AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS: AN INTERPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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NOVEMBER 2006

Dedicated to my father

Joseph J. Kotzé
(1927-2000)

and to my friend

François J. Potgieter
(1967-2002)

As Suzuki Roshi put it:

Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people,

there is only enlightened activity

(Kornfield, 2000, p. 122).

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank and acknowledge the following people:

My Czech friend Tina Filip, whom I met at a turning point in my life in upstate New York and who encouraged me to follow my heart and James O'Kelly, whom I met in Ireland two years later. You both believed in me when I did not and without you, I might never have become a psychotherapist

My supervisor David Fourie for his firm support amidst chaos and for giving me the space to claim my own voice

All the participants who so generously shared their stories with me (also those whose stories I did not include) and the people who helped me find them

Some people I have never exactly met:

Yvonne Kemp for being so calm, able and professional
Jean Shinoda Bolen, Isabel Allende and Alice Walker for their conversation about giving birth and finding form
Julia Cameron and Natalie Goldberg for inspiring me to start writing and then to keep on writing

All my lecturers, but especially Peter Johnson for his intelligence, wit and wisdom, Kate Grieve for her kindness and pragmatism and Val Rapmund for helping me start

Fatima Mbatha and Rochelle Mountany for their encouragement

Catherine Payze, as well as James Kitching and the wonderful library staff for their friendliness and help

Nanette Andersen for teaching me more than Alexander Technique lessons

My friends for being there for me, especially (alphabetically): Agathe Genis, Alexis Symonds, Anke Uliczka, Chanel Martin, Hanlie van Heerden, Karen Mackenzie, Karin Huyssen, Kobus and Rouxnette Meiring, Linda Collison, Liselle O'Flaherty, Nadja Krämer, Richelle Steyn, Susan Barnett and Vivian van den Berg

And finally my family:

My mother for helping when she could and for wishing me happiness
Leza for her care and advice
Riet Marais for so often giving me a place to rest and work in Pretoria
Hilmar for supporting and opposing this project across three continents
My daughter Milena, for her love and acceptance, and my son Pascal, for his joy and for allowing me to take him to the library so many times and breastfeeding through yet another catalogue search.

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Summary

This qualitative study explores the meaning of interpersonal forgiveness, using a both/and or postmodern epistemology and a phenomenological methodology. Forgiveness is seen as a reframe that could transform a limiting, disempowering dominant narrative into a more empowering and useful story. The researcher interviews three participants to co-create stories of forgiveness. Themes of emotional discomfort; blame and responsibility; shift to empathy; forgiveness as process; and lasting change or forgiveness incorporated into way of life, are identified.

Key Terms

Forgiveness; postmodernism; phenomenology; second-order; cybernetics of cybernetics; reframe; story; co-create; re-storying

Chapter 1

Introduction

It is a dark night of the soul, when in the absence of light or love

life seems meaningless, a cosmic joke.

Grieving and forgiving is usually the way out.

Thereafter, vitality and light may return

(Bolen, 2004, p. 298).

Background

It was a dark night of the soul that brought me to the topic of forgiveness. As the author of this dissertation, I co-created this piece of research with the participants I interviewed in order to make meaning of forgiveness.

To me, writing this dissertation has not been a mere formality in order to complete a degree, but the opportunity – perhaps the only one I'll ever have, I often thought – to formally write about something that I find interesting and useful.

As I started thinking about forgiveness, I scribbled the following:

> Why do we seem to have such a lot of unresolved issues? Why does such a lot of time seem to be spent in therapy talking about the past? It seems as if unfairness or past injustices become a part of the stories we tell. As we create and tell our story, so we create our reality – our view not only of our history, but of our present – and this can predict the meaning we make of the future. Do we find some sort of strength in telling our story? Perhaps the emotion makes us feel alive or the anger makes us feel engaged in the world. We do not want to make peace with what happened, perhaps fearing it would make us weak. For who will we be, when we no longer play the role of the one suffering hardship and unjustness at the hand of some mean-spirited other?

The Italian psychotherapist and philosopher Piero Ferrucci (2006) writes that forgiveness is not merely the absence of resentment that creates some emotionally neutral void, nor is it the release of tension. He sees it instead as a positive quality! He describes it as containing joy and faith in others, having a generosity of spirit. Almost poetically he continues: "Illogical and surprising, sometimes sublime, it frees us from the ancient chains of resentment. Whoever forgives, feels uplifted" (2006, p. 34).

Yet in psychology circles this is hardly a common view. In training psychology students, forgiveness is still never mentioned.

Rationale

In the last 10 or 15 years, some articles on forgiveness have started appearing in psychological journals, at first mostly in the United States of America. The topic is still, however, by no means mainstream, causing one researcher (Affinito, 1999) to lament about being warned by colleagues that he was risking academic suicide by choosing to embark on a study of forgiveness.

By 1998 some significant papers on forgiveness had been published in the literature on developmental, counselling/clinical and social psychology (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000). In South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission changed the views and lives of people and made forgiveness a much talked about subject. In 1999 Desmond Tutu wrote *Without forgiveness there is no future* and in Northern Ireland Frederick Luskin started doing "forgiveness therapy" with the close relatives of men killed in the Troubles. Here and there, in the last few years, a book on forgiveness has reached the psychology or self-help sections of bookshops: Casarjian (1992); Gobodo-Madikizela (2003); Jampolsky (1999); Luskin (2002) and Tipping (2000). After I started this dissertation, the first doctoral thesis on forgiveness in South Africa appeared and an excellent South African film called "Forgiveness" was released!

In 1996 Adriaan Vlok, minister of law and order in the apartheid era, became the only former minister to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission to seek amnesty for his part in the system, saying he believed the system had been morally wrong and indefensible (Apartheid era minister seeks politician's forgiveness, 2006). In August 2006 Vlok (then 68 years old) sought forgiveness for his role in the police atrocities committed during his tenure by washing the feet of Rev. Frank Chikane, Director-General of the Presidency and former Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches (Vlok owes SA more, say churches, 2006). Vlok was quoted as saying: "I give up my pride, my own self, my superiority, my uncharitable attitude, and my selfishness" (Why Vlok washed Chikane's feet, 2006). During the apartheid era, Chikane had been targeted by the authorities, who almost murdered him by lacing his clothes with poison in the late 1980s (Vlok's foot-washing apology to Chikane flayed, 2006) and Vlok saw him as symbolising the victims of the past. Chikane described the apology as genuine and forgave Vlok, although he is still seeking to bring those who repeatedly tried to murder him to justice. This event made South Africans think about forgiveness, wondering who needed to wash feet and (especially) who still needed to have their feet washed.

Adriaan Vlok will never be thought of in the same way. Asking for forgiveness in this way, and the various meanings people made of this event, changed the way South Africans see him.

So, although it is no longer an unheard of subject *per se*, I would like to add a description of forgiveness from a psychological perspective to the existing material. The intrapsychic aspects of forgiveness seem to have been

well covered by brilliant authors like the clinical psychologist Robert Karin (2001) and others, and so, in this study, I will focus on the interpersonal aspects.

My Experience of Forgiveness

As this research is coloured by the meaning I am making of forgiveness (Keeney (1982) goes as far as saying that our descriptions of the world say more about us, than about what we are describing), I decided to share my story of forgiveness before continuing.

After being exhausted for longer than I remember, I became very ill at the end of my internship year. This time a course of antibiotics and even a holiday didn't make much difference. I felt slightly better, but had slipped into feeling neither very well nor very ill. When I was x-rayed after being in a car accident, the x-rays revealed lung damage. I was stunned.

I had never had tuberculosis nor ever even smoked. I was referred to a pulmonologist who confirmed bronchiectasis (permanently damaged lungs) due to recurrent infections in childhood due to undiagnosed, untreated asthma.

When I read up on bronchiectasis I learnt that it is an illness that has been completely preventable in South Africa since long before I was born,

although by the time it is diagnosed it is irreversible. It is mostly found in developing countries where medical facilities are lacking and it is also called the “orphan disease” because orphans in the 1800s often died from it. In fact, before the invention of antibiotics, people died within five years of being diagnosed.

In grappling to come to terms with this, I felt powerless and furious that my parents had not given me proper medical care as a child when it had been readily available. The worst was, I could neither change my past nor undo the severe scarring of my lungs. Having such damaged lungs seemed unnecessary and meaningless. As I ruminated about my childhood, I experienced anger and immense sadness which made me feel immobilised and stuck.

Then I moved to Vienna. Leaving my home and losing my infrastructure were difficult, but I was excited that my daughter, my husband and I would be reunited as a family after he had worked in the United Kingdom for more than a year while my daughter and I had lived in South Africa. However, after three months of living in Austria, my husband started working in Germany and we mostly only saw him over weekends. Living in Vienna in winter, on the sixth floor of an old building without a lift, caring for a small child and speaking German badly, made it an isolating, difficult experience that took its toll. My health started deteriorating and I began struggling not to miscarry our second child.

By the time our son was three months old, I was starting to think that I'd probably be dead in 10 years' time. I had taken to scrolling down the numbers on my cell phone and wondering who would raise my children.

I fled to South Africa to escape my second winter in Europe and explored alternative medicine. The weather and people lifted my spirits and although I stayed in a small flat by myself with my children, I started feeling better. Back in Vienna, I felt a little healthier, but started experiencing severe chest pain from time to time. My health again deteriorated and by the time our son had his first birthday I could sometimes hardly pick him up.

Finally I was referred to a good pulmonologist who immediately admitted me to hospital for a bronchioscopy. As I type, the majority of lung specialists who saw me believe that they need to remove a part of my lung later this year, but I hope that will not be necessary. I am motivated to do everything I can in order to become healthy. Forgiveness has been the hardest on my list.

As Karin (2001: 279) writes:

> Not forgiving ourselves, not forgiving others, not forgiving … is part of who we are … . If we can see … this in ourselves, accept it, be concerned about it, talk about it, it is less likely to control or overwhelm us. We will have a better chance to stay connected, to expand our zone of connection, to dissolve whatever scar tissue we

can from a life of hurt and conflict, and move on to the goodness of love.

Forgiveness has helped me live more in the present moment and to make peace with the past. Being very ill has forced me to take stock of my life. For me, healing happened in the process of searching for meaning (Doherty, 1991). Letter writing was something that helped me change not only the way I saw myself, but also my relationships with my parents (Penn, 1991). I realised my life had not been working for me for quite a while. I realised that not having been taken care of as a child was still affecting my health and that the time had come for me to forgive what happened (or not happened) in my childhood and to learn to nurture and take care of myself in the present. I feel fortunate to be alive and I now see my illness as a wake-up call. I started wondering about the meaning other people make through using forgiveness and whether forgiveness can perhaps set one free.

Aim of This Study

As I became curious about other people's experiences of forgiveness, I thought how Alan Watts (1989) once asked himself what kind of book he would write to give to his children – something that would contain the kind of inside information on life and existence that most people "either don't know or won't tell" (p. 3), something that would "slip them into a new domain … a point

of departure, not a point of reference" (p. 11). Could incorporating forgiveness as a way of life be such a point of departure?

My aim in this study is to investigate people's subjective, lived experiences of forgiveness and to produce a rich description of interpersonal forgiveness.

Watts (1989) continues: "They would read it and be done with it, for if it were well and clearly written they would not have to go back to it again and again for hidden meanings or for clarification … " (p. 11). As this study took shape, my goal, too, became to write something simple and useful.

Outline of This Study

In Chapter 2 the relevant literature about the psychological aspects of interpersonal forgiveness is explored. In Chapter 3 the research is put into a second-order cybernetic epistemological framework. In Chapter 4 the phenomenological research design is described. In Chapter 5 the interviews are discussed, analysed and integrated to form a phenomenological composite description. And finally, in Chapter 6 conclusions are drawn and suggestions for future research are made.

Conclusion

"…forgiveness is as fundamental and important as any topic in psychology.
It embraces the meaning of love and hate, the nature of dependency,
the torments of envy, the problems of narcissism and paranoia,
as well as the tension between self-hatred and self-acceptance,
between striving for maturity and refusing to grow up"
(Karin, 2001, p. 9).

I believe that we forgive in order to live more mindfully in the present. When my daughter Milena was almost three years old, I reminded her of what we were planning to do the following day, and she asked me: "But where is tomorrow NOW?" And moments later: "Where does yesterday go, when it is over?" Indeed, how often do we not ponder on yesterday or worry about tomorrow whilst missing out on the present. Restorying the past can change familiar, self-limiting, rigid stories and lessen the pull of the past by freeing us up to embrace more useful narratives (Penn, 1991).

I started having conversations about forgiveness after grappling with the process myself. I then decided to explore how forgiveness could be useful in making meaning and subsequently interviewed the participants in this study.

The next chapter is an overview of the literature on forgiveness.

Chapter 2

The Experience of Forgiveness

The weak can never forgive.

Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

(Mahatma Gandhi cited in http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/2188.html

retrieved September 16 2006)

Introduction

When people speak or write about forgiveness, they often mean different things – and these differences could reflect their different values and motivations (Ransley & Spy, 2004). In this study, the focus is on the psychology of the interpersonal forgiveness process. However, it is perhaps useful to briefly describe the background of forgiveness from a religious perspective, because although the focus in this study is not a religious one, I realised that forgiveness often has positive or negative associations for people based on their previous religious experiences. In fact, forgiveness is explicitly addressed in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism. Concepts of forbearance and compassion subsume forgiveness in Buddhism.

In the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), we are expected to imitate God, who is forgiving by nature (McCullough et al., 2000).

In Hinduism forgiveness seems to be as important to dharma as compassion, duty, patience and other ethical concepts. According to both Buddhism and Hinduism, unresolved issues such as anger, unforgiveness and resentment will reappear in subsequent reincarnations through karma. Receiving forgiveness from Allah is a foundational theological concern in Islam and interpersonal forgiveness is valued primarily because Allah values forgiveness.

Thus from a religious point of view, there are various rationales for forgiveness: to imitate God, to fulfil one's religious duty, to seek God's forgiveness, to follow the path of righteousness, to repair relationships (Ransley & Spy, 2004, p. 15). Although Buddhism has no word for forgiveness, elements of it are encompassed in Buddhist culture (Bayda, 2003). The Jewish tradition differs from the other major religions in how forgiveness is viewed: transgressors must repent (seek teshuvah) before forgiveness can be offered.

What is Forgiveness and What is Not?

Forgiveness is both interpersonal and intrapsychic. It takes place over time and involves choice (Konstam, Chernoff & Deveney, 2001, p. 26).

Definitions of forgiveness range from simple dictionary definitions to complex ones involving psychological processes that attempt to break it up

into empirical constructs. The differences in the definitions of forgiveness have created many misunderstandings among mental health professionals opposed to or in favour of forgiveness interventions (Reed, Burkett & Garzon, 2001, p. 4).

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000, p. 24) define forgiveness as follows:

> People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they wilfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavour to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right).

Most researchers agree on what forgiveness is not:

- Reconciliation. Despite the equation in some religious contexts (Christianity) of reconciliation and forgiveness, forgiveness is under the control of the person who has been offended and may take place without the offender's knowledge or interaction. Forgiveness may or may not lead to the restoration of a relationship as the offender needs to change his or her behaviour and show remorse for that to happen (Freeman, 2000, p. 88). In abusive relationships especially,

forgiveness might ideally occur without reconciliation because of the physical danger in continuing such a living arrangement.

- Condoning. This implies a justification of the offence and means putting up with something that causes resentment (Casarjian, 1992; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Mamalakis, 2001). The philosopher Robert Roberts describes condoning as double-minded – on the one hand we admit that the action is morally wrong, but then we deny the seriousness of the action (McCullough, Sandage & Worthington, 1997). Forgiveness doesn't mean approving of or supporting the behaviour that causes pain, nor does it preclude taking action to change a situation or to protect the rights of the person who was violated or wronged.

- Excusing. This implies that the offender had a good reason to commit the offence (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Smedes, 1984).

- Overlooking or denying. This implies an unwillingness to perceive the harmful injuries that one has incurred, pretending that there isn't "unforgiveness" and possibly denying or repressing negative emotions (Mamalakis, 2001).

- Forgetting. This implies that the memory of the event has simply slipped out of conscious awareness. Desmond Tutu says, in an interview, (The chance for new beginnings, 2006):

> Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering – remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened.

In his work on forgiveness, Smedes (1984) writes that we forget two kinds of pain – hurts too trivial to bother about and pain too horrible for our memory to manage. He writes that once we do forgive, we have a new freedom to forget. Forgiving and forgetting seem to be linked in people's minds, but loss of memory is not the goal. By forgiving we are able to remember in new ways (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

- Tolerance. This implies acceptance of harmful behaviour, which can lead to a degenerating cycle (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Mamalakis, 2001). Smedes (1984) relates a story of a local bread seller who forgave the boy who shot him during a robbery but still participated in the boy's trial as a witness, since he had never decided to tolerate such an act.

In listening to people talk about forgiveness, one repeatedly hears certain expressions, like the following:

- "I've accepted it now". Although forgiveness is a form of acceptance (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), it is possible to make peace with the past but not with the people of the past! Smedes (1984) describes this as accepting people for who they are versus forgiving people for what they did. He believes that we accept people on three levels, namely social (not as a friend, but for the sake of the community we belong to); professional (as in a therapeutic relationship); and personal (friendship, marriage or family). But when we truly release a person for the hurt caused, we are forgiving, not accepting.
- "I've moved on". For some people this can mean forgiving and for others merely forgetting or denying having have experienced the situation.
- "I'll not give them the satisfaction of getting to me". People can "forgive" another person in such a way that he or she is left quite perplexed as the forgiver is actually playing a game of one-upmanship and so keeping the moral high ground or a position of power.

It is clear that people make meaning of forgiveness in very different ways, depending on their past experiences and their context. However, I think it is important to try and describe it clearly without watering it down to some form of acceptance. I now explore interpersonal forgiveness as described in the literature and I then look at how it manifests in connecting people therapeutically. Finally I describe self-forgiveness because it affects forgiveness.

Interpersonal Forgiveness

In exploring the literature on interpersonal forgiveness, the first thing that stands out is how most authors (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Estes, 2003; Hargrave, 1994; Luskin, 2002; Rosenak & Harndon, 1992; Stoop & Masteller, 1996) deconstruct the process into various phases, steps or stages regardless of the severity of the hurt suffered. These seem to overlap and describe a process that I have summarised and simplified into preparing to forgive and forgiving. The other, less obvious, kind of category that stands out, is what I have described below under types, styles or patterns of forgiveness. In this study these are less useful than the phases, steps or stages, but still important because most of these types are not what is defined as successful forgiveness for the purposes of this study. For this reason, I describe these types, styles or patterns of forgiveness before the more useful phases, steps or stages.

Types, Styles or Patterns of Forgiveness

Trainer (1981) was one of the first psychologists to provide a conceptual framework and description of types of forgiveness. In her doctoral dissertation she describes forgiveness as the overt gestures of forgiveness; cessation of overt hostile responses; management of hostile impulses and a gradual letting go of resentment; the re-emergence of positive attitudes and

feelings towards the one who has done the injury; and gestures of goodwill. Trainer interviewed 73 divorced and separated men and women about the phenomenology of their experience during their divorce, using semi-structured interviews. She then grouped her findings within three types of forgiveness: role-expected, expedient and intrinsic forgiveness. Role-expected forgiveness is defined as an overt manifestation of forgiving behaviour characterised by fear, anxiety and resentment. Expedient forgiveness is defined as the overt manifestation of forgiving behaviour that is performed as a means to an end, but with condescension and hostility. Intrinsic forgiveness is defined as occurring when there is a positive inner change of attitude and feeling as well as benevolent behaviour towards the other person. It is important to note that Trainer's different types of forgiveness occurred for different reasons and have very different consequences in terms of the forgiving person's blaming behaviour, feelings, attitudes towards self and offender, and sense of control over self, other people and life events. Evaluating these "types of forgiveness" against the definition of forgiveness used in this study, only intrinsic forgiveness will qualify as successful forgiveness, in other words, a positive inner change of attitude and feeling as well as benevolent behaviour towards the other person.

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) researched the various conditions people set for themselves in order to forgive, and explored whether there might be a statistically reliable progression that describes the way people develop their perception of forgiveness. In the early days of their research they aligned themselves with Piaget and Kohlberg and referred to a "stage

sequence”, whereas later in their careers they used “style” or “soft style” to distance themselves from this rather rigid theory. Most recently they refer to “patterns”. Styles of forgiveness reasoning about the conditions under which a person will forgive are revengeful forgiveness; restitutional or compensational forgiveness; expectational forgiveness; lawful expectational forgiveness; forgiveness as social harmony; and forgiveness as love. This echoes Trainer’s (1981) study, but (again) in this dissertation, the only pattern I would regard as successful forgiveness is forgiveness as love.

It may be that the reasons for forgiveness are irrelevant. However, some of the types, styles or patterns described above, like Trainer’s (1981) role-expected and expedient forgiveness and Enright and Fitzgibbons’s (2000) revengeful, restitutional/compensational, expectational, lawful expectational and even forgiveness as social harmony, do not qualify as successful forgiveness in terms of the definition used in this dissertation. On the other hand, it is perhaps possible that people initiate the forgiveness process because it is expected or for the sake of social harmony, and later progress to sincere forgiving. I suspect, though, that it is more likely that people who do this will find themselves in such a state discomfort that they will either be unable to be congruent or will find that they vent their unprocessed emotions at people who are not involved.

Phases, Steps or Stages of Forgiveness

There is a tendency in the literature on forgiveness to attempt to break down the process of forgiveness into various phases, steps or stages. Some authors stress that these stages do not necessarily follow one another in a linear sequence (Estes, 2003; Hargrave, 1994) and maintain that this process happens regardless of the severity of the hurt suffered (Rosenak & Harndon, 1992). The authors all use differing terminology to describe the similar experiences or processes of forgiveness, so I would like to try and integrate the various views by dividing the process into two parts, namely preparing to forgive and forgiving. Cooper and Gilbert (2004) remind us that partners engaging in couples therapy can experience these various phases, steps or stages at different times.

Preparing to Forgive

The clinical psychologist Estes (2003) describes three stages of preparing to forgive that she uses in working with trauma, namely to forego (to leave it alone), to forebear (to abstain from punishing), and to forget (to refuse to dwell on it) before forgiving. She accentuates that each stage has various levels and that the stages can be dealt with in any order.

Stoop and Masteller (1996) break the preparation stage down into four clear steps, namely recognising the injury; identifying the emotions involved; expressing hurt and anger; and setting boundaries for protection. This is

mirrored in the work of Rosenak and Harndon (1992), as they identify three emotional stages – hurt, anger and information gathering – that they maintain precede forgiveness. This is then echoed more simply in the research conducted by Hargrave (1994), who developed a theoretical framework to work with forgiveness therapeutically in a family context. He divides his work into two categories, namely exonerating and forgiving. Exonerating is the "effort of the person who has experienced injustice or hurt to lift the load of culpability off the person who caused the hurt" (Hargrave, 1994, p. 14) and consists of what he calls "stations of insight and understanding".

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000, p. 67) describe a process model of forgiveness that has been tested empirically with varied populations. It consists of four phases, the first two of which I decided to group under preparing to forgive: the uncovering phase (pre-forgiveness where the client gains insight into whether and how the injustice and subsequent injury have compromised his or her life) and the decision phase (awareness that new solutions may be required). Cooper and Gilbert (2004) used this model and then incorporated an adapted version into their framework of couples therapy.

Malcolm and Greenberg (2000) use five components which they regard as necessary to the process of forgiveness. The first two fall under the preparation stage: acceptance and awareness of strong emotions such as anger and sadness, and letting go of previously unmet interpersonal needs. In doing this, they found that the forgiver is released from the traps of trying to

make the offender understand the magnitude of the harm done and trying to get the offender to take responsibility (p. 180).

Forgiving

This is what Stoop and Masteller (1996, p. 179) call, simply, cancelling the debt. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000, p. 67) describe it, more comprehensively, as the work phase (a change in the cognitive understanding of the offender that leads to viewing the offender in a new light, resulting in positive change in affect about the offender, about the self, and about the relationship) as well as deepening (where the client finds increasing meaning in the suffering, feels more connected to others, and experiences decreased negative affect and, at times, renewed purpose in life).

According to Rosenak and Harndon (1992) forgiveness is divided into reframing, releasing the desire to retaliate and wishing the offender well. Stoop and Masteller (1996) also list considering the possibility of reconciliation as the last step in the forgiveness process. This is because they write from a family therapy perspective and maintain that whereas forgiveness is essential for people who are going to live together (i.e. in families or family groupings), reconciliation isn't necessarily a good thing or something one should strive for otherwise. Unlike Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000), Hargrave (1994) also gives attention to the offender and describes forgiveness as the "stations" of giving the opportunity of compensation and the overt act of forgiving.

Giving the opportunity of compensation is often used in a family therapy context, as described in the work of Madanes (1990). This interpersonal focus will be discussed next with the accent on forgiveness as a tool for connecting and how it has been used in therapeutic contexts.

Interpersonal Manifestation of Forgiveness

Forgiveness as a Tool for Connecting

As a strategic therapist, Madanes (1990) stresses that qualities such as kindness, compassion, empathy and forgiveness are not the qualities of an individual, but rather qualities that manifest in interactions that develop and are sustained between people.

This links to the work of Fincham (2000), who makes two assumptions about human existence: humans harm each other and are social animals. He uses the metaphor of two porcupines kissing to illustrate the human condition. Drawing closer on a freezing day, they provide life-sustaining warmth to each other until they receive a painful prick, which leads them to withdraw instinctively – until the need for warmth draws them together again. The challenge is particularly acute in close relationships. People voluntarily make themselves vulnerable in order to experience social fulfilment, but are then open to hurt. Fincham states that the resulting challenge is to retain

relatedness with fellow humans in the face of inevitably being harmed by them. This is the dance of relationships and Fincham urges that relatedness can be maintained through forgiveness (p. 20).

Forgiveness in a Therapeutic Context

Forgiveness was never mentioned in my training and yet it can be useful in a therapeutic context. Cooper and Gilbert (2004, p. 73) state that forgiveness calls for the capacity to empathise with and enter into the experience of the other person and requires a particular form of maturity. It is then interesting, but not surprising, that older therapists seem more likely to use forgiveness in a therapeutic context – as Diblasio (1998) confirmed when he found that therapists tend to adopt a more favourable attitude towards forgiveness when they are beyond mid-life and are then also more likely to associate anger and depression with the need to forgive.

From a couples therapy perspective, Cooper and Gilbert (2004, p. 70) describe forgiveness as

> an intersubjective process involving the full participation of both partners as a couple. The transgressor needs to experience sadness and remorse, accounting fully for the transgression, and the person transgressed against needs to be open to these feelings, to forgive and let go of resentments.

They stress that the transgressor needs to ask for forgiveness, knowing the full extent of what the effect on the other(s) has been and taking full responsibility for the impact of his or her behaviour on the other(s). Earlier in this chapter I stated that successful forgiveness can happen without reconciliation or even without the other person being informed. However, in couples therapy, forgiveness when none has been asked for is not productive for either person (Cooper & Gilbert, 2004). This was illustrated in a couples counselling context during my training when I saw a husband and wife who presented for therapy because they were finding it difficult to communicate productively. It seemed that the wife felt unheard and then escalated her communication, which the husband found overwhelming and responded to by withdrawing. They related how she had recently escalated to the point of using very strong language and crying, at which point the husband said: "You are not rational and saying such terrible things, but I forgive you." In this case his "forgiveness" was merely a way to negate what she was saying, and thus even more of the same!

Murray (2002) presents a case study, using Hargrave's (1994) conceptualisation, on healing intergenerational pain, to illustrate the therapeutic value of encouraging exoneration and then forgiveness. He states that one of the obstacles in intergenerational family therapy is lack of modelling., He therefore uses a forgiveness genogram to chart patterns of family hurt and forgiveness and so to inform the direction of the therapeutic

process. He concludes that it is possible to forgive without reconciling, but impossible to truly reconcile without forgiving.

Once people acknowledge that they have been treated unfairly, they may experience anger. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) state that, in their experience of using forgiveness therapy, the person at whom the anger or negative emotion is directed is often not the one with whom the client is most angry. They have found that as the process of therapy progresses, it often becomes clear that the initial target is someone on whom the client merely displaces the anger arising from earlier incidents with other people. This highlights how an unresolved issue can affect various relationships or contexts.

Cloé Madanes, who founded the Family Therapy Institute of Washington DC with Jay Haley in 1976, mentions forgiveness in her map for thinking about the dynamics within families (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). She believes that, in addition to hierarchy, issues of love and violence are at the root of all problems brought to therapy. Her map consists of four dimensions that appear to affect issues surrounding love and violence – the first and the last are especially relevant to this study.

- First dimension, where we struggle for power and control within our lives, as well as over the lives of others
- Second dimension, where we experience difficulties associated with the desire to be loved

- Third dimension, where we experience the desire to love and protect others
- Fourth dimension, where we have the ability to repent and forgive. This is the dimension Madanes (1990) considers the most important.

Madanes (1990) believes that we feel shame when we inflict trauma, deception or violence on others. There are attempts to place extreme guilt on others for what they have done or not done. Blame is often passed around in an attempt to reduce shame. In therapy the therapist then attempts to take the blame away from the victims and to change the style of avoiding responsibility. The therapist could encourage people to have compassion towards one another, and compassion may lead to repentance and forgiveness. As Ferrucci (2006, p. 37) writes: "It is no accident that the cerebral activities of forgiveness and of empathy take place in the same area of the brain".

Luskin (2002), a psychologist who works with people in Northern Ireland whose close relatives have been murdered, found that even when people were removed from a difficult experience, what had to change was their "grievance story". This is the person's version of what happened, which can often develop into a destructive, often obsessively repeated, subtly or not so subtly distorted account that accentuates the role of the villain who is responsible for one's misery. Creating such stories focus on the other person and why he won't change or what she won't do and in this way the "perpetrator" is given power they shouldn't have (Luskin, 2002).

By re-telling the story, the person re-lives what happened and physically re-experiences the anger (heart rhythm changes, breathing becomes shallow) and so keeps dealing with the original situation in the same, unproductive way.

Luskin (2001) encourages people to recast their grievance stories by articulating what their ideal outcome would have been, accepting that it didn't happen and realising that they probably became involved in the situation for some understandable, human quest for love or parenting or friendship. He then focuses on the future by pointing out that because these rewards didn't result once, it doesn't mean they are lost forever. Reframing both the situation and the person's prolonged and ineffective response to it can enable people to change their "dance" and become unstuck.

Groups of Catholic and Protestant women whose sons were killed in Northern Ireland participate in "forgiveness training" in a group context at the University of Stanford each year. Their overall levels of depression, anger, optimism and perceived stress are measured before and after the training and the women show dramatically improved scores. The principal change is the transformation of their stories from being victimised to being survivors or heroines (Hamilton, 2001).

Freeman (2000) applies Enright and Fitzgibbons's (2000) phases of forgiveness and writes that the therapist can assist the client in gathering

additional information about the offender in order to expand the view the client has of the offender. By exploring the offender's childhood or other relationships, the client can see the offender as someone with a past and a future and may then consider the personal and developmental history of the offender. In this way the injurer is separated from the injury as he or she is taken out of the customary context and placed in a new context which enables the client to view the offender in a new light. The capacity for empathy is an essential element in successful forgiveness (Hope, 1987; Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000; McCullough et al., 2000).

Madanes (1990) identifies the encouragement of forgiveness and kindness as one of the goals common to all therapy. She writes that the only way we can survive from day to day without emotional breakdown is by forgiving. She goes so far as to say (as Murray (2002) did when he applied Hargrave's (1994) theory on forgiveness) that only when there is total separation is it possible to not forgive (1990, p. 12). However, in her work as a family therapist, Madanes feels that if family members are to continue to relate to each other, they have to forgive each other. She believes that acts of altruism improve self-esteem and improve relationships and often prescribes acts of reparation involving a sacrifice of some kind that the offender needs to perform towards those who were deliberately or unwittingly hurt.

In cases of sexual abuse, Madanes (1990) breaks the reparation process into 16 steps. She maintains that in the seventh step there should be absolutely no pressure on the victim to forgive and that she need not do so.

She believes that it is essential in the family context and for the victim, that the offender makes a humiliating apology as soon as possible – preferably in the first or second sessions. In her practice, she often has the whole family kneel in front of the victim to express remorse and sorrow for not having protected her. She writes (p. 54):

> This establishes, publicly, in front of the whole family that the victim is the victim, that she does not have to apologise, that nobody is interested in what she contributed to the situation, and that she does not even have to forgive … This is the beginning of not having to think of herself always and only as a victim.

Later in her book Madanes (1990) writes that, in her experience, the victim always forgives although she might tell the therapist later, in private, that she actually did not forgive. Madanes answers by praising and removing blame: "I admire you even more for that, because it means that you are so kind and compassionate that you told him you forgive him even though you really cannot." In the sixteenth step the therapist helps the offender to forgive himself, which is sometimes very difficult. Madanes (1990) suggests to the offender the strategy of doing good deeds whenever he or she gets obsessed with thoughts about what he or she did. This is echoed in the work that Luskin (2002) does on self-forgiveness, when he suggests that we make amends by looking for a way to be kind to those whom we have hurt and to perform acts of symbolic kindness to others in cases where the people we have hurt have died or are unavailable.

Self-Forgiveness

At first I thought that self-forgiveness fell outside of the scope of my study, as the focus is on interpersonal forgiveness. However, in working with forgiveness, I have come to believe that forgiving others and forgiving ourselves are interrelated. In speaking to people, I often heard them say how forgiving ourselves is much harder than forgiving others, but we do have more control over our own actions than over the actions of others.

Luskin (2002, p. 194) groups people who want or need to forgive themselves into four categories (which are not mutually exclusive), as follows:

- People who are upset with themselves for failing at one of life's important tasks. This can be either developmental (like completing school or training) or social (like getting married or having children).
- People who are upset with themselves for not taking action to help someone else or themselves when they thought it was necessary.
- People who are upset because they hurt someone else. These are usually people who cheated on partners, behaved badly as parents or poorly in business.
- People who are upset with themselves for self-destructive acts such as addictions or an unwillingness to work hard.

Luskin (2002) found that self-forgiveness follows the same process as interpersonal forgiveness and that the overriding goal of experiencing peace is the same. He therefore also uses the same key components as he uses in his workshops on interpersonal forgiveness:

- Taking something less personally: This happens when we realise that we are not alone in whatever we did wrong – we need to accept that we are human and will make mistakes.
- Taking responsibility for feelings: Luskin uses the positive emotion refocusing technique (PERT) in his workshops to remind people to look for the good in life, practise gratitude and experience these positive feelings in the present.
- Telling a positive intention story: Here the "grievance story" about the offence and the negative feelings around it are changed into a forgiveness story – what is accentuated is that whatever happened is in the past and that only the present can be changed.

Luskin (2002) suggests first "practising" forgiving others before forgiving oneself, but regards self-forgiveness as a powerful tool in learning how to become a forgiving person.

Conclusion

There are various perspectives on forgiveness and people sometimes mean different things when they use the term. I suspect that the religious connotations on the one hand and the association with reconciliation on the other, make forgiveness a threatening concept for many people. This is confirmed in the work of Lamb (2002), Murphy (2003) and Ransley (2004), who are cautious, sceptical or simply negative about using forgiveness in a therapeutic context.

However, research conducted on this topic shows that forgiveness can be a very powerful process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Estes, 2003; Hargrave, 1994; Luskin, 2002; Rosenak & Harndon, 1992; Stoop & Masteller, 1996).

From an interpersonal perspective, forgiveness may be used as a tool to reframe difficult situations in order to mobilise people who have become stuck in a victim role. Emmons (2000, p. 171) describes both the intrapsychic and interpersonal gains by stating how forgiveness can activate integrative tendencies in a person, rescuing the psyche from inner conflict and turmoil and transforming the person from a state of fragmentation to a state of integration and from separation to reconciliation. Facilitating connecting and making peace with the past are useful goals in therapy. Forgiveness as a tool of reframe for developing empathy, taking things less personally and shifting

towards a meta-perspective, is valuable in therapy, yet it is not addressed in training nor is it adequately addressed in the psychological literature.

The goal in this chapter was to gain an overview of the existing literature before I interviewed the participants about their journeys of forgiveness, which I explore in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3

A Both/And or Postmodern Epistemology

The objective of the human sciences

is the deepening of our understanding

of what it is to live a human life

(Sullivan, 1983, p. 304).

Introduction

What we create depends on what we see, so in this chapter my goal is to give an overview of one such lens through which the world can be viewed, namely the ecosystemic perspective. This is the paradigm or epistemology through which I viewed forgiveness as I worked on this study. Auerswald (1985) urges us to become acutely aware of the thought rules that trap us and prevent us from encountering and releasing great ideas in order to "teach epistemological freedom which results in ontological freedom" (p. 19).

An epistemology is the study of the grounds of knowledge. It is how we know what we know. As Bateson said: "You cannot claim to have no epistemology. Those who do so have nothing but a bad epistemology" (cited in Keeney, 1979, p. 118). Auerswald (1985, p. 15) maintains that "[w]henever we construct a theory or a curriculum or any other structure, we are editing the

Universe." The assumption that our edit has anything to do with some ultimate reality or, worse, that we believe that there is some ultimate reality that we see as The Truth, he calls not only arrogant but foolish. Auerswald believes that the truths we encounter are dependent on the reality edit or context in which they emerged. Our particular reality edit then not only directs our lives, but also our thought.

What we perceive and know depends on the distinctions we draw (Keeney, 1983). These distinctions are based on the specific assumptions of the knower's basic epistemology. Hoffman (1990) called such an epistemology the "lens" through which we view the world and through which we will report on what we see. Naturally our lens will also colour our view and make it possible to have multiple descriptions of the same event, depending on the observer.

When we think about forgiveness, as explored in Chapter 2, we see that in order for someone to experience forgiveness there needs to be "unforgiveness", in other words, there needs to have been an incident, or more particularly a person who "committed" an act that generated "unforgiveness". In much of the literature on forgiveness, the description of what happens is that A wronged B. B then blames A or holds A responsible for what happened. So, A wronging B, leads to C which is a state of unforgiveness in B. This fits very well with a linear perspective where the solution to any problem is merely finding the reason for what happened. The

focus is on WHY? And the linear solution to the problem becomes forgiveness.

Through this modernist lens, we will be able to analyse various case studies, it will be possible to reduce what happens to “essentials” and certain rules or laws will emerge. In this way the truth about what really happens will be revealed to us. As a good scientific researcher, I will be able to observe the phenomenon of forgiveness objectively and in a value-free manner. This description fits an intrapsychic theory of forgiveness within a modernist, Newtonian world-view or epistemology (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004).

From this modernist world-view a very different epistemology emerged, based on the premise of interrelatedness as illustrated in ecology and quantum physics (Keeney, 1979; Anderson & Goolishan, 1986; Capra, 1982). Psychologists became aware of how things are interrelated not only in nature, but also in families or between people (Auerswald, 1987). Watts (1989) once said that if we struggle with persistently insoluble problems, we are asking questions in the wrong way. Thus, as psychologists started seeing problems in context, the questions asked about them in therapy changed from “why?” to “what?”. Keeney (1979) called this new paradigm based on cybernetics, ecology and systems theory an “ecosystemic epistemology”.

Systemic Perspective or Cybernetics

In systems theory/cybernetics, our focus is on the relationships between people instead of on the individual. This is seen as merely another lens through which to view the world and not as a way of arriving at "the truth". Through ecosystemic eyes, subjectivity is inevitable and the focus is on the observer rather than on the observed. This interdependence between the observer and the observed is seen as a non-causal, dialectical process of mutual influence in which both participate (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

Keeney (1983, p. 27) says that we can only "understand an individual's experience by observing how his social context is punctuated". In this study an ecosystemic epistemology was used in order to understand the context in which the participants understand and experience forgiveness. This lens has coloured defining the subject, planning the research, selecting the participants and making meaning of an interaction that I call "forgiveness".

In this study the researcher brackets a forgiveness experience in a person's life and looks at it as a dance or pattern. Pattern has no "realness, is not subject to quantification, and cannot be discussed as if it was a thing, influenced by the interplay of force, power and energy" (Keeney, 1982, p. 162). It is not possible to observe this dance or pattern "objectively" from the outside, and so I, as interviewing researcher, was a participant in constructing a reality from the participants' experiences of forgiveness.

Of course, if we look at what happens between the offender and the offended systemically, it is clear that “unforgiveness” (Worthington & Wade, 1999) doesn’t exist *per se* – there is merely stuckness in that the person who feels wronged feels unable to move on and may instead blame the person who wronged him or her. Needless to say “forgiveness” doesn’t exist either. From a cybernetic/postmodernist perspective I describe forgiveness not as a “phenomenon out there”, but rather a construct that we have invented to make sense of an experience.

In order to understand interpersonal forgiveness, it is necessary to describe some important principles of a systems theory/cybernetics approach, namely recursion, feedback, equifinality/equipotentiality and reframing (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

Recursion

Through systemic eyes we see people and events in reciprocal causality instead of acting or occurring in isolation. Meaning is created in the relation between the descriptions of individuals or elements of one another (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). We see the behaviour of A as a logical complement to the behaviour of B, just as the behaviour of B is a logical complement to the behaviour of A. In order to perform a certain behavioural role, an actor requires an audience, and vice versa. From this perspective we see every individual influencing and being influenced by another individual, just as every system influences and is being influenced by every other system (Becvar &

Becvar, 2006). Thus we understand ourselves as part of a connected, conjoined universe.

Feedback

The skill of cycling is reliant on self-corrective feedback. This refers to the process whereby information about past behaviours is fed back into the system in a circular manner (Becvar & Becvar, 2006, p. 66). Capra (1996, p. 56) describes it as

> a circular arrangement of causally connected elements, in which an initial cause propagates around the links of the loop, so that each element has an effect on the next, until the last feeds back the effect into the first element of the cycle.

Equifinality/Equipotentiality

People tend to be in relationship with one another with redundant patterns of interaction – systems consist in patterns and patterns tend to repeat. These repeated patterns constitute the characteristic end-state called equifinality. Bertalanffy (cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2006, p. 71) defined equifinality as "the tendency towards a characteristic final state from different initial stages and in different ways based upon dynamic interaction in an open system attaining a steady state".

Equipotentiality refers to the notion that different end states can be arrived at from the same initial conditions (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). This steers our focus to WHAT is happening instead of WHY it is happening. This is the major difference between intrapsychic and systemic frameworks. Shifting to a systemic view, the goal becomes, first, understanding the context within which the problem exists, then identifying the patterns maintaining the problem and lastly facilitating change in the context.

Keeney (1979, p. 120) writes that ecosystemic epistemology is concerned with patterns of relationship that are described by metaphors of form and pattern. This requires that we no longer allocate intrinsic characteristics to "objects", but rather that we sensitise ourselves to seeing "patterns of relationship".

Naming and Reframing

Minuchin (1984, p. 50) describes the power of naming a construct as follows: "Through magic incantations the named lose their own shape, and become more and more what they're called." In an ecosystemic paradigm forgiveness becomes merely a possible reframe that we could use in certain situations in order to mobilise persons who are stuck. Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974, p. 95) state that reframing means:

> Change [in] the conceptual and or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced [as we] place it in another

> frame which fits the “facts” of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changing its entire meaning.

As Becvar and Becvar (2006, p. 297) put it, “a reframe takes a situation and lifts it out of its old context and places it in a new context that defines it equally well.” What makes this so powerful is that a new perception offers a new meaning and so new responses or behaviours suddenly become possible. Reframing does not draw attention to anything – does not produce insight – but “teaches a different game, thereby making the old one obsolete” (Watzlawick et al., 1974, p. 104). Essential to successful reframing is understanding the world-view of the recipient in order to be able to present a reframe that will be believable enough to make sense and will therefore be acceptable to him or her. It is very important that the language used is compatible with the person’s frames of reference. In effect we are thus creating a new reality and, in the words of Watzlawick et al., (1974, p. 99):

> we cannot so easily go back to the trap and the anguish of the former view of reality. Once someone has explained to us the solution of the nine-dot problem, it is almost impossible to revert to our previous helplessness and especially our original hopelessness about the possibility of a solution.

Efran, Lukens and Lukens (1988) remind us that reframing can easily become “more like cheap carnival tricks” when we “fabricate indiscriminately for immediate effect” (p. 34), and that we need to use reframing wisely.

From conceptualising the family as a system in the last 35 to 40 years, there has been a more recent development in describing the individual heuristically as a system (Anchin, 2003; Fosha, 2004; Schwartz,1995). This integrated complexity indicates that at any given moment of being in the world, multiple, intricately constituted subsystems compose every one of us. As Anchin (2003, p. 337) puts it, “the patient, then, is a system in his own right, constituted by simultaneously interacting subsystems and inescapably intertwined with other systems that make up the social environment”.

Another, more encompassing lens, is seeing the researcher (or observer or therapist) as part of the system as well (Rober & Migerode, 1992). This is described under second-order cybernetics and is complementary to the first-order framework where the family (or even the individual) is seen as a system (Atkinson & Heath, 1990).

Cybernetics of Cybernetics or Second-Order Cybernetics

From an ecosystemic or first-order cybernetic perspective the observer stands outside the system he or she is observing. Whilst able to make interventions, the therapist, for instance, is not seen as participating in the system. On moving up to the next level of abstraction (or second-order cybernetics), the observer becomes part of what he or she is observing (Efran & Lukens: 1985). Who the person is, is reflected in what he or she sees and

by describing what he or she sees, the person is constructing a reality and is a participant in making meaning. When we view the world from a second-order cybernetic paradigm, we see a total, unified whole in which everything fits, is coherent and makes sense (Becvar & Becvar, 2006, p. 358).

Hoffman (1985) says that a second-order framework promotes a high tolerance for difference and that she feels comfortable incorporating methods from different schools of therapy as long as she knows why she is doing so and is able to be clear about what she is doing.

From a first-order perspective, "the system creates a problem"; from a second-order perspective, "a problem creates a system" (Hoffman, 1985, p. 386; 2002). A postmodern therapist would say that there are no problems as such. A system is limited by its structure. According to structural determinism, an environment does not determine what a structure does; a system only does what its structure allows it to do. And so, whatever it does, it is correct (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). A problem, says Hoffman, is merely "an ecology of ideas" (1985, p. 387).

"Problems" are symptoms which can be seen as the ways in which the system tries to adjust. When we do "treat" a "problem", we are participating in treatment systems in order to facilitate adjusting a certain frame of reference or a certain world-view. Problems are in the eye of the beholder!

However, this is not to suggest that we as therapists should sit back and describe the dynamics of a family where frail bodies are being abused without intervening (Hoffman, 2002). Indeed, as Doherty (1991) puts it: "Perhaps a little modernist expertise is helpful at times" (p. 42).

Systems co-exist in contexts with other systems and observers and the extent to which they are able to fit together is called structural coupling. If there is an insufficient fit, the organism or system will die (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

The world is seen as organised in recursive layers of autonomous systems that self-regulate and that are self-generating by nature (Atkinson & Heath, 1990). These systems balance and heal themselves if left alone. There is no cause and effect, but instead constant change in a process of non-purposeful drift within a medium (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Hoffman (1985) describes it as setting a context for change rather than suggesting specific changes and as changing premises and assumptions rather than behaviours.

All Together Now or Postmodernism

Cybernetics of cybernetics fall under postmodernism and it (postmodernism) has allowed a freedom of thinking that was never possible in the previous paradigms. In fact, Anderson and Goolishian (1990) call this

transformation a “post-cybernetic interest in human interest and story” (p. 161). We now see knowledge as partial and ambiguous and the therapist as irrevocably part of a meaning-generating system instead of as the expert who diagnoses and treats a pathological family (Doherty, 1991). Postmodernists are “deeply concerned about language, but unlike their modernist predecessors, far less certain about its meaning” (Doherty, 1991, p. 40). The accent on narrative and discourse frees us from fixed categories and allows us to construct more congruent and useful stories. In this way postmodern thinkers can challenge dominant discourses by drawing attention to marginalised and subjugated discourses (Hare-Mustin, 1994).

This also influences how we see ourselves. From a modernist perspective, we are made up of constant, knowable, fundamental aspects that we can discover if we journey inward and it is in this process that we can live with integrity. Cox and Lyddon (1997) write that this view was challenged when Sartre wrote that identity is continually revealed through the choices people make. They group the emerging postmodernist perspectives of self into the following themes:

- Self as Self-Theory. Erickson’s theory of identity formation is rephrased in postmodernist terms by describing identity as a self-constructed theory that is continually in flux. Here identity is more of a process of continuing becoming, rather than a substance. This theory is active and dynamic, so that even though one’s self exists in the moment, there are also past selves and desired selves or feared future selves.

- Self as Evolving Process. The self is thought to have an innate tendency to adaptively evolve into more differentiated and complex ways of functioning. The ability to view oneself as both subject and object is accentuated and so we are more than just a biologically determined reflection of an external world. Emotion (e-motion) is motion/flux – part of the phenomenological experience of evolving. Giving up meanings or valued beliefs is seen as a kind of death or existential loss.
- Self as Narrative. Instead of being viewed as a substance, identity is also viewed as a process – in this case in the form of a continuously unfolding story. Here the narrative creates a personal myth that has universal elements. People tend to make sense of life within the larger context of their constructed life stories, which are characterised by an ideological setting, images or primary characters in the story, nuclear episodes or turning points that the narrator identifies retrospectively and a generativity script or vision of exactly what one hopes to put into and get out of life. A subtle distinction is made between ego and identity, equating these to the difference between self-as-I versus self-as-me. The more developed the ego, the more differentiated and integrated the constructed story becomes.
- Self as Social/Economic/Political Construction. We are reminded how we are shaped by our social/economic/political realities as we exist within a system, not despite it. This idea is illustrated in the writings of Gergen (1985, p. 271) where the "self-concept is removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse" and thus identity

is decentralised and constituted by a mosaic of relationships. The taken-for-granted cultural/economic/political framework that emerges "serves a set of power relations. Beliefs that come to be regarded as natural do so only because they reflect the most powerful interest groups in society" (Hare-Mustin, 1994, p. 32). Although we are always living in such a framework, we need to be very aware of various discourses – including those that are marginalised – because conversation can be oppressive, especially in what it excludes (often the views held by people subordinated by race, gender, sexual preference, age, ability or class).

- Transcendent Self. A Western concept of ego as an integral concept of identity is combined with Eastern concepts of relatedness. As a person grows in awareness, the identity transforms beyond ego where complete relatedness to the universe is experienced. This threatens to become a rather linear view of cognitive development (combined with some spiritual arrogance!), but it has been complexified by focusing on the affective (rather than the cognitive) domain where imagery or metaphor is used as the foundation of self-reference. Here "consciousness itself gradually becomes sensed to be open and undefined and allowing a space is allowing a simultaneous infinity of multiple perspectives" (Hunt, cited in Cox & Lyddon, 1997, p. 211). Such a description is echoed in both the Christian mystical traditions as well as in Eastern meditation literature.

Capra (1975) suggests that Eastern mysticism provides the most compatible philosophical background to the postmodern scientific paradigm, as it accentuates "an awareness of the oneness of all life, the interdependence of its multiple manifestations, and its cycles of change and transformation" (p. 326).

If we believed that "less is more" during modernism and that God was to be found "in the details", the postmodern ethic is "more is more" (Doherty, 1991) and God is perhaps found in everything.

Conclusion

Because a postmodern ecosystemic epistemology is a holistic, inclusive way of viewing the world, it has stood out as the most relevant epistemology in describing forgiveness. It is useful to use a second-order cybernetic lens in looking not only at the individual as a system when exploring self-forgiveness or at the family as a system when looking at how forgiveness may facilitate connection, but also in seeing the role the observer plays. This makes me aware of my role in co-creating a meaning of forgiveness by interviewing the participants and writing this dissertation, and also in having chosen and defined the topic of forgiveness. I see forgiveness as an alternative conversation. A postmodern view can move beyond existing conversations to their transformation (Hare-Mustin, 1994). As Gergen (1985, p. 271) says about viewing the world through a social constructivist lens:

“Few are prepared for such a wrenching, conceptual dislocation. However, for the innovative, adventurous and resilient, the horizons are exciting indeed.”

Scholars like Anchin (2003), who combines cybernetic systems with existential-phenomenological and solution-focused narrative perspectives, have influenced me in choosing a phenomenological methodology. This method is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Research Design

For the phenomenologist, there are no layers,

there is just one layer of life as such.

There, in that life is a depth of life.

There is the explanation of life,

insofar as life can be explained at all.

For there is much that cannot be explained in life

and never has been explained.

Life is definitely not a nebula, but it is certainly a mystery

(Van den Berg, cited in Becker, 1992, p. 5).

Introduction

To see life as a mystery is something that quantum physics accentuates when one looks at the world through a postmodernist lens, as described in the previous chapter. Perhaps the reader now expects a chapter describing social constructivism or constructionism after reading about the postmodern epistemology, where I describe the role of the observer in co-creating a story by interviewing selected participants – in this case a story of forgiveness. However, I used a phenomenological research design where the role of the observer is more that of a perceiver than a constructor. Ashworth (2003) reminds us that this distinction is by no means absolute, as was illustrated in the influential book *The social construction of reality*, by Berger

and Luckmann (1967), which used a phenomenological basis taken from Alfred Schutz. Indeed, there are several examples where cybernetic systems and phenomenology are combined (Anchin, 2003; Fosha, 2004; Mook, 1984; Tyler, 1994). Cybernetic systems, existential phenomenology and solution-focused narratives concur as to individuals' fundamentally teleological nature, writes Jack Anchin (2003, p. 334) in an article where he includes inspirational transcripts of therapy sessions with a client over time.

In Chapter 1 I described how I set out to create a useful exploratory study of forgiveness, and now in Chapter 4 I outline how the research was designed in order to do this. The data collection process is made clear and shows how the data were analysed to create the final report. This is an exploratory study, and so I have employed an open, flexible and inductive approach in order to find new insights into the process of forgiveness (Durrheim, 2002).

Aim of This Study

The aim of this study is to investigate people's subjective, lived experiences of forgiveness and to produce a rich description of the participants' stories. Accordingly, a qualitative style of research was used. Qualitative researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable, whereas quantitative researchers have an etic, nomothetic focus and are less concerned with detail, write Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 6).

Formulating a specific hypothesis (as one does in quantitative research) seemed inappropriate and unlikely to add as much value as exploring various experiences of forgiveness and creating a thick description of it. Fow (1996) argues that experimental methods which depend on operational definitions, quantification and measurement may not be suited to studying forgiveness.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods allow researchers to study selected issues in depth, openness and detail as they identify and attempt to understand the categories of information that emerge from the data (Durrheim, 2002, p. 42).

In contrast, quantitative research counts occurrences across a large population and uses statistics and replicability to validate generalisations from survey samples and experiments while trying to reduce contaminating social variables (Holliday, 2002). In this study, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to focus on the quality and depth of the subject. Quantitative researchers have a conviction about what is important to look for and have confidence in established research instruments, whereas qualitative researchers believe that what is important to look for will emerge and they have faith that they will be flexible enough to fit the research procedures to both the situation and the people in it (Holliday, 2002).

Marecek (2003) highlights three points that lie at the heart of qualitative research:

- Qualitative inquiry embeds the study of psychology in rich contexts of history, society and culture.
- People are studied in their life worlds, by paying special attention to context or locations they occupy.
- It regards those whom we study as reflexive, meaning-making and intentional actors.

She concludes that a qualitative stance is grounded in a different epistemology than is a quantitative stance. Flick, von Kardorff and Steinke (2004, p. 8), too, state that the epistemological principle of qualitative research is the understanding of complex relationships rather than explanation by isolation of a single relationship, such as "cause-and-effect". Understanding is oriented, in the sense of "methodically controlled understanding of otherness", towards comprehension of the perspective of the other party. As explained in Chapter 3, this study is grounded on a systemic view as the focus is on the interpersonal implications of the psychology of forgiveness.

Qualitative methodologies have not predominated in the social sciences since, as Berg (2001) writes, they take much longer, require greater clarity of goals during the design stages and cannot be analysed by running computer programs. The use of quantitative, positivist methods and assumptions has been rejected by a new generation of researchers who are drawn to post-structural and/or postmodern lenses. In their work they reject the quantitative, positivist criteria that they believe reproduce only a certain

kind of science, a "science that silences too many voices" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 15). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe positivist methods as one way of telling stories about society and the world – these methods are no better and no worse than other methods, they merely tell different kinds of stories. Becvar and Becvar (2006) echo this postmodern view and see qualitative and quantitative methodologies as logically complementary, in that each is useful depending on the context.

Phenomenological Research or "Back to the Things Themselves"

The word "phenomenon" comes from the Greek "phaenesthai", meaning to appear, flare up, show itself, and is the origin of the maxim "back to the things themselves". What appears in consciousness is phenomena: the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Nothing is as selective as perception, just as methods have the effect of constraining what one looks for, write Camic, Rhodes and Yardley (2003). In this study, the focus was not on the interpretation of the different stories, but rather on delving deeply into each unique story and trying to describe the various experiences of forgiveness as accurately as possible. For this reason the phenomenological approach was used.

Phenomenology is a complex system of ideas that some claim was the founding epistemology for qualitative inquiry (Schwandt, 2003). In this study the interest was in finding out *how* people experience forgiveness and so to investigate their subjective, lived experiences of forgiveness. A

phenomenological approach can explore this as it aims to articulate essential insights into phenomena, providing a tangible, penetrating overview that evokes the reader's life experiences of it (Becker, 1992).

Background

Kant argued that we can never know the thing itself, but only know it as it appears to us; and Kierkegaard sought to understand each person as a unique individual, responsible to develop an ethical life based on turning inward and becoming fully who he or she was meant to be (McCall, 1983). These philosophers influenced Husserl (1859–1938), who developed the phenomenological method, which was raised to the status of a fundamental philosophical procedure. He is seen as the founder of (transcendental) phenomenology. Another branch, which perhaps has even greater philosophical and psychological significance, was developed by Heidegger (1889–1976), who was Husserl's university assistant. This became known as existential phenomenology.

The phenomenological viewpoint is based on two premises:

- That experience is valid and a fruitful source of knowledge, and
- That our everyday worlds are valuable sources of knowledge (Becker, 1992).

Phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which human beings gain knowledge of the world around them (Willig, 2001, p. 50). This is a

"study (about) the meanings of human experiences in situations as they spontaneously occur in daily life. The emphasis is on the study of lived experience …" (Von Eckartsberg, cited in Valle, 1998, p. 3).

Varela (1998, p. 34) describes phenomenology as a "style of thinking" or a "special type of reflection … (where) all reflection reveals a variety of mental contents and their correlated orientation or intended contents".

Because phenomenological research is concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world (*Lebenswelt* or life-world) is constituted, the aim, writes Schwandt (2003, p. 297), is to grasp how we come to interpret our own and others' actions as meaningful and to reconstruct the genesis of the objective meanings of action in the intersubjective communication of individuals in the social *Lebenswelt*. To accomplish this reconstruction, indexicality (understanding that meaning is dependent on context) and reflexivity (understanding that utterances are not only *about* something, but also *do* something) could be used.

Phenomenological Methodology

The phenomenological method involves three distinct phases of contemplation or exploration, namely epoche, phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation.

Epoche

Willig (2001) describes epoche as the suspension of presuppositions and assumptions, judgements and interpretations in order to become aware of what we are confronted with. Moustakas (1994) explains that phenomena are revisited in a new way, freshly, naively and in a wide open sense, in a way that requires us to learn to see what is before us without using our ordinary way of perceiving and judging.

Phenomenological Reduction

In phenomenological reduction we become aware of what makes experience what it is. Varela (1998, p. 34) describes it as follows:

> [P]henomenology aims its movement towards a fresh look at experience in a specific gesture of reflection or phenomenological reduction. This approach or gesture changes the habitual ways in which we relate to our lived world, which does not mean to consider a different world, but to consider the present one otherwise. This gesture transforms a naïve or unexamined experience into a reflective or second order one.

The researcher takes a step back to describe and examine every experience – including physical and experiential features. In other words, he or she looks at the “what” of experience. In reduction each experience is

considered in its singularity, in and for itself. Here we derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, from the vantage point of an open self, writes Moustakas (1994). Phenomenological reduction does not involve an absolute absence of presuppositions, but instead a critical analysis of one's presuppositions (Kvale, 1996).

Varela (1998) deconstructs phenomenological reduction into four aspects:

- Attitude: Reduction

  An attitude of reduction is the essential starting point. It can be defined as similar to doubt: a sudden, transient suspension of beliefs about what is being examined. It is self-induced and seeks to be resolved. Thinking is sought to turn from a habitual, content-oriented direction to the arising of thoughts themselves. To mobilise an attitude of reduction, one could start by noticing automatic thought patterns, taking a reflective distance from them and focusing on their source.

- Intimacy: Intuition

  The result of reduction is that a field of experience appears less encumbered and more present – Varela (1998) says it is as if the distance separating the experiencer and the world is dispelled. Intimacy or immediacy is the beginning of the process where the mind intuitively considers multiple possibilities of the phenomenon as it appears. Louchakova (2005) hightlights the emphasis on the "knowledge by presence" in being aware of how the concepts studied

relate to one's own lived experience as well as the use of direct intuition in the training of a phenomenological researcher.

- Description: Invariants

  Intuitive evidence must be inscribed or translated into communicable items. Varela (1998) speaks of "an embodiment that shapes and incarnates what we experience". This accentuates that the researcher needs to be aware of the various ways that an experience can be described – the researcher needs to find a shared language with the participant during the interview and then later translate the story into the study as accurately as possible.

- Training: Stability

  Varela (1998) accentuates pragmatics – "sustained training and steady learning are key". He states that one needs to cultivate the skill to stabilise and deepen one's capacity for attentive bracketing (suspending judgement) and intuition along with the skill of producing illuminating descriptions in order to mature the style of systematic study.

Imaginative Variation

In imaginative variation we focus on "how" the experience is made possible – here the focus is on the structure or context, and this could include time, space and social relationships (Willig, 2001).

Polkinghorne (1989, p. 46) describes the general format of phenomenological research by psychologists as a three-step procedure where the researcher must do the following:

- Gather a number of naïve descriptions from people who are having or have had the experience under investigation;
- Engage in a process of analysing these descriptions so that the researcher comes to an understanding of the constituents or common elements that make the experience what it is;
- Produce a research report that gives an accurate, clear and articulate description of an experience. The reader of the report should come away with the feeling that "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that".

Later in this chapter I describe in more detail how I applied this procedure in the data analysis.

Data Gathering

Selection of Participants

Although Kvale's (1996) term "co-researchers" sounded suitably postmodernist, I decided to use "participants" instead. This is because, although I am very aware that our conversations were co-constructed stories, I also believe that a true co-researcher's name will be on the cover of the manuscript.

A non-random sample of participants who were prepared to share information-rich experiences of forgiveness was selected. Suitable participants were defined as people who had worked with the process of forgiveness and who were able to share their experiences as we co-constructed a story of forgiveness in the interviews. In searching for appropriate participants, various clinical psychologists who work with the concept of forgiveness in a workshop context were requested to distribute a request for people who were willing to talk about their experience of forgiveness.

The major limitation of phenomenological researching forgiveness is the retrospective and subjective nature of the study. The question also arises as to how reliable the reports are when the process might have taken place years previously (Malcolm & Greenberg, 2000). For this reason participants who had had recent experiences of forgiveness were chosen. This is also in line with the list of skills and attributes that Adrian van Kaam (Polkinghorne, 1989) recommends one should seek in selecting participants to interview:

- The experience of the situation under investigation at a relatively recent date
- The ability to express themselves linguistically with relative ease
- The ability to sense and express inner feelings and emotions without shame and inhibitions
- The ability to sense and express the organic experiences that accompany these feelings

- A spontaneous interest in their experience, and
- The ability to report what was going on within themselves.

The aim was to look at the process of forgiving and the implications of forgiving without having a content of extreme violence or suffering that would detract from the study. In looking for participants to interview, people were therefore not chosen on grounds of the severity of the hurt they had suffered.

Pilot Study Interviews

Before the interviews used in this study were conducted, I interviewed two participants as part of a pilot study. Although I had familiarised myself with the literature on interpersonal forgiveness prior to interviewing, the purpose of doing a pilot study was to feel more confident when conducting the actual interviews. Kvale (1996) suggests that such pilot interviews enable the researcher to practise and that his or her ability to create safe and stimulating interactions will increase.

These interviews were also transcribed and I reread them several times as I prepared to conduct the final interviews. This experience made me decide to conduct semi-structured interviews instead of using the almost completely open, free interviewing style that I had used in the pilot interviews. When I later saw that Kvale (1996, p. 147) labels the possible challenging roles that participants play as the “Tacit Oyster”, the “Nonstop Talker”, the “Intellectualizing Academician” or the “Power Player” who tries to take control

of the interview, I truly understood what he meant! I felt much more prepared after the pilot study.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews with semi-structured questions were used to document the various research participants' unique experiences. Kvale (1996) describes the qualitative research interview as a construction site of knowledge and states that the knowledge generated by interviews is related to five features of a postmodern construction of knowledge, namely the conversational, the narrative, the linguistic, the contextual and the interrelational nature of knowledge.

An empathic, interactional and inter-subjective stance was adopted towards the participants. Descriptions from them provided the researcher with specific instances from which to tease out the structure of consciousness that constituted the experience. The production of phenomenological protocols requires that the co-researchers' awareness be redirected towards their own experiencing, states Polkinghorne (1989). For this reason, interviews are preferred to written questionnaires, where responses tend to be "distant and highly reflective". The goal of the qualitative interview is to obtain access to qualitative descriptions of the participants' life-world (the world as it is encountered in everyday life and given in direct and immediate experience, independent of and prior to explanations) (Kvale, 1996).

Ethical Considerations

To protect the welfare and rights of the participants, their anonymity was assured – people participated in the study only after I had obtained their voluntary and informed consent, as suggested by Durrheim and Wassenaar (2002). The participants were informed of the nature of the study beforehand and were assured that they could cease to participate at any time during the process. I tape-recorded interviews only after participants had consented to this. Confidentiality was assured and the interviews remain anonymous. The participants were informed of the "findings" once the study had been concluded. The results and the transcripts were shown to the participants before the dissertation was submitted so that they could verify that their stories had, in fact been accurately portrayed. This process is described at the end of Chapter 5 under "Comments on Comments".

Reliability and Validity

The traditional criteria of methodological adequacy and validity were formulated by positivism – the philosophical, theoretical and methodological perspective that justified the use of quantitative methods in the social sciences for most of the twentieth century (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 487). Positivism sought to formulate "universal laws" in order to explain actual or real events. Here "reliability" or the stability of methods and findings is an indicator of "validity" or the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings. Thus positivism answered the validity question in terms of reliability, where reliable (repeatable, generalisable) methods were valid.

Qualitative research relies on a different science of design and defines quality research differently than does quantitative research. Eisner (2003) states that the term valid (as opposed to invalid) refers to something that is unimpaired, well-grounded, justified or strong – and that that is what qualitative researchers strive for: to create work that is unimpaired, well-grounded, justified or strong. Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999) adjust the terminology and argue that instead of validity, quality research should aim for the credibility of findings, which depends on how convincing and believable they are. Instead of reliability, the goal is dependability, which refers to the degree to which the reader can be convinced that the findings did occur as portrayed.

Krahn and Putnam (2003, p. 189) argue that as the frequency of qualitative research increases, there is a corresponding and pragmatic need for established criteria by which to evaluate the rigour of research methods. The primary concept that Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose is *trustworthiness,* a concept broadly analogous to reliability and validity in quantitative studies. They use the following four criteria to determine trustworthiness in a framework that incorporates, but that is more detailed than, Durrheim and Wassenaar's (1999) description above:

- Credibility

  This is the confidence in the procedures and findings and is achieved by establishing that the information being reported accurately reflects the informants' experiences. It requires going back to the informants

and determining whether the summarised information is consistent with their experiences.

- Transferability

  This is the extent to which findings are limited to their present context or are transferable to other groups or contexts. The goal is to provide the necessary descriptions to enable conclusions to be made about whether transfer is a possibility. This is achieved by making the database available.

- Dependability

  This is the extent of agreement in categorising or coding the data or the reliability of the study's conclusions. The goal is to determine the acceptability of the process of inquiry and the accuracy of the product from that inquiry. It is achieved when the researchers demonstrate that the findings could be repeated in the same context and with the same participants.

- Confirmability

  This is the ability of the procedures to be formally audited and confirmed by independent review. The goal is that another researcher should be able to see the logic the researcher used to come to the final conclusions. This is made possible by keeping an audit trail using transcripts, field notes, observations and a journal of personal reactions throughout the study so that the confirmability of the findings can be demonstrated.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) later also add *authenticity*, which touches on fairness, ontological authenticity (enlarges one's personal constructions),

educative authenticity (leads to improved understanding of the constructs of others), catalytic authenticity (stimulates action) and tactical authenticity (empowers action) as criteria of qualitative research.

Holliday (2002) summarises the sources of validity in quantitative research as the need to tell the reader of the research details of the population (in samples), the sort of questions asked, which statistics were used, the composition of groups (in experiments), which variables were being included and excluded and what groups were exposed to in experiments. To achieve validity in qualitative research, the researcher needs to tell the reader of the research the reason for the choice of social setting (how it represents the research topic in its role in society; how feasible/accessible; how substantial), choice of research activities (how they suit the social setting; how appropriate to researcher-subject relationships; how a strategy was formed), and choice of themes and focuses (how they emerged; why they are significant; and how they are representative of the social setting).

Today there is a widespread awareness of the social construction of reality. This, as well as reflexivity, has ironically led to a radical antifunctionalist position in terms of which knowledge, even the knowledge process, is without grounding and without authority. In other words, “knowledge” is no longer the criterion, because “knowledge claims” are based on various assumptions and “assumptionless science” is not possible, argue Altheide and Johnson (1994). What has changed is the purpose of research and the standards for assessing the purpose. Research is no longer coupled

with knowledge, but has been given multiple choices and is defined accordingly. Altheide and Johnson disagree with the view that an account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise. They believe that validity will depend on the reader and so suggest a narrower conception of validity that is tied more to the researcher/design/academic audience(s).

The frame of this study is an ethical and humanistic one rather than conventional scientific parameters of idealism or realism.

Data Analysis

Polkinghorne (1989, p. 55) points out that three of the prominent phenomenological researchers, Giorgi, Colaizzi and Van Kaam, all employ a series of similar steps. These are also followed in this research:

- The original protocols (interviews that have been transcribed) are divided into units based on the different aspects of the topic discussed
- The units are then transformed by the researcher into meanings that are expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts
- These transformations are tied together to make a general description of the experience.

Moustakas (1994, pp. 120–121) modified the more detailed Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data as follows:

1) Listing and Preliminary Grouping

   List every expression relevant to the experience (Horizonalization)

2) Reduction and Elimination: To determine the Invariant Constituents

   Test each expression for two requirements:

   a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient condition for understanding it?

   b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.

3) Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents:

   Cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label. The clustered and labelled constituents are the core themes of the experience.

4) Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application:

   Validation

   Check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant.

   - Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcription?
   - Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?
   - If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the co-researcher's experience and should be deleted.

5) Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher an Individual Textural Description of the experience. Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview.
6) Construct for each co-researcher an Individual Structural Description of the experience based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation.
7) Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes.

From the Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole.

These are the steps employed in this study to analyse the transcribed interviews in order to generate or construct a composite description in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter the goal has been to make the reader part of the thinking that led to the choice of research design. Although originating in the 1800s, the phenomenological method still has a lot to contribute today.

Moustakas (1994, p. 65) reminds us that

> no experience is ever finished or exhausted and that new and fresh meanings are forever in the world and in us … there is no limit to our understanding … immersing ourselves in what is before us, keeps us forever awake, alive, and connected with what is and with what matters in life.

In the next chapter the analysis of the actual interviews is presented.

Chapter 5

Interpretation of Stories of Forgiveness

The stupid neither forgive nor forget;

the naïve forgive and forget;

the wise forgive but do not forget

(Szasz, 1973, p. 51)

Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the three participants to the reader – and if Thomas Szasz was right, my participants were, in fact, wise.

For the sake of confidentiality, the full transcriptions of our conversations are not included. Pages of transcribed material also tend to appear fragmented and I wanted, instead, to present more integrated stories of forgiveness. I have quoted liberally from the conversations we had, in an attempt to re-create the lived experiences of forgiveness. Of course, these final stories were co-created between the participants and myself as we spoke about how they had experienced forgiveness in their lives. This chapter is then also the story I created from reading and re-reading the transcripts of our conversations, and is by no means the only possible story. From a second

order cybernetic perspective, I, as the researcher, am inextricably linked to what I observe and am, moreover, part of the meaning making (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

Initially I derived meaning units and themes from the transcribed interviews. This was done by reading and re-reading the interviews repeatedly until I started seeing a pattern of themes. I colour coded the different themes in the different transcripts and then integrated these themes in order to create a description of the "what", or the content, of forgiveness. I called this the textural description (a phenomenological term) of forgiveness.

By reflecting on this textural description of forgiveness, I then constructed a description of the process or the "how" whereby forgiveness was achieved and called it the structural description (another phenomenological term). This step in phenomenological research is similar to looking at an experience from a meta-perspective.

The results in this phenomenological study are called the composite textural-structural description (once again a phenomenological term). The meaning of interpersonal forgiveness is integrated into this description, and in it I also explore to what extent this description is mirrored in the literature.

This chapter lies at the heart of my dissertation, and I shall begin by giving a brief sketch of the three participants who agreed to have

conversations with me about their experiences of forgiveness. Without them, this study would not have been possible.

Participants in the Study

As explained in Chapter 4, three participants were chosen based on their having recently experienced forgiveness as “useful” (as I framed it). I assured them that the full transcripts would not be included in the dissertation and that, in order to further ensure confidentiality, I would use pseudonyms. I made it clear that they could decide to stop participating in my study at any time and that the complete transcripts of the interviews would not be included in the dissertation.

Anna

Anna is in her 30s, married and the mother of two children. She is a qualified scientist and also has an MBA. She is the eldest child of four children, born after her parents immigrated to South Africa from Greece. The family are close and see each other often. Her husband is also Greek and used to work for her father. Anna’s story of forgiveness started after the death of her first baby. It is a story in which, after mourning her child, she managed to reframe his death and forgive her parents.

Catherine

Catherine is in her late 40s, unmarried, and a successful human resources manager. After her birth her biological parents' marriage was quite unstable, so her mother's eldest sister raised her for the first nine months of her life. Another sister of her mother then adopted her. (Catherine referred to her biological mother as Bea or her "birth mother" in our conversation.) When she was eight years old, Catherine found out that she had been adopted. At the age of 16 she moved in with her biological family as they seemed more liberal and wealthy, but was very unhappy there. As soon as she turned 21, she moved back to her adoptive family. Though she has been in several serious relationships, Catherine has not married or had children.

For Catherine, forgiveness centred around the adoption and, specifically, forgiving her mother for giving her away.

Jonathan

Jonathan is in his early 50s, married and a qualified clinical psychologist. He works as a therapist and a corporate consultant. He was raised in the Jewish tradition and is well-versed in world religions. He accentuates the spiritual component of his work and sees forgiveness as part of this.

For Jonathan forgiveness started as a personal process of self-forgiveness which changed the way he later experienced a violent hijacking.

Themes From the Interviews

The themes that started forming a pattern as I read and re-read the transcripts of the conversations about forgiveness were: emotional discomfort; blame and responsibility; redefinition of relationship or event; forgiveness as process; and change or forgiveness incorporated. This is part of a description that I as researcher constructed as I selected the themes that stood out for me through the lens through which I view the world. Another researcher with another world-view might have highlighted different themes.

In order to highlight what was said during my conversations with the three participants about forgiveness, I have used a different format and font to distinguish this material from the rest of the dissertation.

Emotional Discomfort

The theme of emotional discomfort kept recurring in the interviews of all three participants. They spoke of feeling hurt, angry, abandoned, alone and guilty. What also stood out was that they felt that the issue was unresolved – they reported feeling uncomfortable or having a feeling of stuckness. An excerpt from the conversation with Catherine illustrates this well:

> ***Catherine****: …very emotional, very, lots of tears or anger…I just felt stuck! You know, it's the sense of stuckness, and I thought, no, no, maybe I'm not healing or moving forward because I haven't healed properly. I did not belong anywhere*

and (I felt) the abandonment. ... We would go and visit Bea (birth mother) together and I was always like, what shall I call her, I can't call her mother, couldn't call her Mom and I did not know what to call her, and up until meeting her and telling her this, I had sort of processed beforehand that I would like to tell her that I need to call her Bea, so that I could give her a name and a place and a home in my life sort of thing. So, I told her at that breakfast, from now on I am going to call you Bea, but she said no, I'm your mother, and I said, no, you're not, I said you gave birth to me but you gave me to your sister and that's my mother and I'm going to call you Bea from now on. I said it doesn't put you in any less of a place in my life, it's just helping me to make sense of who I am.

***Researcher**: What did you call her before that?*

***Catherine**: Nothing, I would like skirt around it. I'd go like you or…it was always awkward.…It felt uncomfortable because it was not finished, it was like swimming inside of me. …[I] came to this T-junction, I call it, that [one] path is no longer open and you've got to find another, so it's like, it's almost that stuckness, but it's like, this is not okay anymore, not a moment longer will I tolerate whatever it is…and forgiveness and healing is all very much going forward.*

Anna's perspective is that her illness and the fact that her baby would not have died had she not had lupus forced her to take stock of her life and in that process she examined her relationships with her parents and the view she previously had of herself.

***Anna**: But lupus is an interesting disease, you know, it makes you, I think it makes you sit up and pay attention, you're forced to. And that's what happened, everything came to a halt, work, the whole lot came to a halt and it was a whole grieving process, it took me a long time, it took me years. …So I came out of*

hospital, it was like, wow, how much more do you need, it's like the universe saying, okay, are you going to listen now.

After the death of her baby she was angry with the doctors and angry at herself for having followed their advice:

> ***Anna**: I listened to them, which was a stupid thing to have done. Because I just, the guilt that comes in later, because when you go through a loss like that, you begin to analyse absolutely everything. So he was born and he died four days later and it was the biggest shock of my life because everything came to a standstill, it's not what you imagine to happen. And so life changed very abruptly, but the process of actually adapting was horrific because the guilt set in…my wheels completely (came off) and my world came to an end. …You have no idea, from being this very driven person to absolutely nothing, I sat at home and I cried, I cried and cried and cried for months.*

Her second pregnancy was very difficult, and she described it as follows:

> ***Anna**: So he was born at 38 weeks and you can imagine how stressed he was as a child and I think the mother had a huge role to play, I mean it was a really non-calm pregnancy. He was born, and I was depressed, that's when the depression, the realisation of what had actually happened, and I have this new child, I actually hadn't finished grieving for the first, and now I had a new child who was as stressed as anything and screamed his head off all day. When he wasn't sleeping, I was anxious because I was so exhausted and when he was sleeping, I was actually afraid he might die so I used to sit and watch him, so I never got rest.*

Here Anna's sense of isolation is clearly evident. Although she is married, although her entire family live in the same city as she, and although she is able to afford a night nurse, she still chooses to sit by her baby's bed alone at night.

Jonathan describes how being angry and hurt after a hurtful event can make it impossible to consider forgiving the person who caused the hurt. He then focuses on the emotional discomfort and explores the hurt more fully.

> ***Jonathan****: I was struggling with a personal issue with somebody where I wasn't able to forgive…I just can't do it and I'm in victim and I'm wounded and I'm angry and hurt.*
>
> *I look at when I work with people, and I see that they can't forgive, and in myself, when I can't forgive there's always one reason, there's anger and the anger is a secondary emotion. I have never, I have looked for years to find a primary anger and there isn't in my experience. It's always secondary and there's always a wound or a fear and the fear is there because of a previous wound anyway. So, if I can't forgive, it's because I haven't healed the wound, so I heal the wound in myself. And I am not saying it is a rule, but very often anger blocks the forgiveness of [the] other so a person cannot forgive [the] other.*

Blame and Responsibility

This theme was very prevalent. For all three participants blame seemed to be something they used to make sense of what happened. This

prevented them from doing much about what they felt angry or hurt about. It seems as if taking responsibility mobilised them to take a more active role in making new meaning of the event in their lives.

For Catherine being adopted was the root cause of many of the things she felt dissatisfied with in her life.

> ***Catherine****: …it was about her and giving me away (pause) and it encompassed all the things, I remember (long pause) it was because of that that I never got married, and never had children etc. etc. and all the sort of things that I had expected to experience in life and hadn't, and I wasn't in a permanent relationship and so the whole lot came out. It felt like it was about my adoption and it was her giving me away, but it was all the struggle through my life that I sort of had (long pause) starting with the adoption.*

Anna felt so powerless that she blamed the doctors for misdiagnosing her symptoms, herself for listening to them, her body for failing her, her parents for not taking care of her when she started having symptoms and later even for raising her to be so driven and such a high achiever.

> ***Anna****: I really believed at that point that I had actually been responsible for the death of my child because it was my body that had given up.*
>
> *I had a lot of stuff to deal with myself and actually tried to be less harsh on myself, that's the big thing because you know that it's your body that's given up, I got sick before and it's not your husband to blame, it's you. You do begin and I did go through that blaming everybody else to start with, everybody else was responsible except me.*

***Researcher**: Who did you blame?*

***Anna**: I always blamed my father for the way he raised us, because he was very hard on us, he was very driven, he was a very driven man and he forced us all to be very driven, so the stress levels I always attributed to him. At the end of the day we had a choice and yet it took me years to figure it out, you know ten years down the road, the realisation, I can't tell you when it actually happened, but he actually had nothing to do with it. I chose to actually just adhere, I could have been a non-compliant child and I could have done things my own way but I chose to live by his rules. And I think you do when you're little but when you're in your twenties, you have your own say in your life and so I didn't have to go that route, I chose to go that route. It's what I knew and what I was most comfortable with because it's what you know…*

***Researcher**: It seems as though this whole experience made you first kind of look at people around you and your father specifically?*

***Anna**: Yes, he was a big culprit and then I blamed my mother, because she was the one who sat by and watched all of this and never did anything. That was the other big thing that came out of this, it's funny how you see people are, it's okay to, like my father, he was always the head of the house and constantly pushed us but my mother was compliant, she just agreed. By not saying anything, she agreed. And she was, she always played the victim, shame she was forlorn and she was, not abused, but she was pushed into a situation, but at the end of the day it was her choice.*

And as it is for all of us, it was our choice.

And then she got lambasted, not…and then we would see her as an accomplice, she was definitely an accomplice, she didn't, she never…and the thing that killed me, excuse the terminology, but what really worried me was that they could see that I was getting ill, and they did not do anything. When you see that your child is stressed, surely you try to minimise the stress levels, they never did because they believed it made you achieve.

Everyone has to go through it because forgiveness of self and forgiveness of everything and everyone around you as well, I mean you can't, how can you be without it, I mean, I think we all at some point blame, blame, try and find somebody else to blame, blame self.

Researcher*: That sounds as though you are also seeing it as a way of claiming responsibility and empowering yourself.*

Anna*: Yes, everybody else, and even blaming yourself because you just say you are disempowered, 100% – you can do nothing, but the minute you realise, and blame self, the minute that you decide that this isn't the way it's going to be, it's amazing what it does to you – you realise that you're a 100% responsible for where you're at. It was a wonderful experience realising that I was the one who actually caused all of this, I mean I really was, I mean I had drawn this into my life, the lupus, the death of my first child and it came as a huge lesson, a huge gift. This huge gift was that, to wake me up to the fact that I had to be kinder to Anna and not lambaste her all the time, she was fine, I'm perfect the way I am.*

I had chosen this really difficult path. I think it is a very difficult path. For any parent to bury a child is an absolute nightmare, even if it is four days old. And I had to learn not to be so hard on myself.

Anna shifts from blaming people around her to taking responsibility. She does this by reframing events: from seeing herself as a victim in a world where bad things can happen at any time and doctors are supposed to prevent death but do not, to finding meaning in difficult events. She even reframes the death of her child as a lesson that she was meant to learn.

Jonathan, perhaps because of his training, uses the word "victim" and also talks about blame.

> ***Jonathan**: … we, I, hold on to the victim position (pause) really difficult to get out of the victim position.*
>
> *I call it the blame culture, it's a blame culture and I still catch myself doing it… I lash out! Why? Because there's this pain, because I am not going to get what I want, I can't control it.*

Shift to Empathy

When the participants were able to feel empathy, they seemed to be able to reframe an event or start making a new meaning of what had happened. For Catherine this happened when she wrote a letter to herself. When her birth mother, Bea, finally told her about the events surrounding her birth and the circumstances that made her decide to have Catherine adopted, she was able to respond differently.

> ***Catherine**: I was able to, to absolutely hear her whole story and resonate with her story and also have huge compassion for her and what she, and the decisions she had to make and so on.*

Anna had previously spent her whole life being angry with her father for preventing her from studying art or music. She felt that she had never had a choice about being a high achiever and that she had been driven to excel by her parents. However, re-examining her childhood and thinking about her parents' background made her see what had happened through a very

different lens. In fact, she ended up thinking that she would probably have done exactly what they had!

> ***Anna**: So I was eternally grateful for the scientific exposure because it's definitely held me in good stead but I've always swayed towards the arts and the combination is, I think, fantastic, if you can. So there have been the plus sides. My father, in many ways, might have thought he was doing me, a great service. He never wanted his kids to ever suffer in life, you know he comes out of extreme poverty, I could understand where he came from and that was where the forgiveness kicked in. I realised that he only did this because of his own fears, he came out of an incredibly poor background so when you're incredibly poor, you don't want your kids ever to be that so any child that wanted to study the arts and music, which is what I wanted to do, would be a no no. He'd reject that outright and force them to go another route so that wherever they went in the world, they would be able to earn a living. That was his entire argument, he said I want you to be able to earn a living.*
>
> *And so I understood where it came from and the minute I understood why he was thinking that way, things lightened up, I could understand how my mother was thinking, I could understand how my father was thinking, because she came out of the same environment.*
>
> ***Researcher**: It seems as if you could start that process with your parents by kind of almost putting yourself in their shoes and understanding where they were coming from, when they emigrated, and how hard it was for them.*
>
> ***Anna**: Absolutely, I probably would have done the same.*

Jonathan also describes being caught (no pun intended) in a challenging relationship some months after being hijacked with a landowner who, in fact, has more power than he does, and being stuck until he sees the situation differently.

> ***Jonathan**: … and thinking I can't let go of this stuff of mine, nothing is working, I cannot do it. And then I thought: Can Mr X help being what he is? I, with all of my background, and my training and my experiences and the gifts of the masters and the people I have met, I can't do it just driving along the road, he has had probably no exposure to this, how on earth can he do it and just seeing, I kind of get a landscape of the suffering of humanity, and how most of us, most of the time can do nothing. It's like we are just trapped and lost in our suffering and our pain, and our victim consciousness. Entrapment in each other's stuff. And that really helps me to…to forgive, and to honour and to forgive what I am, and to forgive myself.*

Forgiveness as Process

Forgiveness was experienced as a process that unfolded as the participants grappled with a difficult situation. Catherine found that preparing herself before working on forgiveness and then writing about it in the form of letters (which she subsequently burnt) to various people helped her, while Anna said that writing in her journal made her explore issues that she had not thought of previously. Reading stories about other people's experiences of forgiveness inspired Jonathan in his own journey to forgiveness. He also spoke about corresponding with Aba Gayle, who founded the Hope Foundation after her daughter, Catherine Blount, was murdered. Thinking, reading and writing about forgiveness, or their processes of forgiveness, took time and therefore I describe the experience of forgiveness as process.

***Catherine**: Prepare myself psychologically for it. So, talk myself through how I'm going to do it, what I'm going to do, and I let it just float around inside of me, be part of me, probably in terms of time, once I've made the decision, I let it go for a good week at least before I get there.*

… so in my own journey of learning about myself and becoming more (pause), getting to the place where I am now, which is a really nice place, no, because we go back into the whole behaviour often, or more often than we would like.

***Anna**: So it was forgiveness of parents and it was forgiveness of self but the forgiveness of self is an ongoing process because I do seem to be quite hard on myself, I think it's an ongoing thing. I'm aware of it, when you're aware of it, you can always help.*

I must tell you, thinking about you coming today, I didn't know when it actually happened, I think it is a process – and I think it's an ongoing process. I don't think I've ever fully, I've never got it 100% right, have I. I definitely got a different view on it, and I see him, I see him for what he really was for me, he was a huge lesson for me.

Jonathan found various people's stories about forgiveness very inspirational and used some of these to work on his own issues. He reflects about how different people experience the process of forgiving at varying paces:

***Jonathan:** …what fascinates me about her story, she took nine years to come out of the darkness, and you know what occurred to me recently was, if she had been able to love herself in her rage and her woundedness, I think it might have taken nine months or nine weeks.*

However, even with all his experience in using forgiveness, he acknowledges:

> ***Jonathan:*** *…there were bits that were not done…there you go: I am a work in progress, as much as I would like to be otherwise.*

Relationship or Event Redefined

After forgiveness finally took place, it seems as if the participants all experienced a redefinition of sorts. For Catherine the way she thought about her adoption changed. The experience also helped her to put better boundaries in place and so she related to family members in a more productive way.

> ***Catherine****: You don't forget the experience, but the experience has less emotion attached to it, I think, after you've forgiven.*
>
> *I'm in a place now, where I can be with all of them, absolutely no problem and I can be clear, I'm very clear about what's okay and what's not okay for me to take on. So I've put boundaries in place for myself and how I handle things.*

After forgiving, Anna no longer ruminated about her baby:

> ***Anna****: Now I'm not obsessed about being buried next to him because I know that's not what's important.*

And this enabled her to focus more on her two living children more. It seems she gained a lot of insight into the energy required to maintain a relationship fraught with unresolved issues:

> ***Anna****: It's, I think, probably quite simplistic to only see it the way I'm going to say it now, but I wonder if there was a level of kind of, when you blame someone, you're almost more enmeshed, whereas when you forgive, you're at peace with them, and that's my view now.*

Even though Jonathan believed that forgiveness did not necessarily include telling the other person that he or she had been forgiven, he cautioned against creating a kind of utopia where a person makes him or herself vulnerable to a repeat offence after forgiving an offender.

> ***Jonathan****: …and the danger is that you will forgive and then behave as not still there, this guy raped again, he was convicted recently, you heard about it. So,…people, people feel so good when they forgive that they become filled with the illusion that they have healed the other person, whereas Aba Gayle, the American woman that I correspond with, whose daughter was murdered, Catherine Blount, she is friends with Douglas Mickey (her daughter's murderer)…they cry together, they laugh together, she is a close, close friend of his and he is still sitting in prison 15 years later. For Aba Gayle, Douglas Mickey has changed, so I haven't met her, but my hunch is she is probably right.*

Lasting Change or Forgiveness Incorporated Into Way of Life

The participants in this study all reported that having forgiven, in a certain context in their lives, influenced how they experienced certain other events or challenging relationships. It seems that this experience enabled them to find another way of relating – not only in the experience they discussed, but also in general.

> ***Catherine****: Forgiveness and healing is all very much of going forward…it's like you close those doors and create space for something new to come into your life.*
>
> ***Researcher****: I wonder how, if you look back now, how all of that, the forgiving process – how would you say that has changed you?*
>
> ***Catherine****: I can tell you exactly how it's changed me, it changed me in, I don't, very seldom, unless it's actually something that needs to be healed, do I take things incredibly personally.*
>
> *My resilience, my bouncing back-ness is much quicker than it used to be so, so it like hurt and I say, okay, I need to see what I need to do with that, so I take that separately to process, and so I can pick up things, and process them more easily, more quickly. I bounce back much more quickly and easily, I stay in, what I call "consolation" for much longer periods of time, I'm more peaceful inside of myself, physically that peaceful so that when hard things are happening to people around me, I can be compassionate and not be…what's the word I'm looking for?…like "involved" or, or "take it personally", you know, take it to heart myself.*

And yet I can still be compassionate. It's an odd thing and I, I sort of over time needed to process that and say is it because I am blocking off the feelings so that I don't feel it and that I can do the work that I do, or am I genuinely compassionate but able to see it from the outside in.

After hearing her mother's version of what happened at the time of the adoption, Catherine was not only able to see the events from another perspective, but here she seems to describe being able, as well, to take a meta-perspective in general.

For Anna it seems as if relating to others also became easier and she feels that she has become a very different kind of mother after forgiving her parents for their style of parenting. As she had always been driven and perfectionistic in general, she probably would also have been a parent with high expectations – of herself as a mother and perhaps also of her children. Yet after this experience of seeing her parents and her childhood differently, she is a more relaxed mother and even accepts that she will not be the perfect mother, that her children will complain about her as she did about her parents, and that that is fine!

Researcher*: What changed after you forgave your parents?*

Anna*: Everyone else seemed more approachable – I become, not that aggressive, and not that, out there…I became more in touch with the people who reach (out to) me. (Pause) I must tell you that I think the huge wake up was her, my little one. The death of my child was one thing, I think it started the ball rolling, but the little girl, that whole experience, with the brain, was just like the ultimate wake up – because it opened up the other side. It showed life for what it*

really is, it's not a closed circle, in a very real way. I mean how more real can you get than an immediate experience.

***Researcher**: Would you say forgiving changed you?*

***Anna**: Definitely, I think I would have been had I had children and carried on, I would have been a very non-present mother, I would have been out there. (Pause) Parents – and kids – always have their complaints. I say to them: You'll complain about me and I complained about my mother, and you'll have some issue. You learn to become very tolerant when something like this happens. And maybe only then is it possible to be more kind to yourself, if you can be compassionate to others…*

And that's another thing (I've learnt); going with what's come, trusting that it's all going to be okay. (Pause) What I thought I needed and what I actually did need were two different things.

And it was trusting, just trusting that there was something greater than self, that's been the most awesome part of it, the understanding that you are a part of something so much greater and yet you are that greatness. That it all works together and you are given these promptings and guided into places, meeting people.

At the end of telling her story, it becomes clear that she now makes a very different meaning of the way she sees not only herself, but also her place in the world.

When Jonathan spoke about forgiving the people who attacked and hijacked him, he also mentioned not only relating differently to people he knew, but also taking things less personally in general.

***Researcher**: How did that affect your life in other ways?*

***Jonathan**: It helped me to forgive more in my relationships…what it's done is it's helped me to honour and forgive people more and more and to let go of stuff and to just smile at them and if I do get hooked and I do get into woundedness with somebody, I let it go in ways I never could before…*

Out of that, I just knew that out of the soul work that I had done with that anger and this forgiveness stuff, I wanted to create a workshop around forgiveness and primarily I wanted to do it with forgiveness itself because I know that often we need to forgive ourselves first before we forgive the other person.

So in this case, the experience of forgiveness inspired him to develop a workshop where he uses his training as a therapist to offer other people the possibility of transforming their experiences, as he did.

Individual Textural Descriptions

Here the content or "what" of the stories the participants told is recreated. Of course, the stories were co-constructed in our talking about forgiveness, and other questions, which I did not ask, would have influenced the conversation in a different way and so created another version of the stories.

Catherine's Experience of Forgiveness

For Catherine, the experience of forgiveness was something she felt she had chosen because she was working on herself. Although highly functioning in her career and socially, she regretted not being in an intimate relationship. As she explored this issue, she decided to forgive her previous partners as a way of finding closure in the various relationships. This was a very positive experience for her, but she still felt that there was something unfinished. She realised that not having forgiven her biological mother for having her adopted was the one thing in her life that was holding her back, and this led her to explore her experience of being adopted by her mother's sister when she was nine months old.

Being adopted had challenged Catherine to find a sense of belonging. When she moved from her adoptive family's house to her birth family at the age of 16, it was an act of rebellion and a search for belonging, although not at all thought through. In the process she not only hurt her adopted family's feelings, but was miserable and felt unable to verbalise it, much less try and change it. Only when she turned 21 did she "allow" herself to move out and work at repairing her relationships with her adoptive family by moving in with them again.

Although as an adult Catherine had contact with Bea, who was close to her sister (Catherine's adoptive mother), she was closer to her adoptive family. Her relationship with her birth mother was not always easy and often awkward – this was illustrated by the fact that she never knew what to call Bea. Writing a letter to her biological sister in her 20s helped her to redefine the boundaries and clarify where she belonged. She was able to redefine that relationship as one between cousins rather than siblings.

What helped her to start the process of forgiving her biological mother was writing a letter, which she describes as a very emotionally draining and healing experience. She burnt the pages (without showing them to her biological mother) and soon afterwards invited her adoptive mother for a visit. During this visit her adoptive mother rather unexpectedly told her about her own experience of adopting Catherine. Catherine had never heard this and it was a very positive experience. A few months later her biological sister tracked down their biological father in another country. Despite her biological siblings' excitement, Catherine felt clear that she had no desire to meet him or have a relationship with him. She seemed at this point to have finally found a sense of belonging and felt at peace. When her biological mother then invited her to visit and, for the first time, shared with her the events surrounding her birth and adoption, she felt touched and could listen to Bea with compassion for what she had gone through. Catherine felt that forgiving Bea had been a process, and that when she could listen to her version of events, she knew that she had completely processed her adoption and had forgiven her biological mother for having her adopted.

Anna's Experience of Forgiveness

Anna felt that she had been forced to address what was happening in her life. Her first baby had died and she was struggling to cope. She travelled abroad to scatter the ashes in the family cemetery and wanted to be buried next to him. When she fell pregnant for the second time, she was deeply afraid of going through the same experience. When Max was born at 38 weeks, he was a difficult baby who screamed and screamed for hours. Anna was exhausted and would sit and stare at him when he finally did sleep – too scared to leave him in case he stopped breathing. Then things seemed to deteriorate:

> ***Anna:*** *There were a whole lot of things that actually happened. It was interesting, after my son was born, Max was born – my second child – my husband was hijacked (pause) and you can imagine, he was three days old and my husband was hijacked, I actually couldn't believe this was happening, I mean terrible things happening to the family.*

The hijacking added to her feeling that she was unable to control events and accentuated her view of herself as a victim.

Six weeks after her third child was born, she was hospitalised and transferred to a psychiatric ward. She was diagnosed as suffering from cerebral lupus and hallucinated for six weeks. When she was discharged, she started making meaning of what had happened to her. This led her to explore

her relationship with her parents and the way she saw herself. She realised that she was making them responsible for her choice of university degree and for her tendency to put great stress on herself to achieve and often feeling guilty when she did not achieve her goals:

> ***Anna:*** *The guilt was the big thing to get over, guilt for everything because I was always, I always felt guilty about everything…guilty of not achieving enough, being good enough, guilty for sitting too long on the couch watching TV, guilty for not having got a first, having got a second or... it's ridiculous…stupid stuff. It's so stupid now – but then either way you're probably screwed because if you take care of yourself you also feel guilty about that – there's no out. So you feel stupid. Until you actually figure out what's happening here. I mean guilt is the first thing, then you realise how ridiculous you're actually being because it really isn't important, it's putting everything into its place. What is important and I think that's why this was so, I think, severe for me – it was…one day it was like this and by the next day I had no child, I came back home, no pregnancy, it was the biggest shock ever. It was an abrupt change from one day to the next. Amazing what that does to you – it really made me sit up and pay attention, how can it not?*

She had blamed her body for the death of her first baby and later she blamed her parents for not looking after her when she was presenting with symptoms of lupus:

> ***Anna:*** *And the thing that killed me, excuse the terminology, but what really worried me was that they could see that I was getting ill, and they did not do anything. When you see that your child is stressed, surely you try to minimise the stress levels. They never did because they believed it was healthy or helping, because it made you achieve. I, maybe the next generation of parents can see*

that that isn't the way to achieve. There are many ways to achieve, but that is not the way, because it wipes you out.

Anna emphasises that forgiveness was an ongoing process for her, rather than an instant moment or a single event:

> ***Anna:*** *And if you had to say to me, so how did you forgive (your)self, I don't know, I think it's a process, it's a realisation that you've got to claim responsibility. Probably the first step, yes, that not everybody else is to blame, so stop that now. See them for what they are and see them for that great gift that they have given you, because that's what it was, an understanding that actually parents behave like that. It was actually a gift because they pushed you into a situation where you have to face things and I think you come into a lifetime with that in mind, that's what you're going to learn, you're going to learn about self-worth and self-esteem and that's what you've chosen. So leave them alone, you know, they've done their job actually, haven't they? And they've got their own stuff, at the end of the day they've got their own issues, but don't we all.*

At the end of her experience of forgiving her parents and herself, Anna felt freed to live her life on her own terms instead of in the way she had felt her parents had dictated. She could view them with compassion and move on in her own life.

Jonathan's Experience of Forgiveness

In contrast to Anna, who was experiencing a crisis, Jonathan seemed to choose to work on an issue where he wanted to use forgiveness. He was

greatly inspired by two stories of people who had forgiven others for unthinkable hurt caused: David Chetlahe-Paladin, who was tortured severely during World War II, and Aba Gayle, a mother who forgave her daughter's murderer and many years later started visiting him in jail and later founded the Catherine Blount Foundation. Jonathan wanted to forgive himself for having harmed others. After working on what had happened for a few years, he visualised himself in the previous context and forgave himself for what he had done.

Following this experience, he was violently hijacked by two armed men, tied up and held at gunpoint in the veld. His life was threatened and he believed that he would be shot and killed at any moment. At first he felt absolute terror, but suddenly, as it was happening, he was able to forgive them and to feel a sense of peace.

These experiences profoundly influenced his relationships with other people. Jonathan reported that the experiences of forgiving himself and then forgiving the hijackers transformed him. When confronted by a particularly challenging landowner a few days before our interview, Jonathan was able to shift to a place of feeling empathy for a person that he would perhaps have felt mostly impotent rage at previously. After his experience of being hijacked he developed a workshop in which forgiveness is a central focus.

Structural Description of Forgiveness

This is a summary of *how* the journey of forgiveness was possible for the participants in this study, in that I have tried tracking the process they experienced.

In telling their stories, the participants related how forgiveness could only occur when they had acknowledged the hurt and accompanying emotional discomfort they had experienced.

Catherine mentioned putting healthier boundaries in place before she re-established contact with her biological family and was able to forgive her mother. What helped both Catherine and Anna to forgive was writing about their experiences. For Jonathan reading about other people's experiences was inspirational and when he later visualised the event that he wanted to forgive, he was able to do so.

All the participants reported finding ways of seeing the world through the eyes of the people they forgave. This shift to empathy seemed to make it possible for them to forgive. In the case of Anna she not only realised that her parents had meant well, she also realised that she would probably have acted in the same way, given similar circumstances. When Jonathan was confronted with Mr X, a powerful landowner, he moved from feeling disempowered and furious to realising that he had had the opportunity to be trained and to experience the world in a way that Mr X had not. This realisation helped him to "*forgive (Mr X) and to honour and forgive what I am"*, as he put it. Empathy

mobilised the participants to reframe what had happened. Catherine discovered information that she had not previously had – that she had been cared for by her Auntie Zia for the first nine months of her life. When Auntie Zia then told her about the experience, she felt “special” and taken care of instead of abandoned, as she had previously framed the experience. When her biological mother, Bea, told her about the time of her birth and adoption, she was able to hear her perspective and feel touched by what Bea must have gone through at the time.

Composite Textural-Structural Description of Forgiveness

Here the textural (content) and the structural (process) descriptions are combined to create an integrated description of forgiveness. Literature on forgiveness is referred to in order to illustrate the phases of participants' journeys.

In all three conversations the participants spoke about an unresolved event that left them feeling stuck and the strong emotions they experienced. The participants grappled with the emotional discomfort, acknowledged and revisited what had happened – Catherine and Anna both wrote about it extensively, while Jonathan read and re-read stories about forgiveness and visualised what had happened in his own life.

In reframing the various events, the participants created new meaning around the issue they were grappling with and this enabled them to shift from

a position of blame to one of taking responsibility. In a therapeutic context, blaming is associated with the victim position, where responsibility is abdicated and an uncomfortable feeling of stuckness is reported, often causing people to seek therapy. The shift from blaming to taking responsibility was essential in enabling the participants to ultimately forgive. This is echoed in the experience of several therapists mentioned in Chapter 2, such as Casarjian (1992), Luskin (2001) and Madanes (1990). Luskin helps people achieve this by reminding them of their goal of achieving peace and of what they are actually able to change.

After forgiving in the situations they discussed, the participants experienced forgiving in general as an ongoing process of changing perspective. This is confirmed by Casarjian (1992), who states that forgiveness is “a way of life that gradually transforms us from being helpless victims of our circumstances to being powerful and loving co-creators of our reality” (p. 25), and that it “is not about what we do, it is about the way we perceive people and circumstances. It is another way of looking at what is being, or has been, done” (p. 30).

What was especially salient from an interpersonal perspective in analysing the stories of the three participants, was how their shift towards empathy was the turning point at which they became mobilised to change how they viewed what had happened. This enabled them to reframe the event and to ultimately create a new meaning about what had happened. This is what Luskin (2001) refers to when he emphasises how essential it is for people to

change their “grievance story” in order to forgive. In creating a new meaning, the participants in this study redefined their relationship with the person they had forgiven. Casarjian (1992) describes forgiveness as an attitude that implies the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s perceptions and realising that perceptions are a choice and not an objective fact.

Catherine said that, before being able to forgive, she had to put more productive boundaries in place. After forgiving, Anna felt that she was no longer “enmeshed” with her parents, and Jonathan reported not being as easily “hooked” by people as before. Boundary setting was not mentioned in the literature on forgiveness I consulted, but after identifying it as a theme, I found it mentioned in a book by Stoop and Masteller (1996) that deals with healing the adult children of dysfunctional families. These authors write that setting boundaries for protection is necessary before attempting to forgive. They believe that the boundaries may be temporary in order to create “space to work in” (p. 176), or that they may become permanent, creating lasting change for the better in the dynamics of a family system (p. 177).

Using forgiveness as a reframe was experienced as a process and not as a moment when the participants suddenly saw things differently. McNab and Kavner (2001) emphasise that forgiveness is an unfolding process that may take weeks or years to achieve. This idea is also echoed in the literature by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000), Estes (2003), Hargrave (1994) and Rosenak and Harndon (1992).

The reframe of forgiveness was useful in helping the participants break through the isolation of their hurt and enabled them to relate to others in new and more productive ways. This view of forgiveness is articulated by Fincham (2000), who states that the challenge of maintaining relatedness with other people, while risking inevitable harm, is possible when there is forgiveness. As he puts it: "relatedness can be maintained through forgiveness" (p. 20).

Another significant feature of the story of forgiveness that the participants and I co-created is that the experience influenced their other relationships and made it more likely that they would incorporate this reframe in other contexts in their lives as a new way of relating. In most of the literature (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough et al., 2000; Ransley & Spy, 2004), forgiveness is described or thought about as something to be used in one difficult situation after another, and although it is very useful at these times it could also be, in its broadest sense, a *pervasive* way of relating that is clear, compassionate and understanding (Casarjian, 1992).

Comments About Comments (or Feedback From Participants)

As I planned, I showed the various transcripts used to the participants as well as my interpretations in order to give them the opportunity to amend or change their comments and, more particularly, to comment on my comments or on the process. All the participants were satisfied that the excerpts from our conversations reflected their experiences. One participant requested a

change in the initial description to further ensure confidentiality, which I made. Two of the participants said they found re-reading the comments they had made during the interview useful and affirming. One participant experienced a "softening" on reading it and was reminded of our limitations and how "no one arrives", which enables "me to allow imperfection in myself and in others". Some of the other comments were: "After the interview my sense of belonging has really spread to other areas of my life"; "It was really therapeutic reading my story again"; and "Since we spoke my critical voice no longer gets much airtime". Jonathan no longer focusses on forgiveness per se in workshop contexts, and now aims to address and resolve the judgement that underlies unforgiveness. He related how, by using a new model one "is able to can get beyond forgiveness in pure love and gratitude for all that is in a matter of five to 10 hours of work".

Conclusion

What emerges clearly from my conversations with the participants and in creating a version of a story of forgiveness, is how profoundly challenging the process was, but that it was accompanied by immense growth and transformation.

This particular reframe enabled the participants to develop a meta-perspective of the events that had troubled them so deeply. They mentioned not taking things so personally anymore or being able to see things from

another perspective. Once one can see the process of the world through such different eyes, one can never go back to merely seeing the content.

In the next chapter this study is summarised, limitations of the research are highlighted and suggestions for future research are explored.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary intellectual aim of the humanities and social inquiry, quite generally,

is to help us to realise what is of value to us in our personal and social lives.

What ultimately matters is personal and social progress

towards enlightenment and wisdom:

all academic progress is but a means to this end

(Maxwell, 1984, p. 73).

Introduction

This quote never ceases to inspire me. My hope is that this study adds value to the reader in some small way. Having conversations about forgiveness with so many people during the course of this study and working with it as a reframe in my own life has been a rewarding and enriching experience.

I am reminded of Bateson's description of psychosis:

> It would appear that once precipitated into psychosis the patient has a course to run. He is, as it were, embarked upon a voyage of discovery which is only completed by his return to the normal world, to which he comes back with insights different from those of the inhabitants who

> never embarked on such a voyage. Once begun, a schizophrenic episode would appear to have as definite a course as an initiation ceremony – a death and rebirth (cited in Liang, 1970, p. 97).

It seems to me that forgiving, too, is a kind of initiation that changes the forgiver. In Chapter 2 I quote Cooper and Gilbert (2004) who write that forgiveness calls for the capacity to empathise with and enter into the experience of the other person as well as having a particular form of maturity. This "particular form of maturity" (p. 73) calls for crossing a threshold, and I think doing so changes the way we see the world – possibly irrevocably.

People have such varied experiences, and yet the different stories about forgiveness seem to have a rather similar "rhythm" to them. This rhythm was described by the various themes that I "identified" in this study.

Identified Themes

In the literature many authors address getting in touch with and processing emotions prior to forgiving. The consensus seems to be that unless the injury is fully acknowledged, none of the other phases, steps or stages can follow. This is what Hargrave (1994) describes as exonerating, which consists of insight and understanding. Stoop and Masteller (1996) delineate the stages of recognising the injury, identifying the emotions involved, expressing hurt and anger and setting boundaries for protection.

Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) break it down into an uncovering phase of pre-forgiveness where the client gains insight into whether and how the injustice and subsequent injury have compromised his or her life and a decision phase where the client becomes aware that a new solution is needed.

In this study all the participants felt that the issue they had grappled with was unresolved and they experienced feelings of hurt, anger, abandonment, aloneness and guilt. They processed this by talking and writing about it. It seems that blaming the perpetrator is where people can remain stuck and immobilised. This was a point that the participants in this study explored and revisited until they shifted to a position of taking responsibility and having empathy with the perpetrator(s).

Once they reached this milestone, the participants were able to reframe what had happened and in doing so created meaning of events they had previously wished hadn't happened. Although they didn't use the word, all the participants described having a meta-perspective on what had happened and even of being able to access such a perspective in other contexts.

What also stands out is how forgiveness is a process, that it happens at varying paces for different people. The various participants experienced it differently – Jonathan spoke about how he read and actually studied some inspirational stories of forgiveness as he was grappling with forgiveness in his own life. Catherine also almost processed her unforgiveness in layers as she took time to rethink things and write letters that she never posted. Anna felt

that she had had various wake-up calls and that she was almost guided in this way to forgiving her parents, and in doing this was able to forgive herself. In his last book on forgiveness the psychiatrist Jampolsky (1999, p. 122) writes that the pace of our forgiving depends on our belief systems, which he expresses thus in a poem he wrote:

> If you believe it will never happen, it will never happen.
> If you believe it will take you six months, it will take six months.
> If you believe it will take but a second, that's all it will take.

Limitations of This Study

In pursuing Husserl's arguments, Sartre (cited in Spinelli, 1989) concluded that no amount of bracketing (epoche) will ever be complete. Contemporary phenomenological thought echoes this – ultimate reality is unknowable. Nevertheless in conducting this study I strove to be as aware as possible of judgements even though a complete suspension of previous knowledge is impossible and idealistic.

Obviously only subjects who had successfully forgiven were chosen as participants in this study. That might lead to the mistaken conclusion that forgiveness is good for everyone or in every circumstance.

Two participants were interviewed as part of the pilot study and then three participants were interviewed in the final study. Such a small sample is, of course, not representative of any general population as such and the interviews should be seen for what they are, namely subjective, detailed illustrations of experiences, but where the insight gained can be transferred to other contexts and so serve as a framework for understanding new meanings (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). The goal was to add some depth to the existing material on forgiveness and not to predict future trends or reduce the findings to a summary of past patterns.

This study explored forgiveness from within a systemic framework. This is only one way of looking at the world and, as Capra (1982, p. 369) states, "psychologists may have to use a network of interlocking models, using different languages to describe different aspects and levels of reality." However, incorporating both an intrapsychic and an interpersonal approach falls outside the limited scope of this dissertation.

Qualitative research should not be judged by the same criteria as hypothetico-deductive research, with quantifications of generalisability, but it does need to lead to usable results (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). The goal of this study was not to "discover" something new. I was fully aware that the end result would be a construction – merely one of many possible versions. The goal therefore was to construct a trustworthy, authentic and useful version of or perspective on forgiveness in order to explore the topic further.

Recommendations for Future Research

There still seems to be limited research on using forgiveness in a group or workshop context. Forgiveness could be useful in the South African context where resources are limited and there is a need to reach more people in a therapeutic context. For example, blame versus taking responsibility was an issue that often featured in the groups of HIV-positive people that I met once a week during my internship. I believe a forgiveness workshop in this context could be a very empowering experience.

Casarjian (1992) believes that people in prison commit repeat offences on release, partly because the role of the offender has become integrated into their identity. In her therapeutic work with prisoners in jail, she uses forgiveness, and later in the therapy self-forgiveness, as she believes that only then are prisoners able to start redefining themselves and therefore their role in society. Except for her book, *Houses of healing* (Casarjian, 1995), there seems to be no literature on using forgiveness in a prison context. Such research could be particularly useful in South Africa.

Something that needs further exploration is the relationship between forgiveness and health. This has been touched upon in a few studies like those of Berry and Worthington (2001), who explored forgiveness, relationship quality and stress while imagining relationship events, and physical and mental health by testing salivary cortisol; Mickley and Cowles (2001), who

studied the use of forgiveness for healing after cancer diagnosis; and Witvliet, Ludwig and Laan (2001), who looked at the implications for emotion, physiology and health when granting forgiveness versus harbouring grudges by testing corrugator (brow) electromyogram, skin conductance, heart rate and blood pressure. At the moment the postulation of a relationship between health and forgiveness is still seen as highly controversial, but these quantitative studies are paving the way to further exploration of the body-mind connection.

Forgiveness was never mentioned in my training. Jonathan also felt that this was a gap in his training (at another university). We, as South Africans, are especially prone to blaming and feeling immobilised and threatened by crime in this country. Most South Africans' lives have been affected by crime or the fear of crime. This is a heavy burden to carry. Added to this background, we also have a high divorce rate, poverty, child and women abuse and lingering racism. Given this environment, we need to explore forgiveness during our training as psychotherapists. Surely it isn't necessary to wait for therapists to become "older than midlife" as Diblasio (1998) found in his research, in order that they be comfortable about addressing forgiveness in a therapeutic context.

Conclusion

To forgive is to start again. To judge is to be brought to an end.
The vision of the ancient wisdom brings both forgiveness and judgement into relationship.
There is the time of forgiveness and the time of judgement.
Together, they both exist in the law of cycles…
The sorrow of our modern life is that we live in one part of time – the time of judgement,
where things end, where everything flows towards death
(Needleman, 2003, p. 50).

As a therapist I am always aware of the meta-perspective, and working within a systemic paradigm helps me give words to the patterns and cycles that I have observed since I was a child. When Jacob Needleman writes how we live in but one part of time, where everything ends and leads to death, it describes so accurately the predicament we find ourselves in when we are unable or unwilling to forgive. Unforgiveness does lead to a kind of death – usually the death of a relationship and perhaps also of a trusting part of ourselves. By forgiving we complete the cycle and can truly start again.

Reflecting on beginnings and endings, as Needleman describes above, brings Maslow to mind. When Maslow (1987) studied healthy, highly functioning, actualised individuals, he found that they escaped simplistic, dichotomous forms of description. Instead they exhibited attributes from both sides of a multitude of differences, rather than being characterised by the maximum or minimum of any particular characteristic (such as kindness–ruthlessness, conventional–unconventional, mystic–realistic, acceptance–

rebellion, serious–humorous, intense–casual, active–passive, masculine–feminine, etc.). Looking at the interviews on forgiveness, I wonder whether this isn't also true of the "perpetrator–forgiver" dichotomy. In working as a therapist on the one hand and being in therapy on the other, I have found it useful to remind myself that somewhere, someone is also in therapy because of me. Just as no one is ever only a perpetrator, no one is ever only a victim. Keeney (1979, p. 127) argues that a healthy individual may therefore appear to be both symptomatic and symptom free, depending upon when and how an interviewer views him or her.

As we forgive, we realise that we also have to be forgiven. This could be the perspective that became so very much a "way of life" that it perhaps led Aba Gayle, whom Jonathan mentioned in his interview, (Catherine Blount Foundation, 2005) to say that, in the end, she realised that there was nothing to forgive. Maslow might have said this is how we make the transition from being antagonistic to being synergic.

When we are healthy and actualised, there is a resolution of dichotomies, as Maslow (1987, p. 149) writes:

> The higher and lower are not in opposition but in agreement, and a thousand serious philosophical dilemmas are discovered to have more than two horns or, paradoxically, no horns at all. If the war between the sexes turns out to be no war at all in matured people, but only a sign of crippling and stunting of growth, who then would wish to choose sides?

> Is it necessary to choose between the good woman and the bad, as if they were mutually exclusive, when we found that the healthy woman is both at the same time?

At one end of the continuum we have authors like Sharon Lamb (2002), Jeffrie Murphy (2003) and Cynthia Ransley (2004) who are cautious, sceptical or simply negative about forgiveness, while at the other extreme we have Enright and the Human Development Study Group (cited in Reed, Burkett & Garzon, 2001) who, while doing good research, almost painfully deconstruct forgiveness in a model with 17 "therapeutic processes"! Forgiveness is merely a reframe, as Watzlawick (1984, p. 330) reminds us: "the apparent separation of the world into pairs of opposites is constructed by the subject"; and I would speculate that, if we (and our contexts) were healthy and actualised, we'd have no need for it.

However, the majority of us are neither actualised nor always healthy, and so I do believe that forgiveness is useful. I would like to end by quoting Casarjian, (1992, p. 219): "Forgiveness gives us the clarity to differentiate the past from the present while offering us hope for the future." Perhaps giving hope is what psychology needs to do today more than ever before.

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