

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS PREDICTORS OF TENDENCY TO FORGIVE AMONG STUDENTS OF NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated religious affiliation and emotional intelligence as predictors of tendency to forgive among undergraduates. The study was conducted using 204 participants (88 males and 116 females) who were conveniently sampled from undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Participants' ages ranged from 18-35, with a mean age of 22.86 and a standard deviation of 3.97. This research was a survey study that adopted a correlational design and linear regression analysis. Instruments used for data collection included: The Religious Affiliation Scale (RAS) developed by Omoluabi (1995), the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) developed by Dr. Nicola Schutte (1998), and the Bolton Forgiveness Scale (BFS). The results showed that religious affiliation strongly predicted the tendency to forgive, and likewise, emotional intelligence strongly predicted the tendency to forgive among undergraduates. Results support theoretical frameworks, including Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Social Learning Theory, which emphasize the role of religious and emotional factors in fostering forgiveness. The findings underscore the importance of integrating emotional intelligence training and religious teachings to enhance forgiveness behaviors. Implications for therapeutic interventions, mental health practices, and educational programs are discussed, alongside suggestions for further research on diverse cultural and religious contexts.

Keywords: Religious affiliation, Emotional intelligence, forgiveness, Predictor, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Learning

Introduction

In our world today, many people struggle to let go of grudges or forgive those who have wronged them. Forgiving someone can feel like giving up a personal right, especially when individuals believe the wrongdoer should be held accountable for their actions. Some people refuse to accept their transgressors' behavior, while others do. Forgiveness is a complex and multifaceted construct that has been explored in various fields, including philosophy and theology. Researchers have examined forgiveness from an evolutionary standpoint, viewing it as an instinct with interpersonal and societal purposes (McCullough, 2008; Okoye, et al., 2017).

Religious affiliation plays a significant role in shaping one's tendency to forgive. Religiosity can be generally defined as an organized system of belief, practice, and symbols designed to enable closeness to God (Matthew, 1996; Ifeacho, et al., 2015). Emotional intelligence is another key factor in the forgiveness process, as it contributes to self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy. Studies have shown that individuals with higher emotional intelligence levels are more likely to forgive others, as they can better manage their emotions and understand the perspectives of those who have wronged them.

No comprehensive sources of research have measured the predictive role of religious affiliation and emotional intelligence on forgiveness. Forgiveness is often experienced through religious and cultural beliefs. Psychological well-being has to do with emotionality, or perception of emotion which is common in researcher's conceptualization of Emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995; Wade *et al*, 2010; Woodyalt & Wenzal, 2014). Forgiveness is a crucial aspect of human

relationships, mental health, and well-being, yet it remains a complex and elusive construct. Despite its importance, many individuals struggle to forgive others and themselves leading to prolonged suffering and distress, strained relationships, and social connections. It as well could lead to increased anxiety, depression, and mental issues. Religious affiliation has been identified as a potential predictor of forgiveness, but the current understanding of this relationship is limited. There is no explanation of the mediating factors that may influence the relationship considering individual differences in cultural factors and beliefs (Ezeokana, et al., 2021; Onyemaechi, et al., 2017).

Research Questions

1. Will religious affiliation predict the tendency to forgive?
2. Will emotional intelligence predict the tendency to forgive?
3. Will individuals with higher emotional intelligence and stronger religious affiliation exhibit greater forgiveness tendencies than those with lower emotional intelligence and weaker religious affiliation?

Theoretical Review

Social Learning Theory

SLT, proposed by Albert Bandura 1977, suggest that behaviors are learned through observation, imitation, and modelling. People acquire new behaviors by watching others, especially individuals they admire or see as authoritative models. In this context, SLT can be applied to understand how religious affiliation and emotional intelligence contributes to forgiveness tendency. This theory

emphasizes that learning occurs in a social context and can take place through direct instructions, observing the behaviors of others (modelling), and the outcome of those behaviors (vicarious reinforcement or punishment). Religious affiliation plays a significant role in shaping an individual's behavior through the lens of SLT. People who belong to religious communities are often exposed to models who demonstrates the importance of forgiveness such as religious leaders, sacred texts, or fellow believers. In many religious settings, forgiveness is modelled by figures like clergy, family members, or community leaders. For example, in Christianity, Jesus is portrayed as forgiving those who wronged him, and in Islam, the prophet Muhammed is depicted as merciful and forgiving. Followers may observe these figures and learn that forgiveness is a desirable behavior. Religious teachings that promote forgiveness serves as reinforcement. Sacred texts, sermons, and religious rituals often emphasize the importance of forgiving others. Individuals learns that forgiveness is not only expected but it also rewarded in spiritual and social terms (e.g., divine reward, social acceptance). Religious communities act as environments where norms and values, including forgiveness, are reinforced. People are often surrounded by peers who encourage forgiving behavior, and they may witness the social benefits of forgiveness, such as maintaining relationships or resolving conflicts within the community. Through SLT, individuals are affiliated with a religious tradition are more likely to learn and practice forgiveness because they observe it as virtuous, rewarded behavior within their religious environment. Individuals learn emotionally intelligent behavior through observation of emotionally competent people in their environment, such as caregivers, mentors, or peers. A person who witnesses someone managing their emotions effectively, resolving conflicts peacefully, and forgiving others may internalize these behaviors as valuable. If individuals observe that those who forgive others experience positive emotional

outcomes (e.g., reduced anger, emotional relief) or social rewards (e.g., strengthened relationships, social acceptance), they are more likely to imitate these emotionally intelligent behaviors. People with higher emotional intelligence have likely learned to manage their emotions and empathize with others by observing emotionally competent models in their environment. This theory explains that by observing models of forgiveness in their religious environments and through the development of emotional regulation skills learned from social interactions, individuals learn to forgive more readily. Religious teachings and emotionally intelligent behavior work together, creating a social and emotional foundation for forgiving others.

Empirical Review

Religious Affiliation and Forgiveness

A study was conducted on the link between religiosity and forgiveness among Christian, Muslim, Jewish and secular affiliations by an Australian psychologists Fox et al, (2008) “Impact of religious affiliation and religiosity on forgiveness”. Measures of forgiveness includes attitudes towards forgiveness (attitudinal) and tendencies to forgive transgressions in the past (behavioral) and future (projective). Religious faith, interpretation, prayer and religiosity. 475 Christians, Muslim, Jewish and secular individuals participated and completed an internet-based questionnaire. The study found religiosity positively correlated with forgiveness. Religious groups reported significantly higher attitudinal and projective forgiveness than secular group. Among religious groups, religiosity was stronger determinant of forgiveness than the specific religion an individual was affiliated with. This finding suggested that faith is the strongest religiosity predictors of forgiveness.

Emotional intelligence and forgiveness

In 2011, research was done to see the accuracy of emotional intelligence and forgiveness in prediction the degree of satisfaction in marital communications. 200 Iranian couples were randomly selected for this study. Result showed a significance relationship between emotional intelligence and satisfaction in marital communications. However, no relation was found between emotional intelligence and forgiveness (Afsaneh et al., 2011, Onyemaechi, 2025).

Hypotheses

1. Religious affiliation will significantly and positively predict forgiveness tendency among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
2. Emotional intelligence will significantly and positively predict forgiveness tendency among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
3. Religious affiliations and emotional intelligence will significantly and positively predict forgiveness tendency among students

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational survey research design, which is appropriate for examining the degree and direction of relationships among multiple variables. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether emotional intelligence and religious affiliation can significantly predict the tendency to forgive among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. This design was considered most suitable because the variables under investigation religious affiliation,

emotional intelligence, and forgiveness are psychological constructs that cannot be ethically or practically manipulated.

Participants

The population for this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in various faculties at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. A total of 216 students participated in the study. The participants were selected using convenience sampling, a non-probability technique that involves selecting individuals who are readily available and willing to participate.

The sample included 113 males (52.3%) and 103 females (47.7%), with participants' ages ranging from 17 to 30 years ($M = 22.5$, $SD = 2.9$). The diverse composition of the sample ensured a relatively balanced representation of students from various academic disciplines and religious backgrounds. Participants self-identified their religious affiliation, which was categorized into three groups: Christianity (75.5%), Islam (17.1%), and Others (7.4%). These categorizations allowed for the analysis of the influence of religious identity on the tendency to forgive.

Instruments

Three main instruments were used for data collection:

Tendency to Forgive Scale (TTF):

This instrument was developed by Brown (2003), the TTF is a 4-item self-report measure designed to assess individuals' general tendency to forgive others for transgressions. Items include statements such as "I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings." Responses are

rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The TTF has demonstrated good internal consistency across various populations ($\alpha \approx 0.75$). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.73, indicating satisfactory reliability. The TTF is widely used in forgiveness research due to its brevity and psychometric soundness.

Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS):

This instrument was developed by Schutte et al. (1998) based on the theoretical framework by Salovey and Mayer (1990). The scale consists of 33 items assessing various aspects of emotional intelligence, including emotional perception, expression, regulation, and utilization. Example items include: "I know when to speak about my personal problems to others," and "By looking at their facial expressions, I recognize the emotions people are experiencing." Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate greater emotional intelligence. In previous studies, the EIS has shown high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$). In this study, the alpha coefficient was 0.85, reflecting strong reliability.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Participants were approached in classrooms, libraries, and hostel lounges. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and assured participants of

voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before administration of the questionnaires.

The administration process involved both paper-and-pencil formats and small group sessions, depending on the setting. Questionnaires were distributed with clear instructions, and participants were given approximately 20–25 minutes to complete them. A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed, and 216 were properly completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 94%. The researchers remained present during administration to clarify any doubts and collect completed forms immediately to ensure data integrity.

Design

This study adopted a correlational design and used multiple linear regression analysis via SPSS to examine the relationship between religious affiliation, emotional intelligence, and forgiveness tendencies.

Statistical Analysis

The study employed multiple linear regression analysis to test the predictive relationships between the independent variables (religious affiliation and emotional intelligence) and the dependent variable (forgiveness tendency).

Results

The results of the regression analysis conducted on religious affiliation and emotional intelligence as predictors of the tendency to forgive are presented below.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	204	17.00	39.00	22.8676	3.97989

Table 2: Regression Coefficients of Religious Affiliation and Emotional Intelligence as Predictors of Tendency to Forgive

Predictors	R ²	df1(df2)	F	Beta	SE	β	p
Model 1	.29	2(201)	41.17				
Religious Affiliation				.72	.16	.27	.00
Emotional Intelligence				.30	.04	.42	.00

Dependent Variable: Forgiveness

The R² value of .29 indicates that the predictor variables explained 29% of the variance in forgiveness tendency. The findings revealed that both religious affiliation ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$) and emotional intelligence ($\beta = .42$, $p < .05$) were positive and statistically significant predictors of forgiveness.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that both emotional intelligence and religious affiliation significantly predicted students' tendency to forgive, with emotional intelligence accounting for a greater portion of the variance. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of forgiveness as a psychological and social process.

Emotional intelligence, as measured in this study, was positively correlated with forgiveness tendencies, which is consistent with the literature (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Schutte et al., 2001; Onyemaechi, 2025; Achebe & Onyemaechi, 2023). Individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more adept at recognizing, understanding, and managing their own emotions and those of others. This emotional regulation facilitates adaptive responses to interpersonal conflicts, making them more likely to forgive transgressors. Forgiveness, in this context, can be seen as an emotionally intelligent response that promotes psychological well-being and social harmony.

Religious affiliation also emerged as a significant predictor of forgiveness, although its influence was less pronounced than that of emotional intelligence. The result suggests that religious beliefs and values may shape individuals' attitudes toward forgiveness. Most religions—including Christianity and Islam—emphasize forgiveness as a moral duty, encouraging adherents to let go of resentment and seek reconciliation. For example, Christian teachings often highlight the importance of forgiving “seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22), while Islamic teachings also underscore mercy and compassion (Quran 42:40). These religious doctrines may serve as internalized moral frameworks that promote forgiving behavior (Okoye, et al., 2017).

However, the stronger effect of emotional intelligence indicates that personal emotional competencies may play a more direct and pervasive role in forgiveness than religious identity alone. This finding aligns with contemporary views that place greater emphasis on emotional skills in interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution.

The practical implications of these findings are noteworthy. University counseling centers and educators can integrate emotional intelligence training into their programs to enhance students'

interpersonal competence and resilience. Such interventions may not only promote forgiveness but also reduce interpersonal conflicts and improve overall mental health. Additionally, religious leaders and organizations on campus can reinforce forgiveness teachings within faith-based programs to further support students' emotional and moral development.

Future research should consider exploring other potential predictors of forgiveness, such as personality traits, cultural background, or trauma history, to provide a more holistic understanding. Longitudinal designs and qualitative approaches could also deepen insights into how forgiveness develops over time and in specific contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that:

1. Religious leaders and organizations can integrate teachings and workshops that emphasize the importance of forgiveness as part of their regular activities. Highlighting the role of forgiveness in religious practices could strengthen this tendency among individuals.
2. Mental health professionals and counselors should incorporate forgiveness therapy into their practices, particularly for individuals struggling with interpersonal conflicts. Such programs could leverage the positive influence of emotional intelligence and religious beliefs on the forgiveness process.
3. Also, as it has been shown that religious affiliation predicts tendency to forgive, individuals should explore religious practices and their beliefs in order to develop the intentions and behaviors of forgiving spirits in them.

Conclusion

This study investigated the predictive role of religious affiliation and emotional intelligence on tendency to forgive among undergraduates. From the results it was found that religious affiliation and emotional intelligence are strong predictors of tendency to forgive. This finding supports the existing literature on the role of religiosity and religious affiliation on forgiveness. These results underscore the importance of providing supportive religious environments and fostering emotional intelligence to enhance the capacity for forgiveness. In conclusion, promoting forgiveness through religious affiliation and emotional intelligence can have a profound effect on interpersonal relationships and overall emotional well-being. By understanding and leveraging these connections, individuals and students can cultivate a more compassionate and forgiving society.

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