



**COMILLAS**  
**UNIVERSIDAD PONTIFICIA**

ICAI

ICADE

CIHS

## Document Version

***Accepted version***

Citation for published versión:

Ordóñez-Carabaño, Á., & Prieto-Ursúa, M. (2025). The role of forgiveness in refugee well-being: A systematic review. *European Psychologist*. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000564>

Please note that the full-text provided on Comillas' Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version.

## General rights

This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence (<https://web.upcomillas.es/webcorporativo/RegulacionRepositorioInstitucionalComillas.pdf>).

## Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact Universidad Pontificia Comillas providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim

## Systematic Review

# The role of forgiveness in refugee well-being

## A systematic review

Ángela Ordóñez-Carabaño<sup>1</sup>

María Prieto-Ursúa<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Comillas Pontifical University, Madrid, Spain

### **Abstract:**

Refugees often struggle with a range of emotions, including grief and anger at the losses and hardships they have suffered, as well as unmet expectations of resettlement in the host country. Feelings of injustice, shame and a sense of irreversibility add to their challenges. Despite these complexities, traditional refugee treatment models focus primarily on symptom management, with limited inclusion of forgiveness as a central aspect of the recovery process. However, numerous studies suggest a relationship between refugee symptoms and the inability to forgive or lingering unforgiveness. Recognising the multifaceted nature of forgiveness and the diverse experiences of refugees, we conducted a systematic review to explore the potential role of forgiveness in refugee well-being. Our findings shed light on the significant implications and effects of forgiveness within refugee populations. We argue that mental health practitioners should integrate forgiveness into treatment approaches to enhance refugee well-being and mitigate future challenges.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, unforgiveness, reconciliation, refugees, systematic review

### **Corresponding author:**

Ángela Ordóñez-Carabaño  
Department of Psychology  
Universidad Pontificia Comillas  
C/ Universidad Comillas, 3-5  
28108 Alcobendas, Madrid, Spain  
[aordonez@comillas.edu](mailto:aordonez@comillas.edu)

Significant challenges encountered during the journey, upon arrival, and during the integration process often have a profound impact on the well-being of refugees who have fled persecution and violence in their countries of origin (Schock et al., 2016).

The main traumatic events experienced by refugee populations include: war in their home country, physical abuse, serious illness or injury themselves, death or serious illness of relatives, and verbal threats (Abu Suhaiban et al., 2019). Traumatic events should be considered together with their frequency and degree of exposure, as well as how these traumatic events moderate the effects of pre-existing stressors on refugees' mental health (Rasmussen et al., 2018) and how they affect current stressors (Droždek et al., 2013).

Due to the considerable vulnerability inherent in this population, numerous studies have endeavored to identify the risk factors that increase the likelihood of refugees developing mental health issues (Fazel et al., 2005; Königstein, 2013). These include gender, age, length of stay in the host country (Montgomery, 2011), number and degree of exposure to traumatic events, experiences of violence and loss (Miller et al., 2002), frequency and severity of painful reminders of the deceased (Hinton, Field, et al., 2013), level of education, and the deterioration in pre-existing health issues and the emergence of new ones (Miller, 1996).

The most prevalent mental health diagnoses in this population, namely anxiety, depression, and PTSD, fail to encompass the extensive array of challenges faced by refugees (Weine & Henderson, 2005). A number of studies have focused on chronic, complicated, or prolonged grief symptoms (Craig et al., 2008; Nickerson et al., 2014), feelings of sadness and anger stemming from the myriad losses and humiliations they have suffered and their unfulfilled expectations upon arrival (Betancourt, 2005), the

stigma against refugees in host countries (Williams & Nshom, 2024), feelings of injustice, shame, the sense of a lost future, the impossibility of undoing what has happened, the desire to avenge their deceased or injured family members, and especially the anguish of realizing that their experiences have irreversibly changed their lives (Hinton, Nickerson, et al., 2013).

However, the majority of refugee trauma treatment models focus on symptomatology (Turrini et al., 2017), with only a few interventions including forgiveness as a critical component of the recovery process (Goh, 2020). This is despite the fact that numerous studies have demonstrated a correlation between refugee symptoms and unforgiveness (Kalayjian, 2009).

The psychological literature has demonstrated the advantages of interventions aimed at facilitating forgiveness processes within groups of victims (Lundahl et al., 2008; Wade et al., 2005). Nevertheless, further research is required to elucidate the effects of forgiveness on victims of severe traumatic experiences (Witvliet et al., 2008). In response to the losses incurred due to injustice and aggression, individuals typically exhibit two primary response tendencies: a desire for revenge stemming from a sense of injustice, or a tendency to avoid situations perceived as threatening. These reactions are frequently accompanied by a spectrum of emotional responses, including anger, pain, sadness, confusion, feelings of humiliation, shame, vulnerability, helplessness and a sense of betrayal (Clark & Kaufman, 2009).

In the field of psychology, there has been a growing interest in forgiveness as an alternative response to revenge and avoidance following instances of assault or conflict (Prieto-Ursúa, 2017; Wade & Worthington, 2003).

Forgiveness is of crucial importance to the well-being of refugee populations who have experienced displacement, violence, and trauma. As a psychological and social process, forgiveness allows individuals and communities to move beyond grievances, thereby reducing the psychological burden of resentment and fostering reconciliation (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004). However, within refugee communities, the capacity to forgive is often impeded by the persistent memories of conflict and injustice, rendering it a complex yet essential factor in the processes of healing and integration (Cehajic et al., 2008; Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011).

At the societal level, forgiveness contributes to intergroup reconciliation by altering negative perceptions and reducing intergroup hostility. The Reconciliation Pyramid framework (Auerbach, 2009) posits that forgiveness constitutes a pivotal step in post-conflict healing, situated between acknowledgment, restitution, and narrative incorporation. Studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, demonstrate that intergroup forgiveness is influenced by acknowledgment of past wrongs and perceived justice (Cehajic et al., 2008). Conversely, Schmitt et al. (2004) posit that collective victimhood narratives frequently impede the forgiveness process by perpetuating entrenched identity conflicts.

The process of forgiveness is intricately intertwined with the concept of empathy. Halpern and Weinstein (2004) underscore the pivotal role of rehumanization in reconciliation processes, contending that empathy facilitates recognition of the suffering of others, thereby paving the way for forgiveness. This finding is consistent with the notion that acknowledging the shared suffering experienced by different groups can disrupt cycles of vengeance and promote healing (Uluğ et al., 2021). Furthermore, Arai (2019) highlights that conflict intervention training programmes have the capacity to foster forgiveness by creating safe spaces for dialogue, promoting strategic convening

among opposing groups, and encouraging constructive human interaction in conflict settings.

Additionally, the act of forgiveness is frequently contingent upon the presence of sincere apologies and reparations. Blatz et al. (2009) emphasise the pivotal role of governmental apologies in facilitating reconciliation, particularly in instances where historical injustices have inflicted enduring harm. Nevertheless, it is important to note that apologies in the absence of restitution or substantive action may be perceived as insincere, thus hindering the promotion of authentic forgiveness (Blatz & Philpot, 2010). The role of governmental and institutional apologies is particularly relevant in refugee contexts where systemic injustices, such as statelessness, discrimination, and lack of access to resources, continue to shape the lived realities of displaced populations (Merhej & Rahme, 2024).

Furthermore, the role of forgiveness in the alleviation of post-traumatic stress symptoms among displaced individuals is critical. Research has shown that the maintenance of resentment is associated with diminished mental health outcomes, whereas forgiveness is linked to enhanced psychological resilience and well-being (Hornsey et al., 2015). Moreover, research on reconciliation initiatives suggests that structured interventions, such as dialogue programs and community rebuilding efforts, are effective in promoting forgiveness among refugee populations (Bilali & Mahmoud, 2017).

However, it should be noted that forgiveness is not universally attainable or desirable. Aiken (2010) cautions against the pressure to forgive, arguing that some survivors may require justice and accountability before they can genuinely engage in the process. Furthermore, Eisikovits (2004) emphasises that in cases of extreme violence and displacement, the expectation of forgiveness may place an undue burden on victims.

In summary, forgiveness can be conceptualised as a multidimensional process with the capacity to substantially enhance the well-being of refugee populations by promoting psychological healing, intergroup reconciliation, and social cohesion (Hornsey et al., 2015). However, the efficacy of forgiveness is contingent on various factors, including the acknowledgment of past injustices (Cehajic et al., 2008), the presence of empathy (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004), the provision of restitution (Blatz et al., 2009), and the transformation of conflict-driven narratives (Auerbach, 2009). As research continues to explore the intersections of forgiveness, reconciliation, and refugee well-being, it remains essential to approach forgiveness as a process that must be supported through justice mechanisms (Blatz & Philpot, 2010), community-building efforts (Arai, 2019), and sustainable peacebuilding initiatives (Merhej & Rahme, 2024). Moreover, insights from historical conflicts underscore the necessity of integrating psychological and structural components into reconciliation efforts, thereby ensuring that forgiveness does not serve as a tool of forced pacification but rather as an empowering choice for affected communities (Finnegan, 2010). The balance between transitional justice and forgiveness remains a critical area of study, particularly in refugee contexts where displacement often exacerbates intergroup tensions and hinders long-term integration (Cehajic et al., 2008).

Some researchers have investigated the potential benefits of forgiveness, particularly within the refugee population (Aziz, 2017; Kira et al., 2009). However, our understanding of the relevance of forgiveness in situations where there is no singular perpetrator, where injustices extend beyond isolated incidents, and where the repercussions are far-reaching, remains limited (Alim et al., 2019). Consequently, given the intricate and subjective nature of forgiveness and the diverse array of experiences

among refugees, we conducted a systematic review to discern the potential role of forgiveness in refugee well-being.

### **Systematic Review Methodology**

The methodology is based on the guidelines set out in the PRISMA statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Moher et al., 2009). The critical appraisal, data extraction, and exploration of relationships between studies were guided by the guidelines set forth by Popay et al. (2006).

A total of seven research databases were consulted in the course of this study. These included: *APA PsycINFO*, *Academic Search Complete*, *Web of Science*, *Scopus*, *OpenDissertations*, *SocINDEX with Full Text*, and *Family & Society Studies Worldwide*. The last search was conducted on 12 May, 2024. The keywords for this search were “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, “forgiveness”, and “reconciliation” (and any derived word). Therefore, the search term combination within the databases was as follows: *refug\* OR asyl\* AND forgiv\* OR reconcil\**. One reviewer conducted two rounds of searches, screening titles and abstracts and compiling records for potential inclusion. Following each round of screening, an additional reviewer conducted a second review of the sample. Only records that were in complete agreement between the two reviewers were included in the final analysis. One reviewer conducted the full-text screening and data extraction, and the final information was reviewed by an additional reviewer. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. After database searches 1,335 records went into the review (before duplicate removal). In order to ensure the greatest possible comprehensiveness, the search was not limited by open access, publication year, publication type, publication language, location/geography, age group, or population group. The initial search was limited to the “Keywords” field, resulting in a total of 73 records across all databases, after the removal of duplicate entries. Given

the limited number of results, we expanded the search to the “Abstract” Field, resulting in a total of 815 records identified through database searching, after the removal of duplicates.

### ***Inclusion/exclusion criteria***

- (1) The following criteria were employed for the purposes of inclusion: The study must have been published in English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese.
- (2) Studies that measured forgiveness or reconciliation with a forgiveness component among refugees or asylum seekers, from a perspective that focuses on the process and components of forgiveness.
- (3) Studies that do not explicitly measure forgiveness, but analyse the role of forgiveness or reconciliation with a forgiveness component among refugees or asylum seekers from a theoretical perspective.

The Rayyan QCRI program was employed for the purpose of citation screening (Ouzzani et al., 2016).

### ***Definition of terms***

The current 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (U. N. General Assembly, 1951) defines a refugee as a person who, having applied for international protection, obtains a favourable resolution after the assessment period. An asylum seeker is someone who requests recognition of refugee status and whose application is being assessed. In this research, the term “asylum seeker” was included because, given that the granting of refugee status often depends on political matters (and these processes sometimes take years), many analyses from a psychological point of view also include both populations as they frequently share multiple characteristics (Slobodin & de Jong, 2015).

In order to align our search criteria with the reconciliation model proposed by Auerbach (2004), we incorporated the term "reconciliation" into our search criteria. This model posits forgiveness as a prerequisite for achieving reconciliation, although it does not claim to be the sole determinant.

## **Results**

This study presents a narrative synthesis of the results and a table of the most relevant information (Table 1). Each article was coded for information on the type of sample, including the number of participants, the country of origin and the country where the research took place (i.e. the country of asylum or resettlement), the method (qualitative or quantitative), the study design (cross-sectional or longitudinal), the sampling strategy (snowball, convenience, or judgmental), the measures used, and the key findings related to forgiveness. In order to identify the strengths and limitations of the selected studies, a quality assessment was performed in accordance with the Mixed-Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). A matrix was created (see Appendix A in the Supporting Information) which includes all papers that were analysed and assessed with the MMAT quality criterion, across various methodologies.

### ***Identification of studies and data extracted***

The process of identifying and selecting studies for this systematic review is outlined in Figure 1. The diagram illustrates the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and ultimately included in the final analysis. Following the systematic review process, a total of 15 studies were included in the review. The characteristics and findings of these studies are summarised in Table 1. The rigorous systematic selection process was implemented to ensure the inclusion of only high-quality, relevant studies, thereby

providing a comprehensive overview of the extant evidence on the role of forgiveness in refugees.

-----Insert Figure 1. PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram (Moher et al., 2009)-----

-----Insert Table 1. Studies included (quantitative and qualitative) -----

The experience of each refugee is unique and shaped by a range of factors, including their background, trauma history, country of origin and individual characteristics. In the following section, we present the primary commonalities of forgiveness within refugee populations, organised into two main themes: forgiveness implications and forgiveness effects.

### ***Forgiveness implications for refugees***

#### *Forgiving who? Perpetrators but not leaders*

Although it may be possible to identify a specific group as the perpetrator of all human rights violations experienced by refugees, the reality is often more complex. There may be a designated group responsible for the aggression, as well as one or more leaders who orchestrated the violence, support from world leaders, and passive involvement from members of the international community (Nyarko, 2015; Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017). Furthermore, it is possible for victims to identify the specific individuals responsible for particular assaults.

Consequently, the refugee's situation is most accurately conceptualised as a complex system in relation to the perpetrator. In such intricate circumstances, the facilitation of forgiveness hinges on a comprehensive understanding of the refugee's situation, precise identification of the aggressions, and the accountability of all parties responsible for the refugee's suffering. While forgiveness may not be a viable option in instances of systemic injustice, it may still be possible at certain levels ( see Table 1; Alim et al., 2019).

In terms of attributing responsibility for the events that have transpired, refugees tend to differentiate between political leaders, whom they perceive as accountable, and ordinary individuals, whom they regard as less culpable (Kira et al., 2009).

Consequently, forgiveness may be granted to varying degrees to different parties involved in aggression, contingent on their respective levels of responsibility.

Furthermore, the primary challenge in forgiving specific forms of system-level injustice is the concern that doing so might result in a loss of identity. In such instances, refugees assert that they are unable to forgive system-level aggression, citing the government as the primary perpetrator of the injustices. They posit that forgiveness represents the initial step towards relinquishing the pursuit of justice, a moral transgression that contravenes their identities (Alim et al., 2019; Kira et al., 2017).

Furthermore, in the context of ongoing international conflicts where transitional justice processes have yet to be established, the majority of refugees exhibit an inability to forgive those responsible for the violence they have endured. When prompted, they often express profound disquiet at the prospect of forgiveness (Pham et al., 2019). The reluctance to forgive in these instances is associated with the matter of accountability for the crimes committed. A minority of refugees in this situation indicated that they might be able to forgive if they were reunited with their relatives, suggesting that refugees' views on forgiveness are related to family safety and future guarantees of community protection. The pursuit of justice and accountability for crimes is a crucial step in ensuring safety, which in turn facilitates forgiveness.

#### *Forgiveness does not mean giving up justice*

The majority of refugees have endured significant infringements of their fundamental human rights, compelling them to seek refuge in secure locations. When individuals are subjected to some form of injustice, they endeavour to alter the circumstances and pursue justice. The pursuit of legitimate retribution for transgressions can engender a sense of satisfaction, a sense of control over one's future, and a sense of

security among refugees ( see Table 1; Nyarko, 2015; Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017). Some authors (Longman et al., 2004; Strelan et al., 2008) posit that an alternative response to injustice might be forgiveness, rather than compensation or reparation. Nevertheless, forgiveness is only a viable option for refugees when it is coupled with justice (Alim et al., 2019). It is imperative that forgiveness and justice are not considered as separate entities. Otherwise, achieving forgiveness may be a challenging process (Pham et al., 2019).

Some refugees perceive resettlement as a form of justice, as it entails some acknowledgement of their status as victims, alleviates the circumstances they have endured in their country of origin and provides opportunities for the future. In instances where the extent of the loss is such that it is irreparable, resettlement can serve as an alternative form of justice that allows for forgiveness (Alim, 2016). It is noteworthy that not all refugees perceive justice as a prerequisite for forgiveness. Some argue that the process of forgiveness is not contingent on the attainment of justice and that their forgiveness journey is shaped by their faith, regardless of the extent of justice achieved (Peddle, 2001; Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2022).

The role of legal actions and procedures can engender therapeutic outcomes if victims perceive them as fair and just. A sense of justice facilitates forgiveness (Alim et al., 2019; Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017; Pham et al., 2019). Consequently, the implementation of legislation that promotes justice for refugees may also serve as a potential facilitator of forgiveness and therapy (Kira et al., 2009).

#### *Forgiving involves changing the narrative*

The integration and reconciliation of narratives by conflicting groups is also key in the process of forgiveness. Auerbach (2009) proposes that national narratives in

conflict must undergo transformation before reconciliation can take root. In the context of refugee populations, Klar and Schori-Eyal (2015) argue that historical narratives that reinforce victimhood and moral superiority can impede the forgiveness process by creating a rigid identity that views the other as an immutable aggressor. Similarly, Finnegan (2010) examines how the Acholi people in northern Uganda embraced forgiveness as a survival strategy, driven by factors such as war fatigue and a strong sense of collective identity. This suggests that forgiveness can serve as a form of agency in contexts where communities seek to reclaim power over their trauma and post-conflict narratives.

In the aftermath of violence and displacement, refugees must seek to imbue their experiences with meaning, crafting a narrative that resonates with their lived realities (Kandemiri, 2019; Peddle, 2001). After a conflict, individuals may identify themselves in one of four ways (see Table 1; Schuff, 2010). These include as an *indisputable victim*, as a *victim that was confused with the aggressor*, as a *survivor*, and as a *non-victim*. Refugees who identify as *indisputable victims* typically do not challenge their designation as victims, as it serves as the foundation for their narrative. They may verbalize their need to forgive and not to be forgiven, or to find a way to live with the pain caused by others. Other refugees proffer more explicit narratives as *misunderstood victims* (Schuff, 2010), as a reaction to being assigned to a group that others perceive as the aggressor. Conversely, some refugees assert that they have no desire to be regarded as victims and express a preference for avoiding such a categorisation entirely.

Ultimately, some individuals perceive themselves as *survivors with a purpose*, de-emphasising the significance of victimhood and prioritising the notion of overcoming adversity in their narrative. The manner in which each refugee constructs their identity will determine the narrative that is required for forgiveness.

In terms of the narrative about the other, refugees often portray the aggressor as either human or inhuman (e.g. as a monster devoid of a soul). In order to alter the prevailing narrative about the aggressor as human, many refugees employ *recategorisation*, applying the premise that all individuals are capable of error and possess the potential to engage in malevolent actions (Schuff, 2010). However, there are also those who maintain a rigid description of their perpetrators as inhuman. The narrative then typically encompasses the brutality of the violence, which is perceived as cruel and ruthless and therefore unforgivable. This hinders collective processes of forgiveness (Fabbe & Sınmazdemir, 2018). The possibility of forgiveness is contingent upon the perception of the other as a human being (De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2017). The perception of shared humanity leads to the perception of vulnerability and mutual connection, both of which are the basis for empathy. Empathy is a necessary facilitator in any forgiveness process.

*Forgiving does not mean giving up one's identity, but it might change it*

The term *identity* is used to describe the processes by which individuals assume and categorise themselves, their self-concept and subjective position within the social world, their sense of belonging and their attachment to particular groups (see Table 1; Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2022).

At any stage of an individual's life, traumatic experiences have the potential to result in a range of adverse psychological effects, including feelings of uselessness, inadequacy, alienation, and a loss of control over oneself or a group and its destiny. Such experiences, when occurring during childhood, have the potential to disrupt the development of healthy autonomy and identity formation. In adulthood, such experiences can result in feelings of identity loss and helplessness (Kira et al., 2001).

Refugees may encounter challenges in their identity formation as a result of the confluence of traumatic experiences at the point of origin, uprooting, and resettlement. Nevertheless, they may also regard the host country as an opportunity for a fresh start, which could facilitate a positive transformation in their identity through the healing of their self-narrative (Schuff, 2010). The act of forgiveness, both towards others and potentially towards oneself, can be facilitated by positive religious coping mechanisms. This, in turn, can lead to the restoration of personal and potentially communal meaning and purpose, thereby promoting perceived post-traumatic growth (Ochu et al., 2018).

During the process of forgiveness, individuals integrate new attitudes towards others, such as acceptance and respect, into their identities. This occurs gradually, replacing their previous attitudes, which may include hatred and blame (Schuff, 2010). The identity change resulting from the forgiveness process suggests that the new attitudes are more closely aligned with the individual's pre-conflict values and are perceived as congruent with their identity. This represents the individual's reconnection with their most genuine sense of self.

In the context of group conflict, the threat to one's identity can function as an emotional barrier that impedes the process of forgiveness. The primary threat is the sense of helplessness that undermines their identity as individuals with power and control over their lives (Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017). In contrast, aggressors perceive a threat to their identity as moral agents. An increase in the victims' sense of power and the aggressors' moral self-image has been observed to result in a greater willingness to forgive on both sides. The implementation of intergroup apologies, offenders' acceptance of responsibility, and victims' expressions of empathy can serve to mitigate these threats. Conversely, the absence or threat of certain identity needs, such as self-

esteem, integrity, or belonging, can exacerbate intergroup conflict. However, when these needs are promoted, they can facilitate the process of forgiveness.

*Forgiveness and memories: Fear of forgetting*

Refugees express apprehension that forgiveness may result in a loss of their historical identity, leading to a sense of detachment from their true self (Alim, 2016). For refugees, grieving and holding onto pain serve as mechanisms for remembrance; they may perceive forgetting those who have perished or endured suffering as the ultimate betrayal, and may choose to cling to their suffering rather than forgive aggressors, equating forgiveness with forgetting. In this context, the reluctance to forgive is not tantamount to a rejection of forgiveness per se, but rather arises from the fear of losing the memory of their losses.

However, some refugees understand that the power of forgiveness lies in the ability to free oneself from the past; the will to change one's mind and start over to rebuild oneself. Therefore, some may find it helpful to try to stop remembering negative experiences and see letting go as necessary to enable forgiveness. This strategy can also have a dark side, leading the person to avoid anything related to their experience, such as talking about the past, not wanting to visit the country of origin, and avoiding contact with other refugees. The key consideration is that facilitators should never advocate forgiveness at the expense of remembrance. It's important to acknowledge the fear of forgetting and to facilitate forgiveness processes that encourage healthy remembrance of the past without dwelling on it.

Nevertheless, some refugees recognise that the capacity to forgive is contingent upon one's ability to liberate oneself from the past, and to embrace a willingness to alter one's perspective and commence anew in order to rebuild oneself. Consequently, it may

be beneficial for some individuals to attempt to cease recollection of unfavourable experiences and perceive relinquishment as a prerequisite for forgiveness. This strategy can also have a detrimental effect, prompting the individual to avoid any association with their experience. This may manifest as a reluctance to engage in discourse about the past, a disinclination to visit the country of origin, and a tendency to avoid contact with other refugees (see Table 1; Schuff, 2010). It is of paramount importance that facilitators refrain from advocating forgiveness at the expense of remembrance. It is crucial to recognise the concern that forgetting may cause and to facilitate forgiveness processes that encourage a constructive and healthy remembrance of the past without excessive dwelling on it.

#### *Religious commitment, spirituality, and refugees' forgiveness*

Several studies provide substantial evidence for the notion that religiosity and spirituality play a crucial role in fostering forgiveness. For instance, (Goh, 2020) developed a faith-based psychological framework incorporating Christian spirituality, prayer, and scripture to enhance forgiveness and well-being among Chin refugees. Similarly, Peddle (2001) identified faith as a central factor in the trauma recovery and forgiveness process, with many participants viewing spirituality as a source of resilience. Schuff (2010) reinforced this perspective by identifying forgiveness-spirituality as one of three reconciliation strategies, where religious beliefs were directly linked to forgiveness as a moral duty.

Furthermore, Skalski-Bednarz et al. (2022) explored the impact of faith maturity on forgiveness and well-being, finding that individuals who had a more mature faith were more likely to forgive and experienced improved psychological outcomes. The study

also highlighted the negative relationship between anger toward God and forgiveness, suggesting that religious struggles could hinder the forgiveness process.

In the context of war and political trauma, studies on refugees from conflict zones also show a strong association between religiosity and forgiveness. Ochu et al. (2018) found that positive religious coping mechanisms, such as prayer and faith-based community support, were significantly associated with dispositional forgiveness. In a similar vein, Kira et al. (2009) demonstrated that religiosity was a predictor of interpersonal forgiveness among Iraqi refugees, particularly in cases where faith provided a framework for reconciliation and meaning-making. Nyarko and Punamäki (2017) further emphasised this relationship, showing that religious beliefs and spiritual leaders influenced young war survivors' perceptions of forgiveness (see Table 1).

### ***Effects of forgiveness on refugees***

#### *Unforgiveness: rumination and vengeful desires*

A number of studies have indicated that refugees exhibit symptoms associated with unforgiveness (Kira et al., 2009; Stammel et al., 2012). The presence of unforgiveness factors is the most predictive of trauma and depression symptoms among refugees. Park (2012) identified four components of unforgiveness as the most predictive factors of symptomatology. Of these, rumination on the painful experience was identified as the most significant predictor of trauma and depression symptoms. Similarly, Kira et al. (2009) identified a correlation between unforgiveness towards collaborators and elevated rates of blood pressure, digestive disorders, and respiratory issues. Conversely, the authors observed a reduction in instances of circulatory problems among individuals who did not forgive the dictator. As Ochu et al. (2018) conclude, refugees who have been directly exposed to violence present higher levels of

PTSD and lower levels of dispositional forgiveness. Those seeking asylum who are unable to meet their most basic needs are less able to forgive and experience lower levels of well-being than those whose needs are met.

#### *Mental health and well-being benefits of forgiveness*

The GRACE intervention (Goh, 2020) is a faith-based psychoeducational programme designed to assist Chin refugees from Burma in coping with stress, trauma, and forgiveness through Christian spiritual practices. It integrates scripture reading, reflective writing, meditation, and prayer to promote gratitude, forgiveness, and well-being. The five-step model is designed to guide participants through a process of understanding, acceptance, and practical application of grace, with the ultimate aim of fostering emotional healing and resilience. The study's findings suggest that adhering to the protocol results in a reduction in distress and an enhancement in gratitude and forgiveness.

The study found that forgiveness of perpetrators of injustice had positive mental health benefits for refugees, whereas unforgiveness had negative mental health costs (Kira et al., 2009). Refugees who elected to forgive exhibited diminished self-reported trauma and depressive symptoms (Park, 2012), along with reduced levels of anxiety and stress (see Table 1; Kandemiri, 2019; Peddle, 2001). Aziz (2017) identified a modest yet statistically significant correlation between emotional forgiveness and all domains of psychological well-being. Other researchers have also demonstrated that forgiveness enhances refugees' well-being by reducing rumination, anger, anxiety, and depression (Alim et al., 2019; Kandemiri, 2019). Anger towards God was identified as a negative predictor of forgiveness and overall well-being. This relationship was found to be mediated by faith maturity and decisional forgiveness (Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2022).

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study align with key theoretical frameworks on intergroup relations, forgiveness, and reconciliation. By examining these results in light of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954), and existing literature on intergroup forgiveness, we can better understand the psychological and social mechanisms that facilitate or hinder forgiveness among refugee populations.

A salient theme that emerges from this systematic review is the role of intergroup contact in fostering forgiveness (De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2017). A substantial body of research has repeatedly demonstrated that high-quality intergroup contact has the capacity to reduce prejudice and to promote empathy and trust, which are critical factors in fostering forgiveness (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The present findings lend further support to this view, indicating that structured intergroup contact initiatives among refugee populations may engender an environment conducive to forgiveness (Cehajic et al., 2008).

For refugee populations, these insights suggest that structured intergroup contact interventions may help mitigate hostility and foster forgiveness. Nevertheless, it is important to note that merely establishing contact is insufficient in itself; factors such as perceived outgroup heterogeneity and common-ingroup identity have been shown to play crucial mediating roles (Cehajic et al., 2008; Hässler et al., 2021).

A critical barrier to intergroup forgiveness, as identified in both this systematic review and the literature, is the lack of acknowledgement from the perpetrator group. Uluğ et al. (2021) found that unacknowledged past trauma and genocide lead to enduring resentment, obstructing forgiveness (Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017). The present findings serve to reinforce this notion, demonstrating that refugees' resistance to forgiveness is

frequently rooted in the absence of formal apologies and reparations. This is particularly salient for refugee populations, who may also perceive the host society as complicit in or indifferent to their suffering.

In a similar vein, Hornsey et al. (2015) posit that collective apologies, though symbolically significant, frequently fall short of engendering forgiveness unless they are accompanied by tangible reparative actions. Blatz and Philpot (2010) provide a comprehensive review of intergroup apologies, emphasizing that remorse, sincerity, and reparations are critical for an apology to have a lasting impact on intergroup relations. These findings are consistent with research on government apologies for historical injustices, which suggests that apologies are often favorably received by victimized groups when they include concrete reparative measures (Kira et al., 2009; Park, 2012). Additionally, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that individuals derive a proportion of their self-concept from their group memberships. In the context of post-conflict settings, this tendency may manifest as competitive victimhood, wherein groups compete for recognition as the primary victim, thereby impeding the process of forgiveness. This dynamic has been shown to reinforce group boundaries and impede the process of reconciliation (Hornsey et al., 2015). The present findings suggest that interventions promoting shared group identity and acknowledgment of mutual suffering may help dismantle this psychological barrier.

Theories frequently differentiate between two categories of trauma that impact identity: personal identity trauma, such as sexual abuse, and collective identity trauma, such as war (Kira, 2001). It is evident that traumatic experiences have an impact on both personal and collective identity. In accordance with the tenets of self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) and intergroup emotion theory (Mackie et al., 2000; Smith,

1993), when social identity is a salient factor, as may be the case for minorities, members tend to perceive other group members as representing the collective entity. Consequently, events that are perceived to be beneficial or detrimental to the group are also attributed to individuals within that group (Kira et al., 2009).

Research by Klar and Schori-Eyal (2015) in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict supports this, showing that perspective-taking can mitigate competitive victimhood and promote mutual forgiveness (Alim et al., 2019). The Reconciliation Pyramid Model, proposed by Auerbach (2009), delineates the stages of narrative reconciliation, including the acknowledgement of competing narratives and the facilitation of forgiveness. The implications for refugee populations suggest that interventions emphasising shared suffering and common identity may be beneficial in overcoming these psychological barriers.

Furthermore, the role of transitional justice is of particular pertinence to the discourse on forgiveness among refugees, as it pertains to the redress of past injustices and the establishment of institutional frameworks that may promote forgiveness and reconciliation. Aiken (2010) explores how decentralised transitional justice efforts in Northern Ireland have contributed to intergroup forgiveness, arguing that instrumental, socioemotional, and distributive efforts are necessary for sustainable peace. In a similar vein, Bilali and Mahmoud (2017) examine how civil society efforts to transform conflict narratives can shape forgiveness processes.

On the other hand, Eisikovits (2004) adopts a more critical stance, interrogating the role of forgiveness in political reconciliation. He contends that sympathy, rather than forgiveness, might be a more pragmatic and efficacious approach for political reconciliation. The present review corroborates the notion that refugees are more

inclined to engage in forgiveness when apologies are accompanied by tangible reparations and policy reforms.

The cultural and religious framing of forgiveness emerged as a significant theme in our review. Finnegan (2010) documents how Acholi leaders in Uganda have promoted forgiveness as a means of regaining agency and overcoming trauma, even in the absence of formal justice mechanisms. The present findings are in alignment with this, demonstrating that religious faith and community support frequently function as a basis for forgiveness and post-traumatic growth.

Extensive research support that religiosity and spirituality predict forgiveness (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016; Smith, 2016; Worthington & Sandage, 2016). In this regard, studies also support that one of the main motivations for refugees to forgive is linked to their faith experience (Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017; Peddle, 2001), promoting a belief in a worldwide brotherhood and helping victims understand the other as human or even ‘brother or sister’, instead of ‘opponent or enemy’ (Dorais, 2007; Schuff, 2010), or even giving the survivors a purpose, understanding that their faith helps them give meaning to their suffering and reframes it as an experience that connects them with other people’s suffering (Nelson, 2009).

In this sense, Ochu et al. (2018) found out that positive religious coping might promote forgiveness in the refugee community they studied and might help to reestablish a personal sense of meaning, purpose, and even growth after traumatic experiences. Specifically, they found that positive religious coping predicted dispositional forgiveness, and this one, in turn, contributed to their self-perception of posttraumatic growth.

However, as demonstrated by Schmitt et al. (2004), forgiveness is often contingent on whether the victim perceives the perpetrator's apology as sincere and accompanied by reparative actions. This finding suggests that religious narratives, in and of themselves, may be inadequate to facilitate forgiveness unless they are complemented by social and political measures that address the grievances of refugees.

In this line, religious-related measures should be chosen carefully as some studies use 'religious practices' as indicators of religiosity or spirituality, which are, in fact, different, and not always congruent (Kira et al., 2009; Van Niekerk, 2018). Religious practice should not be considered an indicator of religiosity or spirituality, and even less in those countries where religion is still so linked to the culture that the vast majority of the population attend religious services (Cohen et al., 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The present systematic review constitutes a substantial contribution to the field of mental health for refugee populations, introducing and exploring in depth the role of forgiveness in enhancing the psychological well-being of refugees.

Despite its frequent omission from conventional treatment frameworks, forgiveness can play a pivotal role in the psychological rehabilitation and recovery of refugees who have endured significant trauma and profound loss. Our findings indicate that forgiveness plays a key role in mitigating trauma symptoms, promoting resilience, facilitating better social integration, and contributing to long-term mental health. Conversely, unforgiveness has been identified as a significant predictor of trauma and depression symptoms among refugees. By addressing the issue of forgiveness, mental health

professionals can assist refugees in rebuilding a sense of personal and community identity, which is vital for their adaptation and well-being in new environments.

This study offers new insights into the psychology of forgiveness by examining the impact of complex dynamics of injustice, loss, and trauma on refugees' capacity to forgive. The process of forgiveness presents significant challenges for refugee populations, who have often endured egregious violations of human rights, including violence, persecution, and the loss of loved ones. These traumatic experiences can lead to the development of intense feelings of anger, betrayal, and mistrust, which can further complicate the forgiveness process. Such profound emotional distress serves to complicate the process of forgiveness. For refugees, the most challenging aggressions to forgive often involve the suffering endured by their family members. Besides, the persistent sense of insecurity and instability in their lives, which serve as constant reminders of their trauma, can reinforce feelings of unforgiveness. Potential barriers such as the asylum process may impede forgiveness processes, as refugees may perceive their legal situation as indicative of ongoing injustices. Furthermore, the ambiguous and sometimes faceless nature of their perpetrators, which ranges from state actors to unknown militant groups, adds another layer of complexity. Moreover, forgiveness and justice are inextricably linked. Forgiveness without accountability may appear insincere or forced. The fear of identity loss is particularly acute among refugees, for whom the act of forgiving might be perceived as a betrayal or a relinquishment of their past struggles. Additionally, refugees may be reluctant to engage in forgiveness if it is perceived as a precursor to reconciliation, which they may not yet be prepared to embrace. A lack of understanding of these distinctions may result in resistance to forgiveness interventions, emphasising the necessity for a nuanced approach that respects the individual's readiness and contextual circumstances.

In conclusion, this article not only addresses a significant gap in the existing literature but also provides guidance for integrating forgiveness into psychological interventions with refugees. These insights are fundamental for the design of more effective intervention strategies that recognise and utilise forgiveness as a powerful tool for healing in contexts of extreme adversity and displacement. The process of forgiveness requires supportive, culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Data availability statement**

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials for consultation.

### **References**

- Abu Suhaiban, H., Grasser, L. R., & Javanbakht, A. (2019). Mental Health of Refugees and Torture Survivors: A Critical Review of Prevalence, Predictors, and Integrated Care. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(13), 2309. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16132309>
- Aiken, N. T. (2010). Learning to Live Together: Transitional Justice and Intergroup Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4(2), 166–188. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijq002>
- Alim, M. (2016). *“But this I will always carry with me”: Perceptions of Forgiveness Among Iranian Refugees*. University of Adelaide.
- \*Alim, M., Due, C., & Strelan, P. (2019). Perceptions of forgiveness in response to systemic injustice among Iranian refugees. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 25(3), 255–258. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000355>

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*.
- Arai, T. (2019). Conflict Intervention Training as Strategic Convening: Lessons From Syria. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, *14*(3), 288–303.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316619862770>
- Auerbach, Y. (2004). The role of forgiveness in reconciliation. In Y. Bar-Siman-Tov (Ed.), *From conflict resolution to reconciliation* (pp. 149–175). Oxford University Press.
- Auerbach, Y. (2009). The reconciliation pyramid—A narrative-based framework for analyzing identity conflicts. *Political Psychology*, *30*(2), 291–318.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00692.x>
- \*Aziz, I. A. (2017). *Individual difference predictors of well-being among displaced persons who live under stressful conditions*. University of Leicester.
- Betancourt, T. S. (2005). Stressors, supports and the social ecology of displacement: Psychosocial dimensions of an emergency education program for Chechen adolescents displaced in Ingushetia, Russia. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, *29*(3), 309–340. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-005-9170-9>
- Bilali, R., & Mahmoud, R. (2017). Confronting history and reconciliation: A review of civil society’s approaches to transforming conflict narratives. In C. Psaltis, M. Carretero, & S. Čehajić-Clancy (Eds.), *History education and conflict transformation: Social psychological theories, history teaching and reconciliation* (pp. 77–96). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blatz, C. W., & Philpot, C. (2010). On the Outcomes of Intergroup Apologies: A Review. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *4*(11), 995–1007.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00318.x>

- Blatz, C. W., Schumann, K., & Ross, M. (2009). Government Apologies for Historical Injustices. *Political Psychology, 30*(2), 219–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00689.x>
- Cehajic, S., Brown, R., & Castano, E. (2008). Forgive and Forget? Antecedents and Consequences of Intergroup Forgiveness in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Political Psychology, 29*(3), 351–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00634.x>
- Clark, P., & Kaufman, Z. D. (Eds.). (2009). *After genocide: Transitional justice, post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in Rwanda and beyond*. Columbia University Press.
- Cohen, A. B., Wu, M. S., & Miller, J. (2016). Religion and Culture: Individualism and Collectivism in the East and West. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 47*(9), 1236–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022116667895>
- Craig, C. D., Sossou, M. A., Schnak, M., & Essex, H. (2008). Complicated grief and its relationship to mental health and well-being among Bosnian refugees after resettlement in the United States: Implications for practice, policy, and research. *Traumatology, 14*(4), 115–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765608322129>
- Cuhadar, E., & Dayton, B. (2011). The Social Psychology of Identity and Inter-group Conflict: From Theory to Practice. *International Studies Perspectives, 12*(3), 273–293. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2011.00433.x>
- \*De Tezanos-Pinto, P., Mazziotta, A., & Feuchte, F. (2017). Intergroup contact and reconciliation among Liberian refugees: A multilevel analysis in a multiple groups setting. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 23*(3), 228–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000251>
- Dorais, L. J. (2007). Faith, hope and identity: Religion and the Vietnamese refugees. *Refugee Survey Quarterly, 26*(2), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdi0227>

- Droždek, B., Kamperman, A. M., Tol, W. A., Knipscheer, J. W., & Kleber, R. J. (2013). Is legal status impacting outcomes of group therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder with male asylum seekers and refugees from Iran and Afghanistan? *BMC Psychiatry, 13*(1), 148. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-13-148>
- Eisikovits, N. (2004). Forget Forgiveness: On the Benefits of Sympathy for Political Reconciliation. *Theoria, 51*(105), 31–63. <https://doi.org/10.3167/004058104782267015>
- \*Fabbe, K., & Sinmazdemir, T. (2018). Syrian Refugees in Turkey and the Politics of Postconflict Reconciliation. *Review of Middle East Studies, 52*(2), 249–262. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2018.90>
- Fazel, M., Wheeler, J., & Danesh, J. (2005). Prevalence of serious mental disorder in 7000 refugees resettled in western countries: A systematic review. *The Lancet, 365*(9467), 1309–1314. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(05\)61027-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)61027-6)
- Finnegan, A. C. (2010). Forging Forgiveness: Collective Efforts Amidst War in Northern Uganda. *Sociological Inquiry, 80*(3), 424–447. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2010.00341.x>
- Freedman, S., & Zarifkar, T. (2016). The psychology of interpersonal forgiveness and guidelines for forgiveness therapy: What therapists need to know to help their clients forgive. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice, 3*(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000087>
- \*Goh, S. (2020). *A Faith-Driven Protocol on Gratitude, Forgiveness, and Stress for Chin Refugees from Burma: An Exploratory Study*. Liberty University.
- Halpern, J., & Weinstein, H. M. (2004). Rehumanizing the other: Empathy and reconciliation. *Human Rights Quarterly, 26*(3), 561–583. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2004.0036>

- Hässler, T., Uluğ, Ö. M., Kappmeier, M., & Travaglino, G. A. (2021). Intergroup contact and social change: An integrated Contact-Collective Action Model. *Journal of Social Issues, 77*(1), 217–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12412>
- Hinton, D. E., Field, N. P., Nickerson, A., Bryant, R. A., & Simon, N. (2013). Dreams of the Dead Among Cambodian Refugees: Frequency, Phenomenology, and Relationship to Complicated Grief and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Death Studies, 37*(8), 750–767. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2012.692457>
- Hinton, D. E., Nickerson, A., & Bryant, R. A. (2013). Prolonged Grief in Cambodian Refugees Following Genocide: Rebirth Concerns and Avoidance of Reminders. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 18*(5), 444–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2012.714218>
- Hong, Q. N., Fàbregues, S., Bartlett, G., Boardman, F., Cargo, M., Dagenais, P., Gagnon, M.-P., Griffiths, F., Nicolau, B., O’Cathain, A., Rousseau, M.-C., Vedel, I., & Pluye, P. (2018). The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 for information professionals and researchers. *Education for Information, 34*(4), 285–291. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-180221>
- Hornsey, M. J., Wohl, M. J., & Philpot, C. R. (2015). Collective Apologies and Their Effects on Forgiveness: Pessimistic Evidence but Constructive Implications. *Australian Psychologist, 50*(2), 106–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12087>
- Kalayjian, A. (2009). Forgiveness in Spite of Denial, Revisionism, and Injustice. In A. Kalayjian & R. F. Paloutzian (Eds.), *Forgiveness and reconciliation: Psychological Pathways to Conflict Transformation and Peace Building* (pp. 237–249). Springer.
- \*Kandemiri, P. (2019). Forgiveness as a positive contributing factor on the mental wellbeing of Congolese refugees and asylum seekers post-war experience.

*Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 29(8), 1044–1058.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2019.1658685>

Kira, I. A. (2001). Taxonomy of trauma and trauma assessment. *Traumatology*, 7(2), 73–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/153476560100700202>

Kira, I. A., Clifford, D., Wiencek, P., & Al-Haidar, A. (2001). *Iraqi refugees in southeast Michigan: First report*. ACCESS Community Health and Research Center.

\*Kira, I. A., Lewandowski, L. A., Templin, T. N., Ramaswamy, V., Ozkan, B., & Mohanesh, J. (2009). The effects of post-retribution inter-group forgiveness: The case of iraqi refugees. *Peace and Conflict*, 15(4), 385–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10781910903158669>

Kira, I. A., Shuwiekh, H., Rice, K., Al Ibraheem, B., & Aljakoub, J. (2017). A Threatened Identity: The Mental Health Status of Syrian Refugees in Egypt and Its Etiology. *Identity*, 17(3), 176–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2017.1340163>

Klar, Y., & Schori-Eyal, N. (2015). Gazing at suffering Gaza from suffering Sderot: Seeds of forgiveness and reconciliation amidst the turmoil? *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 18(5), 624–643. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430215570502>

Königstein, H. F. (2013). *The influence of mental health on reconciliation in post-war Lebanon. An explorative field based study using grounded theory research*. IFHV Working Paper Vol.3, N°2. Ruhr University Bochum.

Longman, T., Pham, P., & Weinstein, H. M. (2004). Connecting justice to human experience: Attitudes toward accountability and reconciliation in Rwanda. In E.

- Stover & H. M. Weinstein (Eds.), *My Neighbor, My Enemy* (pp. 206–225). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511720352.014>
- Lundahl, B. W., Taylor, M. J., Stevenson, R., & Roberts, K. D. (2008). Process-Based Forgiveness Interventions: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Research on Social Work Practice, 18*(5), 465–478. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731507313979>
- Mackie, D. M., Devos, T., & Smith, E. R. (2000). Intergroup emotions: Explaining offensive action tendencies in an intergroup context. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(4), 602–616. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.4.602>
- Merhej, R., & Rahme, B. (2024). Review of Selected Essays on Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. *The Journal of Social Encounters, 8*(1), 94–114. <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1245>
- Miller, K. E. (1996). The Effects of State Terrorism and Exile on Indigenous Guatemalan Refugee Children: A Mental Health Assessment and an Analysis of Children's Narratives. *Child Development, 67*(1), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131688>
- Miller, K. E., Weine, S. M., Ramic, A., Brkic, N., Bjedic, Z. D., Smajkic, A., Boskailo, E., & Worthington, G. (2002). The relative contribution of war experiences and exile-related stressors to levels of psychological distress among Bosnian refugees. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 15*(5), 377–387. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020181124118>
- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., & Altman, D. G. (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. *PLoS Medicine, 6*(7), e1000097. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097>

- Montgomery, E. (2011). Trauma, exile and mental health in young refugees. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *124*(440), 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.2011.01740.x>
- Nelson, J. M. (2009). *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. Springer.
- Nickerson, A., Liddell, B. J., Maccallum, F., Steel, Z., Silove, D., & Bryant, R. A. (2014). Posttraumatic stress disorder and prolonged grief in refugees exposed to trauma and loss. *BMC Psychiatry*, *14*(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-14-106>
- Nyarko, F. (2015). *Understanding the war experience of adolescents: The role of forgiveness and future prospect*. University of Tampere School.
- \*Nyarko, F., & Punamäki, R.-L. (2017). Meanings and preconditions of forgiveness among young adult war survivors in African context: A qualitative study. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *23*(2), 162–173. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000245>
- \*Ochu, A. C., Davis, E. B., Magyar-Russell, G., O’Grady, K. A., & Aten, J. D. (2018). Religious coping, dispositional forgiveness, and posttraumatic outcomes in adult survivors of the Liberian Civil War. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *5*(2), 104–119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000163>
- Ouzzani, M., Hammady, H., Fedorowicz, Z., & Elmagarmid, A. (2016). Rayyan—A web and mobile app for systematic reviews. *Systematic Reviews*, *5*(210), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-016-0384-4>
- \*Park, J. U. (2012). *A study of social injustice and forgiveness in the case of North Korean refugees*. Liberty University.

- \*Peddle, N. A. (2001). *Forgiveness in recovery/resiliency from the trauma of war among a selected group of adolescents and adult refugees*. The Fielding Institute.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(5), 751–783.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>
- \*Pham, P., Gibbons, N., Denkinger, J. K., Junne, F., & Vinck, P. (2019). Justice Not Forgiveness: Perspectives on Justice and Reconciliation among Yazidi Women Refugees in Germany. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *11*(3), 530–553.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huz037>
- Popay, J., Roberts, H., Sowden, A., Petticrew, M., Arai, L., Rodgers, M., Britten, N., Roen, K., & Duffy, S. (2006). *Guidance on the conduct of narrative synthesis in systematic reviews*. ESRC Methods Programme.
- Prieto-Ursúa, M. (2017). *Perdón y salud: Introducción a la psicología del perdón*. Universidad Pontificia Comillas.
- Rasmussen, A., Miller, K. E., & Verkuilen, J. (2018). Conceptualization and Measurement of Traumatic Events among Refugees and Other War-Affected Populations. In N. Morina & A. Nickerson (Eds.), *Mental Health of Refugee and Conflict-Affected Populations* (pp. 327–339). Springer.
- Schmitt, M., Gollwitzer, M., Förster, N., & Montada, L. (2004). Effects of Objective and Subjective Account Components on Forgiving. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *144*(5), 465–486. <https://doi.org/10.3200/SOCP.144.5.465-486>
- Schock, K., Böttche, M., Rosner, R., Wenk-Ansohn, M., & Knaevelsrud, C. (2016). Impact of new traumatic or stressful life events on pre-existing PTSD in

traumatized refugees: Results of a longitudinal study. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 7(1), 32106. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v7.32106>

\*Schuff, H. M. T. (2010). *Moving on: An interview study of reconciliation practices among war refugees*. University of Oslo.

\*Skalski-Bednarz, S. B., Konaszewski, K., Niesiobędzka, M., Gładysz, O., Toussaint, L. L., & Surzykiewicz, J. (2022). Anger toward God and well-being in Ukrainian war refugees: The serial mediating influence of faith maturity and decisional forgiveness. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2022.2158019>

Slobodin, O., & de Jong, J. T. (2015). Mental health interventions for traumatized asylum seekers and refugees: What do we know about their efficacy? *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 61(1), 17–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764014535752>

Smith, A. V. (2016). *Exploring the role that religiosity and/or spirituality plays in the appraisal and coping processes of low-income, African American, adolescent males who have been exposed to community violence: A phenomenological approach*. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Smith, E. R. (1993). Social identity and social emotions: Toward new conceptualizations of prejudice. In D. M. Mackie & D. L. Hamilton (Eds.), *Affect, cognition and stereotyping: Interactive Processes in Group Perception* (pp. 297–315). Elsevier.

\*Stammel, N., Neuner, F., Böttche, M., & Knaevelsrud, C. (2012). Construction of a questionnaire for readiness to reconcile in victims of human rights violations. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 3(1), 15785. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v3i0.15785>

- Strelan, P., Feather, N. T., & McKee, I. (2008). Justice and forgiveness: Experimental evidence for compatibility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*(6), 1538–1544. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.07.014>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall Publishers.
- Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.
- Turrini, G., Purgato, M., Ballette, F., Nosè, M., Ostuzzi, G., & Barbui, C. (2017). Common mental disorders in asylum seekers and refugees: Umbrella review of prevalence and intervention studies. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 11*(1), 51. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-017-0156-0>
- U. N. General Assembly. (1951). *Convention relating to the status of refugees (Treaty Series, vol. 189)*. United Nations.
- Uluğ, Ö. M., Bilali, R., Karasu, M., & Malo, L. (2021). Obstacles to reconciliation and forgiveness among victim groups of unacknowledged past trauma and genocide. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 51*(2), 313–325. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2740>
- Van Niekerk, B. (2018). Religion and spirituality: What are the fundamental differences? *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies, 74*(3), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4933>
- Wade, N. G., & Worthington, E. L. (2003). Overcoming Interpersonal Offenses: Is Forgiveness the Only Way to Deal With Unforgiveness? *Journal of Counseling & Development, 81*(3), 343–353. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00261.x>

- Wade, N. G., Worthington, E. L., & Meyer, J. E. (2005). But Do They Work? A Meta-Analysis of Group Interventions to Promote Forgiveness. In E. L. Worthington (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 423–440). Routledge.
- Weine, S. M., & Henderson, S. W. (2005). Rethinking the role of posttraumatic stress disorder in refugee mental health services. In T. A. Corales (Ed.), *Trends in posttraumatic stress disorder research* (pp. 157–183). Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- Williams, E., & Nshom, E. (2024). Prejudice towards refugees in the United States. In *Research Handbook on Communication and Prejudice* (pp. 223–240). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802209662.00023>
- Witvliet, C. V. O., Worthington, E. L., Root, L. M., Sato, A. F., Ludwig, T. E., & Exline, J. J. (2008). Retributive justice, restorative justice, and forgiveness: An experimental psychophysiology analysis. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*(1), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2007.01.009>
- Worthington, E. L., & Sandage, S. J. (2016). *Forgiveness and spirituality in psychotherapy: A relational approach*. American Psychological Association.
- Note.* Citations marked with an asterisk (\*) represent the primary studies included in the systematic review sample.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram (Moher et al., 2009)

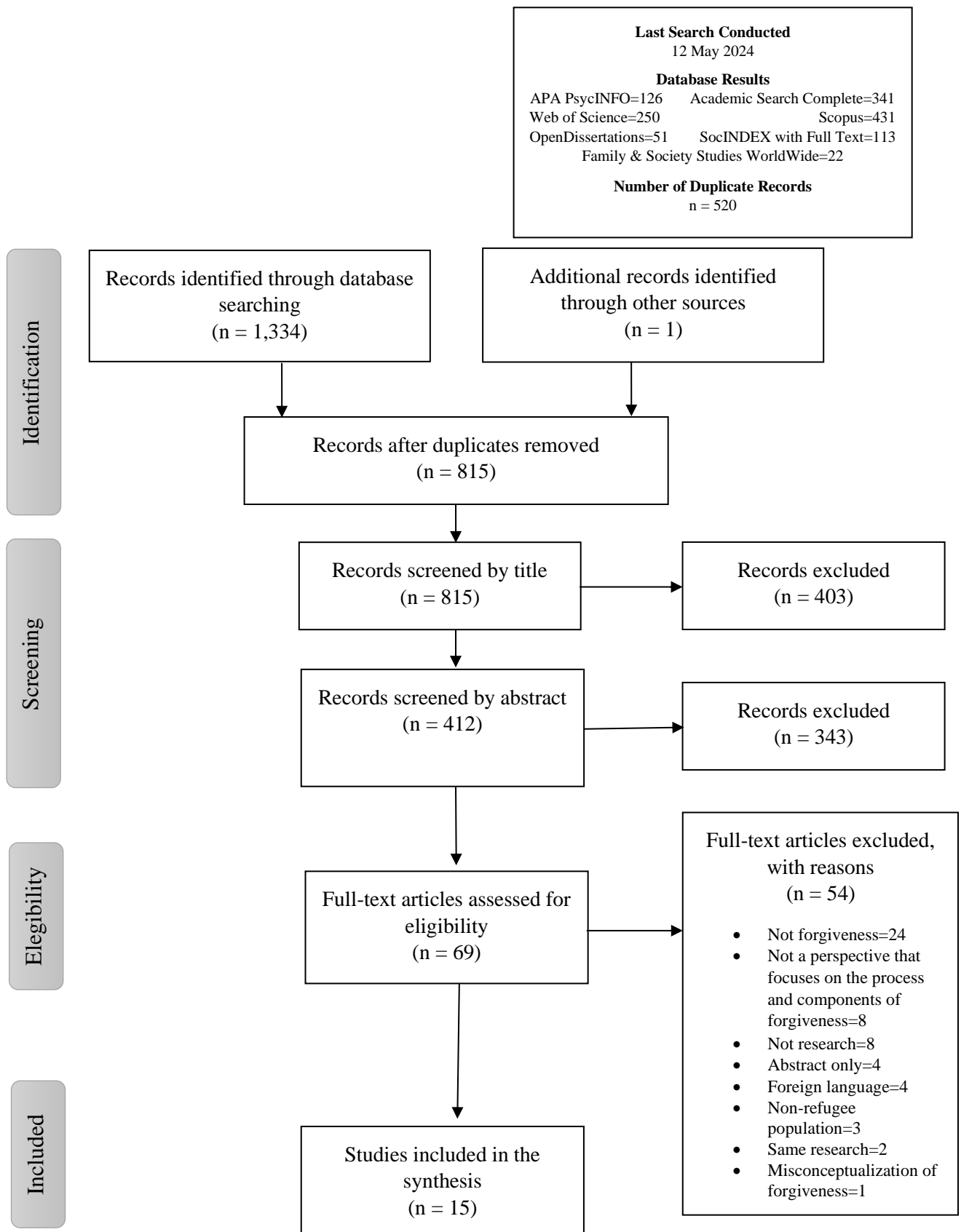


Table 2. Studies included (quantitative and qualitative)

<i>Study</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Study design/ Sampling</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Key forgiveness-related findings</i>
Alim et al. (2019)	Iranian refugees in Australia (N=7)	Qual.	Cross-sectional/ Snowball sampling	Semi-structured interviews on forgiveness, justice, and well-being.	Views on forgiveness depend on the transgression, forgiveness takes time and may be related to resettlement, confusion between forgiving and forgetting, difficulty forgiving ongoing system-level transgressions, and forgiveness leads to positive well-being.
Aziz (2017)	Arab IDPs who live in the Kurdistan (Iraq) (N=350)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	<i>Intrapersonal forgiveness</i> : McLernon, et al. (2004) short version of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (22 items). <i>Psychological well-being</i> : Ryff's Scale (PWB; 42 items). Depth of hurt (1 item from 1 to 5) and time of the incident.	Participants show lower levels of forgiveness and well-being than the general population. Emotional forgiveness associated with all domains of well-being. Behavioral forgiveness associated with purpose in life and self-acceptance (PWB). The cognitive component of forgiveness was associated with positive relationships, environmental mastery, self-acceptance and purpose in life (PWB). No significant gender differences were found.
De Tezanos-Pinto et al. (2017)	Liberian refugees in Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana (N=181)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Snowball sampling	<i>Forgiveness</i> : "I can forgive members of the other tribes who acknowledge the harm their tribe did" and "...who make amends for what their tribe did." <i>Intergroup contact</i> : Cross-group friendship (single item) and extended cross-group friendship (single item). <i>Attitudes</i> toward Liberian ethnic groups: feeling thermometer. <i>Intergroup trust</i> and <i>empathy</i> : 3 items each. <i>Traumatic war experiences</i> : exposure to 4 events and reexperiencing (single item).	Individual-level: intergroup contact predicts intergroup attitudes ( $\beta=.44$ , $p<.001$ , $R^2=.20$ ), which in turn predicts trust ( $\beta=.44$ , $p<.001$ ), empathy ( $\beta=.34$ , $p<.001$ ), and forgiveness ( $\beta=.19$ , $p=.039$ ). Indirect effects of intergroup contact via intergroup attitudes significant trust ( $\beta=.19$ , $p<.001$ ), empathy ( $\beta=.15$ , $p=.003$ ), and forgiveness ( $\beta=.09$ , $p=.048$ ). Reexperiencing: significant negative correlation with forgiveness.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Study</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Study design/ Sampling</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Key forgiveness-related findings</i>
Fabbe & Sinmazde mir (2018)	Syrian refugees in Turkey (N=1,384)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Systematic sampling (mixed)	Survey: different topics; exposure to violence, patterns and reasons for leaving, access to services, daily life in Turkey, attitudes towards those involved in the conflict, and beliefs about peace and reconciliation in Syria. Not able to ask about religious sects because it was considered too sensitive.	When asked what should happen to individuals affiliated with the regime, regime fighters, ISIS, and opposition members who killed civilians, the response option “admitting their actions and seeking forgiveness from those they harmed” was chosen only 1-3% of the time. The most common response was “the appropriate punishment would be trial by the Syrian national courts” (with 53% for regime affiliated and 42% for regime fighters). The most common response for ISIS and opposition members who killed civilians was “trial by an international court” (10% each).
Goh (2020)	Burmese Christian Chin refugees in USA (N=15)	Quant.	Quasi-experimental Design/ Convenience sampling	Refugee Health Screener-15 (RHS-15; 15 items). Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES; 16 items). Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM; 12 items). Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6; 6 items). Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; 5 items).	Participants in the GRACE intervention reported significantly lower levels of psychological distress and higher levels of forgiveness at post-intervention.
Kandemiri (2019)	Female Congolese refugees in South Africa (N=10)	Qual.	Cross-sectional/ Judgmental sampling (purposive)	Semi-structured interviews (about forgiveness and well-being).	Forgiveness improved respondents' mental well-being by reducing anger, depression, anxiety, stress, and rumination (compared to respondents who found forgiveness difficult).
Kira et al. (2009)	Iraqi refugees in Wayne County, Michigan (USA) (N=501)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Snowball sampling	Forgiveness vs. refusal to forgive scale (FRFS; 10 items). Health scale (12 items) (Kira et al., 2001). PTSD: clinician-administered (subscale of CAPS-2; 18 items). Cumulative trauma disorder (CTD) scale (15 items). Religious practice (single item).	Forgiveness toward collaborators yielded positive mental health outcomes and was correlated with religiosity, whereas lack of forgiveness toward the dictator was linked to favorable health and mental health indicators. The impact of unforgiveness (toward collaborators and the dictator) on PTSD symptoms was mediated by health factors.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Study</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Study design/ Sampling</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Key forgiveness-related findings</i>
Nyarko & Punamäki (2017)	Liberian refugees living in Buduburam camp in Ghana (N=13)	Qual.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience and snowball sampling	Semi-structured interviews (about their readiness, preconditions, and experiences of forgiveness regarding war trauma and persecution).	Reasons given by participants to explain their forgiveness process (meanings and prerequisites): religious beliefs, apologies and acts of repentance, the importance of justice, personal choice (self-liberation, healthier life), and the influence of respected leaders.
Ochu et al. (2018)	Liberian survivors in Monrovia (Liberia) and a Buduburam refugee camp (in Ghana) (N=407)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	<i>Religious coping</i> : Brief RCOPE (14 items). <i>Dispositional forgiveness</i> : Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS, 18 items). <i>Posttraumatic stress</i> : Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R, 22 items). <i>Perceived posttraumatic growth</i> : Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI, 21 items).	Women reported lower levels of dispositional forgiveness. Directly exposed survivors reported higher levels of post-traumatic stress and lower levels of dispositional forgiveness and perceived post-traumatic growth. Dispositional forgiveness partially mediated (explained) the relationship between positive religious coping and perceived post-traumatic growth.
Park (2012)	North Korean refugees residing in South Korea or the USA (N=269)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	Social Adaptation Self-evaluation (SASS; 21 items). Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10). Trauma Scale for North Korean Refugee (TSNKR; 16 items). Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D; 20 items). Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness (DFS/EFS; 8 items). Rumination About an Interpersonal Offense (RIO). Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM; 9 items). Most Painful Hurt Experience (4 items). Hurt types (7 items).	Unforgiveness was the strongest predictor of both trauma and depression symptoms (specifically, rumination about the North Korean government was the most significant predictor). Rumination was also the strongest component of unforgiveness for mental health.  Decisional forgiveness was the main component for trauma and depression (participants who decided to forgive experienced lower depressive disorders and levels of self-reported trauma: lower levels of trauma and depressive disorders were related to decide to forgive).  Participants with higher levels of unforgiveness and more painful experiences had higher levels of depression and trauma.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Study</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Study design/ Sampling</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Key forgiveness-related findings</i>
Peddle (2001)	Adolescent and adult refugees (71% Yugoslavia) in Illinois (USA) (N=83)	Mixed	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	Short form on background information. Multidimensional Trauma Recovery/resiliency (r/r) Interview and Scale (MTRRIrev.99; 99 questions that are coded into eight domains). Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; 60 items).	Forgiveness correlates significantly with trauma recovery. 72.3% rated themselves as not forgiving at all. The adolescents had lower levels of forgiveness than the adults. The EFI subscales and the total forgiveness score correlated significantly with recovery. Reversed anger and anxiety correlated with trauma recovery and forgiveness. Five main elements for refugees' understanding of forgiveness: faith, possibility to forgive the unforgivable, struggle to find meaning, view of the offender, and forgiveness as a process.
Pham et al. (2019)	Yazidi women refugees (Iraq) resettled in Baden-Württemberg (Germany) (N=117)	Mixed	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	The authors developed a questionnaire on perceptions of justice and accountability (both structured and open-ended questions).	Almost all participants responded that it is not possible to forgive those responsible for the violence. A small number said forgiveness could be an option if their missing relatives were returned, but most said they did not think forgiveness was possible (because of the impossibility of restoration). Participants' views on forgiveness are linked to their prospects for community protection.
Schuff (2010)	Refugees (Balkans and Great Lakes) in Norway (N=12)	Qual.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	Semi-structured interview guide. Twenty Statements Test (TST).	Three distinct reconciliation practices among refugees: activism-expression, forgiveness-spirituality, and distancing-avoidance.
Skalski-Bednarz et al. (2022)	Ukrainian refugees in Poland and Germany (N=243)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	Four-item anger toward God subscale from the Attitudes toward God Scale. Faith Maturity Scale (FMS; 12 items) short version. Decision to Forgive Scale (DTFS; 5 items). World Health Organization's Well-being Index (WHO-5; 5 items). Spirituality Index of Well-Being (12 items).	Anger toward God was a negative predictor of faith maturity, forgiveness, and well-being (psychological and spiritual). Greater exposure to war was associated with lower forgiveness rates, faith maturity, and well-being, while anger toward God increased. Faith maturity and decisional forgiveness mediated the relationship between anger toward God and well-being.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Study</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Study design/ Sampling</i>	<i>Measures</i>	<i>Key forgiveness-related findings</i>
Stamm el et al. (2012)	Kurdish refugees from Turkey in Germany (80% patients at Center for Torture Victims) (N=60)	Quant.	Cross-sectional/ Convenience sampling	Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale (PDS; 49 items). Depression and anxiety: Hopkins Symptom Checklist-25 (HSCL-25 items). Emotional closeness to ethnic groups: Pictorial Representation of Illness and Self Measure (PRSIM).	The first factor of the readiness to reconcile questionnaire was “openness to interactions” (as opposed to avoidance), the second “absence of feelings of revenge”, and the third “openness to conflict resolution”. The first two factors are often included in definitions of unforgiveness. Highly educated respondents were significantly more open to reconciliation. Respondents who perceived themselves as Kurdish (more than Turkish) were less willing to reconcile. This correlation appeared in all subscales of the RI (avoidance: $r=-0.53$ , $p<0.001$ , revenge $r=-0.39$ , $p<0.01$ , conflict resolution $r=-0.49$ , $p<0.001$ ). Participants from urban areas showed less avoidance of Turkish people.