

PUNITIVENESS SCHEMA AS PREDICTOR OF VENGEANCE AND FORGIVENESS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between punitiveness schema, vengeance, and forgiveness among young adults. Specifically, the study investigated whether punitiveness schema predicts vengeance and forgiveness. Furthermore, it also explored gender differences in these associations. A correlational research design was employed using convenience sampling technique to gather a sample of N=300 young adults from various universities. Data was collected using demographic questionnaire, Young Schema Questionnaire -Punitiveness Schema Subscale (Young et al., 2003), Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005), Vengeance Scale (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). The data was analysed on SPSS version 26 using descriptive statistics, correlational analysis, simple linear regression and independent sample T-test. The findings showed that punitiveness schema has a significant negative correlation with forgiveness and its subdomains while significant positive correlation with vengeance. Simple linear regression revealed that punitiveness schema significantly predicts forgiveness and vengeance among young adults. Independent samples t-tests showed significant differences across both genders in terms of study variables. The study helped fill the research gap and also increased the understanding of these complex psychological constructs. This study can also be helpful in developing schema focused interventions to foster forgiveness and reduce vengeful tendencies.

Keywords: Punitiveness schema, forgiveness, vengeance, young adults, gender differences.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood life experiences and care-giving styles shape an individual's personality development (Bowlby, 1988). Parents and care-givers play an important role in the life of an individual and determine the personality characteristics later shown in their lives (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988). Early hostile and punishment-based experiences in childhood lead to development of punitiveness schema (Young et al., 2003). When individuals experience harsh punishments for even minor mistakes, they may

internalize a punitiveness schema. Punitiveness schema can be defined as the belief that mistakes warrant harsh punishment. It is the conviction that errors should be severely penalized, marked by intolerance, irritability, and a reluctance to forgive oneself or others due to failure to acknowledge extenuating circumstances or human imperfection (Young et al., 2006). Individuals holding this schema leads them to impose rigid standards and severe self-criticism, as well as unrealistic expectations from others in their surroundings

(Young et al., 2003). Schema therapy model conceptualizes an Early Maladaptive Schema (EMS) as a perceived threat that activates one of three largely unconscious coping responses including overcompensation (fight), avoidance (flight), or surrender (freeze). Each of which, can perpetuate the original schema into adulthood. When a schema of punitiveness is activated, it can follow multiple paths. Surrender may paradoxically express as harsh, punitive treatment of oneself and others and can fuel vindictive responses when the individual “freezes” into punitive attitudes. In this study, it was hypothesized that vengeance defined as a motivational state in which an individual seeks to inflict

harm, injury, or punishment on someone who has wronged them (Stuckless et al., 1992). Stuckless and Goranson emphasized that vengeance is driven by a desire to restore a sense of justice or balance, often rooted in feelings of anger, betrayal, or humiliation, might act as a surrender coping of punitiveness schema. On the other hand, avoidance leads to social withdrawal or distancing driven by fear of punishment. While overcompensation may take the form of exaggerated leniency or forgiveness which is defined as a deliberate internal change in one’s motivational state toward a transgressor, a reduction in anger and the desire for revenge, often accompanied by cognitive reappraisal and occasional goodwill (Thompson et al., 2005).

In collectivist societies like Pakistan where familial roles, honor and social expectations are deeply embedded, responses to interpersonal conflicts are often guided by cultural conditioning (Hofstede, 2001). Young adults who are raised in environments emphasizing obedience, shame or rigid authority may internalise punitiveness schema or retaliatory worldviews (Triandis, 1995). Simultaneously, religious and moral values that promote forgiveness may also be deeply instilled, leading to internal conflicts of how they process injustice (McCullough, 2001; Worthington, 2006). The conflicting messages can shape enduring schemas about what is right, deserved or justified in the face of wrongdoing (Young et al., 2003).

Schema theory as proposed by Young et al. (2003), suggests that early maladaptive schemas form if emotional needs are not fulfilled during childhood. These schemas become the cognitive templates that effect how individuals will perceive their own-selves and others. Punitiveness schema

also relates to other schemas as schema of defectiveness and unrelenting standards (Young et al., 2003). Forgiveness has been recognised as an important aspect of human relationships playing significant role in promoting mental health, well-being and positive social behaviours (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). According to Worthington (2006), forgiveness is the process of leaving behind negative emotions and thoughts associated with a past transgression that can lead to increased empathy, compassion and understanding towards other. For example, a person having punitiveness schema adopting overcompensation coping style may become lenient even when he had to provide justice to a victim and may pardon the criminal for his crime (Worthington, 2006). This theoretical framework is grounded in social cognitive theory which explains that cognitive processes such as thoughts and attitudes, play an important role in shaping behaviour (Bandura, 1986).

Forgiveness is not just a moral or spiritual practice, it has empirically supported mental as well as physical health benefits (Worthington, 2006).

Berry et al. (2001) has conceptualised forgiveness as a stress reaction to judgements of interpersonal stressors that include transgressions, betrayals, offenses and wrongs. Unforgiveness is a part of emotions of the stress reaction as people attempts to reduce the gap of injustice and unforgiveness seen as coping strategies (Exline et al., 2003). Schema theory (2003) also implies that people having punitiveness schema may develop vengeance as a coping style where they seek revenge from wrongdoers whether themselves or others. They fail to take into account the emotional or psychological account of the wrongdoing and are obsessed with justice and conflict resolution by vengeance (McCullough, 2001). As, chronic experiences of injustice or humiliation may foster a desire for vengeance, rooted in unresolved emotional pain (Charles, 2015). Covert revenge is usually seen in lower status individuals who cannot take overt revenge due to the risk counter-retaliation (Sell et al., 2009). Vicarious revenge is mostly related to displaced revenge in which an original transgression involves neither the avenger nor the avenged (Lickel et al., 2006). Vengeance is a complicated emotional state that is derived from pain and rage apparently and secondary to loss (Charles, 2015). Some studies found that the power which the people have over their offender can boost vengeful responses (Kim, & Brigham,

1998). People seeking vengeance reports that they are doing right thing and doing justice through revenge (Barber et al., 2005). Vengeance is an equally justified goal of punishment (Vidmar, 2005). Narcissism can make a successful difference between vengeful and non-vengeful people among individuals who are low in dispositional forgiveness (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014). People who take revenge because of vengeance hope to have better feelings when they do so (Carlsmith et al., 2008).

Attachment theory proposes that early interactions of a child with his primary care-givers shape their internal working models of relationships, influencing their emotional and social development throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1988). These internal models have expectations about self, others and the world which guide individual's behaviour and interpersonal dynamics (Ainsworth, 1989). Insecure attachments styles including anxious and avoidant attachment may also contribute to punitiveness schema that may either lead to forgiveness or vengeance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

The relationship between forgiveness and vengeance is complex and reflects the tension between emotional impulses and moral or social norms (McCullough, 2001). Vengeance like forgiveness is closely associated with the past (Bill, 2022). Forgiveness can be a source to better psychological health such as reduced depression and improved mental health while vengeance provides a temporary sense of justice and closure which is associated with negative outcomes (Aquino et al., 2001).

Narcissism is not related to vengeance for individuals who have a high degree of forgiveness (Leonie et al 2014). Cultural and contextual factors also contribute towards these responses like collectivist societies may emphasize forgiveness to maintain social harmony while individualistic cultures may prioritise justice through vengeance (Leung & Cohen, 2011). As Pakistan has collectivist culture so the people will be more inclined towards forgiveness rather than vengeance trying to maintain social harmony (Triandis, 1995; Leung et al., 2011). Islamic teachings emphasize mercy and forgiveness in Quran as it has been mentioned to pardon and forgive anyone who does wrong to you as your God is also forgiving and merciful (Qur'an, 64:14).

As, much experiential work has focused on permanent externalizing and quarelling with the Punitive Parent mode (Young et al., 2003). But this cannot only help to address schema of punitiveness. As, patients can develop punitive parent attitude outside therapy room and have parasuicidal behaviours like cutting themselves etc (Young et al., 2003). This study will focused on a multidimensional approach to address this schema of punitiveness by mentioning role of forgiveness and vengeance. By exploring the complex ways in which these early maladaptive schemas influence young adults attitudes and behaviors, we can develop more culturally relevant therapeutic interventions that acknowledges both the schema and behavior of a person.

Research Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant relationship between punitiveness schema, forgiveness, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, forgiveness of situations and vengeance among young adults.

H2: Punitiveness schema will significantly predict the variance in forgiveness among young adults.

H3: Punitiveness schema will significantly predict the variance in vengeance among young adults.

H4: There will be significant gender differences in punitiveness schema, forgiveness, and vengeance among young adults.

Methodology

Research Method

A cross-sectional, correlational research design was used to study the relationship between punitiveness schema, forgiveness, and vengeance among young adults.

Sample

A sample of 292 participants was determined using a G-power analysis. The sample consisted of a total of 300 participants both male and female from public and private universities of Lahore, using convenience sampling strategy. The inclusion criteria was young adults age range 18 to 30, studying in any higher education program.

Measurement Tools

Following measurement tools were used to study the variables in the research.

Socio-demographic Questionnaire

A socio-demographic questionnaire was developed in English to collect demographic information of participants including age, gender, educational level, major discipline, family system, and residential area.

Young Schema Questionnaire-Punitiveness Schema Subscale

To assess punitiveness schema, Punitiveness Schema Subscale from Young Schema Questionnaire-Long Form (Young, J. E., 2003) was used. It is a self-reported measure consisting of 232 items measuring 18 different EMS using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "completely untrue" to 6 "describes me perfectly". Punitiveness Schema subscale consists of 14 items. YSQ-LF has high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha's coefficient ranging from 0.83 to 0.96 across different EMS.

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

The HFS (Thompson et al., 2002) is a most widely used self-report measure to assess forgiveness in three domains i.e. forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations. It consists of 18 items, divided equally among three subscales. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost always false) to 7 (almost always true). Items 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15 and 17 were reverse scored. Cronbach's alpha for HFS ranges between 0.86 to 0.87 showing excellent reliability.

The Vengeance Scale

The Vengeance Scale (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992) is a unidimensional tool which measures an individual's tendency toward vengeance in response to perceived wrongs or injustices. It has 20 items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Item number 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 19 were reverse scored. The Cronbach's alpha for the vengeance scale is reported to be 0.92 indicating excellent internal consistency.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Board of Studies and Ethical Review Committee of Department of Psychology, Government College University, Lahore. Permission was taken from the public and private universities to collect data by writing them

emails and written permission letters. Participants were approached. They were assured about the confidentiality and anonymity of the personal data collected. A booklet containing all the psychometric tools along with the demographic sheet and informed consent was distributed to the participants. Upon completion of the data collection, participants were thanked for their valuable time and contribution.

Ethical Considerations

Approval and permission were taken from Board of Studies (BOS), Ethical Review Committee (ERC), of Department of Psychology, Government College University, Lahore. Permissions to use tools were taken by writing emails to the authors. Permission was also taken from concerned authorities regarding data collection. The participants were also asked to sign consent form at the start of study. They were given the right to withdraw from study whenever they wanted. The participants were ensured that their data would be kept confidential and anonymity would be maintained.

Results

After cleaning the data, and treating the outliers, descriptive statistics were used. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of sample (N=300). The mean age of participants was 21.01 years (SD = 1.84). The gender distribution was evenly split, with 50.0% identifying as men and 50.0% as women.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 300)

Variables	f	%	M (SD)
Age of Participants			21.01 (1.84)
Gender			
Men	150	50.0	
Women	150	50.0	
Family System			
Nuclear	225	75.0	
Joint	75	25.0	
Education Level			
Bachelors	287	95.7	
Masters	13	4.3	
Major Discipline			
Business	67	22.3	
Humanities	80	26.7	
Natural Sciences	72	24.0	
Social Sciences	81	27.0	
Residential Area			
Urban	249	83.0	
Rural	51	51.0	

Note. f= Frequency; %= Percentage; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between punitiveness schema, forgiveness, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, forgiveness of situations and vengeance among young adults. For this purpose, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used. Table 2 shows that punitiveness schema had a significant negative relationship with overall forgiveness ($r = -.36$, $p < .01$), self-forgiveness ($r = -.35$, $p < .01$), others forgiveness ($r = -.39$, $p < .01$), and situational forgiveness ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$). In contrast, punitiveness schema had a significant positive relationship with vengeance ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Forgiveness was negatively associated with vengeance ($r = -.37$, $p < .01$), and this relationship was consistent across its subdomains.

Table 2
Mean, Standard deviation, and correlation among variables of the study (N=300)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PS	49.28	10.19	-	-.355**	-.352**	-.389**	-.320**	.391**
2. F	79.38	12.25		-	.782**	.723**	.761**	-.366**
3. FOS	26.32	5.36			-	.442**	.454**	-.414**
4. FO	27.80	5.61				-	.381**	-.474**
5. FoSit	25.3	5.52					-	-.353**
6. V	71.69	13.54						-

Note. ** $p < 0.01$; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; PS=Punitiveness Schema; F= Forgiveness; FOS=Forgiveness of Self; FO=Forgiveness of Others; FoSit=Forgiveness of Situations; V=Vengeance.

To check the prediction related hypothesis, Simple Linear Regression analysis was used. Table 3 shows that punitiveness schema was a significant predictor of forgiveness, $F(1, 298) = 127.89$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.55$, $t(298) = -11.31$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .300$,

indicating that 30% of the variation in forgiveness can be accounted for by punitiveness schema. Beta value shows a large effect size, suggesting that punitiveness schema has 55% relative influence on forgiveness, which indicates that higher levels of

punitiveness were strongly associated with lower levels of forgiveness.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients for the Prediction of Forgiveness from Punitiveness Schema

Variable	B	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	105.432		3.210			
Punitiveness Schema	-0.652	-0.55	0.085	-11.31	< .001	[-0.64,-0.46]
R ²	0.300					

Note: $p < .001$, B = Unstandardized Coefficient, SE= Standard Error, β = Standardized Coefficient

To check whether punitiveness schema also predicts vengeance or not, another simple linear regression analysis was run. Table 4 shows that punitiveness schema, was a significant predictor of vengeance as well, $F(1, 298) = 182.58$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .62$, $t(298)=13.51$, $R^2 = .380$, indicating that 38% of the variance in vengeance can be accounted for

by punitiveness schema. Beta value shows a large effect size, suggesting that punitiveness schema has 62% relative influence on vengeance which indicates that higher levels of punitiveness schema were strongly associated with higher levels of vengeance.

Table 4

Regression Coefficients for the Prediction of Vengeance from Punitiveness Schema

Variable	B	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	31.33		3.05			
Punitiveness Schema	.82	.62	.06	13.51	< .001	[0.53, 0.71]
R ²	.380					

Note. $p < .05$, B = Unstandardized Coefficient, SE= Standard Error, β =Standardized Coefficient

To examine gender differences in terms of punitiveness schema, forgiveness, and vengeance, three separate Independent samples t-tests were conducted. Table 5 shows the results which indicates that men ($M = 51.00$, $SD = 9.67$) scored significantly higher on punitiveness schema than women ($M = 47.50$, $SD = 10.60$), $t(298) = 2.98$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.35$, suggesting a small-to-moderate effect moderate effect size.

size. For forgiveness, women ($M = 82.00$, $SD = 12.00$) reported significantly higher levels than men ($M = 78.97$, $SD = 13.50$), $t(298) = 2.20$, $p = .028$, $d = 0.25$, reflecting a small effect size. Finally, men ($M = 74.00$, $SD = 12.00$) scored significantly higher in vengeance than women ($M = 69.50$, $SD = 13.00$), $t(298) = 2.50$, $p = .013$, $d = 0.36$, indicating a small-to-

Table 5

Independent Samples t-Tests for Gender Differences in Punitiveness Schema, Forgiveness, and Vengeance (N = 300)

Variables	Women (N=150)		Men (N=150)		t	p	95%CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Punitiveness Schema	47.5	10.6	51.0	9.7	2.9	.003	1.19	5.81	0.35
Forgiveness	82.0	12.0	78.97	13.5	2.2	.028	-5.94	-0.12	0.25
Vengeance	69.5	13.0	74.00	12.0	2.5	.013	1.65	7.35	0.36

Note. * $p < .05$, M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between punitiveness schema,

forgiveness, its subdomains and vengeance among young adults. Correlational analysis revealed that punitiveness schema was negatively associated to forgiveness and its all dimensions including forgiveness for self, others, and situational. The punishment tend to struggle with extending compassion, tolerance, and understanding, whether toward themselves or others (Paleari et al., 2022; Pouresmali et al., 2017). It was also found that punitiveness schema was positively related with vengeance. It indicates that individuals who hold rigid beliefs about the necessity of harsh punishment are more likely to endorse retaliatory attitudes and behaviors (Roberts et al., 2013). When mistakes are interpreted through a punitive lens, the impulse to restore perceived justice often manifests as vengeful thinking rather than reconciliation (Yeager et al., 2011). Theories of retributive justice propose that individuals high in punitive orientation interpret interpersonal harm as deserving of proportional retaliation (Carlsmith et al., 2002). This finding reflects cultural narratives in collectivistic societies, where maintaining honor or restoring justice through vengeance is often legitimized. However, in the Islamic tradition, vengeance is discouraged, while *Afw-o-darguzar* (forgiveness) and *Sabr* (patience) are considered virtues (Qur'an 42:40).

Results also show negative association between vengeance and forgiveness across self, others, and situational domains which suggests that these constructs function as opposing motivational orientations in interpersonal and intrapersonal regulation. Individuals who have vengeful tendencies are less inclined to extend compassion or understanding, instead prioritizing retaliation over reconciliation. These results also suggests that vengeance not only diminishes the capacity to forgive others but also obstructs self-forgiveness and situational forgiveness, which reinforces cycles of hostility and psychological distress. supports prior studies that conceptualize forgiveness as an effective mechanism for breaking cycles of retaliation (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Forgiveness interventions have consistently been shown to reduce anger, hostility, and desire for revenge, thereby promoting psychological well-being (Wade et al., 2014). Prior research in collectivistic cultures has also emphasized that punitive schemas often legitimize vengeance as a moral response. In South Asian cultural contexts especially tribal and Pashtun communities, the

findings indicate that higher levels of punitiveness schema are associated with lower levels of forgiveness across self, others, and situational contexts. This suggests that individuals who hold rigid beliefs that mistakes warrant harsh

concept of *badal* (revenge) forms part of the Pashtunwali code, where vengeance is viewed as a duty to restore honour (Yousufzai & Gohar, 2005). The present findings also provide robust empirical support for the central role of a punitiveness early maladaptive schema in shaping both forgiving and vengeful responses. Regression analyses showed that punitiveness schema significantly predicted lower forgiveness, and strongly predicted higher vengeance with very large standardized effects. These effect sizes indicate that punitiveness is not a trivial correlate but a substantive determinant of how young adults respond to transgressions. Theoretically, these findings are also coherent with schema therapy, an activated punitiveness schema signals a perceived threat (frustration of core emotional needs) and elicits one of three largely unconscious coping responses including surrender, avoidance, or overcompensation (Young et al., 2006). In the present study, the surrender response plausibly manifests as vindictive, punitive behavior (vengeance), whereas overcompensation may present as excessive or superficial forgiveness. Importantly, overcompensatory "forgiveness" may be maladaptive if it functions to deny legitimate anger, mask unresolved hurt, or perpetuate the underlying schema rather than achieve genuine reconciliation. Nonetheless, the results validate schema-theoretical predictions and suggest clinical targets (Johns, 2004). These results indicate how punitive cognitive schemas can act as barriers to reconciliation, self-acceptance, and adaptive interpersonal functioning, underscoring the importance of addressing such maladaptive beliefs in therapeutic and relational contexts (Baelemans et al., 2025).

Results also indicate that there are significant gender differences in terms of study variables. Men scored higher on punitiveness schema and vengeance while women scored higher on forgiveness. Meta-analytic and large-sample studies indicate that women, on average, report higher dispositional forgiveness than men and tend to endorse more relationally oriented, empathic responses to transgression (Kaleta & Mróz, 2021; Miller et al., 2008). In Pakistan, community and

school-based studies likewise report greater forgiveness among females relative to males, suggesting that the pattern is present within local samples as well (Javed et al., 2014). Similar findings in South Asian studies confirm that women report greater forgiveness and lower vengeance than men (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Considering Pakistani cultural context, masculinity in Pakistan is frequently constructed around strength, honor, and dominance, with socialization that tolerates or even valorizes aggressive, punitive responses when status or reputation is threatened. Such norms can increase male endorsement of punitive and vengeful strategies as socially sanctioned means of restoring perceived injustice. At the same time, Islamic teachings and local religious discourse strongly valorize forgiveness, mercy, and restraint norms that are widely taught and may be particularly internalized by women through gendered expectations of relational care and community cohesion. Thereby, promotes forgiving responses in many situations (Muhammad, 2020). Men are often expected to safeguard family honour sometimes through punitive or vengeful actions, whereas women are culturally linked with compassion and relational harmony (Sadiq & Ali, 2012)

Implications of the Study

Clinically, the results identify punitiveness schema as a clear intervention target in reducing punitive appraisals and rigid moral demands may both increase authentic forgiveness and decrease vengeful reactivity. Schema-focused interventions (e.g., imagery rescripting, cognitive restructuring, limited reparenting and behavioral experiments) that directly modify the punitiveness schema and its maladaptive coping responses (surrender → vindictiveness; overcompensation → superficially forgiving behaviors) are indicated. For applied and community settings in Pakistan, clinicians should integrate culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge gendered socialization, honor norms, and religious prescriptions for mercy while addressing how these forces interact with schema-driven responses. Prevention programs and psychoeducation that target rumination, empathy deficits, and punitive attributions may also reduce revenge cycles and foster genuine reconciliation.

Limitations and Suggestions

The present study used cross-sectional, correlational design which precludes causal inference and is susceptible to shared-method variance and social desirability. The sample young adults from a single cultural context also limits generalizability. There could be some confounding variables (e.g., agreeableness, attachment style, religiosity, exposure to interpersonal violence) which can account for part of the observed associations. Future work should use longitudinal and experimental designs, incorporate behavioral or informant measures of forgiveness and revenge, and test mediators (rumination, empathy, anger regulation) and moderators (gender, cultural norms, religiosity). Finally, randomized controlled trials of schema-focused interventions that measure changes in punitiveness, authentic forgiveness, and vengeful behavior would be the definitive test of the theoretical and clinical claims advanced here.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that a punitiveness early maladaptive schema is a substantive determinant of how young adults respond to transgressions. Men in this sample reported higher punitiveness schema and vengeance, whereas women reported greater forgiveness. These findings collectively indicate that punitive cognitive structures substantially decrease forgiving dispositions and simultaneously increase retaliatory tendencies, lending empirical support to schema-theory predictions about the behavioral consequences of activated early maladaptive schemas.

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