
CHAPTER 5**5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY****5.1 AIM OF THE RESEARCH**

Using a mixed method in which the phenomenological principles of data reduction were used (Giorgi, 1975), six participants' retrospective experiences of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy were investigated in order to provide an experientially based and clinically useful understanding of this experience, i.e. the undertaking of the systematic study of human phenomena as they are actually lived, enacted and experienced by human beings. In addition, a hermeneutic approach was applied to the subjects' responses, to the researcher's own and to the discussions within the psychologists' group.

According to Giorgi (1975), 'Phenomenology is the study of the structure, and the variations of structure, of the consciousness to which any thing, event or person appears' in order to elucidate both that which appears and the manner in which it appears, as well as the overall structure which includes only 'that which appears precisely as it presents itself' (pp. 80 & 84). In other words, 'man can only speak of that which appears to his/her stream of consciousness or experience' and Giorgi states that 'the minimum condition for the study of anything is that it be present to someone's consciousness' (p.84). As Fischer (1983) so aptly puts it, the researcher would like to 'reawaken reflectively understand and articulately characterize the psychological meanings of the human phenomenon' (p.64).

In understanding the experience of self-forgiveness as it is lived and experienced in the individual's world, it is important to explain how self-forgiveness is involved in a situation not only pertaining to the self, but in relation to the other. In other words, self-forgiveness is a relational phenomenon and 'describes the manner in which a person co-creates, is affected by, and responds to, a situation' (ibid, 1983, p.65). Thus the aim of this study is to research the experience of self-forgiveness in the individual's world, as well as the interrelated meanings of the situation(s) in his/her life which gave rise to the need for self-forgiveness. It also aims to research the styles individuals use to live out their situation and how they experience this phenomenon in psychotherapy.

5.2 METHOD

In this study, a mixed research approach was used, based on Giorgi's psychological, scientific,

phenomenological principles of data reduction. As Giorgi (1985) states, the guiding theme of phenomenology is to go ‘back to the things themselves’ (Husserl, 1900, cited in Giorgi, 1985, p.8). For an existential-phenomenological psychologist, ‘the interpretation of that expression means to go to the everyday world where people are living through various phenomena in actual situations’ (ibid, 1985, p.8).

In this study, the set of data was subjected to a mixed existential/hermeneutic interpretive approach, as was the dialogue within the psychologists’ group (based on the dialogal research method at Seattle University, 1984-1998). This was done in order to elaborate on the understanding of themes which I, as the primary researcher, had extrapolated from the data obtained with the six participants I had interviewed over two sessions. The assumption that the group would provide an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon was based on the fact that according to Rowe & Halling (1998), understanding and interpretation arose out of dialogue, particularly pertaining to a phenomenon such as self-forgiveness, which is fundamentally interpersonal and ‘could be studied most appropriately using a method characterized by open and ongoing conversation’ (p.231).

5.3 SOURCES OF DATA

There were two sources of data using empirical phenomenological principles in order to analyze the individual’s retrospective experience of self-forgiveness in his/her world and psychotherapy, as well as an existential hermeneutic approach to the subjects’ responses, to the researcher’s own interpretations and to the dialogue within the psychologists’ group.

The first was gaining data on the phenomenon from initial and follow-up in-depth interviews with six research participants (former therapy clients) and checking interpretive themes against various data collections (from previous research) in order to verify existing data and/or introduce new data or elaborate on interpretations.

The second was the dialogal group discussions involving the group’s understanding and experience of the phenomenon. The significance of the discussions with fellow psychologists was that while it was important to get close to the phenomenon in order to let its dimensions emerge, it was also important to be able to distance oneself from the phenomenon in order ‘to be able to share one’s articulation imaginatively with someone else’. In other words, ‘the truth requires a third as witness’ (Kruger, 1986, p. 201).

5.4 THE DATA COLLECTION

5.4.1 THE INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The six participating clients consisted of four women and two men (ranging in ages from 22 to 55 years) who had been in psychotherapy with the researcher (duration of between six to eighteen months) and all of whom had now completed psychotherapy. The clients were selected at random, the only prerequisite being that they had terminated therapy. The selection was also based on their consent and availability. (See Client Permission Form, Appendix B)

It must be emphasized that their reason for contracting for psychotherapy was not in order to seek self-forgiveness and neither had these clients specifically dealt with the experience of self-forgiveness and forgiveness in psychotherapy. It was only once the psychotherapy had ended that they were asked about their understanding and experience of this phenomenon and that they reflected retrospectively on their experience of this phenomenon in psychotherapy. In addition, this study focused on the view of the client who experienced self-forgiveness and was not that of the psychologist.

Brief descriptions of the six clients interviewed follow, introducing them by pseudonym and giving the reason for their referral to psychotherapy as well as a sense of the circumstances that may have given rise to the need for self-forgiveness:

Vernon, (Subject A), a professional man in his thirties, had been in therapy for six months. The reason for referral for psychotherapy was panic and anxiety as a result of dysfunctional childhood experiences and a painful relationship with his father.

Sally, (Subject B), a journalist aged twenty-two years, had been in therapy for nine months. The reason for referral to psychotherapy was panic and anxiety as a result of traumatic childhood experiences connected with sexual abuse and her parents' dysfunctional behaviour.

Justine, (Subject C), a woman in her early forties and the mother of two young children, had been in therapy for nine months. The reason for referral was to work on her marital issues and childhood experiences.

Kathy, (Subject D), a successful businesswoman in her late thirties, recently separated from her husband and the mother of two young children, had been in therapy for fifteen months. Ongoing stress in her marriage was the reason for referral for psychotherapy.

Michael, (Subject E), a businessman in his early thirties, had been in therapy for eighteen months. The referral reason for psychotherapy was panic and anxiety as a result of dysfunctional childhood experiences and his recent divorce.

Wilma, (Subject F), a nursery school owner/manager in her early fifties, had been in therapy for twelve months. She was in a second marriage and mother of four children from a previous marriage (two teenagers and two young adults) whom she had raised single-handedly after the divorce from their father. She was referred to psychotherapy for panic and anxiety as a result of unresolved issues with her former husband.

5.4.2 THE DIALOGAL GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The four psychologists (including this researcher) participating in the informal dialogal group consisted of three female and one male of varying ages, from varying backgrounds and religious beliefs. All had different theoretical training and approaches to their work, and studied at different training institutions within South Africa. One of the participating psychologists had been on the Masters' training programme at Seattle University. All the psychologists have had their own psychotherapy practices from between five to twenty years. (See Confidentiality Form For Participating Psychologists' Group, in Appendix E).

5.5 PROCEDURE

5.5.1 THE COLLECTION OF THE DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Each participating client was interviewed over two sessions. A third interview with one of the

participants was conducted, as it was clear that an additional session was required in order for her to reflect and elaborate further on her experience, so that a mutual understanding of the phenomenon could be reached. In interviewing the six participants regarding their experience of self-forgiveness, this researcher was principally guided by a respectful concern for the phenomenon. The subjects were encouraged to recollect and articulate their own understandings and experiences of self-forgiveness.

At the outset of the first interview, when the individual had agreed to participate as a subject in this research, each participant was reminded about the parameters and conditions of this involvement. (See Sample Introduction for Participant Interviews, Appendix C, adapted from Rooney, 1989). Each participant was then asked to sign a consent form (reproduced in Appendix D, adapted from Rooney, 1989).

The following four general questions were then presented and audiotaped in the first interview: (See Appendix A).

1. **‘Can you tell me what self-forgiveness means to you?’** (adapted from Bauer et al., 1992).
2. **‘What situation or situations in your life gave rise to the need for self-forgiveness?’** (adapted from Rowe, et al., 1989).
3. **‘Can you tell me a time in your life when self-forgiveness was an issue?’** (adapted from Bauer et al., 1992).¹
4. **‘How did your experience in psychotherapy contribute to your understanding of self-forgiveness?’**

‘The only sense in which the subjects’ description is focused by the instructions, is that both situational and subject meanings of the phenomenon are solicited’ (Fischer, 1982, p.66). Thus an attempt is made ‘to remain faithful to the realization that every phenomenon is situated and that it is a phenomenon for someone’, the aim being to induce the individual’s own concrete, situated, and yet unrestricted,

¹. Only the data obtained in questions 1, 2 and 4 were used in the analysis as it was found by the researcher that the participants’ responses to question 3 were often repetitive of question 2.

5.5.2 THE FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

A follow-up interview was conducted once the audio-taped responses to the questions had been transcribed. In the follow-up interview, the subject was given a copy of his/her original description to read and a clarification and/or elaboration of the original descriptions was then requested. No new material was introduced, which ensured the protection of the phenomenon as the subject experienced it, free from the researcher's own preconceptions. This procedure of having the subject read his/her original descriptions helped to situate the subject in the situation that had been experienced and thus facilitated the recall of finer details (Fischer, 1982).

The second interview provided the interviewer and the interviewee an opportunity to reflect on the lived experience presented. The clients responded to the research questions being asked, with both interviews being conversational and open-ended. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were both audio-taped and transcribed.

Each interview was conducted as a collaborative dialogue. The interviewer/researcher tried to be as empathically aware and completely present to the participant as possible. At times, the researcher asked questions for clarification and elaboration, until both the interviewer and interviewee felt a sense of mutual understanding of the phenomenon being explored. An effort was made to keep the questions as open-ended and as non-directive as possible in order not to influence the participant's responses. Interviews ended when a clear empathic understanding and description of the experience of the phenomenon had been obtained.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Staying with the phenomenon meant reading the transcripts at the same time as listening to the audio recording of the scripts. The scripts were then re-read numerous times in order to empathically enter the world of the participant's lived experience rather than being an objective observer. The fact that this researcher had conducted the psychotherapy as well as the interviews, meant that a therapeutic relationship and bonding had occurred. This resulted in the participants being more relaxed and uninhibited about their discussions. However, because of this, client bias could have interfered with his/her discussion regarding the psychotherapy (see Limitations of Research).

Each script was edited by removing or altering all identifying information and fictitious names were

assigned to each of the participants and any other person(s) or places mentioned in their interviews. Questions or remarks by the researcher were deleted, as were those comments judged by the researcher to be repetitive.

63/.....

Page 63

These judgements were based on assessing each statement pertaining to ‘what is revelatory about this question’ and ‘how does this statement shed light on the participant’s experience of finding forgiveness?’ (Wertz, 1983, cited in Rooney, 1989, p.46).

The initial editing process attempted to retain the participant’s own words and only identifying data was changed in order to maintain the participant’s anonymity. This resulted in a more concise version of the participant’s original descriptions in the initial interview.

Questions or remarks made by the researcher were edited. In addition, only statements which were based on the relevance of the individual’s experience of the phenomenon in his/her own world were included. Editing of the scripts resulted in a more concise version of the original descriptions made by each participant in his/her interviews.

5.6 DATA ANALYSIS

5.6.1 THE APPLICATION OF THE EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD TO THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

The data was analyzed in a way that was proposed by Giorgi (1975). A brief description of the structure follows (adapted from de Koning, 1979, in Giorgi et al., 1979; Fischer, 1982, & Giorgi, 1985):

- The researcher reads the entire description of the situation in order to get a sense of the whole.
- The researcher then reads the same descriptions and describes each time that a transition in meaning is perceived with respect to the intention of discovering the meaning of the phenomenon. This procedure results in a creation of a sense of meaning units or constituents.
- Redundancies within the meaning units are then eliminated and the researcher clarifies or elaborates the meaning of the units by relating them to each other and to the sense of the whole.

- The researcher reflects on the given units (expressed essentially in the concrete, everyday, spontaneous language of the subject) and then goes through all of the meaning units and expresses

64/.....

Page 64

the psychological insights and themes in more precise and direct psychological terminology. This is especially true of the meaning units most relevant of the phenomenon under consideration. These transformed psychological insights and themes are listed under the heading of Thematic Meaning Units, in a second column which corresponds directly to the subject's concrete language of the Natural Meaning Units in the first column.

- The researcher then synthesizes all of the transformed Thematic Meaning Units into a consistent description for each of the six participants' respective experiences of the phenomenon. The analysis of each individual description is the achievement of a situated structural description, i.e. a characterization of how self-forgiveness was lived and experienced by each of the particular subjects in each of their particular situations.
- In this research, the situated structural descriptions were grouped under three headings. These headings were the experience of self-forgiveness as lived and experienced by the respective participants; situation(s) in their respective lives which gave rise to the need for self-forgiveness and their respective experiences of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy.
- After completing the situated structural descriptions of each of the six participants' experiences of the phenomenon as described above, an attempt was made by the researcher to determine the general themes around which each of the situated structural descriptions was a variation. A general psychological description of the phenomenon was then formed bearing in mind what general meanings these situations and experiences shared, and as such, how they constituted examples of the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy.

5.6.2 THE DIALOGAL GROUP'S REFLECTIVE DISCUSSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Group dialogue on the phenomenon took place with three psychologists (including this researcher),

during six two-hourly audio-taped sessions over a period of six months. Initially, these open-ended general discussions focused on reading and discussing the literature on forgiveness and self-forgiveness and sharing our own descriptions and experiences of the phenomenon. These discussions then progressed to informally discussing, clarifying and elaboration of the data/scripts.

65/.....

Page 65

Similar to Leifer's (1986) analysis of the dialogal research of the group at Seattle University (cited in Rowe & Halling, 1998), audio recordings of dialoguing within our group meetings confirmed that the context in which the research happens is constituted by three levels of dialogue. These levels are preliminary; transitional; and fundamental. The movement is from preliminary to fundamental dialogue; being the movement from abstract, disjointed, generalized discussion, to a more focused experientially grounded one. It is from this dialogue that a collective understanding emerged (Rowe, et al., 1989). All three levels of dialogue were present in each of our collaborative group discussions and did not happen sequentially.

In addition, the dialogue was not merely between ourselves 'about' the data but more dialogue 'with' the phenomenon (ibid, 1989). We were all personally touched by the phenomenon being studied, which had a direct impact on the group. During one session, discussions of the experience of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy, brought to mind the psychologists' own subjective experiences which were personal and painful and, at times, threatening to 'one's sense of the world', which left one feeling vulnerable (Bauer, 1992, p.153). This self-revelatory session reflected the experiential reality of self-forgiveness in our own lives. Themes relating to the phenomenon which were also based on our personal experiences emanated in these discussions. Gradually a broader general understanding of the phenomenon emerged, as well as an understanding of the role of self-forgiveness in psychotherapy and the value of understanding, both forgiveness and self-forgiveness as therapeutic tools in helping clients deal with these issues in psychotherapy.

The dialoguing investigative process helped the group differentiate between experiential description and theoretical generalization. Ultimately, it got us back to the core essence of the phenomenon itself. The dialogue 'made the phenomenon come alive for us, within us and before us' (Halling & Leifer, 1991, p.10). Dialoguing not only assisted with the group discussion, but resulted in a group cohesion and bonding. Each person's personal account and observations pointed to a larger whole rather than a statement about an individual life. This helped us understand the phenomenon in a broader sense i.e. the notion of 'the general is a positive phenomenon and that structures are lived or implicit, rather than

5.6.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE DIALOGAL GROUP RESEARCH METHOD AT SEATTLE UNIVERSITY AND THE DIALOGAL GROUP DISCUSSIONS REGARDING THE RESEARCH OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-FORGIVENESS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

The main difference with the dialogal group discussions used in this study and the dialogal group research carried out at Seattle University, was that I, being the primary researcher, formulated the research questions on my own. I then collected the descriptions by carrying out the interviews and follow-up interviews with the six participating clients, and informally presented the transcribed scripts (from the audio-tapes) to the group for discussion, clarification and elaboration of themes which I had identified within the scripts.

I read and re-read the scripts on my own whilst listening to the audio-tapes. This was done in order to extrapolate and experience pertinent themes relevant to the individual's experience of self-forgiveness as it occurs in his/her world, which may have been missed in earlier readings. Writing and critiquing the interpretation of the data involved not only continued re-reading of the narratives and transcripts, but returning to the literature and previous research. Unlike the Seattle group, this did not take place in dialogue with fellow colleagues.

Another difference compared to the dialogal research group at Seattle University, was that our dialogal group consisted of four practising psychologists (including this researcher) and besides me, none of the psychologists were directly involved in the research. The groups at Seattle University consisted primarily of students on the Masters' programme who were directly involved in the research. Only one of the groups had more than one faculty person among its members (Halling & Leifer, 1991).

Chapter 6 contains the Results of the Research and includes the following:

1. THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The complete breakdown of the protocol of Subject A into Natural Meaning Units and corresponding Thematic Meaning Units.

67/.....

Page 67

2. THE PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

- The Situated Structural Descriptions of Subjects B, C, D, E and F, in response to the three general questions presented and audio-taped in the first interview with the six participants.
- The General Psychological Description of the Experience of Self-Forgiveness in Psychotherapy.
- Illustrative vignettes of the Constituents of the General Description of the Experience of Self-Forgiveness in Psychotherapy as extrapolated from the Specific Descriptions of the Situated Structures of each of the six participants.
- The Elaborated Structural Description of the Experiences of Self-Forgiveness in Psychotherapy.
- Themes Identified from the Edited Dialogue of the Psychologists' Group regarding the Phenomenon of Self-Forgiveness.
- The General Description of the Identified Themes of the Psychologists' Dialogal Group regarding the Phenomenon of Self-Forgiveness in Psychotherapy.
- The Comparison of the Constituents of the General Description of the participating clients of the Experience of Self-Forgiveness in Psychotherapy and the Identified Themes of the Psychologists'

- The conclusion includes an integration of the above results and an overview of the significant points of the participants' experience of the phenomenon in psychotherapy as well as the psychologist group's reflective understanding of the phenomenon and its role in psychotherapy.

Note :

The hermeneutic or contextual approach to research and to psychotherapy is an interpretive approach within the context of the individual's own world of experience. As psychotherapists, the 'challenge is to illuminate this experience' and 'this approach places a dramatic emphasis on the individual experience of the patient in psychotherapy' (Moss, 1989, cited in Valle & Halling, 1989, p.197).