into the forgiveness process in children, especially young adults experiencing parental infidelity. Therefore, this study aims to explore the stages of forgiveness in young adults who have experienced their parents' infidelity.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The researchers highlighted significant statements that were further developed into various themes (Creswell, 2015). These themes were used to provide a textual description of what the participants experienced. Statements

and themes were also utilized to explain the context and background influencing how individuals experienced a particular phenomenon, describing the structural description. Participants in this study were two early adult women aged 21 to 22 who experienced and were aware of both parents' infidelity, which began during their adolescence and continues to the present. They are both eldest siblings with a younger brother, and no longer live with their parents. Both participants were selected through purposive sampling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

Uncovering Phase

Children's emotional and cognitive responses to parental infidelity

Overall, both participants expressed feelings of disappointment, anger, and betrayal upon first discovering their parents' infidelity. However, there were differences in the emotional responses between P1 and P2. Unlike P2, who tended to be apathetic in response to their parents' infidelity, P1 experienced severe emotional turmoil, leading to suicidal thoughts.

"It seems like these feelings (of wanting to commit suicide) started around middle school or high school. I have intentions to commit suicide because I... I can't handle the pain I feel anymore, it's too overwhelming. It's too heavy to bear, and I can't help to endure it anymore." (P1)

The infidelity of P1 and P2's parents persisted and recurred multiple times. P1 expressed

profound disgust with the cycle of her father's infidelity. She perceived her father as not taking responsibility for the emotional pain he caused, stating, *"I feel like my mental state was abused by him, I feel abused by him, and then he just left... he just left..."* (P1).

P1 exhibited a cognitive response by perceiving her mother's infidelity as a betrayal of the children. Initially, she felt that, after discovering her father's infidelity, her mother was the only person she could rely on. However, this hope was shattered upon learning that her mother was also engaged in an affair. P1 stated, *"I think, you already have me and my brother, so the three of us should be enough. You don't need anyone else."* (P1).

In contrast, P2 perceived the infidelity as advantageous, as her mother's affair partner provided financial support and emotional needs to P2's family.

"We made it to where we are now because of his (the mother's affair partner) help. So, as I mentioned earlier, I wouldn't have made it this far without their assistance. He has been very supportive, both emotionally and financially." (P2)

Meanwhile, the father's infidelity elicited similar cognitive responses from both participants. Both P1 and P2 perceived their father as the primary cause of family conflict. The only difference is that P2 viewed his father's infidelity as for his own pleasure.

"So, I feel like actually, oh, he (father) cheats for his own pleasure, while my mother cheats for us ... But that's how my mother is, the results (money) are for us, if she gets money,

if she gets anything, it's for us, for our schooling, our lives, our future" (P2)

Changes in the relationship between children and parents

Both participants expressed changes in their relationship with their parents. Both P1 and P2 disclosed that they lost respect for their father.

"When you find out that someone you love, someone you consider a hero in your life, continues to have an affair, and you were the first to know about it, you can't see that person the same way as before." (P1)

"I no longer have that feeling (respect) for my father. There is no feeling that this is my father; I have to respect him. Those feelings have gone, especially since he did not put me through school. I feel like he has not made any contribution to my life." (P2)

The relationship with their parents deteriorated as the parents vented their emotions on their children. This behavior was exhibited by both P1's parents and P2's mother. P1 and P2 expressed annoyance, weariness, and hurt due to bearing the psychological and emotional burden of their parents' mistakes. P1 expressed her feelings as follows:

"... There were instances that my brother and I pretended to sleep. We did not want to be bothered (by the father) with his constant nagging and criticism of my mom like my mom was incompetent, my mom was a bad mother. We pretended to sleep because we did not want to hear any of his complaints... My mom was also doing the same thing... It was

overwhelming, to be in between those emotions was exhausting” (P1)

Both participants' relationships with their mothers have improved, while their relationships with their fathers have deteriorated. P1 has chosen not to engage in interactions with her father due to the ongoing cycle of infidelity, causing persistent thoughts of suicide.

“But why do I have to do that (maintain communication with her father) if that hurts so much, I feel the pain, and I feel like it's not worth it to... sacrifice myself, sacrifice myself just because of that.” (P1)

P2 limits her conversations with her father to casual ones, but she no longer entrusts him to influence her life decisions. This behavior stems from his infidelity and his preference for women working, which contrasts with traditional familial roles. *“...I can still share my life updates with him, but I cannot tolerate him telling me what I should do with my life...” (P2)*

Furthermore, both participants illustrated the absence of their father's role and function. P1 illustrates it as, *“A collapsed billboard, you know? (pause) Billboards are usually huge, but the picture (in the billboard) falls off, it is how my father is to me. He is physically there, but he has lost his role as a father...” (P1)*

Decision Phase

According to P1, her decision to consider forgiveness for her mother began when her mother fell ill. The feeling of significant guilt stimulated a reflection of her resentment of her mother's affair, leading to a new perspective. *“...My mom had a stroke, and I feel guilty about her. It burdens me*

as I regret that all this time, I never try to understand her perspective, her position in life...” (P1)

Meanwhile, P2 conveyed that the consideration to forgive her mother arose when she perceived a change in her mother's attitude, demonstrated by increased care and concern.

“I feel, over time, she (mother) has become more understanding. She can sense my needs and concerns. Then, I think, maybe she has been acting that way because she's been shouldering all the burdens herself.” (P2)

The care and financial support provided by her mother helped P2 realize her mother's position all along. P2 began to understand that her mother's change in attitude might reflect the unfair situation she was enduring while taking the sole responsibility as a breadwinner and household leader when her husband was having an affair. This also promoted a different viewpoint that her mother might never have intended to verbally or physically hurt her. By viewing the situation from her mother's perspective, P2 was willing to forgive her mother.

While considering forgiving, both participants articulated a sense of relief from emotional burdens. However, they also conveyed lingering resentment when witnessing their mother's infidelity. This forgiveness decision has been extended only for their mother's infidelity (both P1 and P2). P1 stated her understanding that forgiveness liberates her from emotional imprisonment and fosters personal relief. However, she had not been able to extend this forgiveness to her father's infidelity.

"But to let go and accept things as they are... I feel some sense of relief when I finally forgive my mom. But I cannot accept my father's deed, although I know for sure if I could forgive him, if I could let go, it would benefit me. But for some reason, I cannot forgive him." (P1)

Working Phase

Reframing

Both participants' working phases began with the process of reframing. In P1's case, reframing involved placing herself in the position of the mother who was betrayed by her husband and the need for external support to bridge the emotional void.

"I'm not justifying it, but I have to understand that sometimes we need to talk to someone who is not part of the familial relationship. I do have that kind of relationship with some of my male friends. There's a space that can't really be replaced..." (P1)

Through reframing, P1 had come to grasp the underlying circumstances surrounding her mother's infidelity, recognizing the unmet needs for comfort, validation, and emotional support from her partner. P1 emphasized that forgiveness does not excuse or condone the infidelity but rather reflects her willingness to respect her mother's autonomy and continue to love and honor her as a parent.

Conversely, P2 undertook reframing by reflecting on the burdens borne by her mother and the extensive efforts made to support the family's livelihood and assume responsibility for her husband's actions despite the misguided approach taken. This

introspection evoked feelings of guilt in P2 for harboring resentment towards her mother, prompting her to cultivate empathy for the challenges her mother faced.

"How can parents behave that way? I keep wondering if my mother is hustling like this; am I at fault? Essentially when, she is the breadwinner, while my father behaves that way (continuing the affair). Isn't it mean of me not to forgive her?" (P2)

Positive emotional response after reframing

Moreover, through the process of reframing, both participants cultivated empathy toward their mothers. P1 expressed a newfound appreciation and understanding for her mother and committed to being a supportive listener of her grievances despite occasional feelings of annoyance toward her behavior.

"...I don't want to lose anyone, especially those I care for, including my mom. Including my mom (with a stronger tone). From that moment on (her mother's sickness), I started to appreciate her (mother's) presence, and I realized that I was not the only one who was suffering. She was also bearing the same pain" (P1)

On the other hand, P2 expressed that she was able to develop empathy and affection towards her mother, although she acknowledged lingering hurt that has not been completely released. *"Even though sometimes it still hurts when I remember how stressful it was when she vented her distress onto me. But I don't hate her as much anymore."* (P2)

Adversely, while reframing aided both participants in understanding and contemplating forgiveness toward their mothers, it has instead intensified their resentment toward their fathers, whom they perceived as the source of family conflicts. Consequently, forgiving their fathers became more difficult.

"...You know, when you think about it, people... um... people definitely make mistakes; yes, there's always someone who makes mistakes. But as long as you're not the one who starts it, then I'll forgive you if you are not the instigator." (P1)

Deepening Phase

Seeing the perpetrator from a new perspective

P1 had entered a deepening phase, whereas P2 was still processing and recovering from the emotional wounds. P1 demonstrated a new perspective characterized by increased trust in her mother. Previously perceived as a betrayer, P1 could then view her as a source of reliability, offering emotional security and support amidst challenges.

"From this experience, I finally come to perceive that mother is like a tree. You cannot take shelter under it if it does not have a strong root. I trust my mother; she has a strong root. I can take shelter." (P1)

Finding meaning in suffering

P1 gleaned profound life lessons from her parents' infidelity. She acquired the ability to embrace life with acceptance, understanding that circumstances are not always ideal. Moreover, she cultivated a resilient hope, believing in brighter days

despite life's challenges. *"My experience, my constant experience with heartbreak, teaches me to believe that everything happens in its own time. Life is a journey." (P1)*

P1 also conveyed that her parents' infidelity did not lead her to question God's justice; rather, she learned to entrust her life to God's plan. Through this experience, she navigated a journey of embracing spiritual growth, finding solace in believing that challenges are part of a larger divine purpose.

"For even during those hard times, I feel that God is fair. I feel His presence in every step of the way. Sometimes, we find solace and our way out when we surrender, when we are willing to let go..." (P1)

Another meaning P1 derived is the importance of having strong faith and spiritual grounding to endure difficult situations. P1 articulated that this helped her maintain a positive mindset.

"When you lose the passion or zest in life, your life is over. Thus, we need to have faith in the Bible... and to have something to hold onto, an anchor to hinder us from resorting to negative doings. Personally, it is what allows us to endure." (P1)

DISCUSSION

This research aims to explore the stages of forgiveness among young adult women whose parents have engaged in infidelity. The findings indicate that both participants were able to forgive their mothers. P1 progressed through all four stages of forgiveness: 1) the uncovering phase, 2) the decision phase, 3) the working phase, and 4) the deepening phase. Meanwhile, P2 reached the working

phase of forgiveness. Both participants cited feelings of guilt as driving forces behind their decisions to forgive their mothers. This aligns with the study by Priadi and Gurmichele (2019), which suggests that guilt assists victims in reframing and forgiving offenders. Furthermore, the working phase began with reframing by empathizing with their mothers' motivations behind the infidelity. This finding reflects previous studies by Priadi and Gurmichele (2019) indicating that reframing from the offender's perspective aids forgiveness.

Conversely, forgiveness toward their fathers halted at the uncovering phase for both P1 and P2. Additionally, both participants tended to adopt a passive stance towards their fathers, albeit in different ways. While P1 chose to disengage and exclude her father from her life, P2 minimized interactions with her father, especially concerning significant life decisions. This phenomenon may relate to the age of the participants. Rey and Extremera (2016) suggest that young adult women often take passive steps by distancing themselves, applying selective attention, and minimizing personal investment when responding to painful events involving their parents. This is consistent with Kaleta and Mróz's findings (2018) that young adults find forgiveness challenging and may demonstrate tendencies toward revenge or avoidance.

In both participants, the forgiveness process did not proceed linearly from one stage to another. P1 and P2 often regressed to the uncovering phase from the decision

phase when their parents repeated hurtful actions or when new information about infidelity emerged. For example, P1's forgiveness towards her father reached the decision phase until she discovered her father's second infidelity with a different woman, prompting her to revert to the uncovering phase. Moreover, the uncovering phase proved to be the longest for both participants among the four stages of forgiveness. This is because both needed considerable time to process the negative emotions stemming from their parents' infidelities and adapt to the changes in their lives post-infidelity.

Based on the stages of forgiveness, both participants appear more capable of understanding and forgiving their mothers' infidelity compared to their fathers'. This supports April and Schrodts's (2019) findings that young adults, both male and female, tend to blame fathers more for infidelity than mothers. Fathers or male figures who commit infidelity are often seen as lacking self-control regardless of their partner's actions that may trigger the infidelity. In contrast, mothers' or female figures' infidelity is viewed as a reasonable response understandable due to their partner's failure to meet their needs. This view is echoed by P1 and P2, where reframing helped them understand their mothers' infidelity, thereby increasing their resentment towards their fathers. Another explanation for this is given by Thorson (2019), who claims that the possibility of young adults forgiving their parents' infidelity is higher when they receive a sincere apology from the cheating parent. The same findings are found in P1, who received a

sincere apology from her mother but not from her father, so P1 is more able to forgive her mother. This indicates that the participant's forgiveness is mistaken and prevents forgiveness. However, the findings of Thorson (2019) do not align with P2, who is able to forgive her mother even though her mother never apologizes.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it is evident that both participants exhibit a foundational willingness to forgive their parents for their infidelities. However, forgiveness towards mothers tends to proceed

more successfully than towards fathers. Factors hindering forgiveness towards fathers include the absence of expressed remorse and observable behavioral changes or commitment to the family. The inability of the children to forgive their parents' infidelity not only affects the parent-child relationship but also significantly impacts their social interactions, psychological health, and perspectives on gender dynamics within romantic relationships and marriage.

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ABOUT

SALASIKA etymologically derived from Javanese language meaning 'brave woman'. SALASIKA JOURNAL (SJ) is founded in July 2019 as an international open access, scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal publishing theoretically innovative and methodologically diverse research in the fields of gender studies, sexualities and feminism. Our conception of both theory and method is broad and encompassing, and we welcome contributions from scholars around the world.

SJ is inspired by the need to put into visibility the Indonesian and South East Asian women to ensure a dissemination of knowledge to a wider general audience.

SJ selects at least several outstanding articles by scholars in the early stages of a career in academic research for each issue, thereby providing support for new voices and emerging scholarship.

AUDIENCE

SJ aims to provide academic literature which is accessible across disciplines, but also to a wider 'non-academic' audience interested and engaged with social justice, ecofeminism, human rights, policy/advocacy, gender, sexualities, concepts of equality, social change, migration and social mobilisation, inter-religious and international relations and development.

There are other journals which address those topics, but SJ approaches the broad areas of gender, sexuality and feminism in an integrated fashion. It further addresses the issue of international collaboration and inclusion as existing gaps in the area of academic publishing by (a) crossing language boundaries and creating a space for publishing and (b) providing an opportunity for innovative emerging scholars to engage in the academic dialogue with established researchers.

STRUCTURE OF THE JOURNAL

All articles will be preceded by an abstract (150-200 words), keywords, main text introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion; acknowledgments; declaration of interest statement; references; appendices (as appropriate); table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figures; figure captions (as a list); and a contributor biography (150 words). Word length is 4,000-10,000 words, including all previous elements.

TIMELINE AND SCHEDULE

Twice a year: February and July.

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CONTENT ASSESSMENT

All articles will be peer-reviewed double-blind and will be submitted electronically to the journal (journal@salasika.org). The editors ensure that all submissions are refereed anonymously by two readers in the relevant field. In the event of widely divergent opinion during this process a third referee will be asked to comment, and the decision to publish taken on that recommendation. We expect that the editorial process will take up to four months. We will allow up to four weeks for contributors to send in revised manuscripts with corrections.



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