

## CHAPTER 2

### 2. FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The first part of this chapter will include a reference to the existential-phenomenological research carried out by previous researchers on the phenomena of forgiveness and self-forgiveness. In addition, the need for additional research of the lived experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy which, hitherto, has been overlooked in both general and applied psychology, will be addressed.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the phenomenological descriptions of the phenomena of forgiveness and self-forgiveness, the similarities and the difference between these phenomena and the implications of the existential-phenomenological view for psychotherapy.

The main phenomenological research of the experiences of forgiveness and self-forgiveness has been conducted at Seattle University (1984-1998). Self-forgiveness as a lived experience has not been well explored in the field of psychology and the paucity of research in both general and applied psychology indicated the importance of conducting this research.

Self-forgiveness is a multidimensional phenomenon and impacts on both the personal and socio-cultural aspects of our lives. Problem areas which various mental health practitioners deal with are clients' feelings of chronic guilt, self-blame, shame, anger, anxiety, depression, pain and general feelings of estrangement and isolation. There is a great deal of personal and cultural pain in our world and the impact of injury on the individual's life impinges not only on the functioning of the individual but has a spin-off on families, communities and society as a whole. On a personal level, part of resolving and healing the individual's pain involves exploring the lived experience of self-forgiveness through the process of psychotherapy.

In South Africa, we have seen and lived through a history and legacy of hostility and alienation at both interpersonal and socio-cultural levels. We have had our share of ethnic pain which emanated from centuries of hatred and distrust, political tension and social and domestic violence. Self-forgiveness, as well as forgiving another, are crucial issues which have become familiar and more easily understood in the 'new South Africa'. We have seen the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998) focus on the phenomena of forgiveness of the self and others when dealing with both the perpetrators and victims of crimes in our society.

Bauer et al. (1992), of Seattle University, state that hitherto dominant, statistical, experimental research methods in the social sciences (and psychology), have increased the obscurity of forgiveness – ‘and the fragmentation and alienation of modern life’ (Bauer et al., 1992, p.160). This provided the impetus for the existential research carried out by the research team at Seattle University (1985-1998). Further existential-phenomenological research included the work of Rooney (1989), in his unpublished dissertation, which focuses on the experience of forgiveness in psychotherapy; Safer (2000) and Ferch (2000), focus on the lived experience of forgiving and non-forgiving as well as the meanings of touch and forgiveness respectively. These phenomena are studied within the context of every day life rather than the complexity of studying the phenomena within social and political contexts. (The different approaches to these phenomena will be discussed in the theory and literature survey in Chapter 4).

In focusing on the retrospective experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, the researcher hones in on the experience at a deep and personal level and moves from the understanding of self-forgiveness as an abstract ideal to one that is powerful and central to one’s experience of healing in psychotherapy. More significantly, as a psychotherapist working with psychic pain, one is in the position to help facilitate the movement towards self-forgiveness (and forgiveness) and in so doing, would hopefully enhance the sense of individual freedom, a reconnection with the self and others and a restoration of hope and options regarding the future. This research would, in turn, have positive repercussions on the family, communities and society as a whole. Thus extending the research of the individual’s actual experience of forgiveness and self-forgiveness in every day life to the individual’s retrospective experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy would have ‘far reaching implications for intrapersonal, interpersonal and political relationships’ (Rowe, et al., 1989) and therefore, would justify additional scientific research in this area.

Rowe, et al. (1989), state that traditionally, psychology has shied away from phenomena that are closely related to theology and religion. Furthermore, psychology which has been conceptualised as a natural science, has placed priority on experimental methods. Psychology has thus avoided topics which cannot easily be studied by statistical experimental methods (Giorgi, 1970, cited in Rowe, et al., 1989). These researchers state that forgiveness (and self-forgiveness), being human phenomena, are topics which are resistant to simple definitions and direct observations. They felt that exploration of the individual’s experience of forgiveness and self-forgiveness was critical and significant for further research, in order to realize one’s own freedom and humanity. Despite the increased attention given to the topic of forgiveness, Rowe & Halling (1998), reiterated the need for further phenomenological investigation of this phenomenon as they stated that very few systematic studies of the actual lived experience of forgiveness (and self-forgiveness) had taken place. This was the inspiration for this research of the lived experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy.

## **2.2 THE EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PHENOMENA OF FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS**

The existential-phenomenological view of both the phenomena of forgiving another and forgiving oneself, will be described in this chapter, in view of the fact that previous researchers have shown that these may be simultaneous processes and may be two sides of the same coin (Rowe, et al., 1989 and Rowe & Halling, 1998). In addition, the similarities and difference between these phenomena and the relational and temporality dimensions pertaining to these phenomena, will be outlined in order to understand the client's 'unique world of the experience' of self-forgiveness (and forgiving another) 'in terms of time, space and interpersonal forms' (Moss, 1989, p.194). This chapter will also focus on the implications of the existential-phenomenological view for psychotherapy.

### **2.2.1 THE DESCRIPTION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FORGIVENESS**

In describing the lived experience of forgiveness, Rowe, et al. (1989), state that 'the need for forgiveness arises when someone has acted in such a way as to bring about a fundamental disruption to the wholeness or integrity of one's life' (p.239). The authors continue, that according to the individual's experience, this injury is 'initially on a deep almost organic level, there is a tearing of the fabric of one's life, one's world and that the injury that involves forgiving, is one that violates a person's identity' (p.239). Forgiveness, is thus experienced, when one perceives oneself as having been harmed by the wrongdoer and ends in a psychological reconciliation with the perceived wrongdoer (i.e. intrapersonally) this reconciliation may or may not take place face-to-face with the wrongdoer (i.e. interpersonally).

The initial hurt is often accompanied by feelings of blame, anger and a desire for revenge and retribution. These feelings need to be acknowledged and experienced if genuine forgiveness is to take place. This is difficult when the individual is emotionally dependant on the other and/or has disowned the disliked parts of the self which has resulted in, self-blame and guilt for 'bad' or 'angry' parts of the self (Rowe & Halling, 1998). The experience of forgiveness may be a long arduous process, where the individual feels trapped. The individual feels caught, on the one hand between holding on to the hurt and anger, thus maintaining boundaries and creating distance between the self and the wrongdoer and avoiding grief and loss, and on the other hand, accepting the past (1998). Grief and loss, is felt not only for the relationship and what was and/or could have been, but for the loss of identity and a particular way of viewing oneself and the world. These researchers suggest that the experience of forgiveness as a solution to betrayal, anger and hurt,

occurs unexpectedly and cannot be willed. However, to some degree, there is a certain willingness and receptivity within the individual to forgive the injurious other. “Experientially however, the moment of forgiveness, appears to be the moment of recognition that forgiveness, has *already* occurred. Rather than being aware of changing, one realises that one *has* changed, one *has* forgiven the other’ (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.235). The researchers state that ‘forgiveness comes as a revelation and is often viewed as a gift’ (p.235).

Forgiveness is usually distinguished from reconciliation (Horsbrugh, 1974, & Kolnai, 1973-1974 cited in Enright, 1994). While forgiveness is an internal, psychological response to injury, reconciliation with the other is seen as a behavioural coming together again, often after negotiation has taken place (ibid, 1994). However, it is possible to forgive without reconciliation. In the research and further readings, it has shown that forgiveness is neither condonation nor indifference. In fact, the forgiver is aware that injustice has occurred and yet takes a stance of letting go and overcoming amongst other feelings, despair, anger and pain within oneself, as well as towards the wrongdoer.

In defining forgiveness, Safer (2000), proposes a paradigm shift and states that genuine forgiveness ‘as it is commonly understood is only one of many routes to resolution, humanity and peace’ and that ‘false forgiveness damages self and society and that not forgiving without vindictiveness can be morally and emotionally right’ (p.2). For this author, the resolution process (which she states may or may not lead to forgiveness), consists of three essential tasks: firstly, re-engaging internally with the hurtful relationship; secondly, recognizing its emotional impact and, thirdly, re-interpreting the meaning of the experience and one’s own participation in it, from a deeper broader perspective. Safer, states that this tripartite model applies equally to forgiveness and real unforgiveness, i.e. non-forgiveness without vengeance.

### **2.2.1.1 INTERPERSONAL, INTRAPERSONAL AND TRANSPERSONAL ASPECTS OF FORGIVENESS**

The interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of this definition are significantly illustrated by Fischer (1970), who stated that ‘(i)dentify is grounded in the unfolding of (one’s) relationships in the projects and plans to which one has assigned oneself’ (Fischer, 1970, cited in Rowe, et al., 1989, p.239). The impact of the injury or pain is felt at an intrapersonal level having a profound impact on the ‘individual’s only world his/her only meaningful identity perceived at the time’ (ibid, 1970, p.239). However, forgiveness is experienced most immediately at an interpersonal level, in that the relationship with the other comes to an abrupt halt as it

occurs within a specific event and/or relationship involving the other, who has by causing harm, deeply impacted on the self. In addition, the experience of forgiving another, also has qualities which transcend the relationship with the other and were described by researchers as having a spiritual or transpersonal, as well as interpersonal dimension resulting in 'a deeper sense of connection to oneself, to others and in some cases, to something beyond oneself' (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.237). These aspects are also evident in the experience of self-forgiveness.

#### **2.2.1.2 THE TIME ELEMENT IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-FORGIVENESS**

Understanding the definition of the experience of forgiving another, has great significance within the therapeutic setting regarding the impact of the injury caused by the wrongdoer on the individual's sense of self, which causes a disruption of 'one's only world' and 'one's only meaningful identity as perceived at that time' (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.235). In addition, the injury impacts on one's interpersonal relationships and the time element involved, i.e. how the injury impacts on the past relationship, the present relationship and the vision of a planned future relationship. The future may be experienced as irrevocably changed and/or even destroyed. Merleau-Ponty (1968), speaks of time as a difficult phenomenon to examine because it is not 'something outside of us, flowing past us, instead we are time' (cited in Halling, 1979, p.201).

#### **2.2.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SELF-FORGIVENESS**

Rowe & Halling (1998), describe the individual's lived experience of self-forgiveness as a pervasive ongoing process which 'involves a shift from fundamental estrangement to being at home with oneself in the world' (p.237). This estrangement from the self and others, occurs as a result of a traumatic or stressful event in one's life (e.g. divorce, death of a loved one, abuse, etc). As a result, this painful, traumatic experience, the need to forgive oneself (which may or may not be articulated), becomes an issue because the understanding and awareness of the event, is generally accompanied by feelings of self-judgement, anger, blame, shame and guilt. 'This experience is so intense it pervades one's existence and the embodied belief is that nothing will ever change, the future seems dark and foreboding' (p.239). The experience of forgiving oneself is also accompanied by a change in identity, a self-acceptance and acknowledgement and the integration of previously denied or rejected parts of the self (such as one's own anger and the ability to inflict pain). One then gradually moves from an attitude of critical self-judgement to 'embracing who one truly is' (p.237).

There is an intrapersonal and interpersonal aspect to the experience of self-forgiveness (as in the experience of forgiving another), mainly focusing on the awareness and acceptance of one's own human fallibility and

that of others resulting in a connectedness with oneself and the other, a sense of freedom as well as a positive movement towards faith in the future, healing and 'being at home in the world' (ibid, 1998, p.238). Bauer et al. (1992), state that 'the term self-forgiveness implied that this is a solitary act, completed in isolation from others'. Instead, research has shown that the individual's experience of self-forgiveness, is not 'entirely of one's own doing, which takes place within some form of relationship and involves a radical shift in one's way of moving in the world' (p.150). As self-forgiveness is gradually 'embodied', the individual moves towards feeling 'at home in the world' (p.150). According to Bauer et al. (1992), the lived experience of self-forgiveness involved a movement from estrangement and reconciliation with the self and the human community. This arduous journey involved coming to terms with oneself, not being stuck in the past and holding on to illusions about oneself 'as a fellow human being, like others, imperfect but no longer alone' (p.160). A core aspect of the self, in the experience of self-forgiveness and overcoming self-judgement and despair is that, according to Kierkegaard, 'the opposite of despair is to be the self which one truly is' (Kierkegaard, 1941, p.28; cited in Halling, 1979, p.202).

### **2.3 SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE EXPERIENCES OF FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS**

Thus from the above descriptions, one clearly concurs with the researchers at Seattle University when they say that these phenomena may be simultaneous processes or two sides of the same coin. Both are transforming experiences, bringing one an awareness of one's own humanity and connection with the world while offering new freedom and possibilities (Rowe, et al., 1989). In both cases, one embraces, with a compassionate view, both one's own human fallibility and that of the other.

Halling (1994) claims that in forgiving the other, one relinquishes the notion and illusion of one's own innocence and perfection and as being not unlike the other. In addition, with both experiences, 'one moves into a deeper more profound connection with one's own life and the lives of others, one moves towards selfhood' (p.112).

Thus, common themes have emerged in the research on the two phenomena, e.g. both involve overcoming unrealistic feelings of shame, guilt, pain, loss, anger, self-blame, a letting be, a letting go and acceptance of one's human fallibilities the fallibility of others resulting in a renewed identity; both phenomena not being acts of will; both phenomena being described as transformative and as 'a gift'; both are arduous, pervasive and ongoing processes and normally these phenomena occurring within the context of some variation of a loving relationship with others. Although research has shown that the experience of

research may reveal that often individuals, in forgiving the other, discover that they have indeed forgiven themselves, ‘both of these experiences partake of the same depth’ and ‘either form of forgiveness implicitly touches upon the other’ (p.112).

## **2.4 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE EXPERIENCES OF FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS**

Halling (1994), in his article on ‘Embracing Human Fallibility: on Forgiving Oneself and Forgiving Others’, points to an integral difference between forgiving another and self-forgiveness, saying that the experience of self-forgiveness is the more difficult issue to get at. Our feelings about ourselves and our own judgements and actions, infiltrate, influence and pervade our being, our lives and our attitudes. However, our feelings about ourselves and what we do and do not forgive about ourselves, are not implied in what we do and say but are also carefully concealed. Halling asserts that Freud was correct in saying that human beings have an extraordinary capacity for self-deception and concealment, particularly parts of ourselves, which we dislike, deny and reject. In addition, the experience of self-forgiveness is difficult to describe because there are no clear boundaries, unlike forgiving another, where there is an injury caused by a specific person involving and followed by a specific course of events. Halling warns that ‘with the issues that gather around self-forgiveness, we operate in murkier territory’ (ibid, 1994, p.112).

## **2.5 IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL VIEW FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Psychotherapists generally have formed theoretical and philosophical views regarding the essence of human existence. These views may range from an adherence to a particular theory and beliefs or a more integrated eclectic and synthesized approach to human nature (King, Valle & Citrenbaum, 1978).

The existential-phenomenological understanding of human existence is particularly significant in our world of technical and scientific advancement. The therapeutic environment is where psychotherapists are having to deal with individuals’ concerns and issues regarding the nature and meaning of their existence. The key concepts in psychotherapy are alienation (ibid, 1978) and existential isolation (Yalom, 1980). These concerns could be dealt with directly, using an existential-phenomenological approach to psychotherapy.

Moss (1989), states that a phenomenological approach to psychotherapy would require a 'human science' approach to human behaviour and experience in order to understand these phenomena; that psychological

15/.....

Page 15

---

phenomena, behaviour and experience have an 'intentional structure', in that they are intentionally and meaningfully directed toward a situation or object; and more significantly, that in order to meaningfully relate to and understand the client, the psychotherapist needs to mutually experience the temporal, spatial and interpersonal aspects of the client's unique experience of the world.

Pertaining to the temporal aspect of forgiveness in psychotherapy, the psychotherapist deals with the impact of the pain of the injury in the present, as well as the experience of the client's mourning and loss of the past, present and future relationships, i.e. 'the past is the present and the future too'. The statement that 'the past and future only exist in relation to the present' (Minkowsky, 1970, p.37 cited in Halling, 1979, p.201) help the psychotherapist understand and situate the client's experience of interpersonal pain and loss regarding relationships within a time frame. Loss of one's past and on a deeper level, a change in one's present identity and 'the loss of a, particular way of viewing oneself and the world' (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.235), interpersonal and intrapersonal issues pertaining to the pain of the injurious relationship, despair at the loss of past and hope in future relationships, are all experiences associated with forgiving another and self- forgiveness, which will be included in this research on the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy.

At an interpersonal level the psychotherapist's role in the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy is helping the client accept and integrate parts of the self, which the client dislikes and rejects, into the whole self and assisting the client with a solid foundation from which to move forward and face the future with renewed hope. An acceptance of the self, who 'one truly is', overcoming self-blame and accepting responsibility for one's own 'situated freedom' and role in the injurious or problematic event, are core phenomenological issues the psychotherapist needs to be aware of in helping the client move from an attitude of self-judgement to enabling who one is – a 'shift from fundamental estrangement to being at home in the world' (Halling, 1998, p.237).

Healing and change take place within the context of a profoundly interpersonal relationship between the vulnerable client, who has begun a process of self-exploration and the respectful, empathic, responsible affirming therapist (ibid, 1998), 'out of this develops a relationship with a quality unlike any other' (ibid, 1998, p.243). A basic therapeutic tool in the existential-phenomenological approach to psychotherapy is the therapist being present to the client in order to make the client present to the consciousness of the therapist with as little distortion or interpretation as possible. 'This client as present to the therapist, becomes the data for the therapy sessions' (King, Valle & Citrenbaum, 1978, p.270). The existential-



phenomenological idea is that a phenomenon is always located in the dialectical relationship of the individual in her world, i.e. the concept of co-constitutionality and that the individual could not exist without the other (ibid, 1978).

16/.....

Page 16

---

The focus of the existential-phenomenological therapist is to deal with the client's life as it is lived, 'the concrete embodied existence of the client is the data of the therapy sessions' (ibid, 1978, p.268). In fact, all perceptions and experiences are subjective and the focus of the therapy is from the perspective of the individual experiencing the world in terms of unique 'personal history, present situation and future goals' (p.268).

The existential-phenomenological approach focuses on language and human reality and the clients recounting their personal stories. It is in the dialogue between psychotherapist and client that the client is assisted in constructing unique and different versions of self-understanding. It is within the therapeutic setting that clients are able to view themselves and events as 'different from their current view'. 'Narrative truth emerges from the dialogue between therapist and client which provides an organizing influence in the client's life' (Messer, 1986, p.1269, cited in Moss, 1989, p.207).

According to Yalom (1980), the single most important lesson that a psychotherapist must learn is that 'it is the relationship that heals' (Yalom, 1980, p.401). It is the encounter itself in psychotherapy which is healing for the client 'in a way that transcends the therapist's theoretical orientation' (ibid, 1980, p.401). Within the therapeutic encounter and the client's confrontation with her existential isolation, the therapist becomes the external reference point with whom the client can relate regarding the experience of self-forgiveness whereas previously, the self may have been the only reference point and it is difficult to describe the experience of self-forgiveness 'which has no clear boundaries' (Halling, 1994, p.112).

Yalom states that it is 'extraordinarily difficult to absolve guilt for the past in the presence of ongoing guilt-providing behaviour' and 'one must learn first to forgive oneself for the present and the future' (Yalom, 1980, p.349). The presence of the therapist as 'witness', may enable the client with 'educative insight', to cease to operate toward the self in the present in the same way that one has acted in the past. As a result, one can then forgive oneself for the past and cease to carry assumed, unrealistic, disproportionate guilt, shame and self-blame for others' actions and feelings, particularly pertaining to childhood relationships. Thus the therapist may help the client locate the appropriate boundaries of responsibility (ibid, 1980). In other words, the memory of the past 'is reconstituted by the present' and it is through therapy that one can change the image of oneself and thus, 'one may reconstitute or reintegrate one's past' (ibid, 1980, p.349).

The lived experience of self-forgiveness has been described by researchers as a moment from 'estrangement

17/.....

Page 17

---

to feeling at home, from darkness to light, from deception to honesty and acknowledgement' (Rowe & Halling, 1998, p.238). Research has shown that self-forgiveness is a difficult ongoing journey involving a personal struggle, a to-ing and fro-ing between maintaining past illusions about oneself and others and coming to terms with oneself and others, resulting in a reconnectedness to the self and the world (ibid, 1998). In addition, self-forgiveness involves a letting go of one's old identity, expectations and beliefs, a grieving and mourning process for who one was and what might have been. More significantly, the experience of self-forgiveness is accompanied by an acceptance of one's human fallibility and the fallibility of others resulting in a sense of belonging to the human community but, at the same time, feeling a sense of separateness, individuality and freedom (Bauer et al., 1992).

This hermeneutically and existentially oriented research of the individual's retrospective experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, using phenomenological principles, will elaborate on the work of previous existential-phenomenological researchers in focusing on the experience of this phenomenon within the therapeutic environment, as well as the impact of this phenomenon within the South African context. Bauer et al. (1992), state that the complexity of the experience of self-forgiveness was reflected in both the cultural and personal contexts and that the cultural values of the Western world served to obscure forgiveness, a factor which had provided impetus to their study. This research may show that the profound political, social and cultural changes within South Africa which provided the background against which this study was conducted, resulted in the phenomena of forgiveness and self-forgiveness becoming common, familiar and more easily understood. In the South African context, the terms forgiveness and self-forgiveness are no longer spoken of in abstract terms but as central to people's existence.

It is evident, as previous researchers have stated (Rowe, et al., 1989), that these phenomena are multi-faceted and would have far reaching significant effects on the individual and on social, cultural and political relationships. In addition, the experiences of self-forgiveness and forgiveness would impact on the psychotherapist as 'witness' to this process, in dealing with clients in psychic pain who are grappling with this phenomenon in psychotherapy.

In Chapter 3, the religious (with a focus on the Jewish perspective), cultural (with a focus on the South African background against which this research was conducted), moral and philosophical approaches to

forgiveness and self-forgiveness will be explored. These approaches to both phenomena will be discussed in view of the fact that researchers have found that these phenomena are 'intimately related' and may possibly be simultaneous processes (Rowe, et al., 1989 and Rowe & Halling, 1998).