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How Child and Youth Care Students Think About and Practice Forgiveness: A Qualitative Course-Based Research Study

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ABSTRACT

At the core of child and youth care (CYC) practice is the ability to cultivate meaningful and positive relationships with children and youth. As CYC students we are taught from day one that knowing one's self is a pre-condition to building positive and meaningful relationship with others. As a result, we are educated to become more self-aware, a process that involves building our capacity to honestly recognize our beliefs, emotions, personality traits, values, biases, and motivations. Most importantly, we are taught to be forgiving because as human beings we are adept at hiding awkward or painful truths from ourselves. The aim of this course-based study is to contribute to the body of relational CYC knowledge by investigating the perceptions of CYC students' understanding and practice of the concept of forgiveness. The data were analyzed using a six-phased process of thematic analysis based on the work of Braun and Clark (2006). Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) freedom, (b) learning how, (c) forgiveness is a process, and (d) your road to forgiveness is your own.

Keywords: child and youth care, course-based research, forgiveness, qualitative

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I. Introduction

At the core of child and youth care (CYC) practice is the ability to cultivate meaningful and positive relationships with children and youth (Bellefeuille, Ricks, & Jamieson, 2012; Krueger, 1991; Ricks, 1989). The importance and significance of being self-aware is, therefore, an essential aspect of a CYC student's professional development. As CYC students we are taught from day one that knowing one's "self" is a pre-condition to knowing "others." We learn that self-awareness requires building one's capacity to honestly recognize beliefs, emotions, personality traits, values, biases, and motivations. Most importantly, we are taught to be forgiving because forgiveness is the cornerstone of any relationship.

A. The Art of Forgiveness

Similar to other virtues, forgiveness is an ancient ideal that has been studied and discussed for thousands of years, yet there is no consensus in the literature, which spans various disciplines, regarding how to define the act of forgiveness (Denton & Martin, 1998). There are, however, certain recurring characteristics that are commonly used to describe the concept of forgiveness. For example, Scobie and Scobie (1998) describe the act of forgiveness as a "conscious decision to set aside one's legitimate claim for retaliation or restitution for a damaging act committed by a significant other" (p. 382). For McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) forgiveness is explained as:

> …the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes (a) decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner; (b) decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender; and (c) increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions (pp. 321–322).

Though forgiveness is often understood as a circumstantial response or as a learned skill, a variety of studies have concluded that it is also largely influenced by aspects of one's personality, which has been coined as trait forgiveness (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; McCullough & Hoyt, 2000). In the end, forgiveness is a personal process. As Desmond Tutu (2014), South Africa's former Anglican archbishop and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, said, "We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves." In other words, forgiveness is a positive act of self-interest.

II. Undergraduate Course-Based Research

This section begins with a word about course-based research. The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinking, reflection, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, a course-based research approach, in contrast to the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small low-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching.

The use of course-based research in higher education has increased substantially in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille, Ekdahl, Kent, & Kluczny, 2014; Harrison, Dunbar, Ratmansky, Boyd, & Lopatto, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods are significant for CYC students. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge learned in traditional education practice. For example, former students have reported that their engagement in course-based research enabled them to deepen their scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a mentoring relationship; one result is that a greater number of student's express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, results generated through course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and thereby contribute to the discipline's knowledge base. The ethical approval required to permit students to conduct course-based research projects is granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete an REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class; each application is reviewed by the course instructor and an REB committee to ensure that the project is completed in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

The focus of the course-based research project presented here is to explore how self-aware CYC students are about being forgiving to both themselves and others. More specifically, this study explores how CYC students define forgiveness, assesses their capacity to forgive themselves and others, and examines the reasons behind their choices to forgive or not.

III. Research Design

Exploring the question of how CYC students at MacEwan University view forgiveness required a methodology that considered the nature of the phenomenon being studied. As Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) point out, it is imperative that researchers consider paradigm issues critical to their inquiry and not proceed without having a clear understanding of the paradigm that best informs their research question. Similarly, Crotty (1998) states that research designs should be based on the concepts of ontology (the way the researcher defines the nature of reality), epistemology (the process by which the researcher comes to know the nature of reality), and methodology (the framework that guides the research process, including strategies, methods and analysis). With the aim to gain broad insight rather than test a specific hypothesis, this coursed-based research project was undertaken using a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach.

IV. Sampling Strategy

A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants for this study. A basic principle of non-probability sampling techniques is that sampling is generally assumed to be selected purposefully to yield cases that are information rich (Cresswell, 2013). Purposive sampling is the specific technique of recruiting participants based on a set of criteria. According to Dudovskiy (2017), purposive sampling can be highly effective in exploring lived experiences that have to do with an intuitive approach. We drew our purposive sample from a group of undergraduate CYC students at MacEwan University.

V. Statement of Research Question

The following research question guided the inquiry: How do CYC students at MacEwan University view forgiveness?

VI. Data Collection Strategy

Data were collected using semi-structured, online focus groups facilitated by the videoconferencing platform Zoom. There is a wealth of literature on the benefits of remote data-collection methods (Chen & Neo, 2019; Ferrante, 2016 et al.; Tuttas, 2015), which include greater flexibility in time and location, increasing convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness for both the researcher and participants (Cater, 2011; Deakin, & Wakefield, 2014; Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2016). Semi-structured focus-groups fit well with our interpretive focus as they consist of a dialogue between researcher and participant, characterized by guided questions, probes, and comments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2000).

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

A crucial component of ensuring data integrity is the selection of an appropriate data analysis method (Creswell, 2013). Thus, Braun and Clark's (2006) six phase approach to data analysis was selected, as it aligns well with the interpretive research paradigm. The six phases include (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Braun and Clark (2006) explain that the aims of thematic analysis are to make sense of the data and provide an accurate account of what the data mean. They also point out that thematic analysis should not be undertaken as a linear process but rather a recursive, reflexive process of moving back and forth between phases.

VIII. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the following four themes: (a) freedom, (b) learning how, (c) forgive is a process, and (d) forgiveness is a very personal process. Each is discussed below.

A. Freedom

Under the theme of freedom, several of the participants described the freedom of forgiveness as being relieved of a burden. For example, one participant referred to the act of forgiveness "as a weight off one's shoulders". Another participant used the term "relief." For a few other participants, to forgive meant, "creating a new chapter for yourself and others" and hitting a "restart button." For all of these participants, forgiveness was experienced as a liberating practice that not only enabled the one who had wronged them to be free from the past but also allowed the forgivers themselves to live more fully in the present, a key capacity of relational-centered practice.

B. Learning How

The theme of forgiveness as a learning process emerged strongly from the data. For example, one participant described forgiving as "something that takes practice." Others used words such as "forgiveness is a learned thing" and forgiveness is "learned from personal experience with others." The concept of forgiveness as a learned skill or developed personal capacity was not shared by all participants, which leads to the broader nature versus nurture debate.

C. Forgiveness is a process

Perhaps one of the most significant sub-themes within the concept of freedom is that it takes time, meaning that forgiveness is not an act but a process. Several of the participants were very clear that being ready to forgive is a key step in the forgiveness process. For example, participants' comments included the following: "you can't forgive unless you are ready," "forgiving is a deeper level then just saying sorry," "when one forgives two are healed," and forgiveness is like "walking along with the other person."

D. Your Road to Forgiveness is Your Own

The concept of the forgiveness process as a personal journey implies that there are many factors in play. While all of the participants experienced the four common themes, the forgiveness process was not the same for any two participants. The qualitative data analysis revealed that the forgiveness experience is a profound individual process that looks different for everyone. Some of the comments expressed by the participants included, "even though you forgive someone, the connection isn't the same," "it is the hardest thing to do in someone's life," and "not everyone is able to forgive."

IX. CONCLUSION

The central purpose of this course-based study was to explore how CYC students view forgiveness as an important component of CYC practice. Both the findings of this course-based study and the previous literature support the view that forgiveness is indeed a multi-faceted and complex process with individual differences. However, one qualitative course-based study cannot adequately investigate how CYC understand, value, and intentionally practice forgiveness. The researchers thus recommend that this course-based study be replicated or that other aspects of forgiveness be explored to add to the growing body of knowledge of CYC relational-centered practice competencies.

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