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Forgiveness among Ghanaian children and early adolescents in the context of peer-to-peer dyads

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Abstract

How children experience forgiveness within peer relationships is unknown among children in West Africa. In this study, we sought to understand the contributing factors and influences of forgiveness among children in Ghana for peer-to-peer offenses. We conducted a qualitative study on 25 participants (between the ages of 12 and 15 years) in Accra, Ghana. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify themes from semi-structured interview transcripts. Unique themes centered around the perception that forgiveness ensures relationship

Statement of Relevance: Forgiveness involves an intentional process of letting go of negative intentions and feelings toward an offender. Forgiveness is an important life skill that supports social functioning and benefits wellbeing. Little is known about forgiveness among early adolescents. Our research identified cultural contributors to children's forgiveness processes such as the role of religion and religious figures. It also revealed child-relevant interpersonal perceived offenses (e.g., relational aggressions). This research has implications for supporting children to learn about forgiveness.

continuation, and that a major source of learning about forgiveness is via a religious institution. Despite a common theme that an offense undermines trust in a relationship, most participants perceived that forgiveness was the preferred option for handling the offense. Results suggest that early adolescents can benefit by learning the skill of forgiveness.

KEYWORDS

children, forgiveness process, offenses, peer relations, socialization

1 | INTRODUCTION

Social development is an important aspect of child development. This development happens through socialization, which is crucial to help children develop character strengths to underpin their wellbeing. Thus, these character strengths contribute to their success in school and social life (FitzSimons, 2015). In Ghana, social skills are taught to children by parents, older adults, and institutions such as churches and schools (Haslip et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2018).

Offenses occur often during early adolescence. Forgiveness is one such social skill that facilitates social interaction in damaged relationships and is affected by social status among children (Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2018; van der Wal et al., 2019). There is additional evidence that this is true for forgiveness (Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2019). Our present study has relevance in understanding forgiveness socialization among early adolescents in Ghana.

Forgiveness is most often understood within the stress-and-coping theory (Lazarus, 1999). Worthington Jr. (2006, 2020b) has advanced a stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness by adapting Lazarus's theory largely for middle and late adolescents and adults in Western culture. Worthington suggests that an offense is an injustice that is appraised as a threat (or a challenge) and also associated with some injustice gap (Davis et al., 2016). Large injustice gaps might lead to the stress of perceived injustice or, if motivations, emotions, and behavioral intentions are negative and antisocial, unforgiveness. As a stress reaction, unforgiveness might stimulate coping efforts that seek to reduce the injustice gap and mitigate threat or challenge. Coping might affect the injustice itself by seeking justice. Coping might also affect the appraisal process through various ways of reducing the size of the perceived injustice gap (e.g., turning the matter over to God, forbearing, accepting, or behaving less prosocially, such as seeking retaliation or getting even). Finally, coping might affect the stress reaction through forbearing, accepting, or forgiving.

Although the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness is used widely (see Strelan, 2020; Worthington Jr., 2020b), it has some weaknesses. First, it might not apply across cultures without theoretical adaptation. Second, it might not apply to early adolescents who are just formulating coping mechanisms that will be applied more intentionally and consistently in middle and late adolescence and throughout adulthood. In this article, we seek to adapt the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness to better fit Ghanaian culture and in particular early adolescents in that culture. Based on the existing literature, we will suggest some potential testable research

questions pertaining to those two systemic adaptations. Then, we will conduct a qualitative study of early Ghanaian adolescents as they discuss how they deal with offenses and hurts. Finally, we will discuss our narrative findings in light of the potential modifications suggested by the literature.

2 | HOW FORGIVENESS IS UNDERSTOOD

Conflicts are unavoidable in every interpersonal relationship across the lifespan (Ghaemmaghami et al., 2011). Conflicts may include differences in opinions, profound transgressions, and deep hurts (Ghaemmaghami et al., 2011). Transgressions and hurts may cause anger, resentment, and motivation to retaliate, which together can be labeled unforgiveness which constitute aspects of the stress response in the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness (Worthington Jr., 2020b). Victims and transgressors differ in their perceptions of a transgression, and this has been shown to interfere with forgiveness and relationship repair, and justice restoration (Adams, 2016). In modifying the theory for collectivist Ghanaian culture, such differences in perspectives might be expected to loom larger than for more individualist Western culture.

Justice is a social phenomenon (Exline et al., 2003), An "injustice gap," is the perceived difference between the way a person would like an unjust situation resolved and the way the person perceives it to be at present (Davis et al., 2016). Western cultures tend to value justice and conceptualize transgressions in terms of injustices. However, other cultures might be more oriented toward honor-shame or fear-power (Hesselgrave, 2002). McDonald and Fine (2013) suggest that "there is some evidence of shame culture in Ghana", but strong Christian influences (see Central Intelligence Agency, 2020) have skewed morality more toward justice and guilt. Differences in perceptions and response patterns yield different emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes and social or societal acts aimed at maintaining or repairing relationships (Denham et al., 2005). Those processes, in turn, might lead to forgiving an offender or to being forgiven for transgressions committed. Repair of relationships is of high importance in Ghanaian culture.

Scholars (e.g., Enright et al., 1998; Worthington Jr. & Sandage, 2016; McCullough et al., 2000) have defined forgiveness differently. Almost all believe it to be an intrapsychic experience, and different theorists emphasize different parts of the complex experience of forgiving (Worthington Jr., 2020b). In a collectivist society such as Ghana, defining forgiveness can be complicated. Because a high value is placed on group cohesion, that may force people to make a decision to forgive (i.e., to forswear revenge and to treat the offender as a valued and valuable person; Worthington Jr., 2020b) even though they might not have forgiven emotionally (Worthington Jr., 2020a, 2020b; Worthington Jr. et al., 2020). Within collective societies, the self is socially constructed and embedded in the norms of the society, emphasizing relationships and collective wellbeing (Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007). When an offense is committed, it not only affects the individuals but the social context in general. Therefore forgiveness is more strongly dependent on the interpersonal context than in individualist societies. It is vital to repair social damages (Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Kadima Kadiangandu & Mullet, 2007). Because forgiveness has elements of cognitive, emotional, motivational, and decisional aspects and because this research is focused on children, this present study adopted a working definition of forgiveness from Denham et al. (2005, p. 129). They stated the following:

> Forgiveness is a transformation of one's effect, cognitive judgments, and motivations toward an offender. The victim assesses the harm done and acknowledges the perpetrator's responsibility but voluntarily chooses to cancel the debt, giving up the need for revenge, punishments, or restitution. Importantly, one removes oneself from the negative emotions directly related to the transgression. Over time, there is a motivational transformation, including a reduction in negative motivations and an increase in constructive motivations toward the perpetrator. The forgiver may be motivated toward positive social behaviours toward the offender (p. 129).

Forgiveness, thus involves at least two processes (Worthington Jr., 2020b). First, decisional forgiveness involves an implicit or explicit decision about future behavioral intentions toward an offender (namely, deciding to treat the person well, as a valued and valuable person and deciding not to take revenge), called *decisional forgiveness* (Davis et al., 2015). Second, emotional forgiveness involves replacing negative feelings (e.g., resentment and hate) with positive ones (e.g., compassion and affection), and a related change of motivation from revenge or avoidance to benevolence (Lijo, 2018; McCullough et al., 2010). Negative and positive emotions and motivations can co-exist. Emotional (and motivational) replacement or transformation typically entails a gradual neutralization of negative emotions by positive ones. The negative emotions decline as replacement occurs until emotional neutrality is reached. Then additional positive emotions *might* push the net emotional experience to positive (Worthington Jr., 2020b). A similar neutralization occurs with negative motivations (i.e., revenge and avoidance) being reduced through benevolence (McCullough et al., 2010) until benevolence might virtually eliminate the negative motivations. Although both decisional and emotional forgiveness are anticipated in Ghana, scholars who have studied collectivistic cultures have suggested that decisional forgiveness is more likely in such cultures relative to Western individualistic cultures.

3 | FORGIVENESS AMONG EARLY ADOLESCENTS

So, what are the pre-requisites for children to be able to engage in decisional and emotional forgiveness? We assume that children can decisionally forgive once their verbal capacity has developed enough to respond to parental scaffolding (i.e., "You must forgive your brother by treating him better") and their behavioral intentions match their motivations. They can emotionally forgive when they understand the rules of social interaction, are able to engage in perspective-taking to comprehend the offender's perceptual frame, and are capable of emotion regulation so that their emotional responses are consistent with their social understanding and comprehension (Reik & DeWit, 2018). In Ghana, social context is vitally important. Children learn morality, including forgiveness, from parents, children older than them, authority figures like mature adults or elders, and representatives of the church or school system.

It is important for children to develop the prosocial skills of decisional and emotional forgiveness, as forgiveness can promote self-esteem, cooperation, and conflict management (Denham et al., 2005). Children learn to behave prosocially during childhood. *Prosocial behavior* is approved of and aspired to by most people in a community—even if many within the society fall short of those aspirations. Children learn how to forgive—which is typically seen as prosocial behavior even if people do not individually practice it—by observing others forgive through the process of socialization (Garthe & Guz, 2019; Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2019). Children may not necessarily have the ability and coping skills to conceptualize an offense and how

to respond to conflicts (Wal et al., 2016). Culture and social contexts, therefore, influence the development of coping skills and empathy through parents, other caregivers, and sometimes peers. The interactions of children during play supports learning social cognitive skills to identify, evaluate, and enact solutions for social problems (Denham et al., 2005). Other effective models for learning forgiveness include teachers, church members, and family members. According to Haslip et al. (2019), early childhood educators (teachers)—besides parents—are particularly influential in the socialization of young children. They may nurture the development of the social skill of forgiveness. Social transmission of forgiveness is expected to be even more prevalent in Ghanaian children than in many Western cultures.

Family functioning is another social context that may affect how children learn the skill of forgiveness. Harold and Sellers (2018) reviewed research that indicates that exposure to interparental conflict characterized by hurtful interactions adversely impacts a child's emotional, behavioral, and social development. On the other hand, parents who behave more prosocially toward each other—treating each other kindly even in the midst of conflict—have children who exhibit more prosocial behavior and stable relationships when they are older (Ackerman et al., 2013). Children who see their parents forgiving one another are more disposed to forgive others because they can immediately see the positive effects of forgiving, including increased relationship satisfaction (van der Wal et al., 2017).

In Ghana and Africa in general, religion plays a major role in molding the moral values of society; the Central Intelligence Agency (2020) ranks Ghana as the most Christian country in the world. In collective societies where religious practices provide social networks where resources may be shared (Dueck & Byron, 2011), religious practices (e.g., church services) also pass on habits, beliefs, and social expectations for children/adolescents to develop morally. For example, church services commonly teach children to love their neighbors and to forgive those who offend them. van der Walt et al. (2018) posit that Christian teachings entail multiple levels of forgiveness education intended to cultivate a culture of forgiveness. For example, the two centerpieces of Christianity are love and forgiveness. Christianity is based on receiving forgiveness from God and passing that forgiveness along to others. Because of the emphasis on Christian doctrine and practice throughout Ghana, it is likely that much of the socialization of early adolescents will occur through church and religious teaching of adults (e.g., parents, teachers, and church leaders).

4 | PEER-TO-PEER DYADS AND FORGIVENESS

Children spend much of their time with their friends, thus the peer group may affect forgiveness. Peer relationships play an important role in social functioning. McCullough (2008) indicated that children's social standing within their peer group has been strongly linked to their affective and behavioral responses to an offense. Peer relationships help children obtain social skills and become acquainted with the social norms and processes involved in interpersonal relationships (Mitic et al., 2021). Children's positive social relations have positive associations with aspects of wellbeing such as higher self-esteem, academic functioning, and social competence. The absence of supportive social relationships is associated with mental health risks, risk-taking behaviors, and social withdrawal (Mitic et al., 2021). As such, peer relationships are fundamental to psychosocial adjustment. They may facilitate a sense of relatedness, connection, and belonging (Maunder & Monks, 2019).

When an offense is committed against an individual, habitual motivational systems are activated. In addition, situational cues (i.e., whether the offender accepts responsibility for wrongdoing, apologizes, seeks to make amends, and so forth, and the presence of witnesses who are perceived to hold certain beliefs about the appropriateness of forgiving), avoidance, revenge, and benevolence motivations (Billingsley et al., 2020) affect the degree to which individuals forgive the offender. Avoidance motivation reflects a flight tendency. It is usually associated with feelings of hurt from the offender. Revenge motivation reflects a perception of injustice and desire to restore justice (Billingsley et al., 2020). Decreases in avoidance and revenge motivations can accompany increases in benevolent motivation toward offenders (McCullough et al., 2010).

Many children are offended by peers. They might be physically or verbally bullied or harassed (Quintana-Orts et al., 2021; Salifu Yendork et al., 2022). A factor that might affect forgiveness is the interpersonal context in which an offense occurs. Thus, although there is evidence that victims of interpersonal transgressions are more likely to blame the transgressor than to take responsibility for the offense, relationship context is likely to moderate such transgression judgments (Smetana & Ball, 2017). Smetana and Ball (2017) indicated that children judge, justify, and attribute emotions toward a transgression depending on the relationship context (e.g., bully, close friend, acquaintance, or disliked peers). As an example, transgressions by friends who offend were viewed as less intentional and not retaliated, although transgressions "transgressions by bullies were seen as more acceptable to retaliate." This again suggests that intentions to forgive a peer may be affected by the relationship quality. Because transgressions by friends are more likely to have decreased avoidant and revenge motivations, this may support conflict resolution and reduce rumination.

Rumination, which is frequently cognitively replaying negatively valenced emotional experiences and their consequences, has the potential to decrease the likelihood that forgiveness will occur. Ruminating about a hurtful incident is likely to trigger and prolong negative feelings (Mróz et al., 2020), maintain revenge or avoidance motivations, and decrease benevolent motivations. In addition, individuals who have been victims of some form of transgression believe that retaliating, making the offender feel what they felt, is justified and fair. However, revenge motivation, if actualized in aggressive retaliation, can give rise to a vicious circle of negative exchanges (Quintana-Orts et al., 2021) and can put children at risk for further attacks and harm. In summary, peers are sources both of teaching and positive (and negative) peer pressure. We expect that such influences will be seen in our transcripts.

5 | FORGIVENESS RESEARCH IN AFRICAN CHILDREN

Forgiveness has been studied in adults throughout the world. One review found 95 studies in Africa published prior to 2019 (Worthington Jr. et al., 2020). However, none assessed children. It is important to understand how children understand offenses and forgiveness in the African context. There is a scarcity of literature on interpersonal forgiveness among children in West Africa, especially in Ghana. However, a study of forgiveness and interpersonal relationship in Nepal by Watkins et al. (2011) indicated that a collectivist worldview positively affected forgiveness. In another study, Hook et al. (2009) studied closely linked individuals in collective societies such as Ghana. Hook et al. noted that social norms to forgive were motivated by societal values to maintain social harmony, and repair relationships and reconcile when trust is damaged.

Salifu Yendork et al. (2022) indicated that forgiveness among Ghanaian children has some nuances relative to forgiveness in Western studies. One is deferral to God, possibly because Ghana has been rated the most religious (Christian) nation worldwide (see Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Religion is strongly related to forgiveness (for a meta-analysis, see Davis et al., 2013). Another nuance of Ghanaian forgiveness is educating offenders on the impact of their offense, which promotes offender understanding and empathy toward the victim regarding the offender's offense. Empathy has continually been shown to promote forgiveness (Paleari et al., 2005), so educating the offender can promote empathy. Seeing that the offender understands and empathizes, often facilitates forgiveness. A third nuance of Ghanaian forgiveness is its location in Africa. Worthington Jr. et al. (2020) have reviewed research involving 95 empirical research studies in Africa (excluding Northern Africa, which was reviewed in a separate review). They found that Africa was particularly open to forgiving due to (a) their collectivistic culture; (b) tribal loyalties that extended across country boundaries, weakening the effects of nationalism; and (c) a high degree to which Africans employed religious or spiritual coping.

This study seeks to build upon the Salifu Yendork et al. (2022) study. We seek to understand what factors contribute to forgiveness among Ghanaian children in the peer-peer dyad. We also anticipate that, by addressing research questions fueled by the suggested culture-relevant and development-oriented modifications to the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness, we will contribute to the advance of theory. We (a) examine the perception of forgiveness and unforgiveness among children, (b) ascertain ways through which children learn forgiveness, and (c) examine the types of offenses perceived by children. We addressed six research questions (Q): Q1—What kinds of offense(s) do you consider your peers committed against you? Q2—How did you behave after the offense? Q3—In your own words how do you describe unforgiveness? Q4—In your own words, how do you describe forgiveness? Q5—How did you learn to forgive? Q6—What made you forgive?

6 | METHOD

6.1 | Study design

This study received Institutional Review Board approval from the Ethics Committee for Humanities at the University of Ghana (ECH 062/17–17). We used phenomenological methods in this study. Unlike grounded theory that focuses on the generation or discovery of a theory, this approach enables the description of the meaning for several individuals who have lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon and helps to bring out what is common among all participants who have experienced a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013a). It is aimed at exploring, uncovering, and capturing experiences, discerning meanings related to a phenomenon, and providing interpretations for experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Phenomenology is grounded on four philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013a). First, phenomenological enquiries are focused on the search for wisdom. Second, the approach of phenomenology is to suspend all judgment about what is real until they are founded on a more certain basis. Third, consciousness is always intentionally directed toward an object. Fourth, the reality of an object is always perceived within the meaning of the experience an individual has. In this study, the phenomenon being examined was the experience of offenses and forgiveness. Thus, using a phenomenological approach enabled us to capture

the descriptions and meanings that a group of Ghanaian children had about offenses and experiences of forgiveness in the context of peer-to-peer dyads. To further meet the requirements of a phenomenological study, we conducted interviews with only children who were likely to have experienced the phenomenon being studied (i.e., the experience of offenses and forgiveness) and our analysis systematically focused on "what" and "how" the participants experienced the phenomena (Creswell, 2013a).

6.2 | Participants

Our sample consisted of 25 participants who were recruited from the Madina municipality in Accra, the capital of Ghana (Komesuor et al., 2017). *Purposive sampling*, a data collection strategy that allowed us to focus mainly on selecting prospective participants who meet the study's inclusion criteria, was used. To be included, prospective participants had to be living in Madina, which was the study location. We were interested in early adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 years. This age group was chosen rather than a younger age because the literature (Denham et al., 2002; Denham et al., 2005) suggested that forgiveness is not well understood by younger children. Denham and her colleagues argued that the understanding of forgiveness only emerges during middle childhood when children face developmental tasks that require them to employ forgiveness, and it flourishes at the outset of adolescence. The early adolescent stage was chosen because at this stage individuals would have experienced adequate social interactions and would be able to regulate their emotions and engage in perspective taking. These factors are vital for smooth peer relationships and forgiveness (Denham et al., 2002; Reik & DeWit, 2018). Parents (at least one) of prospective participants gave consent, and participants voluntarily provided assent.

We did not predetermine the sample size. However, by the 19th interview, we determined that data saturation had been reached. *Data saturation* refers to a point in qualitative research where new participants do not add new information to that which has already been given by previous participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Even though there is no agreed-upon sample size in qualitative research, some have suggested that a range of 20–30 participants may be acceptable in interview studies (Creswell, 2013a, 2013b). Saturation depended on both interviewers agreeing that further interviews were unlikely to yield unique findings.

About 70 percent of Ghana's population of 25 million identified as Christian in 2010. Other major religions are Islam and African traditional religion (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Further details of the participants are presented in Table 1.

6.3 | Data collection

Interviews were conducted in English, the official language of Ghana, by two of the authors. Data collection occurred from March 2017 to April 2017. We used convenience sampling in selecting Madina Municipal in Accra for data collection. The municipality has nine electoral areas. We selected a maximum of three participants from each of the electoral areas. Because the number of households within each electoral area is unknown, the research team selected every tenth household at random. Households that had children who met the inclusion criteria were recruited and their parents were contacted. The purpose of the study was explained to the

TABLE 1 Participants' demographic details.

Participant number	Age	Gender	Education level
1	12	Female	JHS 1
2	13	Female	JHS 2
3	14	Female	JHS 2
4	12	Male	JHS 2
5	13	Male	JHS 2
6	14	Male	JHS 2
7	14	Male	JHS 2
8	15	Male	JHS 3
9	14	Female	JHS 2
10	14	Female	JHS 2
11	13	Female	JHS 2
12	12	Female	JHS 2
13	13	Female	JHS 1
14	13	Female	JHS 1
15	13	Female	JHS 1
16	13	Female	JHS 2
17	12	Male	Primary 6
18	14	Female	JHS 2
19	13	Male	JHS 2
20	14	Male	JHS 2
21	13	Male	JHS 2
22	14	Male	JHS 1
23	14	Male	JHS 2
24	15	Male	JHS 2
25	14	Female	JHS 2

Note: JHS = Joniour High School. JHS 1 = 7 years of basic education; JHS 2 = 8 years.

parents (i.e., to determine how adolescents understand forgiveness and how they experience it in their peer relationships). Informed consent was obtained from those who agreed for their children to participate. Arrangements were made to meet with potential participants at their convenience, and face-to-face interviews were conducted. Following parental approval, participants were informed about the aims and the methods for conducting the study and for ensuring participant confidentiality. Their anonymity on recorded responses was ensured by assigning pseudonyms, which also were used in internal research team discussions. Assent was obtained from the early adolescent. The interview was conducted using a semi-structured guide (see Table 2).

The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The duration of interviews ranged between 45 min and 1 h.

6.4 | Interview guide

We used a semi-structured interview guide created by the research team to collect the data. Semi-structured interviews provide some structure and allow flexibility for the interviewer to use follow-up questions or probes to obtain further details or seek clarifications (Harding, 2013). The semi-structured interview guide used in this study comprises five sessions. Each session had at least one main questions, and several follow-up questions. The sections and sample questions are presented in Table 2. Interviewers asked follow-up questions and used probes as necessary.

6.5 | Data analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim by two of the authors with attention paid to intonation and exact meaning (Giorgi, 2010). We took steps to minimize bias by having multiple authors listen to the audio and by checking explicitly for alternative explanations of concepts. We used the thematic analytic frame described by Braun and Clarke (2021). The process included six steps. It starts with familiarization with the data, and it moves in turn to the identification of codes (i.e., units of meaning), organization of codes into themes, review of themes, defining and naming of themes, and writing the results.

Three authors reviewed the transcripts and analyzed them to identify units of meaning (i.e., codes). We used the questions in the interview guide to organize the analysis. For each main question, we read each participant's response and derived codes from the more complicated full response. For example, for the question "what is forgiveness", we noted the following

TABLE 2 Semi-interview guide used in the study.

Section A: Demographic Information
1. Male or Female 2. Age 3. Class
Section B: Children and Forgiveness
1. In your own words, how do you describe forgiveness? 2. In your own words, how do you describe unforgiveness? 3. How did you learn to forgive?
Section C: How Children Perceive Offenses
1. What kinds of offense(s) do you consider your peers committed against you?
Section D: Behavior of Offended after the Offense
1. How did the you behave after the offense?
Section E: Forgiving or Unforgiving
1. Have you considered forgiving or not forgiving your peers? a. If you did, can you tell me how? b. If you did not, can you tell me how? 2. Do you think the kind of relationship between you and the perpetrator affected the forgiveness process (was he/she your classmate, friend, or somebody you just met? 3. If you have forgiven the perpetrator, how do you feel about the person now?

codes among the various participants: "Letting go of an offense," "negative emotions," "negative plans," "forgetting the offense," and "accepting an apology."

After generating the codes, similar codes were grouped together to form themes. A theme consists of two or more similar codes. For example, under the question, What is unforgiveness, codes such as "avoiding a relationship" and "avoid friendship" were grouped together and labeled "cutting ties" because both codes are about staying away from or disconnecting from a relationship.

Subsequently, the codes and themes derived from the data were shared with the other authors for review. The other authors suggested that some themes should be regrouped, combined, or redefined. For example, a theme of *offense against social image* and *offense against self-image* were combined. The final themes were agreed upon by the authors, and they informed the results presented in this article.

We sort to assess the reliability of the coding process by asking two of the coders to independently apply the themes and sub-themes to each participant's transcript. The two coders were required to indicate whether a particular subtheme was present (1) or absent (0). We calculated the percent agreement between the coders by calculating the number of times the coders made the same judgment on each sub-theme. Overall, the interrater agreements ranged between 80% and 100%. The interrater agreement for the theme on type of offense ranged between 88% and 96%; Effect of offenses was 88%–96%; Definition of unforgiveness (88%–100%); Definition of forgiveness (84%–100%); Learning about forgiveness (96%–100%); and Motivation to forgive was between 80% and 100%.

7 | RESULTS

Based on responses to questions, themes were identified along with sub-themes presented in Figure 1. One theme was about offenses in the peer-to-peer dyad; the second theme was about the effects of the offenses. Even though the focus of the study was on forgiveness, we present the offenses in the peer-to-peer dyad to provide context in which forgiveness is discussed and practiced. The remaining four themes were about the meanings of forgiveness, meanings of unforgiveness, learning about forgiveness, and the effects of forgiveness.

7.1 | Types of offenses: Q1—What kinds of offense(s) do you consider your peers committed against you?

Offense against a victim's self-image was the most cited type of offense. Specifically, offenses that minimized an individual's self-worth were most identified. The other offenses involved attacks on a victim's social-image, relationship, and property. Other participants also indicated an offense against the victim's physical body. Below are some of the narratives of participants.

7.1.1 | Offenses against self-image

The participants shared experiences of offenses in which their mates seemed to raise questions about the personality or abilities of the offended person. In the first quote below, one participant narrated an instance where she was accused of lying. The second quote relates to an

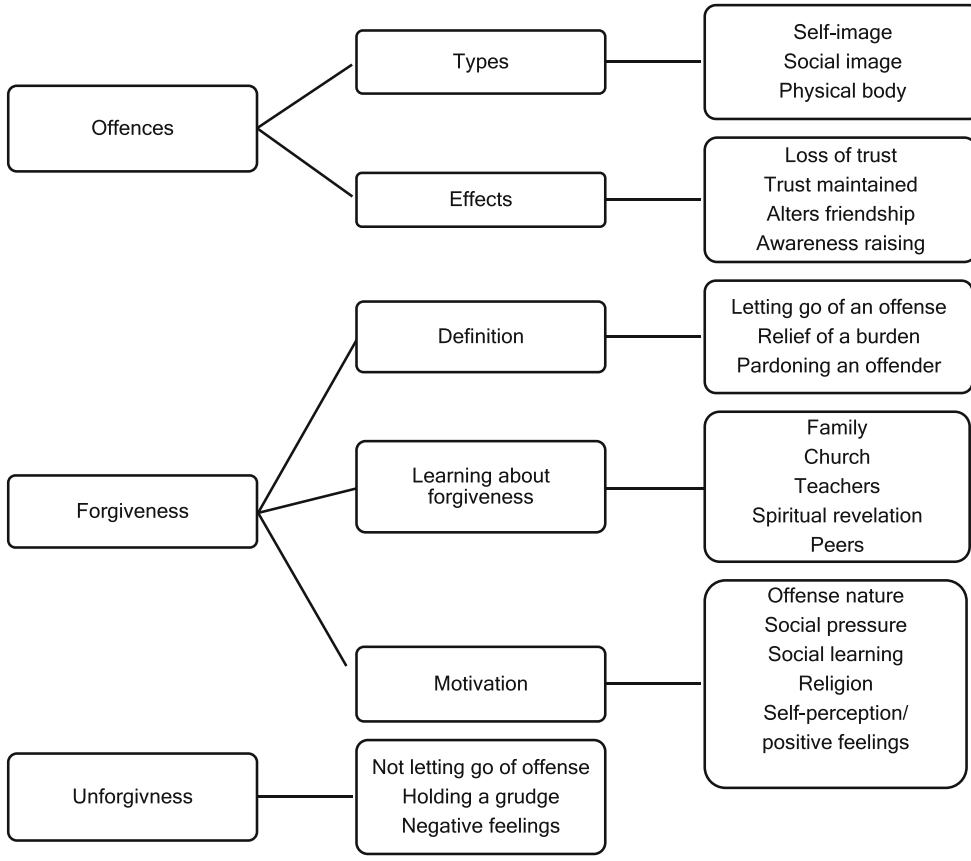

FIGURE 1 Themes and sub-themes.

instance where the participant was insulted. Even though the content of the insult was not given, the second part of the quote suggests that the offense transcended the personal boundary, extending to the parents of the offended.

> I told my friends about my aunt and later one of them went to tell her that I said she had an abortion. But I didn't say that. (13-year-old female).
> I was angry because he insulted me that, he insulted me and even added my parents to it. Meanwhile my parents have done nothing to him. (13-year-old male).

Abortion is a taboo topic in most Ghanaian settings and is associated with individual and familial shame. Information about abortion is often kept a secret. In disclosing this information to others, the participant in the first quote would expect that the friends would not discuss it with others, much less report back to the aunt.

7.1.2 | Offenses against social image

In the first quote below, a female participant was concerned that her mates seemed to suggest that she is lazy and also perhaps not responsible when it comes to her academic work. This is

an issue that can have negative connotations for social image. In the second quote, the male participant is concerned that he is presented as a liar to a person in authority.

> We were talking, and then when I left there, they started gossiping that I don't learn when we are doing classwork then I will be asking questions about the answers. (14-year-old female).
> He was telling a lie, like he was putting all the blames on me because ... the teacher believed that it was me. But I was innocent. (12-year-old male).

7.1.3 | Offenses against physical body

This theme describes offenses that were committed against the physical body of participants. The first quote describes a peer retaliating to a participant's behavior whereas the second quote describes an experience that could be akin to bullying as participants suffered an injury for no offense committed.

> We were all playing, and I said something and he threw the ball at me. The ball hit me in my eye, and they all started laughing. It made me cry. (12-year-old female).
> When I was in the canteen eating my food, somebody took my food and hid it under the table ... Because I refused to eat the rest of the food, he was happy and laughing and started punching me very hard. (13-year-old male).

7.2 | Effects of offenses: Q2—How did the offended person behave after the offense?

Most participants reported that an offense had a negative impact on the perceived trust a victim had toward the offender. They also observed that an offense had a negative impact on the victim's perceived relational closeness with the offender. Yet, a few participants did not perceive that an offense affected their trust toward the offender. A substantial number of participants indicated that offenses are opportunities for a victim to communicate the impact of the offense to an offender, so as to maintain trust and decrease the likely occurrence of future offenses. Four sub-themes were identified for the effects of an offense: loss of trust, trust maintained, reduction in closeness (alters friendship), and raising the offender's awareness of his or her hurtfulness.

7.2.1 | Loss of trust

Trust is the sense that it is relatively safe to be vulnerable in a relationship. Offenses damage trust. Worse, offenses open the possibility that safety can again be violated. Most participants perceived that, with the potential for the offense to be repeated, there was a low level of motivation for sharing personal information with the offender. This is how a 13-year-old female put it: "I feel next time if I tell her something she will [go] and tell another person".

Below is another narrative from a participant whose trust in a particular relationship was damaged, but the loss of trust was generalized to other relationships.

> I don't trust them because of what they did to me. I can't put my trust in them because I think they can do it again. They are on and off. They can be this today, then tomorrow they turn their mouth and change their mouth. I don't trust people. (12-year-old female).

7.2.2 | Trust maintained

A few participants said that even though they had been offended, they still trusted the offender. With a damaged sense of trust, some cognitive processes are needed to regain trust. One way to do that is to assume that the offense was not intentional and would not be repeated. A 14-year-old female participant said, "Because I am sure the person wouldn't do that again, I still trust her." Other cognitive transformations are possible. These might include believing that the offender learned his or her lesson. For some, reprisal against the breach of trust might be believed to have been punishing enough to deter new transgressions.

7.2.3 | Reduction of closeness

One of the negative impacts of an offense is the reduction in closeness (*alteration of friendship*). As was seen above, a breach of trust might not necessarily destroy the trust. But generally, it can affect the quality of the relationship, even resulting the end of a close friendship. Once an offense has been committed, the friendship is affected. The following two examples show first a girl whose relationship was damaged, and the second one, a girl whose relationship was ended.

> She was my best friend now she is no more my best friend but if we see her, we talk to her, we play with her but [we are] cautious ... (15-year-old female).
> First the person was my close friend, but now no more. (13-year-old female).

7.2.4 | Raising the offender's awareness of the offender's hurtfulness

An offense does not necessarily end trust nor does it end the relationship, but often some effort at relational repair is needed. Some victims would explain the offender's hurtful behavior to the offender as a way to help the offender reform. Some participants said that they sat with the offender to express their misgivings about the offender's behavior. The offender stopped offending after being made aware of the offense.

> I will sit with them and then I will tell them what they did is wrong. When they accept it, then I will be friends with them again. (14-year-old male).
> Actually, I didn't react to him .... I told him that what he did was not good, so he shouldn't commit that offense again... he has not hurt me again. (12-year-old male).

In general, we saw evidence of a range of effects that transgressions had on relationships.

7.3 | Definition of unforgiveness: Q3—In your own words, how do you describe unforgiveness (i.e., not forgiving somebody)?

Participants identified that unforgiveness requires the presence of an offense that is of high severity. Most participants reported that unforgiveness involves holding on to a negative experience (e.g., offense and negative emotions) for social disengagement and punishing the offender. Unforgiveness was also associated with negative implications for the victim. The following three main themes emerged from the definition of unforgiveness: not letting go of an offense, holding a grudge, and residual negative feelings.

7.3.1 | Not letting go of an offense

Some participants perceived unforgiveness as not letting go of an offense. To them, when someone commits an offense that causes pain and hurt, it is difficult to let go of the offense, which could involve remembering and ruminating about the offense. The following sums up some of the views expressed by participants

> ...you are still keeping the thing (offense). It pains you. (13-year-old female).
> Unforgiveness is not pardoning somebody for what he has done wrong in a society or community. (13-year-old male).

7.3.2 | Holding a grudge

Most participants reported that unforgiveness involves not only failing to forget a negative experience, but also actively ill-wishing the offender, and socially disengage from or punishing the offender. This was interpreted as holding a grudge. For example:

> Concentrating all your anger on someone who has done wrong to you. (14-year-old male).
> When someone has done something bad to you and you say that I will never talk to you or I will never relate to you, or never do something or never do anything with you. (13-year-old female).

7.3.3 | Residual negative feelings

Some of the participants reported having residual negative feelings about the perpetrator long after the offense has been committed. Beyond merely remembering the event or holding an active grudge toward the offender, some participants focused on their residual negative emotions. The quotes below illustrate their responses:

> When somebody does something bad to you, anytime you see the person you always feel bad because the hurt is still there and you can't do anything about it. (12-year-old, female)

> I had a discussion with my friend about my aunt and she went to tell her, I felt betrayed and decided not to confide in her again. Anytime I see her I am reminded about what she did. (13-year-old, female).

In general, these participants clearly remembered hurts and offenses negatively, but for some people, the negativity was directed toward the offender and for others, it was experienced as immediate feelings of recurring pain. For some, the recurring pain could last a long period.

7.4 | Definition of forgiveness: Q4—in your own words, how do you describe forgiveness?

Lay definitions of forgiveness sometimes differ from definitions held by psychologists (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Almost all psychologists treat forgiveness as a complex intrapersonal experience that occurs in an interpersonal context of an offense and its aftermath (Worthington Jr., 2020b). Professionals emphasize different aspects of the complex internal experience of forgiveness—motivations, decisions about behavioral intentions, emotional transformations, or cognitive processes. Adult lay definitions often conflate internal aspects of forgiving with external aspects (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), such as reconciling or saying "I forgive you." We identified three themes for the ways these adolescents defined forgiveness. Some defined forgiveness as letting go of an offense; others as relieving a burden; and others as pardoning an offender.

7.4.1 | Letting go of an offense

For letting go of an offense—which is a change in motivation or behavioral intention (and perhaps cognition)—the following quotes summarize participant's definitions:

> Forgiveness is when somebody offends you, you put it behind you and become friends again. (13-year-old, female).
> Forgiveness is when somebody offends you and you put it behind you. (14-year-old, female).
> Forgiveness is the act of letting something be behind you, you just forget about it and be friends with the person again. (15-year-old male).

These adolescents use a metaphor of leaving the hurt behind—either actively "putting" it behind or less directly actively "letting something be" behind. The third example, from the young man, states an ideal relational goal—"be friends" even though that depends also on the other person. That could be interpreted as a behavioral intention to act friendly toward the offender, or it might reflect a cognitive confounding of the interpersonal context within the young man's definition of forgiveness.

7.4.2 | Relief of a burden

Other participants also defined forgiveness as relieving a burden. The following quote summarizes the views of participants, which resembles an emotional transformation from *feeling* a burden to *feeling* free.

> ...being relieved of a burden. You feel free; your heart is like you feel comfortable. You feel you are yourself. (14-year-old female).

An uncommon report was around the experience of discomfort as a result of forgiving an unrepented offender. The early adolescent participant below seems to be seeing forgiveness as an emotional transformation, but he realizes that the context of an unrepentant offender creates mixed emotions. The following quote captures this: "because when the person was doing a wrong thing to you, the person didn't feel anything, so I feel pain." (12-year-old male).

7.4.3 | Pardoning an offender

The third theme identified for forgiveness was pardoning an offender.

> Forgiveness is pardoning somebody for what he has done wrong or what he has done wrong in society. (13-year-old male).

Legally, pardoning is freeing an offender from just punishment. The adolescent sees forgiveness as not just an intrapersonal experience but as needing public pardon in "society."

7.5 | Learning about forgiveness: Q5—How did you learn to forgive?

Developmentally, we might expect that most early adolescents learned forgiveness from parents. Yet, for most of a child's life, the cognitive capacity to forgive is not well developed, and many parents substitute behavioral scaffolding (i.e., "Tell your sister you are sorry.... Tell your brother you forgive him") for actual instruction about how to forgive. In our sample, the most pervasive source of learning about forgiveness was via a religious institution. Participants also indicated that their understanding and practice of forgiveness were influenced by teachers (usually religious teachers), religious community members, or even spiritual experiences. Fewer learned forgiveness from family members (especially parents) and friends (which tend to become more influential throughout the journey from early to late adolescence). However, participants commonly reported that these support figures used religious texts to teach forgiveness.

7.5.1 | Family

Most participants mentioned that their parents communicated about religious examples of forgiveness, and indicated how their parents demonstrating forgiveness toward others served as their role models. Some participants expressed their views like this.

> They (parents) taught me that Christ said in the Bible that when your neighbor offends you, you should forgive the neighbor irrespective of the offense he or she did to you. You are compelled to forgive the person. (15-year-old male).

Christianity is a big part of Ghanaian everyday life. The quote above suggests that some parents used the Christian lens when teaching about forgiveness.

Not all parental teaching about forgiveness was embedded in a religious framework. This early adolescent (below) describes a parental appeal for freedom from emotional suffering as a motivation to forgive.

> My mummy has been telling me if I keep this thing [as a grudge], it is hurting only me so why don't [I] let it go? After all, it's like a burden, and if the burden is taken off you, [you] become very free. So why don't I let this let go of this burden so that I will become very free. (12-year-old female).

7.5.2 | Religious community

Some participants expressed the view that they learn forgiveness from religious texts and religious figures. For instance, a 12-year-old male said "No one taught me but the teachings in the church." Similarly, another participant responded:

> They said when someone offends you; you just put it behind you because it makes you happy. .... God forgive you your sins because the Bible says if you don't forgive others of their sins how will God forgive you? (14-year-old female).
> So I learned to forgive because Jesus Christ came to this world and when Jesus Christ came to this world he forgave some people for what they have done. He died on the cross to forgive us for our sins, so if you don't forgive others, it makes, it makes Jesus Christ and God sad that the death he died in this world is useless. (13-year-old female).

Christianity is a major religion in Ghana. Most people go to church on Sundays, in addition to other mid-week church activities. People often make references to the Bible, God, and Christ when discussing issues of moral or religious nature.

7.5.3 | Teachers

Some participants reported learning forgiveness from school. Below are some of the views expressed by participants.

> He [teacher] told us that it is in the Bible as we Christians must forgive our friends because we are one, we are Abraham's descendants. (14-year-old male).
> They said we should forgive one another. It's in the Bible. We shouldn't like we should forgive, we shouldn't fight. (13-year-old female).

Religious education is part of most basic school education. School children learn about teachings and practices associated with the three major religions of Ghana, namely Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion.

7.5.4 | A spiritual source

Only one of the participants indicated that she learned forgiveness from a supernatural source. That is from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. A 15-year-old female put it this way: "I was praying, and the Holy Spirit told me...".

7.5.5 | Peers

Some of the participants also explained that they learned forgiveness from their peers. From the two quotes below, it was evident that religion was used as the medium for peer education on forgiveness. For example, a 14-year-old male put it this way: "He [my friend] gave me a script about forgiveness, then when I read, I had the knowledge". Another 12-year-old female said: "They [peers] told me if someone insults you, you have to forgive the person because the person is your best friend. Because even if you sin, God forgives you so you too have to forgive people".

7.6 | Motivation to forgive: Q6—What made you forgive?

There was perhaps more diversity in the answers to this question than in any other. We grouped the responses into three main categories: the nature of the offense and aftermath, social pressures, and self-perception.

7.6.1 | Nature of the offense and aftermath

Frequent observations from participants involved the nature of the offense and what followed. Some said that they chose to forgive regardless of whether offenses were perceived to be intentional or non-intentional, severe or not severe, but others looked closely at the offender's behavior.

Participants indicated that harder-to-forgive offenses are those that are repeated rather than first-time, intentional rather than unintentional, severe rather than non-severe, and not followed by offender apologies rather than followed by apologies. Although offenses without an apology were perceived as severe offenses, some participants forgave regardless of the receipt of an apology. Such was stated by a 13-year-old: "I have forgiven them even though they didn't come to apologise."

7.6.2 | Social pressure

Participants thought it is important to forgive to avoid social judgments because some social systems treat forgiveness as normative. Also, forgiving an offense by an older individual indicates respect for the older person. Thus, failing to forgive would incur a social judgment. This is consistent with the collectivistic nature in Ghana where elders are revered, and social harmony is often prioritized over individual preference. For example, a 12-year male participant said, "forgive because he is old enough to be my brother."

7.6.3 | Social teachings

Participants stated that decisions to forgive were influenced by teachings from people important to them. In Ghana, parents, children older than them, and authority figures like mature adults or elders serve as socialization agents who pass on important teachings, including teachings about forgiveness.

A 12-year-old participant, gender not disclosed stated: "...you **have to** forgive the person." Another 12-year-old female participant shared: "...if you forgive the person, you are not supposed to be like he has done this to me so I won't be that free with him. You are supposed to be free with him."

Participants did not report relational closeness to the offender prior to the offense as important to forgiveness, one motivation to forgive was to respond to relationship-destructive offenses by fostering interdependence and restoring the damaged relationship.

Participants further explained that forgiveness does not depend on having an exceptionally close relationship. Rather, a decision to forgive is not affected by the relationship prior to the offense. When asked directly whether their relationship with the offender had any impact on forgiveness, all the participants indicated it did not.

Forgiveness was also influenced by other motivations such as saving one's positive self-image, experiencing positive emotions, obeying God, and avoiding conflict. Another important influence promoting decisions to forgive was religious teachings.

7.6.4 | Religious reasons

Finally, an offense might be seen as a test from God. Failing to forgive might be seen as failing that test (which could incur social judgment and divine judgment).

Religion was a major influence on decisions to forgive. Most participants indicated that they deemed it necessary to forgive due to the tenants of their religion. Below are some of the narratives from participants:

> The Bible said we should forgive and forget. So when you forgive someone, that means you are going according to the Bible or what God said we should do. (13-years-old female).
> It is God's commandment to forgive our fellow. ... It is in the Bible as we Christians must forgive our friends because we are one. We are Abraham's descendants. (12-year-old male).

7.6.5 | Self-perception

Forgiveness was further influenced by motivation to feel positive about themselves. One 13-year-old female said, "I feel free like if I don't forgive someone, I will be thinking of it that what I did was wrong." A 13-year-old male said that he forgave because "you feel free and you feel happy" when you forgive. A 14-year-old female considered why she forgave, "I feel relieved because it's like a burden has been removed from me."

8 | DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to explore forgiveness in the context of peer-to-peer dyads in early adolescents in Ghana. Whereas we know a lot about forgiveness in adulthood and late adolescence, little is known about forgiveness in early adolescence. In addition, we know a lot about forgiveness in the United States and Western Europe, but little is known about forgiveness in parts of Africa outside of South Africa (for a review of research on forgiveness in Africa,

see Worthington Jr. et al., 2020). Thus, we formulated research questions on the basis of the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness (Worthington Jr., 2006), and sought to look especially for adaptations needed regarding early adolescence and cultural adaptation to Ghana.

From the outset, we acknowledge that our findings are based on a few participants, so generalization is not possible. We hope, though, that our qualitative study has provided some heuristic propositions that will fuel future research and perhaps encourage others to adopt the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness to their particular population.

Some of our findings have differed from existing research, primarily done in the West. The official language of Ghana is English, so differences between Ghana and other English-speaking countries cannot be attributed to language differences alone, but must be due mostly to other cultural differences. Ghana has been ranked by the Central Intelligence Agency (2020) of the United States as the most religious nation in the world. This study sheds light on how forgiveness processes among Ghanaian early adolescents are influenced by the cultural, religious, and spiritual life in Ghana as well as characteristics of early adolescents. In particular, numerous mentions were made of being taught within the church or by religious teachers or religious parents. This suggests that these early adolescents valued both collectivistic relationships and those associated with religion in particular. The interaction of these cultural and religious factors with the needs of early adolescents could explain the homogeneity in the responses we obtained from our participants. Thus, although Creswell (2013a, 2013b) suggested that a range of 20–30 participants may be acceptable in interview studies prior to saturation, we determined that saturation was reached after only 19 participants, likely owing to the homogeneity in religion within Ghana and within our sample specifically.

We explored early adolescents' experiences of offenses and their effects, their perceptions of forgiveness and unforgiveness, sources of forgiveness socialization, and their perceptions of the impact of forgiveness and unforgiveness. We found that offenses, in contrast to many adult samples, were not centered on romantic relationship failures, serious relationship harms (like abuse or traumatizing betrayals), and other harms like surviving a murdered loved one's death, war, or major disaster. Rather, early adolescents experienced less complicated relationship issues, and offenses revolve around attacks on their self-worth, social image, relationships, and property. These offenses caused participants to mistrust their peers. Although these relational harms do not seem earth-shattering to adults, they are the center of most early adolescents' worlds. Relational aggression is common among children and adolescents (Low et al., 2010) and has also been reported in studies among children and adolescents placed in residential care in Ghana (Salifu Yendork & Somhlaba, 2015; Salifu Yendork et al., 2022). Finding that the prevalence of relationship harms was associated with peers does not require modification of a culturally modified stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness. It merely alerts researchers to examine different types of relationship offenses as triggers for the consideration of forgiveness. Similarly, we found little evidence of honor-shame or fear-power thinking among the participants. Rather, justice-guilt thinking was prevalent, and that is likely due to the value placed on the Christian religion within Ghana; however, even justice-guilt thinking seems to be contextualized within a collectivistic and Christian culture that values relationships.

Participants' reaction to gossip shows evidence of cognitive maturation. The development of higher-order theory of mind and an awareness that reputation can be linguistically transmitted in early adolescents (Ingram, 2019) likely increased the experience of hurt from gossip and insults. Among early adolescents, covert relational aggressions (e.g., gossip) are common. Overt negative conversations about others are frowned upon. One common method of coping with gossip in Ghana is gentle confrontation (Ingram, 2019). This study shed additional light on the

function of such confrontations after a transgression. Confrontations were not seen as a form of punishment or to seek justice; instead, they were seen as a way to correct the offender's behavior and to induce empathy in the offender for the hurt they have caused.

The function of unforgiveness in the current study was not to avoid or exact revenge on the offender. Early adolescents often reported holding a grudge as a way of socially disengaging from the offender without cutting off the relationship. Social skills for discussing relationship conflict and agreeing to go separate ways often are not developed until later in adolescence or early adulthood. So unforgiveness at times took on instrumental qualities of managing relational closeness, which is consistent with a collectivistic worldview.

Early adolescents perceived forgiveness as putting an offense behind them, letting go of an offense, relinquishing a burden that they were carrying, or pardoning an offender. This pattern corresponds with findings among children placed in residential care in Ghana (Salifu Yendork et al., 2022), in which participants' understanding of forgiveness reflected concepts such as pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denial. Worthington Jr. (2020b) has argued that there are many ways of reducing one's sense of injustice, which include things like getting even, seeing justice done, turning the matter over to God, tolerating, forbearing, accepting, and moving on with life, and forgiving. Adults often distinguish those from each other in the abstract. However, studies of lay definitions of forgiveness (i.e., Joo et al., 2019) and even some professional writing (e.g., see McNulty & Russell, 2016) show that adults often employ working definitions that incorporate contradictions. In Ghana, Worthington's list of potential ways of reducing one's sense of injustice must be widened to include transforming the situation from a strictly justice-guilt situation to a relationship-maintenance situation.

In this research with early adolescents, however, there were instances when early adolescents treated each of these alternatives (e.g., forbearing, accepting, and moving on with life) to forgiving as forgiveness. For early adolescents, such alternatives to forgiveness help them with managing their behavior and emotions and appear to support their subjective experience of forgiveness. Yet, for adults, imprecise use of these alternatives may prevent forgiveness (Worthington Jr., 2020b).

There were numerous indications within the interviews that adolescents understand unforgiveness and forgiveness in ways that do not match most professionals' definitions. Although it is not possible to compare across our sample and adult samples available in the literature, a reasonable supposition is that adolescents use conflated definitions more often than adults do. Such a supposition deserves an empirical test. In adulthood, some studies have shown that people still report a mix between forgiving and some alternatives to forgiving (Osei-Tutu et al., 2019; Younger et al., 2004). But an important question is, does this mix between forgiveness and alternatives to forgiveness fade with time, and another important question is, could intervention clarify understandings of forgiveness, and if so, would it matter? Another possible supposition deserving an empirical test is whether the collectivism and religious worldviews were strong enough to obscure aspects of the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness within these adolescents.

The socialization of forgiveness knowledge was gained from (a) interactions with parents, peers, and teachers, (b) teachings at church, and (c) other spiritual means (e.g., sacred texts, or other religiously flavored writing on forgiveness, and in one case a feeling that the Holy Spirit told the person to forgive). These results indicate that Ghanaian early adolescents, similar to American early adolescents, perceived social norms to influence forgiveness. In contrast to American children, Ghanaian early adolescents demonstrated unconditional offers of mercy (Enright, 2019). Parental socialization has been considered the best avenue to lay the

foundation for empathy and forgiveness (Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2019). Parents in their interaction with children and through the forgiveness of children's transgression become role models for children to emulate (Maio et al., 2008). Also, the quality of a parent—adolescent relationship predicts benign attributions for negative parent behavior, which in turn, is related to forgiving behavior. Peers, on the other hand, facilitate forgiveness among children due to the need to maintain positive peer relationships. Another difference that might have been culturally and religiously driven was the frequencies with which early adolescents sought interaction with religiously affiliated adults—in the home, church, or school. Again, that would not require modification of the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness but would alert people to pay particular attention to the religious aspect of culture.

Forgiveness thus becomes a healthy consequence of promoting functional peer relationships (van der Wal et al., 2017). To handle the slights, gossip, and petty betrayals, early adolescents must deal flexibly with injustices using a variety of means (see Vangelisti, 2009; Worthington Jr., 2020b). However, as we have seen, in this early adolescent sample in a highly Christian country, the language of forgiveness is often employed—even when adults might name the action as forbearance, acceptance, or relinquishment of a grudge to God. Nevertheless, this process of learning to deal flexibly with wrongdoing and offense becomes an avenue for learning forgiveness as it is differentiated throughout middle and late adolescence and as it is described and articulated more fluently by teachers, through religious and moral education, and interaction with parents. A unique finding from this research is the influence of a societal culture of forgiveness on young adolescents' motivations to forgive regardless of the degree of closeness to the offender. This is different from the vast literature that supports the Model of Motivated Interpersonal Forgiveness (Donovan & Priester, 2020), which purports that closeness to an offender affects motivations to forgive.

Early adolescents were motivated to forgive to adhere to the teaching of their religion and the instructions of God as well as to set themselves free from the burden of holding a grudge. In this study, religion and learning from respected models within religious communities and from sacred texts and religious community teachings was arguably the most important driving force in forgiving early adolescents. Forgiveness is a key virtue in Christianity and a popular topic in Sunday school teachings. It is often taught as an ideal response of Christians to offenses (van der Walt et al., 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants learned about forgiveness at church, from religious figures, and from parents who were themselves religious. These findings are consistent with a Ghanaian study conducted on forgiveness among children placed in residential care (Salifu Yendork et al., 2022) and other international studies (Davis et al., 2013). In addition, Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) developed two versions of REACH Forgiveness (Worthington Jr., 2020a), a psychoeducational group intervention to promote forgiveness. They used a version that accommodated Christian beliefs, values, and practices. One version was culturally adapted to Ghanaian culture as well as to religion. The other version was only adapted to religion. The cultural adaptation did not add to the effectiveness of the already religiously adapted version. This provides additional evidence of the power of Christian values in the Ghanaian culture, and this study highlights the power of religion in Ghana from at least early adolescence. In other cultures, there might be core cultural values that drive forgiveness and over-shadow other cultural values. For example, Kurniati et al. (2017) found that maintaining harmony was such a core value in Indonesia. These findings point the way to future research on core cultural values.

Participants stated that they were willing to forgive when the offender offended unintentionally, when the impact was less severe, and when the offender apologized.

Participants generally preferred forgiveness over unforgiveness. This finding is consistent with the literature on blameworthiness, which states that the judgment of an offense depends on the perception of the actor's moral character and the transgressor's intentionality, the causal proximity of harm, and whether the harm was foreseeable (Nadler & McDonnell, 2012). Hence, when people judge a harmful act being committed by a bad person with a bad motive, they are more likely to perceive the offender as responsible, and the act as more causal, intentional, blameworthy, and punishable rather than forgiving. On the other hand, rendering an apology makes forgiveness more likely and restores the moral level of respect in the context of intentional wrongdoing (Roadevin, 2016). In this study, the adolescents hinged their motivation to forgive the actions and intentions of the wrongdoer. Hence, when they judge the offender to be blameworthy of the offense and when the offender does not render an apology to justify the victim's forgiveness, participants found it difficult to forgive such offenders. On the other hand, those who elected to forgive regardless of their judgment of blameworthiness and the lack of apology did so due to factors such as religion and respect for the seniority of the offender. These reasons are consistent with Roadevin's (2016) "non-desert type" reasons such as generosity and strong community support.

8.1 | Implications for wellbeing

The findings of this study might have implications for supporting early adolescent's social and emotional competence, such as via forgiveness. A child's social and emotional development can be affected by problems in peer relationships (Boivin, 2016). Parents and teachers take the offenses that early adolescents are experiencing more seriously than they might take the same offense in another adult. Early adolescents are learning emotional regulation, social skills, and cognitive differentiation among different ways of dealing with injustices. Parents and teachers can maintain a patient attitude and help early adolescents learn.

The findings might also have implications for interventions aimed at enhancing coping with transgressions among early adolescents. Besides forgiveness, adolescent may need education on alternatives to dealing productively with transgressions. Although forgiveness among Ghanaian adolescents is highly influenced by religious values, early adolescents may still be empowered by learning prosocial ways of handling offenses besides forgiveness. It may be helpful to help early adolescents differentiate forgiveness from pardoning, excusing, denying, forgetting, seeing justice done, turning the matter over to God for divine justice or simply relinquishing the matter to God, accepting, and moving on with life, and forbearing. This may enhance their knowledge and equip them with additional skills for handling hurts. Importantly, early adolescents should also be taught that forgiveness should not become an avenue for enduring abuse. They should be equipped to develop the confidence to report offenders who harm them.

8.2 | Limitations and recommendations for future studies

Despite the significant potential contributions of this study in suggesting future research, there are limitations that are worth highlighting. First, the small sample size used for the study did not allow for diverse views to be garnered although we judged that saturation within the sample had been achieved. Future studies should consider employing a larger and more diverse representative sample size to enrich the findings. Also, although the use of qualitative design allowed

for the acquisition of rich and in-depth findings, it does not allow for the extrapolation of findings to the entire population of children in Ghana—or indeed beyond Ghana. Hence, future studies should use quantitative designs with rigorous experimental controls, which will allow for larger representative samples from which findings could be generalized to the entire population of children in Ghana (and beyond). Also, cross-cultural comparisons are needed to see whether the findings, especially regarding religion in Ghana, might be due to culture, and whether these findings also emerge in non-religious regions. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this research means that changes in early adolescents' views and experiences about forgiveness could not be garnered and causal attributions could also not be made. Therefore, future studies would benefit from a longitudinal approach, which will allow for the exploration of developmental changes in children's understanding and experiences of forgiveness and for causal effects to be drawn.

9 | CONCLUSION

This study has shown that, although early adolescents experience normal and diverse offenses in the context of peer-to-peer relationships, their understanding of forgiveness is limited and seems intensely culture-bound—especially in the religious context of Ghana. Surprisingly, their motivation to forgive stems from wanting to adhere to the demands of their religion and also to relieve themselves of the burden of unforgiveness rather than to repair broken relationships. We set out to see whether it might be necessary to adapt the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness when applying it to the specific population of early adolescent Ghanaians. Our conclusion is that the theory is generally robust, but the culture and developmental status of the target population impacted the strength of the connections between transgression, the injustice appraisal process, and coping efforts, such as by incorporating relationship-maintenance orientations.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in the research are available by emailing: jkomesuor@uhas.edu.gh and nsamenang@goldmail.etsu.edu. The materials used in the research are available by emailing: jkomesuor@uhas.edu.gh and nsamenang@goldmail.etsu.edu.

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