

Resilience as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Forgiveness and Happiness Among College Students

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The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between dispositional forgiveness and happiness with a particular focus on the mediating role of resilience. Participants consisted of 203 undergraduate students from a private university in Indonesia who completed the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), and Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). Results of mediational analysis showed that resilience partially mediated the relationship between forgiveness and happiness with the overall model explaining 27% of the variance in happiness. Limitations and practical implications were discussed.

Keywords: forgiveness, happiness, resilience, mediating role

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menelaah hubungan antara kecenderungan pemaaf dan kebahagiaan dengan secara khusus melihatnya dari sisi peran mediasi variabel kelentingan. Sejumlah 203 mahasiswa S1 perguruan tinggi swasta di Indonesia yang terlibat sebagai partisipan penelitian mengisi *Subjective Happiness Scale* (SHS), *Heartland Forgiveness Scale* (HFS), dan *Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale* (CD-RISC). Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa kelentingan secara parsial memediasi hubungan antara pemaafan dan kebahagiaan. Keseluruhan model ini menunjukkan pula peran 27% variansi variabel bebas dalam menjelaskan kebahagiaan. Telah dibahas pula keterbatasan dan implikasi praktisnya.

Kata kunci: pemaafan, kebahagiaan, kelentingan, peran mediasi

Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest among psychologists in the field of positive psychology (Krentzman, 2012). Being a major focus in positive psychology (Snyder & Lopez, 2007), the concept of happiness has been widely explored and is acknowledged to provide many benefits. Substantial evidence indicates that happiness predicts good physical health, longevity, and serves as a protective factor against illness (Diener & Chan, 2011; Sabatini, 2014; Veenhoven, 2008). Happiness has also been linked to desirable outcomes, such as fulfilling relationships with other people, successful career, and good mental health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). All things considered, happiness is essential for an individual's life.

Considerable attention has been paid to mental health issues happening among students in higher educational institutions around the world. College students experience the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 1994). Having to adapt to a

new environment, they are likely to face pressures in various aspects of their lives (Howard, Schiraldi, Pineda, & Campanella, 2006). A survey conducted by American College Health Association (ACHA) (2015) highlighted the results of mental health conditions among college students within the last 12 months. Findings showed that issues in academics, finance, intimate relationships, sleep, family, and career were most frequently reported to be traumatic or difficult to handle. Mental health concerns comprising depressive feelings (sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and hopelessness), suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and mental disorders had also been covered in the study. Similarly, Kawuryan and Astuti (2015) investigated sources of stress among college students in Indonesia. Psychological problems were found to be the most significant stressors, particularly academic stress, unreleased anger, traumatic events, and problems related to family and social relationships.

Based on the findings reviewed above, either daily hassles or traumatic events encountered by college students can trigger stress responses thereby increasing the likelihood of developing mental health pro-

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blems especially anxiety, depression, and mental disorders. Because happiness is a part of emotional well-being that is characterized by the presence of general life satisfaction, positive emotions, and low levels of negative emotions, the absence of these symptoms indicates unhappiness (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Resilience as a Mediator

Resilience can be defined as “*effective coping and adaptation although faced with loss, hardship, or adversity*” (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, p. 320). It is central in preventing someone from engaging in risky behaviors and has been shown to predict variables related to mental health and well-being (Chen, 2016; Haddadi & Besharat, 2010; Hjemdal, Aune, Reinfjell, & Stiles, 2007). Research suggested that resilient individuals have a lower risk of suffering from psychological distress, depression, and anxiety (Haddadi & Besharat, 2010). A study from Hjemdal et al. (2007) found that high levels of resilience were associated with reduced depressive symptoms. Other findings indicate that resilient individuals are more likely to be happy (Chen, 2016; Mahmood & Ghaffar, 2014).

Yet while there is clear consensus that resilience is important, there is little consensus among researchers when it comes to defining and conceptualizing the term (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Many agree, however, that it involves a dynamic process (e.g., Garcia-Dia, DiNapoli, Garcia-Ona, Jakubowski, & O’Flaherty, 2013; Luthar et al., 2000; Windle, 2011). As a dynamic process, resilience develops from a complex interaction between risk, protective, and outcome factors which may derive from the individual’s inner characteristics (internal) and environmental conditions (external) (Garcia-Dia et al., 2013). Adaptive coping ability and spirituality have been shown to serve as strong internal resources that reduce the impact of risk and help one to thrive in stressful situations (Ahern, 2006; Garcia-Dia et al., 2013; Kumpfer, 1999).

An increasing amount of evidence has demonstrated that forgiveness predicts resilience (Gupta & Kumar, 2015; Hwei & Abdullah, 2013; Saffarinia, Mohammadi, & Afshar, 2016). Forgiveness can be considered as a religious coping. Many religious traditions exalt the value of forgiveness and encourage the followers to cultivate this virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, in Islam, *Al-Afu* (forgiveness) is a religious practice according to the Quran

that helps Muslims to succeed in overcoming life’s challenges and struggles (Husain, 1998). Forgiveness may also act as an emotion-focused coping strategy to minimize the emotional stress responses towards a transgression and reduce health risks (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Given the consequences of daily stressors and significant adversity faced by college students, the present study sought to answer the following questions: What was the difference of resilience between individuals who were more disposed towards forgiveness and those who were not? What was the relationship between forgiveness, resilience, and happiness? This study aimed to investigate dispositional forgiveness as a predictor of happiness with the potential mediating role of resilience. Specifically, it was hypothesized that resilience would function as a mediator of the relationship between forgiveness and happiness.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 203 undergraduate psychology students at a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Among them, 54 were males, 139 were females, while 10 others did not provide information regarding their gender. Their age ranged from 16 to 25 years ($M = 19.07$). Overall, 97 of the participants were freshmen, 46 sophomores, 54 juniors, four seniors, and two with no college grade.

Measures

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was assessed using the 18-item Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) (Thompson et al., 2005) which contains subscales of Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, and Forgiveness of Situations. In the present study, only the total score was calculated because it represents dispositional forgiveness as a whole. Responses to all the scale items were acquired on a 5-point Likert scale that was accompanied by frequency-based potential responses ranging from “never” to “always.”

Resilience. Resilience was assessed with the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) on which the items had been factor-analyzed and reduced to a single factor of resilience by Notario-Pacheco et al. (2011). The measure had 10 items presented on a 5-point Likert scale with frequency-based alter-

Table 1
Summary of Mediation Analysis

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Forgiveness x Resilience	0.193	0.0374	5.174	.000
Resilience x Happiness	0.335	0.0458	7.317	.000
Forgiveness x Happiness	0.118	0.0272	4.336	.000
Indirect Path through Resilience	0.053	0.0258	2.066	.040
Model Summary	<i>R</i> ²	<i>Adj. R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	0.279	0.271	38,6275	.000

native responses ranging from “never” to “always.”

Happiness. Happiness was measured using the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999). Items were rated on a 5-point semantic differential format with bipolar adjectives and phrases at either end of each item.

Results

Mediation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis whether resilience would mediate the relationship between forgiveness and happiness using Preacher and Hayes’ SPSS Macro for Multiple Mediation. The results are summarized in Table 1. The first analysis revealed that forgiveness positively predicted resilience ($t = 5.174$, $p = .00 < .05$). Further, resilience positively predicted happiness ($t = 7.317$, $p = .00 < .05$). It was also found that forgiveness positively predicted happiness ($t = 4.336$, $p = .00 < .05$). Lastly, the path in which forgiveness was associated with happiness decreased in its significance level after resilience as the mediating variable was included ($t = 2.066$, $p = .04 < .05$). Following Baron and Kenny’s (1986) criteria for mediation, resilience served as a partial mediator of the relationship between forgiveness and happiness in this study. Overall, this mediation model explained 27 percent of the variance in happiness (adjusted $R^2 = 0.271$, $p = .00 < .05$).

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between the dispositional tendency for forgiveness and happiness and extended previous studies by empirically investigating the potential mediating role of resilience. Based on the analysis, forgiveness was found to be directly related to happiness. This result is in line with prior studies concerning the relationship between forgiveness and happiness (Datu, 2014;

Nsamenang, Webb, Cukrowicz, & Hirsch, 2013). As an emotion-focused coping strategy, forgiveness involves the regulation of negative emotional responses to a transgression which should lead in diminished stress (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Perceived stress has been shown to be inversely correlated with happiness (Schiffirin & Nelson, 2010). In this way, forgiveness may be conceptualized as a factor that bolsters happiness.

As hypothesized, the relationship between forgiveness and happiness was partially mediated by resilience. The inclusion of resilience in this study results in increased happiness suggesting that to some extent resilience functions as a pathway to explain why individuals who are dispositionally more forgiving tend to be happier. The tendency to forgive appears to significantly influence one’s ability to rebound from adversity, which in turn engenders happiness.

In accordance with previous studies (Gupta & Kumar, 2015; Hwei & Abdullah, 2013; Saffarinia et al., 2016), the current study demonstrated that forgiveness was positively associated with resilience. This provides support for the notion that forgiveness may boost an individual’s resilience capacity (Worthington et al., 2016). Theories typically emphasize the coping mechanism of forgiveness to overcome negative behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses following a transgression (Thompson et al., 2005; Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Worthington et al., 2016). Since resilience broadly refers to successful adaptation in difficult circumstances (e.g., Masten & Powell, 2003; Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), this relationship seems reasonable. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of forgiveness as a religious coping that enables Muslims to survive hardship (Husain, 1998).

Characteristics of forgiveness, some of which are benevolence, cognitive flexibility, less rumination, less hostility, and less vengefulness (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006; Thompson et al., 2005), correspond to the internal protective factors of resilience. Examples of these factors include problem solving, interpersonal skills, and adaptive coping which

facilitate recovery from stressful events and mitigate the impact of risk factors (Ahern, 2006; Garcia-Dia et al., 2013; Kumpfer, 1999). Therefore in principle, the disposition to forgive provides internal strengths that aid in enduring stress and adverse life experiences.

The analysis also revealed a positive relationship between resilience and happiness. This finding is largely consistent with previous research evidence linking resilience to variables related to well-being and mental health (Bajaj & Pande, 2016; Chen, 2016; Haddadi & Besharat, 2010; Hjemdal et al., 2007; Mahmood & Ghaffar, 2014). The link between resilience and happiness can be explained by examining factors and sources of happiness, including coping ability, self-regulation, and social support (Chen, 2016; Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, & de Ridder, 2014; Siedlecki, Salthouse, Oishi, & Jeswani, 2013). These are characteristics of resilient individuals who effectively bounce back from suffering, establish strong social connections, and possess the capacity to manage their emotions, behavior, and impulses (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Reivich & Shatté, 2003). Other factors that contribute to happiness are optimism and spirituality (Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Vela, Castro, Cavazos, Cavazos, & Gonzalez, 2015) which can be observed in resilient people as well who generally maintain faith and a hopeful outlook during hardship (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Reivich & Shatté, 2003). Conversely, low-resilient individuals lack of the aforementioned personal and interpersonal resources that could promote happiness.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the research findings. First, participants relied solely on college students at a private university who were selected based on a non-random sampling technique, thus caution must be applied in generalizing the results. Furthermore, while inferences about the relationships between forgiveness, resilience, and happiness can be made based on the findings, conclusions about causality cannot be drawn due to the correlational nature of this study. For future research, it would be beneficial to use experimental approach in order to make more informed decisions regarding the causal pathways between study variables. Despite these limitations, this study allows a better understanding of the mediation process in the relationship between forgiveness and happiness.

The partial mediation model in this study points out that there might be other intervening variables contributing to the association between forgiveness and happiness. In Zhu's (2014) study, social support

and affect balance were found to have mediating effects on forgiveness and life satisfaction. This implies that apart from resilience, forgiveness may also lead to higher happiness through social support and affect balance since life satisfaction is a component of emotional well-being (Snyder & Lopez, 2007; Zhu, 2014). In terms of future research, it would be of interest to explore other aspects to mediate the association between forgiveness and happiness, such as self-esteem, as self-esteem has been shown to be influenced by forgiveness and predictive to happiness (Kim & Lee, 2014; Srivastava & Singh, 2015).

In conclusion, the present study confirms that resilience partially mediates the association between forgiveness and happiness among college students. This highlights the potential for intervention approaches that focus on increasing resilience through forgiveness to improve well-being for college students. As forgiving qualities can be learned and cultivated (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991), intervention strategies on forgiveness may provide clients with coping efforts that foster resilience, which in turn should maintain and enhance well-being.

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