













Understanding the Nature and Consequences of Transgressions and Forgiveness in the Workplace in India

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Abstract

The cultural context of an organisation may significantly shape the nature of transgressions and consequent forgiveness relevant to understanding the workplace outcomes. This study explored the nature of transgressions and the dynamics of forgiveness in the workplace of a heterogeneous Indian sample which have not been well addressed in previous studies. Qualitative research design was employed. Using a purposive sampling method, 48 participants from the government (n = 30) and private organisations (n = 18) were selected to form the final sample. The transcriptions from semi-structured interviews were analyzed by the Thematic Analysis Method. Two themes related to the nature of transgressions emerged: multiplicity of the sources of workplace transgressions (such as anger, discrimination, and work overload) and communications of workplace transgressions (e.g., through criticism, altered relationships, warnings). Concerning the dynamics of forgiveness in the workplace, three broad themes emerged: facilitators of workplace forgiveness (such as positive treatment, direct communication, scolding), barriers to workplace forgiveness (like, the intention behind wrongdoing, repetition of wrongdoing, decreased trust), and benefits of workplace forgiveness (such as positive emotions, good relations, healthy work environment). Management should develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of transgressions and the



dynamics of forgiveness embedded in a specific cultural context which may help enhance a variety of positive organisational outcomes. Workplace transgressions and concomitant forgiveness are interwoven with the nature of organisations, individual level factors and socio-cultural contexts. Findings also provide some support that the coexistence of individualistic and collectivistic cultural values among Indians may have shaped workplace transgressions and consequent forgiveness.

Keywords

collectivistic culture, forgiveness, qualitative study, thematic analysis, transgression, workplace

Forgiveness traditionally has been the subject matter of religion and philosophy (Enright et al., 2020). During the past two decades, a sudden upsurge in the scientific study of forgiveness has been noted after the Positive Psychology movement (Legaree et al., 2007). Forgiveness refers to giving up resentment against or the desire to punish, stop being angry with, pardon, or to give up all claims to punish or exact penalty for an offence (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019). Forgiveness helps individuals to grant complete absolution and redemption, frees from resentment of past and fosters well-being, positive relationships, and flourishing (Epstein et al., 1998).

Studies report that forgiveness cultivates internal harmony, positive emotional and cognitive frameworks, reparative strength, compassion, well-being, health outcomes, and productive relationships for children and adults (Demertzis, 2020; Pandey et al., 2020). It promotes positive health behaviours, social support, and flourishing for individuals and groups because of its inherent qualities of reparation, resilience, coping, and enhanced self-acceptance (Maynard et al., 2016). It carries positive emotions that directly strengthen physical and psychological health by shaping perceptions, attributions and physiological processes (Enright et al., 2020; Karner-Huțuleac, 2020), and it reduces depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviours in adolescents and adults (Barcaccia et al., 2020).

Given these widely reported benefits of forgiveness, in the recent past, some studies (Firulescu et al., 2020; Giebels & Janssen, 2005) focused on understanding the impact of forgiveness on various indices of organisational outcomes. These studies observed that workplace conflicts and transgressions, varying in nature and severity, may result in absenteeism (Firulescu et al., 2020), lack of productivity (Mulki et al., 2015), stress (May et al., 2021), and adverse health outcomes (Salvador, 2019).

Workplace transgressions and conflicts may also affect the behaviour and motivations of employees which may lead to withdrawal, reduced cooperation, and aggressive behaviour (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Organisational relationships differ from ordinary human interactions and thus, they may reflect dissimilar nature, dynamics and mechanisms of forgiveness (Enright et al., 2020), due to the specific nature of stress and conflicts involved in the former (Toussaint et al., 2019). The processes and dynamics of interpersonal and social life may represent a different set of social and interpersonal contexts, communication patterns, compulsions and life outcomes as compared to that in the workplace. Workplace forgiveness may occur in more structured and formal relation-

ships where mutuality and cooperation may be unavoidable and the relationships may have legal and formal structures with more tangible outcomes and scope. Here the nature and impact of transgressions may occur more concretely and explicitly and forgiveness may be negotiated. The negotiated aspect of forgiveness is more social and contextual (Andrews, 2000) and may involve justice, discrimination, caste, and class identities with current socio-political happenings and history of relationships in the society.

From the preceding review of literature, it is amply clear that the scientific study of forgiveness has been largely conducted in American and Western cultural contexts (Temoshok & Chandra, 2000). Most of the modern theories of forgiveness (Worthington, 2006) lend their genesis in urban and individualistic American and Western cultures that conceptualize interpersonal conflicts to be individual-focused (Demertzis, 2020; Karner-Huțuleac, 2020). These individualistic and situational models of forgiveness may not be useful for collectivistic cultures where conflicts and transgressions may have community orientations with emphasis on interdependence and salience of social and cultural norms (Sandage et al., 2003) rather than on the situational context. Collectivist culture lays more emphasis on social harmony, interdependent self and compulsory reconciliation in the face of conflicts (Sandage et al., 2003). Re-establishing damaged relationships, social harmony, and compassion may be more important goals in collectivistic societies (e.g., India) than the relevance of avoidance and revenge (Sandage et al., 2003). Thus, the nature and dynamics of workplace transgressions and forgiveness may differ across individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Despite the salience of studying workplace forgiveness in a collectivistic culture, studies focusing on workplace forgiveness in Eastern cultures, such as India, are somewhat lacking. The study of the nature of transgressions and associated dynamics of forgiveness in workplaces in countries like India is important because without taking into account the cultural and situational distinctions in the understanding of forgiveness, it will remain distant from lived experiences (McCullough et al., 2000).

Research suggests that cultural and contextual differences may cause differences in the construal of the role of apology, transgression, and models of forgiveness in practice which may have significant organisational outcomes of specific nature (DiBlasio, 2001). An exploration of the nature of forgiveness in the Indian cultural milieu is also essential as cultural differences in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and other factors have been reported (Lennon, 2013). For example, in collectivistic societies like India, Taiwan and Japan, individuals are influenced more by culturally-defined roles (Takaku et al., 2001) and judge transgressions by taking into account the key historical events (Mullet & Neto, 2009), the conceptions of the offended person or group (Bagnulo et al., 2009), self-construal group loyalty and support, social connection and security (Deal & Prince, 2003), and social harmony (Joo et al., 2019) as compared to individuals from individualistic cultures.

Indian society is basically a mix of a traditionalist society and a modernist society with a prominence of the former. Here people have a strong inclination towards collective values which involve relationship and group norms orientation, social harmony, and interdependence (Hofstede, 1984; Tripathi, 2019). The mindset enshrined in collectivistic values may exert incessant influence on their behaviour and functioning in all spheres of life including forgiveness in the workplace (Dahiya & Rangnekar, 2020).

Apart from these reasons, most of the earlier studies have focused on factors that promote forgiveness, while from the perspective of a systems approach, it is also important to explore the factors that create a hindrance to forgiveness (Bies et al., 2016). Research suggests that the nature, type, and severity of transgressions play a significant role in forgiveness (e.g., Gabriels & Strelan, 2018). However, little has been done to qualitatively explore the nature of transgression in the workplace in Indian settings particularly for understanding the dynamics of transgressions and forgiveness.

Another important rationale for undertaking the current study was the fact that the studies on workplace forgiveness are mostly based on self-report methods (Toussaint et al., 2018). The use of quantitative methods does not allow reflecting much upon the occurrence of transgressions and forgiveness processes in the workplace settings due to the cultural differences in the conceptualisations of transgressions and forgiveness. However, qualitative methods are deemed more helpful where the nature and attributes of the construct/s are not explicit, the significant correlates are not known or there is no guiding framework or theory (Creswell et al., 2004).

Thus, the current study not only differs in goals and methods from earlier studies but also its findings may be of help to understand various outcomes at the workplace. For example, it may shed light on the methods employees use to understand workplace transgressions and strategies they employ to exhibit forgiveness. These new insights may be of help to improve relationships, productivity and other positive outcomes at the workplace. They may also help employers to develop forgiveness-based interventions aimed at relieving their employees from emotional constraints and instability in work relationships (Cao et al., 2021). These, in turn, may enhance their job satisfaction, work engagement, creativity, cooperation, commitment, productivity and well-being (Cao et al., 2021) and may reduce aggression and burnout at the workplace (Liao et al., 2013).

The aforesaid gaps and the interwoven nature of transgression and forgiveness necessitated undertaking this study to explore the nature of transgressions in the workplace and associated dynamics of forgiveness using qualitative research methods. Understanding transgressions may be relevant to other aspects of forgiveness, such as unforgiveness (Rapske et al., 2010; Stackhouse et al., 2018). The presence or absence of a climate of procedural justice and organizational structures (absolute and hierarchical) has significant implications to underscore transgressions, forgiveness, and their consequent outcomes (Aquino et al., 2006).

Research Context and Purpose

The foregoing discussions suggest that the meaning and practice of forgiveness and its correlates may have strong links with cultural contexts. Further, the dynamics or the mechanisms and/or correlates of forgiveness in the workplace settings in India are poorly understood and it is yet unclear why some people exercise forgiveness in the same organisational structures whereas others refrain from it, even though the legal provisions of the organisations for violating norms or transgressions are the same. Thus, the nature of transgressions, the reasons that prevent the exercise of forgiveness, the strategies used to forgive, and the correlates of forgiveness in the workplace are poorly understood.

The present study attempts to fill these gaps in the literature by exploring the nature of the perceived causes of transgressions and the challenges, dynamics, and benefits of forgiveness in the workplace of a heterogeneous sample of employees working in government and private sectors in India. Specifically, using qualitative methods in a new cultural milieu (collectivistic culture like India), the study aimed to understand the nature and types of transgressions, the sources and the process of becoming aware of transgressions, and the reactions after getting familiar with the transgressions. The study also explored the strategies of forgiving and the difficulties and benefits of forgiving transgressors at the workplace to come up with new insights.

Private organisations are self-reliant and governed by private management. These are different from government sector organisations in which the government holds the majority of the shares. Thus, these organisations significantly differ in the service conditions and the nature of the job, work environment, and culture. We chose only those governmental and private organisations which had a clear organisational structure with a diversity of gender, age, work-related experiences, and relationships. The organisations chosen for this study are situated in Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India. It is the district headquarter and a suburban area with a population of around 4 lacs. The society of Sagar is a mix of people with collectivistic and individualistic values with more prominence of the former. The pace of life is average and most people follow and practice the Hindu religion.

Method and Materials

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed which used a semi-structured interview protocol to develop a deeper understanding of the nature and sources of transgressions in the workplace and consequent forgiveness. The narrative approach of inquiry was used that refers to a dialogical exchange with the participants to arrive at the meanings

held by them through a blend of inductive and deductive processes for interpreting data and making inferences (Levitt et al., 2018).

Participants

Forty-eight participants comprising 33 males and 15 females (*Age Range* = 30–58 yrs., *Mean Age* = 37.56 yrs., *SD* = 6.38) were chosen through purposive sampling method. They were employed at different positions in various government ($n = 30$) and private ($n = 18$) organisations in Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India. Participants with at least five years of work experience and perceived good health (as reported by them) were included in the study.

Five years of work experience was used as an inclusion criterion because with this duration of time the employees are likely to have developed significant familiarity with organisational functioning and relationships. The nature of one's role, discipline, relationships with co-employees, rights and duties and the required skills are some examples. In this way, one could be expected to have a good understanding of the happenings of the transgressions and the significance of forgiveness in the workplace. This information was important for participants' full involvement and cooperation in the interview process.

Similarly, perceived good health condition was also used as an inclusion criterion given the empirical evidence documenting bidirectional relationships among health, stress (transgression), and forgiveness (Toussaint et al., 2016). Further, health has been reported to significantly influence life outcomes including the perception of transgressions (stress) and forgiveness (Lee & Enright, 2019). Prospective participants with less than five years of work experience and unwilling to participate due to some personal reasons were excluded from the study. The full demographics of participants are presented in [Supplementary Materials Table 1](#).

Recruitment

The junior researchers visited five governmental and three private organisations and sought permission from the competent authorities of the organisations. Then they contacted all the members of the organisations and briefed them about the basic study objectives. We have selected samples from this location only due to the unavailability of funds for going beyond this location.

Those who agreed to participate and gave their written consent were included in the study. Initially, 75 participants were invited who were found suitable as per the inclusion criteria. Out of these, 27 were excluded either due to their personal problems (08), refusal to participate (05), unavailability (03), transfer (01), urgent assignment (04), being only a single participant from the public sector (01) or unwillingness (05) to continue to study.

Forty-eight participants fulfilled the inclusion criteria and provided written consent to participate in the study.

Pilot Study

Before the start of actual data collection, some consensus meetings and pilot interviews were carried out employing four participants with work experience of more than 5 years that helped in the development of a preliminary interview protocol. The data of these participants were not included in the final analysis. These efforts strengthened the interview protocol/schedule as well as the interviewing skills of the researchers.

Data Saturation

The data collection indicated saturation when no new themes and codes emerged from the additional interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). Inductive thematic saturation was adopted that focuses on the identification and number of new codes and themes (Saunders et al., 2018).

In this study, we observed that inductive thematic saturation occurred with the completion of forty-five interviews but an additional three participants were interviewed to confirm the saturation. Thus, it resulted in a final sample of 48 participants. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the transcriptions were read multiple times and compared with one another to assess continuity in meaning according to the study goals each day. Any inconsistencies so observed were removed.

Interview Questions

The following open-ended semi-structured interview questions were asked from the participants, which were adapted, elaborated, or used flexibly according to the demands of the individual context:

1. Can you tell me the nature and types of wrongdoings occurring at your workplace against you?
2. How do you become aware of the wrongdoings that occur in your workplace?
3. What steps do you follow when you become familiar with these wrongdoings?
4. How do you forgive other people/situations in your workplace for their wrongdoings?
5. What difficulties do you face when you try to forgive people at your workplace?
6. What are the benefits of forgiving people and situations in your workplace?
7. Can you tell me something more about the importance of forgiveness in your workplace?

Procedure

Initial Development of the Interview Protocol

The pilot study facilitated taking decisions regarding the initiation of the interview process with an open and unstructured inquiry about their varied experiences of transgressions and processes of forgiveness in the workplace. This also allowed the participants to talk about their experiences of transgressions and occurrences of forgiveness in their workplace settings.

The emergent themes were added to the further interview protocol as they came up. For example, it became explicit after the completion of ten interviews that the experience of transgressions and their consonant forgiveness may be difficult for some to understand and discuss with the interviewers in the beginning. Moreover, the participants may show differences in their emphasis on the nature of transgressions and the relevance of forgiveness according to their social status, designations, and organisational roles. These insights helped the interviewers to shape their supplementary queries about workplace transgressions and forgiveness.

The Interview Process

Using a semi-structured one-to-one interview protocol, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted and the contents of the same were audio-taped. The average duration of the interviews was 32.50 minutes. Each interview was started with some initial questions (e.g., How are you? How are things in your life?) followed by focused questions presented above.

Some supplementary, probe, and follow-up questions were also asked according to the unique needs in the case of each participant. These questions were meant only for clarification. With the completion of each interview, a code was assigned to each participant and the contents were transcribed verbatim and also scrutinized for their accuracy, completeness and consistency as previously suggested (Howitt, 2016).

The participants were not familiar with the researchers before meeting with them during the data collection, thus excluding familiarity as a response-biasing factor. The cultural similarity between the participants and the interviewer as well as the interviewers' knowledge and/or familiarity of the participants' religion facilitated smooth communication and understanding of each other's viewpoints. Due care was taken to minimize the incongruity in power and emotional labour demands between the interviewers and the participants as suggested by researchers (Hoffmann, 2007). To achieve these goals, the interviewers recognized the views of the participants and expressed their intentions that the facts, information and contents provided by them (participants) are the only significant sources to learn about workplace experiences of transgressions and concomitant forgiveness.

The interviewers also expressed that their intention is only to learn from their experiences (Hoffmann, 2007). They were informed that their privacy and confidentiality will be maintained. For example, codes were assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity and they were made aware that the facts of the interviews will only be used for academic purposes and will be shared only among the researchers of this project.

Data Analysis

The contents, the emerged descriptions and the codes of the interviews were studied and explored by using a mix of inductive and deductive thematic analyses which facilitated the emergence of initially less structured narratives (inductive component) to more structured codes (deductive component) in accordance with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of both analysis methods is reported to be efficacious (Roberts et al., 2019).

The Thematic Analysis Method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting repeated patterns (themes) of meaning within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis comprised six steps namely, familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report sample (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In short, this procedure facilitated the generation of initial codes that were regularly compared and modified with the progression of a new analysis of the transcriptions of an interview and identification of preliminary themes. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee, Doctor Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India.

After data collection, the transcribed contents of the interviews were read many times to get familiar and develop insights for assigning codes and understanding the inherent meaning. To enhance the quality of coding, an iterative approach was adopted that helped in the inclusion and review of relevant codes. This process was carried on until the complete analysis was done. The contents of the interviews were coded by the first three authors adopting predetermined criteria (a priori criteria): the nature, severity, and sources of perceived transgressions, and need, challenges, facilitators, inhibitors, and benefits of forgiveness for the individual (health, well-being, relationship, psychological needs etc.), interpersonal (relationship, organisational goals, harmony, we-feeling, etc.), group (team), performance (output), and the organisation itself. In essence, the major criteria included: the nature and types of wrongdoings, the sources and process of becoming aware of wrongdoings, the reactions after getting familiar with the wrongdoings, strategies of forgiveness, difficulties before forgiveness, and benefits of forgiveness in the workplace.

Following Barbour (2001), the contents of the interview of each participant were coded multiple times, the reviews of the assigned codes were done by the authors and conferencing was done to resolve inconsistencies, if any, to increase trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have posited that the trustworthiness of a qualitative study involves

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Accordingly, prolonged engagement, systematic observation, peer debriefing, member checking, thick descriptions of the contents, inquiry audit, and reflexivity were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Following the study goals, the first three authors independently assessed four interview transcripts in terms of the adequacy of the code generation criteria and the richness of the transcriptions to understand the coding process, the usefulness of the data, the development of insights, and the finalization of the coding framework for further data collection.

Methodological integrity was maintained through the assessment of the adequacy of the data relevant to the research goals and approach of inquiry, regular discussion among the researchers, focusing on the evidence, insight and meaning, coherency, consistent analysis process and maintaining a codebook to achieve a high ethical standard. Accordingly, the codes for each transcription were generated.

A handwritten codebook was prepared to keep the details of the records of the codes (their origin, coder, etc.). Moreover, the framework of coding was regularly assessed and reviewed by senior authors to incorporate relevant and needed modifications to identify the codes. After coding every five transcripts, the coding framework was assessed for the richness and consonance of the contents that led to further enlarging and shrinking of the inclusions and exclusions of the codes in a specific criterion of codes. Further refining of the coding process was done to assess the usefulness, appropriateness, effectiveness, and suitability through team discussions. Care was taken to follow the suggestions of pertinent researchers, which facilitated the reorganizing, merging and re-categorizing of codes leading to the emergence of more refined and pertinent codes (Guest et al., 2012).

The relevant revision of the coding framework helped in dropping irrelevant codes and insertion into the broader code categories. The details of original changes and modifications were recorded and marked in the codebook to check the loss of original ideas and their further use in the analysis process. Moreover, to check the loss of the missing relevant codes and capture pertinent data, an iterative approach was adopted that involved the review and inclusion of useful codes in previous transcriptions. After all the interviews were completed, each transcript was scrutinized for coding checks that involved reviewing the initial codes after a reasonable gap with a fresh look to lower the distortions due to over-involvement in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012).

Results

According to the above-stated procedure, the data collection and analyses were carried out. Each participant was assigned a code. For example, 33 male (M) participants were allotted codes from M_1 to M_33 while 15 female (F) participants were assigned codes from F_1 to F_15. To show the organisational affiliation, GR (government sector) and

PR (private sector) suffixes were added with the code of each participant. The following themes were identified from the data analysis:

Theme 1: Multiplicity of the Sources of Workplace Transgressions

The participants ascribed negative reflections of administrative attributes and personal/work behaviours as responsible for their perceived transgressions. For example, jealousy, pulling one down, strong differences in opinions and choices, anger, use of demeaning words, scolding, lying, cheating (F_1_GR), negative attitudes, poor conformity, misbehaviour, irresponsible gestures, indiscipline, dishonesty (M_1_PR), misbehaviour by seniors and negative comments (M_25_GR) were some of the personal behaviours responsible for the perceived transgressions. Participant verbalizations reflecting this and the other themes and subthemes are presented in [Supplementary Materials Table 2](#).

Likewise, some improper work behaviours were also responsible for the perceived transgression of the majority of the participants. For instance, lack of work/task coordination, improper working styles, exploitation, manipulation, misuse of authority (M_4_PR), demoralization, negligence, carelessness, social loafing, discrimination (F_12_PR), the burden of work, de-motivation, demoralization, improper demands, non-cooperation and favouritism were recorded under this category.

Poor management, delayed decisions, ignoring feasible and essential infrastructural facilities required for doing a task, and insensitivity on the part of management led employees to feel transgressed. For example, official fault, the burden of work, uncomfortable working conditions, corruption (F_3_GR) and lack of support (M_9_PR) were observed as some of the negative administrative attributes that were perceived as wrongdoings.

Theme 2: Communications of Workplace Transgressions

Some scuffle communications, compromises, and complaints used to face the perceived transgressing situations were indicative of the perceived transgressing situations by the participants. Some gestures, acts, expressions, communications, altered relationships and performance, ill-behaviours of co-workers, and threats of punitive actions were reported as the major sources through which the participants became aware of the transgressions.

For example, differences in discriminatory behaviour, cooperation, criticism, delay in completing the target, repetition of wrongdoings, misplacing of important documents, colleagues, mass media, gossip, alertness (F_10_GR), warnings (M_5_GR), threats of appraisal and negative reports were major sources that helped the participants to become familiar with the wrongdoings.

A set of adaptive and compromising strategies were also reported by most of them. For instance, proper adherence to the instructions, proper communication, ignoring the

wrong behaviours (M_02_GR, F_16_GR) and correcting mistakes were observed under this category.

Theme 3: Facilitators of Workplace Forgiveness

Recognition, appreciation, scolding, and developing new understanding such as care, positive emotions, positive treatment, and direct communication were some strategies to forgive co-employees. Focus on unity, the importance of community, dignified behaviour (F_13_PR), the avoidance of negative things, moving away from confrontation, positive direct communication (M_21_GR, M_27_PR) and rebuke (F_8_PR, M_33_GR) were observed to be used by the majority of employees to forgive the transgressors in their workplace.

Theme 4: Barriers to Workplace Forgiveness

The nature of wrongdoing (minor or serious) (F_11_PR), intention, past similar experiences, repetition of wrongdoing (M_29_PR), decreased self-control on anger, and negative wordings were reported as the major hurdles in the forgiveness of the participants. Decreased trust (M_19_GR), negative emotions, work stress, authority, rigidity, teasing, false complaints, inconvenience, social pressure, fear of losing respect, shyness and ruminative thoughts also acted as hurdles in forgiving others.

Theme 5: Benefits of Workplace Forgiveness

Positive emotions (happiness, joy, pride, love, amusement, etc.) (M_26_GR, M_24_GR), satisfaction, good relations (F_14_PR), moral outcomes, we-feeling, harmony (M_19_GR), healthy work environment, positive work culture, and efficiency were reported to be linked with forgiveness in the workplace. Sympathy from others, self-worth, happiness, satisfaction, positive thinking, inner peace, energy, lowered stress, etc. were major psychological benefits of forgiveness in the workplace [e.g., Forgiveness in the workplace also benefits its practitioners. It also enhances the positive image of the forgivers and makes them feel good from within (M_29_PR); see [Supplementary Materials Table 2](#)]. Better and improved relationships were interpersonal outcomes (e.g., When I forgive, my co-workers label me as a good person).

A healthy environment (M_17_GR), faith and trust in leadership, organisational commitment, unity (M_7_PR), harmony (M_32_GR), and progress of the organisation were team benefits. Moreover, increased work efficiency (M_6_GR), good health, and better work opportunity signified performance gain (see [Supplementary Materials Table 2](#) for more related quotes).

Discussion

The basic objective of the current study was to understand the nature and consequences of transgressions and forgiveness in the diverse workplace settings (government and private) in the Indian cultural context. Five major themes were identified after the thematic analysis of the interviews comprising two themes related to workplace transgressions and three themes pertaining to workplace forgiveness: (1) Multiplicity of the sources of workplace transgressions, (2) Communications of workplace transgressions, (3) Facilitators of workplace forgiveness, (4) Barriers to workplace forgiveness, and (5) Benefits of workplace forgiveness.

The study findings revealed that workplace wrongdoings are caused by a variety of factors and many channels are present in organizations that help employees become familiar with them. Theme 1 denotes that interpersonal/work-related inappropriate behaviours of co-workers, as well as administrative malfunctioning of the employees' workplace settings, are major sources of perceived transgressions. For example, anger, indiscipline, misbehaviours by seniors, negative comments, exploitation, and discrimination were some unacceptable personal and work behaviours behind their perceived transgressions. Their descriptions of transgressions generally ranged from low to moderate in severity.

Although the role of transgressions in forgiveness is well-studied, there is little research on the nature and types of workplace wrongdoings. The present study findings lend partial support to previous research that suggests workplace wrongdoings to include a wide range of behaviours related to violations of civil, criminal and administrative laws, professional codes and contraventions of organizational rules, social norms, and ethical principles (Palmer et al., 2016). The differences in the perceived workplace transgressions may be caused by differences in age, sex, race, ethnicity, education, and personality of the employees (Bashir et al., 2014). Research suggests that understanding the nature, types, and severity of transgressions is significant for facilitating forgiveness in all human relationships, including those at the workplace (Gabriels & Strelan, 2018). Cheating or betrayal of trust is a significant transgression that may inhibit workplace forgiveness (Strelan et al., 2017). Many of the types of workplace transgressions come under the comprehensive classification given by Pearce et al. (2018) who divided them into reactive and active categories.

Theme 2 shows that the types and severity of workplace wrongdoings are communicated to the victim employees through a variety of channels such as unwarranted criticism, repetition of wrongdoings, vigilant gestures, warnings, and threats of appraisal. Thus, the study findings reveal that workplace transgressions and their manifestations differ in nature, type, severity, and source which may have significant implications for workplace forgiveness. To some extent, these findings are mirrored in previous studies. For example, King and Hermodson (2000) reported that personal ethics, the severity of

the wrongdoing and compliance or non-compliance with policy and procedures contribute to the perceived workplace transgressions and their reporting.

Thus, the perception and communication of workplace transgressions are determined by a variety of individual, situational and organizational issues. Similarly, individual differences in values, personality traits, and life goals may cause differences in the perceptions and communication of workplace transgressions (Elnaga, 2012). Understanding the workplace transgressions is significant since it determines forgiveness-seeking behaviours and the severity, intentionality, and frequency of the transgressions, which play a significant role in granting forgiveness (Martinez-Diaz et al., 2021). Research also suggests that the presence of workplace transgressions is linked with lowered productivity, negative health outcomes, and increased occupational conflicts (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Toussaint et al., 2018).

Theme 3 reflects that certain facilitating strategies are used by employees to forgive their co-employees for their wrongdoings at the workplace. For example, they forgave their co-employees by using strategies such as recognition, appreciation, scolding, developing new understanding, and direct communication. The major precursors of forgiveness include unavoidability of workplace relationships, assumed harm of holding transgressions for a longer time, levels of manageability, presence of positive others, and perceived loss. These observations provide support to the notion that a sense of wrongdoings and/or awareness and other facets of transgressions are linked with forgiveness in the workplace and may be considered as one of the antecedent factors for an act of forgiveness. Again, there is little research on the facilitating factors of workplace forgiveness.

To some extent, the study findings lend support to previous research. For example, a recent study suggests that a variety of methods are used by individuals such as apologies, restorative action, relational caring behaviours, and diverting behaviours to seek forgiveness in the workplace (Martinez-Diaz et al., 2021). Similarly, empathy, rectification, and rebuilding trust have been suggested to ease forgiveness (Chi et al., 2019). Similar to the current study findings, previous research has also noted the fear of losing relationships as an important factor behind forgiveness (Sheldon & Antony, 2019). Thus, the observed link between the availability of others in the workplace and forgiveness in the present study may be explained as an indirect or mediated effect. Some earlier studies have documented that the availability of others in the workplace helps in building trust which, in turn, may facilitate forgiveness (Strelan et al., 2017).

Theme 4 reveals that there are many obstacles to workplace forgiveness. For instance, nature and fear of reoccurrences of the wrongdoing, anger, and low self-control are some of the described difficulties in forgiving the co-employees. Similar to the current study findings, previous research reports that negative feelings (anger, jealousy, etc.) of victims toward the transgressors prohibit them from granting forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Similarly, severe transgression and negative intentions of transgressors are suggested to

lower the occurrence of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2003). Research suggests that transgressions that challenge victims' self-esteem, morality, and identity are also difficult to forgive (Pearce et al., 2018).

Social pressure (Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016) and fear of reoccurrence of transgressions and bad intentions of transgressors (Martinez-Diaz et al., 2021) have been suggested to lower forgiveness. Past similar experiences of transgressions are also found to hinder forgiveness (Cao et al., 2021). Research suggests that increased anger and decreased happiness may lower self-control that, in turn, may decrease workplace forgiveness (Liu & Li, 2020). Sustained negative thoughts or feelings about a transgression cause rumination. Dwelling on the past experiences of a betrayal may lead to rumination that lowers forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2001). Thus, it is evident that the current study findings are well supported by previous research.

Theme 5 denotes a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organisational benefits of observing forgiveness at the workplace. These include positive emotions, relationship satisfaction, good relations, harmony, a healthy work environment, positive work culture, and efficiency. Similar to this study, some benefits of forgiveness have been mirrored in earlier studies for individual and interpersonal situations. For example, forgiveness has been argued to carry positive emotions and cognitions that directly strengthen physical and psychological health, and positive life outcomes by shaping perceptions, responsivity, attributions, and physiological processes (Karner-Huțuleac, 2020; Toussaint et al., 2018).

Previous research also found that forgiveness promotes feelings of benevolence toward the transgressor (Martinez-Diaz et al., 2021). Workplace forgiveness was found to enhance the health and well-being benefits of employees (Cox et al., 2012). Forgiveness has been reported to lower stress, rumination, and hostility among employees (Friedberg et al., 2005) and enhance the level of self-esteem (Hong et al., 2020) and positive workplace culture (Toussaint et al., 2018). These, in turn, may improve workplace outcomes. Forgiveness was also found to regulate the emotions of individuals (Ho et al., 2020).

Research reported that there is a reciprocal influence of forgiveness and organizational culture that allows organizational climates to develop restorative justice, compassion, and self-control (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Another study found workplace forgiveness to increase creativity, productivity, and greater flexibility to adapting changes (Stone, 2002). A recent study also suggests that workplace forgiveness predicts better work outcomes comprising higher job satisfaction, higher work engagement, and lower burnout (Cao et al., 2021). Thus, the majority of the described forgiveness benefits in the present study are supported by previous findings.

The study findings help develop new insights into the nature and dynamics of forgiveness in organisational settings. It has shown close associations with the perceived performance, functioning, and productivity of the organisations. Forgiveness has been observed to be associated with various non-organisational outcomes. Some peculiarities

in forgiveness in the workplace were also noted. For example, the workplace setting is characterized by some definite and structured sources of transgressions that annoyed all the participants alike. Moreover, forgiveness was recognized by most of them to carry significant implications for health, relationship, teamwork, decision making, productivity, and general progression of their organisations. The findings provided initial clues of dissimilar nature, dynamics, and challenges of the perceived transgressions and forgiveness for the employees belonging to different organisations.

In essence, perception of transgression at the workplace due to stress, poor work culture, poor working conditions, and reflections of negative social conditions and practices is natural. Different components of an organisational system are characterized by dissimilar challenges of developing, maintaining, and preserving human strengths like forgiveness. Forgiveness reflects its significant links with performance, health, well-being and the development of positive and productive organisational culture and practices. In essence, forgiveness represents a promising construct that can be cultivated to give new momentum to the all-round development of individuals, organisations, and workplace human issues with appropriate methods.

A unique finding of the study is that the mechanisms and consequences of forgiveness have provided some initial clues to the coexistence of both individualism and collectivism in India as suggested by some earlier researchers (e.g., Pandey et al., 2021). Some causes of the perceived wrongdoings may be viewed as reflecting an individualistic view. For example, jealousy, pulling one down, strong differences in opinions and choices, anger, use of demeaning words, scolding, lying, cheating, and negative attitudes may come under this category. On the other hand, poor conformity, poor task coordination, social loafing, discrimination, non-cooperation, lack of support, and favouritism would likely fall under the collectivistic view. As this study could not cover this issue in its full length, further studies are needed to understand the impacts of the two coexisting cultural views.

Summary and Conclusions

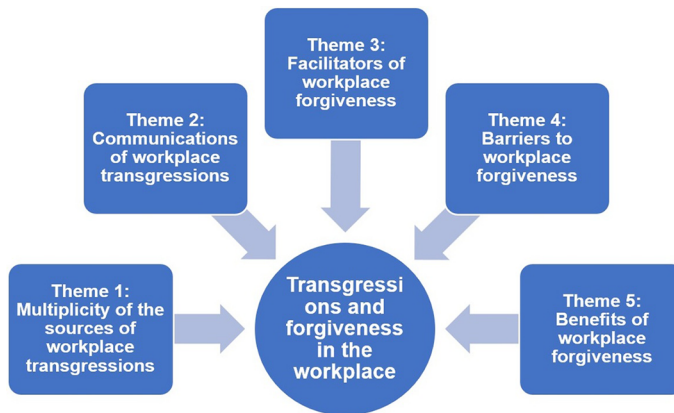
The study showed that there are various sources of transgressions occurring at the workplace which are generally distressing and painful irrespective of the nature of organisations (i.e., government/private). Forgiveness is one of the important mechanisms which help face these ill-happenings, lower their negative impacts, and enhance multiple positive outcomes. The majority of the participants accepted the significance and benefits of forgiveness in the workplace. Forgiveness was pervasive in the workplace setting and was reported as essential to many positive outcomes.

Theme 1 denotes that some negative personal/work behaviours of co-employees and administrative attributes were the major causes of the perceived wrongdoings. Theme 2 signifies that a variety of communication channels (direct and indirect) help increase awareness of workplace transgressions. Theme 3 represents that a variety of facilitating

factors are adopted by employees to forgive their co-employees. Theme 4 reflects that certain obstacles hinder workplace forgiveness. In Theme 5, many psychological, interpersonal, team and performance benefits of forgiveness in the workplace surface (see Figure 1 for study themes).

Figure 1

Depicting the Major Study Themes on the Workplace Transgressions and Forgiveness



Implications, Directions for Future Research and Limitations

The findings of the study have shown that forgiveness has a significant role to play in the workplace setting and in impacting human performance and functioning in organisations. Many organisational, group-related, decisional, and environmental factors were reported to be closely associated with organisational forgiveness. As evident from the verbalizations of the participants, forgiveness can influence the various indices of performance, communication, and diverse health, interpersonal, and environmental outcomes carrying important implications for the positive functioning of the organisations. The findings evinced that forgiveness has enough potential to understand organisational conflicts and help understand and promote human well-being in organisations of various sorts.

The findings of the study have significant implications for various organisations, policymakers, psychologists working in organisations and the public at large. Forgiveness may be cultivated by emphasizing positive work culture, weakening non-functional group identities, collaborative goals, regular inter-departmental activities, legal provisions, organisational recognition, and intergroup interactions. New theorizing and empirical works are needed to decipher the nature, dynamics, and consequences of forgiveness in organisational and workplace settings. The findings carry significant implications for charting out plans and policies to understand the genesis, maintenance, and promo-

tion of well-being and performance of employees. A more permissive and participatory culture is to be inculcated for organisational health, productivity, and development as well as for the overall well-being of the employees. The role of some cultural, moral, social-class, and gender-role socialization factors in shaping workplace forgiveness need further exploration.

Cross-cultural verification of these findings, using samples from diverse populations, testing the efficacy of forgiveness for promoting human performance and its further implications at organisational and collective levels will constitute other avenues for future researchers. Future researchers may also study the role of perceived injustice, discrimination on the grounds of class and caste affiliations prevalent especially in Indian society, misuse of power, expulsions, legal actions and other tangible negative outcomes such as dangers of decreased salary and promotions and the perceived transgressions and challenges of forgiveness with these issues. The current sample comprised participants distributed unevenly across government ($n = 30$) and private ($n = 18$) sectors, possibly limiting the diversity of opinions. This is a significant limitation of the current study.

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Data Availability: Data will be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Supplementary Materials

For this article, the following Supplementary Materials are available (for access see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#) below): Demographic details of the participants (Table 1) and representative examples of verbatim responses of participants (Table 2) related to various themes and sub-themes linked with transgression and forgiveness.

Index of Supplementary Materials

Tiwari, G. K., Pandey, R., Rai, P. K., Shukla, M., Jain, R., Budhwani, P., Choudhary, A., Namdev, L., Kachhwaha, N., & Sharma, D. (2022). *Supplementary materials to "Understanding the nature and consequences of transgressions and forgiveness in the workplace in India"* [Tables]. PsychOpen GOLD. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.7778>

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