

Forgiveness and psychological well-being among university Muslim students

Nazwa Rizki Fahrani¹
Kurnia Putri Dwi Habsari²
Dhiyaa Aqeela³
Iffa Anja Ruhanda⁴
Hariz Enggar Wijaya^{5*}

^{1,2,3,4,5}*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Islam
Indonesia, Yogyakarta*

*Corresponding Author: 093200102@uii.ac.id

Abstract: Forgiveness has been widely studied as a psychological resource linked with mental health and well-being. However, empirical findings remain inconsistent across cultural and religious contexts. This study intended to examine the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being among Muslim university students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Using a quantitative correlational design, 56 undergraduate students were enrolled in this study, of whom 91.1% were female, with a mean age of 20.3 years. They recruited through convenience sampling. Forgiveness was measured using a scale grounded in Islamic psychological values encompassing emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal dimensions. Psychological well-being was assessed using the Indonesian adaptation of the Psychological Well-Being Short Scale. The results indicated that forgiveness was not significantly correlated with psychological well-being ($r = .20$, $p = .07$). These findings suggest that forgiveness may not directly affect psychological well-being among Muslim students in this context. Potential mediators and moderators should be explored in future research.

Keywords:

Forgiveness,
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Psychological well-being plays an important role in human life. It has become a global issue that has drawn attention from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations since the first measurement in 2013 (OECD, 2024). Empirical surveys have shown a gap between economic growth and well-being (OECD, n.d.). World Health Organization reported that approximately one in eight individuals worldwide experiences a mental disorder, with anxiety and depression as the most prevalent conditions (WHO, 2022). A recent study in Italy showed that 88.6% of university and high school students experienced psychological distress, and only 16.5% having high level psychological well-being (Nosè et al., 2025). While in Southeast Asia, university students reported that the median point prevalence of depression was 29.4% and 42.4% for anxiety (Dessauvage et al., 2022).

Aligning with the global data, a recent study of university students in Indonesia suggests a high prevalence (51.3%) of students who experienced mild to severe depressive symptoms (Ekawati et al., 2025). This supports a previous survey on Indonesian adolescents, of whom one in three had experienced a mental health problem at least in the past year (Center for Reproductive Health, 2022). Furthermore, current evidence from the University students of Central Java showed 34.6% having experienced a desire to die (Yunitri et al., 2025).

Previous data, both locally in Indonesia and worldwide, highlight the existing problem of student well-being. Without sufficient concern, this prevalence may worsen and become burdensome. Low well-being is consistently associated with negative outcomes. In academia, low well-being is associated with poor academic performance (Awadalla et al., 2024; Chu et al., 2022) and a tendency to drop out (Hjorth et al., 2016; Römhild & Holleder, 2025). Simultaneously, low well-being affects students' quality of life, such as impaired social relationships and suicidal behavior (Center for Reproductive Health, 2022), and risk-taking behaviors (Sanci et al., 2022).

According to the World Health Organization, well-being is an integral part of health. It is a "state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (Schramme, 2023). This definition underlines that well-being is a multidimensional and positive state, encompassing physical functioning, psychological health, and social participation, rather than being limited to the absence of illness. From this perspective, well-being reflects an individual's capacity to function effectively, to be aware of personal potential, to cope with life's challenges, and to engage meaningfully with their social context.

This shows that well-being is not only related to physical health but also to how a person lives their life optimally, making psychological well-being an important indicator of the overall quality of life of individuals. Psychological well-being is a condition where individuals have a positive attitude towards themselves and their

past lives, have the ability to foster warm relationships with others, have independence in dealing with social pressure, are able to control the external environment, have clear life goals, and are able to continue to develop their potential (Ryff, 1989).

Ryff (1989) explains that psychological well-being consists of six main aspects that reflect how individuals can develop optimally. First, self-acceptance, which is the extent to which individuals accept themselves with all their strengths and weaknesses. Second, positive relationships with others, which is the ability to establish and maintain harmonious relationships. Third, independence, which reflects the individual's ability to think and act without being influenced by societal pressure. Fourth, mastery of the environment, the individual's ability to manage his life well in accordance with his needs. Fifth, life purpose, which refers to the belief that life has a clear direction and meaning. Finally, personal development is the individual's drive to continue developing and achieving their maximum potential. These six aspects are the basis for understanding individual psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989).

Among many factors affecting psychological well-being, forgiveness is consistently associated positively with well-being. A meta-analysis found that greater capacity to forgive is significantly associated with greater life satisfaction and less emotional distress (Gao et al., 2022). Whether adolescent or emerging adult, this relationship remains significant (Barcaccia et al., 2019; Bonete et al., 2025). It serves as a promotive factor for psychological well-being.

Forgiveness is unique in that it is both a psychological construct and a virtue (Worthington & van Zyl, 2021). In psychological studies, forgiveness, along with other character strengths, is acknowledged as the foundation of positive psychology (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2021). As an expression of religious teaching, forgiveness allows individuals to release negative emotions, creating space for positive psychological growth (Safaria, 2014). Religious practices not only strengthen mental resilience but also encourage forgiving attitudes.

Forgiveness is conceptualized as a voluntary, intrapersonal process characterized by the intentional reduction of resentment toward a transgressor, accompanied by emotional transformation, attitude, and behavioral tendencies (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). According to Worthington, forgiveness is a process through which a person reduces unforgiving emotions, cognitions, and motivations toward a transgressor and replaces them with other-oriented emotions such as compassion, empathy, or love (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

In Islamic teaching, forgiveness is regarded as a divine command (Warsah, 2020). The Holy Al-Qur'an has mentioned the word *al 'afwu* (forgive) 35 times. In the Al-Qur'an, Allah states that: "Who spend [in the cause of Allah] during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people – and Allah loves the

doers of good” (QS. Al-Imran: 134). It means that the Holy Al-Qur’an mentions forgiveness as a trait of the pious, which is "to restrain one's anger and forgive others". Ismail and Desmukh (2012) interpret that forgiveness in Islam improves spirituality and psychological well-being.

Forgiveness has been shown to positively influence psychological well-being through several mechanisms. Worthington and Scherer (2004) found that Forgiveness serves as a coping strategy that reduces stress and negative emotions. Individuals who forgive show lower levels of depression and anxiety. Toussaint and Friedman (2009) suggested that forgiveness could affect well-being directly and indirectly. Positive affect and belief mediated the relationship between forgiveness and well-being. Empirical findings also indicate that individuals with a greater capacity to forgive tend to experience higher levels of happiness (Ercengiz et al., 2023).

Studies on forgiveness and well-being have grown significantly. However, it is predominantly conducted in Western countries. Research on forgiveness and well-being outside Western countries is still limited, particularly among university students in Indonesia. For example, several studies have linked forgiveness and well-being (Khootimah et al., 2024; Lubis et al., 2023; Nashori et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being among university students in Indonesia. Understanding the association between the two variables underscores the pivotal role of forgiveness in promoting psychological well-being in the educational setting.

METHOD

Participants

Participants of this study are undergraduate students from the Psychology Study Program. They were Muslims, domiciled in Yogyakarta, and willing to participate in the study. The selection of subjects who meet these requirements aims to ensure that the data obtained is relevant and can represent the psychological dynamics under study. Additionally, religious background is taken into account because the values in the forgiveness scale are grounded in Islamic psychology. The number of Respondents who met the criteria was 56 students. The sampling technique applied was convenience sampling. Respondent details show a composition of 91.1% females and 8.9% males, with an age range of 18 to 26 years and an average age of 20.3 years. The selected respondents will voluntarily complete the questionnaire after signing an informed consent form. All data collected will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Research Method and Measurement

This study uses a quantitative, correlational approach to determine the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being. The first stage of this research is to identify measurement instruments based on predetermined theories and variables. The researcher then compiled the scales and items that had been searched into a Google Form. Once the instrument is ready, the researcher conducts socialization and recruitment of respondents who fit the criteria through online and direct media. Before filling out the questionnaire, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form. Each filling session was conducted at a single time to maintain data consistency.

Psychological well-being is measured using an adaptation of the Psychological Well-Being Short Scale, developed based on the theories of Ryff and Keyes. The Psychological Well-Being Scale used in this study was adapted into Indonesian by Humaidah and Mulyono (2025). This adaptation includes six dimensions of psychological well-being, namely self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, mastery of the environment, life goals, and personal growth. It consists of 18 items with six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, mastery of the environment, life goals, and personal growth. Measurement uses a Likert scale of 1-4 (strongly disagree - strongly agree) with sample statements such as "I feel my life has direction" and "I feel I am growing as a person." In the reliability test conducted on this research sample. The scale showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87. This reliability value is within the Cronbach's alpha range (.82 – .90) commonly reported in various adaptation studies of Ryff's psychological well-being scale in Indonesia, indicating that the instrument is reliable for use with Muslim students in Yogyakarta.

The forgiveness variable was measured using a measuring instrument developed based on Nashori's study (Aprilia & Nashori, 2023), which includes three main aspects: emotions, cognition, and interpersonal behavior. Each aspect describes an individual's ability to manage negative feelings, assess events objectively, and demonstrate a forgiving attitude in social interactions. The scale consists of 22 statement items. Each item is answered using a four-point Likert scale, namely "Strongly Agree (SS)", "Agree (S)", "Disagree (TS)", and "Strongly Disagree (STS)". Examples of statements in this scale are: "When friends have regretted their mistakes, our friendship will easily return to its original state." The reliability test results, using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, showed that the forgiveness scale obtained a value of .901. The value ranges from 0 to 1.00, with values closer to 1 indicating greater reliability. In this context, the value of .901 indicates that the instrument used to measure forgiveness has excellent internal consistency, suggesting that the forgiveness scale is reliable and appropriate for research on the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being among Muslim students in Yogyakarta.

Data Analysis

After completing data collection, tabulation, and analysis, the data were analysed using the JAMOV version 2.4 program. After all the data had been collected, the researcher processed the data using a statistical program. The analysis starts with a normality test to determine the data distribution, then uses the Pearson correlation test if the data is normally distributed, and the Spearman correlation test if the data is not normally distributed. The analysis results were then interpreted to address the problem formulation and achieve the research objectives.

RESULT

The participants in this study consisted of 56 Muslim students from various higher education institutions in Yogyakarta. A total of 51 students (91.1%) were female, and 5 (8.9%) were male. The mean age of the participants was 20.3 years, ranging from 18 to 26. The majority of participants were 20 years old, accounting for 55.4%. The origins of the participants' educational institutions also varied, including UMY, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, UNY, Amikom University Yogyakarta, Poltekkes Kemenkes Yogyakarta, UGM, UPNYK, UII, UAD, and PGRI, with the largest distribution coming from UII at 37.5% (see Table 2).

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistic

Statistic	Forgiveness	Psychological Well-Being
N	56	56
Missing	0	0
Mean	59.2	51.5
Std. Error of Mean	1.15	0.743
Median	58.0	51.0
Mode	52.0 ^a	49.0
Standard Deviation	8.59	5.56
Variance	73.8	30.9
Range	42	24
Minimum	43	41
Maximum	85	65
Shapiro–Wilk W	.972	.979
Shapiro–Wilk p	.223	.450

Table 2.

Participants Distribution

Institution	n	%	Cumulative %
UMY	2	3.6%	3.6%
UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta	4	7.1%	10.7%
UNY	14	25.0%	35.7%
Universitas Amikom Yogyakarta	1	1.8%	37.5%
Poltekkes Kemenkes Yogyakarta	1	1.8%	39.3%
UGM	9	16.1%	55.4%
UPNVYK	2	3.6%	59.0%
UII	21	37.5%	96.4%
UAD	1	1.8%	98.2%
PGRI	1	1.8%	100.0%
Total	56	100.0%	

Descriptive results in Table 1 indicate that the forgiveness score has a mean of 59.2 and a standard deviation of 8.59. The lowest score is 43. For the mental well-being variable, the mean score is 51.5 with a standard deviation of 5.56. The lowest score on this variable was 41, and the highest was 65. Before conducting data analysis, researchers first conducted assumption tests, namely tests of data normality and linearity for correlation analysis. Normality and homogeneity tests for the t-test were also conducted. The Shapiro-Wilk normality test showed that the data were normally distributed, with $W = .972$ and $p = .223$ for forgiveness, and $W = .979$ and $p = .450$ for mental well-being.

Table 3.

Correlation between forgiveness and psychological well-being

Variables	Forgiveness	Psychological Well-Being
Forgiveness	—	
Pearson's r	—	.199
df	—	54
p (two-tailed)		.070
N	—	56
Psychological Well-Being	—	-

Note. p is a two-tailed significance level. $p < .05$, $p < .01$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis testing was carried out based on the results of the assumption test. Because the data were normally distributed and linearly related, Pearson's correlation analysis was used. Based on the t-test analysis, no significant differences were found in the two variables across participants' demographic characteristics. The analysis showed a correlation coefficient of .156 ($p = .125$), indicating no significant relationship between forgiveness and mental well-being.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that there is no significant relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being among Muslim students in Yogyakarta. The results of this study reject the initial hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between forgiving attitudes and mental well-being. This finding differs from previous results, such as those of Toussaint and Friedman (2009), which showed that forgiveness is positively correlated with well-being by reducing negative emotions. Similarly, McCullough stated that forgiveness has a role in reducing stress levels and improving social relationships, both of which are closely related to psychological well-being (Hogan, 2010).

The findings also do not support previous studies among university students in Indonesia that highlighted a significant relationship between forgiveness and well-being (Khootimah et al., 2024; Lubis et al., 2023; Nashori et al., 2024). However, this study aligns with the studies mentioned, which suggest that the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being may be indirect and influenced by mediating factors such as gratitude, hope, and emotion regulation abilities. This finding is supported by several studies that show similar results. Kim et al., (2022) found that forgiveness has a weak to moderate relationship with anger and hope, but was unrelated to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. This suggests that forgiveness does not necessarily correlate with all aspects of mental health.

In addition, research on interpersonal commitment shows that forgiveness is associated with improved well-being, but this association is more pronounced in relationships with strong commitment than in those with weak commitment, suggesting that forgiveness's effects are conditional and depend on the relationship's context. This suggests that the relationship between forgiveness and well-being may be complex and influenced by various contextual factors. Empirical studies have shown that mental well-being is more likely influenced by complex factors, such as academic pressure, social relationships, institutional, economic, and demographic factors (King et al., 2024; Konstantinidis, 2024).

As for the quantitative approach used in this study, it can objectively and measurably explain the relationship between variables. However, this approach cannot describe students' subjective experiences of interpreting forgiveness, such as

how they go through the process of forgiveness, whom they forgive, and in what context. Therefore, although not a weakness, this quantitative approach can be complemented by a qualitative approach in subsequent research to achieve a deeper, more comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, the absence of mediating or moderating variables is not a weakness of this study, as it focuses only on the direct correlation between forgiveness and psychological well-being. However, based on the results, it may be worth including additional variables, such as gratitude, resilience, or social support, as mediating or moderating variables in future studies to test whether the relationship between forgiveness and well-being is indirect or depends on other factors.

Finally, the relatively small sample size and gender disproportion (majority female) are of note. Although it does not affect the overall validity of the study, this imbalance may compromise the generalizability of the results, especially when examining psychological dynamics that may differ between men and women in interpreting and seeking forgiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found no significant correlation between forgiveness and psychological well-being among university students in Yogyakarta. Findings suggest that forgiveness may not be the sole determinant of student well-being. Importantly, the result contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that the association between forgiveness and well-being may vary across different contextual settings. The influence of forgiveness on student well-being is conditional and may operate indirectly through other psychological or social processes. Accordingly, future studies are encouraged to incorporate potential mediating variables, such as positive or negative affect, emotion regulation, or social support, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanism through which forgiveness may contribute to psychological well-being. Additionally, subsequent research should examine both mediating and moderating factors, including religiosity, social support, and emotion regulation, to better elucidate the complex relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being among students.

SUGGESTIONS

Future research may benefit from employing a qualitative or mixed-methods design to deeply explore the subjective meaning and experiences of forgiveness within the Islamic context. Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches would enable a more comprehensive, culturally sensitive understanding of forgiveness as a psychological construct within the Indonesian community. Furthermore, subsequent

studies are encouraged to include larger and more demographically diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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