An Examination of Forgiveness and Revenge in Victims of Crime.

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Courtney Timothy Field
ABSTRACT

This body of work examines the concepts of forgiveness and revenge in victims of crime. Victims are historically under-researched and in particular there is a need for further examination of the psychological impact of victimisation. Twelve victims participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews concerning their understanding of forgiveness and revenge. Transcripts of these interviews were subsequently analysed using a rigorous Grounded Theory approach.

This thesis presents the argument that forgiveness is contextually bound; its exact nature being determined by the circumstances and consequences of a particular transgression. The research emphasises the intrapersonal nature of forgiveness, revealing a model that is considerably different from those that have been proposed by other researchers. In particular, the broad assumption that forgiveness is a ‘prosocial’ construct that involves the development of positive affect for a transgressor is not supported. Forgiveness is understood as a ‘gift to the self’ stemming from the development of deeper self-awareness concerning the impact of the offence on victims. With deeper self-awareness, victims are able to let go of the negative feelings, thoughts and behaviours which have resulted from the offence. Instead of developing benevolent feelings towards the offender, victims engage in perspective-taking which fosters attributions for an external locus-of-control for the offender’s behaviour. The major result of forgiveness is a sense of moving on from the offence which can be understood as the lessening of a cognitive orientation to the past.
Revenge has received very little attention from researchers to date. Where it has been examined previously, it has been assumed to be a unidimensional construct. By posing a rich and intricate model, this thesis provides the most detailed understanding of revenge currently available. Revenge is a distinct form of aggression stemming from substantial negative affect towards the offender and entrenched feelings of powerlessness that result from the offence. These feelings of powerlessness result in a strong motivational drive to restore the balance between the victim and the offender. While generally an affective construct, victims tended to compulsively plan and fantasise about how they would exact revenge.
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