

“Our capacity to make peace with another person and with the world, depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves”.

- Thian Nhat Hanh  
Living Buddha, Living Christ  
In Rutledge, T., 1997, p.5

The son of a Rabbi went to worship on the Sabbath in a nearby town. On his return, his family asked, ‘Well did they do anything different from what we do here?’ Yes, of course’ said the son. ‘Then what was the lesson?’ ‘Love thy enemy as thy self’. ‘So, it’s the same as we say. And how is it you learned something else?’ ‘They taught me to love the enemy within myself’.

(Quoted in Tarrytown Letter, April,  
1983, p.16, in Zweig, C. and  
Abrams, J., 1991, p.190)

**EXPLORING THE RETROSPECTIVE EXPERIENCE  
OF SELF-FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY**

**BY**

**IRENE GILLIAN BOWMAN**

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**SUPERVISOR: DR A. GILDENHUYS**

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‘But I have discovered the secret that, after climbing a great hill, one only finds there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom, comes responsibility and I dare not linger for my long walk is not yet ended’ (Mandela, 1994, p.751).

EXPLORING THE RETROSPECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-FORGIVENESS  
IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to explore the retrospective experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, using a hermeneutically and existentially oriented research approach and using phenomenological principles in the data analysis (Giorgi, 1975). This research focused on the phenomenon of self-forgiveness, not only as a critical human experience in the individual's everyday life's experience, but also as an integral part of treatment and healing in the therapy process. Religious, cultural, moral and philosophical approaches to self-forgiveness were discussed with a focus on the cultural backdrop and the profound socio-political changes in South Africa, against which this research was conducted. In addition the relevant theories and approaches to the phenomenon were reviewed.

Using a mixed research method, three questions were formulated in order to elicit the lived structure of the experience being researched. Two, in-depth interviews, were conducted with six of my own therapy clients whose therapy had ended with myself. This phenomenon had not been articulated in therapy and was considered from the point of view of the client who experienced this phenomenon and not from that of the therapist. Painful relational issues had left the participants feeling estranged from themselves and others and the experience of self-forgiveness had resulted in feeling reconnected with themselves and the world. The study of the phenomenon, included six, one monthly discussions with three fellow practising psychologists, whose reflections enhanced the understanding of this phenomenon.

Significant findings of this research were that; the phenomena of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others were interrelated and that self-acceptance was mandatory in the experience of self-forgiveness without a blanket condoning of one's own actions or the actions of others. Non-forgiveness without vengeance and forgiving without condoning or forgetting the actions of others, could be emotionally and morally appropriate for the individual. Educative insight, a renewed identity and reinterpreted memory were important elements of the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy. Experientially, the moment of recognition of this phenomenon had come as a 'revelation' for the participants after therapy had ended and self-forgiveness, formed an integral part of therapy although this experience was not directly articulated in psychotherapy.

In this study the significance of the self of the client, the self of the therapist and the psychologists' discussions relating to the phenomenon were addressed. Emotions pertaining to the experience of self-forgiveness; theoretical implications of this phenomenon for further research and for psychotherapy; limitations of this research and how the experience of self-forgiveness differed from other significant experiences in psychotherapy were critically discussed.

Key Terms:

Existential	Self acceptance
Psychotherapy	Insight
Hermeneutic	Identity
Self-forgiveness	Phenomenology
Forgiveness	Reconciliation

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