

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 MOTIVATION OF THE STUDY

Our world is dominated by general feelings of anxiety, malaise, at times deep fear and despair, insecurity, vulnerability and a sense of being disconnected from ourselves, our families and our communities. These feelings of being disconnected and alienated are often reflected and presented in psychotherapy in the form of a cluster of feelings such as anger, guilt, shame, anxiety, panic, fear and at times, overwhelming grief and sadness. In addition, there seems to be a lack of direction and a search for meaning and identity in the lives of many clients. Generally, clients seek help in psychotherapy in order to overcome these overwhelming feelings, which often cause a severe interruption and dysfunction in their lives.

The inspiration for this study originated with the research of Rowe, et al. (1989) in their Chapter on *Forgiving Another – A Dialogal Research Approach*. The theme of the group's phenomenological research at Seattle University, as well as their later research on *Exploring Self-Forgiveness* (Bauer et al. 1992) and the *Psychology of Forgiveness – Implications for Psychotherapy*, (Rowe & Halling, 1998) seemed to resonate at a deep personal level with my experience as a psychotherapist working with clients in psychotherapy. The researchers at Seattle University embarked on a study of forgiveness in order to answer the questions of what impact injurious behaviour has on our personal and cultural lives and how we could heal from the hurt caused by the injury and wrongdoing. The focus of their research on forgiveness was within the context of everyday life.

1.2 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to explore the retrospective experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy using a hermeneutic and existential approach. This mixed method involved applying Giorgi's steps of data reduction (1975) and a qualitative hermeneutic approach to the reasoning of the subjects' responses and to the dialogue within the psychologists' group. 'The most fundamental claim of existential-phenomenological psychology is that it provides with an approach that leads to a deeper and fuller understanding of human existence, ourselves and others' (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p.16). In this research I hope to focus on the phenomenon of self-forgiveness, not only as a critical human experience included in the individual's everyday life's experience, but also as an integral part of treatment and healing in the therapy process.

In addition, this research took place against the background of profound cultural, social and political changes in South Africa and I will compare the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy with

the broader cultural and social experience of forgiveness and self-forgiveness within the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (1996 – 1998). The TRC was the platform from which twenty-two thousand of the perpetrators and victims of apartheid crimes, could convey their personal recollections and seek forgiveness of others and /or self-forgiveness, which enhanced the sense of *ubuntu*¹. The TRC was a giant macrocosm of the experiences of forgiveness and self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, and illustrates the significant cultural, moral, social and ethical implications of these phenomena for intrapersonal, interpersonal, socio-cultural and political relationships as a whole.

1.3 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

It must be emphasized that this work was based on two in-depth interviews conducted with six of my therapy clients (two men and four women, of varying ages and beliefs), who had not entered therapy primarily with the intention of exploring their experience of self-forgiveness, nor was the subject articulated directly in their therapy sessions by either client, or therapist. It was only after therapy had ended and the research questions were put to these clients, that they spoke about their experiences of self-forgiveness, what life issues gave rise to this experience, their experience of self-forgiveness in the therapy situation and how this phenomenon had impacted on their lives. The three research questions were:

1. 'Can you tell me what self-forgiveness means to you?'
2. 'What situation or situations, in your life, gave rise to the need for self-forgiveness?' (based on the research questions in Rowe, et al., 1989).
3. 'How did your experience in therapy contribute to your understanding of self-forgiveness?'

It was evident from the participants' responses that the experience of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others were significant issues which had taken place in psychotherapy. It must be noted that in this research, self-forgiveness was not experienced by the participants as a result of having been forgiven by the other. The experience of self-forgiveness arose (although this was not articulated in psychotherapy) as a result of painful relational issues, e.g. betrayal, childhood abuse and deprivation, divorce and separation. In addition, a series of misperceptions, unrealistic expectations, life scripts and identities

¹ 'This is the African philosophy of humanness emphasizing the link between the individual and the community', (Krog, 1999, p. 454).

were formed as a result of events in the individuals' lives in relation to significant others, which gave rise to the need for self-forgiveness. The initial reason for the referral to psychotherapy for more than half of the research participants was anxiety and panic disorder as a result of feeling estranged from the self and others. This distress was as a result of a series of perceived wrongdoings for which the participants felt anxiety, self-blame, shame, guilt and pain. The injurious and painful relational issues left the individual acutely aware of being estranged from the self and others in the world. For the participants, experiencing forgiveness for themselves resulted in a 'shift from fundamental estrangement to 'being-at-home' with oneself in the world' (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.237).

The study of the phenomenon of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy included six one-monthly discussions with three practising psychologists. This approach was inspired by the dialogal group research method at Seattle University undertaken by Leifer (1986); Rowe, et al. (1989); Halling & Leifer (1991), & Bauer et al. (1992), (cited in Rowe & Halling, 1998). These general reflective group discussions involved coming to terms with our understanding of the phenomenon, reading selected literature of prior research regarding the phenomenon, utilizing this phenomenon in our work with clients and discussions of the data obtained from the six participants interviewed by the researcher. The difference between the dialogal group research method at Seattle University and our reflective dialogal group discussions regarding self-forgiveness in psychotherapy was that I, the sole researcher, had formulated the research questions, carried out the interviews, transcribed the descriptions and then presented the transcribed scripts to the group for discussion. The reflective group discussions were used by the researcher in order to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon as it was lived and experienced by the participants. The researcher assumed that the group would provide an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon. This was based on the fact that according to Rowe & Halling (1998) and the group research at Seattle University (1989-1998), an understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon arose out of dialogue within the group, particularly pertaining to self-forgiveness (and forgiveness), which is fundamentally interpersonal and 'could be studied most appropriately using a method characterized by open and ongoing conversation'. (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.231)

1.4 THE PHENOMENA OF SELF-FORGIVENESS AND FORGIVING ANOTHER

According to Rowe, et al. (1989), & Rowe & Halling (1998), the phenomenon of forgiving another is intimately related to forgiving oneself and may be two sides of the same coin. The authors explain that

the experience of self-forgiveness or being forgiven is similar to forgiving another, in that it requires more than one's will and for that reason, is not experienced as something that one does for oneself but rather seems to come when one least expects forgiveness. In addition, forgiving another and self-forgiveness are transforming experiences, bringing one an awareness of one's humanity and connection with the world, while offering new freedom and possibilities. Rowe, et al. (1989), assert that the similarities between self-forgiveness and forgiving another are so striking that they question whether they are not in fact simultaneous processes, i.e. whether self-forgiveness is in the background of forgiving another and vice versa. In other words, 'one cannot realize one's own freedom and humanity without realizing that of the other' (p.243). Although, as stated above, the phenomena of forgiving another and self-forgiveness may be considered simultaneous defining these phenomena within a phenomenological framework, will help explain the individual's experience of self-forgiveness and forgiving another in her everyday lived world. In addition, defining these phenomena would assist the psychotherapist in her own understanding of these experiences, the similarities between these experiences, and the difference between them. This would, in turn, help clients grapple with these issues within the therapeutic setting and the manner in which they integrate these experiences within the views of themselves and the world.

1.5 THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The present thesis is compiled of seven chapters including the first introductory chapter. In Chapter 2 the phenomenological-existential view of the phenomena of forgiving another and self-forgiveness is defined and the similarities and differences between these phenomena discussed, outlining the relational and temporality dimensions pertaining to these phenomena. Chapter 3 explores the religious, cultural, moral and philosophical approaches to forgiveness and self-forgiveness, including a focus on the background of the profound cultural, social and political changes in South Africa against which this research took place.

Chapter 4 includes the theory and literature survey of the phenomena. The reason for focusing on selected literature and theory pertaining to both forgiveness and self-forgiveness is that according to researchers at Seattle University (1984–1998) these phenomena share the same depth and often are simultaneous processes although forgiving others is not necessarily a prerequisite for experiencing forgiveness (Halling, 1994). Included in this chapter will be: a case study using a psychoanalytic/psychodynamic approach to forgiveness; three theoretical perspectives of forgiveness in the psychotherapeutic environment synthesizing theological and psychological principles; a

psychiatrist's view of anger and the healing power of forgiveness; in a clinical setting; a model of interpersonal forgiveness with couples in psychotherapy; the cognitive approach to therapeutic intervention within the forgiveness triad, on forgiving, receiving forgiveness and self-forgiveness; the pastoral/counselling approach to forgiveness and self-forgiveness; the existential- phenomenological approach to these phenomena.

Chapter 5 focuses on the research methodology, outlining the rationale for the research and containing a description of Giorgi's (1975) empirical phenomenological research method of data reduction. A brief description has been included of the six individuals who participated in the research. All were the researcher's former therapy clients who had terminated psychotherapy. These clients were assigned pseudonyms and were known as Vernon (Subject A), Sally (Subject B), Justine (Subject C), Kathy (Subject D), Michael (Subject E) and Wilma (Subject F). The data obtained involved two in-depth, 60 to 90 minutes audio-taped interviews, during which three research questions were asked. These interviews were then transcribed verbatim, edited, and analyzed applying Giorgi's (1975) empirical phenomenological principles of data reduction.

In addition, Chapter 5 consists of the data which emanated from the psychologist (three colleagues) groups' reflective discussions of the phenomenon. These two-hourly meetings took place once a month over a period of six months. Themes which emanated from these reflective discussions were then compared with the participants' data of their experience of the phenomenon and similarities and differences between the two sets of data were evaluated by myself, the researcher.

Chapter 6 consists of the results of the analysis of the data obtained from the six research participants. An example of the division of the descriptive data into 'Natural Meaning Units' and corresponding 'Thematic Meaning Units' was included for Subject A. The presentation of the results consisted of specific descriptions of the situated structures for each of the six participants in response to the three research questions, the common elements of which were then formed into a general psychological description of the phenomenon. Illustrative vignettes of the general description of the phenomenon were included. An elaborated structural description of the constituents of the general experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy was formed, in order to establish a platform from which the focus of the discussion of this phenomenon would be illustrated in Chapter 7.

Themes from the edited reflective dialogue of the psychologists' group regarding the phenomena were

identified and a general description of these identified themes was formulated in chapter 6. The constituents of the general description of the participants' experience of the phenomenon and the identified themes of the groups' reflective discussions were then compared and similarities and differences between the two were extrapolated.

Chapter 7 consists of an amalgamation of the focal points of the theory and literature research survey, illustrating how these different perspectives could be used in a synthesized approach to this phenomenon from the integrative psychotherapist's perspective, using the most useful aspects within a broad empirical phenomenological psychotherapeutic tradition. The discussion of the phenomenon included a blending of the findings of the research and analysis of the data obtained from the six participants, as well as the contribution and implications of the reflective group discussions of the phenomenon. The significance of the self of the client as well as the self of the therapist in relation to the phenomenon were discussed. In addition, the cultural and social implications of the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy against the South African background in which this research was conducted, were addressed.

Included in the discussion were:

- the implications of the phenomenon for psychotherapy;
- a critical review of the methodology used in this research;
- limitations of the research; and
- the differences between the experience of self-forgiveness and other significant experiences in psychotherapy.

The above factors were included in the discussion in order to illustrate the multi-dimensional aspects and significant implications of the phenomenon of self-forgiveness for intrapersonal, socio-cultural and political relationships.

In addition, it is hoped that this discussion will provide an integrative synthesis (from the psychotherapist's perspective), of the most useful aspects of the approach to the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, not only within the hermeneutic, existential and phenomenological frameworks, but within the broader psychotherapeutic traditions. It is hoped that the hermeneutic, existential and phenomenological approaches to this phenomenon could be included in the psychoanalytic/psychodynamic, family systems, cognitive behavioural, transpersonal and

pastoral/religious counselling approaches, in order to reach the individual client and broader socio-cultural and political communities.

1.6 CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy as a ‘corrective emotional experience’, unfolding within an authentic personal encounter with an ‘enlightened witness’² (the therapist) and ‘between two fully human individuals’ (Moss, 1989, p.211). One agrees with Moss (1989) when he states that ‘therapeutic technique lends a practical effectiveness to therapeutic intervention but only when it serves the process of re-awakening a human being to the broader horizon of his or her own world and life’. (ibid, 1989, p.211) In this study, against the background of profound social and cultural changes in South Africa (which contributed to the understanding and relevance of this phenomenon), the multidimensional cultural and personal aspects of the experience of self-forgiveness are discussed.

NOTE : In this text I will be using the feminine gender in order to simplify the references to both genders. However, both the masculine and feminine gender will be used when the researcher refers specifically to the male and female research participants as well as to the male and female psychologist group members in the study. The feminine gender is only used for ease of editorial style. At times the masculine gender has been retained in order to maintain the authenticity of the quotations.

² The term ‘enlightened witness’ is taken from the book entitled ‘The Truth will set you Free’ by the psychotherapist Alice Miller (2001), and is not meant to refer to the psychotherapist in an arrogant way ‘as all-knowing’ but rather as more informed and helping the client to achieve insight and ‘move from ignorance to knowledge and compassion’ (Miller, 2001, p187)