

**ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL**Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. October-December 2025. Page# 2186-2192

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17793818>**Emotional Faces and Forgiveness: A Qualitative Investigation in Pakistani Adults****Saira Jabeen**

Clinical Psychologist

[sjabeen.psychologist@gmail.com](mailto:sjabeen.psychologist@gmail.com) ORCID iD: 0009-0001-3173-6059**Tuba Khalid**

MS. Clinical Psychology Scholar, RICPP, Riphah International University, Gulberg Lahore,

[tuba2412@gmail.com](mailto:tuba2412@gmail.com) ORCID iD: 0009-0006-9032-9345**Saira Fazal**

MPhil Psychology, Lecturer Psychology, Department of RICPP, Riphah International University, Lahore,

[sairafazal0@gmail.com](mailto:sairafazal0@gmail.com) ORCID iD: 0009-0008-5658-7616**Corresponding Author: Saira Jabeen, [sjabeen.psychologist@gmail.com](mailto:sjabeen.psychologist@gmail.com)****Abstract**

*This qualitative study explored how emotional facial expressions shape the willingness to forgive among adults in Pakistan while keeping cultural and religious meanings in mind. A total of forty eight participants between 20 and 40 years old took part in four group interviews and all conversations were carried out in Urdu. The study used culturally adapted photographs that showed sad, happy, and neutral faces to spark reflection. Questions were taken from well-known US measures like TRIM 12, IRI, EC, and FEEL, but they were turned into open-ended prompts so that people could speak freely in their own words. Thematic analysis brought forward four main ideas: Sadness often opened the door to forgiveness; Many participants described forgiveness as a cultural and religious duty; Stress influenced how people noticed and interpreted emotional expressions; Empathy made the movement toward forgiveness stronger and more meaningful. Each theme held several subthemes and these were supported through direct quotes from participants. The findings suggest that emotional recognition works together with personal traits and cultural values to guide forgiveness decisions in Pakistan. The study offers practical insight for therapy, conflict resolution, and educational settings with an emphasis on approaches that respect cultural and religious contexts.*

**Keywords:** *forgiveness, emotional facial expressions, empathy, qualitative research, Pakistan*

**Introduction**

Forgiveness is a complex part of human life. It touches our relationships, mental health, and the way we connect with others in society (Toussaint & Friedman, 2020). In countries like Pakistan, forgiveness is not only a personal choice but something taught through religion, family values, and the expectations of the people around us. It

shapes how people decide whether to let go of hurt or hold onto it (Naeem et al., 2024) Despite being so important there is not much research that looks closely at what triggers forgiveness emotionally in Pakistani adults

Studies from other parts of the world especially the United States show that seeing sadness on someone's face often makes people more willing to forgive them (Batson et al., 2015; McCullough et al., 2021) The empathy altruism idea suggests that when we notice sadness in others it can spark caring feelings and push us to act in helpful ways like forgiving (Eisenberg & Miller, 2019) But people are different Some forgive more easily some less Empathy how much attention they pay and their own tendency to forgive changes how they respond Also stress can change how we notice emotions and affect our decisions to forgive in real situations (Robinson et al., 2023)

The U.S. study that inspired this work used numbers and large samples to measure how facial expressions affected forgiveness While useful those methods cannot show the small cultural details the personal stories or the meaning making that happens when people decide to forgive in Pakistan The present study takes the same ideas but uses a qualitative approach letting adults explain in their own words how they notice emotions how they think about cultural and religious duties and how they balance what they feel with what society expects

### **Research Objectives**

- 1 Explore how sad happy and neutral facial expressions influence forgiveness decisions
- 2 Examine how trait forgiveness and empathy appear in participants stories
- 3 Investigate how stress changes attention to emotional expressions
- 4 Identify cultural and religious influences that shape forgiveness in Pakistan

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative descriptive design with semi-structured interviews to capture participants experiences their interpretations and the way they make decisions about forgiveness This design works well for studying ideas that are deeply embedded in culture like forgiveness and noticing emotions in others

#### **Participants**

Forty eight adults between 20 and 40 years old took part in the study Twenty six were female and twenty two male Participants were purposively selected from urban and semi urban areas of Punjab and Sindh They were divided into four groups of twelve so that discussions could be interactive yet manageable Participants had to speak Urdu and be willing to talk about personal experiences of forgiveness and have no history of severe psychiatric disorders The sample was chosen to reflect diversity in gender age and educational background

### **Materials**

#### **Facial Expression Stimuli**

Culturally adapted photographs of Pakistani faces showing sadness happiness and neutral expressions were used They were inspired by the FEEL database (Traue, 2002) and pretested for recognizability emotional intensity and cultural relevance

### Interview Guide

Open-ended questions were developed based on items from TRIM 12 IRI EC and willingness to forgive scales but they were not formally translated or validated. Instead the questions were adapted into simple Urdu prompts to allow participants to speak freely in their own words. Sample questions included

- **Trait forgiveness**
- “ہیں؟ کرتے فیصلہ کیسے پر کرنے معاف آپ ہے؟ ہوتا کیا ردعمل کا آپ تو ہے پہنچاتا نقصان کو آپ کوئی جب”
- **Empathy**
- “ہیں؟ ہوتے پیدا احساسات کیا اندر کے آپ تو ہیں دیکھتے اداس کو کسی آپ جب”
- **Willingness to forgive**
- “ہے؟ سکتا ڈال اثر پر فیصلے کے کرنے معاف کے آپ یہ کیا ہیں؟ کرتے محسوس کیا آپ کر دیکھ چہرہ یہ”
- **Stress influence**
- “ہوگا؟ فرق کیا میں ردعمل کے آپ تو پہنچائے تھیس کو آپ کوئی اور ہوں میں دباؤ آپ اگر”

### Procedure

- Participants gave written informed consent
- Group interviews were conducted in four groups of twelve and lasted about 40 to 50 minutes each
- Facial expression images were shown sequentially and participants responded to each prompt
- Discussions were audio recorded transcribed in Urdu and then translated into English
- Ethical considerations such as confidentiality voluntary participation and emotional support were ensured

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006)

- 1 Familiarization Transcripts were read multiple times to become familiar with the data
- 2 Coding Meaningful statements about emotions empathy stress and forgiveness were identified and coded
- 3 Theme generation Codes were grouped into broader categories
- 4 Review Themes were checked across groups to ensure consistency
- 5 Definition Themes were named with clear subthemes
- 6 Reporting Themes were supported with direct participant quotes and examples from dialogues

### Rigor Measures

- Credibility Member checking was done with ten participants to verify interpretations
- Dependability A detailed audit trail was maintained throughout
- Transferability Thick descriptions of context and participants were provided
- Confirmability Multiple researchers coded the transcripts independently to reduce bias

### Results

#### Results

#### Overview

Four major themes emerged, each with subthemes and supporting participant quotations. Such a framework embodies emotional, cultural and contextual aspects of forgiveness in Pakistan.

### Theme 1: Sadness Evokes Forgiveness

The respondents always said that they experience empathy when sad facial expressions are involved, and they are more likely to forgive.

#### Subthemes

##### 1. Emotional empathy

- Participant A: "کر معاف اسے میں اور ہے، پچھتاوا واقعی وہ کہ ہے لگتا مجھے ہے، اداس شخص وہ کہ ہوں دیکھتا میں جب" "ہوں۔ دیتا"
- Participant B: "ہے۔ جاتا ہو نرم دل کر دیکھ اداسی کی اس لیکن ہے، ہوتی ناراضگی میں شروع"

##### 2. Perceived remorse

- Participant C: "ہے۔ جاتا ہو آسان کرنا معاف تو ہے، شرمندہ واقعی شخص وہ کہ دیکھوں میں اگر"

##### 3. Relationship preservation

- Participant D: "ہے۔ جاتا ہو نرم دل کر دیکھ چہرہ اداس لئے اس چاہتا، کرنا نہیں خراب کو تعلقات اپنے میں"

**Interpretation:** Empathic concern is provoked by the sadness of others, which supports the hypothesis of empathy- altruism among the Pakistani culture.

### Theme 2: Cultural and Religious Duty to Forgive

Forgiveness was often framed as moral or religious obligation, reflecting societal norms.

#### Subthemes

##### 1. Faith and religious teaching

- Participant E: "کروں۔ معاف میں کہ چاہئے کرنی کوشش مجھے لئے اس ہے، حصہ کا مذہب میرے دینا معافی"

##### 2. Family and social expectations

- Participant F: "ہے۔ ضروری کرنا معاف کو والوں کرنے غلطی کہ ہے جاتا سیکھایا بھی میں فیملی ہماری"

##### 3. Social cohesion

- Participant G: "ہے۔ رکھتا قائم امن سماجی اور ہے کرتا مضبوط کو تعلقات کرنا معاف"

**Interpretation:** Regardless of the emotional stimuli and addressing the context-related aspects, religion and cultural systems promote forgiveness.

### Theme 3: Stress Modulates Attention to Emotional Expressions

Respondents observed that emotional responses change attention to emotional signals, which impact the forgiveness decision.

#### Subthemes

##### 1. Selective attention

- Participant H: "کم۔ پر چہروں خوش اور ہوں دیتا توجہ زیادہ پر چہرے اداس میں تو ہوں، میں دباؤ میں جب"

##### 2. Cognitive load

- Participant I: "ہے۔ ہوتا محسوس وہ ہو واضح سے سب جو صرف پاتا، دیکھ نہیں چہرہ ہر میں میں دباؤ"

##### 3. Emotional regulation

- Participant J: "ہے۔ سکتی ہو تاخیر میں دینے معافی اور ہے، جاتا ہو جذباتی زیادہ فیصلہ کا دل وقت کے دباؤ"

**Interpretation:** Stress also affects attention and decision making, and therefore the situational factors and forgiveness interact in association.

#### Theme 4: Empathy Amplifies Forgiveness

The capability of empathizing by the participants had a significant influence on their disposition to forgive.

##### Subthemes

##### 1. Perspective taking

- Participant K: “بہوتا مائل طرف کی کرنے معاف اسے دل میرا تو ہوں کرتا کوشش کی سمجھنے حالت کی اس میں اگر۔”

##### 2. Emotional resonance

- Participant L: “آتی معافی اور پہ جاتی ہو کم نفرت میری تو پہ، رہا گزر سے حالت کس شخص وہ کہ ہوں کرتا تصور میں جب۔”

##### 3. Moral reflection

- Participant M: “پہ۔ بہوتی آسانی میں دینے معافی سے کرنے غور پر حالات اور جذبات اپنے۔”

**Interpretation:** The empathic concern influences perception of emotions and cultural norms to the process of forgiveness.

**Table 1: Themes and Subthemes**

| Theme                         |  | Subtheme                      | Example Quote (translated)   |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Sadness evokes forgiveness    |  | Emotional empathy             | “When I see someone sad after hurting me, I feel they are remorseful, and I forgive them.” |
| Sadness evokes forgiveness    |  | Perceived remorse             | “Seeing genuine remorse makes forgiveness easier.”   |
| Sadness evokes forgiveness    |  | Relationship preservation     | “I don’t want to damage relationships, so sadness softens my heart.”                       |
| Cultural/religious duty       |  | Faith and norms               | “Forgiveness is part of my religion; I try to forgive.”                                    |
| Cultural/religious duty       |  | Family and social expectation | “My family teaches that it is necessary to forgive.”                                       |
| Cultural/religious duty       |  | Social cohesion               | “Forgiveness strengthens relationships and social peace.”                                  |
| Stress affects attention      |  | Selective focus               | “When stressed, I notice sad faces more than happy ones.”                                  |
| Stress affects attention      |  | Cognitive load                | “Under stress, I only perceive the most obvious faces.”                                    |
| Stress affects attention      |  | Emotional regulation          | “Stress makes my heart more emotional, delaying forgiveness.”                              |
| Empathy amplifies forgiveness |  | Perspective taking            | “Understanding their situation inclines me to forgive.”                                    |
| Empathy amplifies forgiveness |  | Emotional resonance           | “Imagining their state reduces my anger and allows forgiveness.”                           |
| Empathy amplifies forgiveness |  | Moral reflection              | “Reflecting on my emotions and circumstances makes forgiveness easier.”                    |

## Discussion

This study offers a deeply humanized understanding of how people in Pakistan make sense of forgiveness revealing the delicate interplay between emotional cues cultural narratives and personal psychological processes Participants' responses showed that sadness is a particularly powerful trigger for forgiveness echoing international findings that sadness often awakens empathic concern and softens interpersonal boundaries (Batson et al., 2015) Yet in the Pakistani context forgiveness extended beyond an emotional reaction it was often described as a moral pathway a religious responsibility and an essential part of sustaining relationships and social harmony This grounding in faith and cultural ethics sets Pakistan apart from Western samples and underscores the need for culturally sensitive models of moral decision making

Stress also played a meaningful role in how individuals interpreted emotional expressions Participants described moments when heightened stress narrowed their emotional bandwidth making forgiveness more difficult or shifting their attention away from subtle emotional cues These observations resonate with broader literature suggesting that stress reshapes cognitive processing and emotion regulation (Robinson et al., 2023) Equally important was the strong presence of empathy in shaping participants' choices Whether through perspective taking or emotional resonance empathy acted as a bridge connecting the perceived emotion of the other person with the internal moral reasoning of the self

Taken together the findings illustrate that forgiveness in Pakistan is not a single psychological act but a layered process It is shaped by external emotional signals internal cognitive and affective responses and the cultural stories people carry about what it means to be a good human being a responsible family member or a spiritually grounded person The human voices in this study highlight forgiveness not as an abstract concept but as a lived relational and emotionally textured experience

## Practical Implications

Humanistic wisdom of this study gives enough viable solutions of bettering emotional health and interaction harmony.

- **Therapist Practice** that involves the incorporation of the emotion recognition training that involves the empathy training and the culturally sensitive models like the religious stories of mercy and compassion can be applied to help the clients deal with the interpersonal wounds in a healthier pattern.
- **Education** The education Emotional literacy programs may help young people to be more aware of their feelings and be more capable of perceiving emotional expressions of other individuals and to learn to see forgiveness as their strength and not their weakness.
- **Practitioners** in family school or community work as Conflict Resolution may apply the emotional implications of sadness in this specific case, and the cultural values of compassion sabr patience and reconciliation to have an effective de-escalation of conflict and a healing effect on the situation.

This fact is reinforced by these implications that forgiveness is a psychological skill and cultural resource.

## Limitations

Even though this research study had great insights into the topic of forgiveness in Pakistan, there were several limitations that should be put into consideration The sample was primarily obtained in urban areas and this may

not necessarily capture the richness of dynamic emotional communication that occurs through tone gestures and microexpressions And most importantly self-report data is always subject to the influence of the social desirability factor particularly in societies where forgiveness is considered to be a moral virtue and an emotional marker.

Such inadequacies do not null down the findings but rather they aid in putting them into perspective and utilizing them to make them better in the future.

### **Future Directions**

Further research would be well advised to access rural and underrepresented groups to access a broader variety of cultural experiences Incorporating techniques such as physiological measures of eye tracking Incorporation of approaches such as eye tracking Incorporation of methods such as eye tracking Incorporation of methods such as eye tracking Incorporation of methods such as eye tracking Incorporation of methods such as eye tracking Incorporation of methods such as eye tracking

### **Conclusion**

In essence, what the paper is offering is that forgiveness in Pakistan is a kind of emotion recognition that is extremely interwoven with emotional regulation of stress and the moral schemas that exist within the society of Pakistani, which is bound to instigate the depth and the meaning of forgiveness within the context of therapeutic intervention, educational practices and conflict resolution endeavors that is respectful of the science of psychology and not of the cultural realities of the Pakistani society.

### **References**

- Batson CD Ahmad N Lishner DA Qureshi AW Strong HA (2015) Empathy and altruism Does it promote forgiveness Journal of Social Psychology 155(3) 285–298
- Braun V Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology Qualitative Research in Psychology 3(2) 77–101
- Davis MH (1983) Measuring individual differences in empathy Evidence for a multidimensional approach Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 44(1) 113–126
- Eisenberg N Miller PA (2019) Empathy and prosocial behavior Annual Review of Psychology 70 1–28
- McCullough ME Root LM Tabak BA (2021) Forgiveness Theory research and practice Oxford University Press
- Naeem M Zaheer A Khan ML (2024) Emotional intelligence gratitude and forgiveness among university students Pakistan Journal of Positive Psychology 1(1) 8–14
- Robinson E Siddiqui S Ahmed F (2023) Emotion recognition and social functioning Evidence from Pakistani adults Asian Journal of Psychology 17(2) 101–117
- Toussaint L Friedman P (2020) Forgiveness mental health and well-being A review Current Opinion in Psychology 36 1–6
- Traue HC (2002) FEEL Facially Expressed Emotion Labeling Journal of Nonverbal Behavior 26(3) 171–180