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REVIEW ARTICLE

Is the Exoneration-Forgiveness Distinction in Contextual Therapy Evident in Practice, and What Can We Learn From It?

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ABSTRACT

This article compares exoneration with the correlated concept of forgiveness. According to Contextual Therapy, a fundamental distinction exists between the two. It states that exoneration depends on an adult reassessment of history, resulting in the offender being freed of guilt. Conversely, according to Contextual Therapy, forgiveness is beyond reassessment and relies on the generosity of the forgiver while retaining the assumption of guilt on the part of the wrongdoer. After briefly introducing and concisely overviewing contextual theory, the five core elements of exoneration are identified as (a) an intrapersonal, interpersonal, or posthumous process; (b) motivated by loyalty and obligation; (c) recognition of suffered injustice; and (d) an adult reassessment, leading to (e) a promise of improvement. Then, the core elements are compared with the findings of a previously conducted international phenomenological research study on forgiveness processes between children and parents. Instead of finding evidence of the distinction between exoneration and forgiveness as Contextual Therapy proposes, this article confirms the importance of the five identified elements for both exoneration and forgiveness.

1 | Introduction

Studies have revealed that well-being is associated with our relationships with others (Aldersey and Whitley 2015; Block et al. 2022; Gloster et al. 2021; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008; Patrick et al. 2007; Thomas et al. 2017; Uchino et al. 1999). Furthermore, Waldinger and Schulz (2023) researchers in the Harvard Study of Adult Development, conducting a longitudinal study of happiness spanning four generations, concluded that strong relationships substantially impact health and happiness. Nevertheless, relationships appear to be vulnerable. Hence, in couple and family therapy, professionals, models, and methods focus on restoring relationships where substantial harm has occurred.

To that end, Boszormenyi-Nagy and associates founded one such modality, called Contextual Therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 2014). This approach posits that well-being is associated with relationships and asserts that individuals possess a deep-seated motivation to care for and do justice to each other. A key concept in relational healing within Contextual Therapy is *exoneration* (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 2014), where helping family members "lift the load of culpability off the shoulders," for instance the parent is essential (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 416). Even though exoneration appears to be similar to *forgiveness*, Contextual Therapy poses that a clear distinction is present between the two by stating that forgiveness "retains the assumption of guilt and extends the forgiver's generosity to the person who has injured her or him" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 416). Contrarily, exoneration involves the "unburdening from blame" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1991, 50:53) by introducing an "adult reassessment"

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(Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 416) as part of the exoneration process. This conceptualized distinction has sparked an ongoing debate (Cotroneo 1982; Dillen 2004, 2008; Hargrave and Pfitzer 2003; van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf 1997). However, no study has determined whether this distinction is observed in practice. Thus, we aimed to bridge this gap. For this purpose, I compare the core elements of exoneration with the findings of phenomenological research I conducted with my colleagues Alvin Lander and Valentina Simon. The phenomenological research was an international, qualitative, and exploratory examination of the processes where adult children were able to forgive their parents for severe injuries inflicted on them during childhood (van der Meiden et al. 2024).

A literature review of contextual theory and a study of exoneration follow, crystallized in its most relevant aspects. A brief exploration of forgiveness precedes the comparison, encompassing an explanation of the distinction between exoneration and forgiveness as assumed in Contextual Therapy. Then, an introduction to the above-mentioned international phenomenological research on child–parent forgiveness, hereafter referred to as "phenomenological research," is presented, after which I compare the five core elements of exoneration with the findings of this phenomenological research.

2 | Contextual Theory

Contextual approach encompasses contextual theory as its foundation and Contextual Therapy as its application. The contextual theory is comprehensive and comprises concepts that may not belong to the current field of couple and family therapy at first glance. Therefore, this article presents a theory with a model representing its key concepts from a framework constituting four perspectives to help understand the theory: axiom, contextual anthropology, contextual pathology, and contextual methodology (van der Meiden 2019).

2.1 | Contextual Axiom

Contextual theory is "rooted in the ontology of the fundamental nature of all living things" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 420). People are interdependent and cannot individually exist. Thus, contextual theory deduces that individuals have the right to receive care and an obligation to give care (Boszormenyi-Nagy 2014; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 1987). However, this concept does not involve legal rights but ethical rights and obligations. Furthermore, this theory posits that the dialectical interweaving of ethical rights and obligations constitutes the deeper motives and structures of close relationships. This underlying principle, called relational ethics, forms the foundation of contextual theory. Additionally, ethical obligations should not be confused with moral obligations. In this regard, Boszormenyi-Nagy stated that the term *ethics* is an unfortunate concept. However, he could not find a better word (Sollee et al. 1992). Ethics belongs to "the fundamental nature of living beings" and should not be interpreted as "abstract moral values, assumptions about moral, psychological development, or codelike, reified religious and cultural doctrines" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 2014, 275).

2.2 | Contextual Anthropology

Contextual anthropology derives from this axiom, as can be summarized as two intertwined pillars of relational ethics: interconnectedness and justice as its regulative principle. This interconnectedness is not about functional, instrumental connectedness with others; instead, it implies an ontic connectedness "based on a fundamental dependence on the tie with the other" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Framo 2015, 37). Contextual theory introduces *loyalty* as an essential element of that interconnectedness, identifying it as a preferential attachment to the one most entitled to it (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 418), an existential, intrinsic loyalty imparted with "existence." Additionally, contextual theory focuses on human obligation to others, particularly the next generation, as part of their existential attachment (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 2014). Thus, contextual anthropology is shaped by human ethical connection to the present, past, and future generations. It depicts the balance of giving and receiving as a metaphor for just, reciprocal care, the bedrock for trustworthy relationships, and the avenue where each individual earns entitlement.

2.3 | Contextual Pathology

Contextual theory poses "a multi-person systemic counterpart to what psychopathology is in individual terms" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 2014, 100). The contextual pathology involves violations of justice in interpersonal relationships, representing an imbalance between giving and receiving, considering the paramount role of justice in contextual theory. For example, when the loyalty a child gives is not received by the parents, the child is wronged and acquires destructive entitlement. When justice is frequently withheld, the one suffering injustice acquires the right to receive compensations of the missed justice. Unfortunately, destructive entitlement can target innocent third parties, becoming "a force that limits personal choices and makes recurrence of past injustices likely in successive generations" (Knudson-Martin 1992, 245). Thus, we encounter the revolving slate, "a relational consequence in which a person's substitutive revenge against one person eventually creates a new victim" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 420). This situation encapsulates the consequences of contextual pathology: Injustice reclaimed from innocent third parties.

2.4 | Contextual Methodology

Boszormenyi-Nagy highlights the importance of all helping techniques and methods as he reflects in his model of the four and later five dimensions (Ducommun-Nagy et al. 2023, 19–34). Furthermore, four methodological principles were derived from the contextual theory to serve as guidelines for its application in therapy. The first principle is context as a resource. Based on the axiom, the context is regarded as "the organic thread of giving and receiving that weaves the fabric of human reliance and interdependence" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 414). Within the dialectical interweaving of giving and receiving, humans become humans. The second principle is multidirected partiality. Multidirected partiality is the most pivotal methodological principle or the methodological cornerstone

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(Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 139), helping therapists be partial to all impacted by the therapy, including the next generation. It encompasses the method and an attitude concerning "the therapist's determination to discover the humanity of every participant - even the family's monster member" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 418). The third principle is associated with evoking a genuine dialogue, "a means of growth and maturation in the social sense," encompassing "a capacity for responding and being open to the other's responses. … It is a means of developing and maintaining selfhood through meeting the other as well as having one's own needs met" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 2014, 72). Hence, genuine dialogue fostered by restoring giving and receiving forms the path to restoring relationships. The fourth principle is exoneration. When a genuine dialogue is impossible due to family members leaning heavily on destructive entitlement, the contextual therapist can assist these people with finding a means of exonerating their victimizer(s) (Boszormenyi-Nagy et al. 1991, 226–227).

3 | Exoneration

Exoneration is a legal concept inserted into an approach focusing on justice within a relationship. The term stems from the Latin word onus, meaning burden (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1991). Therefore, exoneration can mean unburdening.

Webster's dictionary defines exoneration as "To relieve of a responsibility, obligation, or hardship, or to clear from accusation or blame" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Exoneration can be recognized daily, such as signs in public cloakrooms or parking lots that read, "No liability accepted for loss or damage." Thus, the owner is released or exonerated from liability or guilt. Presumably, this definition is also associated with the concept of exoneration Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (2014) introduced in their book *Invisible Loyalties*. They used the concept 14 times without further definition. Later, in 1986, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner (2014), 416 defined it as "a process of lifting the burden of culpability off the shoulders of a person who had previously been blamed".

In contextual theory, exoneration refers primarily to the exoneration of parents who have committed serious violations causing damage to their children. The primary reasons and intrinsic motivations for exonerating a parent who has inflicted harm on the child can be explained by loyalty and obligation.

This ethical obligation stems from children's loyalty to their parents whose contributions should be acknowledged, how small they may have been. It also comes from the obligation to protect future generations from the adverse effects of unresolved issues in the past generations, especially the multigenerational consequences of destructive entitlement. In this perspective, the parents are the ones who benefit from this exoneration. But the children do not loose, since loyalty can be seen as a form of giving. Showing loyalty, even to nondeserving parents, becomes a source of constructive entitlement. The same is true of exoneration. It provides constructive entitlement for the child, which "removes the sting from the revolving slate: projecting the blame for injustices on innocent third parties and thus creating a threat to the future" (van der Meiden et al. 2020, 355).

Ducommun-Nagy et al. (2023) clarifies the concept of exoneration by stating that it is not a matter of complete exculpation but more of a revaluation. To this end, she introduces the concept of *recategorization*, suggesting that children can shift their parents from the category of wrongdoers to victims of injustice in their own lives. Consequently, those involved comprehend that the parents and the entire family, including themselves, are victims of the original situational injustice. This realization results in what Ducommun-Nagy (2023), 106–107 as a *requalification* of the injustice within the family. It is no longer viewed as relational injustice because the entire family is now victims of a broader injustice beyond their control, thus becoming "a fact of their lives".

3.1 | Exoneration in Practice

The following outlines the most relevant aspects of how exoneration occurs in practice.

3.1.1 | Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Posthumous Processes

Even though the outcome of an exoneration process influences several people, Contextual Therapy does not prescribe the ones to be involved. Thus, an intrapersonal process without parental involvement or an interpersonal process with parents is probable. The contextual theory also acknowledges the possibility of forgiving deceased parents, a posthumous process (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014).

3.1.2 | Motivation by Loyalty and Obligation

The motivation to exonerate parents stems from the "deeply ingrained loyalty and obligation" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 2014, 178). Consequently, contextual theory assumes that children owe their parents "generous consideration" even if neglected or abandoned (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 102).

3.1.3 | Recognition of the Injustice Suffered

A crucial, even indispensable element of exoneration is recognizing the injustice suffered. Even in adulthood, children tend to exonerate quickly out of compassion and loyalty toward their parents. Alternatively, they may avoid the pain and anger of acknowledging the inflicted injustice. The adult child must first honestly confront the injustice suffered to release their parents from the burden of blame (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014).

3.1.4 | Process of Adult Reassessment

The pivotal aspect of exoneration involves eradicating the sting of the injustice suffered, dismissing accusations, and lifting the load of culpability. Hence, the contextual theory introduces the "adult reassessment" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 416). This circumstance leads an adult child to

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reconsider their long-held interpretation of the injustice suffered. To this end, the adult examines the history of the parents, under what circumstances they were raised, what they experienced, what injustices they suffered, and how that affected their parenthood in upbringing their children (van der Meiden et al. 2020). This insight in the parents' context can modify the former interpretation of rejection into acknowledging the parents' own pain and limitations, thereby lifting the burden of guilt from the parents' shoulders. Ducommun-Nagy poses that "exoneration should not be understood as a full exculpation of the parents but as a reassessment of the degree of their culpability," allowing children to "recategorize" their parents. (Ducommun-Nagy et al. 2023, 106).

3.1.5 | Promise of Improvement

No single occurrence in a family's life has a greater promise of improvement than when a child exonerates their parent(s) (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014). This improvement comprises self-delineation and self-validation, with the freedom to assume responsibility in other relationships and toward the next generation (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014).

4 | Forgiveness

Forgiveness was initially conceptualized as a philosophical or religious construct, and the end of the last century marked the time that forgiveness received attention from psychology and the related fields of couple and family therapy (Davis et al. 2013; Gao et al. 2022). Many studies were conducted in the following decades, and many studies were published on what forgiveness was and how people could be helped to forgive those who had wronged them (Tangney et al. 2005; Worthington et al. 2014). This development has prompted distinct forms of forgiveness, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, self, and divine forgiveness (Fincham and May 2022; Rourke 2008). The distinction between decision-based and process-based forgiveness (DiBlasio 1998; Ho and Worthington 2020) emerged with the development of different models, such as the four-phase model of Enright (2019) and the Reach model of Worthington (2013).

Various insights into forgiveness and how it occurs have accompanied developments in forgiveness. However, Li et al. (2020, 1) state that a consensus exists: "forgiveness is a changing process of prosocial motivation toward the offender, including changes in cognition, emotion, and motivation." Moreover, forgiveness has impressive outcomes. Several authors posit that forgiveness is a pivotal determinant of psychological and mental well-being, reduces negative affect, fosters positive relationships, promotes spiritual growth, enhances one's sense of greater meaning and purpose in life, and improves one's sense of empowerment (Akhtar et al. 2017; Akhtar and Barlow 2018; Raj et al. 2016). Other studies have also reported that forgiveness reduces depression, anxiety, and stress (Baskin and Enright 2004; Lundahl et al. 2008; Wade et al. 2008), causes higher levels of self-acceptance and control over the environment, leads to more stable relationships, higher relational quality, and improvements in physical health (Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 2009; Kim and Enright 2016; Raj et al. 2016; Van Oyen Witvliet et al. 2001).

Even though many views and developments are present, I limit myself here to a global overview, as I find detailed consideration unnecessary for answering the central question in this article. After all, the theory of exoneration is not contrasted with publications on forgiveness but with the concrete experiences of the interviewed respondents.

5 | Comparison

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner clearly distinguish between exoneration and forgiveness in the Introduction I described. They posit that forgiveness "retains the assumption of guilt and extends the forgiver's generosity to the person who has injured her or him" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 416). Boszormenyi-Nagy et al. (1991) accentuates this distinction, stating:

> Forgiveness is really dismissing the accusation, I don't pursue I don't accuse anymore, but the person is a wrongdoer. In exoneration, the blaming is removed also. So, there is no more, neither active pursuing of blaming, but culpability itself is removed. So, that the person is being viewed in a kind of average human range rather than a wrongdoer
>
> (50:55).

Conversely, exoneration involves the "unburdening from blame" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1991, 50:53) by introducing an "adult reassessment" as the center of the exoneration process (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 2014, 416). Ducommun-Nagy articulates this distinction: "The main difference between forgiveness and exoneration lies in the fact that forgiveness does not require a reappraisal of the degree of culpability of the wrongdoer, while exoneration does" (Ducommun-Nagy 2023, 106). Her introduction of the two above-mentioned new concepts does not imply a different view on exoneration but is intended to understand exoneration better.

5.1 | Discourse on the Difference

Several authors endorse the difference or explain the contextual theory of exoneration without questioning it. However, others doubt the correctness of this argued difference. Hargrave and Pfitzer (2003), 140 regard exoneration as a pivotal "station" in a process that may eventually result in forgiveness. Dillen questions whether Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner have accurately assessed forgiveness because they believe the forgiver's generosity leads to control over the perpetrator. Dillen argues that if, as contextual theory suggests, the offer of forgiveness is meant to be able to rely on this "generous" act afterward, it does not involve true forgiveness (Dillen 2008, 18). Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf believe that Boszormenyi-Nagy opposes a particular view of forgiveness. However, they pose that he actually opposes a distorted version or caricature of forgiveness (van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf 1997, 321). Finally, without pretending to be complete, I mention Cotroneo (1982), who published an article entitled "The role of forgiveness in Contextual Therapy," where she seems to exchange the word exoneration for forgiveness

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without further explanation as if she considered the two concepts interchangeable.

5.2 | Phenomenological Research

I use our phenomenological research on forgiveness processes between adult children and their parents to explore whether the difference postulated by Contextual Therapy is reflected in the experiences of these respondents. Thus, I positively contribute to the discussion concerning exoneration and forgiveness. This article is the first to compare this postulated difference with experiences from practice. The above list reveals aspects of the discourse surrounding the proposed difference by Contextual Therapy between exoneration and forgiveness.

Our international, qualitative, and exploratory research focused on the processes by which adult children were able to forgive their parents who inflicted severe injuries on them during childhood (van der Meiden et al. 2024). The research sample comprised 48 respondents: 14 from the Netherlands, 20 from Israel, and 14 from Romania, aged between 40 and 70 with no overt signs of acute mental illness. The chief criterion for participation was to have forgiven one or both parents for inflicted relational injuries. The semi-structured interviews were employed to follow the commencement, progress, and results of the forgiveness process. Ultimately, we summarized the data into four themes portraying the core of the respondents' forgiveness processes.

The design of our phenomenological research, including the in-depth examination of 48 adult participants' lived experience of forgiveness, comprises the necessary data to examine whether the difference Contextual Therapy postulates between exoneration and forgiveness is actually found.

6 | Exoneration Versus Forgiveness

I compared the findings of our phenomenological research with the five core elements of exoneration and specified to what extent these core elements were acknowledged in the forgiveness processes of the respondents.

6.1 | Forgiveness Is an Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, or Posthumous Process

Most forgiveness processes in our phenomenological research were intrapersonal, occurring without parental involvement ($n = 32$), with some occurring posthumously ($n = 5$). We had the impression that an essential reason for excluding parents was the wish not to hurt them, as the following quote suggests:

Interviewer: "Have you talked to him about it?"

Respondent: "I have tried it before, sometimes. I tell him things, but at the same time, I think, what does it change? Nothing can be changed now. It is what it is. However, I have no control over the past. What good does it to keep bringing it up?" (P01).

Parents participated in 11 of the 20 processes of Israeli respondents. However, the respondents did not take this initiative; the parents took the initiative to ask for forgiveness and explicitly apologized.

6.2 | Motivation by Loyalty and Obligation

Contextual theory indicates that children's motivation to forgive their parents emerges from loyalty and obligation. Even though these terms did not appear explicitly in the respondents' stories, these deep-seated motivations could be recognized in all the respondents' stories, as the following quote suggests: "I made that choice because he is my father. So, I guess it is the blood bond that speaks" (P07).

Loyalty was also acknowledged in their pursuit of understanding their parents' history, seeking a new interpretation of what had happened, and generating space for growing empathy for the parents out of the desire to overcome negative feelings toward the parents to stop blaming them. However, loyalty is recognizable in the reluctance to involve parents in the process, as evident in the quote above, as well as in the following phrases such as: "No, but I do not think my mother could handle it either. Yes, I end up stepping in for her a lot. I can hear myself doing it" (P08). Furthermore, the obligation to the future was evident in their concerns about their own parenting and their desire to prevent suffering transfer: "Forgiveness was for me... I did not want my past to shape my present" (P07).

Another respondent mentioned her responsibility as motivation: "How can I make sure I'm there for my children? Before you know it, they'll grow up carrying this baggage. So, I tried to find a way to honor my parents, even just a little" (P10).

Few respondents felt obliged to forgive out of obedience to God ($n = 10$), as in the following example: "It is a choice to follow God's command—to forgive others" (P04).

6.3 | Acknowledging Injustice Suffered

In our phenomenological research, acknowledging the injustice suffered often preceded the decision of wishing to forgive the parents. This decision was not forgiveness per se but initiated the forgiveness process. This realization of injustice suffered has always been present or followed after a long time of repressed anger and grief because of abuse and neglect or projecting it onto others. When they could no longer avoid it, they wanted to confront the reality of their history. Acknowledging the injustice suffered caused them to question why their parents acted the way they did; thus, a desire to forgive them emerged. As this respondent stated:

> But that's it. That anger or sadness can really be released first. You need to acknowledge that it wasn't right; it was an injustice. Only then can you slowly reach the point where you can say: I want to forgive you
>
> (P09).

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6.4 | Process by Adult Reassessment

I address here what Contextual Therapy presents as the difference between exoneration and forgiveness. In forgiveness, the perpetrator is still regarded as the wrongdoer. In contrast, in exoneration, the blaming is removed, and the perpetrator is viewed in "a kind of average human range rather than a wrongdoer" (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1991, 50, 55). This condition does not correspond with the findings of our phenomenological research, depicting that the respondents, precisely due to the emerging awareness of their own humanity, no longer see the other as a wrongdoer. You may follow how respondent P38 expresses the sense of her own humanity:

I came to realize that I make mistakes, too, both as a parent and in life. More than that, I have been forgiven for my worst mistakes, some of which were serious. So, I understand that being part of a human means making mistakes and learning to forgive.

Contextual Therapy states that forgiveness, unlike exoneration, does not depend on adult reassessment. However, our phenomenological research reflects that in forgiveness, one of the relevant factors is an improved understanding of parents' own victimization ($n = 36$). This understanding was so evident that it developed into one of the four themes of our phenomenological research, characterizing the forgiveness process: "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" (van der Meiden et al. 2024, 12). This process led respondents to trade guilt and anger for understanding their parents, as respondent P10 described:

Over time, I began to think: yes, I used to judge them very harshly, but now I'm starting to understand them more. That softens you, and you start to see things differently, a bit more forgiving. I thought, "Yes, they did manage to raise six children, despite everything they had to carry."

This quote can be interpreted as what Ducommun-Nagy introduced as the recategorization of the parents, becoming possible when the insight that parents' abuse was not intentional but stemmed from a search for reparation for their injustices suffered (Ducommun-Nagy 2023).

Respondents were supported by siblings, friends, therapists, pastors, and others, reading books, watching films, attending conferences, and praying to God. A few respondents did not mention elements that referred to reassessing the parents' history. However, they declared that God had turned their unforgiveness into a desire to forgive ($n = 3$), as this respondent's interview reveals: "God changed my way of thinking. Since then, I truly know that God can transform people and completely turn them around, but in His own time" (P02).

6.5 | Promise of Improvement

Contextual theory indicates that exoneration leads to better self-delineation and self-validation. In our phenomenological research, the respondents reported feeling lighter, experiencing peace, and releasing anger. They also felt relieved, recalled good experiences from the past, and thought of their parents and their shared history with appreciation. Furthermore, they reported improved self-esteem, greater self-awareness, and a stronger sense of personal responsibility. A similar finding is evident in the fourth theme from our phenomenological research: "Forgiveness of parents, although an ongoing process, brings many fruits" (van der Meiden et al. 2024, 14). The forgiveness process enhanced the respondents' personal development and promoted self-determination and validation, as these quotes reveal: "For me, that was the turning point. I was given more room to become myself." (P06). P04 further stated "It helped me set clearer boundaries to say: This is my space. It made me more stable."

The forgiveness process improved their relationship with their parents, children, siblings, and others:

Interviewer: "Did that affect other relationships as well?"

Respondent: "Yes, absolutely. With my husband and my children, and in the things I do with others, yes, I believe it brought much more relaxation and, even more, it allowed them to see more of who I really am." (P06).

7 | Conclusion

I did not find evidence of the distinction between exoneration and forgiveness, as conceptualized by Contextual Therapy. All five elements of exoneration emerged in our phenomenological research despite varying degrees. Most of the 48 respondents across the three countries appeared to have been particularly helped by adult reassessment, leading to understanding and forgiving their parents. Consequently, it is not generosity but the realization that their parents are as human as they are that causes them to consider their parents not merely wrongdoers but fellow humans. This finding suggests that exoneration and forgiveness are linked more strongly than the contextual theory assumes.

8 | Discussion

This article addresses the stand of Contextual Therapy in assessing the essential difference between exoneration and forgiveness and determines the extent of that difference in practice. Our findings suggest that there is no practical difference between forgiveness and exoneration postulated by Contextual Therapy. The comparison demonstrated that each of the five core elements of exoneration formulated by Contextual Therapy was also recognized in the processes of the 48 respondents across three countries. When considering that this article is the first on this subject, caution should be exercised regarding our findings, and further research is highly recommended.

The relevance of this article lies in being the first to address the difference between exoneration and forgiveness, as Contextual Therapy posits, using empirical findings and thus contributing to the current debate. Moreover, I conclude that most research on forgiveness may also be relevant for exoneration and the further development of its implementation in Contextual Therapy, and

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vice versa. Furthermore, we may suspect that the proven effectiveness of forgiveness may also be expected from exoneration.

Based on these pivotal results, one may expect forgiveness to be a vital feature of family therapy and suggest that family therapists would be well-versed in integrating forgiveness into therapy. However, I wonder to what extent this assessment is valid. To my knowledge, integrating forgiveness into family therapy has been scarce, thus highlighting the need to incorporate this proven and effective process into family therapy.

For the fundamental difference postulated by the contextual theory, I wonder to what extent this difference was relevant at the time. Forgiveness has long been associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. This tradition suggests forgiveness is a form of commandment. Therefore, the church has continually prioritized obedience to that commandment while supporting the process of forgiveness. It was certainly the case in 1973 when exoneration was introduced. It may be the reason that Boszormenyi-Nagy accentuated the importance of a process, a process of adult reassessment. However, our 21st-century phenomenological research indicates that most respondents, including Christian respondents, forgiving out of obedience, mentioned adult reassessment as a vital means through which they forgave their parents. This situation prompts the question of whether the connotations of forgiveness have changed. In this regard, I want to reflect on an unmentioned finding of our phenomenological research concerning the use of the word forgiveness. An understandable reluctance to mention these words has existed in therapy, primarily due to its Judeo-Christian connotations and the danger of evoking unwanted associations. Nevertheless, several respondents demonstrated that they began considering forgiveness because one or another family member or another person involved used the word explicitly. The explicit use of the word could reflect such a changing connotation of forgiveness and provide contextual therapists more latitude to employ it in a Contextual Therapy process.

Our phenomenological research focused on adults forgiving their parents, aligning with contextual theory and accentuating exoneration in the child–parent relationship. Accordingly, the generalizability of the conclusions to exoneration or forgiveness processes in other family or nonfamily relationships remains to be seen. Similar phenomenological studies on forgiveness within other relationships may substantially contribute to the further development of exoneration and forgiveness. On top of that, phenomenological research within family therapy may offer valuable insights into the respondents' experiences, enhancing family therapy practice.

Furthermore, contextual theory addresses children's obligation to exonerate their parents, hardly to prevent a revolving slate favoring the next generation. However, contextual theory does not explicitly speak of a similar obligation for parents to actively acquaint themselves or even take the initiative by asking for exoneration or forgiveness, as most Israeli parents did in our phenomenological research. This finding may be valuable for the theories of exoneration and Contextual Therapy. It is particularly relevant, considering that parent-initiated forgiveness processes may lead more to reconciliation, as the findings of our phenomenological research suggest.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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