Understanding 'forgiveness' in the context of psychosis: A qualitative study of service user experience

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Summary

Twenty-three people with psychosis were interviewed about their subjective experience of 'forgiveness'. Resulting themes of enabling conditions, thinking styles, psychological and interpersonal benefits, and need for caution may inform clinical practice on trauma, adverse life events, and relationships in psychosis.

Summary word count: 40

Introduction

Forgiveness has been defined as 'a process (or the result of a process) that involves a change in emotion and attitude' (APA, 2006). This process can have an adaptive, prosocial outcome which allays negative consequences of revenge-seeking (McCullough, 2000). Targeting forgiveness in psychotherapy is associated with increased positive affect and self-esteem, and less negative affect (Lundahl et al., 2008)

Given significant trauma experiences, adverse life events, and difficult social relationships (Spauwen et al., 2006; Varese et al., 2012), notions of interpersonal forgiveness can figure prominently for people with psychosis. Research shows that negative emotions associated with trauma and adverse life events are directly linked to the development of positive symptoms (Hardy et al., 2005) with delusions conceptualised as direct representations of emotional concerns (Freeman & Garety, 2003).

Forgiveness is increasingly targeted by psychological interventions. Third wave interventions such as compassion-focused therapy (Leaviss & Uttley, 2015) and positive psychotherapy (Seligman et al., 2006) employ specific forgiveness-targeting exercises. Compassion-focused treatments have been shown to be effective for people with psychosis (Laithwaite et al., 2009) although forgiveness-specific exercises raised challenges in relation to recognition of hurt and relating to transgressors (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006). Positive psychotherapy for psychosis interventions have included a forgiveness letter, which is written but not necessarily delivered, to a transgressor in order to transform anger or resentment into positive or neutral feelings (Riches et al, 2016). In psychotherapy research more generally, concerns have been raised about the impact forgiveness-targeting exercises will have on the therapeutic relationship (Wade et al., 2008).

A clearer understanding of how people with psychosis understand forgiveness is required to inform psychological interventions. This study aimed to consult with people with psychosis to understand their subjective experience of forgiveness.

Methods

Participants with a range of characteristics (age, ethnicity, experience of psychosis) were purposefully recruited from NHS community mental health services in South London. Inclusion criteria were aged 18-65 years; clinical diagnosis of psychosis; sufficient conversational English; and capacity to provide informed consent. The study received National Health Service Research Ethics Committee approval. All participants gave informed consent. Participants were initially consulted by BS about forgiveness in relation to general wellbeing and the development of a positive psychotherapy for psychosis trial (Riches et al, 2020; Schrank et al, 2014; 2016). Due to participants' interest in this topic, they were invited for a more in-depth interview by BS or SR specifically on forgiveness. Example questions included "What do you think about forgiveness, e.g. forgiving someone who has offended you in any way? How would that make a difference in your life? What may be challenging about forgiveness? What may be positive about forgiveness?" Further questions relating wellbeing to forgiveness were also asked, e.g. "What do you think about forgiveness changing bitter feelings?" Participants were also presented with forgiveness exercises from positive psychotherapy and their feedback was sought (Riches et al., 2016). All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in the clinic. Participants received £20 for each interview.

Interviews were anonymised, transcribed, and analysed using the qualitative data analysis software package Nvivo9. Data from the initial consultations and the more in-depth interviews were pooled. Thematic analysis was employed with the aim of understanding how participants view the concept of forgiveness. In the descriptive analysis, themes were identified and coded. SR and TB coded all transcripts, and analysis was regularly discussed by the research team. This process involved iterative coding following regular repeated inspection of data and discussion by researchers, SR, TB, and VL, leading to identification of key themes. Alternative interpretations, groupings, and relations were discussed, consensus was reached, and the coding framework developed iteratively, using an inductive process. In

the interpretative analysis, the emergent coding framework was applied to each participant to explore themes in greater depth.

Results

Twenty-three adult service users with psychosis took part in the initial consultations. Their mean age was 44.6 years (SD 9.3), 35% were female, 65% had a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and all were clinically stable and living independently. In the more in-depth interviews, thirteen of the original twenty-three participants were interviewed. The mean age was 43 years (SD 8.7), 31% were female, and 92% had a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Those that did not participate in the in-depth interviews either declined to be re-interviewed (n=4), were uncontactable (n=5), or hospitalised for a physical condition (n=1). Three stages of forgiveness emerged inductively from the data: pre-forgiveness, the forgiveness act, and post-forgiveness consequences. A clear pre-forgiveness stage emerged, which was characterised by themes of enabling conditions to forgiveness and anticipatory thinking styles. Participants described the forgiveness act in two contrasting ways. We labelled these two themes 'inferential' and 'non-inferential' forgiveness. Inferential forgiveness was broadly defined as a cognitive process that involves consideration of situation-specific reasons for forgiving and culminates in a conclusion to forgive, based on those reasons. Non-inferential forgiveness involved commitment to a general principle of forgiving and was not based on a process of considering situation-specific reasons for forgiving, sometimes motivated by a religious or moral perspective. A clear stage of post-forgiveness consequences emerged, which was characterised by themes of psychological benefits, interpersonal benefits, and need for caution. These stages, themes, and supporting quotes are now explained in full.

Stage 1. Pre-forgiveness

Theme: Enabling conditions. Participants reported certain conditions had to be in place in order to forgive. Enabling conditions were conditions required to make forgiveness possible. For example, it being the right time to forgive, having enough time to forgive, being in the

right frame of mind to forgive, and acknowledging 'unforgivable' events or acts that posed challenges to forgiveness: *"I can't forgive because I'm confronted with these things every day, I'm thinking about these things and…I've lost" (#13)* Participants reported numerous idiosyncratic enabling conditions to forgiveness; a personal understanding of why they were forgiving was important for many participants: *"You have to understand why you should forgive" (#14).* Participants reported that forgiveness was conditional on an apology or a change in transgressors' behaviour and that this could be more important than understanding forgiveness: *"Just say 'I'm sorry'. You don't even have to explain why you did it. Just say you're sorry, and it's all gone" (#1). "What makes forgiveness easier is when the person who has done the wrong to you is trying to change their behaviour, so that they, if they're genuinely sorry, and I don't mean sorry as in just regretful, I mean sorry as in regretful and doing something about it, so they don't do stuff again" (#19).* Apologies or transgressors making amends emerged as important enabling conditions for forgiveness. Relationships with transgressors were linked to the forgiving/forgetting distinction. Participants reported that forgiving could be easier, often when forgiveness was accompanied by an apology or transgressor behaviour-change, and that the greater challenge lay in forgetting; while combining both was the greatest challenge of all: *"Forgiveness is easy…once the person has made amends and acknowledged what they've done to you. Forgetting is the hard part" (#1). "Apparently part of forgetting is to forgive them so if you forgive someone then you could forget it or you could try and problem-solve it. But the thing is that I hold a burden of people from the past, I feel angry with people from the past, but I haven't forgiven yet or that I haven't forgotten about what they did to me. Maybe because I'm still healing from it and trying to get over it, maybe once I'm past what they did to me, like the way they – I feel like they've sabotaged my best effort. If I could get past that and put my best effort in again in those areas of my life then I could forget about it" (#2).* Participants reported that talking to a transgressor could facilitate forgiveness: *"It could be very helpful to discuss with that person and come to an agreement or acknowledgement about what happened" (#3).*

Theme: Anticipatory thinking styles. These were specific enabling conditions that commonly preceded forgiveness. Participants described rumination, paranoia, anger, frustration, grudge, worry, and uncertainty about what a transgressor is thinking before engaging in forgiveness. Rumination was the key process that impeded forgiveness. Participants conceptualised rumination as a temporal process that underpinned paranoid ideation, anger, frustration, grudge, worry, and uncertainty about what others were thinking: *"It sticks in your brain and you analyse and re-analyse and: 'Well, he said this and he said that, and he did this and he did that. Or she did this and she did that. And they must have done it because of this.' And it can drive you absolutely crazy, you know, it is overwhelming"* (#1).

Stage 2. The forgiveness act

Theme: Inferential forgiveness. Participants who engaged in inferential forgiveness considered themselves as consciously thinking rationally about the process and evaluating or 'weighing up' evidence: *"It's about rationalising and seeing both points of view…It's a balancing act"* (#1). *"You have to understand why you need to forgive, why should you forgive, you have to take a person back to understand that we're not all perfect…we all make mistakes, nobody knows really the right way to, to even do the right thing, we're just learning…sometimes you can be treated badly by somebody because they were just ignorant…they didn't understand you"* (#14). Inferential forgiveness was deemed personal and intentional, a decision that could only be made by oneself: *"I just think it's a very personal thing and I certainly don't think its anyone else's domain to be saying, to be telling you that you should forgive someone for doing something…you have to make your own decisions about your own experiences about if you want to forgive someone"* (#19). Inferential forgiveness could be ongoing, worked on, revisable, and could involve dialogue: *"Something bad happens between two people and then it has to be kind of worked through, and at the end of that process, and that involves both parties and then at the end of it, it may involve some kind of an argument, discussions may be ongoing, they start blaming each*

other for various things and then when everything is brought out in the open, that sort of clears the way to forgiveness" (#5).

Theme: Non-inferential forgiveness. This tended to involve a general reason or principle to apply forgiveness in all situations rather than situation-specific reasons for forgiving. It was not a process leading to a conclusion but was instead pre-determined. It was characterised as less conscious; more 'from the heart' than 'from the head': *"I suppose it's not really like a conscious thing is it? It's very much a case of what your heart thinks" (#6).* Participants reported that non-inferential forgiveness was motivated by religious or moral reasons that were outside of their influence, with responsibility often delegated to an external agent: *"You could pray about it…and then ask God to help you to forgive them and then go to them and say, you know, 'I forgive you for what you did to me'…at least you would have rested it in God's hands and be a very different person" (#20). "And when I feel hurt I feel like, you know, paying back, that like repaying them what they done to me, by hurting them as well, but then you feel like you taking advantages or revenge or something and it's not up to you, when you, when you have faith in God you know it's not up to you, the revenge belongs to God so you have to leave it to God, that could help you in forgiving those who have hurt you before" (#17).*

Stage 3. Post-forgiveness consequences

Theme: Psychological benefits. Psychological consequences often focused on improved mood and wellbeing: *"Forgiveness changes me … it makes me that little bit more happier" (#13).* Participants reported that forgiveness could increase confidence and trust: *"It could actually help to heal you and help you to move further, or to move on more confidently and you take some of the pain, the hurt and the pressure off of yourself and help you move further and maybe trust again" (#14).* Participants identified value in taking control of their own forgiveness and forgiving for their own sake: *"You've got to do it for your own sake, not for the other person but for yourself" (#6).*

Theme: Interpersonal benefits. Forgiveness could help maintain positive relationships: *"I suppose the reason why people forgive is because there's something they value, there's a relationship with somebody and they don't want to break that up" (#5).* Participants reported that forgiveness resulted in less anger, and was important for letting go and moving on, which led some to feel a sense of freedom: *"It allows you freedom, it gives you back freedom. Freedom then to go home and…enjoy the rest of your day" (#8).*

Theme: Need for caution. Participants reported concerns that forgiveness could lead to exploitation. Distal consequences referenced complex and challenging family issues. Some participants had experienced traumatic events, forgave the transgressor, and then the transgressor reoffended: *"You've got to make sure your forgiveness isn't just letting someone off the hook, so they can go and repeat the same actions again" (#19).*

Discussion

This qualitative study presents the subjective experience of forgiveness for a sample of people with psychosis. Positive consequences, such as improved wellbeing, confidence, and social relationships, suggest forgiveness can be an important target area in psychological interventions. An inferential/non-inferential distinction, analogous to decision-based forgiveness (DiBlasio, 1998), sense-making processes (Fehr et al., 2010) or to dual processing systems (Evans, 2008) suggests distinct thinking styles underpin forgiveness. This has useful clinical applications when considering the prevalence of trauma experiences, adverse life events, and difficult social relationships in this population. Previous research highlights public and private dimensions to forgiveness by distinguishing 'negotiating' and 'unilateral' forgiveness (Andrews, 2000). This study suggests that 'negotiating forgiveness', which requires dialogue between transgressors and transgressed, is likely to incur obstacles for people with psychosis, especially given challenging social relationships; whereas 'unilateral forgiveness', which involves a predominantly personal approach, can be

neglected, delegated to external agents or principles, and conflated with associated concepts such as forgetting.

These findings indicate that clinical psychologists may wish to assess rumination; notice if waiting for an apology or behaviour-change of transgressors is impeding forgiveness; safeguard against potential exploitation; observe perceived conflations of forgiveness and forgetting; and facilitate a transgressed person's independent control over forgiveness. Inferential forgiveness styles could be supported by cognitive work on social schemas and interpersonal attributions in order to address dysfunctional beliefs (Kuipers et al., 2006). Such therapeutic work may target thoughts of blame towards another person. This approach may be especially suited to NICE-recommended cognitive behavioural therapy for psychosis, given its attention to identifying maladaptive thought processes. Cognitive models of psychosis typically facilitate inferential, 'decision-based' approaches towards belief appraisals (Garety et al., 2001). By contrast, the non-cognitivism and lack of situation-specificity of non-inferential forgiveness may be better supported by behavioural approaches, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (Bach et al., 2013), mindfulness (Chadwick, 2014), and a general move away from thought-challenging (Longmore & Worrell, 2007). Prevalence of religious content in psychotic delusions and hallucinations (Ng, 2007) could intensify non-inferential forgiveness and suggests additional, psychosis-specific factors in relation to understanding thinking styles that may facilitate or impede forgiveness. Greater awareness of different cultural norms and their relation to thinking styles is likely to foster greater person-centred, culturally competent clinical practice in this population (Hodge & Nadir, 2008).

A strength of this study is its direct consultation with people with psychosis. The qualitative methodology provided a deeper understanding of how people with psychosis experience forgiveness. The three stages may serve to aid clinical practice by suggesting target areas for psychological assessment and therapeutic intervention. Limitations include lack of

longitudinal analysis, a relatively small sample size, and lack of a comparison group, which was not used as this was an exploratory study.

Further research into forgiveness in psychosis is important given the prevalence of traumatic life events. With the significance that forgiveness may hold over psychological distress and recovery in psychosis, further examination into thinking styles and their relationship to trauma, will aid psychological interventions.

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Table 1. 'Forgiveness' in the context of psychosis: Summary of thematic analysis of service user experience

Stage	Theme	Explanation	Key quote
Pre-forgiveness	*Enabling conditions*	These were necessary to make forgiveness possible, e.g. time, frame of mind, understanding of why, or relationships with transgressors.	*"You have to understand why you should forgive" (#14)*
	Anticipatory thinking styles	Paranoia, anger, frustration, grudge, worry, uncertainty, and rumination were reported prior to forgiveness.	*"It sticks in your brain and you analyse and re-analyse…it can drive you absolutely crazy, you know, it is overwhelming." (#1)*
The forgiveness act	*Inferential forgiveness*	This involved consciously thinking rationally about the process and evaluating (or 'weighing up') evidence.	*"It's about rationalising and seeing both points of view…It's a balancing act" (#1)*
	Non-inferential forgiveness	This involved a general reason or principle to apply forgiveness in all situations, often motivated by religious or moral reasons.	*"I suppose it's not really like a conscious thing is it? It's very much a case of what your heart thinks." (#6)*
Post-forgiveness consequences	*Psychological benefits*	These included improved mood, wellbeing, confidence, and trust.	*"Forgiveness changes me…it makes me that little bit more happier" (#13)*
	Interpersonal benefits	These included more positive relationships.	*"I suppose the reason why people forgive is…there's a relationship with somebody and they don't want to break that up." (#5)*
	Need for caution	There were concerns of exploitation, transgressors re-offending, and complex family relationships.	*"You've got to make sure your forgiveness isn't just letting someone off the hook, so they can go and repeat the same actions again" (#19)*