

# To forgive or not to forgive? Is that the question?

## Forgiveness, Transitional Justice and the Historic Abuse of Children in Care.

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### Abstract

This PhD project aims to develop the theoretical and practical understanding of historic abuse by exploring the concepts of forgiveness and transitional justice and studying how these can be applied to the processes and interventions in responding to adults abused in care as children.

### Keywords

Residential child care, historic abuse, forgiveness, transitional justice, social work

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### Setting the Context

This PhD project aims to develop the theoretical and practical understanding of historic abuse by exploring the concepts of forgiveness and transitional justice and studying how these can be applied to the processes and interventions in responding to adults abused in care as children.

The historic abuse of adults who experienced care as children is a contentious and topical issue and is being addressed in a number of different ways. Some countries have developed wide-ranging responses with apologies, truth-telling commissions and compensation and reparation schemes. Other countries have barely acknowledged the problem (Kendrick & Hawthorn, 2012; Skold & Swain, in print). Research and literature on this topic, however, has tended to focus on descriptions of the nature of the abuse and the practical responses to historic abuse. Much of the knowledge and understanding has come from inquiries into specific cases of abuse as well as more general reviews.

This research intends to examine the way in which victims/survivors of abuse and professionals are involved in advocacy services; provision of residential and foster care services and the way in which professional associations and local and national government understand forgiveness in the context of historic abuse and its relevance to transitional justice frameworks. The study will compare and contrast the way in which these issues are

perceived and experienced in a number of countries which have adopted differing responses to historic abuse, namely Australia, Canada, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland.

## Forgiveness

We deal with the issues of forgiveness and forgiving on a day-to-day basis and yet, when confronted with unspeakable injustices, we question how forgiveness is possible. Some victims of terrible wrongs are able to grant forgiveness to the perpetrators; others state that they will never forgive. What motivates such responses and what does it actually mean to forgive?

One definition of forgiveness is the completed act of reconciliation of the guilty one with the offended one... involving six steps: guilt, confession, remorse, restitution, mutual acceptance, reconciliation Pattison (1965 p. 114), whilst Murphy (2005) sees forgiveness as:

the overcoming on moral grounds of the vindictive passions - the passions of anger, resentment, and even hatred that are often occasioned when one has been deeply wronged by another. (p. 20). From a psychotherapeutic perspective, forgiveness has been described as ... a harmonious closure in the resolution of a difficult relationship; a closure... one which allows the patient to redirect his energy (Durham, 2000, p.13).

Forgiveness is also a concept with deep religious roots (McCullough & Worthington 1999). It is a central concept, for example, in Christianity (Marty, 1998), Islam (Abu-Nimer & Nasse, 2013) and Judaism (Newman, 1987).

Forgiveness, then, is a complex and difficult concept and it is unsurprising that there is a range of views about what forgiveness entails. What appears clear, however, is that it is a process rather than a single action (Worthington, 2005).

Griswold (2007) also suggests that forgiveness requires reciprocity between the 'injured' and the 'injurer'. In this situation, it is important that those who are accountable for the injury take steps toward a resolution, and the individual who has experienced the injury must be willing to work with the resolution process if it is going to be fully effective. In this way, forgiveness is said to be a process of exchange, where ideally the 'injurer' attempts to make amends in whatever way necessary or is obliged to because of external forces, whilst the 'injured' accepts attempts at resolution and responds by moving on from the experience as fully as possible once justice has been seen to be served.

Researches on the consequences of forgiveness for the individual have suggested that forgiveness leads to improved emotional and physical wellbeing for those who have been affected by injustice, (see Luskin, 2002; Van Oyen et al., 2001). Forgiveness has also been studied in the context of psychotherapy (Gartner, 2008; Durham, 2000) and research has found associations between the willingness to forgive and a reduction in negative feelings such as anxiety and depression whilst promoting self-esteem and feelings of optimism; essentially demonstrating that forgiveness enhances psychological health (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman, 1995).

## Transitional Justice

The roots of transitional justice can be traced back to the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War (Kritz, 1995). Transitional justice concerns the study of strategies employed by states and institutions to deal with the legacy of human rights abuses and to effect social reconstruction in the wake of widespread violence. The main contexts of historical injustice have been identified as genocide; wars; racial, ethnic and colonial oppression; and political violence (Barkan, 2000; Thompson, 2003). These have been categorised in terms of 'conflict', 'post-conflict' and 'non-conflict' situations (Barkan, 2012). A significant feature of most of these situations is that the experience of individuals is framed by an over-arching identity: racial, ethnic, national or political; and this can be framed as communal injustice. Other contexts of historical justice, however, consist of situations where individuals have suffered injustice and abuse, and it is this very experience which identifies them as a group. The victims of thalidomide would be one such group, as would the soldiers and civilians exposed to radiation in atomic bomb tests who are now suffering long-term effects on their health.

The theory and practice of transitional justice have identified a framework for justice which embraces acknowledgement, accountability and reconciliation. Acknowledgement involves truth-telling and survivors' testimony; apology and apology legislation; and commemorative activities. Accountability addresses criminal justice and the prosecution of abusers; compensation, reparation and redress and counselling and support. Reconciliation involves the development of reciprocal trust and relationship building (Barkan, 2000; Marrus, 2007; Tavuchis, 1991; Thomson, 2003; Walker, 2010).

Forgiveness has also been highlighted as a significant factor within the process of transitional justice (Inazu, 2009). An example of this was in South Africa where Archbishop Desmond Tutu encouraged civilians to forgive and move on from the injustices of the past. Forgiveness was embedded in the transitional justice process in South Africa as the nation made attempts to move on into a peaceful future.

## Linking Forgiveness and Transitional Justice to Historic Abuse

We find situations of both communal injustice and individual injustice in the historical abuse of children in care. For example, residential schools in North America and Australia were used to deprive aboriginal children of their religion, language and culture; this has been described as 'cultural genocide' (Millar, 1996; Churchill, 2004). In other contexts, however, individual children in residential and foster care were subject to physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect (Gil, 1982).

The response of organisations and governments to the historical abuse of children in care has drawn on the processes of transitional justice outlined above. There has not, however, been an exploration of the role of forgiveness in relation to historic abuse.

The project will draw out the ways in which forgiveness and transitional justice are perceived and experienced in the context of the historical abuse of children in care.

The specific research questions the study aims to answer are:

- What does forgiveness mean within the context of historic abuse?

- What does justice mean within the context of historic abuse?
- What are the attitudes of victims/survivors and other key stakeholders to current approaches to address historic abuse?
- What needs to be done by victims/survivors and other key stakeholders for resolution to be achieved?
- How relevant are transitional justice frameworks and notions of forgiveness to approaches to historic abuse in care in Australia, Canada, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland?

### **An Invitation ...**

Currently we are in the process of beginning the undertaking of a pilot study in Scotland to inform research questions and methodology. It is hoped that once this has been completed, the main body of research will be undertaken in Australia, Canada, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland to address the key questions highlighted above.

If you are a victim/survivor based within any of the these countries, or work for/represent key institutions such as advocacy services; providers of residential and foster care services; professional associations or local and national government, then please get in touch. We would be delighted for you to participate in the research or ask questions and provide comments. Please do accept this invitation and contact us at any point.

## End Notes

Please make contact via email to: [samina.karim@strath.ac.uk](mailto:samina.karim@strath.ac.uk). We look forward to hearing from you and having your invaluable input.

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