

LETTING BYGONES BE BYGONES: THE STABILITY OF FORGIVINGNESS TENDENCY

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Abstract: Over the past decades, forgivingness has been hypothesized as a stable personality trait. Despite this early assertion, evidence supporting this claim remains limited. This study investigated the stability of forgivingness tendency over time, seeking to answer whether an individual's disposition to forgive is stable or changes over time. Moreover, it aimed to determine the age trajectory at which an individual's forgivingness tendency becomes relatively stable. The purpose of the study was to test the Personality Stability Theory of McCrae and Costa (1994) and Caspi et al. (2005) in terms of forgivingness. This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design, and data were collected via an online survey. Descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and post-hoc tests were used in data analyses. The results showed a change in an individual's dispositional forgiveness between early and middle adulthood, while no significant changes were observed between middle and older adults. Forgivingness, therefore, becomes stable upon reaching middle adulthood. The study highlights the importance of age-specific interventions and recommends further research on factors affecting forgivingness stability.

Keywords: Forgivingness, Personality, Stability, Age, Change

INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness research has gained increased and sufficient attention in previous decades. This has helped researchers in philosophy, religion, and psychology advance the science of forgiveness in the social and behavioral sciences (Worthington, 2020) in further understanding the dynamics of human

relations. Specifically, the interest in theory-driven empirical studies, communication across disciplines, and sustained interest among scholars have lately become hallmarks of the field of forgiveness research.

Recent studies on forgiveness have mostly focused on understanding its psychological and health benefits (Bono et al., 2008; Toussaint et al., 2015, 2016), exploring the factors that influence people's ability to forgive (Edwards, 2015; Li et al., 2020), and developing interventions to promote forgiveness in various contexts (Baskin & Enright, 2004; López et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2020). Building on these themes, experimental and intervention studies have concentrated on studying the process of forgiving to promote the act of forgiveness.

Since forgiveness can potentially reduce feelings of anger, resentment, and emotional distress—leading to improved well-being—it makes sense that researchers have focused on exploring various aspects, including its psychological, physiological, and social effects and its role in therapeutic interventions and conflict resolution. However, because of this focus, the stability of an individual's disposition to forgive has been insufficiently researched.

Forgivingness, as the disposition to forgive, is a term proposed by R. C. Roberts (1995) to identify the personal trait from the state of forgiveness. This personality characteristic is assumed to make amends with transgressions and transgressors and is stable through time and in different contexts.

McCrae and Costa (1994) identified five universal personality traits referred to as the Big Five: neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. These traits are considered relatively stable by the age of 30 and remain unstable until young adulthood. There may be specific changes in personality traits and cognitive processes due to life events beyond this age; however, on the whole, they remain very stable. Caspi et al. (2005), however, provided an alternative view suggesting that traits continue to change uniformly over the adult years; the change becomes subtle from the age of 50 onwards. This is additionally supported by the meta-analytic results of Ardel (2000). He reported that the social environment plays a significant role in stability and change of personality traits. The results also showed that personality was observed to be less stable when the test-retest interval is large, the first measurement is taken at a young

age or over 50, and when one is measuring a change in an individual aspect of personality rather than the whole personality.

Many discussions of forgiveness, its benefits, and implications are, at least implicitly, concerned with the stability of an individual's disposition to forgive over time. Researchers have underlined the necessity of further in-depth research on dispositional forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001). Since 1994, researchers have conceptualized 'forgivingness' as a stable characteristic—a personality trait. However, evidence supporting the stability of forgivingness over time across varying contexts remains limited. While researchers have examined it along with the five-factor model of personality (Brose et al., 2005; Kaleta & Mróz, 2018), it is also critical to ascertain whether people's tendency to forgive is consistent as they age.

It is also interesting to examine the stability of dispositional forgiveness across its three dimensions: forgiveness of self, others, and situations (Thompson et al., 2005). Dispositional self-forgiveness involves reducing self-blame and self-criticism (Ingersoll-Dayton & Krause, 2005). Forgiveness of others reflects openness to making amends with a wrongdoer (Strabbing, 2020). Forgiveness of situations involves accepting and finding peace with uncontrollable events (Thompson et al., 2005). Each aspect plays a unique yet interconnected role in shaping an individual's overall tendency to forgive. Investigating these aspects separately can uncover nuances that may be overlooked when examining overall forgivingness tendency.

From a developmental perspective, forgiveness may vary with age. Young adults, as they explore identity and relationships, often face internal and interpersonal conflicts. They may struggle with forgiveness due to heightened sensitivity to rejection, a strong sense of justice, and a developing self-concept (Ghaemmaghami et al., 2011). Middle-aged adults, who balance careers and family responsibilities, tend to adopt a more practical and empathetic approach to forgiveness, using it as a means for conflict resolution (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Older adults, with a broader life perspective, prioritize emotional well-being and are generally more inclined to forgive (Brudek et al., 2023; Ermer & Proulx, 2016). These differences emphasize the importance of age when investigating dispositional forgiveness.

The purpose of this study is to test the Personality Stability Theory by McCrae and Costa (1994) and Caspi et al. (2005) by investigating people's forgiveness-tendency-stability with age and their disposition to forgive. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Is forgiveness tendency a stable trait, or does it vary over time? The study hypothesizes that a person's forgiveness tendency is stable over time (Hypothesis 1); and (2) At what age does a person's forgiveness tendency become relatively stable? It is hypothesized that the age trajectory where a person's forgiveness tendency becomes relatively stable occurs between ages 30 and 50 (Hypothesis 2).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some individuals may respond to transgressions with negative behavior, such as seeking revenge or avoiding the person who wronged them, especially when they feel insulted, forsaken, or attacked. The damaging repercussions of interpersonal transgressions have inspired experts to develop various interventions. Forgiveness is one approach that can break the cycle of avoidance and retaliation by suppressing people's innately negative responses to transgression and transgressor. Hence, individuals are more driven to respond positively toward transgressors (McCullough & Witvliet, 2001).

The Forgiving Personality

Individual differences in the tendency to forgive—regardless of the specific transgressor or transgression—are referred to as dispositional forgiveness. To forgive is to undergo a contextualized psychological transformation toward a transgressor and transgression (McCullough et al., 2003). It is a personality dimension (McCullough & Witvliet, 2001)—a trait-like quality associated to other dispositional factors. For example, forgiveness fosters social relationships and lessens dispositional rumination, anger, and seeking revenge among those who are forgiving (Berry et al., 2005; Brown, 2003).

Forgiveness as a Trait

Forgiveness can be understood in two ways. First, it can be viewed as a contextualized psychological process in response to a specific transgressor and transgression (Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 2003). Second, it can be considered a personality dimension, meaning it is a stable trait of an individual's personality (McCullough & Witvliet, 2001). In this context, 'forgiveness' refers to individual differences in the tendency to forgive across various situations (Berry et al., 2001; Brown, 2003; Mullet et al., 2003;

R. C. Roberts, 1995). Forgivingness reflects an individual's disposition to forgive, manifested through consistently forgiving behavior. R. C. Roberts (1995) explained forgivingness as a personality trait that makes life in social isolation uncomfortable and reflects a concern for maintaining benevolent, harmonious relationship with others. It is a virtue that facilitates ease in social interactions. Additionally, Mullet et al. (2003) proposed three aspects of forgivingness: enduring resentment, sensitivity to situations, and overall forgiveness or avengement tendencies.

Forgiveness as a State

Although theorists have clearly distinguished forgiveness and other similar constructs, the exact concept of forgiveness and its measurement are still under discussion. Researchers have not yet reached a universally agreed-upon definition of forgiveness. However, most concur with Enright and Coyle (1998), as cited by Neto (2007), that forgiveness is distinct from similarly related concepts, such as pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, denial, and reconciliation. It involves replacing negative, unforgiving emotions with positive, other-oriented ones (Berry et al., 2005; McCullough et al., 2000) and is considered a character strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Tirrell, 2022).

The aforementioned strength is also observed in Filipino psychology through the concept of *kapwa*. The depth of relationships influences forgiveness-seeking and the intention to forgive. Rungduin et al. (2021) noted that people considered “one of us” are more likely to be forgiven than those who are “not one of us.” In a collectivistic culture such as the Philippines, relationship quality and cultural context drive forgiveness. However, expressing regret does not guarantee forgiveness without sincerity, with empathy and relational dynamics being key factors (De Leon & Lopez, 2017; Rungduin et al., 2021; Rungduin & Rungduin, 2013).

Personality Correlates to Forgiveness

Researchers have shown that forgiveness is related both positively or negatively to the Big Five personality traits. Kaleta and Mróz (2018) hypothesized that agreeableness and extraversion foster forgiveness, making people more likely to maintain favorable social relationships. Contrarily, neuroticism impedes forgiveness as it entails a predisposition towards anxious thoughts and an impaired ability to regulate emotions. Abid et al. (2015) reported that only a few attributes are associated with forgiveness, and there

is limited evidence relating forgiveness to all the Big Five personality traits. Furthermore, findings have been inconsistent regarding the relationship between forgiveness and the Big Five personality traits (Brose et al., 2005).

Forgiveness of Self, Others, and Situations

Researchers have drawn attention to the complexity of forgiveness and its multidimensional construct, including forgiving oneself, others, and uncontrollable situations (Sandage et al., 2000). Forgiveness of self reflects a person's predisposition to forgive oneself for interpersonal and intrapersonal transgression (Terzino, 2010). The forgiveness of others is an individual's tendency to forgive others, involving a person, forgiving another for wrongdoing. The forgiveness of situations captures how individuals respond to adverse situations, events, or circumstances beyond their control, such as illness or disaster (Thompson et al., 2005).

Age Differences in Forgiveness

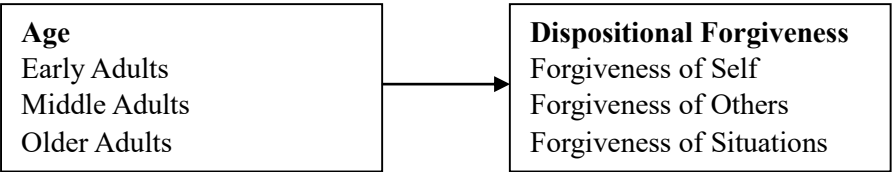
Age has been suggested to relate to forgiveness, with earlier studies indicating that forgiveness may change over the lifespan. Older adults, believed to have greater experience of handling transgressions, are said to be more forgiving than younger individuals. However, empirical evidence does not support the relationship between age variations in forgiveness and their underlying causes. Understanding people's dispositional forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions is crucial, given its significance for emotional and social distress (Allemand, 2008).

In a study assessing the relationship among dispositional forgiveness, potential mediating factors, and health outcomes of adults aged 50 to 95, Lawler-Row and Piferi (2006) found that forgiveness increases with age and that older adults reported being more forgiving than middle-aged adults. Similarly, Toussaint et al. (2001), in a cross-sectional study examining age differences in the association between forgiveness and religion and spirituality, observed that elderly persons (65 years and older) and those in the middle age range (45–64 years) were more likely to forgive others than those in the younger age range (18–44 years). However, it is too soon to draw any firm conclusions regarding the trend of forgiveness across the lifespan. Understanding the reason why there are age disparities in forgiveness becomes an essential topic in light of their study.

A construct must first be conceptualized to be measured and studied. Recent studies on dispositional forgiveness have concentrated on its relationships with other personality traits and predictors, such as age and sex. While it is true that forgiveness may be perceived as a situational response and a skill that can be acquired, it is also significantly affected by a person’s personality and is known as trait forgiveness. Correspondingly, this study conceptualizes forgiveness as a personality trait instead of a state assumed to be stable across time and in various situations.

The study’s conceptual framework (Figure 1) shows two variables: age and dispositional forgiveness. The independent variable is used to predict another variable. The independent variable in the study is age, categorized into early adults, middle adults, and older adults, according to Levinson (1986) Conception of Adult Development. The dependent variable, on the other hand, is the variable being predicted. The study’s dependent variable is dispositional forgiveness, including forgiveness of self, others, and situations.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



METHODS

Research Design

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design to investigate the stability of an individual’s tendency to forgive across different stages of adulthood. This approach allowed for a comparison of how dispositional forgiveness varied among individuals categorized as early, middle, and older adult age groups.

Participants

The study participants included aged 18 to 69 (M = 29, SD = 12.1) from Metro Manila, Philippines. The study’s initial sample size is n = 403. However, six respondents did not proceed with participating in the study; hence, n = 397. The number of young adults (M = 23.7, SD = 5.19) was 318 (80.10%), middle

adults ($M = 47.5$, $SD = 5.10$) was 67 (16.88%), and older adults ($M = 65.5$, $SD = 2.61$) was 12 (3.02%). The number of female respondents was 289 (72.80%); male respondents were 108 (27.20%).

Instrument

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS)

The HFS ($\alpha = 0.87$) was used in the study. Instead of examining the forgiveness of a particular person or event, this 18-item self-report questionnaire measures a person's dispositional forgiveness. It consists of three six-item subscales: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations, as well as the overall dispositional forgiveness, which is obtained from the total score (Thompson et al., 2005). The HFS has stable psychometric properties (internal consistency reliability, test-retest reliability, and convergent validity). This study specifically used the Filipino-translated version of the HFS (Florendo et al., 2013).

Analysis Procedure

The online data collected was initially retrieved for data analysis. Initial inspections were conducted by checking the error responses, outliers, and transposition of responses. The researchers used the mean-level approach to evaluate mean differences or the effect size of these differences over time. It indicates that the average personality scores remain stable over time (B. W. Roberts et al., 2006). The Total HFS score, reported means, and associated standard deviations, were calculated using descriptive statistics. The stability of the forgivingness tendency was analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a post hoc test.

RESULTS

The results of this research provide a comprehensive overview of the findings obtained from the analyses that were conducted.

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 2 displays the mean for each age group with the HFS subscales. The mean of Forgiveness of Self in early adults was 28.32 ($SD = 6.65$); in middle adults was 34.09 ($SD = 4.87$); and in older adults was 31.58 ($SD = 7.20$). Additionally, the mean of Forgiveness of Others in early adults was 28.62 ($SD = 7.11$); in middle adults was 32.38 ($SD = 5.95$); and in older adults was 32.17 ($SD = 4.71$). Moreover, the mean of Forgiveness of Situations in early adults

was 28.13 (SD = 7.03); in middle adults was 33.84 (SD = 0.67); and in older adults was 32.58 (SD = 1.73).

Figure 2: HFS Subscales Mean per Age Group

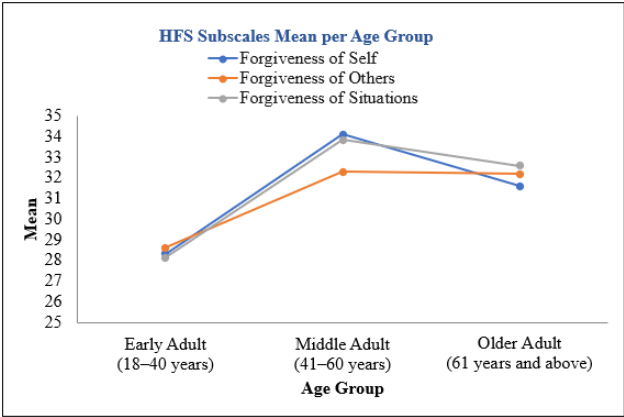
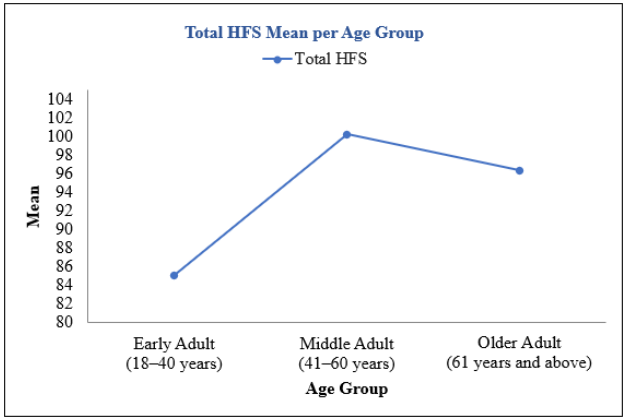


Figure 3 shows the mean per age group concerning the Total HFS. The mean of overall forgiveness in early adults was 85.07 (SD = 0.95); in middle adults was 100.21 (SD = 1.57); and in older adults was 96.33 (SD = 4.39).

Figure 3: Total HFS Mean per Age Group



One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Post Hoc Test

Comparison of the HFS Forgiveness of Self is presented in Table 1. Analysis showed a statistically significant difference in mean HFS Self score between age groups ($F(2, 394) = 23.16, p < .001$). Tukey's test showed only difference between early adults and middle adults ($p < .001, 95\% \text{ C.I.} = -7.80, -3.74$) age groups.

Table 1: Forgiveness of Self by Age Group ANOVA

| Cases | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | p |
|-----------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|--------|
| Age Group | 1901.04 | 2 | 950.52 | 23.16 | < .001 |
| Residuals | 16169.66 | 394 | 41.04 | | |

Table 1.1: Forgiveness of Self by Age Group Post Hoc Comparisons

| | | 95% CI for Mean Difference | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|-----------|
| | | Mean difference | Lower | Upper | S.E. | t | ptukey |
| Early Adult | Middle Adult | -5.77 | -7.80 | -3.74 | 0.86 | -6.70 | < .001*** |
| | Older Adult | -3.26 | -7.70 | 1.17 | 1.88 | -1.73 | 0.195 |
| Middle Adult | Older Adult | 2.51 | -2.22 | 7.23 | 2.01 | 1.25 | 0.426 |

*** $p < .001$

Note. P-value and confidence intervals adjusted for comparing a family of 3 estimates (confidence intervals corrected using the Tukey method).

Comparison of the HFS Forgiveness of Others is presented in Table 2. Analysis showed a statistically significant difference in mean HFS Others score between age groups ($F(2, 394) = 8.93, p < .001$). Tukey's test showed only difference between early adults and middle adults ($p < .001, 95\% \text{ C.I.} = -5.84, -1.49$) age groups.

Table 2: Forgiveness of Others by Age Group ANOVA

| Cases | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | p |
|-----------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|--------|
| Age Group | 842.94 | 2 | 421.47 | 8.93 | < .001 |
| Residuals | 18604.47 | 394 | 47.22 | | |

Table 2.1: Forgiveness of Others by Age Group Post Hoc Comparisons

| | | 95% CI for Mean Difference | | | S.E. | t | p _{Tukey} |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|--------------------|
| | | Mean difference | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Early Adult | Middle Adult | -3.67 | -5.84 | -1.49 | 0.92 | -3.97 | < .001*** |
| | Older Adult | -3.55 | -8.30 | 1.20 | 2.02 | -1.76 | 0.186 |
| Middle Adult | Older Adult | 0.12 | 0.50 | 5.18 | 2.15 | 0.05 | 0.998 |

*** p < .001
Note. P-value and confidence intervals adjusted for comparing a family of 3 estimates (confidence intervals corrected using the Tukey method).

Comparison of the HFS Forgiveness of Situations is presented in Table 3. Analysis showed a statistically significant difference in mean HFS Situations score between age groups ($F(2, 394) = 21.25, p < .001$). Tukey’s test showed only difference between early adults and middle adults ($p < .001, 95\% \text{ C.I.} = -7.84, -3.57$) age groups.

Table 3: Forgiveness of Situations by Age Group ANOVA

| Cases | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | p |
|-----------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|--------|
| Age Group | 1941.77 | 2 | 970.89 | 21.25 | < .001 |
| Residuals | 17997.83 | 394 | 45.68 | | |

Table 3.1: Forgiveness of Situations by Age Group Post Hoc Comparisons

| | | 95% CI for Mean Difference | | | S.E. | t | p _{Tukey} |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|--------------------|
| | | Mean difference | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Early Adult | Middle Adult | -5.71 | -7.84 | -3.57 | 0.91 | -6.28 | < .001*** |
| | Older Adult | -4.45 | -9.13 | 0.22 | 1.99 | -2.24 | 0.066 |
| Middle Adult | Older Adult | 1.25 | -3.73 | 6.24 | 2.12 | 0.59 | 0.825 |

*** p < .001

Note. P-value and confidence intervals adjusted for comparing a family of 3 estimates (confidence intervals corrected using the Tukey method).

Comparison of the Total HFS is presented in Table 4. Analysis showed a statistically significant difference in mean Total HFS score between age groups ($F(2, 394) = [25.71]$, $p < .001$). Tukey's test showed only difference between early adults and middle adults ($p < .001$, 95% C.I. = -20.28, -10.01) age groups.

Table 4: Overall Forgiveness by Age Group ANOVA

| Cases | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | p |
|-----------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|--------|
| Age Group | 13557.08 | 2 | 6778.54 | 25.71 | < .001 |
| Residuals | 103899.36 | 394 | 263.70 | | |

Table 4.1: Overall Forgiveness by Age Group Post Hoc Comparisons

| | | 95% CI for Mean Difference | | | S.E. | t | p _{Tukey} |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------------------|--------|--------|------|-------|--------------------|
| | Mean difference | Lower | Upper | | | | |
| Early Adult | Middle Adult | -15.14 | -20.28 | -10.01 | 2.18 | -6.94 | < .001*** |
| | Older Adult | -11.27 | -22.50 | -0.03 | 4.78 | -2.36 | 0.049* |
| Middle Adult | Older Adult | 3.88 | -8.10 | 15.85 | 5.09 | 0.76 | 0.727 |

*** $p < .001$

Note. P-value and confidence intervals adjusted for comparing a family of 3 estimates (confidence intervals corrected using the Tukey method).

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the stability of people's forgivingness tendency over time. The study hypothesized that (1) people's forgivingness tendency is a stable trait over time and (2) the age trajectory where a person's forgivingness tendency becomes relatively stable occurs between ages 30 and 50. Based on the theoretical background of Personality Stability Theory, the researchers examined people's disposition to forgive across three age groups (early adults, middle adults, and older adults). The results partially support the hypothesis that an individual's tendency to forgive is an enduring trait. On the other hand, the study's results support the hypothesis that an individual's disposition to forgive becomes relatively stable by the age trajectory between ages 30 and 50.

The stability of forgivingness tendency results supports the Personality Stability Theory of Caspi et al. (2005) that personality becomes stable during middle adulthood. This investigation found that the overall tendency to forgive and its three domains—forgiveness of self, others, and situations—changed from early to middle adulthood and became relatively stable, with subtle decreases between middle and older adulthood. These findings aligns with those of Bleidorn et al. (2021) and Wagner et al. (2020), showing that adult personality is not entirely stable but is malleable, moderately stable, and can change in response to specific life events.

Similarly, Toussaint and Webb (2005) found that forgivingness significantly changes from early to middle adulthood. Early adulthood is often marked by high levels of interpersonal conflict and a greater focus on personal goals and ambitions. During this stage, trait forgiveness is challenging to develop and consistently practice. As individuals progress to middle adulthood, they tend to experience increased responsibilities, life experiences, and a broader perspective on relationships and life. These factors often contribute to a greater tendency to forgive.

In line with Levinson's (1986) Conception of Adult Development, it is during early adulthood (17–40 years) that people experience satisfaction in romantic relationships, sexuality, family life, career advancement, and fulfillment of major life goals. However, this is also when people undergo severe distress, undertaking the burdens of parenthood and establishing a career. Moreover, the transition from young adulthood to middle adulthood entails merging of concerns specific to caring for both children and parents, dealing with the changing demands at work, and addressing a balance between life satisfaction and giving family members a good life. Filipino late adolescents often experience offenses including aggressive behavior, trust issues, and rejection—typically committed by their friends, romantic partners, family members, and others (De Leon & Lopez, 2017). During this period, individuals face crucial life choices concerning marriage, family, work, and lifestyle. However, many may lack the maturity to choose wisely. Hence, most personality change occurs in early adulthood (Caspi et al., 2005).

Individuals experience greater stability in various life domains as they progress to middle adulthood. This period is characterized by established

family and career roles, which can provide a sense of security and emotional well-being (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Consequently, individuals might become more consistent in their disposition to forgive as the challenges and changes that prompt reflection and growth in early adulthood become less frequent. During middle adulthood (41–60 years), people experience transitioning into becoming more compassionate, sensible, and wiser overall. They are more likely to be loving not only towards themselves but also for others. They now have a more encompassing and purposeful responsibility—to hone the succeeding generations expected to take over soon (Levinson, 1986).

As individuals transition from middle to older adulthood (60 years and above), the tendency to forgive appears to be more stable. Significant changes are generally not observed between middle and older adults due to psychological and emotional factors that develop over time (Standish, 2016). Having experienced various conflicts and challenges, older adults tend to have a broader perspective on life. They often focus more on nurturing relationships and reducing interpersonal conflicts (Allemand, 2008). This shift can also lead to a greater tendency to forgive, contributing to the stability of forgivingness tendency in older adults. Further, Lawler-Row and Piferi (2006) have shown that individuals often better regulate their emotions as they age. Older adults tend to prioritize emotional well-being and may choose forgiveness to achieve emotional stability and inner peace; this enhanced emotional regulation can lead to a more consistent tendency to forgive.

The results of the study, with the stability of forgivingness tendency, corroborate the Cumulative Continuity Principle (Caspi et al., 2005), which states that as we age, stability increases in a wide range of personality attributes, such as trait forgiveness. While traits are generally consistent in adults, they can change over time in the adult lifespan (B. W. Roberts & Caspi, 2003).

In this study, there is no significant mean-level change observed between the middle and older adults, dispositional forgiveness and its three domains, seem consistent with minimal changes over time. The changes in an individual's disposition to forgive between the middle and older adults are by no means dramatic. Therefore, by age 40 onwards in middle adulthood, people's dispositional forgiveness tends to be relatively stable. At this age in the

lifespan, an individual's tendency to forgive can slightly change due to specific life and work experiences (B. W. Roberts & Mroczek, 2008).

Middle-aged adults often exhibit a relatively stable forgivingness tendency. As individuals progress through adulthood, personality traits generally become more stable (Costa et al., 2000). Middle adulthood is marked by increased stability in various aspects of life, including emotional regulation and interpersonal behaviors (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). By this age, individuals have accumulated significant life experiences and have typically developed a clearer sense of their values and priorities. The increased self-awareness and emotional maturity contribute to a more consistent disposition to forgive. In addition, middle adults are often better equipped to handle conflicts, empathize with others' perspectives, and prioritize maintaining positive relationships (Levinson, 1986). Middle adulthood is also characterized by a focus on family, career, and personal growth, which often encourages individuals to reflect on their past experiences and consider their future goals. Trait forgiveness can play a crucial role in maintaining family harmony (K. Roberts et al., 2021) and building a supportive social network (Bono et al., 2008), aligning with the stability of forgivingness tendency in middle adults.

Mean-level change in forgivingness tendency predominates between early and middle adulthood. It is also observed that middle and older adults have higher dispositional forgiveness than early adults. Toussaint et al. (2001) reported that middle-aged and older adults tend to be more forgiving than young adults, with older adults describing themselves as more forgiving than middle-aged adults (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006). However, results show only a minimal decrease in forgivingness tendency between middle and older adults, which contrasts the expectations of the Maturity Principle (Caspi et al., 2005), stating that personality traits tend to change positively on average over time.

To better understand this pattern, Set-Point Theory can also shed light on the stability of forgivingness tendency over time. The theory posits that individuals have a baseline level of emotional well-being to which they typically return after experiencing significant life events—whether positive or negative (Diener et al., 2006; Headey, 2006, 2010; Luhmann et al., 2012; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). When applied to forgivingness tendency, this theory suggests that people have an inherent predisposition to forgive,

influencing their consistent forgiving behavior throughout their lives. Just as individuals have a baseline level of emotional well-being that they tend to return to, they might also have a baseline level of forgiveness tendency. Some people naturally have a more forgiving disposition, while others may be less inclined to forgive. Although life experiences and developmental changes can influence this tendency, many people return to their baseline level of forgiveness, which remains relatively stable throughout an individual's life.

Moreover, life events can cause temporary deviations from an individual's baseline level of forgiveness. For instance, an individual with a naturally forgiving disposition may temporarily become less forgiving in response to a hurtful transgression. Conversely, an individual who is generally less inclined to forgive may temporarily become more forgiving due to a transformative life experience. Despite these fluctuations, individuals tend to return to their baseline forgiveness tendency. This return to the set point aligns with the idea that forgiveness, like emotional well-being, exhibits a degree of stability. Even when situational factors temporarily influence an individual's tendency to forgive, they are likely to return to their inherent disposition to forgive over time.

Scope and Limitations

The study excluded respondents aged under 18, those who could not access the online questionnaire, and those who did not agree to the informed consent. The study specifically investigated forgiveness as a personality trait. Forgiveness that takes place within interpersonal and intergroup relations were not inferred in this study. Additionally, the results of the study may not be generalizable beyond the cultural context and specific demographic of the sample.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study provides empirical evidence that people's dispositional forgiveness is not an entirely stable trait, with significant changes observed between early and middle adulthood, but showing relative stability from age 40 onwards. The findings contribute to the theory of personality stability and change of Caspi et al. (2005), highlighting the dynamic nature of forgiveness in earlier adulthood and its consolidation in later years.

Future research should adopt more rigorous designs to explore factors beyond age that may contribute to the stability of forgiveness tendencies, such as

individual differences, genetic predisposition, and environmental stability. Given the study's overrepresentation of early adults and underrepresentation of older adults, future studies should include larger, more representative cohorts to ensure accurate generalization. Additionally, investigating forgivingness trajectories beginning in adolescence would fill a gap in the literature and offer a more complete developmental picture.

The results underscore the importance of age-sensitive psychological interventions. Mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers can develop programs to enhance forgivingness in young and middle-aged adults, while it remains more malleable. Intervention strategies may include psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, expressive writing, empathy training, mindfulness and self-compassion practices, and interpersonal skills development. In contrast, approaches for older adults should focus on maintaining their already stable forgiveness traits, likely shaped by life experiences and accumulated perspective. Institutions such as families, schools, and religious communities may also play a critical role in shaping forgiveness across the lifespan (Rungduin & Rungduin, 2013). Interventions should also consider the influence of cultural, societal, and contextual factors on forgivingness trajectories.

The findings offer important insights for research and practice in emotional well-being. The observed changes in forgivingness during young and middle adulthood suggest a dynamic interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Future studies could investigate the specific life events, cognitive maturation, and identity development processes that contribute to shifts in forgivingness during these stages. Employing a longitudinal and rank-order stability approach would provide a deeper understanding of how forgivingness evolves, offering insights into both fluctuations and enduring patterns.

Despite progress in understanding personality development, questions remain about the processes and mechanisms driving trait stability, with regard to forgivingness. How generalizable, for instance, are the results of the stability of forgivingness tendency? Can we assess the stability of an individual's disposition to forgive using methods beyond self-report? What causes a change in a trait like forgivingness? Addressing these questions will require new theoretical models and collaborative, interdisciplinary research—both of

which are essential for advancing the understanding of trait forgiveness stability.

Ultimately, the observed shift in dispositional forgiveness between young and middle adulthood carries practical implications for policymaking. Initiatives focused on forgiveness education, conflict resolution, and interpersonal skills development could be particularly impactful during early adulthood. By equipping young adults with these skills and cultivating their forgiveness traits, policymakers can support emotional well-being and healthier interpersonal relationships in later life stages across one's lifespan.

Informed Consent Statement

Under Republic Act No. 10173 (Data Privacy Act of 2012), respondents' personal data was processed only as agreed and kept confidential. By completing the form, they consented to or declined the terms outlined for data collection, processing, and use.

Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

The respondents were informed about the nature of the study and voluntarily consented to participate. The researchers ensured respondent data privacy and confidentiality. The researchers did not engage in research misconduct, such as falsifying or manipulating data or misrepresenting results. The researchers upheld academic integrity throughout the entirety of the research process.

Author Contributions

KRTT: Conceptualization, Methods, Data Collection, Formal Data Analysis and Interpretation, Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing; DCR: Research Mentor, Conceptualization, Methods, Formal Data Analysis and Interpretation, Writing – Review and Editing; TTR: Research Adviser, Writing – Review.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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