Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Family Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjfs20

Towards a fuller understanding of the healing of childhood parental wounds: an international study of adult children's forgiveness. 'No matter how deep the hurt'

Jaap van der Meiden, Alvin Lander & Valentina Simon

To cite this article: Jaap van der Meiden, Alvin Lander & Valentina Simon (09 Apr 2024): Towards a fuller understanding of the healing of childhood parental wounds: an international study of adult children's forgiveness. 'No matter how deep the hurt', Journal of Family Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13229400.2024.2332347

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2024.2332347

Published online: 09 Apr 2024.

JOURNAL OF FAMILY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2024.2332347

Towards a fuller understanding of the healing of childhood parental wounds: an international study of adult children's forgiveness. 'No matter how deep the hurt'

Jaap van der Meiden[a], Alvin Lander[b] and Valentina Simon[c]

[a]Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences, Research group Youth and Family, Ede, the Netherlands; [b]Sapir College, School of Social Work, Ashkelon, Israel; [c]Independent Researcher

ABSTRACT

This article describes a study of adult children's forgiveness processes following severe childhood parental injury. Consistent with the phenomenological tradition of qualitative research in-depth interviews were conducted with forty-eight participants in the Netherlands, Romania, and Israel to capture their lived experiences of recovery, using forgiveness, from early parental injury. The findings highlight the commanding importance of reaching a conscious wiled decision to pursue child–parent forgiveness, such decision-making fuelled by insights facilitated by the processes of adult development and reinforced by a pro-forgiveness environment. Subsequent to this initial decision, recognizing the joint humanity of parent and child and scaffolding an understanding of the parent and his or her injury within its temporal, cultural and psychological context is of paramount importance to the eventual attainment of forgiveness. Forgiveness, although an ongoing journey, brings with it important fruits. Study findings, including their various nation-specific nuances, are discussed in light of the existing literature on forgiveness processes. Implications of study findings for clinicians working with individuals to facilitate forgiveness of parentally inflicted wounds are considered.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 October 2023
Accepted 27 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Child–parent forgiveness; forgiveness-process; qualitative research; international research

Introduction

Human beings are social creatures and as such live within a matrix of relationships. That which is between parent and child, owing to its existentially commanding nature and influence, is among the most fundamental (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). The infliction of severe parental injury early in life may often result in a profoundly negative and lingering impact on children and the disruption of this basic attachment relationship. Future generations may also be adversely impacted (Brann et al., 2007).

In recent decades, forgiveness has gained widespread recognition as a potentially important element in promoting individual and relationship recovery following interpersonal and self-injury (Akhtar et al., 2017). Forgiveness processes and dynamics related to

CONTACT Jaap van der Meiden jhvdmeiden@che.nl Christian University of Applied Sciences, Ede, the Netherlands

many types of relational injuries, perpetrated within the context of a variety of human relationships, have been described in the literature (E.L. Worthington, 2005).

However, little empirical research has been conducted on the forgiveness process of those, who as children and youth, experienced severe parental injury, and later in life succeeded in achieving personal healing through forgiveness. This is despite the recognition in the literature that forgiveness can be an important tool for children healing from parental injury (Brann et al., 2007). The current study represents an in-depth exploration, conducted within the qualitative phenomenological tradition, of the lived experience of forty-eight participants who, as adults, forgave their parent(s) for the infliction of severe injury during childhood. What is more, the current research appears to be distinctive in that it includes participants from three different countries. While the aim of building an international sample for this study is to begin to identify those child–parent forgiveness processes that may be similar across national boundaries, it also endeavours to start to point to nuances of difference.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness has traditionally been considered a central element of both individual and relational healing and recovery. It has been related empirically to a spectrum of positive well-being outcomes, including higher levels of general positive affect, self-acceptance and environmental mastery, increased relationship stability and quality and improved physical health (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2009; Kim & Enright, 2016).

At the crux of most scholarly definitions of forgiveness is the transformation, fundamentally affective, of a person deeply and unfairly hurt (Hantman & Cohen, 2010). Early conceptualizations tended to focus on the reduction of unforgiveness, where negative emotions, such as anger, hate and hostility, were resolved or at least significantly decreased (Ho & Fung, 2011). Forgiveness was seen as also including a significant reduction in the injured person's motivation to seek revenge and avoid contact with the injurer. More recently, forgiveness has been understood as also featuring an increase in positive feelings, thoughts and actions towards an injurer, including compassion and generosity (Hernandez et al., 2012). One of the most widely accepted definitions of forgiveness is that of Enright and colleagues, who described forgiveness as 'a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgement and indifferent behavior toward one who has unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him/her' (Enright, 1996, p. 108).

While definitions of forgiveness have evolved in terms of their delineation of the individual emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes of forgiveness, they have paid less attention to the broader context (Ho & Fung, 2011). The distinct nature of the relationship between the injurer and injured merits a more central role in conceptualizing forgiveness and the relative importance of negative and positive forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013; Maio et al., 2008). In the case of an injury by a stranger forgiveness may be most appropriately conceptualized as simply reducing one's grudge and giving up negative thoughts, motivations and feelings. In contrast, in ongoing relationships, forgiveness may be best understood as including both the reduction of unforgiveness and the promotion of more positive feelings, thoughts and behaviours (Gordon et al., 2009).

The notion of relational context influencing the nature and scope of forgiveness appears consistent with empirical evidence pointing to significant differences in the reach of forgiveness across various dyadic family relationships (Hoyt et al., 2005). The forgiveness of children by parents requires a relatively simple set of antecedents. The other way round, and specifically in instances when parents have emotionally injured their children, forgiveness appears to require a more complex and intricate set of facilitative factors (Breshears, 2015; May et al., 2015). Parentally inflicted injuries may often result in children feeling intense and lingering pain, anger, animosity and resentment (Sherr et al., 2019). The difficulty involved in children's forgiveness of their parents may be related to the perceived sacredness of parenting and the role desecration that may frequently occur with parental maltreatment (Brann et al., 2007). According to contextual therapy, children's existential loyalty to their parents can also be an obstacle to acknowledging parental abuse, with the risk of passing on the wrongs suffered to the next generation, the so-called revolving account (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; van der Meiden et al., 2020).

Both negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness are particularly difficult to achieve in the father–child relationship (Lander, 2012; Lee & Enright, 2014; May et al., 2015). Nixon and colleagues (2012) in their study of children disengaged from non-residential fathers found that a small minority experienced processes of forgiveness. Most participants continued in their intense negative feelings and rejected the idea of possible future paternal contact, believing they would be better off without their father playing any role in their lives. For those who forgave this was related to the ability of the child to have empathy for their father and to accept his humanity, in particular, his shortcomings and mistaken behaviour. Such difficulty in the forgiveness of fathers is echoed in the study by Lander (2020) of 20 young adult men who sustained severe relational injuries from their fathers. These injuries included the father disengaging from his child, betraying the child's trust, severe emotional neglect and severe emotional abuse. For the most part, they did not experience a process of forgiveness towards their father. For those who forgave this was closely related to the mother as gatekeeper of paternal forgiveness, that is mother's active encouragement to forgive. Additional factors identified in the literature as related to children's forgiveness of fathers include satisfactory apology, belief in paternal non-recidivism and longstanding close father–child relations and parenting involvement (Hill et al., 2013; Maio et al., 2000, 2008; May et al., 2015). When the forgiveness of the father was granted, its outcomes tended to be unclear and complicated. Children appear to have special difficulty in conveying and detecting forgiveness in their relationship with their fathers, and where they do forgive their fathers, this does not predict increased closeness and relationship quality, nor a positive ripple effect in the overall family emotional environment (Maio et al., 2008). The complexities surrounding children's forgiveness of their fathers have also been discussed in terms of the relative forgivability of the father and mother. Fathers seemingly are generally less likely to be forgiven than mothers, with forgiveness of the mother likely representing a strategy to prevent disruption of an existentially intense maternal-offspring bond fuelled by pregnancy, birth and early childhood caregiving (Hoyt et al., 2005; May et al., 2015; E.L. Worthington et al., 2014). Maternal high forgivability has not only been found in children raised by their birth mothers but in addition in children adopted at an extremely young age, who, despite a lack of caregiving by the birth

mother, appear to feel a unique genetic, historical and emotional and spiritual connection with her (Anderson, 2020). In this, too, viewed from contextual therapy, children's existential loyalties become apparent. (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). When child–parent forgiveness, with respect to both father and mother, has been achieved it may be communicated to the parent by the offspring in many ways. The most common strategy is nonverbal forgiveness, expressed through spending time with the parent, phoning the parent or through gift-giving. Less common is the direct verbal expression of forgiveness and also quasi-direct communication through such means as letter writing (Breshears, 2015).

Some forgiveness scholars differentiate between the injured person's willingness and actual capability to forgive. The latter has been associated with a generally 'adaptive personality profile' (Hill et al., 2013, p. 7). An individual's capacity to forgive has also been related to executive functioning or ego strength. Strong executive functioning has been associated with the ability to restrain the overt expression of negative emotions that may arise in the initial response to an interpersonal injury. It has also been related to the capacity to inhibit rumination, associated with unforgiveness (Pronk et al., 2010). The ability of an injured party to forgive has also been linked to the developed capacity of the ego for self-object differentiation. Where this exists projection and primitive splitting will be lessened, decreasing the construction of the injurer as a purely malevolent object and increasing the possibility of a more realistic and expanded view of him (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). The ability to be empathic towards an injurer is underscored in the literature as an important requisite of forgiveness and common neurophysiological correlates of empathy and forgiveness have been uncovered (Farrow et al., 2001). Empathy in the promotion of forgiveness involves the modification of previously held attributions about the injurer through recognition of his internal frame of reference, and an understanding of the unfolding of events related to the transgression within this context (Exline et al., 2008; Macaskill et al., 2002). Recently the ability to be empathic in the service of forgiveness has been linked to a secure attachment style and related low levels of attachment anxiety and the use of self-protection strategies. What is more, neuro-imaging studies have provided evidence that unconsciously perceived affective clues linked to autonomic sensorimotor resonance between others and the self may be largely responsible for those empathic experiences that promote forgiveness (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016; Rivera & Fincham, 2015).

Method

The research is a qualitative study, consistent with the phenomenological tradition where the intention is to explore and as fully as possible capture the real-live setting of participants within their naturally occurring setting (Gray, 2018). The current study explores those processes adult children go through to forgive their parents for severe injury, inflicted upon them during childhood. The three researchers are practising family therapists and trainers who met at an international family therapy conference, discovered their shared involvement with and interest in the process of intrafamilial forgiveness and initiated a joint research project on adult-child forgiveness. Throughout the research process, they consulted with each other, discussed and analysed each other's data and finally formulated the findings and conclusions. Such a multi-eye principle proved

itself helpful. Achieving agreement between multiple coders in coding the data added to the reliability of the results. The monitoring of the subjectivity of each researcher improved the reliability of the analysis (Kumar, 2012; Maso & Smaling, 1998).

The research sample was made up of forty-eight participants: fourteen from the Netherlands, fourteen from Romania and twenty from Israel. Inclusion criteria consisted of the following: (a) participant acknowledgement of an experience of severe childhood parental injury, either physical or emotional or both; (b) participant perception of having attained forgiveness of his or her parent(s) for the particular severe injury and (c) participant between the ages of 30 and 70 with no blatant sign of acute mental illness. Even though designing a transcontinental and transcultural study was not the main goal of this research, it was thought that a sample comprised participants from three countries might provide some insight into national and cultural differences in child–parent forgiveness processes. This is in keeping with the call in the literature that research on forgiveness needs to take the topic of culture more into account (Ho & Worthington, 2020).

After receiving ethical approval from the researchers' academic institutions participants were actively recruited by the three researchers. In the Netherlands, an invitation to participate in the study was placed in a Christian broadcasting magazine with a wide readership. In Israel, a similar invitation was placed on a website promoting family-life. In Romania, the recruitment of participants began with an invitation to former clients of psychotherapy practice, initiating a snowball-sampling. It should be noted that the Romanian researcher herself had no previous relationship with recruited participants. All potential participants provided written informed consent after receiving an explanation of the research and what exactly would be required from them.

The data for this research were collected by all three researchers using a semi-structured interview schedule compiled together in English and then translated by each into the appropriate national language. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in their totality into their respective national language. Select parts of the transcripts were then translated into English to allow for joint analysis by the researchers.

The process of data analysis comprised open coding and categorization, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, the analysis began with a process of familiarization with and subsequent immersion into the data with each researcher viewing, reading and transcribing his or her respective interviews (Yoo et al., 2020). Next, each researcher independently analysed his or her data by inductively selecting and meticulously coding the relevant fragments. The researchers did not use a pre-formulated code list (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014), but kept in mind the focus of this study: the respondents' experiences with forgiveness. Subsequently, the researchers combined their codes into a joint code list. After this, the researchers started a process of disaggregation of the data into units (Gray, 2018): Codes referring to the same subject or element were clustered into categories, after which these categories were named according to their characteristic content. The axial coding described above ultimately led to the selection of eight cores (Gray, 2018). Together with the memos with insights, ideas and theoretical perspectives (Friese, 2012, p. 141; Miles et al., 2014, p. 95), this wave of selective coding ultimately culminated in a list of several themes.

Findings

Before presenting the themes that emerged from the study, some examples of the injuries that the participants suffered are given. The analysis found that participants' experiences included emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and physical abuse including sexual abuse. The following reflects the types of maltreatment encountered in the study:

Participant 45 experienced verbal and physical injuries:

> Most of my childhood he yelled and screamed at me. That is how I remember him. I thought that was normal for a long time. But when he would beat me … even I knew that wasn't, what you can call normal … He would even run after me if I tried to escape his punches … and even when I crawled up into my bed and covered myself with the blanket, he would beat on me until he himself got tired out.

Participant 12 also talks about emotional and physical abuse:

> My father had a very peculiar idea about parenting: if you just hit your children for three weeks, they'll be raised. But he soon found out that it doesn't work that way because raising them took much more than three weeks. So, I was hit a lot and punished for things I didn't exactly know were wrong. When I was hit, it was really in my face. I discovered that if I didn't cry, he would stop. So, I forcefully held back my tears to make it shorter. Sometimes I was also locked in the basement.

Participant 16 talks about the emotional damage she has suffered in a context of inconsistency, verbal aggression and threats of violence.

> My parents were often inconsequent with my emotional needs and affection. They were arguing most of the time and sometimes even with violence. My father used to beat my mom. Fear was my biggest burn. I could not sleep in the night until my father got to sleep in his bed. He always had a frozen look and never know what was about to come. My mother never took me in her arms or to try to comfort me, she didn't even come close to me, and in all those moments I was in a terrible pain. In the dark of the night I had hate my father, I wanted him to die, and the next day it was like he was a different person, and somehow I forgave him. I developed a lot of symptoms for a very long time, from panic attack during sleeping, to epileptic seizures or I had real impression that I will suffocate.

The following themes, reflecting the main contours of participants' experience of forgiveness of severe parental injury, emerged from the data analysis: (a) reflection promoted by adult personal development brings insights that pave the way for the possibility of a forgiveness process; (b) the making of a conscious willed decision to attempt to attain forgiveness, reinforced by the existence of a pro-forgiveness environment; (c) forgiveness ultimately reached through a bi-directional process where a humble realization of joint humanity between themselves and their parents facilitates seeing the injurer and injury in its temporal cultural and psychological context, vice versa and (d) forgiveness, although an ongoing journey, brings many fruits.

Reflection promoted by adult personal development brings insights that pave the way for the possibility of a forgiveness process

The participant's narratives revealed that reflection triggered and promoted by experiences associated with the adult stage of personal development led to powerful insights

that paved the way for a potential forgiveness process to occur. Newfound insights, regarding life meaning, hurt and coping, human nature and well-being, predisposed participants to make an eventual decision to attempt to pursue forgiveness as a way to resolve their childhood injuries. Participants emphasized many insights that promoted pro-forgiveness motivation that emerged from reflection related to experiences facilitated by and characteristic of adult personal development.

Almost half of the participants spoke of an arousing awareness that they are no longer willing to continue to be victimized, nor allow their loved ones to be indirectly victimized, by their early parental injury. This newfound insight highlighted an adamant desire to take full and active responsibility in the here and now for their well-being, rather than live a life predominantly driven by unprocessed negative emotions, residuals remaining from their experience of parentally-related childhood adversity ($n = 22$).

Such an insight, of commanding importance in paving the way for a process of child–parent forgiveness, is described by participant P32:

> It hit me that I was bringing my parents into my life every single day, and that it was deeply harming me. Every day I was angry at something, at anyone in my path, and people were starting to turn from me, even those closest. But the anger had to do with my parents not them. It was like a time machine, I was always bringing the far past into my life, even now I was grown with a mind of my own, and choice about how I wanted to live. I got it —that I needed to use that choice to choose –me. That I would be the driver of my own car, of my own journey. That I would have to find a new way to live my life. That it was basically now or never.

Such a sentiment was echoed by many other participants. In the words of participant P11:

> Yes. Yes. That is, that is it … I don't want to be a victim. I want to take responsibility for my life.

Participant P7 also claimed:

> I don't want my past to have negative influence over my present.

This newfound refusal to allow the continuation of suffering and the related imperative to take responsibility for healing from their injury was frequently attributed to having taken part in informal learning activities, including adult education courses and workshops or even the watching of popular television shows and movies, reading of books and listening to podcasts ($n = 13$).

Participant P18 eloquently related:

> Four years, after my divorce I started looking more after myself, trying to understand my overreactions. I started reading a lots of books and online material, participating in workshops, watching all kind of videos and listening to podcasts along with the discussion that I had with my friends, my family, my father, so I started looking into forgiveness also.
>
> Watching other perspectives about healing. Jordan Peterson, watching various psych seminars - they all boiled down to the same conclusion: you either do it or don't waste your time.

And P28 said*:*

> Artists that I look up to who have been vocal about their similar experiences and their journey with healing. The only influence in my decision to forgive was to end the hurt and to not take it further. I forgave but I didn't forget! Corey Taylor, musician, abandoned

> by his father in his youth. Wrote songs about his hate towards his father but then reconnected, talked, and chose to forgive him and to ask for forgiveness as well. I started reading a lot and started to attend personal development group and it helped me to get in touch with the emotional storm I got into.

Participant P8 shared

> Well, uhm, I've done a lot of studies for myself. And that gave me a lot. I also read things about forgiveness and healing of the soul, that was another one of those books. But it was also always forgiveness, should you always? Those are the kind of issues. Well, so then I was in my mid-thirties, I already had my children, and I had continued to move forward with that. I had gained more insight and then I thought: Yes I do have to forgive my father, uh, actually, of what he did to me.

Participant P45 attributed newly attained insights to formal studies:

> I took a psychology course in university that opened my eyes to what is really important in life. It was a course on positive psychology. There I discovered that negative emotions would eventually kill me. That the anger I have been holding to my parents would eat me alive in the end if I didn't stand up to the plate very very soon.

Nearly half of the participants attributed the newfound awareness of the refusal to continue to suffer in the present nor to allow their loved ones to continue to indirectly suffer as a result of their childhood parental injury to their experiences in a committed romantic relationship. ($n = 23$).

Participant P39 vigorously asserted:

> Though I couldn't ever get this myself my wife was able to understand and make me see once and for all that I was letting my anger to my parents spill over into our relationship. One time she dragged me to sit down after I spoke to my brother about our childhood, and she made me see how full of rage I was … all the time … that I would automatically and unconsciously get out onto her. She could be more objective than me. I did listen to her because I totally trust she is in my corner, always was and always would be.

Almost half of the participants also attributed the newfound awareness of the refusal to continue to suffer and the imperative to finally heal from this injury to their new and commanding experience of parenthood ($n = 23$).

Such a highly impactful experience was ardently described by participant P36:

> The thought of being an angry parent, well I have been an angry person all my life because of how I was hurt by them, well when I heard that the pregnancy test was positive, the blood test, in a few seconds I knew that this meant a giant change that had to take place. That once and for all, and before the child was born, I would have to cleanse myself. I would have to come to terms with what had happened to me in a way that would put it finally to rest. It was one thing, the anger I bore, sure from time to time I would see how that hurt me, but for what happened to me as a child to screw up my own kid's life, well that was unbearable. I couldn't afford any longer to let my own childhood shit continue to influence me and my life, well at least not my own kid's life.

The words of participant P17 also attest to important insights regarding coping with early parental injury facilitated by new parenthood:

> First of all becoming a parent, my son and all those bad feelings, always came back. I realized I was not good with myself and if I will not forgive my parents and leave all that behind my life will be very hard.

> I was the mother of my child and as a grownup I surely can do something about it.

Participant P19 also spoke of the insights stemming from the experience of parenthood:

> The fact that I became a mother. I realized I was doing some things with my son that I thought I will never do; and I quickly understood I had a big contribution. I had to forgive my father in order to have a peaceful life.

Similar insights were expressed by participant P20:

> The relationship with my daughter … I wish that she doesn't have a bad relationship with her parents as I did with mine. The most motivating thing for me was the desire to have a healthy relationship with my child and not passing the same patterns to him in the future.

And by participant P21:

> Forgiveness of my parents came from the desire to be reconciled with myself. But also being a mother, I understood that we as parents often do or say certain things that when we were children we swore we would never do to our future children. And the relationship with my eldest son helped me to see things differently and didn't want my boys to suffer from the same things I suffered when I was a child.

The making of a conscious-willed decision to attempt to attain forgiveness, reinforced by the existence of a pro-forgiveness environment

The majority of participant narratives revealed that the actual forgiveness process began with a conscious-willed decision to pursue forgiveness, on the heels of previously reaching profound pro-forgiveness insights ($n = 31$). This newfound commitment to start down the path towards potential future forgiveness of their parent(s) was frequently supported by pro-forgiveness influences in the participants' wider environment ($n = 37$). For several participants environmental systems were perceived as more than supportive of possible forgiveness, but rather as commanding forgiveness as a direction for healing and recovery from early parental inflicted wounds ($n = 9$).

The words of participant P29 describe a distinct and intentional, insight fuelled, decision to undertake the journey towards potential future child–parent forgiveness:

> It suddenly occurred to me, in the strangest of places, at the exit of a clothing store in a shopping plaza on a regular Saturday afternoon, it was simply a moment of truth, a crossroads in my life, an ah-ha moment. I had been mulling my life over for the last couple years, my relationship with my parents wasn't good, there and then I made the decision, no it was more of a vow to myself, that for my own good and the good of my own new family, I would make every effort, even heroic effort to get to a place where I could forgive my parents. I wasn't at all sure and didn't even think about how that could happen, what I would have to do, or how long it would take, but I grabbed onto this goal with all of my might, I would somehow get to the place where I could forgive them, and hopefully while they were still alive, for the sake of my health and those I love in my new family, for the sake of making a better life now than I had as a child. This was now in my power to do.

Such a sentiment was echoed by participant P4:

> I have seen and learned that it is a choice (…). And I want to forgive. And the moment you make that choice, and take that step, yes, then God does something with it. Yes.

And participant P11 said:

> It starts with a decision that you want it. And then you start doing that rationally, and then you notice 'yes that's good' and then you move on. From a certain point you start doing it with heart and soul and that's important: if you only do it with your head, then you have missed it. You have to put your heart and soul into doing that.

The participants mentioned some important figures in their human environment as consolidating their decision to pursue forgiveness. One commonly mentioned figure was a professional therapist ($n = 21$). Important to note, however, that none of the participants was their original goal in beginning therapy the attainment of forgiveness.

The words of participant P33 eloquently underscore the importance of therapist support for embarking on a forgiveness process:

> My therapist was very much in favour of my drive to pursue forgiveness. He even related how he himself had discovered the value of forgiveness in his own life and also how many of the people who he helped had been very pleased with their decision to try to forgive someone who had deeply hurt them in their life. He spoke of the hard work involved, that the decision was only the beginning. But this seemed to calm me, as knowing what likely would be involved is far better than just going after something blindly, unrealistically.

The words of participant P15 highlight the importance of therapist support and the support of the spouse in deciding to begin the forgiveness process:

> I knew it was not my fault for what happened. Didn't want to feel guilty so I started to read some books, like: Attitude is everything. Jeff Keller opened my eyes, and going to a psychologist and a coach. I started therapy and it was the best decision I ever made for me.

The spouse was certainly a prominent pro-forgiveness figure in participants' narratives ($n = 5$). Spousal support ranged from those who encouraged the undertaking of a forgiveness process but left the decision up to the injured partner, to those who vehemently insisted their spouse pursue child–parent forgiveness.

According to participant P17:

> My husband influenced me as he has always been supportive of my own feeling on the topic, so he empowered me to do what feels right. That helped a lot after a life of so many people telling me what is rights, I read a lot and I saw there is a lot of inheritance in our emotions and an important thing I had my husband's understanding and acceptance. He was tolerant and delicate and compassionate with my feelings.

An even more prominent pro-forgiveness figure in the participant's family was a sibling ($n = 22$). For several participants, the sibling, usually older, assumed the important supportive role of helping him/her learn more about the true nature of the parentally inflicted injury.

Participant P10 underscored the importance of sibling support:

> I discussed this with two sisters and a brother. I asked: do you recognize it? Everyone knew about the situation and how it had gone, and everyone suffered from it, never talked about it but said: well, it is true, we can support it. Then one sister said: I'm going with you. Well, that was really, really cool.

Participant P26 echoed such sentiment:

> About forgiveness, I talked with my elder sister, she was eight years older than me and she knew more things about our family and about our mother's illness.

The description of participant P10 was particularly poignant regarding sibling's supportive involvement:

> 'I called my father I wanted to come and tell calmly what is actually going on with me. Then I said that I still had a lot of trouble from the past, how he treated us as children, and that he hit and kicked quite regularly. His response was: I don't understand what you're talking about at all. And he said: now you want to blame this on me, such an old man in his old age, who is alone. That was his reaction, and I was really stunned and … (…) And then my brother said to my father: but I recognize it too. And I thought that was really wonderful, that without ever talking abut it, we could agree on this. And it really felt a real connection.

Almost half of the participants mentioned sources of pro-forgiveness influence related to spirituality and religion, which consolidated their decision to begin a child–parent forgiveness process ($n = 23$).

In the words of participant P13

> My only influence, in trying to find the reasons for my parents' actions and in understanding also, was my faith. In it I found my comfort, emotional support, and the power to forgive. Faith played for me in this process perhaps the most important role … My faith in religion helped me believe there is much more good in this world.

And participant P17 stated:

> So, my faith as spiritually and values played a major role …

With respect to the positive influence of spirituality and religion on the decision to seek forgiveness, the most prominent was the role of an ardent belief in a God who requires that people forgive ($n = -3$). For several participants this belief was coupled with the insight that because they themselves were forgiven by God they must do the same for others ($n = 8$). Still, other participants spoke about actually hearing the voice of God directing them to forgive their parents ($n = 3$).

In the eloquent words of participant P4:

> I have seen and learned that it is a choice, also by command of God. And He forgives us, it says in the Lord's prayer: as we forgive our debtors. (…) It is a choice to obey God's command. To forgive others. And when you take that step, that's at the hand of God and that's sometimes with a lot of difficulties and it's sometimes really a process … . Then at one point I said to God, "Well, if I must forgive then you must do it for me, because I can't do it". And I remember walking out of my bed, and I remember almost to the inch where I stood, next to my bed, thinking, I've forgiven. I have forgiven. I've lost twenty-five pounds, it's a really, really weird feeling. And it was God who really did that in me. I really didn't do anything special. But God has helped me, yes He has done that in me, to be able to forgive.

Participant P16 emphasizes the actual support God provides to the forgiveness decision:

> Faith helped me because I was not feeling alone that someone up there loves me. My grand grandmother told me once: be patient, God is big and sees everything. I wanted a good honest relationship with God. So I was wondered: how can I have a good relationship with God if I won't have one with my parents?!

Forgiveness ultimately reached through a process where a humble realization of a joint humanity between themselves and their parents facilitates seeing the injurer and injury in its temporal, cultural and psychological context and vice versa

The majority of participant narratives revealed a process whereby the recognition of a joint humanity between themselves and their parents facilitated an empathic understanding of the temporal, cultural and psychological context of the parental injurer and injury. What is more, the growing empathic understanding of the context of the parental injury in turn reinforced the participant's sense of joint humanity with the injurer ($n = 36$).

Such a dynamic was poignantly reflected in the words of participant P41:

> It took me a long time to forgive them even though I had made up my mind much before that that was what I wanted for myself and my future. Didn't want to live the past anymore and let the past run my life. Struggled on the way to forgiveness, and was stuck for a couple years time. Couldn't find a reason to forgive. Couldn't find a way to get past all the negativity. Was clear to me that I couldn't have both … could never feel I forgave as long as I remained so negative toward them. Then almost suddenly it rolled over me like a wave … not just in my head. It immersed me. I understood, a deep truth, we are all human, we are all the product of our upbringing, my parents too, they did the best they could with the knowledge and skills they had, their parents didn't teach them any better. That is sad but I could live with this … as the way of the world … of everyone. I felt deeply connected to humankind and this pushed me towards forgiveness. We are essentially just struggling to do our best with what we are handed out at birth.

Such an insight was echoed in the words of participant P10:

> But gradually that started to develop, and I thought, yes, I've always condemned them very much, but now I'm also starting to understand them more. And that really makes you milder and you start to look at things differently, a little more forgiving. I thought: yes, they did manage to raise six children. With everything they had in their baggage.

> I came to understand my parents a lot more, also through my own pregnancies, how hormones can affect you so much, can make you so different and unstable. And that … yes, as you get older you understand that more and more. And I've always focused on what I didn't receive. And then you start thinking about what they did try to give. (…) And that is very difficult, that there is no possibility to ask or say that again or … Well, that has also been quite a process, which did help me understand a bit more about them. I noticed that this made me a lot milder.

The ability of adult children to poignantly realize their joint humanity with their parents was facilitated by the assumption of an existential stance of humility.

Such an inclination is reflected in the words of P38:

> I came to realize that even I make mistakes, as a parent and in general. Not only this, I have been forgiven for my worst mistakes, and some of them were severe. So I realize being part of humanity is making mistakes and forgiving hurts.

Of prominence for a good number of participants was the temporal context surrounding the paternal injury. There was strong recognition that the hurtful parental behaviour they experienced was normative and acceptable during those years when they were children ($n = 17$).

Such an understanding was underscored by participant P43:

> When I was a kid and they were raising me who knew or thought about kids, that we had feelings, that anything went on of importance in our heart and soul. Its not like today, nothing like today, where most people are aware of how delicate children are, how they can be scarred for life if mistreated by their parents. They were too busy building a nation, fighting for survival, wars, poverty, when they first came here they lived in tents and their only possession was their pots and pans.

This was echoed in the words of P17:

> I understand her behavior now. I explored all the ways in which she really did the best she could with what she had. she was a better mother then her own mother was. A lot better, personal opinion, so instead of blaming her 'demons' I am now grateful for all the things she learned and did better than her own mother. By talking I started to understand the dynamics of our relationship. I understood her actions. We were both living in the same story but under very different circumstances.

Participants also stressed the relative cultural context of the parental injury. There was frequent recognition of the commanding influence of their parent's cultural background on their harmful parenting behavior ($n = 15$).

Such was emphatically described by participant P30:

> My parents came from Morocco. They were brought up in a Moslem environment. They were steeped in primitive ways of relating to each other, as spouses and also as parents to us. There everyone hit their children. I think it is even encouraged in the Koran. So when they came to Israel they stayed with the same primitive ideas. Just lately when we are already grown up they have started to get more in step with the wider society. Most of their friends, when I was growing up, were also born and raised in Arab countries, Moslem societies, so they didn't have much exposure to the more progressive ways of being parents to us.

The psychological context of the parental injury was also highlighted by many participants who spoke about the decisive influence of their parents' own psychological deficiencies and limitations, and often their parents' own psychological wounds ($n = 8$).

The importance of this factor in leading to ultimate adult child forgiveness of parental injury was central in the words of P26:

> When my mother-in-law had the same illness as my mother did, Alzheimer, and I saw at some point how insensitive she became with her son, I forgave my mother. Also my mother had another mental illness. I understood than that a psychological disorder makes you heartless no matter what its name is. When I was young I didn't know that my mother is an impossible person because of her sufferance.

According to participant P9:

> His father died when he was eleven. And then he agreed with his oldest brother: we mustn't make it difficult for mother, we will never speak about daddy again and we will be nice to her. So I don't think he never really processed the death of his father. (…) So that for me gave a lot of understanding of who he was, what he went through and how he actually tried his best.

Participant P10 echoed a similar sentiment:

> I see my father as a man who has had a lot of injustice in his life, and has not been able to deal with it at all. But it also went nowhere. So everything has been bottled up, that he has become so bitter that he even kept his own children at bay. And if you learn to see it that way, I actually feel a lot of pity for him. Yes, and I would have loved to have told him that.

According to participant P40:

> My parents were deeply affected in a very negative way … in the last years I realized they they weren't just quirky, or strange … as children of holocaust survivors. They were definitely carrying trauma … and they acted like it to us … so much anger … so much into themselves, terrible neglect of us … depression … when I grew up I met more people of the third generation and I began to read about it for myself … that really impacted me, I was feeling lots of empathy towards them.

For a substantial number of participants the development of the realization of a common humanity with their parents and an understanding of the wider context of the parentally inflicted injury appeared to be related to ongoing contact and in particular, active child–parent forgiveness-seeking behaviour, especially apology ($n = 20$).

Such was the situation for participant P31:

> We never broke off contact though most of our meetings were brief and I myself wasn't very happy to meet them. Did so out of a sense of obligation. But one time, out of the blue, and completely surprising to me, as we were just finishing up supper on some holiday meal, my parents began talking … more personal than usual … unplanned I think but they went on and on, they hadn't before, about personal stuff. My father never spoke about himself and his childhood. This was a turning point for me in understanding where he was coming from as a person and as my parent. It was an eye opener and a breath of fresh air in our relationship Something very authentic and not technical for once.

Participant P44 refers to conscious and planned forgiveness-seeking behaviour by his parents:

> It made all the difference that my parents made many efforts in their many apologies, and there were many apologies from them, to explain, but not justify, their hurtful behaviour towards us. I could tell they were really sweating and it was very uncomfortable to sit with us and bear their souls, to speak about their own childhoods and how they were mistreated by their primitive uneducated parents who worked from dawn to dusk and when they were finally at home, were so terrible to them. It takes a lot of determination and guts and I think love, for parents to be so vulnerable in front of their grown children.

It should be noted that participants' forgiveness, once reached, was very often not explicitly communicated to the parent and when it was, most frequently forgiveness communication was indirect ($n = 21$).

Illustratively in the words of participant P2:

> When I had forgiven them, all the positive things came out. So my thinking towards my parents became more positive. And the negative things just sort of disappeared. And I also started saying out loud to myself dad I forgive you, dad I forgive you. No, I didn't tell my father. What I did was write down all the positive things that kept coming up in the months after that. And that's what I wrote to them. Of these are all nice memories that … But I didn't want to hurt their feelings by saying I've forgiven … it wouldn't have been received properly

Forgiveness of parents, although an ongoing process, brings many fruits

All participants spoke of the various ways in which the attainment of a state of forgiveness brought them highly significant positive outcomes, both personal and relational ($n = 48$).

Almost universally prominent in the participants' accounts of personal gain was the overwhelming sense of liberation, of freedom from persisting onerous negative emotions, such as pain, anger, disappointment and blame, which had deleteriously effected their well-being ($n = 45$).

In the words of participant P2:

> If you can forgive people and let go of things, for whatever reasons, or whatever path you take, it makes you freer, looser. From the past, from what was done to you … Just an awful backpack, or whatever load falls off your back, and you're no longer held with claws in your back. You don't have to worry about that anymore. Almost literally.

The gaining of freedom from negativity was ardently expressed and echoed by other participants, for instance by P5:

> It has made my life freer again. That I was freed from that hatred, from that hatred that I had for my mother. It really set me free from anger at her.

And by P6:

> I think it's kind of a process, which helps to eventually free or break free from people who have done things to you.

Attainment of a state of forgiveness also seemed to bring freedom and liberation from rumination-fuelled thoughts of revenge on their parents.

In the words of participant P11:

> That what was done to me, that I don't blame those people anymore. And that my so-called right to … that they have to recognize that, that they have to apologize for that, to let that go. And also that I must get something in return for what they have done, a kind of revenge for example, that I don't need to have that anymore. So letting go of everything and what I find through that is freedom.

Surrendering of the notion of revenge is also clearly evident in the words of participant P7:

> I thought, God asks of us in the first place, and Jesus shows it to us, to forgive even though forgiveness is not asked. (…) For it is not for me to charge it. Help me to let go of my anger. Help me to let go of my bitterness. Help me to let go of the feelings of revenge that there are sometimes, especially have been. And that was a battle with God, that was a real battle with God. And yes, he will help you but it is not right eh, just pray and it's over or something. (…) If I had remained in my anger, I would not have been able to restore contact with my father at the time, as far as it had been restored. That wouldn't have worked, it wouldn't have worked. So that did change. And there was softness too. And there was contact again.

The liberation from negative emotions and vengeful thoughts directed towards their parents appeared for several participants to lead to more confidence in themselves and their abilities ($n = 5$).

In the words of participant P4:

> It helped me to be able to indicate my limits better. Because I was better able to say this is my area. Or my boundary. And you want to cross that. It helped me, I think it helped me to be more stable.

The interpersonal fruits of forgiveness were also described by most participants ($n = 41$). For the majority forgiveness led to better relations with parents. ($n = 40$).

Such a change was emphatically described by participant P12:

> Yes. Well at least it changed the relationship with my father very much. It has also changed my relationship with my mother. It has affected the relationship of my father with other children. (…) And if I would meet a nice guy now, I could handle it I think. So that changed it. I can now be with my dad, he had heart surgery a few years ago, then I can sit next to him in intensive care. He was out of consciousness or half conscious or something but then I can just sweetly stroke his arm.

It was also evident in the words of participant P7:

> In any case, the whole process has changed the relationship with my father a lot, and also the relationship with my mother. And it has affected my father's relationship with the other children.

A few participants mentioned a newfound positive perception of childhood experiences with their parents ($n = 5$).

In the words of P12:

> From that last moment it was gone. I speak about my father, uhm, I suddenly started seeing different things from him. I've started remembering other things, um. When I looked at pictures of him, it actually immediately irritated me. I thought: that's his holy face. Now I thought: oh, what a nice man actually, what a nice touch. I've come to understand, much more of his background, his pain.

Participant P7 even mentioned a renewed love for their parent:

> Then I also dared to feel love for him again. And that succeeded. It remains difficult, I must say that very honestly, it remains difficult. Yes, love and compassion, we both had to cry a lot.

Such improvement of relations with parents in some instances also led to a renewal of a child's capacity to take care of parents in their times of severe need.

Participant P3 describes:

> I enjoyed having contact with him again. And I could still take care of him a little bit. I liked to get him drinks or give him something to eat. And later he also deteriorated. Actually already two years later he passed away. So I had contact with him for two years. And the last months I actually accompanied him towards dying as well.

This having been said it should be emphasized that for many participants child–parent forgiveness did not result in actual reconciliation with them ($n = 29$).

Participant P34 emphasized:

> Even though I forgave I was still left scarred and without the energy to risk being in touch with them, to risk another hurt … just wanted to let the past go … I don't feel I need them in my life now or in the future …

The difficulty in reconciliation was echoed by participant P7:

> But there's also anger about damage, that's not necessarily anger at him maybe, but well … I think there is anger sometimes, because my life is marked by it, also by what has happened. There are consequences, which I have been angry about at times that I also have to bear those consequences. But that's different from the anger that there was from bitterness, ehm, from anger, ehm, from condemnation, I let that go.

Child–parent forgiveness also facilitated the improvement of most of the participants' other significant relationships, with spouses, children and even grandchildren ($n = 40$).

In the words of participant P6:

> Yes, certainly. On my husband and on my children. And on the things I do with other people, yes I think so. A lot more relaxation. And a lot more that they see who I really am. That I got more space to become myself.

Such a positive consequence is echoed by a participant who eloquently described a change in spousal relations P47:

> The effect has been dramatic on my marriage, in a very positive way. I was displaced my anger on my parents on my partner … no wit seems to her that I am also a different person, not always with an axe to grind, not constantly bitter to her. Not always looking to pick a fight,

Participant P11 emphasized a positive change in her ability to be a parent and grandparent

> I have given it to Jesus and I have also received what has failed me, I have also asked Him to give me all that motherly love that I never received. And I do feel that He has. I can give my children then, my grandchildren, I can really give much more love, happily.

Such fruits of forgiveness notwithstanding many participants perceived their forgiveness process as ongoing, further consolidated and strengthened in the future ($n = 7$).

In the words of participant P48:

> Forgiveness has made a giant change in my own life and those around me, but I sense there is more that can be achieved, that this forgiveness can be deepened … and that with time I will act more and more differently towards myself and others because I have finally forgiven my childhood adversity.

Discussion

Many of the research findings appeared to echo existing literature on forgiveness.

In speaking about the antecedents of embarking on a process of forgiveness, participants highlighted pro-forgiveness insights. These were brought about by reflections on experiences that fostered the process of personal development. Brown and colleagues (2007) highlight the cognitive, emotional and behavioural maturity of adulthood as a prerequisite for children coming to terms with the substantial injury inflicted on them by their parents. Brann et al. (2007) echo this dynamic and highlight the importance of children growing up and moving out of the parental home and establishing their own independence as promoting a coming to terms with childhood parental injury. Breshears (2015) found that adult children who had forgiven a severe interpersonal injury by their parents reported that crucial to the beginning of their forgiveness process was the attainment of an insight gleaned through adult life experience, that only through forgiveness would they be able to gain well being and lead healthy lives. A desire to reach personal well-being, unrelated to a desire to increase the well-being of the injured parent, was a central motivational factor in striving towards forgiveness. Related to this Kelley and Waldron (2005) as well as Younger and colleagues (2004) concluded

that forgiveness motivation rested primarily on the desire of individuals to rid themselves of the distress related to lingering unforgiveness of interpersonal injury.

Participants' description of making a conscious-willed decision to pursue forgiveness, reinforced by a pro-forgiveness environment consisting of people and teachings encouraging forgiveness, also echoes existing literature. Haroon and colleagues (2021) claimed that forgiveness begins with a choice made by those who have been injured. Anderson and Natrajan-Tyagi (2016) in their study of the forgiveness processes spouses undergo following severe injury by their partner, found that a pro-forgiveness community was necessary for a forgiveness process to begin. Such a community was comprised both of abstract and concrete elements. Abstract pro-forgiveness elements in individuals' communities consisted of spiritual ideas that promote forgiveness and concrete community was conceptualized as influential people and non-religious ideas that promoted forgiveness in the environment surrounding an injured person.

Participant narratives underscored the emotion-cognitive work that was involved in attaining actual forgiveness. Most prominent here was the achievement of a humble realization of joint humanity between themselves and their parents and subsequent realization of the temporal, psychological and cultural context of the parental inflicted injury and vice versa. Similar efforts to reach forgiveness are echoed in the forgiveness literature. For example, contextual theory speaks of an adult reassessment of history in this context (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). In speaking about the antecedents of embarking on a process of forgiveness, participants highlighted pro-forgiveness insights. These were brought about by reflections on experiences that fostered the process of personal development.

Breshears (2015) underscored the intricately complex inner work needed by individuals to attain a state of forgiveness following a severe interpersonal transgression. What is more, Farrell and colleagues (2015) emphasize the importance of humility, an accurate view of oneself including an awareness of one's own limitations and one's own injurious behaviour towards others as a scaffold for efforts to reach interpersonal forgiveness and even relationship repair. Worthington et al. (2019) perceive humility as an actual prerequisite for reaching forgiveness in that it reminds us that there is only one God, and he is not on earth. Human fallibility is seen to be universal. Gnaulati (2022) coins humility as one of the healthiest emotional states. Indeed Smallen (2019) speaks of the importance of cultivating an overarching non-judgmental awareness of humanity and human behaviour as important in achieving forgiveness of the other, the value in seeing the injurer as part of the greater circle of humanity inherently suffering though at the same time doing its best. Compassion for the injurer may be promoted (McCullough et al., 1997).

Empathy by and also for the injurer is a well-recognized factor of commanding importance in promoting interpersonal forgiveness, that is the ability to turn into another and thus genuinely understand the context in which the other person was mired when he committed (Farrow et al., 2001; Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016; Morse & Metts, 2011; Vera Cruz & Mullet, 2019). Berndsen and Wenzel (2018) highlighted the special importance of the injured individual gaining insight as to how past patterns of family injustice and maltreatment in the injurer's life developed and fundamentally limited the injurer's capacity for free choice. Indeed the injured individual may also realize that placed in the same circumstances he might likely also inflict a considerable interpersonal injury. By

profoundly understanding the contextual limitation of the injurer the level of the injurer's culpability is lessened changing the relative position of both injurer and injured, though at the same time, the severity and injustice of the injury are not lessened. This corresponds to what contextual theory calls an 'adult reassessment' of history, a process in which grown-up children reconsider their interpretation of the injustice suffered on the basis of a further investigation into the parents and the circumstances under which the injustice took place (van der Meiden et al., 2019, 2020). Breshears (2015) refers to the centrality of reframing per se in the attainment of interpersonal forgiveness, that is changing one's attributional assumptions about why the injurer inflicted the injury and even one's perceptions about the scope and volume of the negative consequences of the injury. In his study of the forgiveness by adult children of their alcoholic parent, Breshears (2015) underscores the centrality of beginning to attribute injurious parental behaviour to an illness and not a personal deficiency. Bell et al. (2018) echo Breshears (2015) and emphasize the more the causal attribution for the injury can be dispersed among several agents the more smooth the attainment of forgiveness.

In addition, the narratives of some participants that suggested ongoing contact with parents that allowed for the child–parent forgiveness-seeking behaviour of apology to take place and appeared to substantially promote empathy for the injurer, also strongly echoes the forgiveness literature.

Apology is recognized as a common and often potent conciliatory device following the infliction of severe injury, thus playing a significant role in the forgiveness process (Ebesu Huberd et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2019). They typically include the offender's expression of remorse, acknowledging an injury, taking responsibility for its infliction, recognition of its negative impact, a promise that it will not reoccur and a clear request for forgiveness (Morse & Metts, 2011; Roschk & Kaiser, 2012).

An apology can also include an offer of compensation for hurtful behaviour (Kirchhoff et al., 2012; Pansera & La Guardia, 2012). It has been suggested that a factor contributing to the effectiveness of apologies is that the injured individual may often see the injurer experiencing difficulty and struggling with offering an apology, in effect making it a moderate punishment for the injurer (Fincham et al., 2002; Takaku, 2002).

The narratives of participants which highlighted a lack of direct communication of attained forgiveness to their parents also echo the literature. Breshears (2015) found in his study of adult children of alcoholic parents that forgiveness once attained, when expressed at all, was done so only in an indirect manner such as by spending more time with them or buying them gifts on important occasions. Kelley and Waldron (2005) delineate the range of forgiveness communication strategies, where direct communication is conceptualized as the ideal form. Sheldon et al. (2014) echo their appraisal of the preferable forgiveness communication strategy.

Participant delineation of the positive outcomes, both personal and interpersonal, of forgiveness, is also echoed in the literature. Most prominent among personal outcomes are the reduction of negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety and depression and an increase in positive affect, including compassion and benevolence, including towards the injurer and a sense of self-esteem and environmental mastery (Legaree et al., 2007; Worthington et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). Physical health is also positively effected by forgiveness (Pernicano et al., 2022).

Prominent interpersonal benefits of forgiveness include increased relationship commitment and satisfaction, the ability to deal effectively with future relationship hurts, as well as an openness to using one's own story of injury and recovery to help others in maltreating relationships (Anderson & Natrajan-Tyagi, 2016; Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2009; Kim & Enright, 2016).

This article discusses perpetrators and victims but does not address the potential reciprocity in forgiveness processes. Notably, the research falls short in acknowledging the phenomenon of 'mutual damage', whereby children who have experienced severe abuse may also accuse and harm their parents. Another limitation is that the three researchers, each with their respective mother tongue, independently translated pertinent excerpts without cross-verification, which is also a limitation of this research.

In addition, the absence of a member check wherein participants could review transcripts is a further limitation. Despite these drawbacks, this research catalyses several other research topics within the realm of family forgiveness. These include child research–parent forgiveness processes initiated by parents, research on child–parent processes that fail to reach forgiveness and research on forgiveness among siblings.

In a broader context, the authors advocate for qualitative, phenomenological research on forgiveness processes. Such investigations could significantly contribute to understanding the nuanced factors essential for effectively navigating troubled relationships that stand to benefit from forgiveness.

Conclusions

The current research highlights four constituent elements of the process adult children may experience in forgiving their parents for substantial injury inflicted during childhood and adolescence. These components emerged from the in-depth interviews of forty-eight participants from The Netherlands, Romania, and Israel. Each element of the forgiveness process uncovered carries important implications for mental health professionals working with individuals struggling with early parentally inflicted wounds.

Notwithstanding the overall similarity of participant narratives across nations, some differences between Israeli, Romanian and Dutch participants deserve mention.

The pro-forgiveness environments of Dutch and Romanian participants were richly laden with religious, and specifically Christian doctrine, scripture and also spiritual leaders, consistent with the substantial literature on the commanding positive influence of Christianity on the forgiveness of Christians (Kim & Enright, 2016; van Herpen & Kruizinga, 2022; E. Worthington et al., 2019). Such was much less the case for Israeli participants. Jewish religious teachings, though present in participant narratives, did not constitute a commanding influence on the participants' pro-forgiveness momentum. Such a finding may reflect sampling differences between nations. However, it may also reflect the relatively conservative view on forgiveness in Jewish theology and teaching (Rozin et al., 2014; E. Worthington et al., 2005).

Another nuance of difference between Dutch, Romanian and Israeli participants was the substantially greater involvement of parents in their children's forgiveness process. Israeli parents seemed to more often engage in active forgiveness-seeking behaviours, particularly the offering of apologies, an effective forgiveness-seeking strategy (Dollahite et al., 2019). The link between forgiveness and injurer repentance demonstrated through

actual steps of forgiveness seeking, appears consistent with the literature that discusses unconditional versus conditional forgiveness (E. Worthington et al., 2019). Forgiveness seeking among Israeli parents, when it occurred, was made possible by children's insistence on not cutting off connection with their parents completely. What is more, Israeli participants more often, after having achieved forgiveness, actually renewed their relationship with them.

While these nuances of national difference should be further examined this study makes a modest though distinct contribution is buttressing the notion of a relatively universal process of adult child forgiveness of severe parental injury.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics Approval

The present study is in accordance with the ethical guidelines for psychological research in all of the three countries. The authors received informed consent forms from all participating respondents in the respective countries. They also are informed that their participation was voluntary, that all data would be anonymized and that access to the data is restricted to those who are involved in this research project. The Research Ethics Committee of the Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences have reviewed the research and declared in their letter of approval under Ref. no.: ECO 07.09/23 that the research complies according to the committee with the criteria of applicable laws (like the General Data Protection Regulation) and the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

References

Akhtar, S., & Barlow, J. (2018). Forgiveness therapy for the promotion of mental well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *19*(1), 107–122. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016637079

Akhtar, S., Dolan, A., & Barlow, J. (2017). Understanding the relationship between state forgiveness and psychological wellbeing: A qualitative study. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *56*(2), 450–463. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0188-9

Anderson, C. L. (2020). Recovery from relinquishment: Forgiving my birth mother. My journey from 1954 to today. *The Qualitative Report*, *25*(11), 3794–3809. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4723

Anderson, J., & Natrajan-Tyagi, R. (2016). Understanding the process of forgiveness after a relational hurt in Christian marriages. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, *15*(4), 295–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2015.1089804

Bell, C. A., Kamble, S. V., & Fincham, F. D. (2018). Forgiveness, attributions, and marital quality in U.S. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, *17*(4), 276–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2018.1433569

Berndsen, M., & Wenzel, W. (2018). Offenders' claims of taking the victims' perspective can promote forgiveness or backfire! The moderating role of correctly voicing the victims' emotions in collective apologies. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *51*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2710

Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Krasner, B. R. (1986). *Between give and take: A clinical guide to contextual therapy*. Brunner/Mazel.

Brann, M., Rittenour, C. E., & Meyers, S. A. (2007). Adult children's forgiveness of parents' betrayals. *Communication Research Reports*, *24*(4), 353–360. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090701624254

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Breshears, D. (2015). Forgiveness of adult children toward their alcoholic parents. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *16*(1), 38–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2015.1086419

Brown, R. P., Barnes, C. D., & Campbell, N. J. (2007). Fundamentalism and forgiveness. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *43*(6), 1437–1447. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.04.025

Davis, D. E., Worthington, E. L., Hook, J. N., Emmons, R. A., Hill, P. C., Bollinger, R. A., & van Tongeren, D. R. (2013). Humility and the development and repair of social bonds: Two longitudinal studies. *Self and Identity*, *12*(1), 58–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2011.636509

Dollahite, D. C., Marks, L. D., & Barrow, B. H. (2019). Exploring relational reconciliation processes in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families. *Family Relations*, *68*(5), 517–533. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12371

Ebesu Huberd, A., Hendrickson, B., Szejda Fehrenbach, K., & Sur, J. (2013). Effects of timing and sincerity of an apology on satisfaction and changes in negative feelings during conflicts. *Western Journal of Communication*, *77*(3), 205–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2013.770160

Enright, R. D., & Human Development Study Group. (1996). Counseling within the forgiveness triad: On forgiving, receiving, forgiveness, and self-forgiveness. *Counseling and Values*, *40*(2), 107–126. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.1996.tb00844.x

Exline, J. J., Baumeister, R. F., Zell, A. L., Kraft, A. J., & Witvliet, C. V. O. (2008). Not so innocent: Does seeing one's own capability for wrongdoing predict forgiveness? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*(3), 495–515. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.94.3.495

Farrell, J. E., Hook, J. N., Ramos, M., Davis, D. E., Van Tongeren, D. R., & Ruiz, J. M. (2015). Humility and relationship outcomes in couples: The mediating role of commitment. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, *4*(1), 14–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000033

Farrow, T. F. D., Zheng, Y., Wilkinson, I. D., Spence, S. A., Deakin, J. F., William Tarrier, N., Griffiths, P. D., & Woodruff, P. W. R. (2001). Investigating the functional anatomy of empathy and forgiveness. *Neuroreport*, *12*(11), 2433–2438. https://doi.org/10.1097/00001756-200108080-00029

Fincham, F. D., Paleari, F. G., & Regalia, C. (2002). Forgiveness in marriage: The role of relationship quality, attributions, and empathy. *Personal Relationships*, *9*(1), 27–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6811.00002

Freedman, S., & Zarifkar, T. (2016). The psychology of interpersonal forgiveness and guidelines for forgiveness therapy: What therapists need to know to help their clients forgive. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *3*(1), 45–58. https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000087

Friese, S. (2012). *Qualitative data analysis with Atlas.ti*. Sage.

Gnaulati, E. (2022). Supplanting prideful monologue with humble dialogue: A dialogical existential approach to couples therapy. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, *50*(2), 256–270. https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000185

Gordon, K. C., Hughes, F. M., Tomcik, N. D., Dixon, L. J., & Litzinger, S. C. (2009). Widening spheres of impact: The role of forgiveness in marital and family functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *23*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014354

Gray, D. E. (2018). *Doing research in the real world* (4th ed.). Sage.

Hantman, S., & Cohen, O. (2010). Forgiveness in late life. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *53*(7), 613–630. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2010.509751

Haroon, Z., Iftikhar, R., Kim, J. J., Volk, F., & Enright, R. D. (2021). A randomized controlled trial of a forgiveness intervention program with female acid attack survivors in Pakistan. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *28*(4), 917–928. https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2545

Hernandez, B. C., Vonderfecht, H., Smith, S. B., Cress, P. K., Davis, R., & Bigger, D. (2012). Development and evaluation of a faith-based psychoeducational approach to forgiveness for

Christians. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, *31*(3), 263–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2012.679842
Hill, P. L., Allemand, M., & Heffernan, M. E. (2013). Placing dispositional forgiveness within theories of adult personality development. *European Psychologist*, *18*(4), 273–285. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000145
Ho, M. Y., & Fung, H. H. (2011). A dynamic process model of forgiveness: A cross-cultural perspective. *Review of General Psychology*, *15*(1), 77–84. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022605
Ho, M. Y., & Worthington, E. L. (2020). Is the concept of forgiveness universal? A cross-cultural perspective comparing western and eastern cultures. *Current Psychology*, *39*(5), 1749–1756. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-018-9875-x
Hoyt, W. T., McCullough, M. E., Fincham, F. D., Maio, G., & Davila, J. (2005). Responses to interpersonal transgressions in families: Forgivingness, forgivability, and relationship-specific effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *89*(3), 375–394. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.3.375
Hu, M., Cotton, G., Zhang, B., & Jia, N. (2019). The influence of apology on audiences' reactions toward a media figure's transgression. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *8*(4), 410–419. https://doi.org/10.1037/PPM0000195
Ingersoll-Dayton, B., Campbell, R., & Ha, J. H. (2009). Enhancing forgiveness: A group intervention for the elderly. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *52*(1), 2–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634370802561901
Kelley, D. L., & Waldron, V. R. (2005). An investigation of forgiveness-seeking communication and relational outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, *53*(3), 339–358. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370500101097
Kim, J. J., & Enright, R. D. (2016). "State and trait forgiveness": A philosophical analysis and implications for psychotherapy. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *3*(1), 32–44. https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000090
Kimmes, J. G., & Durtschi, J. A. (2016). Forgiveness in romantic relationships: The roles of attachment, empathy, and attributions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *42*(4), 645–658. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12171
Kirchhoff, J., Wagner, U., & Strack, M. (2012). Apologies: Words of magic? The role of verbal components, anger reduction, and offence severity. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *18*(2), 109–130. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028092
Kumar, R. (2012). *Research methodology. A step by step guide for beginners*. Sage.
Lander, A. (2012). Toward the incorporation of forgiveness therapy in healing the wounds of eating disorders: A case study in self-forgiveness. *Clinical Case Studies*, *11*(2), 119–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534650112443002
Lander, A. (2020). Toward an understanding of the complexities surrounding forgiveness among men struggling with paternal attachment injury. *Journal of Family Studies*, *26*(2), 188–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2017.1366351
Lee, Y. R., & Enright, R. D. (2014). A forgiveness intervention for women with fibromyalgia who were abused in childhood: A pilot study. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *1*(3), 203–217. https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000025
Legaree, T. A., Turner, J., & Lollis, S. (2007). Forgiveness and therapy: A critical review of conceptualizations, practices, and values found in the literature. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *33*(2), 192–213. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2007.00016.x
Macaskill, A., Maltby, J., & Day, L. (2002). Forgiveness of self and others and emotional empathy. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *142*(5), 663–665. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540209603925
Maio, G. R., Fincham, F. D., & Lycett, E. J. (2000). Attitudinal ambivalence toward parents and attachment style. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *26*(12), 1451–1464. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672002612001
Maio, G. R., Thomas, G., Fincham, F. D., & Carnelley, K. B. (2008). Unraveling the role of forgiveness in family relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*(2), 307–319. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.94.2.307
Maso, I., & Smaling, A. (1998). *Kwalitatief onderzoek: praktijk en theorie*. Boom.

May, R. W., Kamble, S. V., & Fincham, F. D. (2015). Forgivingness, forgivability, and relationship-specific effects in responses to transgressions in Indian families. *Family Relations*, *64*(2), 332–346. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12114

McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*(2), 321–336. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.2.321

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis. A methods sourcebook*. Sage.

Morse, C., & Metts, S. (2011). Situational and communicative predictors of forgiveness following a relational transgression. *Western Journal of Communication*, *75*(3), 239–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2011.571652

Nixon, E., Greene, S., & Hogan, D. (2012). "Like an uncle but more, but less than a father"–Irish children's relationships with nonresident fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*(3), 381–390. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028336

Pansera, C., & La Guardia, J. (2012). The role of sincere amends and perceived partner responsiveness in forgiveness. *Personal Relationships*, *19*(4), 696–711. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01386.x

Pernicano, P. U., Wortmann, J., & Haynes, K. (2022). Acceptance and forgiveness therapy for veterans with moral injury: Spiritual and psychological collaboration in group treatment. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, *28*(51), 557–578. https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2022.2032982

Pronk, T. M., Karremans, J. C., Overbeek, G., Vermulst, A. A., & Wigboldus, D. H. J. (2010). What it takes to forgive: When and why executive functioning facilitates forgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *98*(1), 119–131. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017875

Rivera, P. M., & Fincham, F. D. (2015). Forgiveness as a mediator of the intergenerational transmission of violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *30*(6), 895–910. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514539765

Roschk, H., & Kaiser, S. (2012). The nature of an apology; An experimental study on how to apologize after a service failure. *Marketing Letters*, *24*(3), 293–309. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-012-9218-x

Rozin, P., Cherfas, L., Radil, T., Radil, J., McCauley, C. R., & Cohen, A. B. (2014). Which Jews dislike contemporary Germans: Range and determinants of German aversion in Czech and U.S. Holocaust survivors and young American Jews. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *20*(4), 412–429. https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000056

Sheldon, P., Gilchrist-Petty, E., & Lessley, J. A. (2014). You did what? The relationship between forgiveness tendency, communication of forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction in married and dating couples. *Communication Reports*, *27*(2), 78–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2014.902486

Sherr, L., Roberts, K. J., & Croome, N. (2019). Parenting concepts and experiences of adults abandoned as infants. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, *14*(1), 36–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450128.2018.1554866

Smallen, D. (2019). Practicing forgiveness: A framework for a routine forgiveness practice. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, *6*(4), 219–228. https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000197

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Takaku, S. (2002). The effects of apology and perspective taking on interpersonal forgiveness: A dissonance-attribution model of interpersonal forgiveness. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *141*(4), 494–508. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540109600567

van der Meiden, J. H., Noordegraaf, M., & van Ewijk, H. (2019). How is contextual therapy applied today? An analysis of the practice of current contextual therapists. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *41*(1), 12–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-018-9467-9

van der Meiden, J. H., Verduijn, C., Noordegraaf, M., & van Ewijk, H. (2020). Strengthening connectedness in close relationships: A model for applying contextual therapy. *Family Process*, *59*(2), 346–360. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12425

van Herpen, M., & Kruizinga, R. (2022). Mea culpa: A qualitative interview study on the role of guilt and forgiveness with non-religious and multireligious inmates. *Religions*, *13*(2), 145. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020145

Vera Cruz, G., & Mullet, E. (2019). Empathy and forgiveness among Mozambican wives. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*, *8*(3), 124–143. https://doi.org/10.1037/ipp0000110

Worthington, E., Brown, E. M., & McConnell, J. M. (2019). Forgiveness in committed couples: Its synergy with humility, justice, and reconciliation. *Religions*, *10*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010044

Worthington, E. L. (2005). *Handbook of forgiveness*. Routledge.

Worthington, E. L., Wade, N. G., & Hoyt, W. T. (2014). Positive psychological interventions for promoting forgiveness. In A. C. Parks & S. Schueller (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of positive psychological interventions* (pp. 20–41). Wiley and Sons.

Yoo, H., Racorean, S., & Barrows, V. (2020). Psychotherapy for child welfare cases: Clinicians' and parents' perspectives. *Child & Family Social Work*, *25*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12754

Younger, J. W., Piferi, R. L., Jobe, R. L., & Lawler, K. A. (2004). Dimensions of forgiveness: The views of laypersons. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *21*(6), 837–855. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407504047843

Zhang, Q., Ting Toomey, S., Oetzel, J., & Zhang, J. (2015). The emotional side of forgiveness: A cross cultural investigation of the role of anger and compassion and face threat in interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *8*(4), 311–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2015.1087094