

Exploring Forgiveness: Pathways to Healing and Reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the processes involved when a Filipino family member decides to forgive a relative, a journey that begins with physical and psychological pain and culminates in ginhawa—a transformation bringing psycho-emotional and spiritual relief. Using a narrative inquiry approach grounded in Clandinin's framework, the study explores the lived experiences of eleven cognitively and emotionally healthy older adults whose personal stories illuminate how forgiveness is understood and enacted across the lifespan. The analysis integrates verbal narratives and visual metaphors to provide a nuanced interpretation of meaning-making, complemented by an original artwork created by the researcher that serves as a visual synthesis of the findings. This representation reveals that forgiveness unfolds through six interrelated phases: the experience of pain or injury, the weight of emotional burden, a period of reflection, spiritual and cognitive reframing, the conscious decision to forgive, and relational repair leading to peace and the reconstruction of personal narratives. Findings indicate that forgiveness is a gradual, deeply personal journey shaped by family relationships, cultural values, and social support; furthermore, while participants moved toward acceptance, they acknowledged that unresolved tensions may resurface, highlighting the cyclical dimension of the process. Overall, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Filipino family dynamics and offer implications for culturally responsive interventions that promote reconciliation and support the well-being of older adults.

Keywords: forgiveness, reconciliation, Filipino family dynamics, family conflict, emotional well-being

Introduction

The following section addresses the central problem of the study: the gap in understanding the lived experiences of older Filipino adults as "forgivers" within the complex hierarchy of the Filipino family system. The primary problem addressed in this research is the lack of culturally

specific data regarding the intrafamilial forgiveness processes of older Filipino adults; while the universal benefits of forgiveness on mental and physical health are well-documented—particularly in reducing the "fight-or-flight" response and lowering cortisol levels (Worthington, 2020; Swartz, 2026)—these findings are often stripped of cultural nuance. In the Philippines, the family is the "foundation of life," yet it is simultaneously the primary site of "enduring grievances" (Rowden & Davis, n.d.), making the senior's act of forgiving a relational necessity governed by *kapwa* (shared identity) and the cultural ideal of *ginhawa* (well-being). The "aging population" status projected for the Philippines by 2030 (Villanueva, 2025) underscores an urgent need for interventions that promote "Healthy Ageing" (WHO, 2020), yet most existing models, such as Enright's Process Model or Worthington's REACH Model, focus on individualistic cognitive reframing rather than the Filipino values of interdependence and respect for elders. To address this gap, the study proposes a Narrative Inquiry approach grounded in Clandinin's (2006) framework, which treats stories as the primary unit of "experience" to uncover the nuanced interpretation of meaning-making that quantitative surveys often miss. This methodological solution is bolstered by Family Systems Theory, which views the family as a complex social system where any change in one individual influences the entire system (Pfeiffer & In-Albon, 2022), framing a senior's forgiveness as a relational mechanism that repairs the family fabric. As a final component, the research utilizes an assemblage of verbal narratives and visual metaphors to map forgiveness as a gradual journey through six phases: the experience of injury, emotional burden, reflection, spiritual/cognitive reframing, the decision to forgive, and relational repair. Ultimately, this holistic approach contributes to a deeper understanding of forgiveness in Filipino families and offers a template for culturally responsive interventions that leverage the senior's role as a storyteller to foster family unity and personal *ginhawa*.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a narrative inquiry design based on the **Connelly and Clandinin (1990) framework**, which explores the lived experiences of seniors as "forgivers" through the three-dimensional space of **temporality, sociality, and spatiality**. Utilizing convenience and snowball sampling, the researcher recruited 11 cognitively healthy older adults (aged 60–80) from the National Capital Region and the United States to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The procedural flow emphasized ethical safety and rapport—facilitated by the researcher's own status as a senior and a background in gerontology—ensuring a secure environment for participants to "restory" their experiences of family conflict and reconciliation. Data analysis followed an eight-step workflow: transitioning from raw interview transcripts to "restoried" narratives, which were then analyzed for **resonant threads** using 3D coding. To deepen the interpretation, the findings were further examined through the lens of **Bowen and Minuchin's family systems theories**, mapping how emotional processes and family structures

influence the forgiveness journey. This holistic methodology effectively synthesizes personal voices with systemic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how forgiveness reshapes the narratives of Filipino seniors.

Results

The narratives of the eleven participants reveal that forgiveness is a multifaceted journey structured by the interplay of time, relationship, and environment within the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry. Within the dimension of **Temporality**, forgiveness is rooted in a "Chronology of Grace," where internalized biblical teachings serve as a lifelong script for mercy—captured by the mandate to "keep on forgiving repeatedly"—while simultaneously involving a confrontation with the "Long Grudge," in which reflection reveals the heavy emotional burden of wasted time. This temporal shift transitions into the dimension of **Sociality**, where "Relationship Restoration" takes precedence over the ego; here, participants prioritize the preservation of *kapwa* (shared identity) by actively "building bridges" and choosing humility to transform long-standing rivalries into shared laughter and closure. Finally, the dimension of **Place** anchors these experiences within the "Internal Landscape" of the physical and spiritual self, where forgiveness is framed as a biological necessity. Participants describe the physiological impact of stress, noting that unforgiveness causes nerves to "constrict" and induces sickness, leading them to reclaim their hearts as a sanctuary of peace and their bodies as a "temple." Collectively, these results suggest that for older adults, the ultimate "place" of forgiveness is a state of holistic health and divine equilibrium, where the release of internal toxins facilitates a return to relational and biological harmony.

Discussion

The findings from the narratives of eleven senior forgivers illustrate that forgiveness is an integrated, culturally grounded journey that unfolds within Clandinin's (2006) Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space. This process is characterized by a spatial transformation of the Filipino *bahay* (home) into a "sacred space" of emotional protection, a social transition where individual hurt is reframed through collectivist values like *kapwa* (shared identity) and *malasakit* (empathy), and a temporal shift where the "memory of the heart" moves from *sugat* (wound) toward *ginhawa* (holistic relief).

Five resonant threads emerged from the analysis: (1) forgiveness as a non-linear journey from pain to *ginhawa*; (2) the role of reflective pausing and cognitive reframing as essential pathways; (3) forgiveness as a vital mechanism for family repair and the prevention of intergenerational trauma; (4) the cultural grounding provided by collectivist values such as *utang na loob* (reciprocal gratitude); and (5) spiritual anchoring through *pagsusuko* (surrender to a higher

power). Ultimately, these findings reveal that for Filipino seniors, forgiveness is not merely a one-time decision but a sophisticated process of "narrative repair" and "socio-emotional selectivity." By prioritizing relational harmony over individual vindication, seniors transform their internal *loob* (inner self) and restore systemic equilibrium, ensuring both personal well-being and the continued resilience of the family collective.

Conclusion

The narratives of senior forgivers reveal that forgiveness in the Philippines is a journey of the "*loob*" (inner self) deeply embedded in the collectivist values of "*kapwa*" (shared self/identity) and the family system. Within this cultural framework, a "*pagkasira ng ugnayan*" (relational breakdown) triggers a profound collapse of identity and belonging, as seen when Belen felt she "suddenly became nothing" or when Maritess was physically and symbolically excluded from the "*bahay*" (home) by a changed lock. This pain is sustained through "*pagtitiis*" (endurance), manifesting as a persistent "*bigat ng loob*" (heaviness of the inner self) that Mamita described as "very heavy to carry" and Belen noted remains "*sariwa*" (fresh) in memory over time. Healing emerges through "*pagmumuni at pag-unawa*" (reflection and understanding), where the focus shifts from being right to "building bridges" and seeking divine guidance, leading to a "step-by-step" transformation of perspective. This inner journey culminates in "*pagbitaw*" (letting go), where the burden naturally softens into "*ginhawa*" (holistic ease/relief), allowing for a decisive release of anger. Ultimately, the process leads to "*kapayapaan*" (peace) as broken ties are mended through humble reconnections, such as a simple smile or handshake, transforming the individual's "*loob*" (inner self) and restoring harmony within the broader family system.

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