

Is Forgiveness the Best Solution? Perspectives of Bullying Victims within Families

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Forgiveness has been recognized as influential in cases of bullying, but little research has focused on when the perpetrator is a family member. Forgiveness in Indonesian families is crucial because it prioritizes the values of family harmony. In Indonesia's collectivist culture, maintaining family relationships and integrity is considered more important than retaliation. However, the relational dynamics between feelings of hurt and the desire to maintain family values create a dilemma, thereby generating a research gap. This qualitative study aims to explore factors influencing the forgiveness process in cases of family bullying. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 victims of family bullying in Indonesia, aged 18–56. Inductive coding and member checking were used to ensure validity in data analysis. The researcher stopped the interviews when data saturation was reached. Thematic analysis revealed several factors influencing forgiveness: a) breaking the chain of bullying, b) empathy, c) support from family and community, d) maintaining family honor, e) history of kindness, and f) religious considerations. These findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive environment to address bullying within the family and prevent its transmission to future generations.

Key words: forgiveness, bullying, nuclear family, social interaction, qualitative

Introduction

Bullying is a highly complex and heterogeneous social phenomenon that can occur in education, work, organizations, and families.

The Dilemma of Bullying in the Family

Bullying perpetrated by family members, whether physical, psychological, verbal, or

through neglect, is a significant problem, but it often goes undetected due to underreporting. This is where the family's role should come in. Ironically, however, the family, which is supposed to be a safe haven, can actually become a source of danger, leaving victims with little access to support. This lack of listening skills and a focus solely on control are associated with victims' silence and reluctance to disclose their experiences (Yu & Reiss, 2025). This silence is often due to victims'

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fear of negative reactions if they choose to report (Boulton et al., 2017). In some cases, victims have actually tried to tell others about the bullying they experienced, but no response was deemed helpful (Bjereld et al., 2021); moreover, if the victim is considered to have a role in the error (Yu & Yu, 2024). This dilemma is what causes cases of bullying that occur in families to often go undetected.

Structural Family Risks

Within the family system, structural risk factors often trigger bullying and hinder reporting. Research shows that dysfunctional family hierarchies, such as parental violence against children, neglect, and maladaptive parenting, play a role in bullying (Dědová & Baník, 2024; Nocentini et al., 2019). In addition to structural factors, interaction patterns within the family system also play a role. Poor interactions can occur when problems are handled destructively (Khoshimjanovna, 2021). This can be due to unmet expectations and behavior that deviates from family norms (Ali et al., 2022). When problems are handled using negative power relationships between partners, it escalates the conflict, which leads to domestic violence (Mas'udah, 2021). This maladaptive conflict management can trigger bullying between family members or exacerbate the impact of existing bullying (Burger, 2022).

Empirical evidence also strengthens the theoretical foundation by showing that unresolved parental conflict and a conflict-ridden family climate are risk factors for bullying, which children replicate in their relationships with siblings (Qing et al., 2022). Further research shows a correlation between sibling bullying and peer bullying (Tippett & Wolke, 2015; Truong et al., 2022). In fact, bullying and violent behavior by family members are more common than outside the family (Borualogo & Casas, 2022; Hoetger et al.,

2014; Loinaz et al., 2019). This suggests that a positive family environment plays a crucial role in fostering healthy relationships among family members. Family environments with a history of violence are associated with risky behaviors, physical and mental health problems, and difficulties in psychosocial adjustment (Carr et al., 2020). Bullying victims experience increased depressive symptoms, psychosomatic problems, self-harm tendencies, and suicide attempts (Bao et al., 2023; de Oliveira Pimentel et al., 2020; Sheng et al., 2024). These various negative impacts require appropriate solutions so that the problem can be handled immediately.

Family systems theory emphasizes the importance of family involvement during conflict to prevent problems from being passed down to the next generation. This theory explains that bullying behavior within families often reflects unresolved issues within the family. Despite its seriousness and widespread scale, this problem is overlooked and normalized. This creates a cycle of relationship patterns that not only damage internal family dynamics but can also increase the individual's risk of reproducing the same patterns outside the family system. Therefore, general protective factors, such as bonds with parents, warm parenting, parental involvement, and parental support and acceptance, play a role in bullying cases (Kustanti et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, one potential mechanism to interrupt this destructive cycle is forgiveness. Forgiveness can serve as a relational repair strategy, helping individuals release resentment, restore emotional balance, and prevent the intergenerational transmission of harmful relational patterns. In this way, forgiveness can be a protective factor that helps break the cycle of bullying within families. In family systems theory, forgiveness serves as a relational reparation to maintain family bonds and loyalty between the victim and the perpetrator.

Forgiveness and Collectivistic Culture

A more effective approach is to focus on empowering victims. One method to empower victims is through forgiveness, where forgiveness has been shown to correlate with reduced symptoms of depression (Fincham, 2015), enhanced marital satisfaction (Fahim-danesh et al., 2020; Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2023; Sheikhzahed, 2024), and marital stability (He et al., 2018). Forgiveness also strengthens interpersonal relationships (Merolla, 2017) and facilitates reconciliation (Berndsen et al., 2018). Within this framework, justice is no longer about revenge but about restoring relationships through forgiveness.

Worthington (2020) defines forgiveness as a process of change in a person after experiencing unpleasant treatment by not seeking revenge or avoiding the perpetrator. Another opinion also defines forgiveness as replacing bad intentions with good intentions toward the perpetrator who committed the evil (VanderWeele, 2018). These two definitions of forgiveness essentially narrow down to a moral response to address injustice with good.

Despite significant research on the detrimental impacts of bullying, focus on bullying within the family environment remains limited. Bullying is often discussed more frequently in the school setting (Barcaccia et al., 2018; Cantu & Chen, 2021; Darimis et al., 2022; Eroglu et al., 2022; García-Vázquez, Valdes-Cuervo, & Parra-Perez, 2020; Ogurlu & Sariçam, 2018; Purwandari et al., 2024; Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018; Quintana-Orts et al., 2019; Rey et al., 2020). In collectivist societies like Indonesia, where individuals are integrated into a strong group (the nuclear family) and emphasize unconditional loyalty, the use of power is considered acceptable (Pinquart, 2021). Physical punishment, which can potentially lead to bullying, is often perceived as a manifestation

of caring and love, intended to maintain obedience and social order. Likewise, punishment for perpetrators of bullying is still carried out. In England and America, the option of punishment is more commonly carried out as a form of justice for the perpetrator (Lacey & Pickard, 2015), even though it has been proven to be ineffective (Zambuto et al., 2022).

In contrast to Western individualism, forgiveness in Indonesia's collectivist culture reflects the importance of community (family), which influences the structure and social order of society. Although the results of the literature review indicate a decline in collectivism levels in Asia, this does not necessarily imply an increase in individualism (Kim, 2024). One characteristic of collectivist culture is marked by an appreciation for the value of social harmony, in which Indonesians with high harmony values tend to forgive easily (Kurniati et al., 2017). Therefore, although collectivist culture has the potential to be a gateway to bullying, it also provides open space for problem solving through forgiveness. Based on these statements, the role of forgiveness in bullying incidents is crucial to promote as a solution (Handayani, Taufik et al., 2024). Meanwhile, if we refer to the religious side of the Indonesian population, forgiveness is also motivated by worship, seeking rewards and forgiveness from God. This motivation ultimately aims for the afterlife, seeking the goodness of forgiveness promised by God (Warsah, 2020).

Limitations of Forgiveness Research in the Family

Despite extensive research examining the positive impact of forgiveness, few studies have focused specifically on forgiveness within the nuclear family. This context is crucial, as forgiveness within the family can be a preventative response to conflict escalation (Zagrean

et al., 2020). Bullying by family members often leaves deep emotional scars, creating a unique challenge for victims who must navigate the tension between familial loyalty and personal pain. Forgiveness can reduce uncertainty in the relationship between the victim and perpetrator (Merolla et al., 2017), fostering optimism and hope for a better future (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Family-based forgiveness, in particular, has been linked to improved intergenerational mental health outcomes (Hargrave & Zasowski, 2016) and self-reported happiness (Handayani, Kasturi et al., 2024).

Based on the above description, research on forgiveness in the Indonesian family context still leaves several theoretical gaps that need to be explored. The strong collectivist culture and values of family resilience create a unique context that differentiates it from the more individualistic Western model of forgiveness. Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors that influence the forgiveness process in cases of family bullying in Indonesia. Based on this objective, the research question is: What are the factors that can influence the forgiveness of victims of bullying perpetrated by families in Indonesia? This research is expected to contribute to family psychology by developing a more contextual model of forgiveness. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a nuanced examination of this multifaceted phenomenon.

Methods

This study used an interpretive paradigm to gather in-depth insights into victims' perspectives on their experiences of bullying within the family context. The study adopted a nuclear family perspective, focusing on the structural roles and interactions shaped by generational dynamics (de Bel & Widmer, 2021).

Participants

Participants were identified as having experienced bullying by a nuclear family member, aged between 18 and 60, and not experiencing significant stress when sharing their experiences. Stress identification was conducted prior to the interview using a subjective stress scale, asking participants to rate their stress level on a scale of 1 to 10 (very stressed). If the score was above 7, the researcher discontinued the interview.

Of the 18 initially recruited participants, two did not meet the criteria because the bullying they experienced was not from their nuclear family, and two others declined to continue due to ongoing trauma, prompting the researcher to recommend further counseling with a psychologist. One additional participant was ill at the time of the interview. The final participants were 14 people whose interviews were analyzed (13 women and 1 man) with an average age of 38.5 years (18–56). In addition to the methods section, information on how to disclose participants can be seen in the flowchart (Figure 1).

All quotes from participants use the flower name code. Participant characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Among the participants, six reported being bullied by their husbands, five by their mothers, two by siblings, and one by their father. This distribution reflects the diversity of bullying dynamics within nuclear family relationships.

Forgiveness responses were evaluated holistically through two components: participants' subjective assessments and interview analysis. Subjective assessments provided an initial overview of participants' feelings toward the bully. To gain a more valid understanding, thematic analysis of interview transcripts was conducted to identify indicators of

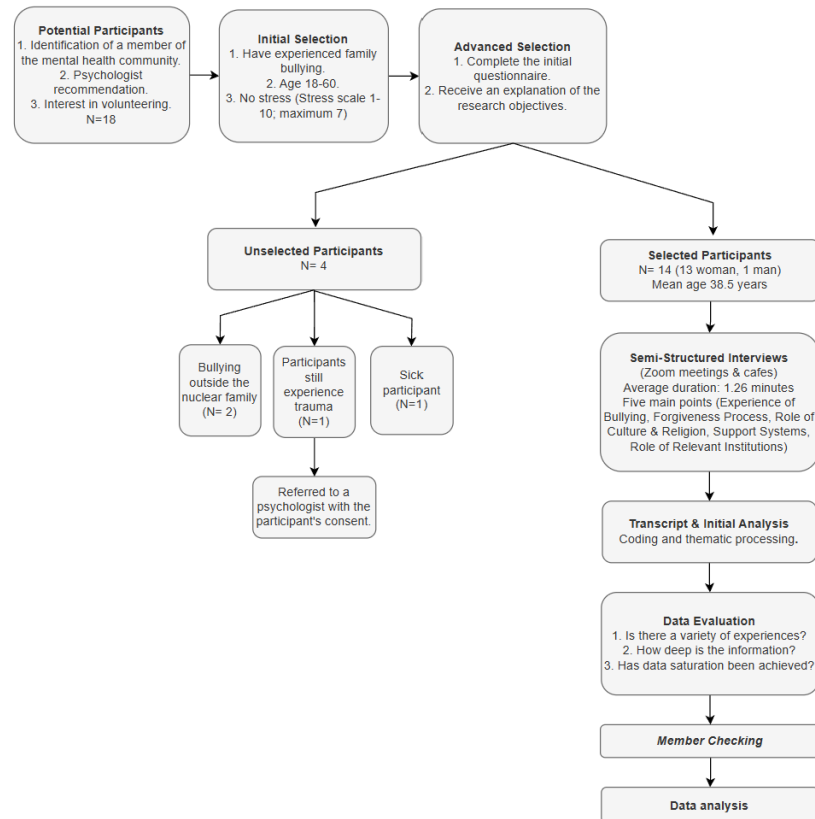


Figure 1 Participants flowchart.

forgiveness (such as empathy or a lack of revenge). Thus, subjective assessments served as an initial overview, while interview analysis validated these perceptions.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were recorded between July and September 2024 via Zoom Meeting or in a private cafe setting. Both settings prioritized the comfort and confidentiality of participants when sharing their experiences. The average interview duration was approximately 1 hour and 26 minutes.

The interview protocol was structured around five main points: experiences with bullying (Example: *Can you tell us about your experience with bullying in your family?*), the forgiveness process (Example: *Can the bully be forgiven and why?*), the role of culture and religion (Example: *How do your cultural background and religious beliefs influence your choice to forgive?*), support systems (Example: *How did your family respond to the bullying incident?*), and the role of relevant institutions (Example: *What programs do you believe family-related institutions should offer to support victims of bullying?*).

Table 1 *Participant characteristics*

No.	Participant	Age (Years)	Gender	Bullying Perpetrator	Response
1	Aster	49	Woman	Husband	Forgiveness and Reconciliation
2	Begonia	18	Woman	Mother	Forgiveness and Reconciliation
3	Carnation	36	Woman	Husband	No Forgiveness
4	Dahlia	40	Woman	Younger Sister	Forgiveness and Reconciliation
5	Edelweiss	40	Woman	Husband	Forgiveness with Divorce
6	Freesia	39	Woman	Mother	Forgiveness with Avoidance
7	Gardenia	30	Woman	Mother	Forgiveness with Avoidance
8	Hibiscus	45	Woman	Husband	Forgiveness with Divorce
9	Iris	41	Woman	Husband	Forgiveness and Reconciliation
10	Jasmine	49	Man	Mother	Forgiveness with Divorce
11	Kalmia	36	Woman	Older Sister	Forgiveness and Reconciliation
12	Lily	22	Woman	Father	No Forgiveness
13	Marigold	56	Woman	Husband	Forgiveness with Divorce
14	Nigella	38	Woman	Mother	Forgiveness with Avoidance

Participants were also recruited through referrals from colleagues (psychologists) who had clients who had experienced family bullying. Potential participants completed an initial eligibility questionnaire (e.g., *Who was the bully?*) and signed an informed consent form, which explained that the interview results would be used solely for research purposes and would be kept confidential.

Participants were allowed to bring a trusted companion if desired. To account for the context of Indonesian families, the researchers reiterated their commitment to the confidentiality of sensitive information and the participants' right to refuse to answer questions or withdraw. Participants also received post-interview support if needed to mitigate potential impacts on family dynamics. As a token of appreciation, participants received a batik cloth.

Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new themes, categories, or meaningful insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Saturation was assessed through ongoing comparisons of codes and themes during data analysis. When additional interviews yielded repetitive information without contributing new conceptual understanding, recruitment was stopped.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. Interview transcriptions were followed by coding and grouping the codes according to patterns or similar meanings (e.g., Impact of Bullying, Forgiveness Process). This was followed by cross-checking the themes and interpreting the data.

Results

Factors Influencing Forgiveness of Victims of Bullying in the Family

The thematic analysis revealed six major themes that explain the factors influencing forgiveness among victims of family bullying. These themes were derived inductively from participants' narratives and reflect psychological, relational, cultural, and social dimensions of forgiveness. The themes are presented in order of their conceptual relevance and frequency across participants' accounts. The six themes include breaking the chain of bullying, empathy, support from family and community, maintaining family honor, history of kindness, and religious considerations.

To provide a more meaningful and contextual overview, these themes will be presented in order of prevalence, that is, the number of participants whose narratives included that theme. This order begins with the most frequently occurring theme. This is important because the frequency of a theme indicates its significance and universality among victims. In other words, a theme raised by a greater number of participants emphasizes that it is a more common and crucial consideration in their journey toward forgiveness.

1. Breaking the Chain of Bullying

This theme explores the victims' desire to end their grief and trauma through forgiveness. The goal is to avoid resentment and prevent the continuation of intergenerational bullying. Three sub-themes were represented by eight participants (Aster, Edelweiss, Freesia, Gardenia, Hibiscus, Iris, Marigold, Nigella).

Forgiveness enables problem solving and a peaceful future

Forgiveness is a way to resolve problems and find peace: *"I want to break this cycle. I want to move on. I want to resolve this, and I want peace."* (Freesia 797-806). *"Hopefully, forgiveness can end the conflict and lead to a more comfortable life."* (Aster 192-296). *"I just want to end the pain of my wounds by accepting and forgiving."* (Edelweiss 375-380). *"Forgiveness is my way of not holding on to sadness so I can live in peace."* (Hibiscus 176-181). The ultimate goal of forgiveness is peace so that problems do not linger unresolved.

Preventing traumatic patterns from affecting future generations

Forgiveness aims to end the cycle of suffering and trauma, thus preventing the continuation of negative patterns in future generations: *"And it has to be stopped so that it doesn't become a grudge and the wounds aren't passed down to the next generation."* (Marigold 1313-1315). Participants worried that if the traumatic experience was not stopped, it could potentially perpetuate the abuse: *"I don't want to repeat the cycle of harm that I'm going to pass on to my children. I don't want to repeat it. I choose peace and forgiveness."* (Nigella 146-158). *"I need to forgive to continue living a better life, to break the cycle, to continue being a better parent."* (Freesia 923-927). *"Forgive those who hurt you. My mother was abused by my grandfather, and then she abused me, her child. How can I be involved in bullying my child now? This has to stop."* (Gardenia 456-461). Participants who were bullied by their husbands (Marigold) and their mothers (Nigella, Freesia, and Gardenia) took mitigation steps to prevent the bullying from continuing to the next generation.

Prevent revenge

Forgiveness is linked to mental health, enabling a life without resentment: *"Because I want to move on with my life. It's not healthy to hold a grudge."* (Iris 873-874). *"Hopefully, by forgiving, my relationship with my mother will no longer be problematic."* (Freesia 889-891).

The peace that participants Iris (who was abused by her husband) and Freesia (who was abused by her mother) hope for is the absence of resentment. Revenge perpetuates wounds, while forgiveness releases them. They do not want future generations to bear the emotional burden of the family's past.

2. Empathy

This theme explores the victim's perspective on the perpetrator when deciding to forgive. There are three sub-themes represented by seven participants (Dahlia, Edelweiss, Freesia, Hibiscus, Kalmia, Marigold, Nigella).

Seeing the perpetrator's difficult life journey

The choice to forgive stemmed from considering the issues the perpetrator faced, such as the bully's difficulty managing his emotions: *"He's had a difficult life, and I think that difficult journey may have prevented him from learning to manage his emotions well. So I forgave him."* (Edelweiss 361-367). Participants personally empathized with the perpetrator's suffering because they believed they also had significant unresolved issues: *"Personally, I empathize. If someone is throwing a tantrum or bullying, it shows significant unresolved issues. They must be suffering a lot."* (Freesia 1067-1076). Reflecting on the perpetrator's past experiences of abuse made it easier for participants to empathize and forgive them:

"My older sister felt a lack of affection from our parents. As a child, she was often beaten and compared to the neighborhood kids. So, I chose to forgive her." (Kalmia 257-264).

All participants decided to forgive because they recognized that the perpetrators also had serious issues in their lives. Participants did not want to add to the bully's suffering by not forgiving them.

Understanding that everyone makes mistakes

This is the victim's attempt to understand the perpetrator's perspective with the goal of transforming negative emotions into positive ones. Participants understand that the bully is a human being who can make mistakes. *"People make mistakes. I hope my forgiveness can make him realize that."* (Dahlia 494-499). Participants also emphasized the human tendency to sometimes find it difficult to let go of the same mistakes and chose forgiveness to ease the burden of the perpetrator's sin. *"Even though it's unjustifiable, I understand how difficult it is for my mother to overcome her repeated mistakes. I forgive her to ease her sin."* (Nigella 247-251).

Although both participants forgive out of an understanding that humans make mistakes, their motivations differ. For Dahlia, forgiveness is given in the hope that the perpetrator will realize their mistake. For Nigella, forgiveness is intended to ease the perpetrator's sin.

Believing that the perpetrator has the right to be forgiven

The perpetrator of bullying has the right to be forgiven so they can repent: *"I forgive because, after all, everyone deserves a chance to improve themselves."* (Marigold 1280-1284) and every mistake is still worthy of forgiveness: *"He did make a mistake, but I can*

still forgive him because everyone deserves a chance to be forgiven.” (Hibiscus 182-185).

This theme of empathy provides a perspective from the victim’s side that forgiveness is still carried out regardless of the perpetrator’s response.

3. Support from Family and Community

Social support is an important factor in the forgiveness process because it provides peace, comfort, and not hopelessness. This theme can be broken down into two sub-themes represented by seven participants (Aster, Edelweiss, Gardenia, Hibiscus, Kalmia, Marigold, Nigella).

Family encouragement and guidance to forgive

Family is a primary source of psychological strength. This support not only provides encouragement but also provides advocacy, so that victims feel protected: *“My family supports me to stay strong and forgive my husband.”* (Aster 160-162). This illustrates the victim’s psychological needs, which are met by the family to prevent despair when facing challenges. Two participants combined this with a religious dimension: *“My husband is very supportive. He advises me to be patient and forgiving. He’s the one who always calms me down.”* (Nigella 254-258). *“My parents want us to get along. I was advised to be patient and love my sister. Just forgive.”* (Kalmia 213-215).

Supportive, non-blaming responses can actually motivate victims to forgive more easily: *“My parents supported me, and my in-laws never blamed me either.”* (Hibiscus 94-96). *“I told my husband’s older brother, but I hid it from my own family, and they all defended me. That also made it easier for me to forgive my husband.”* (Marigold 691-692). However,

a lack of family support leads victims to seek support outside the family, such as within their community.

Seek professional support or join a community

Joining a community helps victims feel less alone in facing their problems and makes it easier for them to forgive: *“Being part of a community means I don’t feel alone. I can reconcile and go through the forgiveness process thanks to the support of my friends in the community.”* (Gardenia 1230-1234). *“Because I didn’t get support from my family. The forgiveness process came from the community.”* (Edelweiss 182-183). *“Joining the community allows me to process everything better. I feel more comfortable mentally. I’ve learned how to forgive and control my emotions.”* (Hibiscus 147-153). This demonstrates the important role of community support in stabilizing victims’ emotions. The majority of participants (64.3%) were members of the mental health community.

4. Maintaining Family Honor

This theme illustrates the importance of maintaining the family’s reputation in the forgiveness process. There are two main sub-themes represented by five participants (Aster, Begonia, Dahlia, Marigold, Nigella).

Protecting the family’s good name

Family honor is a determining factor in the decision to forgive. This is evident in a participant’s statement that prioritized “family name” as a reason for forgiveness when experiencing physical, verbal, and psychological abuse from her husband: *“If I choose to divorce and not forgive, the family name will be at stake.”* (Aster 224-227). Another partici-

pant did not want to tarnish the family's reputation by harboring anger when experiencing physical and verbal bullying from her husband: *"I don't want the family's reputation to be tarnished."* (Marigold 414-415). Similarly, a participant who was verbally and psychologically abused by her younger sister chose to forgive to protect the family's reputation: *"For me, the family's reputation is more important."* (Dahlia 460-461).

Participants Aster and Marigold shared similar reasons for forgiving. However, Aster chose to maintain the marriage, while Marigold decided to divorce while maintaining a good relationship. This means that forgiveness still allows for separation.

Maintaining family privacy

The family is seen as a private space that should not be intruded upon by outsiders. Forgiveness is a way to ensure family matters remain confidential: *"I have to keep my husband's mistakes and shortcomings a secret. That's the norm for my parents, including being forgiving easily."* (Aster 165-168). Family norms also hinder the disclosure of shame for participants Begonia and Dahlia, who experienced verbal and psychological bullying from their mothers: *"I have to cover up the family's shame."* (Begonia 388-389). *"But I still forgive. I can endure this pain rather than let others see our family's shame."* (Dahlia 435-440). Similarly, a participant who experienced physical and verbal bullying from her mother chose not to reveal the shame to preserve the bully's self-esteem: *"Forgiveness is my way of preserving her self-esteem."* (Nigella 114-119).

From this theme, victims still want the bullying problem resolved through forgiveness. The goal is to prevent anyone from knowing about the bullying perpetrated by family members.

5. History of Kindness

This theme explores how victims try to focus on the perpetrator's positive qualities based on their past interactions, considering one mistake should not erase past kindness. There are two sub-themes represented by five participants (Begonia, Edelweiss, Iris, Jasmine, Marigold).

Repaying past kindness by forgiving the perpetrator

The perpetrator's past kindness is a reason for the victim to forgive the perpetrator: *"I forgive him because he has actually done a lot of good things."* (Jasmine 367-368). Participants appreciated the perpetrator's kindness and reciprocated with forgiveness when mistakes occurred: *"He has also done good things for me. I don't take his kindness for granted."* (Edelweiss 704-706).

The forgiveness of both participants was based on memories of the perpetrator's past good deeds.

Focusing on the perpetrator's positive qualities

For the participants, the perpetrator still had positive qualities that could be used as reasons for forgiveness: *"The mistakes he made shouldn't negate his other good deeds."* (Marigold 1460-1462). *"Actually, Mom has many good sides. Not all of her behavior is wrong. That's why I always forgive her."* (Begonia 421-424). *"She's not completely bad in her behavior. There must be some good things too. I want to focus more on the good things."* (Iris 876-878). All three participants acknowledged that perpetrators should still be seen as human beings with good sides to their lives.

This theme shows forgiveness driven by the perpetrator's past track record of goodness and the recognition that the perpetrator also has a good side, even if it is not directed at the victim.

6. Religious Considerations

The theme of religion clearly highlights the role of religious doctrine in influencing forgiveness. There are two sub-themes represented by four participants (Aster, Begonia, Jasmine, Nigella).

Intention to carry out religious commands

Religion commands not to hold grudges, making forgiveness the most appropriate action: *"God commanded me to forgive, so I did."* (Aster 190-191). Belief in the importance of obedience and the obligation to honor parents also underpins forgiveness: *"Instead of being a disobedient child, I chose to forgive."* (Begonia 201-203). *"I understand the obligation to honor my parents. I know I must forgive."* (Nigella 221-223). Religion is the reason why forgiveness must be practiced, so sometimes forgiveness is only superficial.

Hope for reward and forgiveness from God

The belief that forgiving others brings reward, guarantees entry into heaven, and earns forgiveness from God also motivated two participants to forgive: *"I forgave his actions in the hope of receiving reward and the promise of heaven from God."* (Jasmine 202-204) and *"I forgave because I also wanted to receive forgiveness from God."* (Aster 186-190). Religious beliefs can prevent victims from seeking revenge.

Forgiving one's parents is a manifestation of one's religious obligation. Religion provides the rationale for forgiveness, so it can sometimes be merely outward. From this theme, it can be concluded that religious beliefs help

victims forgive, even when that forgiveness is based on personal gain.

A summary of the factors that influence the forgiveness of victims of bullying in the family is presented in Table 2.

These themes align with the socio-interpersonal framework model, which comprises three layers: the individual, close relationships, and society (Maercker & Hecker, 2016). The socio-interpersonal framework model is used to understand interpersonal relationships and social interactions after experiencing a traumatic event. A summary of the themes according to the socio-interpersonal framework model is shown in Figure 2.

The relationships among themes and their conceptual structure are illustrated in the thematic map (Figure 3), which provides a visual representation of the forgiveness process within family bullying contexts.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the factors influencing forgiveness among victims of bullying within nuclear families in Indonesia. The findings revealed six interconnected themes that reflect psychological, cultural, relational, and social influences on forgiveness. These results provide important insights into how forgiveness operates within collectivist family systems and highlight the complex interplay between emotional healing, social expectations, and cultural norms. This section discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Demographic Analysis

There was a striking gender difference (93% women and 7% men). This figure may suggest that women are more receptive to sharing their stories when given space to express the emotional burdens associated with the

Table 2 *Overview and brief description of themes*

No.	Theme	Description	Example
1	Breaking the chain of bullying	The desire to end suffering and trauma, thereby preventing the continuation of negative patterns in future generations.	a. Aims to find solutions and self-healing to achieve peace. b. Reconciliation without resentment. c. Preventing traumatic patterns from affecting the next generation.
2	Empathy	The victim's efforts to understand the perpetrator's perspective to change negative emotions into more positive ones.	a. Understanding the perpetrator's difficulties with their own badness. b. Recognize that each individual is prone to making mistakes. c. Give the perpetrator the right and opportunity to be forgiven.
3	Support from family and community	Get motivational, advisory, and emotional support from family and community to help victims forgive.	a. Family support and guidance in forgiveness. b. Help in restoring self-confidence. c. Professional or community support to reinforce the importance of forgiveness.
4	Maintaining family honor	Concerned with maintaining the family's reputation and dignity. Emphasis on brotherly relationships despite family conflict.	a. Avoid disclosing family conflicts to preserve a peaceful family image. b. Maintain family privacy, limiting outside interference. c. Cultivate forgiveness as a family practice. d. Emphasize the importance of family relationships during conflict.
5	History of kindness	Taking into account the perpetrator's past positive actions towards the victim.	a. Repay past kindness by forgiving. b. Focus on the positive qualities of the perpetrator. c. One mistake should not erase other good deeds.
6	Religious considerations	Making religious teachings a basis for forgiveness.	a. Intended to carry out religious commands. b. Seeking reward from forgiveness. c. Expecting forgiveness from God.

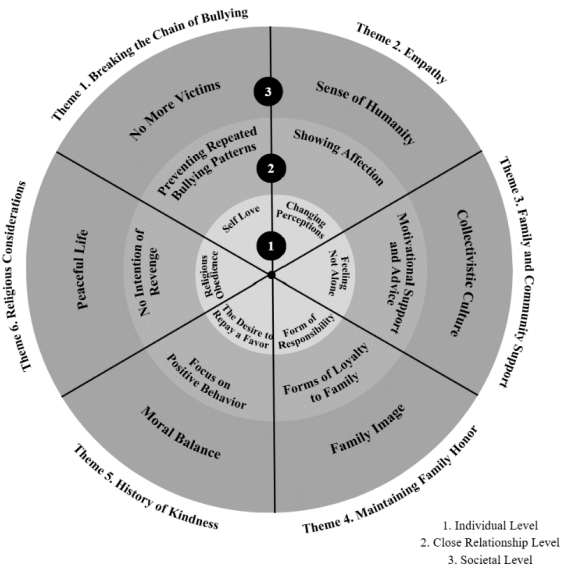


Figure 2 Summary of themes of factors influencing forgiveness of victims of bullying family according to the socio-interpersonal framework model.

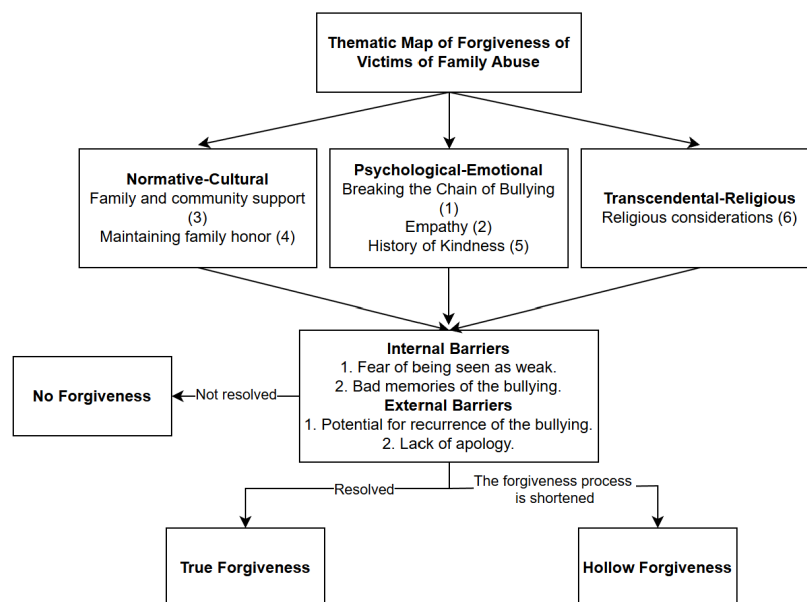


Figure 3 Thematic map of forgiveness of victim of family bullying.

bullying they experienced than men. Strong masculine norms and concerns about social judgment influence how men express themselves (Sullivan et al., 2015). This is in line with Connell's theory of masculinity, which holds that men are considered physically stronger and mentally tougher (Allen, 2025). This finding cannot be separated from the hierarchical cultural context that governs social relations in Indonesian families. Family structures with a hierarchical concept that positions men as heads of the family often also foster the view that men must be strong, making it taboo to open up about their problems. Meanwhile, women are considered more comfortable expressing their feelings. This has an impact on the themes that emerge, being dominated by typical female emotional expressions that are perhaps rarely found in men.

The predominance of verbal and psychological bullying (42.9%) indicates that domestic violence is not limited to physical violence. However, verbal and psychological bullying are more often normalized because they do not leave scars on the body, although verbal bullying related to physical and family background is the most painful (Maaliki et al., 2024). Meanwhile, half of the participants' responses (50%) were forgiveness with separation or avoidance. This finding reinforces the notion that someone can forgive but still choose to separate from the perpetrator (Sengupta et al., 2025). This means that forgiveness does not always lead to a return to the original relationship. The process of forgiveness can be seen as a mechanism for reinterpreting past traumatic experiences into something more positive (Rusmahadewi et al., 2024).

Factors that Influence the Forgiveness of Victims of Family Bullying

The research context was the nuclear family, divided into three relationships: spousal-wife,

parent-child, and sibling bullying. Findings showed mixed results regarding forgiveness among victims of family bullying in these three contexts. Six themes emerged as influential factors: breaking the chain of bullying, empathy, support from family and community, maintaining family honor, a history of kindness, and religious considerations.

Mixed results were found regarding forgiveness in cases of partner bullying. Of the six participants who had been abused by a partner, only two forgave without divorce. In this case, forgiveness has been shown to foster reconciliation between victim and perpetrator (Berndsen et al., 2018). The desire to preserve the marriage, improve the partner's behavior, and improve personal well-being are also reasons for forgiveness (Sarı & Cihan, 2024). Furthermore, the primary function of forgiveness in a marital relationship is to help maintain the value of the relationship (Fincham, 2020). However, not all cases of forgiveness end in reconciliation (Wade et al., 2014). Forgiveness also does not guarantee a lasting marriage. A person can forgive even by detaching themselves from the relationship (Sengupta et al., 2025). Divorce is chosen because the relationship is deemed unhealthy to continue, and trust is difficult to restore. This can occur when there is still a fear of the recurrence of violence if the relationship continues.

So, forgiveness and divorce are two different things. In cases of bullying between partners, forgiveness is done to release emotional burdens for peace of mind. Research by Takada and Ohbuchi (2013) explains two motivations for forgiveness: true forgiveness, which is oriented toward relationship integrity through collaborative conflict resolution, and hollow forgiveness, which is motivated by self-interest and prefers avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy.

Meanwhile, one participant firmly refused to forgive her husband. This is understand-

able, as forgiving a partner who has abused is not an easy process for victims. The severity of the offense is often a significant barrier to forgiveness (Sarı & Cihan, 2024). Furthermore, the perpetrator's ongoing negative behavior, challenges in rebuilding trust, and persistent negative emotions have been identified as reasons for difficulty in forgiving (Singh et al., 2022). In contrast, male participants chose to forgive their partners despite their divorce. Previous research also suggests that men tend to demonstrate higher levels of forgiveness and a greater willingness to overcome unforgiveness than women (Cabras et al., 2022; Kaleta & Mroz, 2022). However, men are more likely to seek retaliation when given the opportunity (Ridge et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, forgiveness offered by children who were victims of bullying by their parents focused solely on the family relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Relational practices, communication styles, and forgiveness were indeed found to be related to bullying (Berry & Adams, 2016). The results of research by Belicki et al. (2020) indicated that positive emotional responses to forgiveness occurred for relationship reasons, based on the principle that the perpetrator had repented and on empathy for the perpetrator.

Although both are driven by emotional bonds, forgiveness within families shows significant differences. Forgiveness between husband and wife focuses on restoring trust and considering family integrity. The process is highly dependent on the victim's subjective assessment of the strength of their relationship. Children's forgiveness of their parents is more motivated by strong affective bonds from childhood, social norms, and belief in religious injunctions to serve. The greatest challenge lies in overcoming the emotional wounds caused by parents' supposed protective roles. This results in hollow forgiveness, which merely maintains the relationship but

diminishes emotional closeness and trust. While forgiveness between siblings tends to be driven by empathy, the dynamics of their relationship, and the parenting role of their parents, forgiveness between siblings is relatively easier due to the fact that their relationship is permanent and equal within the family system.

The theme of breaking the chain of bullying is driven more by specific motivations: they do not want past negative experiences to become unresolved emotional wounds that could impact future well-being. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "inner child", reflects how past events continue to shape a person's emotions and behavior throughout their lives (Sjoberg et al., 2016). This includes concerns about the intergenerational transmission of violence, which carries the risk of criminal activity (Southern & Sullivan, 2021). This theme was widely chosen by participants as a mitigation effort to prevent further victims. Research also shows that experiences of violence, especially from mothers, can lead to dysfunctional communication patterns with children, such as emotional disconnection and shallow dialogue (Visser et al., 2016). As a result, children feel unprotected even though they continue to forgive. This forgiveness is motivated more by social obligations, such as respect, filial piety, and maintaining harmony associated with collectivist cultures and religious beliefs.

However, religious considerations were the least frequently cited reason (28.5%), even though victims acknowledged that religion encouraged forgiveness. Previous research also suggests that linking forgiveness to belief in God supports the forgiveness process (Haikola, 2023; Nashori et al., 2020). In this study, forgiveness motivated by religious belief tended to be oriented toward the transcendental dimension, namely the hope for reward from God, rather than as a reconcil-

iatory step to restore interpersonal relationships or return relationship dynamics to their original state. This is evident in empirical reality, where victims still choose to divorce or avoid the perpetrator even though emotional claims such as revenge or resentment are no longer maintained. Thus, religious forgiveness in this context is more declarative and vertical to God than instrumental for horizontal and restorative reconciliation. This aligns with Escher's (2013) research, which found that forgiveness stemming from strong religious roots is more easily facilitated when individuals adopt a collaborative orientation toward God and recognize God as the All-Forgiving One. Although religious coping is often an undesirable option, this strategy remains effective when combined with non-religious approaches (Torralba et al., 2021).

Although religious coping is not always an option for forgiveness, other factors, such as empathy, still allow victims to decide to forgive even without being together again. Several studies have shown that empathy is a crucial component of social interaction and plays a significant role in linking violations to forgiveness motivation (Fupšová & Záhorcová, 2022; Ma & Jiang, 2020; Raj et al., 2016). In this case, religious coping serves as a framework of meaning that can facilitate empathy in the forgiveness process within families. Religion has taught the values of forgiveness, making it easier for victims to understand and develop perspectives on the difficulties or limitations of the perpetrator. Victims also do not need to have experienced the same situation, so previous experience is not a prerequisite for empathy-motivated forgiveness (Aragon, 2016).

More empathetic individuals may experience negative emotions when they perceive another person's emotional suffering (Neumann et al., 2016). In this study, some victims struggled with empathy, leading to insincere

forgiveness. This was because forgiveness was offered to reduce personal anxiety or simply fulfill normative obligations rather than to process the wound. Therefore, some victims chose to join communities that could help them process their wounds.

In cases of parental abuse, empathy and the perpetrator's history of kindness are intertwined themes in the decision to forgive, along with family and community support. This is understandable, as empathy serves as a protective factor when parents and children experience difficult relationships (Boele et al., 2019). In the context of trauma experienced by victims, empathy, gratitude, and altruism serve as mechanisms that can facilitate forgiveness of the perpetrator (Altmaier, 2019).

The theme of family and community support revealed that respondents felt community support had a more significant impact than family support. This aligns with Indonesian collectivist cultural values. Collective action is often driven by group conformity, as individuals tend to conform to what is considered normative in a social context (Badea et al., 2021). When forgiveness is a normative value in the community, it is easier for victims to accept it without feeling defeated. Victims also tend to seek environments where they are accepted and not intimidated. Therefore, if the family fails to provide comfort, victims are more likely to seek safety and support elsewhere.

Social support systems play a crucial role in the forgiveness process, especially when the community is willing to listen rather than just offer advice and to demonstrate an objective understanding of the victim's situation (Maynard et al., 2015). Consistent with previous research, increased social support has been shown to improve problem-solving skills (Çevik & Yıldız, 2017) and influence how individuals appraise stressful events (Acoba, 2024). Social support can also be a relevant and effective mediator in family conflict and

interpersonal relationships, thus having a high potential for achieving reconciliation (Bril et al., 2024).

This study also identified several factors contributing to victims' difficulties and emotional dilemmas when forgiving. The primary obstacle is the perpetrator's lack of change in attitude. Persistent negative behavior makes it difficult for individuals to forgive (Singh et al., 2022). However, it is also important to refrain from judging the perpetrator so that conditions are conducive to motivating them to change their bad behavior (Baum & Pender, 2023). Furthermore, external criticism that views forgiveness as an unreasonable choice can lead victims to interpret it as a lack of support (Eaton et al., 2022). Therefore, it is also important for victims to change their perception that forgiveness is a morally sound choice and does not threaten their well-being (Horowski, 2022).

Referring to Enright's forgiveness model (Uncovering, Deepening, Decision, and Work), research shows that the pressures of cultural and religious norms often "shorten" this natural process (Freedman & Enright, 2019). Victims may be forced to formally forgive without going through the previous phases. This creates the risk of pseudo-forgiveness, where outward reconciliation is inconsistent with the victim's psychological recovery, potentially hindering long-term healing.

Research Limitations

Not all participants can recall past events in detail, as retrospective studies often lack information, resulting in incomplete data. Recall bias is especially likely when events are long past (Talari & Goyal, 2020). This limitation provides room for improvement in future research by triangulating data. For the theme of remembering the history of kindness and empathy, researchers were more diligent in

exploring questions that facilitated participants' recall of events while still adhering to research ethics.

This study employed a qualitative methodology that is not designed to offer a universal solution. However, its findings are expected to provide a deeper understanding of forgiveness in victims of bullying. This includes considering Indonesia's socio-cultural complexity, where collectivist culture, social pressure, and religious norms are uniquely intertwined in understanding forgiveness. This depth of analysis distinguishes it from Western psychological models, such as the dilemma of demands for justice and self-esteem within local culture.

This study also focused solely on the victim's perspective, so the relational dynamics associated with forgiveness, whether authentic or not, are beyond the scope of this study. The research was conducted in Indonesia, a collectivistic culture with a predominantly Muslim population, so the values of forgiveness found may be strongly influenced by this specific context. Findings may differ if conducted in countries with individualistic cultures and differing religious beliefs. Given the sensitivity of this topic, it is possible that some profound experiences may not be fully revealed, limiting the depth of the analysis.

Implications

These findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive environment to address bullying within the family and prevent its transmission to future generations. Not all cases of family bullying have to end in divorce, hostility, or legal action. Forgiveness can be recommended by marriage and family counselors. Forgiveness is far better than harboring anger and seeking revenge. However, it is important to note that forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation, forgetting, or

justifying bad actions (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Counselors should also be cautious in providing advice if the victim of bullying is still experiencing trauma.

The focus of future research should shift from questions about the factors that promote forgiveness to more critical questions, such as "Under what conditions does forgiveness lead victims to healing or further harm?" In doing so, research can contribute to the creation of more ethical, sensitive, and effective practices in supporting the recovery of victims of family bullying.

Conclusion

Forgiveness has been proven to be a beneficial solution for victims of bullying, both emotionally, relationally, and physiologically. However, victims face challenges in responding when the perpetrator is a family member. For example, there is the dilemma of maintaining family honor with self-protection instincts, and between religious teachings on forgiveness and demands for justice. At the policy level, restorative justice is needed without neglecting the victim's trauma recovery, thus positioning forgiveness as an option rather than a necessity. Longitudinal studies tracking the impact of using these themes will provide empirical evidence of what leads to long-term healing and resilience for victims.

Forgiveness in the context of Indonesian families is the result of the interaction of three interrelated factors. First, normative-cultural factors emphasize harmony, respect, and social obligations (maintaining family honor and receiving support from family and community). Second, psychological-emotional factors focus on calmness, healing wounds, and managing the inner child (empathy, breaking the chain of bullying, and a history of kindness). Third, transcendental-religious factors focus on obedience to religious commands and the

hope of receiving rewards and forgiveness from God (religious considerations).

These findings underscore that in collectivist cultures like Indonesia, forgiveness tends to follow a pattern of pseudo-reconciliation. This pattern is characterized by pursuing normative demands (maintaining the appearance of a harmonious relationship) without releasing positive emotions, restoring trust, and fully resolving the issue. Forgiveness serves only to fulfill the need for social display and to maintain collective honor within the family. Meanwhile, psychological wounds are displaced and suppressed. The results of this study provide new insights into the need to shift the meaning of forgiveness from merely pursuing reconciliation to focusing more on analyzing the gap between adherence to norms and the victim's actual psychological state.

These conclusions are expected to serve as a foundation for further research, exploring the strategies victims of family bullying use to bridge this gap, ensuring that cultural and religious norms are not used to pressure victims to forgive without the psychological and emotional healing involved in the forgiveness process.

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