

ARTICLE

Offenders' understandings of forgiveness

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on victim perceptions of forgiveness comparatively little is known about the meaning offenders attach to forgiveness. Through in-depth interviews with 19 criminal offenders this study sought to lay foundational groundwork regarding offenders' understandings of forgiveness. Offenders viewed forgiveness through both a 'victim' and 'offender' lens. From a victim perspective offenders described giving forgiveness as a response that enabled them to 'let go' or 'get over' personal harms. From an offender perspective receiving forgiveness was defined as being either conditional or unconditional. Conditional forgiveness was related to evidence of positive change in offenders that must occur prior to forgiveness while the essential characteristic of unconditional forgiveness was found to be love. A better understanding of the significance of forgiveness in the lives of criminal offenders has practical implications for clinicians, service providers, and criminal justice professionals involved in the treatment or custodial care of this population.

Keywords: Offenders, forgiveness, victim lens, offender lens.

1. Introduction

Forgiveness is commonly conceptualised in victim-oriented terms (Enright, 2001; Luskin, 2003; North, 1987; Pargament, McCullough & Thoresen, 2000). Forgiveness is theorised as a transformation process, an intrapsychic struggle (Enright, Freedman & Rique, 1998) and a journey that takes time (Whitney, 2011), involving changes in victims' cognitions, emotions and behaviours in relation to the offender (Pargament et al., 2000). North describes forgiveness as

the overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying the right to such affect and judgment, but by endeavouring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to them (North, 1987: 502).

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Empirical research commonly focuses on the effects of forgiveness in ameliorating adverse impacts of victimisation. Crime victims commonly experience severe and negative psychological (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman & Serafini, 1996; Herman, 1997), emotional (Masters, Friedman & Getzel, 1988), behavioural (Bloom, 2010) and somatic (Bloom, 2010; Kendall-Tackett, 2009) outcomes. Victims who forgive report a release from many of the painful after-effects of traumatic experiences (Enright, 2001; Jaeger, 1998) as forgiveness is said to alleviate the mental and emotional 'burden' caused by the offence, allowing forgivers to 'move on' with life (Jenkins, 2018).

While a victim perspective is a common lens from which to view the meaning and salience of forgiveness in addressing harm, scant literature is devoted to offenders' perceptions of forgiveness. Research on combat-related effects on soldiers (Cigrang et al., 2014; Hecker et al., 2013; MacNair, 2002a, 2002b; Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen & Slakov, 2010) and on violent offenders (Evans, Ehlers, Mezey & Clark, 2007; Pollock, 1999) suggests that those who hurt others may be subject to adverse reactions, including PTSD (Pollock, 1999) and perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) (MacNair, 2002a). Such literature advances the notion that, similar to crime victims, offenders suffer adverse effects consequent to their offending behaviour that may profit from forgiveness.

Research suggests that receiving forgiveness benefits wrongdoers in that it helps them desist from crime (Maruna, 2004), promoting future compliant behaviours (Murphy & Helmer, 2013), alleviating feelings of guilt and increasing joy and relief (Gassin, 1998). However, we know little about how or why this occurs. In order to determine whether forgiveness holds ameliorative capacity in addressing the detrimental personal impacts associated with criminal wrongdoing, it is imperative that we *first* understand how offenders make sense of forgiveness particularly in terms of the context of their offences.

The aim of this article is to lay a foundation for understanding offenders' perceptions of forgiveness. Through in-depth interviews, this study explores forgiveness from the point of view of 19 perpetrators of crime by asking 'what are criminal offenders' understandings of forgiveness?' Research supports the assertion that criminal wrongdoing has dire consequences for offenders as well as victims, and therefore it is important to identify responses that may ameliorate the egregious effects of crime and benefit offenders by helping them transition to a more conventional life.

This article is organised as follows: first, in order to contextualise offenders' views of forgiveness I offer an overview of forgiveness as it is conceptualised within psychological, religious and philosophical frameworks. Next, I ground the framework and design of the study in the method of interpretive phenomenology. To follow, I provide a biographical sketch of the offenders and present the findings of the study, focusing on the ways that offenders understand or make sense of forgiveness. Lastly, I discuss the findings as well as the study's limitations and conclude with a consideration of the implications of the study findings for justice and mental health professionals.

2 Conceptualising forgiveness

A variety of lenses are used when conceptualising forgiveness. In the psychological literature forgiveness has been viewed as both a motivational and a prosocial construct (McCullough, 2000). McCullough (2000) posits that forgiveness is evidenced by relationship-constructive transformations such that victims are motivated to respond in a manner that contributes to the offender's well-being rather than avoid or retaliate. McCullough explains, 'thus forgiveness is not a motivation per se but rather, a complex of prosocial *changes* in one's basic interpersonal motivation following a serious interpersonal offence' (2000: 45, emphasis in original).

Enright et al. define forgiveness as 'a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behaviour toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her' (1998: 46-47). Similarly, psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (2009) states that 'forgiveness, at a minimum, is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward the person that wronged you'.

While there is no single consensual definition of forgiveness, the above conceptualisations suggest that forgiveness may be recognised or expressed as the complete absence or *giving up* of the justly held feelings of anger, negative judgment, revenge and indifferent behaviour towards an offender in conjunction with the *giving* of goodwill, compassion, generosity and sacrificial love.

Forgiveness is also a religious construct with significant import for the adherents of various faiths. As a key tenet of many religions, forgiveness is conceptualised as a sacred gift so imbued with the essence of the Divine that it holds the keys to enlightenment, righteousness and Eternal Life (Al-Hadis, as cited in Ali, 2000; Beck, 2000; Bishop, 1968; Carus, 1894; Newman, 1987; Pilch, 2014). To forgive in the aftermath of wrongdoing is viewed as both an ethical obligation and a religious duty to God (Newman, 1987). To receive God's forgiveness, the sin is confessed, a sincere commitment is made to refrain from future wrongdoing and God's forgiveness is petitioned (Ali, 2000). When the wrongdoer desires the victim's forgiveness, he or she must seek to rectify the harm they caused and ask for forgiveness (Ali, 2000).

Like religious scholars, philosophers have sought to understand the meaning, depth and breadth of forgiveness. Forgiveness, according to Kant, involves a change of *action* towards an offender, not a change of *feeling*. Murphy disagrees, stating, 'forgiveness is primarily a matter of how I feel about you (not how I treat you)' (1988: 21). Hampton¹ refers to the feeling that allows forgiveness to occur as a 'change of heart', which is the culmination of a process that, in part, includes the 'giving up [of] emotions such as spite and malice [and] ... overcoming resentment' (1988: 83).

In Hampton's (1988) view, forgiveness particularly benefits the wrongdoer, as it liberates him or her from 'the hell of self-loathing' resulting from the victim's

1 Jean Hampton (1954-1996) was an American political philosopher, professor and author.

moral hatred² of them (Hampton, 1988, 86-87). Forgiveness from others may help pave the way to the perpetrator's future law-abiding behaviour, as they may reason, 'if he can see enough in me to welcome me back, then maybe I am not such a hideous person after all' (Hampton, 1988: 86-87). Therefore, forgiveness as a change of heart – experienced by the victim towards the offender – releases the offender from the burden of a discredited identity.

Forgiveness can be controversial and is often rejected as a legitimate response to wrongdoing as a result of numerous misperceptions (Freedman & Enright, 1996). Forgiveness is not forgetting (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010) and is discrete from condonation (Enright 2001; North, 1987), tolerance, excuse and justification (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini & Miller, 2007). Forgiveness is also differentiated from reconciliation, as one may forgive without reconciling with the offender (Freedman, 1998).

In sum, forgiveness may be recognised or expressed as the relinquishment of the justly held feelings of anger, negative judgment, revenge and indifferent behaviour towards an offender in conjunction with the bestowal of goodwill, compassion, generosity and sacrificial love.

3 Method

The analytic framework used in this study was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Heidegger, 1953/1996). IPA is a means of performing qualitative analysis that focuses on how people make sense of their experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) and is thus a suitable methodology in research that aims to better understand a particular phenomenon through precise and rich descriptions of others' experiences and insights (Finlay 2009; van Manen 1990). Phenomenology attempts to grasp not the objective 'facts' of an experience but rather the experience as it is lived through an individual's actions, relations and situations (van Manen, 2007).

The primary focus of IPA is to 'give full appreciation to each participant's account (case)' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014: 9). IPA researchers are encouraged to focus more on the depth of the study as opposed to the breadth. While there is 'no rule' regarding an appropriate number of research participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014: 9), IPA studies commonly have small samples focused on individuals for whom the research questions have personal significance. A purposive sampling strategy was employed in this research (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant & Rahim, 2013). The criteria for inclusion in the study were that the individual be an adult 17 years of age or older and have, at least once in their lifetime, been formally charged with a criminal offence. To capture a large range of offence types and experiences, no criteria regarding the nature of the offence was imposed. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and participants were given the opportunity to choose their own.

- 2 According to Hampton (1988), moral hatred 'involves believing, by virtue of the insulter's association with the evil cause, that she has "rotted" or "gone bad" so that she now lacks some measure of goodness or moral health' (p. 80).

Offenders were contacted through recruitment flyers emailed to all university community members via the university's monthly e-newsletter, and through personal emails and private messages on social media, to past-incarcerated offenders who were known to a member of the research team. Individuals who expressed interest in participating were sent further details on the study, and interviews were scheduled at that time. Participants were 19 offenders (14 men; 5 women), ranging in age from 20 to 70, who had been charged with a variety of offences.

Data collection comprised semi-structured interviews with those who confessed to have committed an offence. To facilitate the natural flow of conversation (Faubert, 2012) and allow participants to tell their own story rather than 'to simply be a respondent' (Eatough & Smith, 2006: 119), each interview began with the open stance of asking participants to share their experience of committing crime(s), particularly those offences that would be relevant to a consideration of forgiveness. Follow-up questions were used as needed to guide the direction of the interview towards topics related to their understanding of forgiveness. For example: *How would you describe or define forgiveness? What does forgiveness look and feel like? How can you tell if someone forgives you?*

Interviews were conducted in places that afforded a measure of safety such as a meeting room at the university and a community centre, yet allowed for the conversation not to be easily overheard by others. Eleven of the 19 interviews were held in person; one was held over the telephone; and eight were held via Skype, three with the participant's camera turned off. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

As described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and Larkin and Thompson (2012), data analysis was an iterative process involving multiple readings of the interview transcripts and three divisions of coding, which facilitated identifying emergent and master themes within each case and superordinate themes across cases. The analytic process consisted of three primary steps.

In the first step the audio-recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was then placed in a Word table, with the transcript in the centre column. In the left-hand column, general descriptive elements about initial concepts identified as meaningful were noted. The right-hand column included a running narrative regarding researcher perceptions of the participants' words. The second step involved a more detailed line-by-line analysis of each interview transcript. During this process, sections of text that stood out as having significance for the participant were highlighted and described. The third step of the analysis was conceptual, as the complexity of the participants' meanings (which were identified and described in the second stage of coding) was further honed. This step also involved seeking for relationships, commonalities, differences and patterns between the emergent themes. In addition to displaying the master themes in a table, the ongoing narrative written during each iterative stage of the analysis was used to create an analytical synopsis for each participant. Overall, the coding process underwent several iterations to attain the two superordinate themes of *Giving Forgiveness* and *Receiving Forgiveness* that encapsulated the offenders' perceptions of forgiveness.

4 Findings

4.1 *Sample: Offenders' stories*³

1. **Allegra**, a woman in her early thirties, was convicted of petty theft. She said her toddler grabbed items from a basket at the store and put them in his pram when she was not looking. Upon leaving the store, the items were found and Allegra was arrested.

2. **Austin**, a student in his early twenties, was convicted on child pornography charges. As a young teenager, Austin's Internet 'friend', an adult male paedophile, encouraged him to create a fake Facebook page posing as a teenage girl. Using his online female persona, Austin 'friended' and solicited teenage boys to send 'her' sexually explicit photographs and videos that he then sent to his friend.

3. **Boone**, a middle-aged man, had 'four or five' convictions on various drug possession charges and drink-driving offences.

4. **Bully**, a middle-aged male, had a criminal history involving drug use, possession, stealing and drug trafficking spanning over 25 years. Incarcerated many times, Bully has been out of prison for over a decade.

5. **Claire**, a middle-aged woman, was convicted, 20 years previously, of driving under the influence (DUI).

6. **Crazy**, a middle-aged man, was convicted of theft and breaking and entering (B&E).

7. **Daisy**, a middle-aged former prostitute, was charged with stealing and work cover fraud.⁴ Daisy was convicted in the work cover case and sentenced to pay back \$17,000.

8. **Daniel**, an older man, was, as a teenager, convicted of traffic offences resulting in the death of a pedestrian.

9. **Darrin**, a former English teacher in his early thirties, was convicted of two counts of sexual assault perpetrated against one of his students, a 15-year-old girl.

10. **Gabriel**, a middle-aged man, was convicted of numerous crimes, the most serious being manslaughter.

11. **Hope**, a middle-aged university student, was incarcerated for a number of offences, including drug trafficking and fraud.

12. **Hugo**, a man in his late thirties, was incarcerated for 14 years on two counts of second-degree murder, a crime he committed when he was a teenager.

13. **Inga**, a student in her late twenties, was convicted of simple assault against her uncle after an alcohol-fuelled family argument.

14. **John**, a middle-aged man, spent nearly half his life in prison for a host of offences, including armed robbery, assault on police and break and enter.

3 The stories shared by offenders are presented as they were told to the researcher. There was no attempt to validate or refute the truthfulness of their accounts.

4 Work cover fraud or fraudulent workers' compensation refers to a situation where an employee inaccurately claims that they are unable to work in order to receive financial benefits. Daisy maintained that she was injured on the job and had complied with all the rules.

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15. Lars, a middle-aged man, has a 20-year history as a crystal methamphetamine (ice) addict. Lars said all of his offences have been drug related.

16. Mick, a middle-aged man, was convicted and imprisoned for a number of drug-related offences, including trafficking.

17. Patrick, a middle-aged former neo-Nazi, ran a computer-operated voice-mail system that disseminated hate propaganda for a number of far-right organisations across four continents. Patrick's case went before two Human Rights Tribunals and the Supreme Court after he refused a government order to shut down his operation. Patrick was found guilty of contempt.

18. Real, a middle-aged man, served four federal prison sentences, totalling over 30 years, for a variety of offences, including kidnapping, armed robbery, weapons charges and first-degree murder.

19. Bob, a recent university graduate in his thirties, served time in prison for armed robbery.

The study sample was diverse in terms of ages (20 to 70), gender (5 women and 14 men) and seriousness of the crimes committed; ranging from DUI to first-degree murder. Twelve participants spent time in prison or jail for their offences, while the outcome of the crime for seven offenders ranged from fines to community service.

4.2 Themes

The theme *Giving Forgiveness* revealed both victim-oriented and offender-oriented perspectives. When viewed in the context of personal victimisation, offenders understood forgiveness as 'letting go' of the wounds they suffered, while from an offender-perspective offenders understood forgiveness as empathetic understanding. The theme *Receiving Forgiveness* illustrates offenders' views of forgiveness that depict the receipt of forgiveness as either having conditions attached or as a gift received unconditionally.

4.2.1 *Giving forgiveness: a 'victim' perspective*

I found from my conversations with offenders that forgiveness as a concept was not easy to define. Offenders often responded to the question 'How would you describe forgiveness?' with a long pause, a considered stare or a drawn out 'ummmm'. One said, 'that's a good question', and another, 'it's a hard one, isn't it'. Most offenders grounded their depictions of forgiveness in the deeply personal and painful narratives of their experience of victimisation and/or criminal offending.

4.2.2 *Forgiveness is 'letting go'*

Two-thirds (13) of offenders contextualised their understandings of forgiveness from the perspective of their *own victimisation*. Nearly half (9) defined giving forgiveness as 'letting go' of negative thoughts and feelings and 'getting over' hurts and wounds. Heartbreaking personal stories of victimisation often framed offenders' perceptions of forgiveness. For instance, Hugo, incarcerated for 14

years on two counts of second-degree murder, struggled to let go of the animosity and pain he felt towards his mother for abandoning him as a child:

I can say from my experience because I've forgiven my mother that it just is letting go of her behaviour. Not taking it personal anymore at all you know. Forgiveness to me is whatever I was offended by that other person realising that it's a result of their own inner feelings and so it has nothing to do with me really.

Hugo's account of relinquishing the pain of his mother's hurtful behaviour highlighted the relationship between empathy, understanding and forgiveness. Hugo explained that he was able to cognitively empathise and forgive his mother once he understood that her behaviour was caused by her own issues and problems and not because of anything he had done.

Hope, a woman convicted of drug offences and theft, also understood forgiveness from a 'victim' perspective as she told of the anger she felt when her partner was murdered during a drug deal. Hope said she wanted the man who killed her boyfriend 'to hurt' and 'die'. In fury, Hope confronted the killer in the courtroom, but forgave him when he responded to her outburst in an unexpected manner:

I screamed out in court, *but are you sorry? Are you fucking sorry?* He turned around looked at me and said *of course I'm sorry*. Ahhh! Took the breath away from me! And I really wanted to write to him to say you took someone from my life who's never coming back. You hurt me beyond belief. But I forgive you. So forgiveness to me means that I can harbour no grudges whatsoever. I could talk to him. I could sit down I could even try and help soothe him and heal his wounds and try and help him by saying it's OK you know. Forgive yourself.

Hope's account both illustrates the association between apologies and forgiveness and depicts forgiveness as action oriented. Hope was bitterly angry and vengeful towards the man who killed her partner *until* he said he was sorry. The offender's apology not only precipitated forgiveness, but stirred in Hope a desire to help the offender. For Hope, forgiveness meant becoming personally invested in the offender's life by helping to mend his psychological and emotional wounds.

5 Giving forgiveness: an 'offender' perspective

5.1 *Forgiveness is empathetic understanding*

For one-quarter of offenders (5), their conceptualisations of forgiveness as empathetic understanding came from the standpoint of a wrongdoer or from an 'offender' perspective. Their depictions of forgiveness as tolerance, respect and the ability not only to understand the offender's motivations, but also to see them as someone whose worth was not solely defined by their crimes may reflect the manner in which *they* hoped to be viewed and treated. Daniel, convicted of

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traffic offences resulting in death, was angered by what he believed was unfair judgment directed at himself as a person (i.e. you are 'bad') by the police and even by his father. He explained that forgiveness prescribed a tolerant rather than judgmental view of the wrongdoer, remarking, 'I often say there but for the grace of God, go you' (i.e. it could happen to you). In Daniel's view, forgiveness was the ability to put oneself in the offender's place and an understanding that people should not be judged by one incident.

For two offenders it was the stigma of their sex crimes that underpinned their perceptions of forgiveness. Darrin, a married middle-school teacher, was shocked and ashamed by the improper and illegal sexual relationship he had with a 15-year-old student. He described forgiveness as 'accepting that the person has done harm to you *but* still respecting that person as a *person* and not figuring that person's entire *identity* by that harm'.

Like Darrin, Austin, a 20-year-old convicted of possessing, distributing and procuring child exploitation material, spoke about the stigma he experienced as a sex offender. Austin explained how he viewed forgiveness as an effort made by the forgiver to better understand the factors that motivated the offender's behaviour:

I think it's pretty hard to not forgive someone if you can understand where they were at the point. I think that's why forgiveness is such a hard thing for a lot of people because if you haven't been in the situation how do you know how they were feeling? Or how do you know what emotions are happening in their body and yeah so understanding is sort of how I see it.

It was apparent from the offenders' accounts that for some, empathetic understanding, or what Gladstein referred to as *cognitive empathy*, 'intellectually taking the role or perspective of another person' (1983: 468), was perceived as fundamental to forgiveness. Offenders felt that forgiveness occurred when others released their judgmental attitudes towards the wrongdoer, were able to take the perspective of the wrongdoer, understand that all have the capacity to do wrong, and to view the offender as a person not wholly defined by their crimes.

6 Forgiveness is the giving and receiving of grace

Though forgiveness is often conceptualised within a religious context (Beck, 2000; Newman, 1987), religious beliefs framed the understanding of forgiveness for only a few (3) offenders in this study. For example, Daisy left her husband and turned to prostitution following her husband's infidelity. Taking the victim perspective, Daisy explained that she forgave by letting go of the bitterness. Daisy said she told her husband's mistress, 'I forgive you because *God* tells me I *have* to forgive you'. An essential element of the Christian understanding of forgiveness is the perception of it as the embodiment of grace, a 'free gift' from God (Jones, 1995). Lars, convicted of drug-related charges, described to me his understanding of forgiveness as 'a form of grace', stating that 'we're sort of in a way *expected* to

show the same grace that we've been shown ... the forgiveness from God, that's what it's all about'. In view of the preceding accounts, there is a sense that those who viewed forgiveness through a religious lens perceived it as an obligation – something they 'have to' or are 'expected to' show – because God requires it and because they have received God's forgiveness.

7 Receiving forgiveness

7.1 *Forgiveness is conditional*

In their depictions of forgiveness offenders made a distinction between forgiveness that is given with stipulations attached and forgiveness given unconditionally. For some offenders (4) receiving forgiveness was integrally connected with offender accountability and reparation. These offenders viewed forgiveness as a conditional process whereby the wrongdoer had to take certain actions before forgiveness was given. Mick, a convicted drug trafficker, identified apology, reparative actions and future law-abiding behaviour as actions that an offender had to take to receive forgiveness:

All I can think about is saying sorry and tryin' to – ah – make amends for my actions by becoming a better person. Steering clear of my old behaviour and I suppose try and help people that are in the same predicament as I had *been* and trying to influence them in that way.

Like Mick, Real explained how his understandings of forgiveness centred on actions that he believed the offender should make. While serving two life sentences for murder, Real was introduced to restorative justice, which he credited with helping him make positive changes to his behaviour. Real expressed his opinion on the steps that offenders should take prior to receiving forgiveness:

Forgiveness is first you have to admit that you've done something wrong. For me that's a – well it's a no-brainer [chuckles]. I'm not the shiniest penny in the pond but I know that [laughs] OK. I have done some extremely wrong OK.⁵ Not only towards other people but towards myself OK as a result. And another thing after that is what are you doing to change that behaviour to make sure that this doesn't happen again? Because that's very important because sorry doesn't mean *nothing* if you don't change the behaviour you know.

These offender narratives indicate that forgiveness was understood as part and parcel of offender remorse and accountability. Two other offenders believed that the reparative steps the wrongdoer must take be made with the goal of restoring the injured relationship. Allegra, convicted of petty theft, explained that the process of forgiveness started at the point of an offender's apology and continued

5 English is a second language for Real.

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with efforts to earn the victim's trust. At this point, she said, the victim forgives the offender, and both parties make an effort to mend the 'fractured' relationship. Darrin, a convicted sex offender, told how his wife forgave him as his actions, over time, proved he was worthy of her trust. When asked how he knew that his wife forgave him, Darrin replied:

Both saying it in words but also the fact that we've been able to grow our relationship and even though you know *there are* trust issues there and she is cautious as you would expect her to be she makes efforts not to hold what happened against me and she makes efforts to continue to develop trust again in me. So rather than saying '*I'm never going to trust you anymore*' she's letting me earn trust back.

According to these accounts, some offenders understood that receiving forgiveness was, in large part, predicated on their own behaviours following their offence. To be forgiven or to enhance the likelihood of receiving forgiveness, these offenders recognised that they must not only make an apology, but back up that apology with actions that showed the victim that they had made positive changes and were indeed worthy of being forgiven.

7.2 *Forgiveness is unconditional*

Three offenders described forgiveness as 'unconditional'. This notion of forgiveness was rooted in their understanding of love – unconditional forgiveness was given not because of any meritorious actions on their part, but because they were loved by the forgiver. Two offenders experienced forgiveness through their mother's love. John, convicted of drug offences and armed robbery, said his mother 'played harsh', but he knew she forgave him: 'she'd love me no matter what you know'. Crazy, convicted of break and enter and theft, spoke angrily about being rejected by his siblings and uncles because of his addictions and criminal lifestyle – however, it appeared that Crazy had a different relationship with his mother. Crazy said his mother forgave him because he was, as he described, her 'golden child'. When asked to describe what his mother's forgiveness felt like, he exclaimed:

Love! She's always given me love. She's never turned her back on me. She would never do it. There's no way in the world she would ever do it. I know that about her. She would *never* turn her back on me no matter *what* I did.

It was apparent that John and Crazy never doubted their mother's forgiveness. They both believed that their mothers loved them to such a degree that no action on their part would ever separate them from that love.

Two other offenders characterised unconditional forgiveness by contrasting it with conditional or questionable forgiveness. Bully, a convicted drug trafficker, perceived forgiveness as being able 'to forgive somebody for anything, no matter what it is'. Bully found it difficult to tell if he was forgiven because, as he said, 'There's two types of forgivers. There's genuine ones and there's people that try to

forgive ya'. When I asked Bully how he could tell the difference between these two, he answered:

Well, a lot of people say they forgive ya but deep down they don't and that's always in the back of yer mind that – oh no! Look what I've done. Whereas if you truly forgive someone it doesn't matter what they've done. You're forgiven.

Bob, convicted of armed robbery, also saw true forgiveness as unconditional. However, unlike Bully, in Bob's estimation God was the only one who offered unconditional forgiveness:

Forgiveness for me, come[s] from a Christian background. Being forgiven generally happens through the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection... I suppose forgiveness from people is a little bit fleeting. What's the word for it – unconditional love whereas forgiveness from a person is I see it as conditional...everyone is human there's going to be some reservation or hurt from what's happened. I'd like to go and say sorry to the guy [the victim] but he's probably not going to want to see me so even in *trying* to get forgiveness from him he might say, '*yeah I forgive you*' but it's not going to be unconditional. He's going to reserve some sort of '*screw you buddy*' [little laugh].

Unconditional forgiveness was viewed as a genuine expression of love and acceptance that covered all acts of wrongdoing and reflected a close and committed relationship between the wrongdoer and the forgiver.

8 Contradictory views of forgiveness

Four offenders viewed forgiveness in ways contradictory or opposite to meanings commonly associated with it, such as the belief that to forgive is to forget or the assumption that forgiveness automatically leads to reconciliation between the victim and the offender. Claire, a woman convicted of DUI and herself a victim of domestic violence, shared her struggle to describe forgiveness because of its connection to reconciliation:

Forgiveness is complicated. Because when I think about my abusive ex that's not a word I can use. So I don't hold resentment [or] anger. But at the same time it doesn't feel right to use forgive[ness] the way that I think we often use it. Because I think there's too much about that forgiving and then wanting to embrace the person. I don't want that person in my life or anything to do with me or the kids. So I find it complicated.

Though Claire said that she no longer held ill feeling towards her ex-partner, she was unable to say she forgave him if forgiving meant accepting him back into her life. Two other offenders repudiated the adage 'forgive and forget'. Allegra, con-

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victed of petty theft, rejected this notion because she believed that it was not only impossible for people to 'forget' the offence, but that it was unhealthy to do so. She said that when people 'pretend' to forget the offence, the hurt and offending behaviour remained unresolved: 'you can push it to the back of your mind but you always know it's there.' Even when the phrase 'forgive and forget' was viewed from an 'offender' rather than a 'victim' perspective, offenders said it was an unrealistic expectation. Real, a convicted violent offender, explained, 'I have to live with what I've done for the rest of my life OK. Whether they forgive me or not I still have to live with what I've done ... *I can never forget what I've done OK*'.

Understandings of forgiveness sometimes differ from common conceptualisations. Established meanings of forgiveness, such as those that associate it with reconciliation or the notion that individuals should 'forgive and forget', can be problematic as these interpretations may be viewed as both unrealistic and detrimental to the well-being of the victim and the wrongdoer.

9 Discussion

9.1 Giving forgiveness

The findings showed that offenders most commonly understood forgiveness from a forgiver's viewpoint, or from the perspective of someone who had themselves been the victim of harm. Many offenders described giving forgiveness in terms of an effort made to 'let go' or 'get over' personal hurts and wounds, including parental abandonment and murder of a partner. These findings align with previous research, which finds that the lives of offenders are commonly marked by trauma and victimisation. Personal experiences of mistreatment framed the understandings of forgiveness for a number of offenders in this study. For these participants forgiveness was, first and foremost, viewed as a response that they may (or may not) have chosen to give to those who hurt them.

A few offenders in this study also drew on religious beliefs when conceptualising the giving of forgiveness. The word 'grace' was used to describe giving forgiveness to others in response to receiving forgiveness from God. Some offenders depicted grace not as a change of heart or the adoption of prosocial motivations towards the wrongdoer, as forgiveness is commonly viewed (e.g. Hampton, 1988), but as an 'expectation' that must be fulfilled. The connection between giving forgiveness as a response to receiving God's past and future forgiveness is noted in the literature. For example, in Macaskill's (2005) study on the meaning of forgiveness for Christian clergy (compared with a community sample), she found that clergy members frequently referred to divine forgiveness in their efforts to explain its meaning. Clergy members described forgiveness as 'tak[ing] place whether or not the forgiver feels compassion' and is 'about grace and therefore limitless' (2005: 1247-1249). Offenders in this study who perceived forgiveness as a religious obligation appeared to have less of an emotional connection with the person they forgave. 'We're... *expected* to show the same grace that we've been shown...the forgiveness from God,' as Lars explained, and Daisy too: 'God tells me *I have to forgive you*'. Rather than a gift of benevolence to the offender, forgive-

ness given to fulfil a religious obligation seemed to focus more on benefits for the forgiver in terms of receiving God's forgiveness now and in the future.

Finally, a number of participants described giving forgiveness as taking a cognitive empathetic stance towards a wrongdoer. In contrast with the previous 'victim' perspective, some offenders in this study defined forgiveness as 'empathetic understanding' by situating its meaning in the context of their own offences. Empathetic understanding, while not forgiveness per se, is a facilitating factor of forgiveness (Novitz, 1998). According to Novitz (1998), an integral part of the 'task' of forgiveness entails an effort to 'identify imaginatively' with the offender's situation or seeking 'the other side of the story' to understand what motivated them, a process North (1998: 23) calls 'reframing' and one that is a key aspect of restorative justice processes (Enright & Kittle, 1999).

Empathetic understanding entailed putting oneself in the proverbial shoes of the offender to understand 'where they were at the point' (of the offence), as Daniel suggested. Daniel, who hit and killed a pedestrian with his car, appealed to what Garrard and McNaughton (2003) refer to as a sense of common humanity in his explanation of forgiveness when he said, 'There but for the grace of God, go you'. Rather than being an excuse for his action, Daniel's statement prompts others to acknowledge that had they been in the same position as he, it is possible that they may have acted similarly. Forgiveness recognises our 'common human frailty' (Garrard & McNaughton, 2003: 57) and acknowledges that because *all* people have the capacity to do both *good* and *bad*, a person's worth should not be defined by their wrong behaviours.

This separation of the wrongdoer's worth from their 'bad act' is a fundamental aspect of Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming. Reintegrative shaming condemns the 'evil' act while upholding the worth of the offender (Braithwaite, 1989: 101). The focus of reintegrative shaming is on welcoming the offender back into the community through gestures such as forgiveness that remove the deviant label. For a number of offenders in this study, forgiveness in the expression of empathetic understanding both acknowledged the wrongfulness of their actions and communicated respect for their worth as a fellow human being.

9.2 Receiving forgiveness

Unconditional forgiveness was depicted in the context of close and loving relationships. Crazy trusted that his mother would forgive him 'no matter what'. Unconditional forgiveness came without strings attached; it was given simply because of *who* the offender was and what they *meant* to the person giving forgiveness and was experienced as love. McCullough et al. (1998) found that forgiveness not only occurs more often in the context of close and committed relationships but is also related to restoring relational closeness following interpersonal transgression.

Unconditional forgiveness was not a ubiquitous viewpoint. Most offenders believed that forgiveness should be granted only after the wrongdoer took certain steps, such as accepting responsibility, making a sincere apology, helping other

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offenders get their lives on track and desisting from criminal behaviours. This variance of offender viewpoints regarding unconditional versus conditional forgiveness reflects arguments taken up by various scholars. For example, North asserts:

If I am to forgive I must risk extending my trust and affection, with no guarantee that they will not be flung back in my face or forfeited again in the future. One might even say that forgiveness is an unconditional response to the wrongdoer, for there is something unforgiving in the demand for a guarantee. (1987: 505)

In contrast, Murphy (2003) argues that forgiveness must await repentance or a change of heart shown by the offender. When forgiveness is given without that change of heart on the offender's behalf, which Murphy refers to as 'hasty forgiveness' (2000: 1359), it can harm both the forgiver and the forgiven. In the absence of repentance,⁶ which, if genuine, would indicate a change of heart, forgiveness may be perceived as the victim's failure to show self-respect and may deprive the offender of not only the inducement to receive forgiveness, but also the moral growth that may accompany such efforts.

In consonance with a number of preconditions of forgiveness outlined by offenders in this study, such as acceptance of responsibility, genuine apology, good works and desistance from crime, previous empirical research has also described similar offender responses that some victims require prior to forgiving. For example, Nyarko and Punamäki (2017) found in their interviews with 13 victims of war that they required the offender to recognise their crimes, issue a public apology and display genuine commitment to peacebuilding before they would consider forgiveness. As one victim stated, 'Forgiveness is the key, but the door to forgiveness should be genuine repentance and sincere apology' (Nyarko & Punamäki, 2017: 168). Data from the current study indicates that some offenders, like victims, believed that receiving (or hoping to) forgiveness was fundamentally related to expressions and evidence of positive change on the part of offenders.

10 Forgiveness is not reconciliation and 'forgive and forget'

Some offenders in this study contextualised their understanding of forgiveness more in terms of what it is *not* rather than what it *is*. Forgiveness and reconciliation were commonly associated in meaning by offenders who were grateful that they had been reconciled with loved ones who forgave them, as was Steve, a convicted sex offender, whose wife's forgiveness led to reconciliation. However, for Claire, a woman convicted of DUI and who was also a past victim of domestic vio-

6 According to Murphy (2003), 'Repentance is the remorseful acceptance of responsibility for wrongful and harmful actions, the repudiation of one's character that generated the actions, the resolve to do one's best to extirpate those aspects of one's character, and the resolve to atone or make amends for the harms that one has done' (p. 41).

lence, the association between forgiveness and reconciliation made her understanding of forgiveness 'complicated'. She had no desire to forgive her ex-partner if forgiveness meant reconciliation. The assumption that reconciliation must follow forgiveness is often at the heart of criticisms of forgiveness. For example, prior research suggests that forgiveness in abusive situations may be 'unwise' (Hargrave, 1994) and inappropriate (Forward & Buck, 1989). Though forgiveness has been found to hold potent benefits for victims of abuse (e.g. Freedman & Enright, 1996; Reed & Enright, 2006), the literature nonetheless makes crucial distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Enright, Freedman and Rique, forgiveness 'is one person's response to injury. Reconciliation involves two people coming together again' (1998: 44) and depends on the offender's behaviour and intent to change (Freedman, 1998). Though the literature clearly supports understandings of forgiveness that do not conflate it with reconciliation, it is not surprising that offenders who see reconciliation as a key component of being forgiven are also those who desire to maintain a relationship with the forgiver. It is also equally understandable that offenders who have been subject to victimisation, like Claire, are not inclined to have a conceptualisation of forgiveness that entails allowing the abuser back into their lives. Thus, according to the data from this research, offenders' perceptions of forgiveness appear to reflect the desires and expectations each had regarding how they wanted their life to move forward after forgiveness.

The common adage 'forgive and forget' is a perspective of forgiveness also rejected by a number of offenders in my study. Some believed that forgetting offences, even those that had been forgiven, was unrealistic (e.g. Real: 'I can never forget what I've done') and detrimental to both the victims' and the offenders' psychological and emotional well-being. Ignored or 'forgotten' offences were thought to linger in the back of one's mind. Some offenders believed it was better to address the harms and work to repair the relationship. These findings align with prior research suggesting that negative thoughts or ruminations about distressing experiences and feelings is a maladaptive cognitive response (Carson & Cupach, 2000), and one associated with a number of damaging outcomes, including ongoing PTSD (Ehlers & Clark, 2000) and developing and maintaining depression (Lyubomirsky & Tkach, 2004). In opposition to the colloquialism 'forgive and forget', data from this study indicates that in the estimation of some offenders, it is better to acknowledge and address the pain caused by the harm.

11 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to extend our understanding of forgiveness by adding the voice of offenders to the dialogue. From conversations with criminal offenders, I conclude that offenders viewed forgiveness from the vantage point of both a victim *and* an offender. As part of the way offenders made sense of what it felt like or meant to them to be the forgiver and the role they played with respect to being forgiven, offenders explained forgiveness in terms of 'giving' and 'receiving'. Personal experiences of maltreatment framed the understandings of forgive-

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ness held by many offenders. Offenders understood *giving* forgiveness as a response that helped them 'let go' or 'get over' harm they experienced when they were wronged. Offenders viewed *receiving* forgiveness in terms of empathetic understanding, and empathetic forgiveness as an effort by the forgiver to put themselves in the offender's 'shoes' and as an action that separates the worth of the offender from the 'bad act' they committed. Receiving forgiveness was also associated with expressions and evidence of a change of heart on the part of offenders, was believed to release all hurt, covered all types of offences and was experienced as love.

While this study makes a unique and important contribution to the forgiveness literature by adding offenders' perspectives to our understanding of forgiveness, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The first limitation involves the size and homogeneity of the sample. Though the sample varies in terms of age and type of crimes committed, this is a qualitative study focused on obtaining an in-depth understanding of perceptions of forgiveness in a relatively small, predominately Australian, sample of criminal offenders. The qualitative method of interpretive phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to use for the study objectives. However, this methodology limits the applicability of these findings to other populations. While the purpose of qualitative methods is not to generalise findings to the larger population, future research could seek to extend the study findings by drawing on a larger and more diverse sample and deploying statistical analysis. Gender proportionality is acknowledged as another limitation – the sample comprised nearly three times as many men as women (five women and 14 men). Consequently, the offender findings may be more reflective of male offenders' experiences and perceptions than of women's, although it should be noted that men overall are over-represented in offending statistics.

Moving forward, restorative justice processes such as conferencing and victim-offender mediation provide fertile ground for research exploring offenders' perceptions of forgiveness in terms of whether they felt forgiven, the effects their perceptions of forgiveness had on their overall well-being and their satisfaction with the restorative justice process and whose forgiveness matters most to them (i.e. family, victims). High rates of re-offending suggest that retributive responses do not diminish offending rates (Lacey & Pickard, 2015) – therefore, it may also be useful to understand whether receiving forgiveness within a restorative justice context is an effective risk-reduction strategy and related to offender desistance. In addition, future research could compare offender views of forgiveness with those of non-offenders to explore whether their own offending, in contrast with their victimisation, revealed a different perception of forgiveness.

This study lays the foundational groundwork regarding the meaning and salience of forgiveness in the lives of criminal offenders. An awareness of the meaning criminal offenders attach to forgiveness has practical implications for clinicians, service providers and criminal justice professionals involved in the treatment of custodial care of this population as it may enable them to create and implement treatment programmes and protocols that address the complex needs of criminal offenders. Research suggests that offenders experience egregious impacts as a result of the harm they inflict on others (Evans, Ehlers, Mezey &

Clark, 2007; MacNair, 2002a; Pollock, 1999). In order to assist offenders in effectively addressing the detrimental impacts associated with their criminal behaviour and to facilitate their successful re-entry into the community (see Maruna (2011) – redemption rituals; Bazemore (1998) – community forgiveness as ‘earned redemption’), it is important to identify responses that hold ameliorative capacity. The findings of this study suggest that forgiveness may be such a response.

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