

Forgivingness: Between Personality and Education

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Abstract

Indonesian been known has culturally as forgiving and forgive each other easily. The evidence can found during the *idul fitri* holiday in which people celebrate it by mutual forgiveness each other. It indicates that Indonesian is very respectful to others. Today the phenomenon slightly eroded by the amount of violence due to revenge. People also prefer legal prosecution to solve social problem that resulted by others. It is interesting to examine how dynamics of forgiveness. The study aimed to examine the effect of educational background and big five personality on forgivingness. The study involved 212 students. The results showed that the influence of educational background have a greater influence on forgiveness compared to personality. These results confirm that the learning process has a greater contribution in social interaction, especially forgiveness.

Keyword: Forgivingness, Big five personality, Educational Background.

Background

The phenomenon of violence because of revenge has risen frequently in Indonesia for several years such as the attack at the prison of *Cebongan* (Kompas, 2013), and the Student brawl in *Makassar* (Kompas, 2012). Indonesian, however, is well known as a friendly and forgiving society since forgiveness value has been concerned with every community in Indonesia. Nevertheless, it is natural that daily

interaction with others could be either positive or negative. In his/her life, everyone has ever experienced hurt, has been betrayed, disappointed, or harmed by others (Fincham and Kashdan, 2004). Interpersonal relationships with other people are very vulnerable to a conflict and incompatibility. Without tendency to forgive someone mistakes, social life would be intolerably (Mullet & Akl, 2010). The tendency to forgive to offenses in everyday circumstances, in general, knows as forgivingness.

Forgivingness defined as the disposition to cancel anger (or at all upset loss) on someone who has wronged with a despicable act, by viewing it in terms of virtue given by the characteristic forgiving. (Robert, 1995). Suwartono, Prawasti, Mullet (2007) suggested that there are 3 aspects of forgivingness in Indonesian context. The first is enduring resentment; e.g. difficulty to find a way out of unforgiveness conditions, by choosing revenge, forgiveness or another way. The second are sensitivity to circumstances; e.g. reactivity to the pressure of religious figure or family member to forgive offender's apologizes. The third are willingness to forgive; the overall tendency to forgive or to revenge.

One of many factors that affect forgiveness is personality. Personality model that is widely used to examine its effect on forgivingness is the big five personality. Big five personality consists of five wide-range traits including neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 2003).

Research in the western cultural context showed that personality factors especially agreeableness and neuroticism had a great contribution on one's tendency to forgive. McCullough (2001) concluded that the people who had a high tendency on agreeableness and emotional stability would forgive a mistake easily. This conclusion was based on the research in western cultural context. On the contrary, different study showed that personality variables did not contribute greatly to someone's tendency to forgive. The study in the Chinese cultural context, which known as collective society, found that the tendency to forgive was associated with social variables such as solidarity group harmony, relationship orientation rather than personality variables such as emotional stability and inner harmony (Watkins & Hui, 2008). Findings from McCullough (2001) and other researchers in western context need to reexamine in

different cultural context. It is important to examine whether big five personality also has a great contribution to predict someone's tendency to forgive in the other collective society. According to these inconsistencies of research, the researcher considered that it was important to examine the effect of the big five personality on forgivingness in the context of student of Maliki State Islamic University of Malang as representation of different cultural background from the previous research.

Forgivingness and big five personality

Several studies showed a strong correlation between big five dimensions and constructs related to forgiveness such as revenge or resentful. Research conducted by McCullough, et al (2001) indicated that big five traits correlated strongly with disposition to revenge (vengefulness). Other research by Berry et al (2001) showed that disposition to forgive interpersonal offense negatively correlated with negative affect trait. Negative emotion relating to unforgiveness condition is anger. Empirical research suggested that the act of forgiveness regards to the reduction of anger against offenders.

At the dispositional level, forgivingness had negative correlation with emotional stability such as anger and disposition of hostility and resentment (Berry et al, 2005). The relation can theoretically explained by the system of rumination. Neurotic people tend to contemplate violations causing distress and tendencies of interpersonal hostility, anger and frustration (Maltby et al, 2008). Thus, this tendency leads people to ruminate over vengeful after the attack and hostility to the offenders. As a result, they cannot forgive easily. Besides neuroticism, agreeableness also had a strong correlation with the aspect of forgiveness toward others. Agreeableness dimension deals with aspects of positive emotions such as joyful, obedient, helpful, forgiving, loving inclined so people who have high agreeableness scores tend to score high forgivingness anyway. Individuals who have high agreeableness tendency will be more successful in many areas of interpersonal and be able to solve interpersonal conflict.

Conscientiousness also had a positive correlation with forgivingness. Someone might decide to forgive because forgiveness is included in moral value.

The moral value could be religious motivation. Forgiveness might be motivated by moral value rather than empathy or positive emotions (Berry, Worthington et al, 2005). Berry, Worthington, et al (2005) also found that extraversion was associated with forgivingness. Extraversion related to happiness and subjective well-being. It should be consider that forgiveness is one part of the mechanisms associated to the happiness of extraverted person. Forgiveness described as tendency to overcome negative emotions with positive emotions. Extraversion also characterized by positive affect such as enthusiasm, loving hang out, positive emotion and energy. The correlation between Openness and Forgivingness may not be too strong. The dimensions of openness, however, characterized easily-tolerate personality.

Methods

Participant

The participants of this study were 212 undergraduate students at *Maulana Malik Ibrahim* State Islamic University of Malang. They consisted of 75 men and 137 women, the age ranging from 17 to 22 years. Participants were clustered to six faculties at the undergraduate level at *Maulana Malik Ibrahim* State Islamic University of Malang as a representation of different scientific study and learning focus. The details of Participants were 36 students of Faculty of *Tarbiyah* and Teaching Science, 36 students of Faculty of *Shariah*, 33 students of Faculty of Economics, 33 students of Faculty of Humanities, 38 students of Faculty of Psychology, and 36 students of Faculty of Science and Technology.

Measurements

Forgivingness Questionnaire

Forgivingness Questionnaire adapted from Suwartono, Prawasti, Mullet (2007) consists of 20 items. The scale is Likert-type scale with response option ranging 1-5 points, 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 strongly agree. This scale measures three aspects of dispositional forgiveness including enduring resentment, sensitivity to circumstances, and a high willingness to forgive. Alpha reliability scores estimated in this research were .748 for enduring resentment, .702 for sensitivity to circumstances and .706 for willingness to forgive.

Big Five Inventory

The Big Five Inventory was developed by John, Dunahue & Kentle (1991), consisting of 44 items. This scale is also a Likert-scale with response options 1-5 points, 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 strongly agree. This scale has spread widely and freely used for research purposes. This scale measures five personality dimensions. Extraversion subscale consists of 8 items measuring a person's level of extraversion. Agreeableness subscale consists of nine items measuring a person's level of agreeableness. Conscientiousness subscale comprises of nine items measuring a person's level of conscientiousness. Neuroticism subscale includes 8 items measuring a person's level of emotional stability. Openness subscale involves 10 items measure a person's level of openness to experience.

Results of the Big Five Inventory reliability scale test conducted by the researchers showed that this scale has also been quite reliable. Alpha reliability coefficient of neuroticsm subscale was .712 and extraversion subscale was .771. Coefficient of Openness subscale reliability was .725 and agreeableness subscale was .627. Alpha reliability coefficient of conscientiousness subscale was .686.

Results

To test the hypothesis, the presence of effect of the big five personality on forgivingness, researchers used multiple linear regression analysis. Significance level preferred was 5%. The hypothesis is rejected in case $p > .05$ but accepted in case $p < .05$

Table 1.

Result of simultaneous test for examining the effect of big five on forgivingness

R	Adjusted R	Mean			
	R Square	Square	Square	F	Sig.
.293	.086	.064	164.008	3.865	.002

According to multiple regression analysis, it was obtained $p = .002$ at a significance level of 5% with a sample size of 212 people. These results indicated that big five personality had a significant effect on forgivingness and the hypothesis was accepted. The value of the adjusted R square means effective contribution of big five

personality dimensions simultaneously to forgivingness. The Adjusted R Square value obtained was .063. This score meant that big five personality dimensions contributed to forgivingness only 6.3% and still 93.7% of another factor affects forgivingness.

The results of the examining effect of big five on forgivingness partially are in the table below:

Table 2.

Results of partial test for examining the effect of big five on forgivingness

	B	SE	B	T	Sig.
Neuroticism	-.147	.139	-.087	-1.059	.291
Extroversion	-.014	.111	-.010	-.122	.903
Openness	.027	.105	.019	.253	.801
Agreeableness	.543	.176	.248	3.088	.002
Conscientiousness	-.032	.128	-.020	-.249	.804

The results of multiple regression showed that only agreeableness correlated to forgivingness significantly. The table indicated $\beta = 0.248$ and $p = 0.002$.

Surprisingly, it was found mean difference among groups of subjects. *Anava* test resulted in no significant difference in mean values in overall groups, but *Post-hoc* test pointed out a significant difference in levels of forgivingness between students of faculty Shariah, Tarbiyah, and Psychology. The mean value of *Shariah's* students was 72.61, of *Tarbiyah's* students was 76.94, and of *Psychology's* students was 75.32. The test indicated a significant difference in level of forgivingness students between students of faculty *Shariah* and *Tarbiyah* with $p = .006$ and the mean difference = -4.33 and a significant difference between students of faculty of *Shariah* and *Psychology* with $p = .021$ and the mean difference = -3.59.

Discussion

This research has two important findings: 1) Only agreeableness correlated significantly with forgivingness and 2) In some cases, different educational

background has a different of level forgivingness. The results of the study that agreeableness correlated significantly with forgivingness is in line with McCullough (2001) which said that people having high agreeableness tend to be forgiving. The existence of a significant correlation between agreeableness and forgivingness is also consistent with Berry, et al (2005) and McCullough, et al (2001).

Agreeableness is a personality dimension that describes various traits related to daily social life and positive emotions such as altruism, empathy, tender-mindedness, and generosity. One who has high agreeableness tends to be successful in interpersonal relationships and has less conflict in his/her relationships compared to that of low agreeableness. Individual with low agreeableness will be inclined more to hold a grudge. Agreeableness includes social aspects of a person such as altruism, and humility. People who have high agreeableness would also be easier to succumb. McCullough (2001) argued that before giving the forgiveness, the victim of the offence develops empathy first and humility to the event and the offender. It encourages victims to tolerate mistakes and view the offence wisely.

Agreeableness is also the big five personality dimensions that mostly affect the forgivingness in this study. This finding is also consistent with Hook (2005) that in the collective cultural society, social variables had a major role compared to individual variable such as tendencies of negative emotions and harmony within oneself. Although Watkins and Hui (2008) used the concept of social variables such as interpersonal harmony and relationship orientation instead personality variable like agreeableness, it might noted that agreeableness dimension includes social aspects describe the quality of one's social relationships. The difference is only in terms of how entanglement and quality of social relationships was conceptualize and measured.

The results also strengthened previous studies on the influence of personality on forgivingness in the collective cultural context. The findings that big five personality contribute slightly to forgivingness is nearly consistent with the findings of the research conducted by Watkins & Regmi (2004) in Nepal. Indeed, Watkins & Regmi Research (2004) found that the big five personality all of big five dimensions including neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness

had no significant correlation on forgivingness in Nepalese Student sample. The other study proving the absence of a significant contribution of personality variables is research by Watkins and Hui (2008). They found that personality variables such as inner harmony and anxiety did not contribute to forgivingness. Inner harmony described individuals who maintain a balance, inner pleasure and avoiding conflict. In Chinese student samples, positive emotions such as these variables have no correlation to forgiveness. Variables associated with negative emotions like anxiety also had no strong correlation with the tendency to forgive in a sample of Chinese Students.

The difference finding between western society and eastern society related to the reason to forgive and depending on how people mean forgiveness in those different cultures. Forgiving in the collective society considers forgiveness in the context of reconciliation, social harmony, and improving relationships. Forgiveness on the collective culture generally includes the decision to forgive, but it does not always result in a reduction of negative emotions associated with unforgiveness (Hook, 2005). In an individualistic society, western society, forgiveness might given because of personal reasons and wills, yet, in collective society, forgiveness reflected the rules and norms for conflict resolution and group harmony.

The other significant finding was different level of forgivingness among group of participants based on their educational background especially students of faculty of *Shariah*, *Psychology*, and *Tarbiyah*. Students of faculty of *Shariah* have the lowest level of forgivingness compared to student in the other faculties. According to these results, the researchers concluded that learning process affects someone's tendency to forgive. Students of faculty of *Shariah* learn much about law and justice. Referring to the *Shariah* profession, judges, and professional ethics requires them to act in accordance with the provisions of applicable law, impartial, courteous, and thoughtful and firmly maintain the authority. This learning process concerning the law and justice impacts how they evaluate the violence. People committing mistake and guilt, ought to be punish according to law and principles of justice. In contrast, Psychology students concern in interpersonal skill like emphatic skill. They may tolerate one's mistake easily and evaluate the violence in different perspective. This may cause their

level of forgivingness higher than those of *Shariah* students. In the other hand, Students of Faculty of *Tarbiyah* focus much on Islamic education. They learn moral value in Islamic teaching. Learning moral value of course studies forgiveness since it is studied in religious teaching. Their level of forgiveness is higher than those of *Shariah* students due to different learning focus affecting how they evaluate the mistake or offense.

Suggestion

- a. Future studies expected to pay more attention to the cultural factors where participant studied. Future research is better to investigate the concept of forgiveness according to participant's perspective, for example Javanese community. What is forgiveness defined by them? Should explore before decide the concept and measurement of forgiveness used. Future studies could also use the concept of personality that originated in the communities studied when they want to examine effect of personality on forgiveness.
- b. Further research need to examine other variables, which may affect forgivingness in addition to big five, considering the contribution of the big five to forgivingness in this study, is only small. These variables can be internal variables such as religiosity, spirituality.
- c. Future investigation are necessary to reexamine whether the educational background as a representation of one's learning process in response to an mistakes can affect a person's tendency to forgive.

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