



Research article

Gender and age differences in forgivingness in Italian and Polish samples

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ABSTRACT

This study explores gender and age differences in forgivingness using the crosscultural and stress-and-coping perspective. Polish and Italian versions of the Heartland Forgiveness scale (HFS) were used. The sample consisted of 1957 individuals aged 18–80 (61% females and 39% males). A 3-way between groups ANOVA was used to examine the main effects and interactions of country, age and gender as they relate to total HFS score. Post-hoc analyses were performed where appropriate. The results revealed that Polish and Italian respondents did not differ in the level of the general tendency to forgive. Gender differences in trait forgiveness were reported in whole sample and in Italian subsample, showing males to be more forgiving than females. Further, our results for all study participants, in Polish subsample and among Italian males showed that older adults were more forgiving than young respondents, which is consistent with the previous findings showing an increase in forgivingness with age.

1. Introduction

Although many scholars have investigated gender (see review of Fehr et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2008) and age (Kaleta and Mróz, 2018a; Toussaint et al., 2001, 2020) differences in forgiveness, studies in this area still remain scarce. Some trends have been observed to emerge, however study results have been quite ambiguous and require a more in-depth analysis. This is primarily because empirical research regarding gender and age variations in forgiveness has been mostly undertaken in the United States and very few studies have been conducted in non-US samples. Meanwhile historical background, social norms, changing economic and political conditions may shape different conceptualizations of forgiveness (Balkin et al., 2009; Hui et al., 2006; Joo et al., 2019; Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Paz et al., 2008), leading motives (Huwaë and Schaafsma, 2019) and varying experiences of forgiveness (Cowden et al., 2019; Suwartono et al., 2007; Záhórcová and Zelenáková, 2021) among males and females at subsequent stages of life in different countries. Mixed findings might be related to culture, and studies on samples beyond the US may provide evidence whether gender and age differences in forgiveness are universal or culture-specific. They might also be helpful in searching for the mechanisms underlying gender and age differences in forgiveness.

In the present study, we examine the effect of gender and age on the tendency to forgive using two European samples, Polish and Italian. We

adopt the stress-and-coping theory to consider forgiveness as a way of coping with transgressions that might be differentiated by respondents' gender, age, and culture.

1.1. Understanding of forgiveness

Forgiveness can be considered at the micro level, when it is used as a repair strategy in romantic (Sheldon and Antony, 2019), family (Fincham, 2015) or professional (Yagil and Luria, 2016) relationships, as well as at the macro level, when it is used as a strategy for solving international conflicts (Enright et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the scale of forgiveness, its definitions primarily underline prosocial change in thoughts, emotions, motivations, or behaviors that it involves (McCullough et al., 1997). However, scholars focus on different aspects and dimensions of forgiveness and define it in various ways. First, they emphasize the distinction between state and trait forgiveness (e.g. Thompson et al., 2005; Eaton et al., 2006). State (episodic) forgiveness is related to specific instances when the offended person forgives the wrongdoer a particular harm (Paleari et al., 2009), while dispositional forgiveness, called forgivingness (Berry et al., 2005; Roberts, 1995), refers to the general tendency to forgive regardless of time, relationships and situations (Berry et al., 2001; Brown, 2003). Second, some definitions focus on different objects of forgiveness, for example, forgiveness of others (Worthington, 2019b), of oneself

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(Fincham & May, 2019), of God (Krause and Ellison, 2003), by God (Krause and Hayward, 2015), and of situations beyond anyone's control (Thompson et al., 2005). Finally, some researchers have pointed out two independent dimensions of forgiveness—negative and positive (Fincham et al., 2004; Kaleta and Mróz, 2018b). The negative aspect involves reduction of motivation to engage in retribution towards the transgressor, resentment, animosity, and other negative emotions activated after the harm (McCullough et al., 1997). It implies only the return to the state of neutrality (Braithwaite et al., 2011). The positive dimension entails increasing goodwill towards the wrongdoer. It implies building new attitudes towards the offender through positive cognitive reinterpretations of the transgression (Fincham, 2009). Consequently, the offended person feels more sympathy, mercy, and compassion for the transgressor.

Another approach to understanding forgiveness might be provided by lay people whose conceptualizations differ across cultures. The most robust differences occur between Western (individualistic) and East Asian or Latin America (collectivistic) cultures. While in the individualistic culture forgiveness is understood as an intra-personal process, in the collectivistic culture it is mainly seen as an interpersonal construct (Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007). For instance, the Chinese perceive forgiveness as focused on bringing social benefits (Hui et al., 2006), and the Japanese as focused on relationship harmony, adjustment motives and decisional forgiveness (Joo et al., 2019). The Jewish perspective provides an original conceptualization of forgiveness of debt, called *mechila* (Balkin et al., 2009).

Several studies analyzed data from different countries in terms of four conceptualization factors identified initially in a French sample by Mullet et al. (2004). All those factors, namely: Change of Heart, More-Than-Dyadic Process, Encourages Repentance, and Immoral Behavior, were confirmed in other samples (see Tripathi and Mullet, 2010; Neto et al., 2010). However, the findings regarding particular factors were significantly different for participants from Congo (Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007), Uruguay (Bagnulo et al., 2009), Turkey (Bugay and Mullet, 2012, 2013), and India (Tripathi and Mullet, 2010).

Different conceptualizations determine the manner of experiencing and processing forgiveness, including the general willingness to forgive (Ballester et al., 2009; Neto et al., 2010; Prieto et al., 2013), which, in turn, usually differs across sexes and age groups. All this suggests that gender and age-related differences in forgiveness should be explored in specific cultural contexts.

1.2. Gender and age differences in forgiveness

Forgiveness is believed to differ across sexes. Some meta-analyses confirmed gender differentiation (Miller et al., 2008) whereas other found no differences in this respect (Cabras et al., 2017b, 2018; Fehr et al., 2010). Majority of studies revealed higher levels of forgiveness, especially dispositional one, among women than in men (e.g. Kamat et al., 2006; Toussaint et al., 2008; Finkel et al., 2002). This trend might be explained by females' greater agreeableness (e.g. Feingold, 1994; Rey and Extremera, 2014), religiousness (Edwards et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2007) or empathy (Brown, 2003; Giammarco and Vernon, 2014; Chung, 2014).

In few studies however, women scored lower than men in the tendency to forgive (Brown, 2003; Exline et al., 2004; Miller and Worthington, 2010), whereas in some studies gender differences were not found at all (Berry et al., 2001; Brose et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2006). Most studies were conducted in the US and they did not provide for cross-cultural comparison. Meanwhile, recent research on a Polish sample (Charzyńska, 2015; Kaleta and Mróz, 2021) showed, contrary to the expectations, a stronger tendency to forgive among male participants. Such results might be specific to the Polish sample or more universal in traditional European Christian countries (see Worthington 2019a; Worthington et al., 2019; Zarzycka, 2019). The study did not investigate age differences in forgiveness, which might also account for the results.

With age, people focus on more friendly relationships and building positive social networks, and they seek experiences with more positive emotions than younger adults (see Luong et al., 2011). In their daily life, older people avoid conflicts and other interpersonal stressors, and they are more forgiving than it has been confirmed by previous studies. Generally, an increase in forgiveness with age has been found in the US (Younger et al., 2004), as well as in European countries, for example among Swiss (Steiner et al., 2011; Allemant, 2008), Polish (Charzyńska and Heszen, 2013), Italian (Mullet et al., 2003) and French adults (Mullet et al., 2003; Girard and Mullet, 1997). Toussaint et al. (2001) found that middle-aged and older adults in a US sample had a stronger tendency to forgive than younger adults. Kaleta and Mróz (2018a) revealed that Polish middle-aged and older participants reported a significantly higher level of forgiveness than young adults. Similarly, Romero and Mitchell (2008) found forgiveness to increase among aging Roman Catholic women. However, the effect of age on forgiveness was not found among Kuwaiti citizens (Ahmed et al., 2007) and Spanish adults (Gismero-González et al., 2019).

There were two European studies showing the relationships between gender, age and forgiveness at the same time. The former was conducted in a French sample by Mullet et al. (1998). It revealed a significant gender difference in only one factor, Revenge vs. Forgiveness, with a greater tendency in women to forgive than to take revenge. In addition, older adults reported more willingness than younger adults to forgive than to take revenge. No interactions between the variables were reported. Similarly, Ghaemmaghami et al. (2011) found higher revenge motivation among men in a Swiss sample. Age \times gender interaction showed that gender differences were more noticeable in younger than in middle-aged and older participants.

1.3. Stress-and-coping perspective

As seen, the willingness to forgive may vary depending on respondents' gender, age and cultural context. This differentiation might be comprehended using the theoretical lens of stress-and-coping theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Strelan and Covic, 2006; Worthington, 2019a,b; Worthington et al., 2019). In this approach, transgressions are conceptualized as stressors that involve victims' stress responses, and forgiveness is a strategy of coping with psychological distress. Holding unforgiveness and dwelling on injury escalates stress and might lead to anxiety, anger, avoidance and, consequently, depression (Worthington and Wade, 1999). Forgiveness provides for transformation of negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors to neutral or positive ones, and it reduces stress (Chi et al., 2019; Worthington and Scherer, 2004). Empirical research on stress and coping and their correlates, revealed strong relationships with forgiveness (Crandall et al., 2019; Gall and Bilodeau, 2021; Ochu et al., 2018) which are differentiated by gender, age and culture. Many studies have consistently shown that women experience more chronic, traumatic and minor daily stress (Matud, 2004; Olf et al., 2007; Street and Dardis, 2018) when compared to men. On the other hand, older adults have reported less stress than younger individuals (Birditt et al., 2005). Similarly, women tend to ruminate more than men (Johnson and Whisman, 2013), but the level of rumination lowers with age, both in women and men (Nolen-Hoeksema and Aldao, 2011); additionally, studies have showed cultural differences in rumination (Eshun et al., 1998; Kwon et al., 2013). Anxiety is also more intense in women than men (McLean and Anderson, 2009) and, for both sexes, it decreases with age (Mirowsky and Schieman, 2008), but the results vary depending on respondents' nationality (Peleg and Messerschmidt-Grandi, 2018). Moreover, women score higher in depression (Hankin and Abramson, 2001; Parker and Brotchie, 2010); levels of depression increase with age (1999) and differ across Europe (Copeland et al., 1999). When facing stress and transgressions, females and males use different strategies (Nolen-Hoeksema and Aldao, 2011). The former use more emotional and avoidance coping styles, the latter report stronger rational and detached coping (Matud et al., 2015).

However, with age emotional and behavioral reactions to interpersonal tensions and negative social exchange evolve (Sorkin and Rook, 2006); older adults tend to argue less and are more likely to do nothing (Birditt et al., 2005).

Based on the stress-and-coping theory and the aforementioned results, it is assumed that the level of forgiveness would vary depending on gender, age and culture.

1.3.1. Aims of the study

This study investigates forgiveness in two European countries (Italy and Poland). More specifically, it is focused on differences in the propensity to forgive depending on gender and age.

Based on previous research on Polish samples (Charzyńska, 2015; Kaleta and Mróz, 2018a; Kaleta & Mróz, 2018b), it was predicted that women would report lower propensity to forgive than men (Hypothesis 1) and older people would report higher tendency to forgive than younger participants (Hypothesis 2). More specifically, we assumed that gender differences in the propensity to forgive are more pronounced in younger than in middle-aged and older adults (Hypothesis 3). This hypothesis was driven by the study showing an age \times gender interaction with respect to episodic forgiveness (Ghaemmaghani et al., 2011). Finally, in the absence of previous research, we made no predictions for nationality differences.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

A cross-sectional survey was carried out using non-probability convenience sampling.

The data was collected by facilitators who recruited participants from the Italian and Polish local communities.

Participants were asked to voluntarily agree (with no remuneration) to participate in the study and they were informed that their responses would be kept confidential. They had to take paper-and-pencil questionnaires, answer all the questions in private, and return the completed questionnaires.

All procedures follow the ethical guidelines defined by the institutional research committee, by the American Psychological Association (APA), and by the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Inclusion criteria was limited to an age 18 or older and completing all responses within the survey.

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the present study.

2.2. Participants

A cross-sectional study was conducted. Participants were recruited in two European countries: Italy and Poland. The sample comprised 1957 individuals: 1193 (61%) were females and 764 (39%) were males. Just over half the participants were Polish ($n = 1045$, 53 %) and the remainder was Italians ($n = 912$, 47 %).

The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 80 years, with a mean age of 36.8 years ($SD = 13.9$). In each country they were allocated to one of four age groups: (1) young adults (aged 19–30); (2) adults—aged (aged 31–40), (3) middle-aged adults (aged 41–50) and (4) older adults (above 50) (Kaleta and Mróz, 2018a) (Table 1). All Italian participants were living in Italy and all Polish participants were living in Poland.

2.3. Measures

Propensity to forgive: Propensity to forgive was tested with the Italian (Cabras et al., 2017) and Polish adaptation (Kaleta et al., 2016) of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005). HFS is a multi-dimensional instrument assessing dispositional forgiveness of self,

Table 1. Distribution of study group participants according to country, age and gender.

Age group	Italy ($n = 912$)		Poland ($n = 1045$)		Total participants number for age group
	Females	Males	Females	Males	
	Age M (SD) (n)	Age M (SD) (n)	Age M (SD) (n)	Age M (SD) (n)	
Young adults (19–30)	22.5 (3) (246)	22 (2.7) (142)	23.3 (2.3) (167)	22.9 (3.3) (215)	766
Adults (31–40)	35.9 (2.6) (121)	35.5 (3.7) (62)	36.9 (2.5) (161)	35.9 (2.8) (68)	412
Middle-aged adults (41–50)	45.9 (3.9) (89)	46.7 (4) (65)	44.6 (2.5) (198)	45.5 (2.6) (61)	413
Older adults (>50)	58.6 (7.3) (90)	59.9 (8.4) (97)	56.2 (6.6) (121)	57.1 (6.6) (54)	362

others, and situations beyond anyone's control. Participants rate their responses to 18 items on a 7-point scale. The original version as well as the Italian adaptation, consist of three subscales (forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations). However, in the Polish version, the authors obtained a different structure of the scale. Specifically, the Polish version consists of three indices: total HFS score, positive (P scale-as benevolent thoughts, feelings and behaviors) and negative (N scale-as reduction of hostile thoughts, feelings and behaviors).

Therefore, in order to compare Italian and Polish participants scores, we used the total HFS score that indicates how forgiving a person tends to be. Example of items are “*Although I feel badly at first when I mess up, over time I can give myself some slack*” and “*I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done*”. In the present study, Cronbach alpha coefficients for the reliability of the Italian and Polish total HFS scores were .79 and .75, respectively.

2.4. Procedure

Participants were asked to voluntarily agree (with no remuneration) to participate in the study and they were informed that their responses would be kept confidential. They had to take paper-and-pencil questionnaires, answer all the questions in private, and return the completed questionnaires.

2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted with IBM SPSS Version 21.

The data were preliminarily screened for errors and outliers. No variable had missing data. Descriptive statistics were calculated on the total HFS score, reporting means and associated standard deviations.

A 3-way between groups ANOVA was used to examine the main effects and interactions of Country, Age and Gender as they relate to total HFS score.

Also, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed in Italian and Polish subsamples to determine if significant differences existed between age, gender and age \times gender on the specific HFS subscales (forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations for Italian subsample and positive and negative scales for Polish subsample).

Post-hoc analyses with Bonferroni adjustment were performed to assess significance among intergroup variables.

In discussing the results, we report partial eta squared (η_p^2) for effect size, where .01 is a small effect, .06 is a medium effect and .14 is a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

3. Results

A 2 (country: Italy vs. Poland) \times 4 (age group: young vs. adults vs. middle vs. older) \times 2 (gender: females vs males) ANOVA was conducted on the total score from the HFS.

Analyses showed no significant main effect for country [$F(1, 1941) = .54, p > .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00$]. Thus, there was no overall difference in the total HFS score of Italian participants ($M = 83.5$) compared to Polish participants ($M = 83$).

A significant main effect of age was obtained [$F(3, 1941) = 4.11, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$]. Total HFS scores were significantly different among age groups. Post-hoc analyses indicated that young adults were less forgiving than older adults (Table 2).

A significant main effect of gender was found [$F(1, 1941) = 10.8, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$] such that the total HFS score was significantly higher for males than for females (Table 2).

However, a significant age \times gender interaction was also obtained, [$F(3, 1941) = 2.78, p < .04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$]. The significant interaction effect is graphically presented in Figure 1.

To further investigate the effect of age, univariate analyses were run separately for females and for males. These analyses showed no significant age differences in the females' group but significant age differences in the males' group [$F(3, 763) = 5.13, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$]. Post-hoc analyses indicated that young adult males ($M = 81.3$) were less forgiving than middle ($M = 85.5$) and older adult males ($M = 85.6$).

Follow-up univariate analyses further examining gender differences on the total HFS score showed significant differences between females and males only in the adults' group [$F(1, 411) = 4.32, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$] and in the middle-aged adults' group [$F(1, 412) = 6.64, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$]. Adult ($M = 84.9$) and middle-aged adult ($M = 85.5$) males were more forgiving than adult ($M = 82.2$) and middle-aged adult ($M = 81.7$) females.

The age and gender differences, as well as Age \times Gender interaction were examined further by splitting the dataset by country and performing MANOVAs for Italian and Polish participants separately.

In the Italian subsample, a 4 (age group: young vs. adults vs. middle vs. older) \times 2 (gender: females vs males) MANOVA was conducted on the forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations subscales and total HFS score.

Analysis showed no significant main effect of age [$F(9, 904) = 1.092, p > .05, \text{Wilks' } \lambda = .989, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.00$]. Total HFS score, as well as subscales HFS scores of Italian participants were not significantly different among age groups. A significant main effect of gender was found [$F(3, 904) = 7.017, p < .001, \text{Wilks' } \lambda = .977, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.02$] such that the total HFS score as well as forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situations scores were significantly higher for Italian males than for Italian females (Table 3). A significant age \times gender interaction was also obtained, [$F(1, 904) = 2.927, p < .05, \text{Wilks' } \lambda = .977, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.01$]. The significant interaction effect is graphically presented in Figure 2.

To further investigate the effect of age in Italian subsample, multivariate analyses were run separately for females and for males. These analyses showed no significant age differences in both gender groups.

Follow-up multivariate analyses further examining gender differences on the total HFS score as well as subscales HFS scores on Italian subsample showed significant differences between females and males only in the middle-aged adults' group [$F(1, 150) = 6.893, p < .001, \text{Wilks' } \lambda = .879, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.12$]. Middle-aged adult males reported higher scores

on the Total HFS ($M = 86.2$) and on the forgiveness of situations ($M = 30.1$) than middle-aged adult females ($M = 79.6$ for HFS total score and $M = 28.04$ for the forgiveness of situations).

Respect to Polish subsample, a 4 (age group: young vs. adults vs. middle vs. older) \times 2 (gender: females vs males) MANOVA was conducted on the P scale N scale subscales and total HFS score.

Analysis showed a significant main effect of age [$F(6, 1037) = 2.779, p < .01, \text{Wilks' } \lambda = .984, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.01$] such that the total HFS score as well as P scale scores were significantly different among age groups.

Post-hoc analyses indicated that young adults were less forgiving than adult, middle and older adults (Table 3). No main effect of gender and age \times gender interaction was found in Polish subsample.

4. Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore gender and age differences in forgiveness using the cross-cultural and stress-and-coping perspective. Polish and Italian respondents did not differ in the level of the general tendency to forgive. However, their mean scores appear to be lower than in the US (Thompson et al., 2005) and higher than in Turkey (Arslan, 2017). It suggests that culture accounts for varied experiencing of forgiveness (Ho and Fung, 2011; Sandage and Williamson, 2005) as for other values and behaviors (Hofstede, 2001).

In line with our hypothesis, gender differences in trait forgiveness were reported in whole sample and in Italian subsample, showing males to be more forgiving than females. Similar results were found in previous studies in Polish samples. Charzyńska (2015) investigated forgiveness among participants of a basic alcohol addiction treatment program. When starting the therapy, women reported a lower level of forgiveness of others than men. Kaleta and Mróz (2021) also showed greater male forgiveness in the total score and in reduced unforgiveness (negative dimension of forgiveness). The findings might be interpreted in the light of the stress-and-coping theory. As women generally report more stress and its consequences, like anxiety and depression (McLean and Anderson, 2009; Parker and Brotchie, 2010), they might be more than men prone to experience unforgiveness, which is the constellation of negative affect, cognition and motivation (Stackhouse et al., 2018; Worthington and Wade, 1999). Women also ruminate more than men (Johnson and Whisman, 2013), which upholds negative thoughts and feelings about the transgressions. Consequently, females might have more difficulty in overcoming unforgiveness and showing forgiveness.

Further, our results for all study participants, in Polish subsample and among Italian males showed that older adults (above 50) were more forgiving than young respondents (under 30), which is consistent with the previous findings showing an increase in forgiveness with age (Steiner et al., 2011; Allemand, 2008; Romero and Mitchell, 2008; Toussaint et al., 2001), including research on Polish sample (Charzyńska and Heszen, 2013; Kaleta and Mróz, 2018a). In line with the stress-and-coping theory, age differentiation in forgiveness might be associated with age-related differences in the exposure and reactions to difficult interpersonal events. As older adults are motivated to reduce negative experiences (Carstensen et al., 1999), they might be more willing to forgive in situations causing social distress. Steiner, Allemand, and McCullough (2011) found that older people experienced less frequent and less intense interpersonal transgressions when compared to younger adults. They also showed that age differentiation in transgression occurrences explained the effect of age on forgiveness.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for total HFS score by age-group \times gender.

	Young (19–30)	Adults (19–30)	Middle (41–50)	Older (>50)	<i>p</i>	Females	Males	<i>p</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	
Total HFS score	81.6 ^a (.5)	83.6 ^{a,b} (.7)	83.3 ^{a,b} (.7)	84.4 ^b (.7)	.006	81.1 (.4)	84.3 (.5)	.001

Means followed by the same letter at the same row are not significantly different $p < .05$.

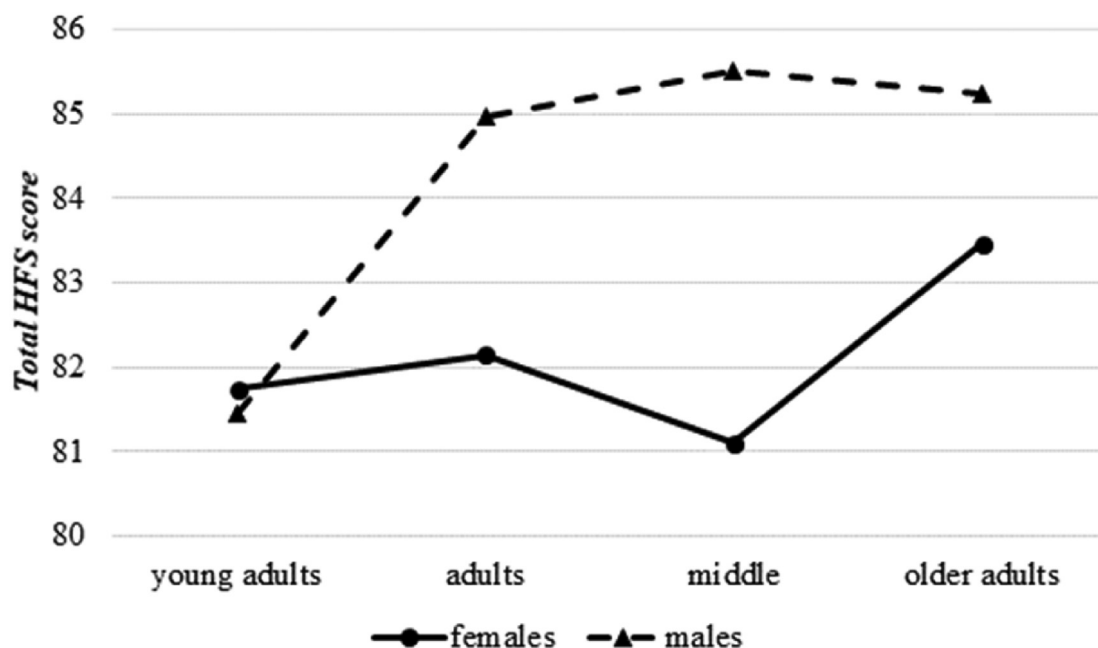


Figure 1. Age-Gender interaction.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for total and subscales HFS' scores of Italian and Polish participants by age-group x gender.

Italian sub-sample								
	Young (19–30)	Adults (19–30)	Middle (41–50)	Older (>50)	p value	Females	Males	p
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		M (SD)	M (SD)	
Total HFS score	82.7 (.7)	83.5 (1.1)	82.9 (1.1)	84.7 (1.0)	.44	81.9 (.7)	85 (8)	.002
Forgiveness of Self	27.7 (.3)	28.9 (.5)	28.1 (.5)	28.8 (.5)	.12	27.8 (.3)	29 (.3)	.01
Forgiveness of Others	26.5 (.3)	25.6 (.5)	26.4 (.5)	26.8 (.5)	.37	26.3 (.3)	26.3 (.4)	.93
Forgiveness of Situations	28.4 (.3)	28.9 (.5)	28.5 (.5)	29.1 (.5)	.62	27.7 (.3)	29.7 (.4)	.00
Polish sub-sample								
	Young (19–30)	Adults (19–30)	Middle (41–50)	Older (>50)	p	Females	Males	p
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		M (SD)	M (SD)	
Total HFS score	80.5 ^a (.6)	83.7 ^b (.9)	82.9 ^b (.9)	83.9 ^b (1.0)	.002	82.4 (.5)	83.6 (.7)	.17
Positive forgiveness (P-scale)	42.63 ^a (.3)	44.38 ^b (.5)	44.0 ^b (.5)	44.07 ^b (.5)	.02	44.0 (.5)	43.54 (.3)	.39
Reduced unforgiveness (N-scale)	38.90 (.5)	39.23 (.6)	39.71 (.7)	39.9 (.7)	.05	38.59 (.4)	40.01 (.5)	.12

Means followed by the same letter at the same row are not significantly different.

Different trends have been observed across sexes in the whole sample and in Italian subsample. Adult and middle-aged males were more forgiving than adult and middle-aged females, while younger and older men did not differ from young and older women. These results can be referred to stress and coping related to the specificity of development tasks in stages between one's thirties and fifties. In adulthood and middle-adulthood, developmental tasks involve starting and maintaining a family (Havighurst, 1948) and the social roles are more numerous, responsible and diverse (Steiner et al., 2011). Women typically feel more responsible for the maintenance of harmonious relationships (Antonucci, 2001) and report to devote more time to housework and childcare (Matud et al., 2015). Consequently, females score higher than males in psychological distress and chronic stress (Matud et al., 2015) and dwell more on chronic harm in their relationships (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999), which inhibits venting negative emotions, favors rumination and becoming unforgiving. Men, in turn, report to have less burdensome household chores, to devote more time to activities they enjoy and weekly physical exercise (Matud et al., 2015). They also show more self-compassion (Yarnell et al., 2015). Being less distressed, they might overcome unforgiveness more easily and be forgiving at these demanding

life stages. Such trend was not observed in Polish subsample in which men and women did not differ significantly in any age group. To some extent this cross-national variation might be related to different European social policy and welfare regimes that shape individual life courses and the intensity of some of the stressors (Schmitz, 2021). Italy, like other Southern European countries, is characterized by strong "familialism". It may result in greater Italian mothers' stress in child care when compared to Italian fathers which inhibits their willingness to forgive on a daily basis. In turn, Eastern European countries including Poland preserve a gendered division of care work and a dual-earner family, leading to equal stress distribution in women and men. Moreover, studies (Castro-Costa et al., 2007; Nedev and Bogdanova, 2021; Schmitz, 2021) suggest that depression prevalence in Latin European countries is higher than in other regions, especially in elderly women. It might explain why older Italian females were not more forgiving than younger ones although older Italian males and Polish females and males reported greater forgiveness than younger age groups. More suffering from depressive symptoms such as fatigue, irritability or lack of motivation (Nedev and Bogdanova, 2021) among older Italian females may prevent them from being more and more forgiving with age.

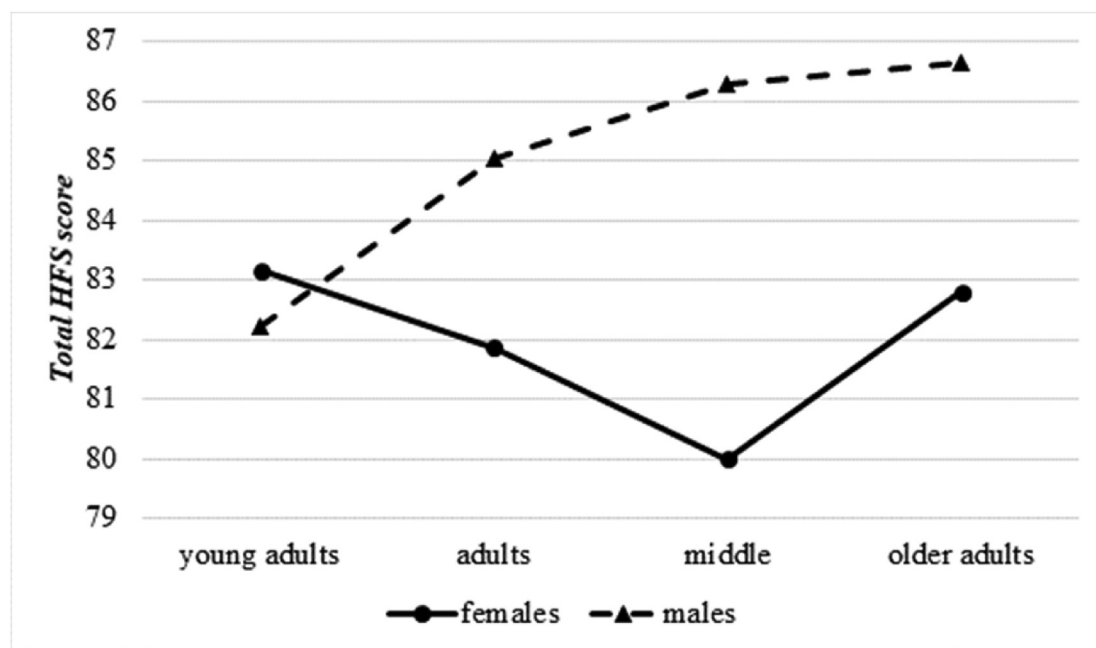


Figure 2. Age-Gender interaction in Italian subsample.

In summary, although the overall level of forgiveness did not differ across countries and the results supported the hypotheses, the analyses in subsamples revealed differentiation. In Italian subsample the differences in propensity to forgive were mainly related to gender while in Polish subsample the differences were mostly related to age. Thus, the main contribution of the present study is demonstrating that age and gender differences in forgiveness are not versatile but depend on the country and its traditions, welfare state and mental health status.

4.1. Practical implication

Besides contributions to the literature, our research findings also have practical implications. We have shown that level of forgiveness is similar between Italians and Poles. Since transgressions are inevitable, it is possible to organize joint forgiveness efforts in these two nations. Collaborative activities to promote forgiveness as a coping strategy could include psychotherapy models and psycho-educational programs (Çelik and Ertürk, 2022; Toussaint et al., 2020). While psychotherapy might be available to select few, psychoeducation can have a wider audience and create environments that encourage forgiveness and relationship repair. In the preparation of psycho-educational programs, it is useful to take into account our other results, especially those related to gender and age differences in forgiveness. Interestingly, in the current study, Italian women were a particular group. For these individuals, more targeted interventions can be used to increase their understanding of the intrapersonal nature of forgiveness. Psychoeducation should focus on forgiveness as a gift to oneself, which reduces negative feelings such as anger, resentment or hatred and consequently leads to relief (Worthington, 2019b).

4.2. Limitations

Several limitations of the study need to be mentioned. The first obvious one is the cross-sectional design of our research. Longitudinal research is expected to establish any potential causal relationships between the variables. Another one is the lack of specific dimensions of forgiveness. We analyzed the results at an overall level, which does not reflect specific differences in forgiveness between gender and age groups. Although Kaleta and Mróz (2021) showed greater male forgiveness in

the total score and in overcoming unforgiveness (negative dimension of forgiveness), there was no difference between genders in the positive dimension of forgiveness. Their findings revealed that dealing with unforgiving thoughts, emotions and behaviors after transgressions is easier for men than for women, but it is not easier for them to evoke positive states than it is for women. Further, we did not propose any mediators that would explain our findings, such as the actual stress and anxiety levels, coping strategies or conceptualization of forgiveness. Therefore, our interpretation remains speculative. Finally, we did not control participants' social desirability, although forgiveness is susceptible to bias (e.g. Rye et al., 2001).

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Cristina CABRAS; Kinga Kaleta; Justyna Mróz: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Giorgia Loi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments.

Cristina Sechi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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