OFFENCE-RELATED EFFECTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF FORGIVENESS: EXPERIENCES OF VICTIMS AND OFFENDERS

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Abstract

This thesis explores crime and forgiveness from the perspectives of victims and perpetrators. While extensive research exists on the traumatic or harmful effects of crime for victims (Davis & Friedman, 1985; Frieze, Hymer, & Greenberg, 1987; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Orth, Montada, & Maercker, 2006) far less research exists on the effect that criminal wrongdoing has on the perpetrator (Collins & Bailey, 1990; MacNair 2002a). The literature likewise holds little in the way of explicating how victims and offenders may be able mitigate such effects. One factor that appears to make a difference in this respect is forgiveness. Yet while forgiveness has received more attention in the religious and psychological literatures, there is much less known about its impacts in relationship to the effects of crime.

In this study I seek to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of the effects of crime and forgiveness in the lives of victims and offenders. As the focus of this study is the understanding of forgiveness from the perspectives of victims and offenders, as well as an examination of how they view forgiveness as affecting their lives, I utilized an interpretive phenomenological approach. Interpretive phenomenology provides a methodological framework from which to explore detailed and intimate understandings of people's lives as they seek to make sense of and live in their social worlds (Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 1990); in this case for victims and perpetrators of crime. Towards this goal, in this study I employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted with a purposeful sample of 12 victims and 19 offenders ranging in age from 19 to 70. Following these interviews, I utilized an iterative process of data analysis, involving multiple readings of the interview transcripts and three divisions of coding which facilitated the identification of emergent and master themes within each case and superordinate themes which occurred across cases.

In this study, I find that victims and offenders are decidedly affected by the harms they received and/or perpetrated, and that many credit forgiveness with restoring their psychological and emotional well-being as it released them from the distressing aftereffects of the crime they experienced. In my analysis of 31 interviews with victims and offenders, I developed seven themes used to explain the offence-related effects experienced by participants from their perspectives. Victims reported suffering ‘traumatic effects’ in the form of mental, behavioural, and somatic outcomes. Crime victimisation also created ‘threats
to identity and self” for many victims. In the aftermath of the crime victims often explained their ‘lost faith in a just world’ or having ‘unmet justice needs’. Offenders reported experiencing ‘challenged lives’ in the form of mental, emotional and future effects due to their criminal behaviour. They also explained significant impression management strategies as a way to ‘save face’ as they engaged in what I call ‘blame talk’ as a means to either accept or reject blame. In the second part of my focus, namely the effects of forgiveness on victims and offenders, I analysed the interviews to develop several themes related to how participants explained their understanding of forgiveness, or how they understood it to have affected their lives. Victims’ conceptualised forgiveness in terms of both ‘victim-focused’ and ‘offender-focused benefits’. Victims also perceived forgiveness in terms of its restorative and transformative ‘functions’ in their lives. Offenders viewed forgiveness in terms of ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ it as a part of the way they made sense of what it felt like or meant to them to be the forgiver and the role they played with respect to receiving forgiveness. Most offenders believed forgiveness assisted them in ‘moving forward’ with their lives. Of particular salience for offenders was ‘self-forgiveness’ and forgiveness they receive from loved ones.

This study makes contributions to both theoretical and applied knowledge regarding the complex needs of victims and offenders in terms of how they make sense of their experiences in the aftermath of crime. Theoretically, the findings of the study suggest that forgiveness may be an effective means for mitigating the offence-related effects experienced by both victims and offenders. In terms of applied knowledge, a keener understanding of the viewpoints of victims and offenders has practical applications as it may assist those such as clinicians, service providers, and criminal justice professionals involved in the treatment or custodial care of both victims and offenders in the creation and implementation of treatment programs and protocols that would better address the complex needs of those who have experienced deleterious effects as a consequence of the harms they received and/or perpetrated.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed: Tamera Dawn Jenkins On: 27/03/2018
# Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Statement of Originality.............................................................................................. iv  
Contents......................................................................................................................... v  
List of Tables.................................................................................................................. ix  
Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ x  
Dedication......................................................................................................................... xi  
Chapter 1: Introduction and Thesis Overview .............................................................. 12  
  1.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................ 12  
  1.2 Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders ........................................................... 13  
  1.3 Forgiveness as a Response to Offence-Related Effects .......................................... 14  
  1.4 Chapter Summaries ............................................................................................... 15  
Chapter 2: Literature Review ....................................................................................... 17  
  2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................ 17  
  2.2 Section 1: The Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders ................................... 18  
     2.2.1 Psychological Effects of Crime on Victims: Lost Belief in a Just World ........... 18  
     2.2.2 Psychological Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders: Trauma and Post- 
         Traumatic Stress Disorder .................................................................................. 19  
     2.2.3 Psychological Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders: Threatened Identities .................................................................................................................... 21  
     2.2.4 Affective Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders ....................................... 22  
     2.2.5 Behavioural Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders ................................. 25  
     2.2.6 Somatic Effects ............................................................................................... 26  
     2.2.7 Summary of Offence-Related Effects for Victims and Offenders .................... 27  
  2.3 Section 2: Conceptualising Forgiveness ................................................................. 27  
     2.3.1 Forgiveness: What It Is and Is Not .................................................................. 28  
     2.3.2 A Religious Construction of Forgiveness ....................................................... 29  
     2.3.3 A Philosophical Exploration of Forgiveness .................................................. 30  
     2.3.4 A Justice Framework of Forgiveness .............................................................. 30  
     2.3.5 Giving and Receiving Forgiveness .................................................................. 33  
     2.3.6 Benefits of Forgiveness to Victims and Offenders .......................................... 34  
     2.3.7 The Salience of Self-Forgiveness .................................................................... 40  
     2.3.8 Summary of Conceptualising Forgiveness ....................................................... 42  
  2.4 Chapter 2 Conclusion ............................................................................................. 43  
  2.5 The Current Study .................................................................................................. 44  
Chapter 3: Research Methods .................................................................................... 46  
  3.1 Overview and Research Questions ......................................................................... 46  
     3.1.1 Research Questions ......................................................................................... 46  
  3.2 A Qualitative Approach ......................................................................................... 46  
  3.3 Methodological Study Foundations ....................................................................... 47  
     3.3.1 Phenomenology: Descriptive v. Interpretive .................................................... 47  
  3.4 Participants ........................................................................................................... 50
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Victims’ Stories</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Traumatic Effects</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Mental Health Effects</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Behavioural Effects</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Somatic Effects</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Threats to Identity and Self</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Devaluation of Self</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Conflicting Identities</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3 Stigmatised Identities</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Lost Belief in a Just World</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Unmet Justice Needs</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Conclusion</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Offenders’ Experiences of Offence-Related Effects</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Offenders’ Stories</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Challenged Lives</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 Mental Challenges</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 Emotional Challenges</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Challenged Futures</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Impression Management</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 Tales of Decency</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 Tales of Victimisation</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3 Tales of Heroism</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Blame Talk</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Victims’ and Offenders’ Perceptions of Forgiveness</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Victims’ Understandings of Forgiveness</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 7: Forgiveness That Matters………………………………………………………… 185

7.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 185
7.2 Self-Forgiveness .................................................................................................. 185
  7.2.1 Self-Unforgiveness ......................................................................................... 189
  7.2.2 Forgiveness from Family ............................................................................. 193
  7.2.3 Forgiveness from Victims ......................................................................... 196
  7.2.4 Rejected Victim Forgiveness: The Offenders’ Victim Self-View ............. 199
7.3 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 202

Chapter 8: Discussion of Victim Findings................................................................. 205

8.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 205
8.2 Offence-Related Effects and Salience of Forgiveness for Victims ................. 206
  8.2.1 Victimisation and its Traumatic Effects ..................................................... 206
  8.2.2 Forgiveness: Addressing the Traumatic Effects of Victimisation ........ 207
  8.2.3 Victimisation Threatens Identity and Sense of Self ................................ 211
  8.2.4 Forgiveness: Constructing a Positive Self-Identity ................................... 212
  8.2.5 Lost Belief in a Just World ....................................................................... 214
  8.2.6 Forgiveness: Rebuilding the Assumptive World .................................... 214
  8.2.7 Unmet Justice Needs ............................................................................... 216
  8.2.8 Forgiveness and Restoration: Addressing Victims’ Justice Needs ......... 218
  8.2.9 Choosing Not to Forgive ........................................................................... 220
8.3 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 220

Chapter 9: Discussion of Offender Findings............................................................ 223

9.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 223
9.2 Offence-Related Effects for Offenders ............................................................... 223
  9.2.1 Perpetration-Induced Harm: Moral Injury and Trauma ......................... 224
  9.2.2 Moral Disengagement ............................................................................. 226
  9.2.3 Blame Talk: Neutralising Personal Responsibility .................................. 227
  9.2.4 Impression Management: Constructing a Morally Good Self .............. 228
  9.2.5 Emotional Challenges ............................................................................ 231
  9.2.6 Challenged Futures ................................................................................... 235
9.3 Offenders’ Perceptions of Forgiveness .............................................................. 237
  9.3.1 Giving Forgiveness: From a ‘Victim’s’ Perspective .................................. 238
9.3.2 Receiving Forgiveness: Perspectives on Unconditional and Conditional Forgiveness ................................................................. 240
9.3.3 What Forgiveness is Not: Reconciliation and ‘Forgive and Forget’ .............. 242
9.3.4 Rejecting Forgiveness ........................................................................ 244
9.3.5 Effects of Forgiveness: Moving Forward ................................................. 244
9.3.6 Forgiveness That Matters ...................................................................... 247
9.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................... 251

Chapter 10: Conclusion .................................................................................... 253
10.1 Summary of Findings and Conclusions...................................................... 253
10.2 The Main Contribution of the Thesis ......................................................... 256
10.3 Study Limitations Study and Avenues for Future Research ................. 256
10.4 Implications for Applied Practice and Conclusion ...................................... 258

Appendix 1—Recruitment Flyer ...................................................................... 260
Appendix 2—Participant Information Sheet ..................................................... 262
Appendix 3—Informed Consent ...................................................................... 265
Appendix 4—Interview Schedule .................................................................... 268
References ........................................................................................................ 270
List of Tables

Table 3.1: Study sample .................................................................................................................. 52
Table 3.2: Example of ‘open’ coding .............................................................................................. 63
Table 3.3: Example of descriptive phenomenological coding ....................................................... 65
Table 3.4: Example of master themes ............................................................................................ 67
Table 3.5: Example of cross-case analysis ...................................................................................... 70
Table 3.6: Superordinate themes for offender offence-related effects ........................................ 72
Table 3.7: Superordinate themes for offenders and victims ......................................................... 74
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Dedication

I first dedicate this thesis to the courageous men and women who took part in this study. I am forever grateful for your willingness to share with me your thoughts and feelings on painful and traumatic life experiences that many might have preferred to bury in the past. It is my hope that your stories will help others to see the human face in crime and respond to victims and offenders in ways that are respectful of their humanity.

To my husband Jim, without whose sacrifice this work would have not been possible I cannot thank you enough. You followed me across the sea. You loved me when I was most unlovable. You supported me in ways that came at a great personal cost to yourself and you stood between me and the door when I wanted to throw it all in and go home. I love you with all my heart.

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To my precious friend Pam—I thought when you put me on the plane to Australia I would see you before long. I didn’t know it would be in Heaven. I love and miss you.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Thesis Overview

1.1 Introduction

Rebecca, a victim of armed robbery, stared at the gun in her face as the man screamed, ‘I’ll kill you! Give me all your fucking money!’ Too stunned to move, all Rebecca could think was, ‘Did I tell my kids I loved them? Was I cranky this morning? Will I see them again?’

Gabriel, a man convicted of manslaughter, got drunk as he waited for the police. The man he stabbed—a rapist—lay dying at his feet. Though Gabriel was no stranger to violence, killing a man was not easy, and this crime weighed more heavily on him than most had. Gabriel knew that he would be paying for this act long after he was released on parole. He told me, ‘this will be firmly stuck in my head for the rest of my life’.

Both Rebecca and Gabriel were participants in my research. Crime statistics suggest that a significant number of people, like Rebecca and Gabriel, have experienced grievous effects as a result of crime. In Australia—the context in which my study was undertaken—in 2016, there were 9,403 robbery victims, 23,052 victims of sexual assault, 176 victims of family and domestic violence-related homicide and related offences and 452 homicide-related victims (e.g., murder, attempted murder) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017a). According to the 2016 ABS Personal Safety Survey (PSS), 39%, or 7.2 million, Australians 18 years and over have experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15 (ABS, 2017c). The most common principle offence in 2015–2016 was illicit drug offences, and there were over 83,000 drug offenders (ABS 2017b). While the statistics alone suggest that a problem exists in terms of the vast quantity of people whose lives are touched by crime, what these statistics do not tell us is how the lives of those victims and offenders are affected and what responses may assist them in dealing with the consequences of crime. For these answers, we must turn to the victims and offenders themselves. My thesis thus aims to better understand the subjective experiences of victimisation and criminal offending in terms of the effect crime has on the lives of victims and offenders, and their perception of the meaning and relevance of forgiveness in their lives.
1.2 Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders

A large body of research exists on the effects that acts of harm and subsequent distress have on crime victims. Victims, in particular, suffer numerous adverse effects as a result of the offence. Studies have found that experiencing violence produces severe and negative psychological (Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996; Herman, 1997), emotional (Masters, Friedman, & Getzel, 1988), behavioural (Bloom, 2010) and somatic (Bloom, 2010; Kendall-Tackett, 2009) outcomes. In the aftermath of crime, victims often feel vulnerable, angry, anxious, fearful and vengeful (Bloom, 2010; Frieze, Hymer, and Greenberg, 1987; Herman, 1997; Orth, Montada, & Maercker, 2006). While these emotions are normal reactions to adverse life events, they are also related to various negative health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Herman, 1997), chronic pain (Greenwood, Thurston, Rumble, Waters, & Keefe, 2003) and cardiovascular disorders (Batten, Aslan, Maciejewski, & Mazure, 2004; Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000), and a wide range of morbidity, including cancer, stroke, diabetes, emphysema and hepatitis (Felitti et al., 1998).

Compared with the abundance of research on the effects of crime victimisation, there is far less literature regarding the effect that crime and violence has on those who commit it. Much of what we know about people’s experience of seriously and/or violently harming others has come from research on combat-related effects on soldiers (Cigrang et al., 2014; Hecker et al., 2013; MacNair, 2002a; MacNair, 2002b; Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, 2010) and on violent offenders (Evans, Ehlers, Mezey, & Clark, 2007; Pollock, 1999). This work suggests that those who hurt others may be subject to adverse reactions, including PTSD and perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) (Pollock, 1999; MacNair, 2002a). However, we have little understanding of how offenders make sense of the harm they have caused others, their thoughts and feelings at the time of the crime and their perceptions of the effects their wrongdoing may have on their own lives and the lives of others. It is important to understand the subjective experience of criminal offending to effectively address the harm these individuals have caused, and the harm they experience. In my thesis, I move beyond the more clinical or detached descriptions of criminal harm by allowing the offenders’ personal reflections on their wrongdoing to guide our understanding of how they are affected by the crimes they perpetrate.
1.3 Forgiveness as a Response to Offence-Related Effects

Past research has found that victims who adopt forgiving or pro-social motivations towards the offender may experience improvements in physiological wellbeing (Hannon, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Ruschult, 2011), a reduction in retaliatory or vengeful motivations towards the offender (Enright, 2001) and psychological healing, wherein they gain a more positive and hopeful attitude about the future (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995). Giving forgiveness has also been positively associated with both relationship (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006) and life (Eldelekloğlu, 2015) satisfaction. Forgiveness is conceptualised as a transformation process involving the victim’s relinquishing of negative thoughts, feelings and actions and towards the wrongdoer and giving of goodwill, compassion, generosity and sacrificial love (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998). While the extant literature points to the manifold benefits of forgiveness, we know less about how victims experience and make sense of forgiveness. To comprehend the merits (or limitations) of forgiveness in addressing the harms of victimisation, it is critical that we know not just what forgiveness is, but what it looks and feels like to victims, how they describe and experience it, how it affects their lives and under what circumstances forgiveness is or is not important to them.

While empirical research suggests that forgiveness holds a wealth of favourable benefits for victims, there is again far less known about the effects of forgiveness for offenders. While prior studies indicate that receiving forgiveness may promote future compliant behaviours (Murphy & Helmer, 2013), alleviate feelings of guilt and increase feelings of joy and relief (Gassin, 1998), we still have little comprehension about how or why this occurs. To determine the efficacy of forgiveness in offenders’ lives, it is imperative that we understand how offenders make sense of forgiveness in terms of their sense of self, how they use forgiveness in their lives or why giving or receiving it matters to them.

Crime touches the lives of many people, and its effects are far-reaching, destructive and long-lasting. There is clear evidence to support the assertion that criminal wrongdoing has dire consequences for both victims and offenders; therefore, it is important to identify those responses that may not only ameliorate the egregious after-effects of crime, but may also benefit offenders by helping them turn their lives around and successfully transition to a more conventional existence. My thesis both adds knowledge to the body of research on the effects of victimisation and the value of giving forgiveness, and makes a unique
contribution to the criminology and forgiveness literature by adding the often-neglected voices of offenders to the dialogue on crime and its aftermath.

To gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of crime for victims and offenders, their perceptions of offence-related effects and the meaning and salience they attach to forgiveness, my thesis seeks to answer three research questions:

1. What are the offence-related effects for victims and offenders?
2. What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?
3. How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparts forgiveness?

1.4 Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of my research topic, explained the gap in the empirical literature that my study seeks to address and presented the three research questions that guide my thesis.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature, and is divided into two sections: in section 1, I provide a context for understanding the psychological, effective, behavioural and somatic effects of victimisation and crime perpetration by drawing from literature on trauma, identity, shame and guilt, assumptive worldviews and research on stress and disease. In section 2, I offer an overview of forgiveness as it is conceptualised within a religious, philosophical and justice framework. I further outline the benefits of forgiveness and arguments for and against its use, and consider the salience of self-forgiveness.

Chapter 3 lays out the methodological approach of my study. I explain the rationale for my use of an interpretive phenomenological approach to meet my research aims and outline the framework and design of my thesis.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 present the findings of my research. Specifically, Chapter 4 introduces the victim participants and their stories of victimisation. It also identifies victims’ offence-related effects. I reveal the mental, behavioural and somatic effects victims have experienced, in addition to the threats to their identity, challenged assumptive beliefs and unmet justice needs.
Chapter 5 introduces the offender participants and their crimes and establishes how their offending affected their lives. I disclose how the offenders’ mental and emotional wellbeing and futures were challenged as a consequence of their criminal offending. I also present the ways in which these offenders managed their identity and dealt with blame.

Chapter 6 explains the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness and the ways in which their lives were (or were not) affected by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves and others. Chapter 7 explores further the offenders’ viewpoints regarding whose forgiveness was most important to them. I reveal that forgiveness has differing salience for offenders depending on who is doing the forgiving.

Chapters 8 and 9 discuss the thesis findings. In particular, Chapter 8 explores the victims’ experiences of offence-related effects and their views on forgiveness. I establish that victimisation was experienced as a trauma and that forgiveness was considered, by some victims, to be a means of letting go of the pain so they could move on in life. For other victims, forgiving offenders was not possible. Chapter 9 discusses the offenders’ offence-related effects and their understandings of forgiveness and its meaningfulness. I confirm that offenders experienced numerous egregious effects when they committed crime, and that they perceived giving and receiving forgiveness as a response that helped them overcome the harm they perpetrated and the wrongdoing they had sometimes experienced when they had been in situations where they were victims of crime.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I conclude my thesis with a summary of the findings and a discussion of the contributions this work may make to knowledge on the effects of crime on victims and offenders, and the role that forgiveness may play in redressing or ameliorating these effects. I also delineate the limitations of my study, implications for applied practice and possible avenues of further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I introduced the thesis and provided an overview of its aims and structure. I explained how the current study seeks to make an important contribution to the criminology and victimology literature by broadening our understanding of the lived experience of victimisation and the perpetration of crime with respect to offence-related effects. I also noted how my study aims to add to the literature on forgiveness by uncovering victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, including the salience they attach to offering or receiving forgiveness. To date, much of the literature has focused on victims’ perspectives of crime after-effects and the meaning they attach to forgiveness, such as granting forgiveness to the wrongdoer. Importantly, my thesis addresses a significantly underdeveloped area in the literature by adding criminal offenders’ perceptions and experiences to the discourse on offence-related effects and understandings of forgiveness.

In Chapter 2, I build on this discussion through a review of the literature that not only explains the context for my study, but establishes this work’s underlying rationale and distinct contribution. The chapter is split into two sections. In section 1, ‘The Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders’, I provide an overview of the research regarding the various dimensions of offence-related harm as it affects both victims and perpetrators of crime. In section 2, ‘Conceptualising Forgiveness’, I first situate forgiveness within the religious, philosophical and justice literature. Next, I examine how giving and/or receiving forgiveness may benefit victims and offenders by helping them, to some degree, better handle or even overcome the deleterious effects that occur as a result of crime. It is noted that some victims view forgiveness as risky, as it may embolden the offender to commit future crimes, while in other cases, forgiveness may prove costly to offenders, leaving them feeling indebted to the victim. Therefore, forgiveness can have both positive and negative effects. The chapter concludes by considering the salience of self-forgiveness for offenders; this then leads into a discussion of the current study’s rationale and a brief presentation of the research questions and methodology used in this thesis.
2.2 Section 1: The Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders

The literature regarding the destructive effects of crime for victims is well established (Åkerström, Burcar, & Wästerfors, 2011; Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1991; Armour, 2002; Bloom, 2010; Foa & Riggs, 1993; Herman, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1985). While much less is known about the effects that offenders’ wrongdoings have on their wellbeing, a growing body of literature suggests that offenders also experience deleterious psychological outcomes directly related to their criminal behaviour (MacNair, 2002a, 2002b). This section discusses the effects of crimes on both victims and offenders.

2.2.1 Psychological Effects of Crime on Victims: Lost Belief in a Just World

Acts of crime are traumatic events that trigger severe psychological shockwaves in the lives of victims (Armour, 2002; Parkes, 1993; Tan & Haining, 2016). A sense of being vulnerable to harm is distressing, as it challenges the primary assumptive beliefs held by most people that the world is benevolent and meaningful and that the self is worthy. According to Janoff-Bulman (1989), this assumption that the world is benevolent is the supposition that the impersonal world is good and people are basically kind and helpful. A belief in ‘justice and controllability’ frames the assertion that the world is meaningful. According to this view, good versus bad outcomes in life are distributed according to the principle of justice, which states that people deserve what they get and get what they deserve. It also reflects the idea that the world can be controlled by one’s behaviour. To the extent that an individual holds a positive view of their moral character, believing that the self is worthy, they may feel impervious to harm, as their virtuousness governs their experiences. In a world deemed ‘controllable’, one’s right behaviour should thus mitigate one’s vulnerability to harm (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, pp. 118–120).

To determine the extent to which a traumatic event\(^1\) influences the basic assumptions of victims compared with non-victims, Janoff-Bulman (1989) assessed a sample of 388 undergraduate students using the World Assumptions Scale (pp. 128–129) and the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (1965). The results of this study found the following:

- Victims viewed the world as more malevolent compared with non-victims.
- Male victims perceived the world as more random (uncontrollable) than female victims and non-victims.

\(^1\) i.e., death of a parent or sibling, rape, incest, home fire and debilitating accident.
• Victims regarded themselves more negatively than non-victims and were more depressed than non-victims.
• Females, regardless of victim status, viewed people more positively than males.

Traumatic events and the ensuing harm can turn the exposed individual’s assumptive world on end. Unaddressed, unresolved and unassimilated psychological distress and trauma can produce serious long-term repercussions for those affected.

2.2.2 Psychological Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders: Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Crime is a traumatic experience for those on both sides of the equation. In the aftermath of an offence, victims experience psychological repercussions such as disorientation, denial, disbelief, depression, vulnerability, fear and shock, terror, hatred, anger, vengefulness, memory problems, nightmares and difficulty concentrating and making decisions (Baures, 1996; Bloom, 2010; Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], nd; Frieze et al., 1987; Gale & Coupe, 2005; Herman, 1997). While comparatively little is known about offenders’ mental wellbeing following a crime, research suggests that hurting others can hurt oneself. This may result in perpetration-induced traumatic stress (MacNair, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2007), distressing intrusive memories, ruminations relative to the offence (Evans et al., 2007) and PTSD (Chung, Di, & Wan, 2016).

PTSD is a chronic and disabling disorder comprising a particular set of responses that may develop in individuals who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event (National Center for PTSD, 2016). Trauma exposure does not necessarily result in PTSD; clinicians who work with traumatised individuals state that the experience of harm is more a result of how an individual’s mind and body responds to that traumatic occurrence than the trauma itself (Bloom, 1999). Indicators (and the criteria for diagnosing PTSD) include avoidance, re-experiencing, hyperarousal and negative cognitions and moods (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Avoidance describes an attempt to distance oneself from the external reminders of the traumatic event and from the attendant disturbing thoughts, memories and feelings. Re-experiencing or intrusion refers to spontaneous memories (flashbacks) of the incident, nightmares and other forms of intense psychological distress. Hyperarousal is the expression of the ‘fight or flight’ mechanism. It is experienced as aggressive, impulsive or self-destructive behaviour, hypervigilance (constantly on guard) and sleep disturbances. Lastly, negative cognitions and moods
cover a wide range of feelings the victim may face, including disinterest in normal activities, guilt and inability to remember significant parts of the event (APA, 2013).

Victims of crime often experience distressing feelings such as anger, bitterness, hatred and vengefulness. Distressing emotions in general have a negative effect on wellbeing (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002), and vengefulness in particular may be related to the development of PTSD. Research has examined whether feelings of revenge commonly experienced by victims of crime may be connected to the high frequency of PTSD symptomology seen in members of this population. In a sample of 174 adult victims of crime, including 84 rape victims and 90 victims of nonsexual assault (e.g., bodily harm, robbery, deprivation of liberty), Orth et al. (2006) analysed the relationship between revenge and the PTSD reactions of intrusion, avoidance and hyperarousal. The results indicate that vengefulness is related to PTSD responses in victims of crime, and that it is significantly mediated by the length of time since the offence. A moderate relationship was found between feelings of revenge and post-traumatic symptoms of intrusion (re-experiencing) and hyperarousal, but not between revenge and the avoidance reaction. The study also found that factors other than the retaliation motive (inferred by revenge) mediated the relationship with PTSD. It has been also suggested that ruminating (the repetitive focus on the negative and damaging aspects of a stressful experience) (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) on feelings of victimisation may be the link between vengeful emotions and post-traumatic stress reactions—the more one ruminates or thinks about the traumatic event and subsequent harm it has caused, the angrier and potentially more vengeful one becomes. Contrary to the popular saying that time heals all wounds, the results of this study indicate otherwise. While a desire for revenge may be, in the short term, a normal coping response to the experience of harm, it has the potential to become increasingly maladaptive over time (Orth et al., 2006).

Much of the literature on the detrimental effects of crime has focused on the experience of victims. Yet, there is research to indicate that people who hurt others do not escape without incurring any adverse psychological costs (Legate, DeHaan, Weinstein, & Ryan, 2013). The literature on perpetration-induced trauma is sparse, and has primarily resulted

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2 The DSM-5 (2013) has added the fourth PTSD diagnostic category of negative cognition and mood. At the time of this study, re-experiencing/intrusion, hyperarousal and avoidance were the three categories of PTSD symptomatology.

3 The motive to retaliate was assessed through statements such as ‘It was important to me that the perpetrator should be punished to make him/her suffer, as I suffered by his action’ (p. 234).
from studies that focus on war veterans (including voluntary and forcibly recruited child soldiers) (Amone-P’Olak, Dokkedahl, & Elklit, 2017; Bayer, Klasen, & Adam, 2007; Vogt et al., 2017) and violent offenders (Evans et al., 2007). Much of this literature proposes that perpetrators are subject to damaging psychological reactions, including PTSD, as a result of the harm they inflict on others.

The psychological consequences of harming others are noted in MacNair’s (2002a) study on PTSD in United States (US) Vietnam War veterans. Those who self-disclosed that they had killed, or believed they killed, someone in Vietnam had significantly higher PTSD scores than those who stated they had not. PTSD scores were even higher in veterans who said they were involved in atrocities (e.g., killing civilians or children, torturing prisoners) than in those who said they simply observed the atrocities. Directly relevant to this thesis is Pollock’s (1999) study, which examined whether the commission of a violent act represented a trauma in a sample of 80 male homicide perpetrators. The study found that 52% of the offenders met criteria for current PTSD diagnosis. Of these cases, 82% described the index offence as traumatising. In addition, 70% of the offenders with PTSD had no other trauma in their histories that would explain their symptomology. These studies lend support to the hypothesis that criminal offenders, like victims, may be subject to distressing psychological effects consequent to their crimes.

2.2.3 Psychological Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders: Threatened Identities

Traumatic events such as crime pose a threat to the identities of both victims and offenders (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Best, 1997; Drake, 2011; Leisenring, 2006; Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). Crime association has the potential to subvert an individual’s prior identities (e.g., mother, brother, pastor, friend, ‘good’ person) and replace it with the deeply stigmatised identities of victim or offender. Goffman (1963), in his seminal work on spoiled identity, refers to stigma as a discrediting attribute that, in the mind of the one bearing it, reduces them ‘from a whole and unusual person to a tainted, discounted one’ (p. 3). Crime dishonours the victim and attacks their identity by symbolically communicating that their status is lower relative than that of the offender (Zehr, 2002). The distress caused by the victim and offender identities may partially be understood in light of Cooley’s (1902) portrayal of ‘the looking-glass self’. If, as Colley argues, people’s self-concepts are a reflection of how others see them, then it becomes clear how the self-concepts held by victims and offenders are threatened by stigmatising
labels such as ‘passive’ and ‘powerless’ (Best, 1997; Lamb, 1999, Leisenring, 2006) and ‘dangerous others and ‘evil monsters’ (Drake, 2011, p. 370).

The stigma of the offender status and ensuing threat of social exclusion has a devastating effect on offenders’ sense of self. Aresti et al. (2010) found in their interviews with reformed male offenders that this threat to self was the result of conflicting identities that occurred when the men’s more positive self-conceptualisations were juxtaposed against their identity as a prisoner. The fear of being judged and rejected because of the stigma of the offender label led some of the men to engage in neutralisation techniques, such as attributing their crimes to uncontrollable influences (e.g., addictions, peers) and avoiding disclosing their criminal history to others.

Like the offender label, the victim identity can also be egregious, as it is often socially discredited (Best, 1997; Lamb, 1999). Leisenring (2006) interviewed 40 women who had experienced violence in an intimate partner relationship to examine the conditions under which women accepted or rejected the victim identity. She notes that women struggled to construct and represent who they were in the context of the offence committed against them and, as a consequence, shifted between claiming and rejecting the victim identity. When women claimed the victim identity, it was primarily to convey that they had suffered harm and deserved sympathy and reparation. The victim identity was largely rejected because of the negative connotations the women attached to it, such as weakness, helplessness and powerlessness.

2.2.4 Affective Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders

The preceding literature explains how crime leads to traumatic effects for victims and perpetrators. The experience of victimisation challenges the key assumptive beliefs of many victims—no longer able to trust that the world is benevolent and meaningful, victims often perceive their environment as unjust and take a more negative view of themselves. Both victims and offenders are subject to numerous adverse psychological ramifications consequent to the offence. The destructive and distressing nature of crime places victims and perpetrators at an increased risk of developing various deleterious psychological outcomes, including PTSD. Common responses to interpersonal harm such as anger, rumination and vengeful desires are understandable. However, over time, such reactions can become maladaptive, leading to increased anger. In addition, crime poses a threat to self-identity as more positive self-conceptualisations become subverted by the stigmatised identities of ‘victim’ and ‘offender’.
Crime is also an emotionally disruptive experience for victims and offenders, having affective consequences for both parties. As a result of the offence, crime victims ride a rollercoaster of emotions, including anxiety, fear, guilt, grief, depression, sadness, anger, irritability, numbness, humiliation, rejection and erosion of trust (FBI, nd; Frieze et al., 1987). Shame and guilt are common affective responses to transgressions experienced by both victims and perpetrators of crime (Gilligan, 2001; Mills, 2008; Tangney, Stuewig, Mashek, & Hastings, 2011; Thomas, 1995; Zehr, 2002). Guilt is described as ‘an unpleasant feeling with an accompanying belief that one should have felt, thought, or acted differently’ (Kubany & Manke, 1995, p. 29). With its focus on the specific act (‘I did a bad thing’), guilt is viewed as a powerful mechanism for strengthening social bonds, promoting social solidarity and enhancing relationships. Guilt prompts individuals to monitor their behaviours and act in ways that uphold moral codes (Turner & Stets, 2005). It also motivates the offender to refrain from acting in ways that hurt or alienate another (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Shame is defined as ‘a painful affect often associated with perceptions that one has personal attributes, personality characteristics, or has engaged in behaviours that others will find unattractive and result in rejection or some kind of put down’ (Gilbert, 2000, p. 175). While guilt centres on the ‘bad act’, shame is said to focus on the ‘bad self’ (Lewis, 1971). Shame attacks the individual’s identity through the negative valuation of self and perceived diminishment in the eyes of others (Turner & Stets, 2005; VanVliet, 2010). Shame is also viewed as a precursor to violent behaviour, as the need to mitigate or eliminate feelings of rejection, humiliation, ridicule and disrespect can motivate people to act violently (Gilligan, 2001; Thomas, 1995). Further, while guilt motivates reparative strategies, shame is more likely to induce efforts by the wrongdoer to hide or disappear (Stuewig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, & McCloskey, 2010).

Crime victimisation is often experienced as a deeply shameful event. In Vidal and Petrak’s (2007) exploration of shame, which involved a sample of 25 female survivors of sexual assault, they found that a significant portion (75%) felt ashamed about themselves after the assault. Those who blamed themselves or who knew the offender were more ashamed than those who did not, and the higher the levels of shame, the more they tried to conceal the assault from others. High levels of self-reported shame also correlated with victims’ pervasive negative views of their selves, their bodies and how they appeared to others, and were significantly associated with higher levels of traumatic stress. In addition, shame can make victims reluctant to report the crime (Weiss, 2010) or seek
mental health services (Raj & Silverman, 2007) and has been associated with PTSD (Andrews, Brewin, Rose, & Kirk, 2000; Beck et al., 2011; Street & Arias, 2001; Vidal & Petrak, 2007).

Shame and guilt are emotions experienced by perpetrators of crime as well as victims. Tangney et al. (2011) explored the association between guilt and shame with crime and delinquency in a sample of 550 prison inmates and found that there were substantial differences between those prone to shame compared with those more prone to feeling guilt. They found that the propensity to experience shame was positively associated with substance abuse, impulsivity, criminogenic patterns of thinking and a greater likeliness to blame others than those who were not shame prone. By contrast, guilt-prone inmates were found to be more empathetic and have lower levels of blame and hostility externalisation relative to those who were less guilt-prone. Proneness to guilt was also negatively correlated with severity of current charges, prior jail experience, prior felony convictions and custody level at the jail. This led Tangney et al. (2011) to suggest that guilt may be the more adaptive ‘moral emotion’.

Much of what we know about the effects that shame and shaming have on wrongdoers is a result of the seminal work by John Braithwaite. Shaming, according to Braithwaite (1989), is ‘all social processes of expressing disapproval which have the intention or the effect of invoking remorse in the person being shamed and/or condemnation by others who become aware of the shaming’ (p. 100). Shaming takes various forms and has outcomes that are either stigmatising or reintegrative. For example, elements of the criminal justice system, from the ‘perp walk’, where arrested offenders are paraded in public as the media documents the event, to incarceration, are all highly stigmatising. Conversely, reintegrative shaming condemns the ‘evil’ act while upholding the worth of the offender (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 101). The focus of reintegrative shaming is on welcoming the offender back into the community through gestures such as forgiveness that remove the deviant label. Reintegrative shaming is argued to have the power to stimulate positive behaviour, especially when it occurs as a result of disapproval (disappointment or sorrow) from those who have a loving and supportive relationship with the offender (Braithwaite, 2004, 1993).

The painfulness of shame leads many people to avoid its confrontation. Nathanson (1992) states that individuals may respond to feelings of shame by withdrawing, attacking themselves or others or practising avoidance behaviours. In a similar vein, Ahmed, Harris,
Braithwaite, and Braithwaite, (2001) describe shame acknowledgement and shame displacement as two strategies people use to manage shame. Shame acknowledgement involves discharging shame by accepting responsibility for the wrongdoing and attempting to put things right; but when shame is unacknowledged, the person rejects the notion that they have done anything shameful and resists taking responsibility and making amends. Unacknowledged shame can lead to shame displacement as the individual externalises the blame and directs their anger towards others. Finally, Cibich, Woodyatt and Wenzel (2016) identify key responses that assist in turning problematic shame into functional shame. These include acknowledging one’s shame, being compassionate and accepting others’ responses, perceiving the self as malleable or capable of change and responding with self-compassion to one’s own failings.

From the literature, there emerges a clear understanding that both criminal victimisation and crime perpetration have serious affective consequences for victims and offenders, most notably with respect to the feeling of shame. Many crime victims feel deeply ashamed following the offence. The shame attached to the label of ‘victim’ causes some victims to view themselves in a negative light, and may result in increased levels of traumatic stress and a reduced likelihood of reporting the crime. For offenders, stigmatising shame is particularly egregious—it leaves individuals feeling dishonoured and, in an attempt to mitigate these painful feelings, they may respond violently or seek to displace, rather than acknowledge, that shame.

2.2.5 Behavioural Effects of Crime on Victims and Offenders

Those who have experienced trauma are, in many ways, very different people than they were prior to the event. The shock sustained by their mind, emotions, and body changes the way they view the world and their place in it, and this has affects the way they behave (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). While much of the literature on the behavioural effects of crime focuses on victims, the findings of these studies may also extend to perpetrators of crime because of the commonality of the trauma experienced by both victims and offenders. In Frieze et al.’s (1987) examination of the literature, it was found that in the aftermath of adverse experiences, traumatised people often adopt behavioural responses that may help mitigate feelings of fear, inequity and vulnerability. Retaliation or revenge against the offender may be pursued to ‘balance the scales’ of justice. Behaviours undertaken by the victim in an attempt to secure their future personal safety may be either constructive or maladaptive. Actions designed to improve their
general safety, such as installing additional locks or other security devices in their homes, moving to a ‘safer’ location or other heightened security measures may enhance the victim’s physical and psychological wellbeing. However, self-protective behaviours that lead to the victim’s isolation (e.g., avoiding people, places or activities they once enjoyed) become increasingly maladaptive over time. In some instances, trauma generates behaviours that are exceptionally destructive to the victim, their families and the community—these include self-harm, eating disorders, risk-taking, compulsive sexuality, violent acting out, substance abuse and even suicide (Bloom, 1999; van der Kolk, 1989).

### 2.2.6 Somatic Effects

Crime victims and perpetrators are both at risk of developing a number of acute and chronic offence-related somatic effects. In the aftermath of the crime, victims may experience an increase in adrenaline and heart rate ‘fight or flight’, hyperventilation, shaking, dry mouth, loss of bowel control (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime, 2005), nausea, headaches, impaired sleep, digestive maladies, loss of energy and appetite, muscle pain, chills or sweating, exaggerated startle responses and high blood pressure (FBI, nd). The relationship between traumatic experiences and somatic ailments and disease has been found to be mediated through a complex interaction of psychological and physiological mechanisms. Common psychological and affective responses to traumatic events, such as depression, anxiety, anger and hostility, have each been linked to numerous substantial health threats. Depressed individuals have 4.5 times greater risk of having a heart attack than those with no history (Pratt et al., 1996) and, among patients who suffer a heart attack, mortality is four times higher for those with depression (Frasure-Smith, Lesperance, & Talajic, 1993). Anxiety is also a factor in the development of cardiovascular disease and contributes to a poorer prognosis following severe coronary events (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002, p. 86).

Research on the relationship between violent behaviour and disease suggests that when violence is experienced as a stressful incident, it increases the likelihood of inducing an overall state that renders a person susceptible to developing chronic disease (Crofford, 2007). In their longitudinal study of more than 80,000 offenders aged 11 to 32, Reingle, Jennings, Piquero and Maldonado-Molina (2014) found that a continuity of violence during an individual’s juvenile and young adult criminal career affects chronic disease in early adulthood. This implies that consistently violent offenders are more likely to be
diagnosed with any chronic disease, diagnosed with a greater number of diseases and diagnosed with diabetes, in particular, when compared with non-violent individuals.

2.2.7 Summary of Offence-Related Effects for Victims and Offenders

In section 1, I explained how both victims and offenders experience adverse effects of crime across psychological, emotional, behavioural and somatic dimensions. I discussed how traumatic events challenge the assumptive views of victims, foster psychological symptomology consistent with PTSD in both victims and offenders and threaten their identity and sense of self. I then explained how wrongdoing causes significant emotional upheaval in the lives of victims and offenders, most notably in the form of painful feelings of guilt and shame. I next illustrated how victims’ and offenders’ behavioural responses to the crime, rather than mitigating overwhelming feelings of trauma, are more often maladaptive, creating further pain and suffering. Lastly, I described how the somatic effects of traumatic events were particularly deleterious, as the common responses to adverse life events (e.g., anger, anxiety, depression) have been associated with serious and negative physical outcomes, including heart disease and a compromised immune system.

It is thus evident from this literature review that crime is a distressing and traumatic experience for both victims and offenders. This points to a clear need to identify responses to criminal wrongdoing that may potentially carry beneficial and perhaps even healing capacities. Forgiveness may be such a response.

2.3 Section 2: Conceptualising Forgiveness

Forgiveness is frequently conceptualised in the literature as a victim prerogative involving changes within and actions made by and for the benefit of the victim (Luskin, 2003; North, 1987; Pargament, McCullough, & Thoresen, 2000). While the victim perspective is one way of examining forgiveness, it fails to account for the perceived relevance and potential benefits of forgiveness for the perpetrators of wrongdoing. As my thesis explores the understandings and perceived salience of giving and receiving forgiveness for crime victims and perpetrators, I aim to review the extant literature relevant to both. To gain a deeper understanding of the various meanings that may be attached to forgiveness, I consider it within religious, philosophical and justice frameworks. Next, I review how various factors such as offender apology and victim closeness may encourage victims and offenders to give and/or seek forgiveness. I explain how giving forgiveness
enhances victims’ overall wellbeing by diminishing PTSD symptomology, rumination and negative affect (e.g., anger, fear), fostering more charitable behaviour towards the offender and improving physical health. In addition, the literature provides evidence regarding how receiving forgiveness releases feelings of guilt, increases empathy and respect for others, assists in the acknowledgement of shame, encourages future compliant behaviour and enhances health. However, not all victims want to forgive the offender; neither do all offenders want to be forgiven. Therefore, I also describe how forgiveness is not considered profitable in all cases. Lastly, I present the debate regarding the salience of self-forgiveness for offenders.

Prior to discussing this literature, I first define what forgiveness is and is not and how misunderstandings of forgiveness often lead it to be rejected, particularly in cases of serious harm.

2.3.1 Forgiveness: What It Is and Is Not

In the psychological literature, forgiveness is primarily viewed in victim-oriented terms. Forgiveness is conceptualised as a transformation process, an intrapsychic struggle (Enright et al., 1998) and a journey that takes time (Whitney, 2011), involving changes in victim cognitions, emotions and behaviours in relation to the offender (Pargament et al., 2000). The word forgive is derived from a ‘calque’, or literal transliteration of the Latin word *perdonare*. In Old English, *per* was changed to *for*, meaning ‘thoroughly’ or ‘completely’, while *donare* converted to *giefan*, meaning ‘to give’. This suggests that by forgiving, one makes the decision to ‘thoroughly or completely give’ something (Morris, 2014). Enright et al. (1998) propose that the retributive attitude towards the wrongdoer is ‘given up’ when one forgives, and define forgiveness as ‘a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behaviour toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her’ (pp. 46–47). Similarly, psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (2009) states that ‘forgiveness, at a minimum, is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward the person that wronged you’. Encapsulating Enright et al.’s (1998) and Lyubomirsky’s (2009) views, North (1987) describes forgiveness as

the overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying the right to such affect and judgment, but by endeavouring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to them. (p. 502)
While there is no single consensus definition of forgiveness, the above conceptualisations illustrate key signposts that indicate its presence (or lack thereof). In sum, forgiveness may be recognized or expressed as the complete absence or giving up of the justly held feelings of anger, negative judgement, revenge and indifferent behaviour towards an offender in conjunction with the giving of goodwill, compassion, generosity and sacrificial love.

Forgiveness as a response to injurious behaviour is often called into question because of common misconceptions concerning what it is and is not. Forgiveness does not entail forgetting (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010), and is discrete from condonation, justification, excuse and reconciliation (Freedman, 1998). When one condones the offender’s actions, one may perceive the behaviour as wrong per se, but not condemn it. If no offence has been taken, there is no need for forgiveness (Kolnai, 1973–1974). Justifiable and excusable offences also have no need for forgiveness. A justifiable offence is behaviour that, though wrong, was, under the circumstances, the correct course of action (e.g., the ‘unlawful’ restraint of a would-be kidnapper until the authorities arrive) (Murphy, 1988a). An excusable offence may be one whereby the offender was unable to act within the bounds of normal societal expectations (e.g., insanity)—therefore, their actions, though wrong, may legitimately find excuse (Murphy, 1988a). In addition, forgiveness is not irrevocably connected with reconciliation, as one may forgive without reconciling with the offender (Freedman, 1998). For instance, a victim of domestic violence may decide to forgive the abuser, but still choose to end the relationship. In sum, forgiveness is not without controversy and is often rejected as a legitimate response to wrongdoing as a result of the numerous misperceptions regarding what it is and is not.

2.3.2 A Religious Construction of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is also a religious construction that has significant import for the adherents of various faith traditions. As a key tenant of many faith groups, forgiveness is conceptualised as a sacred gift so imbued with the essence of the Divine that it holds the keys to enlightenment, righteousness and Eternal Life (Al-Hadis, as cited in Ali, 2000; Beck, 2000; Bishop, 1968; Carus, 1894; Newman, 1987; Pilch, 2014; Violotti, 2013). For many religious devotees, giving forgiveness in the aftermath of wrongdoing is viewed as both an ethical obligation and a religious duty to God (Newman, 1987). As commanded in sacred writings and scriptures, the faithful are required to forgive others to lay claim upon Divine forgiveness: ‘For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father
will also forgive you, but if you do not, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses’ (in Matthew 6:14–15 of the Bible). For offenders to receive God’s forgiveness, they must confess the sin, make a sincere commitment to refrain from the wrongful behaviour and ask God for forgiveness (Ali, 2000). When the wrongdoer desires the victim’s forgiveness, they must make every effort to rectify the harm they caused and ask to be forgiven (Ali, 2000).

2.3.3 A Philosophical Exploration of Forgiveness

Like religious scholars, philosophers have sought to understand the meaning, depth and breadth of forgiveness. Forgiveness, according to Kant, involves a change of action towards an offender, not a change of feeling. Murphy (1988b) disagrees, stating, ‘forgiveness is primarily a matter of how I feel about you (not how I treat you)’ (p. 21). Hampton (1988) refers to the feeling that allows forgiveness to occur as a ‘change of heart’, which is the culmination of a process that, in part, includes the ‘giving up [of] emotions such as spite and malice [and] … overcoming resentment’ (p. 83).

Key to this thesis is Hampton’s (1988) view that forgiveness releases the forgiver from the role of victimhood and the offender from the role of a sinner indebted to the victim. Forgiveness particularly benefits the wrongdoer, as it liberates them from ‘the hell of self-loathing’ resulting from the victim’s moral hatred of them (Hampton, 1988, 86–87). Forgiveness from others may help pave the way to the perpetrator’s future law-abiding behaviour, as they may reason, ‘if he can see enough in me to welcome me back, then maybe I am not such a hideous person after all’ (Hampton, 1988, pp. 86–87). Therefore, forgiveness as a change of heart—experienced by the victim towards the offender—releases both parties from the burden of the discredited identities they have carried.

2.3.4 A Justice Framework of Forgiveness

The Western system of criminal justice is often viewed as an adversarial model (Sarre, 2002). In this system, the victim and the offender (unless called upon to give testimony in the court proceedings) play a peripheral role in a process that pits their representatives against each other in an effort to uncover What law was broken? Who is responsible for the offence? What punishment do they deserve? (Zehr & Gohar, 2003, p. 20). This process

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4 Jean Hampton (1954–1996) was an American political philosopher, professor and author.

5 According to Hampton (1988), moral hatred ‘involves believing, by virtue of the insulter’s association with the evil cause, that she has “rotted” or “gone bad” so that she now lacks some measure of goodness or moral health’ (p. 80).
often leaves both the victim and the offender feeling as though injustice rather than justice has been served (Worthington, 1999). To understand the meaning or efficacy of forgiveness in the justice context, three questions must first be answered: What is justice? How is justice experienced? Are justice and forgiveness compatible?

2.3.4.1 What is Justice?

Justice has various meanings (Lucas, 1972). Derived from root words having to do with ‘law’ and ‘righteousness’ (Breton & Lehman, 2001, p. xxi), justice has been described as a virtue (Plato), fairness (Rawls, 1971), ‘no respecter of persons’ (Lucas, 1972), a ‘balancing of the books’, a repayment of that which is lost (Worthington, 1999) and giving each person what they deserve (von Hirsch, 1976). The idea of giving someone what they deserve (evil for evil or good for good) (Roberts-Cady, 2003) is conceptualised in the retributive model of justice often referred to as ‘just desserts’. A just desserts justice model holds that punishment is meted out to the offender in direct proportion to their ‘internal wickedness’ (Kant, 1790/1952, p. 397). Hampton (1988) states that retribution is compatible with justice, as it is ‘a way of expressing the wrongfulness of the criminal’s act and the value of the victim demeaned by the criminal's action’ (p. 39). Others disagree, stating that the goals of the criminal justice system, such as retribution, deterrence and incapacitation, rarely satisfy the wide-ranging needs of those affected by the crime (Achilles & Zehr, 2001; Strang, 2002). Monture-Okanee (1994) posits, ‘what I have come to understand is that justice is not a legal problem. It is a human problem’ (p. 231). When justice is viewed through a relational lens, it is seen to originate in the connection between people (Godwin, 1976/1793) and be based not on the law, but on values that must be lived between people before it can be realised in society as a whole (Elliott, 2011, p. 50). In sum, there is no singular understanding of what constitutes justice. It can be argued that the aim of justice is to redress wrongs that have occurred, but how these wrongs are addressed or what justice looks like in action are issues that may best be determined by those who have suffered the injustice.

2.3.4.2 How is Justice Experienced?

Intentional harm is insulting—it sends a degrading message that the victim is a person undeserving of care and respect (Murphy, 2003). Wrongful behaviour lowers the status of the victim in relation to the offender by symbolically communicating that the offender is elevated in rank above the victim (Zehr, 2002). This transgression unbalances the ‘scales of justice’, causing the victim to feel a host of unforgiving emotions, including
anger, hatred, resentment, bitterness and hostility (Worthington, 1999). While the aim of the criminal justice system is to balance the ‘scales’, the responses from the justice system may do little to address the emotional needs of the victim or the offender (Worthington, 1999). To restore a sense of justice, the victim’s power and status must again be raised to its pre-offence status. This may be achieved through a variety of means, including successful revenge or retaliation; formal criminal justice processes; receiving an apology or compensation; seeking Divine justice; and (as this study proposes) granting forgiveness.

Victims are not the only ones with justice needs. Zehr and Gohar (2003) contend that for offenders to become productive, law-abiding citizens in the future, their need to experience justice must also be met. The first of these justice needs is accountability. Offenders should be encouraged rather than discouraged to take responsibility for their actions. Offender accountability involves responses that address the harm caused, stimulate empathy for the victim and hold the potential to transform demoralising shame into that which facilitates the offender’s reintegration into the community. Encouragement for personal transformation is another way that offenders may experience justice. Offenders should be inspired to take part in activities that help them resolve the issues that led to their criminal behaviour (e.g., personal victimisation, addictions) and gain opportunities to learn or improve skills. Finally, offenders may experience justice through encouragement and support for their reintegration and, if and when necessary, physical restraint (Zehr & Gohar, 2003, p. 15). Overall, justice aims to balance the ‘scales’ that were ‘tipped’ by the violation that has occurred. For the victims and offenders to perceive that the scales have been balanced, their distinct personal needs must be addressed.

2.3.4.3 Are Justice and Forgiveness Compatible?

When viewed only through a retributive lens, justice and forgiveness appear to be mutually exclusive constructs (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Exline & Baumeister, 2000). It would be expected that victims with a retributive notion of justice (i.e., ‘eye for an eye’) would have a reduced desire to forgive, as to forgive would violate their standard of justice (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997). However, research in the fields of social justice and human values paints a very different picture of individuals’ justice principles. People, in general, often hold conceptualisations
of justice that go beyond that of punishment; they want fair treatment for themselves and others, including the offender (Van den Bos & Lind, 2001).

It has been proposed in the literature that forgiveness may be seen as a means of restoring victims’ sense of justice after it has been threatened by the offence. Participants in Wenzel and Okimoto’s (2010) study on the role of forgiveness in human interaction were asked to imagine themselves in a victim scenario where the perpetrator did (or did not) apologise, and where they were (or were not) instructed to write an email of forgiveness to the offender. The findings indicate that acts of forgiveness, whether precipitated by an apology or not, contribute to a restored sense of justice that in turn leads to decreased desire for vengefulness and an increase in more benevolent feelings towards the perpetrator. Giving forgiveness also enhanced the participants’ sense of justice by both restoring the victim’s perception that they and the offender share the same values (a belief challenged by the offence) and by returning to the victim the status and power they lost as a consequence of the offence.

In summary, acts of wrongdoing unbalance the ‘scales of justice’ by symbolically communicating that the victim’s power and the status has been diminished relative to that of the offender. Justice seeks to ‘balance the scales’ by redressing the harms that occurred, but how this is achieved is a matter of debate. Forgiveness and justice can be considered mutually compatible, as giving forgiveness enhances the victim’s sense of justice by elevating their power and status, while receiving forgiveness meets the offender’s justice needs, including their desire for support and encouragement for reintegration.

2.3.5 Giving and Receiving Forgiveness

The decision to give or receive forgiveness (or not) must be left up to each individual (Braithwaite, 2002; Lerman, 1999). However, studies have found that certain attitudes and behaviours, such as offender remorse (Gold & Weiner, 2000), apologies and victim empathy (Witvliet, Worthington, Wade, & Berry, 2002), may assist in the development of forgiveness. The relationship between apology and forgiveness is particularly well established in the literature. Hayes (2006) notes that ‘when offenders are able to offer sincere apologies and express genuine remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation are more likely to follow’ (p. 375). Victims often want an apology (Strang & Sherman, 2003), and those who receive one tend to have more favourable opinions of the wrongdoer (Gold & Weiner, 2000), which, in turn, may prompt forgiveness.
Factors such as severity of the harm caused, relational closeness between the victim and offender, rumination, responsibility and anger have also been associated with the likelihood that a victim will forgive an offender (McCullough et al., 1998). Riek (2010) examined whether and under what circumstances the above factors would influence a perpetrator’s decision to seek forgiveness. Participants\(^6\) were asked to recall a time they had hurt or upset someone and in which the conflict was as yet unresolved. The participants wrote an account of the offence and then completed a questionnaire containing measures of the variables of interest\(^7\) (p. 250). The findings are of particular relevance to this thesis, as the participants were more likely to seek forgiveness in cases where they felt close to the victim, perceived the offence as serious, acknowledged responsibility for the offence and had ruminated over it (p. 251). Guilt was identified as the key mediating factor through which this process occurred, although it is worth noting that the strength of association between relational commitment and seeking forgiveness was such that it took place even in the absence of guilt. Seeking forgiveness was found to be an important tool in repairing and maintaining social relations (p. 246). In sum, victims are more likely to forgive offenders who offer apologies and express sincere remorse, while offenders who feel close to their victims or who have taken a measure of responsibility for their wrongdoing are more likely to seek forgiveness.

\textbf{2.3.6 Benefits of Forgiveness to Victims and Offenders}

In the preceding section, I discussed how forgiveness is commonly conceptualised in terms of replacing one’s justly held retributive thoughts and feelings towards the wrongdoer with expressions of goodwill, generosity, compassion and love. I explained that forgiveness has been erroneously associated with similar, yet discrete, constructs that have led some to reject its use, particularly in cases of serious harm. I found that forgiveness as it is conceptualised within religious, philosophical and justice frameworks

\footnote{\textsuperscript{6}It should be noted that while the ability to generalise the findings from a sample of undergraduate students who ‘upset’ someone to crime victims and perpetrators is somewhat tenuous, the relevance of such a correlation lie in the notion that if those who commit minor offences tend to a) feel guilty and b) seek forgiveness from one to whom they feel close, it is reasonable to suggest that those who commit more egregious offences may also experience guilt (likely to a greater degree than the study sample) and would be more likely to seek forgiveness from those to whom they are, and presumably desire to remain, close compared with those who have no such attachment.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{7}Variables of interest measured: Rumination (e.g., ‘How often have you thought about the incident since it occurred?’); Responsibility (e.g., ‘How much of the incident you wrote about do you think was your fault?’); Severity (e.g., ‘On a scale from 1 to 7 how serious do you think the offence was?’); Closeness (e.g., ‘At the time of the incident, how close were you to the person you hurt/offended?’); Anger (e.g., ‘How angry are you with the person you hurt or offended?’); Guilt, (e.g., ‘How bad do you feel about your actions and behaviours in this incident?’); and Seeking forgiveness (e.g., ‘In the near future how likely do you think you are to: a) apologise; b) do something to make up for your offence; c) seek forgiveness; and d) desire to reconcile with the person you hurt or offended?’).}
is perceived as an ethical obligation and religious duty, a ‘change of heart’ and a means of balancing the ‘scales’ of justice. Lastly, I noted that the presence of certain factors (e.g., offender apology, feelings of closeness to the victim) were associated with giving and/or seeking forgiveness.

This section now discusses empirical evidence to propose that forgiveness holds psychological, affective, behavioural and somatic benefits for those who forgive and those who receive forgiveness. I also offer evidence that alleges forgiveness is not necessarily beneficial in all cases. Finally, I present the debate in the literature regarding the salience of self-forgiveness for offenders.

2.3.6.1 Psychological Benefits of Forgiveness

The relationship between forgiveness and psychological wellbeing is remarkably straightforward: forgiveness enhances psychological health by reducing ‘unforgiveness’ (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). In the aftermath of an offence, victims experience a number of negative emotions, such as anger, fear and grief (see section 2.2.4). When ruminated or dwelled on, these distressing emotions create unforgiveness, which manifests as resentment, bitterness, residual anger, residual fear, hatred, hostility and stress (Worthington, 2001). Forgiveness reduces unforgiveness by replacing negative emotions with positive ones of unselfish love, empathy and compassion. This replacing of negative affect for positive may improve mental health (Worthington, 2001).

PTSD, one of the hallmarks of experiencing a traumatic event, has been found to be ameliorated through forgiveness. In a sample of 178 college students, Orcutt, Pickett and Pope (2008) examined whether increased forgiveness towards the offender in the aftermath of interpersonal trauma would be associated with victims’ lowered PTSD. Participants identified an occasion where they were deeply hurt, and answered questions regarding their thoughts, emotions and behaviours towards the offender. Seventeen types of trauma were identified, ranging from robbery, threat of death, child sexual abuse and witnessing family violence. The Enright (Enright, Rique, & Coyle, 2000) Forgiveness Inventory (EFI) was used to measure offence-specific forgiveness; questionnaires assessing traumatic and distressing life events were also completed by participants. The results found that when the perceived severity of the offence was high, there was an increase in PTSD symptomology and a decrease in levels of forgiveness, whereas higher levels of offence-specific forgiveness were associated with lower levels of PTSD symptoms.
There is further evidence to indicate that forgiveness results in improved psychological wellbeing for the forgiver. Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman (2007) studied predispositions towards forgiveness, vengefulness, tendency to ruminate, depressive affect and life satisfaction in a sample of 183 undergraduate volunteers. They found that an increase in psychological wellbeing was experienced by those who forgave rather than those with vengeful motivations. In particular, forgiveness was related to lower depressive affect and higher life satisfaction, whereas vengefulness was related to elevated depressive affect, but not to elevated life satisfaction. In addition, forgiveness was associated with a decrease in the tendency to ruminate and brood, while rumination was associated with depressive affect and lower life satisfaction. Therefore, whether those who refuse to dwell on the offence are able to forgive or forgiving enables the individual to stop thinking about the harm, it appears that the cessation of rumination is an especially important component of the forgiveness – mental health association.

The psychological benefits of forgiveness also extend to offenders. The need for confession and forgiveness is considered an integral part of what it is to be human (Todd, 1985). Jung contends that confessing one’s wrongs and receiving forgiveness can ‘[help] the wrongdoer overcome harmful psychological defences, achieve integration of personality and release negative feelings such as guilt’ (Gassin, 1998, p. 72). Gassin (1998) explored the potential benefits or drawbacks of accepting forgiveness by asking 10 university students to complete a survey and answer in-depth questions regarding their experience of being forgiven, including the details of their offence and what led up to and followed being forgiven. Participants rated (0–5) the degree to which they experienced 12 forgiveness outcomes. Receiving forgiveness resulted in a desire or obligation to not harm the person again (70%), joy and relief (60%), reconciliation (30%) and re-established trust (20%) (p. 82). In addition, as a result of being forgiven, participants experienced a decrease or release of guilt; strengthened religious commitment; enhanced respect for others; greater understanding of forgiveness, love and relationships; gained appreciation for the need to take responsibility for their behaviour; heightened empathy; gained insights into human nature; opportunity for reconciliation; and commitment to act correctly in future (pp. 80–82). These findings led Gassin to assert that ‘the experience of receiving forgiveness may have the power to affect positively all systems of moral development: cognitive, affective, volitional, behavioural, and relational’ (p. 84). While

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8 1) Joy; 2) Embarrassment; 3) Obligation to not hurt person again; 4) Relief; 5) Guilt; 6) Desire to not hurt person again; 7) Re-establishment of trust; 8) Closure of incident; 9) Anger; 10) Reconciliation with the person; 11) Improvement in personality; and 12) Improvement in values.
the results of the study should be considered with caution because of the small sample, they are of particular relevance to this thesis, as they offer preliminary understanding of how offenders may psychologically benefit from being forgiven.

2.3.6.2 Forgiveness as a Reintegrative Strategy for Offenders

Forgiveness has the power to reconnect the offender with their community, thereby potentially mitigating the likelihood of future offending behaviours (Denckla, 1999). Murphy and Helmer (2013) examined forgiveness as a reintegrative variable to determine how tax offenders perceived the Australian Taxation Office’s (ATO) enforcement strategy and the effect this had on their subsequent behaviour. Perceptions of both forgiveness and stigmatisation received by the ATO were measured, as was forgiveness from the offender’s family members. It was found that those who felt stigmatised by the ATO were much more likely to displace their shame, feel angry, blame others for their mistakes and report having subsequently evaded their taxes. Those who perceived the ATO as being forgiving were less likely to displace their shame, more likely to cooperate with the ATO and less likely to report reoffending behaviours. Especially relevant to this thesis are the findings regarding the effect that forgiveness from the offenders’ loved ones had on their future behaviour—feeling forgiven by loved ones had a direct and positive effect on offenders’ subsequent self-reported compliance behaviour. However, forgiveness from family and friends did not lead to the offender's acknowledgement of shame. Murphy and Helmer (2013) explain that offenders may have interpreted their loved ones’ forgiveness as approval to let go of negative feelings such as shame, or perhaps forgiveness gave offenders the determination to right the wrong that had occurred and abide by the law in the future. Wrongdoing places the offender symbolically, if not literally, outside the circle of the community. The essence of forgiveness may be seen as a welcoming gesture of social acceptance signifying that while the offending behaviour is denounced, the wrongdoer is welcomed back into the group. These movements of inclusion may promote the offender’s reintegration into the community as a law-abiding citizen.

2.3.6.3 Affective and Behavioural Benefits of Forgiveness

The painful affective after-effects of traumatic experiences have been found to be significantly ameliorated by the decision to forgive (Jaeger, 1998; Luskin, 2003; Yandell, 1998). Enright (2001) states that victims are often hesitant to relinquish feelings of anger in the belief that as long as they hang onto these feelings, they keep the offender, at least
symbolically, in ‘jail’ (p. 18). Over time, many victims come to realise that they have been imprisoned by their own anger, not the wrongdoer. Enright (2001) contends that they keys to releasing oneself from being imprisoned by painful emotions is forgiveness.

While little is known about any direct affective and behavioural benefits that forgiveness may hold for criminal offenders, there is evidence to indicate that through the mediating factor of gratitude, the beneficiary of forgiveness may experience an abundance of positive emotional and behavioural outcomes. Tsang (2006) defines gratitude as ‘a positive emotional reaction to the receipt of a benefit that is perceived to have resulted from the good intentions of another’ (p. 139). McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen (2008) add to this definition the awareness that the gift (whether tangible or not) given was precious or ‘costly’, and was voluntarily offered (p. 281). Studies have found that being grateful improves one’s affective state—for example, Woodward (2000, as cited in Watkins, 2004, p. 173) manipulated gratitude to determine the causal influence of gratitude on mood. Participants in the ‘gratitude’ condition were asked to focus on things for which they were thankful; those in the ‘envy’ condition focused on expected enjoyments that did not transpire. Those in the thankful condition reported more gratitude and less negative affect than those in the envy condition.

According to McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons and Larson (2001), gratitude contains three psychological functions related to understanding and responding to pro-social behaviour that are of particular relevance to this thesis. First, gratitude acts as a benefit detector. That is, gratitude provides an affective readout to the recipient as to the cost of the gift to the giver, the value they place on receiving it, how intentionally the gift was given and the extent to which it was offered freely. Second, gratitude is a reinforcer of pro-social behaviour, as sincere expressions of appreciation shown by the recipient make it more likely that the gift-giver will act charitably towards the recipient in the future. Third, gratitude acts as a motivator of pro-social behaviour by facilitating psychological states in the recipient that support generosity and cooperation. In sum, if offenders receive forgiveness with gratitude, appreciating the magnitude of such a gesture, this may further motivate future benevolent and cooperative behaviours.

2.3.6.4 Somatic Benefits of Forgiveness

There is a growing body of literature explicating the somatic benefits that forgiveness carries for the giver and receiver. Seybold, Hill, Neumann and Chi (2001) describe six pathways linking forgiveness to health: 1) decreased psychophysiological reactivity; 2)
less interpersonal stress; 3) less frequent stress; 4) constitutional weakness associated with hostility and health; 5) more healthy behaviours; and 6) transcendent or religious factors. Similarly, Thoresen et al. (2000) suggest that forgiveness may affect health by diminishing chronic blaming, anger and hostility and reducing chronic hyperarousal and/or allostatic load, and promoting optimistic thinking, self-efficacy in taking health-related actions, social support and transcendent consciousness.

Lawler et al. (2005) appraise the relationship of trait forgiveness (i.e., the extent to which people exhibit a tendency to forgive) and state forgiveness (i.e., the degree in which people forgive a specific act) with health as mediated by a number of the above pathways. A community sample of 81 adults first completed questionnaires regarding forgiveness, social skills, spirituality, stress and health. In the interview segment of the study, participants’ blood pressure and heart rate were monitored as they answered questions regarding a time when they had been hurt or betrayed by a close friend or relationship partner. It was observed that the association between forgiveness and health was robust across a number of measures. Both state and trait forgiveness were associated with all five measures of health, though trait forgiveness accounted for less health variance than state forgiveness. The measures were symptoms improvements; number of medications taken; sleep quality; fatigue; and somatic complaints. In the association between state forgiveness and health, negative affect and stress most fully facilitated the effect, whereas with trait forgiveness, negative affect, closely followed by conflict management and stress, most fully mediated the association. Lawler et al. (2005) estimated that it was by reducing anger, anxiety and depression that forgiveness had a positive effect on health. This research implies that forgiveness may ameliorate many of the negative psychological and emotional after-effects of crime that may, in turn, carry somatic benefits for victims and offenders.

2.3.6.5 Is Forgiveness Beneficial in All Cases?

The preceding literature has illustrated varied ways in which forgiveness plays a positive role in enhancing the overall wellbeing of both victims and offenders following acts of crime. However, the efficacy of forgiveness is not ubiquitous. Some have raised concerns that forgiveness underrates the harm caused, or judges the victim’s feelings of resentment as inappropriate (Murphy, 2003). Forgiveness in cases of sexual abuse has been called ‘unwise’ (Bass & Davis, 1988) and ‘potentially dangerous’ (Engel, 1990). Research has found that women who are more forgiving (e.g., willing to ‘move on’ or let go of anger)
 Forgiveness is sometimes viewed as carrying too great a cost or having too great a risk attached. In Strelan, Crabb, Chan and Jones’s (2017) examination of lay understandings of forgiveness, they asked a community sample (n = 130) to complete a survey whereby, from the perspective of a grantor or a receiver, or as a third-party observer, they described their views on occasions when either giving or receiving forgiveness was costly or risky. From a victim or grantor perspective, the vast majority (82%) stated that forgiveness was risky because it encouraged repeated bad behaviour. Participants made comments such as ‘I forgave him but he continued to do it’ and ‘It [i.e., forgiveness] placed me in a position of being emotionally abused again’ (pp. 397–398). The 20% of the participants who actually or vicariously experienced the granting of forgiveness identified a lack of offender learning (due to a failure to punish) as a cost. One participant noted, ‘I really wanted her to see how her behaviour … was totally unacceptable. Now [following forgiveness] she will never learn’ (p. 399). Another said, ‘It’s always risky to forgive the person who abused you because they may not see that there are consequences for their actions’ (p. 399). With respect to transgressor-related findings, 40% of personally and vicariously forgiven participants explained how receiving forgiveness resulted in negative outcomes. Participants described feeling ‘morally obliged’ towards the victim, ‘indebted to them [i.e., forgiver] indefinitely’, and ‘exploited’ as, according to one offender, the forgiver ‘hold[s] the grudge over your head’ (p. 401). Forgiveness also placed the forgiver (at least symbolically and perceptionally) in a position of moral authority over the one forgiven. As one transgressor explained, ‘having to live with the guilt that you were bad enough to do this thing, and they were “big” enough to forgive you’ (p. 401). In sum, forgiveness is not necessarily a panacea for all interpersonal problems in all cases (Hertlein & Brown, 2017; McNulty, 2011). Victims may refrain from forgiving the offender, fearing that without having to suffer the consequences of their actions, offenders may be emboldened to commit future crimes. Transgressors may reject or resent being forgiven, as it may increase feelings of guilt, shame and regret or leave them feeling unfairly indebted to the forgiver.

2.3.7 The Salience of Self-Forgiveness

While there is burgeoning literature on interpersonal forgiveness and its efficacy in addressing and mitigating the harms associated with acts of wrongdoing, there is
comparatively little understood about the salience of self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness is defined by Williston (2012) as ‘the foreswearing of self-oriented negative attitudes like contempt, anger, and hatred, attitudes generated by an agent’s belief in their own moral failing’ (p. 67). With self-forgiveness, the wrongdoer recognises their inherent worth and its independence from their wrongful behaviour (Holmgren, 1998). That is, self-forgiveness allows the offender to separate their worth as a person from the ‘bad act’ they committed. Like interpersonal forgiveness, self-forgiveness does not imply condoning, forgetting, accepting or overlooking the wrongdoing (Downie, 1965). However, self-forgiveness does mean that the offender explicitly or implicitly acknowledges the wrongfulness of their actions and accepts responsibility (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Genuine self-forgiveness involves a commitment to change (Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1996) and, according to Williston (2012), ‘is often a long and arduous process that requires much self-examination and may be very uncomfortable’ (p. 627). It is possibly because the pathway to true or genuine forgiveness is difficult and painful that some wrongdoers may engage in pseudo or false forgiveness.

With pseudo-self-forgiveness, the wrongdoer in effect lets themselves ‘off the hook’ for the harm they caused by minimising the consequences of their actions, excusing their behaviour or blaming others (Worthington, 2005, p. 144). In contrast with the ‘long and arduous process’ of genuine self-forgiveness mentioned by Williston (2012), pseudo-self-forgiveness is a ‘shortcut’ taken by some offenders as they circumvent accepting responsibility, acknowledging harm and experiencing negative self-conscious emotions (Worthington, 2005, p. 145). Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) liken pseudo-self-forgiveness to a psychological immune system that assists the wrongdoer in maintaining a state of positive self-regard in the aftermath of their offending. Pseudo-self-forgiveness is a defence mechanism against negative feedback that may take the form of justifications, rationalisations, neutralisations and other techniques such as impression management and moral disengagement. While pseudo-self-forgiveness may be beneficial in the short term, Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013) suggest that over time, it can lead to long-term problems, including failure to repair the harm or make amends; failure to gain insights and make positive change; unacknowledged shame and its attendant negative outcomes; and unaddressed victim needs.

There is some debate in the literature as to whether self-forgiveness is always appropriate or justified. Studies examining motivation for self-change (e.g., in smokers and gamblers) have found that self-forgiveness may be maladaptive, as it enables individuals to
relinquish negative feelings instead of taking responsibility and dealing with their problems, making it less likely that the problematic behaviour will cease (Squires, Sztainert, Gillen, Caouette, Wohl, 2012; Wohl & Thompson, 2011). Self-forgiveness in cases of serious harm such as rape or murder may be a particularly provocative topic. Holmgren (2002) maintains that the painfulness of self-forgiveness may make it difficult for violent offenders to achieve; however, if they are sincerely grieved by their actions and the harm they caused, and their self-forgiveness is genuine, then it is an appropriate action. Williston’s (2012) assertion that self-forgiveness and self-reproach are compatible may also alleviate some of the concern regarding the suitability of self-forgiveness in instances of serious harm—Williston argues that the self-forgiver can retain a sense of blameworthiness for their behaviour and still self-forgive or be free from negative self-directed feelings. Williston asserts that the retention of self-blame is crucial to eradicating moral complacency, as it assists the wrongdoer in keeping sight of their previous failing and allowing it to act as a future ‘moral’ compass (p. 74).

While there is evident concern over the efficacy of self-forgiveness in certain cases, there is also substantial evidence to recommend its use. Self-forgiveness has been associated with psychological wellbeing, especially perceived quality of life (Romero et al., 2006), and life satisfaction (Thompson et al., 2005). Self-forgiveness is related to self-esteem, self-trust, more empathy for the victim and a greater desire for reconciliation (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Wohl, DeShea and Wahkinney (2008) suggest that those who self-forgive are more likely to feel, act and think constructively towards the self and see themselves as worthy, asserting that ‘The process of self-forgiveness may be the catalyst for personal growth’ (p. 9). Lastly, according to Cornish and Wade (2015), self-forgiveness may hold particular salience for criminal offenders who still carry shame, guilt and self-condemnation even though they have taken responsibility for their crimes and want to move on and have a new life. Perpetrators of crime often suffer significant painful and destructive after-effects as a result of their actions. Therefore, genuine self-forgiveness may be especially relevant in terms of helping offenders address and perhaps heal from these self-created harms.

2.3.8 Summary of Conceptualising Forgiveness

In section 2, I situated the meaning of forgiveness within the context of religious, philosophical and justice literature. I explained how forgiveness has numerous positive psychological, affective, behavioural and somatic benefits for victims and offenders and
that it holds promise as a reintegrative strategy for offenders. I noted that some victims and offenders perceive the giving and receiving of forgiveness as risky and/or costly, as it may encourage repeated bad behaviour on the part of the offender and leave the wrongdoer feeling morally indebted to the forgiver. Lastly, I illustrated how self-forgiveness, when it entails the offender acknowledging the wrongfulness of their actions, accepting responsibility and committing to change, has particular salience for offenders, as it may prompt positive growth.

2.4 Chapter 2 Conclusion

From this literature review, we can gain a deeper appreciation of how crime and offending leaves a legacy of pain in the lives of the two individuals intimately connected to the offence, the victim and offender, and how forgiveness can play an ameliorative and even healing role in addressing the harm and pain they endured. We first learnt from the wealth of research conducted on victims that crime is a grievous experience that may lead to a wide range of negative outcomes, including psychological trauma, overturned assumptive beliefs, distressing emotions, threats to identity, maladaptive behaviours and somatic illness and disease. Though comparatively less is known about the offence-related effects for offenders, I highlighted literature indicating that offenders suffer consequences very similar to those experienced by victims. This leads to the conclusion that offenders hurt themselves as a result of hurting others. Thus, in the aftermath of a crime, victims and offenders both experience a host of painful and destructive effects that must be addressed for them to effectively handle the experience and move positively forward following the offence.

I next provided an overview of the literature, which sets forth the case that forgiveness, both given and received, may act as a healing agent by assisting victims and offenders in addressing and overcoming many of the injurious and debilitating effects of the crime. Religious, philosophical or justice frameworks all point to an understanding of forgiveness as a change of heart in the forgiver that propels them to give up their negative thoughts and feelings towards the wrongdoer and instead view them with benevolence, compassion and love. Though some research indicates that there are occasionally risks and costs attached to giving and receiving forgiveness, the literature lends strong support to the assertion that forgiveness holds abundant benefits for both victims and offenders. For example, giving forgiveness enhances a victim’s psychological wellbeing by mitigating painful thoughts and emotions, releases the burden of the stigmatised ‘victim’
identity, ‘balances the scales’ of justice by restoring the victim’s power and status (relative to the offender) that were diminished as a result of the offence, and positively affects physical wellbeing.

The scant amount of research conducted on the effects of being forgiven implies that those who receive forgiveness are also greatly benefited. Being forgiven is associated with a release of the burden of guilt and shame, increased empathy and respect for others, heightened willingness to comply with authorities and reduced reports of reoffending behaviours. In addition, forgiveness is a welcoming gesture of social acceptance that may address an offender’s need for reintegrative support and encouragement.

Finally, genuine self-forgiveness, which involves taking responsibility for the offence and committing to change (as opposed to pseudo-forgiveness and its attempts to neutralise or justify behaviour), is also associated with psychological wellbeing, including perceived quality of life and life satisfaction. Self-forgiveness allows the offender to separate their worth as a person from their ‘bad’ act, which in turn may lead to greater self-esteem and self-worth, victim empathy and personal growth.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature presents a clear and compelling argument that both victims and offenders suffer many serious and destructive offence-related effects and that forgiveness, given and/or received, may hold considerable ameliorative capacity to address and overcome these harms.

2.5 The Current Study

It is clear from the literature examined here that crime leaves a legacy of destructive pain and trauma in the lives of both victims and perpetrators, and that forgiveness may act as a healing agent in response to these painful after-effects. My study explores a significantly underdeveloped area of research regarding the lived experience of criminal offenders. Little is known about offenders’ perceptions regarding the personal effects of their criminal behaviours or their understanding of forgiveness and its perceived salience in their lives. Therefore, this thesis aims to make an important contribution to the literature by adding the voices of criminal offenders to the discourse on offence-related harms and the meaningfulness of forgiveness. In so doing, my thesis seeks to answer three questions:

1. What are the offence-related effects for both victims and offenders?
2. What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?
3. How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparts forgiveness?

In Chapter 3, I introduce the methodological framework and design of my study. I provide a detailed introduction of my participants and then justify the use of interpretive phenomenology, review the procedures used and outline and illustrate the analytic steps taken in interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is followed in chapters 4 to 7 with the findings of my interviews with both crime victims and offenders.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

3.1 Overview and Research Questions

This qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of victims and perpetrators of crime with respect to their perceptions of offence-related effects and their understandings of forgiveness. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework and design of the research project. First, I delineate the suitability of qualitative methods for addressing the research aims. I next introduce the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology and justify its use as an appropriate conceptual lens through which to examine the lifeworld of crime victims and perpetrators of crime. Following this is a review of the procedures used, which include participant recruitment and data collection. I then explain the analytic approach of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), outline the steps of analysis I conducted and explore issues regarding the study’s ethical validation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study’s strengths and limitations.

The study is guided by three research questions to explore victims’ and offenders’ subjective accounts of offence-related harm and perceptions of forgiveness.

3.1.1 Research Questions

1. What are the offence-related effects for victims and offenders?
2. What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?
3. How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparts that forgiveness?

3.2 A Qualitative Approach

There is compelling empirical evidence to suggest that both victims and offenders are adversely affected by criminal behaviour (Collins & Bailey, 1990; Davis & Friedman, 1985; Frieze et al., 1987; Riggs, Dancu, Gershuny, Greenberg & Foa, 1992; MacNair, 2002a). It is therefore imperative to identify the responses to criminality that may promote outcomes that help both victims and offenders recover from the effects of victimisation and offending; forgiveness may be such a response (Reed & Enright, 2006; Strang & Sherman, 2003). To better understand and interpret the experience, characteristics and
meaning associated with criminal behaviour and perceptions of forgiveness, including the salience of offering or receiving forgiveness, the focal point of empirical investigation for this research centres on the subjective views of crime victims and offenders.

Qualitative methods are well suited to inquiries regarding the interactions, feelings, attitudes, meanings and lived experiences of human beings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Qualitative research approach provides ‘an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, perspectives, and histories’ (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2003, p. 4). Qualitative methods offer opportunities for crafting rich, thick descriptions of social events and actions, and for ‘sorting out the complex layers of understanding that structure the social world’ (Dawson, 2010, p. 3). According to Bochner (2000), qualitative research procedures are apt for exploring the vast ecology of human experience, ranging from common, everyday life occurrences to the ‘flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life’s contingencies’ (p. 270). The qualitative methodological framework of hermeneutic phenomenology used in my study thus provides a rich environment for a detailed and intimate exploration of the lifeworld of both crime victims and perpetrators.

3.3 Methodological Study Foundations

3.3.1 Phenomenology: Descriptive v. Interpretive

Phenomenology is an inductive theoretical research stance rooted in the works of early 20th-century European philosophers, particularly Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Reiners, 2012). Phenomenology seeks to understand what a particular experience is like and to uncover meanings as they occur in everyday life (Laverty, 2003). Defined as ‘the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experiences’ (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 4) phenomenology is considered an appropriate methodology for gaining insight into the essence of the lived experience or lifeworld (van Manen, 1997). A key aspect of phenomenological research is its focus on this lifeworld and lived experience of those who are the subject of inquiry. Kraus (2015) explains that the lifeworld ‘refer[s] not only to the individual external circumstances of life but refers to the subjective perception of these experiences’ (p. 2). Each of us has a lifeworld with experiential qualities that are fundamentally different to one another. According to Husserl (1964), the lived experience is pre-reflective. It is an implicit awareness, a ‘felt understanding’ or ‘pathic’ sense whereby the world is perceived through ‘a feeling or
emotive modality of knowing and being’ (van Manen, 2007, p. 21). Husserl (1962) suggests that people can really only know what they experience. Therefore, phenomenology attempts to grasp not the objective ‘facts’ of an experience, but rather the experience as it is lived through an individual’s actions, relations and situations (van Manen, 2007).

In this study, it is through the experiential stories of crime victims’ and perpetrators’ lifeworlds that I seek to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of people’s perceptions of the offence-related effects they have experienced, and the meaning and salience they have attached to forgiveness. Two similar, yet distinctive, philosophical streams shape the scope of phenomenological inquiry: (1) descriptive phenomenology, and (2) interpretive phenomenology.

3.3.1.1 Descriptive Phenomenology

Husserl (1970) posits that experience, as it is perceived by human consciousness, is worthy of scientific inquiry, and that because human actions are driven by what they perceive to be real, science should seek to better grasp the essential elements of human lived experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). As conceived by Husserl, descriptive phenomenology asserts that the only objective understanding human beings can have about anything is obtained through a process of directed awareness or consciousness called ‘intentionality’ (Reiners, 2012, p.1). For example, the emotion of anger has intentionality—when someone is angry, they are angry about something (Ratcliff, 2014). Humans, as conscious beings, are affected not only by the world around them, but are conscious of it: the environment, people, objects, events, personal selves and all else that fills their awareness (McIntyre & Smith, 1989).

The primary aim of a descriptive phenomenological approach is reflected in its requirement to explore and analyse, and to provide a detailed concrete description of a phenomenon such that one obtains a picture of it ‘just as it is’ (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000, p. 212). Descriptive phenomenology depicts a lived experience without attaching meaning to it (Charlick, Pincombe, McKellar, & Fielder, 2016). As Sloan and Bowe (2014) explain, ‘once “the things themselves” have been identified, or otherwise analysed, descriptive phenomenology considers its work done’ (p. 9). To render an ‘unsullied’ (Laverty, 2003, p. 32) description of people’s everyday conscious experience, descriptive phenomenology holds that the researcher must carefully ‘bracket’ or set aside
their preconceived ideas, understandings, worldviews or biases regarding the topic of study (Laverty, 2003; Reiners, 2012).

3.3.1.2 Interpretive Phenomenology

Heidegger, a scholar of Husserlian philosophy, rejects the ‘epistemological stance’ of ‘what do we know as persons’ and instead adopts ontology, the science of ‘Being’ (Reiners, 2012). According to Heidegger, the subject matter of ontological investigation is ‘the nature of reality and “Being” in the world’ (Laverty, 2003, p. 27). Heidegger’s intention is to gain an accurate understanding of the structures of ‘Being’ as they manifest in the phenomenon being researched (Schrag, 1958). Interpretive phenomenology was developed by broadening the philosophy of interpretation called hermeneutics. According to Heidegger, humans’ understanding of the world is hermeneutic, as it is a result of the interpretations or meanings they ascribe to it (Reiners, 2012). Heidegger (1953/1996) uses the word ‘Dasein’ (i.e., the situated meaning of a human in the world) to suggest that the person and the world are co-constructed—that is, humans fashion the world in which they live and vice versa (Wu, 2008). However, while interpretive phenomenology seeks to discern and illuminate the human, lived conscious experience by focusing on personal meaning-making, it does not aim to provide undeniable evidence of an objective truth. Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson and Spence (2008) state:

> This approach to researching is complex; every experience has layer upon layer of meaning embedded within it. No one will ever get to the bottom or some kind of Archimedean point—the truth that is ‘all-that-there-is’ once and for all. The complexity and mystery of what it means to be human will always have the last word. (p. 1,391)

In contrast to the ‘bracketing’ or setting aside of one’s pre-understandings as required by the descriptive phenomenological approach, the researcher’s prior knowledge, beliefs, meaning systems and bias are considered an integral part of the interpretive phenomenological methodology (Reiners, 2012). Scholars suggest that pre-understanding is always there, and should not be separated from our thinking (Smythe et al., 2008); rather, the researcher should be open to the other, while acknowledging biases (Gadamer, 1975/1996).

In sum, both descriptive and interpretive phenomenologists aim to understand the nature or meaning of a particular phenomenon by exploring it through the accounts of those who have experienced it first-hand (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015); they differ in terms of how
the findings are generated and used to express knowledge. Descriptive phenomenology proscribes the bracketing of prior knowledge and calls for detailed description of lived experience without ascribing meaning (Charlick et al., 2016), whereas interpretive phenomenology views the participant and researcher as co-creators of interpretation (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) and seeks the embedded meanings in life experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

To more fully understand the experience of offence-related harm and forgiveness from the perspectives of crime victims and offenders, this study adopts an interpretive phenomenological perspective. Though its roots originate in the philosophical field, interpretive phenomenology has demonstrated utility in social science research. In this research project, the personal meaning-making aspect of phenomenology elucidated the victims’ and offenders’ understanding of the phenomena of criminality and their perceptions of forgiveness, while the interpretive element contextualised these depictions by asking: what does being a victim or perpetrator of crime, and what does forgiveness, mean for this individual in this context?

**3.4 Participants**

**3.4.1 Inclusion Criterion**

My study employed a purposive sampling strategy. A purposive sample refers to particular individuals or cases targeted for inclusion in a study because they have characteristics relevant to the research topic (i.e., a victim or perpetrator of crime who has an opinion of forgiveness) (Cresswell & Clark, 2011; Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2013). A purposive sampling approach is consistent with the phenomenological underpinnings of this study, as its focus is on exploring the lived experience of persons involved with the topic under investigation (Miner-Romanoff, 2012). The criteria for inclusion in the study were that the individual be an adult 17 years of age or older and have, at least once in their lifetime, been either a victim of a formally charged criminal offence and/or formally charged with a criminal offence. The decision to include only adults was twofold: first, an adult sample would have the advantage of longer life histories from which to draw on experiences as crime victims or perpetrators; and second, they

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9 Examples include Miner-Romanoff’s (2010) study of incarcerated adults serving sentences imposed in adult courts for crimes conducted as juveniles; Blagden, Winder, Thorne and Gregson’s (2011) study of the experiences and perspectives of sexual offenders who had denied their offences; and McCarrick, Davis-McCabe and Hirst-Winthrop’s (2016) research on men’s experiences of the criminal justice system following female-perpetrated intimate partner violence.
could give their own consent to take part in the study. To capture a large range of offence
types and experiences, no criteria regarding the nature of the offence was imposed. The
only criterion applied in relation to the criminal offence was that it had been formally
charged.

3.4.2 Study Recruitment

Selecting participants for my study was based on the experience of being either a victim
or an offender of a crime that was formally charged. I first sent a recruitment flyer (see
Appendix A) describing the study aims, what participation would involve and the
potential benefits and risks associated with participation to all Griffith University
community members via the university’s monthly e-newsletter, ‘Volunteer for Important
Research Projects’. I also sent, through personal emails and private messages on social
media, recruitment flyers to past incarcerated offenders and/or victims in Canada and the
United States (US) that were known to me. These recruitment flyers differed only slightly
from those used in Australia in that they included the option of conducting the interview
either via email, postal service correspondence or a private chat feature on social media.
In addition, the Canadian and US recruitment flyers, participant information sheets and
informed consent forms all contained contact information for local counselling support
services should a need for these arise following the interview.

When a participant expressed interest in taking part in my study, I emailed them the
participant information sheet, which was a slightly longer version of the recruitment flyer
(see Appendix B) I also scheduled the interview at this time. The majority of participants
were recruited as a result of the university e-newsletter. Eight participants came to the
study as a result of subsequent snowball sampling (i.e., referred by other participants).
Six of these were the drop-in clients of an inner-city community centre servicing transient
populations, including past criminal offenders. The centre director, known by a previous
participant, invited me to spend two days at the centre recruiting and interviewing. All
participants received a $30 voucher for two movie tickets as remuneration for their time
and effort.

3.4.3 The Sample

Participants were 12 victims and 19 perpetrators of formally charged criminal offences
ranging in age from 19 to 70. The sample consisted of 27 Australians, three Canadians
and one American. (see Table 3.1). To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms
were used. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym; if they declined, I chose a name for them.

### Table 3.1: Study sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victims</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Offence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sexual assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Child abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Home invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaye</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philcott</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Home invasion/assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Armed robbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Sexual assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Dangerous driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunley</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Child abuse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offenders</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Offence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allegra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Petty theft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Child pornography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boone</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Drug offences, drink driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Drug trafficking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Drink driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>B&amp;E/theft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Prostitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Traffic offences resulting in a death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Sexual assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Manslaughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Drug offences, theft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Homicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inga</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Offence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Armed robbery, assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lars</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Drug offences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Drug offences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Disseminating hate propaganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Homicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Armed robbery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The Human Research Ethics Committee at Griffith University (GU Ref No: CCJ/31/14/HREC; Variation 2014/693) granted the study full ethical approval.

#### 3.5.1 Informed Consent

I used informed consent to ensure that participants understood the purpose, procedures and potential risks and benefits to taking part in the study. The informed consent form (see Appendix C) stated that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that participants had the right to stop the interview at any point. I also detailed their right to ask that the audio recorder be turned off or to not answer a question if they chose. Lastly, I explained their right to withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any point without penalty. Each participant, including those in the US and Canada, read and signed the informed consent form prior to the interview commencing. With the exception of the six participants who were interviewed at the community centre, all participants received a copy of their signed consent form.

Participants who were recruited through the university e-newsletter and those known to me had email addresses and were thus sent, via email, informed consent forms prior to the interview so that they had plenty of time to review their role in the study and make a decision as to whether they wanted to participate. The majority of participants signed, copied and emailed the form back to me prior to the interview. For the few who signed the consent forms immediately before the interview commenced, I copied the form after the interview and emailed it to them.

The community centre, where I recruited and interviewed six participants over two consecutive days, services a transient population, including criminal offenders. Therefore, many come and go and are not easily contactable; this made disseminating the informed consent forms challenging. More importantly, I had to encourage a number of...
them to read and sign the form. Most tried to wave the paper away, saying that they understood the study from my verbal description and that it was not necessary for them to read or sign the form [I addressed the group as they sat eating breakfast]. Ultimately, all of them read [or I read over it with them] and signed the informed consent form. I kept copies of all signed forms in a locked file cabinet at the university.

3.5.2 Confidentiality

I informed participants about the steps taken to safeguard confidentiality. These were that members of the research team (me and my thesis supervisors) were the only ones with access to participant information, study information, notes and interview data. I also eliminated all identifying information, including names and places, in reports and presentations. Further, either the participant or I chose the pseudonyms used. I instructed participants against making any spontaneous disclosures during the interview regarding personal or third-party illegal behaviour, as it could potentially be used as evidence in legal prosecutions.

3.5.3 Risks and Benefits

3.5.3.1 Risks

Explorations into highly emotive subjects such as personal experiences with criminal misconduct and harm can potentially harm both the study participants and the researcher. To mitigate this potential, I put certain procedures into place, which are detailed below.

The threat of physical harm to the study participants was minimal. However, conducting one-on-one interviews with offenders carries a potential risk for the researcher (Sluka, 1990). To address this risk, I first conducted interviews in locations that afforded the ability to speak privately, and yet allowed me to easily raise an alarm if needed. Most of the interviews were conducted in locations where I was in line of sight of others. I also provided my thesis supervisors with my itinerary and appointment times, including the contact information of people being interviewed, and messaged them at the conclusion of each interview.

The potential for psychological harm or distress is a risk that applies to both research participants and researchers of studies on sensitive topics (Goodrum & Keys, 2007). To minimise the risks of psychological harm to participants, I provided all potential participants with detailed information on the study and examples of interview questions
prior to the interview. This gave them the opportunity to make a well-informed decision regarding their participation. Prior research has found that ‘emotionally fragile persons and those who feel they can’t talk about a problem usually don’t volunteer to be interviewed’ (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 338). Participants had considerable control during the interviews, which reduced the risk of psychological harm. For example, even though I guided the direction and flow of the interview, it was ultimately the participant who decided what questions they wanted to answer, the answers they chose to give or whether they wanted to answer certain questions at all. I also followed the direction of trauma researcher Marvin Westwood (personal communication, 2012), who stresses the importance of taking short breaks during an interview or changing the subject as a way to ameliorate the retriggering or the reactivation of the trauma being discussed. Lastly, I provided participants with the name(s) of free counselling support in the event that they experienced distress following the interview.

The literature suggests that researchers conducting studies on sensitive topics also have the potential to be psychologically affected by the experiences and narratives that their research participants share with them (Cowles, 1988; Dunn, 1991). Cowles (1988) states that ‘Interviews during which the subject experiences strong emotional responses can be physically, emotionally, and psychologically, exhausting for both the subject and the interviewer’ (p. 165). I found this statement to be true—I often left interviews feeling psychologically exhausted and emotionally overwhelmed, particularly when the participant was highly emotional or when the crimes discussed were brutal. Though I knew from my prior research on family survivors of homicide that there was a need for self-care to ameliorate these sorts of distressing thoughts and feelings, they still occurred to some degree. Overall, I tried to follow the suggestions given by others who research sensitive topics (e.g., Cowles 1988) regarding the importance of conducting only a few interviews each week. However, this was not always feasible because of the need to work with individuals’ schedules. I found that part of my psychological processing of the emotionally charged interviews began when I wrote my interview reflections, which was, in most cases, immediately following the interview. In these reflections, I articulated my thoughts and feelings regarding how I thought the interview went and my perceptions of the participant and their experiences. Most importantly, I held debrief sessions, as needed, with my thesis supervisors and another researcher who specialises in traumatised populations.
Victims and perpetrators of criminal misconduct may be especially vulnerable to experiencing social harms or damage to relationships in the event that their involvement in a study were to be revealed. Therefore, to safeguard their privacy, as much as possible, I allowed participants to choose the interview conditions (e.g., location, time and Skype with or without their camera turned on). This protection of participants did not stop when consent forms were signed or the study commenced, but rather was an ongoing process. Throughout data collection, analysis and the process of writing up my findings, my supervisors and I scrutinised the data for problematic areas (e.g., features that could potentially identify participants).

3.5.3.2 Benefits

A number of studies highlight the many benefits received by those who volunteer to participate in in-depth interviews (Hutchison, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994; Murray, 2003). Research suggests that personal interviews provide an avenue for meaning-making and, when handled correctly, may even be therapeutic (Nelson, Onwuegbuzie, Wines, & Frels, 2013), cathartic, healing, empowering, create a sense of purpose or give a voice to the disenfranchised (Hutchison et al., 1994). Personal interviews may offer participants the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings with an interested neutral party, and have been associated with gained self-awareness through the process of answering personal questions (Rossetto, 2014).

My study may also benefit the wider participant community, the ‘community of care’, which includes the family, friends and other supporters of the victim and offenders. As these individuals gain greater insight into the effects of the harm experienced or perpetrated by their loved ones, it may be that they become better equipped to assist them in their healing and personal growth. Through paying judicious attention to the psychological and emotional needs of both the participants and myself, I sought to increase the likelihood of beneficial results for all concerned.

3.6 The Researcher’s Role in Phenomenological Research

The importance of addressing researcher subjectivity in phenomenological research is well documented in the literature (Finlay, 2008; Ladkin, 2005). What is not as clear is the extent to which this should be done. There is agreement that the researcher should adopt a ‘phenomenological attitude’ wherein they endeavour to be open to the ‘other’ and to see the world with fresh eyes (Finlay, 2009). The primary disagreement in the literature
involves how this should be accomplished. As mentioned previously, descriptive phenomenologists hold that researchers must ‘bracket’ or set aside all presuppositions, in particular: 1) scientific theories, knowledge and explanations; 2) the truth or lies of participant statements; and 3) their own personal views and experiences (Ashworth, 1996). Interpretive phenomenologists argue that it is unrealistic to presume the researcher could bracket their experiences or understanding of events. Rather than setting them aside, these experience and understandings should be, as Finlay (2009) argues, ‘placed in the foreground so as to begin the process of separating out what belongs to the researcher rather than the researched’ (p. 12).

To be ‘situated’ means to understand who we are (Chesla, 1995). Rose (1997) states that situatedness ‘is not given it must be developed’, and that one way this can be achieved is through the ‘situating technology’ of reflexivity (p. 308). Therefore, to situate or make my position known in this study, I acknowledge that I bring to it current study life experiences, values and beliefs shaped by various factors. These include the following: I am a middle-aged Caucasian female born and raised in a suburban town in the mid-west US and currently residing in Australia. I married at the age of 19 and have two children and six grandchildren. I have a strong Christian faith, which underpinned my decision to be a ‘stay-at-home’ mother and to home-school my children. I have a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice/Corrections and a Master of Arts in Criminology, and am working on a PhD in Criminology and Criminal Justice. During this time, I have taught an introductory criminal justice course and tutored various others, including restorative justice, rehabilitating offenders and qualitative research methods. In addition, I have previous experience working with both victims and perpetrators of crime. I interned as a victim’s advocate in the homicide department of a prosecuting attorney’s office and volunteered in a minimum security prison, where I attended and facilitated restorative justice programs.

The primary ontological and epistemological assumptions I hold are as follows:

- Reality is socially constructed by each person from within their own particular contextual interpretation. I therefore value the participant’s own interpretation of reality.

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10 See Joniak (2005) for an outline of the basic theoretical views of qualitative researchers.
Knowledge is not gained through objective truths, but is created through understanding of a phenomenon through a particular context. Further, understanding is not immutable, but is fluid in nature.\(^\text{11}\)

Therefore, I believe that discerning the ‘truth’ of a participant’s story is not important for the purposes of what I hope to learn in this study. The stories that participants tell, whether honest or not, still reveal their perceived ‘lifeworld’. I agree with Dean and Whyte (1958), who suggest that rather than trying to figure out whether the participant is telling the truth or lying, researchers should ask, ‘what does the informant’s statements reveal about his feelings and perceptions and what inferences can be made from them about the actual environment or events he has experienced?’ (p. 38).

My interest in the current study arose from my master’s research on family survivors of homicide who forgave the offender (Jenkins, 2012). Upon completion of that study, I realised that if we were to gain a richer understanding of the lived experience of criminal wrongdoing and how forgiveness is understood and experienced by those most keenly affected by crime, then the offender’s voice must be added to the dialogue. Hence, all these experiences, values, and beliefs influence how I interpret what victims and offenders tell me about the crimes they have experienced as either victim or perpetrator.

3.7 Data Collection

3.7.1 The Interview Process

In choosing locations in which to conduct the interviews, I was mindful that it should be in a place that was safe, yet allowed for my conversation with participants to not be easily overheard by others. When scheduling the interviews, I asked for the participant’s input as to when and where it would be convenient for them. Interview locations included a meeting room at the university, a community centre, the fellowship hall of a local church, a recreation hall at a participant’s townhouse, a conference room at a participant’s place of employment and a local café. Participants were given the option of undertaking in-person, face-to-face interviews or interviews via Skype (with or without the use of the camera) or telephone. Nineteen of the 31 interviews were held in person; three were held over the telephone; nine were held via Skype. Telephone interviews were conducted in my home office so that I could put the interviewees on speaker phone (to facilitate audio-
recording) and still maintain their privacy. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and, as suggested by previous research (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012), began with a few minutes of ‘small talk’ to place the participants at ease. In five of the nine Skype interviews I undertook with offenders, they kept their camera off, whereas I always kept mine on.

It is pertinent at this point to mention the challenges I experienced regarding not being able to see some participants during the interviews. The following quotations are a few excerpts from my journal, where I wrote about this difficulty:

Mick kept his Skype camera off so I wasn’t able to see his face or mannerisms while we talked. In these instances I feel as though I am at a disadvantage as I rely on facial expressions and body language more than words to help me know if I should probe a topic further or back off altogether. I don’t like not being able to discern whether someone stops talking because they are uncomfortable with the line of questioning (has it triggered them?) or whether they have simply quit talking because that really was all there was to say on that matter. I also tend to interrupt more because I cannot see when they are getting ready to continue talking and so I move on. When that happens I just apologise and ask them to please continue with their thoughts.

As with previous Skype or phone interviews where I cannot see the individual I am talking with I feel as though I am conducting the interview with ‘one hand tied behind my back’. I had never realised up until now, how much I rely on being able to look at the person I’m speaking with in order to glean information/understanding regarding them and the story they are sharing. All I have in these instances is a disembodied voice and their words. I cannot get a ‘read’ on them. I don’t know that this feeling even makes sense as I am not collecting data or conducting analysis on the participant’s non-verbal behaviour … Nothing in particular stands out about this interview. I have a faceless man who was assaulted.

Though I would have preferred to speak with each of the participants face-to-face, I am well aware that some would have declined to participate in the study had they not been allowed to speak ‘off camera’.

Data collection comprised semi-structured interviews with crime victims and offenders. I developed an interview schedule pursuant to the study aims (see Appendix D), but remained flexible in its use to allow for the natural flow of conversation (Faubert, 2012). Eatough and Smith (2006) recommend that participants be allowed to tell their story rather than ‘to simply be a respondent’ (p. 119). Therefore, I started each interview with
an undirected and open stance by stating, ‘I will let you tell me your story of what happened and then I will have some questions’. In this way, participants were able to ground themselves in their experience in whatever way they chose. I found that when participants told their story, they often answered a number of the questions that I had planned on asking. In cases where participants experienced multiple offences as victims or offenders and asked me which one they should talk about, I encouraged them to share the one(s) most salient to them in terms of the effect it had on their lives and their thoughts on forgiveness.

Each of the audio-recordings of the 31 interviews was transcribed verbatim. With the exception of three transcripts that were sent to a professional transcription service, I conducted the transcription.

3.8 Data Analysis

3.8.1 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is the overarching analytic framework used in this study. It is a means of performing qualitative analysis that focuses on how people make sense of their experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012), and is thus a suitable methodology for analysis in research that aims to better understand a particular phenomenon through precise and rich descriptions of others’ experiences and insights (Finlay 2009; van Manen 1990).

IPA not only allows for a descriptive ‘insider’s account’ of a participant’s experience, but also offers an interpretive account ‘of what it means for the participant to have such concerns within their particular context’ (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 113). Smith (2004) calls this process a ‘double hermeneutic’(p. 40), as the researcher’s goal is to interpret the participants’ attempts to make sense of their experience. While there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model for conducting IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) state that, for the researcher, it must contain the following features:

- conducting analysis that progresses from the unique for one participant to that which is common among all participants
- moving from descriptive accounts of the experience to an interpretation of the experience
- being attuned to the participants’ point of view
• having a psychological focus on personal meaning-making (i.e., how a person talks about or understands a particular experience).

In accordance with the analytic approach described by Smith et al. (2009) and Larkin and Thompson (2012), data analysis was an iterative process involving multiple readings of the interview transcripts and three divisions of coding, which facilitated identifying emergent and master themes within each case and superordinate themes across cases. To undertake coding, I used NVivo.

3.8.2 First Analytic Process Using NVivo

In this study, I engaged in two very distinct and yet ultimately beneficial analytic processes. First, after I finished transcribing the audio-recordings of the interviews, I read them through while listening again to the audio-recording to check for accuracy. I next uploaded the typed interview transcripts into text analysis software called NVivo. The objective of the first stage of analysis is to create descriptive remarks and initial exploratory commentary (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, after reading through the transcripts, I began coding by conducting a line-by-line reading of the text in each interview transcript to search for significant phrases, descriptions, explanations and emotional responses expressed by participants. I then highlighted relevant portions of the interview text and ‘dragged and dropped’ them into ‘nodes’ that held the coded portions of the transcripts. Second, I created a table of initial descriptive annotations for each participant regarding the content and meaning of verbal and non-verbal communication, particularly repetition and expressed emotions, along with preliminary conceptual comments and interpretation.

As the analytic process proceeded, my supervisors recognised that though I had stayed ‘close to the data’ (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 107) as I sought to provide a detailed and accurate reflection of the participants’ perceptions, I did not allow the themes or ‘patterns of meaning’ to emerge naturally. That is, in my coding and analysis, I focused solely on identifying the answers to my research questions rather than letting the themes within the data emerge from the ‘bottom up’. In consultation with my supervisory team, it was decided that I needed to go back to the data with a new focus—one that was not influenced by the research questions, but that allowed for a more organic development of the themes. I was advised to keep my research questions in the background, and not be guided wholly by answering them using the data. While the original coding that I conducted in NVivo still proved useful in the latter stages of analysis (e.g., making
comparisons between cases and seeking disconfirming cases), I decided to do the recoding and re-analysis without NVivo.

3.8.3 Second Analytic Process

My data re-analysis was informed by the recommendations of several scholars, including Larkin and Thompson (2012), Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2008). None of them have described their way of conducting analysis a ‘prescriptive methodology’ (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 67) or ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Rather, they advise that interpretive analysis is a personal process, and that their approaches are adaptable to one’s individual study.

3.8.3.1 ‘Open’ Coding

To reach the heart of the participants’ experiences as victims and perpetrators of crime and their perceptions of forgiveness, I began my second and final round of coding through a process of ‘open’ coding (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). I re-read each transcript through again as I began this process. As Smith and Osborn (2008) state, this is a time to become as familiar as possible with a participant’s account and to comment on anything that is interesting or significant about what was said. To begin, I placed each interview transcript in a Word table, with the transcript in the centre column. In the left-hand column, I identified general descriptive elements about initial concepts that caught my attention (e.g., Gabriel held values regarding those who were and were not appropriate victims); in the right-hand column, I included a running narrative regarding my perceptions (e.g., Gabriel believed the rapist was a deserving victim and someone who needed to be stopped). Table 3.2 is an example of open coding taken from an excerpt of Gabriel’s transcript. Gabriel was one of the offenders.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive elements</th>
<th>Gabriel transcript—manslaughter</th>
<th>Comments/reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel believed in a set of values that said women and children should not be harmed.</td>
<td>T: And the girl [rape victim] who was she to you did you say?</td>
<td>It did not matter to Gabriel whether he knew the rape victim or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘victim’ had been warned about his behaviour previously.</td>
<td>G: No … I didn’t.</td>
<td>According to Gabriel’s ethical stance the man he killed was a deserving victim. He was a repeat offender with a history of violations of the convict code. The man raped a woman in front of him and terrified two other women known to Gabriel. Gabriel asserted, ‘he’s just an intimidating bastard. So sooner or later he had to be stopped. But nobody had the balls to stop it’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rapist ‘victim’ was intimidating other women too and needed to be stopped.</td>
<td>T: OK I didn’t know if it was a family member.</td>
<td>In Gabriel’s estimation the man had run afoul of [the convict code?] and needed to be stopped. However, it would take a hero, someone ‘with balls’, to step in and put a stop to the man’s crimes, thereby protecting the community at large. Gabriel had not sought to be a hero, but when faced with the man’s offences he would not shirk his duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It appears that some crimes may be worse than others, as harm committed against a family member would have been met with even more brutal retribution.</td>
<td>G: No I would have killed him. I would have cut his head off … I would have been slowly … with a blunt knife. Nah nah this Sheila like I had no idea. Like I knew her but not linked to her or any shit like that so but this had been going on. This was not the first and it wasn’t the second and he was intimidating [a woman] and he was intimidating [name of another woman] this [same woman] and that. So he’s just an intimidating bastard. So sooner or later he had to be stopped. But nobody had the balls to stop it.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: How did you know this guy?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>G: I’d done [name of prison] with him.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: OK so he’d been incarcerated at the same time.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G: Yep but I didn’t know him at that stage cause the rape.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: That’s what he was incarcerated for to begin with?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G: Rape and armed robbery.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.8.3.2 Descriptive ‘Phenomenological’ Coding

In the second analysis step, I returned to the beginning of the transcript and performed a more detailed line-by-line analysis of each interview transcript, as described by Larkin and Thompson (2012) and Smith and Osborn (2008). During this process, I highlighted and provided descriptive comments on sections of text that stood out as having significance for the participant. It was at this point that my initial narrative was, as Smith and Osborn (2008) describe, ‘transformed into more concise phrases which attempt to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text’ (p. 68). Therefore, I continued my narrative comments and began to generate possible interpretations. Table 3.3 is an example of descriptive coding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity/impression management</th>
<th>Gabriel transcript—manslaughter</th>
<th>Generating potential interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *I had to kill this man in order to protect my honour, respect and integrity.*  
*Life is not worth living if I have been dishonoured etc.*  
Victim had already been warned about his behaviour: no more second chances.  
Building a case against the victim. ‘I knew about other stuff going down too’  
Witnesses to the rape are also watching Gabriel. Will he be true to his values?  
Use of the word ‘watch’ …  
To keep watch means to observe with continuous attention, especially to act as a sentinel or for protection.  
Views himself as a protector—perhaps even a hero, as he acted to defend a woman [representative of his values or moral code].  
Had the rape occurred elsewhere, he would not be responsible to act.  
The murder was in essence a ‘self’ [identity] protective act. | G: If I had of allowed what I’d see to take place and let it keep going and she had a got raped again then I’ve broken my honour. I’ve broken my respect. I’ve broken my integrity … right and therefore I might as well put a bullet in me own mouth. And that still doesn’t compensate for him. There is other ways to … He already knew that. He already had that second chance.  
T: You said this is someone you had dealt with before.  
G: I’d seen him two nights earlier his shit and I was not and I will say I knew about other stuff too going down and I was not going to allow this to happen again. Not on my watch. If he had a done it somewhere else right. Wouldn’t have been my problem. And it wouldn’t have affected my honour or my integrity. It would have been somebody else’s that was getting compromised not mine But because he done on my place it was mine my integrity my respect had been breached and no no not happenin’ and he was warned not to do it. | Convict code/identity/motive  
Gabriel perceived his crime as a matter of life and death. It was kill or be killed. The victim’s rape and attempted rape of a woman attacked the very foundational principles on which Gabriel staked not only his reputation but the worth of his very life. Gabriel’s entire life would have been defiled had he allowed the man’s actions to go unpunished. He stated, ‘if I had of allowed what I’d see to take place and let it keep going and she had a got raped again then I’ve broken my honour. I’ve broken my respect. I’ve broken my integrity … right and therefore I might as well put a bullet in me own mouth.’  
Motive/need to save face  
The rape of a woman with a loss of integrity, honour and respect.  
In Gabriel’s mind he truly was between a rock and hard place and had no choice but to act as he did. He said he knew of other offences the man had committed and with his own eye (on his watch) in his own home, the victim had not simply degraded a woman; he, had he not been stopped, would have defiled Gabriel as well. |
3.8.3.3 Identifying Emerging Themes

The next step of the analysis was conceptual, as the complexity of the participants’ meanings (which were identified and described in the second stage of coding) was further honed as I sought to understand the connection between the themes that were emerging. As I searched for relationships, commonalities, differences and patterns, I found that some themes could be merged, as they were conceptually similar. At other times throughout the iterative process, themes were dropped when I returned to a participant’s words, as I realised they were not as conceptually strong as I had initially thought. At this point, I compiled a directory of participants’ words or phrases that supported related themes and gave this directory to my supervisory team for feedback. This process eventually resulted in a list of ‘master themes’ for each participant. In addition to displaying the master themes in a table, I used the ongoing narrative I wrote through each iteration of the analysis to create an analytical synopsis for each participant. Table 3.4 is an example of the master themes and their relation to the three research questions, and includes a brief excerpt of the case synopsis for Gabriel.
Table 3.4: Example of master themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master themes:</th>
<th>Case synopsis: Gabriel—manslaughter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity/hero/protector</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame talk</td>
<td>Gabriel perceived his crime as a matter of life and death. The victim’s rape of the woman attacked his code of ethics and foundational principles on which Gabriel said he staked not only his reputation but his very life. Gabriel justified his crime through the adoption of a narrative that placed him in the role of a hero. He said numerous people knew that the victim was an intimidating bully but no one (except him) ‘had the balls’ to confront him. Gabriel said he did the community a service by killing him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental threat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and meaningfulness of forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness than matters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: ‘What are the offence-related effects for victims and offenders?’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity/role—hero/protector</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabriel looked at the rapist he killed as a deserving victim. The man violated the convict code of ethics, which said women and children should not be harmed. The man’s behaviour was also disrespectful to Gabriel as it occurred at his home and in front of him. Gabriel acted to not simply protect the woman but to protect his honour, integrity and values.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame talk</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabriel admitted guilt for committing the crime but did not accept moral responsibility. He placed that squarely on the ‘victim’ for it was, in Gabriel’s mind, the victim’s actions that precipitated the fight and murder.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental threats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel’s violent offending was a threat to his psychological wellbeing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2: ‘What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?’</td>
<td>Gabriel did not define forgiveness but said he believed that forgiveness was only justified in circumstances where the offence was not warranted. In cases where he perceived the victim deserved what they got, Gabriel believed forgiveness was not warranted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and meaningfulness of forgiveness</td>
<td>RQ 3: ‘How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparted forgiveness?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel did not define forgiveness but said he believed that forgiveness was only justified in circumstances where the offence was not warranted. In cases where he perceived the victim deserved what they got, Gabriel believed forgiveness was not warranted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 3: ‘How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparted forgiveness?’</td>
<td>Forgiveness only has meaning when it comes from the right people. If the victims were undeserving, than their forgiveness is acceptable. However, in cases where Gabriel perceived his crime as a matter of life and death. The victim’s rape of the woman attacked his code of ethics and foundational principles on which Gabriel said he staked not only his reputation but his very life. Gabriel justified his crime through the adoption of a narrative that placed him in the role of a hero. He said numerous people knew that the victim was an intimidating bully but no one (except him) ‘had the balls’ to confront him. Gabriel said he did the community a service by killing him. When asked to talk about his thoughts at the time he stabbed the man Gabriel exclaimed, ‘Integrity! Honour! Disrespect! He broke every cardinal rule that I believed in!’ Not only did the man [victim] subvert Gabriel’s system of values, he did it on Gabriel’s property, which magnified the flagrancy of his actions. When asked to define forgiveness, Gabriel gave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He stated that even though he was out of prison he would never be truly free as the murder would forever be in his mind. The victims were to blame or in some way are deserving of what happened, than their forgiveness is not wanted or accepted. An example of when forgiveness was justified or appropriate. Gabriel found forgiveness to be justified when the wrongdoing was "uncalled for". He shared, ‘like um if I’s to call you a nasty name … and I had no right to call you that alright then or I did somethin’ to you that I had no right to do then that is where I’d be needin’ you to forgive me’. In this description, Gabriel articulated a key qualifier in the justifiability of forgiveness; forgiveness is warranted or justified only when the offence occurred for reasons that were not legitimate.

3.8.3.4 Cross-case Analysis

The process of cross-case analysis was conducted over a succession of nine cross-case analysis directories. These were created as transcripts and then coded and analysed, whereby themes began to emerge within and across cases. Though I have presented an example of master themes first (see Table 3.4), in reality, the cross-case analysis and transcript coding and analysis were iterative processes that occurred simultaneously. For example, as more transcripts were coded and their emergent themes added to the cross-case analysis directory, connections were made between cases. At this point, concepts and names for themes were identified. As directed by Larkin and Thompson (2012), I maintained open and flexible labels for the emerging themes through each analysis cycle. Therefore, there was extensive iterative movement until the master and superordinate themes were determined.

Table 3.5 (below) is the first of these analytic directories that was constructed after nine of 19 offender transcripts had been coded and analysed. The numbers correspond to a
particular offender. While each of the directories was simply a Word document with bulleted categories, I have placed the example in table form for clarity of presentation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence-related effects</th>
<th>Self-agency (accepting or deflective position)</th>
<th>Constructing motive</th>
<th>Rejects deviant identity and/or upholds a decent/moral self</th>
<th>The thrill of crime</th>
<th>Paying for crime</th>
<th>Understanding their decision-making</th>
<th>Accounts of desistance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[9 of 19] Transcript analysed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 9</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>n = 7</td>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accept responsibility</td>
<td>3, 4, 6, 9, 16, 19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive or deflective</td>
<td>3, 6, 7, 9, 19</td>
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<td>Need drugs</td>
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<td>4, 14, 16 19</td>
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<td>Self-destructive</td>
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<td>No one was hurt</td>
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<td>Never hurt women or children</td>
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<td>A decent person</td>
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<td>Never forced people</td>
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<td>Exciting</td>
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<td>Getting away with it</td>
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<td>Freeing</td>
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<td>Stigma</td>
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<td>Mental health</td>
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<td>Self-centred</td>
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<td>Cry for help</td>
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<td>Did not consider consequences</td>
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<td>Others at fault</td>
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<td>Wanted perceived benefits</td>
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<td>Personal stress</td>
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<td>Older and wiser</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of forgiveness</td>
<td>Understandings n = 9</td>
<td>Pathways n = 8</td>
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<td>Desired n = 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restoration of relationships 6, 9</td>
<td>Love 6, 19</td>
<td>Move on 3, 9, 16</td>
<td>Family 3, 6, 15, 19</td>
<td>Stop beating self up 7, 9, 19</td>
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<td>Unconditional 4, 19</td>
<td>Apology 16</td>
<td>Lighten load 7, 19</td>
<td>Victim 4, 9, 14</td>
<td>Ongoing process 9, 14, 19</td>
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<td>God’s grace 7, 15, 19</td>
<td>Life changes 4, 9, 14, 15</td>
<td>Belonging 15</td>
<td>Need to in order to forgive others 15</td>
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<td>Letting go 3, 9, 14</td>
<td>God 7, 15, 19</td>
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<td>Never 3, 6, 16</td>
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<td>Apology and amends 16</td>
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3.8.3.5 Superordinate Themes

Lastly, after nine iterative analysis cycles were conducted, a list of superordinate themes was developed. Table 3.6 (below) is an example of the superordinate themes illustrating the offence-related effects for offenders.

**Table 3.6: Superordinate themes for offender offence-related effects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ 1: ‘What are the offence-related effects for offenders?’</th>
<th>Challenged lives</th>
<th>Impression management</th>
<th>Blame talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rumination 37% [n = 7]</td>
<td>Claire: A remorseful person who made amends</td>
<td>Bully: Believed harm done to victims was totally his fault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Real: ‘I can never forget what I’ve done’</td>
<td>Gabriel, Real, Bob: Would never victimise a woman</td>
<td>Daniel: ‘I was the only person responsible for my action’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daisy: Cutting, attempted suicide</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disconfirming case: Gabriel said he does not have a guilty conscience over the murder</td>
<td>2. Emotional challenges 53% [n = 10] felt guilty or ashamed</td>
<td>2. Tales of victimisation 53% [n = 10]</td>
<td>2. ‘Middle of the road’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bully: ‘How many lives did I destroy?’</td>
<td>Austin felt victimised because sexuality not accepted</td>
<td>Admit crime but have excuse, rationalisation, etc. 74% [n = 14]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crazy: ‘Everything I done I felt guilty for’</td>
<td>Patrick: Victim of bullying; becoming a skinhead turned the tables</td>
<td>Bob: The crime, ‘it sort of happened’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anger: [was about personal feelings of victimisation or]</td>
<td></td>
<td>Darrin: Blamed crime on bi-polar issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Crazy: Blamed drugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
injustice] 37% [n = 7]
Allegra: Anger over justice system treatment
Inga: Anger experienced at time of the assault
Emotional disconnection
(Emotional detachment from the worth of others and/or self) 68% [n = 13]
Hugo: Lacked an emotional connection to the victims
Real: Did not care about self or the victims/numb

Disconfirming cases:
Said offences had a positive effect on their lives 26% [n = 5]
John: In awe over all the experiences he had in prison and as an drug addict living on the street

3. Future challenges
Career challenges due to criminal history 16% [n = 3]
Bob: Worried about future in criminal justice field [his degree]
Social and relational challenges 47% [n = 9]
Bill: Lost opportunity for future family

3. Tales of heroism
74% [n = 14]
Learned important life lessons/overcome odds
Bully: ‘Woke up’ and kicked addiction
Daniel: ‘Knuckled down’ to be a good person
Crazy: Believed thefts helped the store

3. Took no blame
11% [n = 2]
Allegra: Blamed bitter store clerk
Daisy: Blamed husband’s cheating for leading to prostitution
While I used offender participants for these examples, it is worth noting that the same analytic steps were also taken for each of the victim participant transcripts. Table 3.7 presents the list of superordinate themes for both offenders and victims.

### Table 3.7: Superordinate themes for offenders and victims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Offender: Offence-related effects</th>
<th>Victim: Offence-related effects</th>
<th>Offender understandings of forgiveness</th>
<th>Victim understandings of forgiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenged lives</strong></td>
<td><strong>Traumatic effects</strong></td>
<td><strong>Giving forgiveness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Victim-focused benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Mental challenges</td>
<td>1. Initial effects</td>
<td>1. ‘Letting go’</td>
<td>1. ‘Letting go’</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emotional challenges</td>
<td>2. Mental health effects</td>
<td>2. Empathetic understanding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Somatic effects</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Impression management</strong></td>
<td><strong>Threats to identity and self</strong></td>
<td><strong>Receiving forgiveness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Offender-focused benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Tales of decency</td>
<td>1. Devaluation of self</td>
<td>1. Unconditional</td>
<td>1. Empathising with the offender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tales of victimisation</td>
<td>2. Conflicting identities</td>
<td>2. Conditional</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Tales of heroism</td>
<td>3. Stigmatised identities</td>
<td>Antithetical perceptions of forgiveness</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In summary, the coding process underwent several iterations to attain the final superordinate themes identified from the victim and offender interviews.

3.8.4 Quality Issues

Validating qualitative research is achieved by making a judgement about how well a study was executed and whether the findings are trustworthy and beneficial (Yardley, 2008). To produce a sound and rigorous study, the researcher undertakes a variety of measures or steps throughout the research process to help others determine regarding whether the study is valid, or if what is being reported accurately represents the events and experiences under review (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Currently, there is much debate in the field as to what constitutes validity in qualitative studies. Some suggest that the criteria of judging good quantitative studies should be adhered to in qualitative research (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998). However, others argue that all evaluative criteria should be eliminated, as qualitative research should be assessed according to the conclusions reached in individual studies (Armour, Rivaux, & Bell, 2009; Rolfe, 2006). Angen (2000) claims that interpretivist methodological approaches such as hermeneutic phenomenology require a reformulation of
validity that is ‘more appropriate to the epistemological assumptions and goals of the lifeworld ontology in which interpretive research is rooted’ (p. 387). According to this view, conducting efficacious research on the lived human experience is more of an ethical stance than an epistemological issue (Smith, 1990). As a consequence, validity becomes a moral question to be addressed throughout the study (Angen, 2000).

3.8.4.1 Ethical Validation

To this end, I followed the two broad principles that Angen (2000) asserts interpretivist researchers should apply in their studies: ethical and substantive validation. Ethical validation demands that interpretive studies should have practical lifeworld value, including generative promise. Generative promise refers to the way in which the study outcomes stimulate new discussion that encourages further research to ‘continue the conversation’ (p. 389). My study holds generative promise, as it focuses on a significantly underdeveloped area of research regarding the lived experience of criminal offenders. As little is known about offenders’ perceptions regarding the effects of their criminal behaviours, particularly their understanding of forgiveness and its perceived salience, my study not only makes a significant contribution to the literature, but also encourages further engagement with the topic by opening the door to future work in this area. For example, future research could examine the lived experience of being the family member of an offender and their perceptions of forgiveness, or perhaps how involvement in crime, whether as a victim or a perpetrator, challenges identity.

Second, Angen (2000) holds that ethical validation is affirmed by the transformative power of a study. Transformative power is indicated by the study’s potential to create positive change, as its outcomes are relevant and beneficial to those involved. The literature is replete with examples of the many ways in which the opportunity to share one’s story with an interested and non-judgemental listener can benefit the interviewee, including self-awareness (Kondora, 1993), sense of purpose (van Manen, 1990), empowerment (Viney & Bensfield, 1991) and giving the disenfranchised a voice (Norman, 1990). The outcomes of the study
may also be transformational for participants, affording them a new perspective by allowing them to view their experiences through the ‘eyes’ of the researcher.

The third and final element of ethical validation is that of balance, which asks whether the answers to the research questions are unbiased. To ensure that I was presenting, as much as possible, an unbiased interpretation of the lifeworld of victims and offenders, I sought continual feedback from my supervisory team throughout the analytic process (see section 3.5 above). For example, after each iterative cycle of coding and analysis (outlined previously), we met to discuss the findings and review my interpretive ideas and thoughts on the emergent themes.

### 3.8.4.2 Substantive Validation

The second principle that Angen (2000) proposes should be applied to interpretivist research is that of substantive validation. Substantive validation is, in essence, an issue of transparency wherein the trustworthiness or goodness of an interpretive study is judged by evaluating the substance of the inquiry (Angen, 2000). That is, has the study provided a fair, rich and multifaceted exploration of the topic? Substantive validation is first increased by a commitment to self-reflexivity. Pillow (2003) describes reflexivity as ‘involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research’ (p. 178). One step of self-reflexivity occurred when I explained my own situatedness in the study in terms of the views and life experiences I brought to the inquiry (see section 3.6). However, self-reflexivity did not begin and end there. Self-reflexivity has been an ongoing part of my study, beginning with its inception as I contemplated my reasons for conducting the research, and continuing into the present as I have sought to uncover any personal biases in my presentation of the participants’ voices. While using a reflexive journal is a common tool for many qualitative researchers to assist in ‘promoting an internal dialogue for analysing and understanding important issues in the research project’ (Smith, 1999, p. 360), and one I used prominently during data collection, an important ongoing means of reflexivity for me has been a weekly debrief session with a peer researcher conducting her
own independent phenomenological research. This has been an invaluable part of the reflexive process, as each of us provided a check for biases that the other overlooked. It also was a time of reciprocal sharing where divergent perspectives were examined and ideas confirmed, refuted, reworked and sometimes discarded. We problem-solved, brainstormed and, perhaps most importantly, listened with sympathetic understanding to the challenges inherent in research on sensitive topics that we both faced, and offered encouragement and support.

Angen (2000) holds that substantive validation is further enhanced by seeking disconfirming cases and conflicting accounts as the researcher stays open to considering alternate or expansive explanations. This too was reflected in my study, as I actively sought to identify disconfirming cases throughout data analysis and then brought them to light in my presentation of the findings.

A third step of substantive validation involves the careful consideration of language. This, Angen (2000) states, involves recognising the embeddedness of one’s own language within a specific cultural context that occurs as we communicate our understandings. To privilege the participants’ voices, I took steps during the study to stay true to the victims’ and offenders’ words and perceptions. For example, when transcribing the interview audio-recordings, I was sure to carefully document specific cultural uses of language prevalent in native Australians and with which I, as an American, was not familiar. In cases where I was uncertain of what a participant said or what a certain word meant, I asked a peer researcher born in Australia to listen to the section of the audio-recording to provide clarification and, if needed, understanding of what the word meant in that context. I also endeavoured to stay true to the participants’ language at every step of the process. Specifically, through the use of direct quotations, I presented participants’ views in their own voice.

The fourth and last element of substantive validation is visibility. Visibility in research occurs when the researcher makes substantive documentation of the steps they took throughout the research process so that others may judge the trustworthiness of the conclusions reached
(Angen, 2000). To this end, in this chapter, I have sought to outline the sequence of steps I took to recruit and interview participants and then code the data.

While I have attempted to enhance the study’s ethical and substantive validation through the aforementioned steps, Smythe et al. (2008) assert that checklists of behaviours that ‘fulfill pre-established criteria do not in and of themselves, lead to an uncontestable description of “how it is”’ (p. 1,396). Smythe et al. further claim that trustworthiness is achieved when the material presented ‘resonates’ with the reader to such a degree that it is not only judged accurate, but also, through thought-provoking and engaging presentation, ‘grabs’ the reader and ‘hooks on’, causing them to think about the experience presented in a new way (p. 1,396).

### 3.9 Strengths and Limitations

This study has a number of strengths and limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the primary strength of the research is in the various aspects of the chosen methodological framework. The qualitative method of hermeneutical interpretive phenomenology is appropriate to the study aims, as it provides the opportunity for rich description and understanding of the meaning victims and offenders attach to the experience of crime and their views regarding forgiveness. I employed an interview protocol that created an adaptable approach to data collection. When I conducted interviews, I did not allow my agenda to take precedence over the specific issues the participants wanted to discuss. This ‘give and take’, where questions were added, modified or excluded as necessary, allowed me and the participants to be ‘co-creators of meaning’ (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011). My past experience interviewing individuals who have been traumatised is another study strength, as it enabled me to establish a comfortable rapport during the interviews. This is critical in studies that ask participants to recount personal feelings regarding painful and traumatic events. The wide range of offence types and ages represented in the sample is also a strength, as it facilitates ample scope in which to explore the topic.

Study limitations include those common to many qualitative studies, and include self-selection and small sample size. Self-selection bias may have played a part in the study, as those who felt particularly traumatised, or for whom forgiveness was irrelevant, were
unlikely to agree to participate. However, a small sample size in hermeneutic phenomenological research is considered acceptable. Several scholars suggest that it is only possible to obtain the nuanced detail associated with interpretive phenomenology in studies with a small number of participants (Creswell, 1998; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Smith, 2004). Gender proportionality is acknowledged as another limitation, as the sample comprised nearly twice as many men as women. While there was an even distribution between men and women in the victim sample, the offender participants were predominately male (five women and 14 men). Therefore, the study findings may be more reflective of male offenders’ experiences and perceptions than they are of women’s. Lastly, personal interviews were the single source of data. While additional data sources may add to the volume of information, it is not certain that they would add to the richness of the data collected through one-on-one interviews.

3.10 Conclusion

In Chapter 3, I first outlined the methodological foundation and design of my study. I presented a case for the utility of qualitative methods, particularly hermeneutic phenomenology, in answering the aims of this research, which was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of victims and offenders regarding their perceptions of how their lives were affected by crime, and their understanding of forgiveness. I explained the structure of participant recruitment and gave an account of how data were collected. Following my explanation of the manner in which ethical concerns were addressed, I positioned myself within the study to make clear the personal experiences I brought to it. I next explained and gave examples of how I analysed the data in accordance with the analytic process of IPA. Lastly, I addressed the steps I took throughout the study to enhance its ethical and substantive validation.

This thesis now moves to presenting the findings. In Chapter 4, I introduce the victims and present the four themes that emerged from our conversations regarding their perceptions of the harm they experienced as a consequence of the crime they suffered. In Chapter 5, I detail the offenders’ stories of criminal wrongdoing and share their perceptions of how their lives
were affected by the harm they inflicted on others. Chapter 6 explores the victims’ and offenders’ understandings and perceptions of forgiveness and the degree to which they were (or were not) affected by the forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others. In Chapter 7, the last of the findings chapters, I delve further into the significance offenders placed on receiving forgiveness by exploring whose forgiveness mattered most to them.
Chapter 4: Victims’ Experiences of Offence-Related Effects

4.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 3, this study is designed to explore: (a) the lived experiences of crime victims and offenders with respect to offence-related harm; and (b) their perceptions of forgiveness. In this chapter, I present the key findings obtained from 12 in-depth interviews I conducted with victims of crime regarding their perceptions of the harm they experienced as a consequence of the offence. In so doing, this chapter answers Research Question (RQ)1: What are the offence-related effects for victims?

From my conversations with victims, four major themes emerged to illustrate their perceptions of the harm they incurred consequent to the offence. In discussing the first theme, Traumatic Effects, I reveal how the trauma of victimisation had deleterious effects on victims’ mental, behavioural and somatic wellbeing. In discussing the second theme, Threats to Identity and Self, I describe how victimisation undermined and threatened the victims’ understandings of who they were as a person. Next, I show how victims Lost Belief in a Just World as victimisation shattered their assumption that the world is benevolent and meaningful and the self is worthy. In discussing the last theme, I set forth how victims had Unmet Justice Needs when the criminal justice system failed to bring the anticipated or hoped-for resolution and/or healing. To create a more nuanced picture of who the victims are and provide a clear context for the ensuing effects of the crimes committed against them, I describe each of the victim participants and the crime they experienced prior to presenting these findings. All names given in the following section are pseudonyms.

4.2 Victims’ Stories

1. Ashley is a teenage university student who, at the age of 13, was the victim of repeated sexual assault by a 17-year-old boy in her church youth group. Ashley said she reported the abuse when she was 15 and the offender was subsequently charged with 34 counts of sexual
assault. He received a one-year good behaviour bond in children’s court and a two-year good behaviour bond in adult court.

2. **Bill**, a man in his late twenties, was victim of child abuse. Bill is one of two victims who were initially recruited to the study as offenders. Bill has a history of committing minor offences (e.g., a break-and-enter [B&E] in an abandoned building as a young teenager). When I realised from some of Bill’s answers that he seemed to resonate more with his experience as a victim of child abuse, I asked if he would prefer to continue in the study as a victim participant, and he agreed. Bill shared how he was subjected to violent beatings by his father from an early age. He said his mother saw bruises on his body (Bill lived with his father) when he was a young teenager and sent him to speak to a counsellor about the abuse. At this point, the abuse was reported to the police and Bill’s father, who was in jail at the time on unrelated offences, was charged with the crime.

3. **Kunley**, a middle-aged male nursing student, is the second victim participant who was originally recruited to the study as an offender. Early in the interview, Kunley shared that he had PTSD and had been the victim of child abuse, likely at the hands of his mother (longstanding physical injuries and family rumours indicate that this abuse happened before Kunley was 18 months old). Like Bill, Kunley agreed to take part in the study as a victim participant. Though Kunley’s mother never acknowledged the abuse, let alone faced formal criminal charges, Kunley met the criteria for participation in the study based on the fact that he had previously been formally charged for an offence.

4. **Jordan** is a university student in his mid-twenties who was the victim of a ‘king hit’ assault six years ago. Jordan said the offence took place when he and his mates were attacked by a number of young men who rushed the restaurant where they were eating and starting throwing punches. One offender, a teenager, was eventually identified and the case was referred to a youth justice conference. Jordan said the youth received community service.

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12 A ‘king hit’ punch is also known as a ‘one hit’ or ‘sucker’ punch. In such cases, the assault occurs before the victim knows what is happening or can respond.
5. Kaye is a middle-aged university student who was the victim of domestic violence for over 13 years. Kaye shared how she took her two young children and left (ultimately divorced) her husband after he tried to kill her. Kaye said her husband pled guilty to serious assault and received a good behaviour bond. Kaye is now remarried to a ‘wonderful’ man and said she hoped her story would help other victims of domestic violence who find it ‘very hard to see past one foot in front of the other’.

6. Philcott is a middle-aged male who was the victim of a home invasion and assault. Philcott has been a prison chaplain in a number of correctional institutions. He shared how he accidentally took pictures of the fleeing offender on his mobile phone when he meant to call the police. Philcott used the photos to print ‘wanted posters’, which he placed throughout the neighbourhood, leading to the man’s arrest within hours of the crime. The offender pled guilty to a string of charges, including robbery with violence, and was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

7. Rebecca is a middle-aged woman and was the victim of an armed robbery (the weapon was a gun) that occurred more than 15 years ago when she worked as a bank teller. Rebecca took a month off from work at the time and, unbelievably, on her first day back on the job, the bank was robbed again, this time by a knife-wielding offender. Rebecca said she left the bank and never returned. The first offender went on to commit a number of other bank robberies in the area and was caught within a few months.

8. Steve is a middle-aged man who was victim of two assaults that occurred in his job as a paramedic. In the first case, the patient spat blood at Steve, and in the second attack, Steve and his partner were threatened by a man with a knife. Steve said both men were charged with serious assault on a public official. The first man received a three-month suspended sentence; the court date for the second case was still pending at the time of the interview.

9. Debbie is a middle-aged nursing student who was sexually abused by her married swim coach when she was in her early teens. Debbie thought she was in love with him as she said he ‘groomed’ her to believe that their ‘relationship’ would one day lead to marriage. Debbie shared that she knew that the relationship was wrong, but the coach’s gifts, including teddy
bears and effusive love letters, kept her attached and hopeful. Debbie brought charges against the offender 30 years after the crime. Convicted of sexual assault, the offender was sentenced to two years in prison.

10. **Brittany** is a university student in her late twenties who was the victim of domestic violence approximately eight years prior to the interview. Brittany said she left the abusive relationship after a year and filed charges against her ex-partner. She said he was charged with aggravated assault and received a suspended sentence.

11. **Bruce** is a middle-aged man who was the victim of two road-related incidents. Bruce explained that in the first offence, he was purposefully run over while riding his bike by a man who was angry that Bruce had touched his car. The second case occurred when Bruce hit a man who walked out in front of his car without looking (the man was on his mobile phone). In the first case, the offender was charged with aggravated assault, whereas in the second case, the ‘offender’ was ticketed for being a negligent pedestrian.

12. **Esther** is a middle-aged woman and a prison chaplain who was the victim of multiple crimes that began as a child when she was molested by her father. Esther explained that she had also been robbed, had her life savings stolen by a family member, lost a loved one to murder and been the victim of two home invasions. Following the last violent home invasion, Esther said that she and her husband fled their home country of South Africa and moved to Australia. To the best of Esther’s knowledge, only one of the offenders (for one of the home invasions) was ever caught and prosecuted.

### 4.3 Traumatic Effects

The question ‘What are the offence-related effects for victims?’ reminds us of the purpose of this chapter. This section discusses the first theme I identified from my interviews with victims of crime. It relates to the various traumas they experienced from their victimisation. Typically, the first question I would ask after participants had shared their story of the offence had to do with the psychological consequences. I asked questions such as, ‘So when this occurred what were you thinking?’, ‘Can you talk about the thoughts that were going on in
your mind at the time?’ or ‘What was the psychological outcomes of this offence for you?’ I found from my interviews that nearly all of the victims (92%) were in some way traumatised by the offence. The victims described three dimensions of traumatic effects. First, victims noted mental health effects as a result of the crime, including PTSD, depression and anxiety. Second, victims identified behavioural effects, including increased self-protective behaviours and those related to violence, risk-taking and substance abuse. Third, victims related varying degrees of somatic effects, including physical injuries that occurred at the time of the offence and subsequent serious illnesses.

4.3.1 Mental Health Effects

The narratives of many of the victims (92%) I interviewed painted a picture of distressing mental health effects that challenged their psychological wellbeing in the aftermath of the crime. ‘Confused’, ‘dazed’, ‘complete and utter disbelief’, ‘hurtful’, ‘it was a bit of shock’, ‘anger and disgust’ and ‘completely terrorised’ were words victims used to describe the way they felt at the time or immediately after the crime. Some victims said they had difficulty sleeping after the offence. Rebecca recalled that her eyes were ‘permanently open’ for days after the armed robbery that occurred at the bank where she worked. Steve, assaulted twice in his job as a paramedic, saw a counsellor and a psychiatrist immediately following the offence to help deal with the stress of the crimes. Rebecca talked about the shock that left her staring ‘dumbfounded’ at the offender for some time after he put a gun in her face and how her thoughts turned to her children and the last words she spoke to them:

Rebecca: It was that moment of initially when he came and was—and I was confronted with him that—did I say—did I tell my kids I loved them? Was I cranky this morning? It was that stuff, it really does make you …

Tamera: It really was going through your mind?

Rebecca: It really flashed before [my] eyes. Will I see them again? I still remember that vividly. Everything else was—I could hear the humming of the printer and all this sort of stuff. Like real surreal—just tiny little noises. I was thinking God, what was I like as a mother this morning? Did I tell them I love them? All that sort of stuff … and because I
had the car—I think all these things flashed—because I had got the family car. I’m thinking how are my kids going to get home from school? How are they going to know? It was all really around the kids.

As Rebecca stared in shock at the gun in her face, her thoughts were not initially focused on obeying the armed robber’s command; rather, they were upon the relationship she had with her children and how the crime would affect their lives. The trauma Rebecca suffered as a result of the crime was long-lasting—she recalled that her body shook for over six months.

Like Rebecca, a number of other victims shared how the initial effects of the offence persisted, resulting in serious long-term mental health consequences. Nearly half (42%) of the victims I spoke with said they suffered from depression and anxiety. Several reported that they dealt with PTSD (42%) and other stress-related maladies (50%). For example, Steve shared that he was diagnosed with severe stress disorder after being twice assaulted by men he was assisting in his job as a paramedic. Steve explained that, for a time, he was unable to work and became depressed. He said the attacks set him on edge so that even inconsequential things such as his teenage son’s failure to pick up his belongings had the power to make him ‘snap’ at his son with anger. Other victims shared disturbing accounts of how PTSD wreaked havoc in their lives through debilitating flashbacks, nightmares and ongoing anxiety. One such case involved Ashley, a young woman who was repeatedly sexually abused by a 17 year old boy when she was only 13. Ashley told me that she was diagnosed with PTSD and was depressed and self-injured¹³ as a result of the abuse:

I’d get like flashbacks and nightmares and night terrors. I’d wake up and things like that. Also feeling like he [the offender] was in the room and like I couldn’t sleep so I’d feel like he was there … like this presence all the time. Yeah and just not being able to go to a lot of places because it happened in like at least 17 different locations. So a lot I guess of avoidance and lot of different things like different smells and the weather as well because it would happen … the weather would be a certain way one day and a lot of it [the sexual

¹³ Ashley explained that while she had self-injured prior to the abuse, the cutting ‘escalated’ during the years she was abused and for a time afterwards.
abuse] was out in the open and so if the weather was a certain way that would trigger me as well.

Ashley further explained that she disassociated (an extreme form of psychic numbing) or removed her consciousness from her body during episodes of ‘sadistic’ forms of sexual abuse. Ashley’s rationale for self-harming appeared to be very complex—however, in part, she said she used it to return to her body following these dissociative states. She explained:

A lot of that [i.e., cutting] was less me trying to inflict pain on myself but more because I felt he was there. I had disassociation as well that was the big one so I’d often dissociate and the only way to kind of bring myself back would be to do that [i.e., cutting]. I’d feel like I guess he would want me to do it ’cause like he was very sadistic in that sense. So I’d feel like he was there urging me to do it like making me do it even and because I guess it rubbed off on me that I felt that he owned me.

Ashley said that rather than abating after the abuse was over, her psychological responses (e.g., cutting) to the abuse actually became more debilitating as she began to think about all she had been through.

Other victims similarly noted that the traumatic effects of the crime lingered after the offence was over. For example, Kaye, a victim of domestic violence, told me how something as ordinary as the sound a crutch made as it scraped across the floor had the power to trigger her anxiety, as her abusive ex-husband walked with a crutch. In another case, Rebecca, who suffered from PTSD after the armed robbery, told me that she still—15 years after the crime—avoided putting herself in a vulnerable position when out in public:

In the supermarket when you’re in the queue, I won’t stand with my back. I’ll always stand side on so just so I can see someone coming behind me. Just that surprise thing, I don’t cope with surprises.

Brittany also suffered from PTSD as a consequence of the violent victimisation that occurred in an intimate partner relationship. She shared horrific accounts of being beaten, suffocated, threatened with a knife, stalked and raped by her partner. Brittany told me how she used to
fight against going to sleep for fear that her violent, drug-addicted partner would kill her while she slept. She recalled:

I remember not sleeping at all because I was so scared! And just not moving and it’s amazing how much like your body wants to go to sleep but you think you won’t wake up if you do.

However, even after the relationship had ended, Brittany’s rest was still tortured:

**The biggest issue I had was sleeping** because sleeping is a very quiet time and I used to get very very overwhelmed. I had horrific nightmares. **Oh my God!** I had night terrors that would wake me up. I used to have a bed that sat under a windowsill and I’d smash my hand against that windowsill from sitting up [during a nightmare].

Brittany cried as she told me how the trauma of the abuse arose even in the most intimate moments of her new relationship and marriage:

I have a lot of anxiety around having sex now. Umm I really struggle with that actually quite a lot [begins to cry] because my first response to sex is to panic. So I have to really prepare myself for that. ’Cause you have to relearn the behaviour. Like I have to relearn a positive connection with intimacy rather than a negative one. That’s been the hardest to overcome. That part.

Some victims disclosed that they were traumatised by the offence to the extent that they considered suicide. Bill said he was seven years old when his dad started beating and threatening to kill him. He said the abuse ‘crippled’ his mind and that he often fantasised about killing himself. He stated, ‘I think most of my life I’ve contemplated suicide’. Bill told how he was easily frustrated and quick to give up on life:

I find it hard to have that **enthusiasm** so if I make a mistake or anything it’s very easy for me to [makes motion of wadding up paper and tossing it in the rubbish bin]. Just quit—chuck life and just get a knife [makes stabbing motion in the side of his neck] and find myself thinking ahh what’s the use. Suicidal stuff so … and just in how I present myself is very topsy-turvy.
Kunley too was a victim of child abuse, although without a specific recollection of the offence. Kunley explained that physical injuries he sustained, longstanding health problems and family rumours told a tale of abuse that occurred (likely) at the hands of his mother before he was two years old. Kunley said that though he did not remember the abuse, it had a negative effect on his life, as he experienced hypervigilance (being on high alert) and had ‘a very strong death wish’.

These narratives illustrate a wide range of deleterious psychological after-effects that the crime victims experienced in the months and years following the crime. A number of victims struggled with depression, anxiety, PTSD and suicidal ideation, which significantly disrupted their lives at the time of the crime; for many, the traumatic consequences have been long-lasting.

4.3.2 Behavioural Effects

Often during my conversation with victims, a discussion surrounding the ways they felt their behaviour had changed since the offence would emerge naturally from their responses. At other times, I would prompt this consideration by asking questions such as, ‘Did you notice if you behaved any differently after the crime?’ or ‘Did your behaviour change after the offence?’ I found that over half (58%) believed they acted differently as a result of the offence. For instance, Jordan and Philcott, both victims of physical assault, said they made self-protective adjustments to their behaviours following the crime. Jordan, a victim of assault by a group of teenage boys, shared with me how after the offence, he stayed away from areas where the local youths liked to hang out and pick fights: ‘If I was going through town at night time especially if I was by myself I was a little more wary on where I was. Like I would avoid the skate park if I could. I would go through a couple back streets or just generally avoid the area in total.’

Like Jordan, Philcott said he subsequently took better note of his surroundings after he unwittingly interrupted a burglary in progress at his home and was attacked. Philcott explained how he now pays closer attention to the condition of his home as, at the time of the crime, he had not noticed that the front door was slightly ajar when he walked in: ‘And
so later after that and pretty much ever since when I’m walking up to that door I’m looking around trying to see is it closed? Is it in good condition? Am I going to find somebody in there?’

While both Jordan and Philcott changed their behaviour to preserve their safety and wellbeing after being victimised, other victims (42%) responded to the trauma of the offence by engaging in self-destructive behaviours such as risk-taking, substance abuse and aggression. For example, Kunley, a victim of child abuse, explained that he spent a good portion of his youth looking for ways ‘to escalate the dramas of life’ in order to ‘feel’ something:

I drank too much and then my kidneys put a flu14 and my kidney flared up … I probably did a lot of petrol. I used to drive at great rates. I had a very big death wish. And diving under the water without not much equipment. Fishing with exploding bait.

Kunley also boasted that he walked into a volcano, took part in the Bougainville riots in Papua New Guinea and smoked bush tobacco with cannibals. He said, ‘I struggled a lot in my life. I was pretty out of control’. Kunley alluded to addiction behaviours, as did a number of other victims in my study.

Some participants disclosed that they struggled with substance abuse or other addictions after they were victimised. For instance, Debbie, who was sexually assaulted by her swim coach as a young teenager, shared how, in the years after the abuse, she dropped out of university, became an alcoholic and ‘ran away from life in general’. Bill, beaten by his father as a child, said that as an adult he turned to alcohol, gambling and prostitutes or what he referred to as ‘all that kind of destructive type stuff’. He shared that his anger issues and ‘broken look at family’ also caused him to behave violently:

So that had a big effect on me in the way that was like to protect me that’s it! I’ll fight you know so. It was fists first. You can’t touch me. I’ll learn how to fight properly and do taekwondo.

14 ‘Put a flu’ suggests Kunley experienced problems with his kidneys.
In some cases, the victim’s behaviours were so out of character that they clearly indicated the degree to which the victims had been affected by the offence. For example, Bruce, an assault victim, said he did not know he had been traumatised until the moment he went to punch a man who reminded him of the offender: ‘I actually went to go and hit someone walking on the footpath a few days later who looked exactly like this guy [the offender]. I had my fist closed walking towards him. I didn’t even realise it.’

While Bruce realised he was acting uncharacteristically aggressively after the assault, Esther did not know the extent to which her behaviour had changed until her daughter, whom she had not seen for a while, pointed it out. Esther explained how she and her husband moved from South Africa to Australia both to escape the violence prevalent in the area where they lived and to be closer to their grown children. Esther said that upon her arrival to Australia, her daughter immediately noticed that she was much more highly strung than she had been previously:

I was loud, stressed, perhaps even aggressive and I didn’t notice. I didn’t notice that I was perhaps as bad as that. My daughter mentioned it when she saw us. She said, Ma, settle down, and I’m saying, but this is normal. I’m normal. What’s the matter with you? I think living in South Africa, we all became normal, that’s how we lived. Here in Australia, being more relaxed and more calm, she was able to identify with it straight away.

From the conversations presented above, we can see that for many victims, the offence caused them to act in ways that differed to how they had behaved prior to being victimised. Some victims responded with self-protective measures, such as avoiding crime-prone areas and being more alert to their surroundings. Others responded to the victimisation in ways that were dangerous to themselves or others, or were self-destructive, taking risks, acting aggressively or abusing substances.

4.3.3 Somatic Effects

The somatic effects victims identified as a result of the offence generally arose as part of a discussion around other effects of the crime. For instance, some victims noted the ways their body responded at the time of the crime or in the days and weeks afterwards; others
mentioned physical complaints in the context of ongoing psychological or emotional effects. Only a few times did I ask prompting questions such as, ‘Did you have any physical injuries?’ or ‘Did you notice any response that your body was making when the crime occurred?’

As I spoke with victims about the trauma and harm they experienced as a result of the offence, I found that nearly all (83%) endured some form of painful and frequently debilitating somatic after-effects. Victims identified physical injuries associated with the offence as bruises, contusions, crushed vertebrae, bone fragments around the spine, damaged jaw and teeth, damaged eyes and genital injuries. They described ailments such as migraine headaches, extreme fatigue, weight loss or weight gain, difficulties eating and sleeping and, as the following narratives by two victims reveal, a physical craving for warmth. Brittany, a victim of domestic violence, explained that she suffered from a physically manifested form of anxiety that left her body reeling with constricted breathing and sweaty palms while her mind was simultaneously calm. She told me how she was able to quell her body’s anxious response by keeping warm:

I found that warmth is something that calms me. So initially when I was at work I’d wash my hands a lot under the warm water. When I was at home I’d have a shower. So I’d have four of five showers a day if I could. I’d get into bed. I’d find comfort. So warmth was something that brought down my anxiety and now obviously I’m used to living with it so a cup of tea, a warm drink at work.

In a similar case, Kaye, also a domestic violence victim, craved warmth to the extreme. She told me that her need to be warm was what led her to move her family from a colder climate to a sunnier part of the country. Kaye shared, ‘I thought—I want the sun. I want to go somewhere where it’s warm. I can deal with anything if I’m warm you know’. Kaye explained that she still avoids the cold, as it can induce anxiety attacks:

I’d go into the supermarket where it was cold you know—be air conditioned and I would get cold and I couldn’t stay. I’d have to get in the warm so my husband [Kaye is remarried] does all the shopping. So I avoided that because as soon as I got really cold it was like oh my!
For some victims, the somatic effects of the offence were substantial. For instance, Jordan sustained extensive damage to his mouth and teeth as a result of being assaulted by a teenage boy. He told me that he was angry about the many painful (and costly) dental procedures he had to endure, and that he was particularly not looking forward to a future surgery that would leave him, for a period, without any teeth at all.

Other victims explained how they blamed the trauma and stress of the offence and/or criminal justice process for the serious physical illness they later suffered. For instance, Ashley said she was ‘extremely upset’ that the case against the offender took two years to come to court. She believed that the stress of being on ‘high alert’ for that long caused her to become sick and have to be hospitalised after the case was over:

I got really sick after the court case which I think was a lot of stress. I couldn’t eat or drink without being in severe pain or feeling really nauseous so I only ever like threw up once. They couldn’t find what was wrong with me but I wasn’t eating for like 10 days and I lost a lot of weight and I was really weak. When I’d been discharged from hospital they did an outpatient procedure and found that ... ‘cause I also had a bit of internal bleeding like in my in my intestines and things like that so they found after I’d been sick that there were places where it had ruptured and started to heal but they couldn’t tell what it was that had caused it.

Tamera: So was this injuries from the sexual abuse?

Ashley: No, not physical injuries from the sexual abuse, probably it was the stress of it all.

Like Ashley, Esther believed that the cumulative effects of a lifetime of victimisation led to a number of very serious physical ailments:

I was angry. Angry! Angry! I was angry at my husband. I was angry at my stepson and I became very ill. I ended up with a back operation because the tension going from my neck all the way down had eventually affected the last two discs and I had to have back fusion.

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15 Esther had been victimised numerous times in her life. She was molested by her father as a child and had her life savings stolen by her stepson. The business she and her husband owned had been burglarised and her elderly aunt was raped and murdered. The final victimisations that caused Esther to flee to Australia were two home invasions that occurred within weeks of each other.
That was one thing. I had depression. I’d been treated for depression for months and months and months. I then ended up with gallstones, with colon problems, polyps, everything that is related to trauma and to stress.

A prevailing theme throughout nearly all the victims’ narratives was that the offence resulted in traumatic effects that began the moment the crime occurred. Most victims described various detrimental effects on their mental health, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD and suicidal ideation, which occurred as a consequence of the offence. Many recognised that they responded to the victimisation in a manner that somehow differed from how they had behaved before the crime. Some said they became more self-protective after the offence, acting to preserve their safety, whereas others stated that they responded in ways that were self-destructive or harmful to their wellbeing. Lastly, victims described how they were somatically or physically affected by the crime years after it occurred. They pointed to various physical injuries they suffered during the crime, including broken bones and damaged teeth, as well as serious, long-term physical ailments that some believed were spurred by the stress and trauma of the crime.

4.4 Threats to Identity and Self

As the victims described to me the various ways in which their lives were affected by the crime, a second theme emerged regarding how victimisation changed how many victims saw themselves. For nearly all victims (92%), the offence threatened and undermined their core identity and sense of self. Specifically, this had to do with their understandings of who they thought they were and the personal attributes they believed they possessed prior to the offence. Victims shared how their identities (e.g., parent, paramedic, aspiring police officer, minister) became subsumed by the identity and experience of being a victim. Their self-concepts of the types of people they were (e.g., responsible, capable, strong, masculine) were also challenged, and in some cases destroyed, by alien self-conceptualisations implying that because they were victims, they were worthless, weak, dependent and a failure. In the following sections, I describe how threats to the victims’ identity and self came from a devaluation of self that occurred when the victims took a negative or critical view of
themselves. I then show how some victims wrestled with conflicting identities as they struggled to reconcile their previous self-perceptions with their new victim identity and its attendant attributes. Finally, I illustrate how the victims’ identity and self was threatened through the stigmatised identity of being a crime victim.

4.4.1 Devaluation of Self

In my interviews with the crime victims, I learnt that three-quarters of them held a negative self-perception that was, as they saw it, a consequence of their victimisation. I found that the primary weapons victims used in the devaluation of self were critical self-judgement and self-blame. By way of illustration, though only a child when his father physically and verbally abused him, Bill said he blamed himself at the time because he believed his behaviour had somehow provoked his father’s actions. When I asked Bill what had been the most significant effect of his father’s abuse, he told me, ‘not worth much … I think I’m not worth much as a human’. The victims of domestic violence also tended to blame themselves for the abuse and were highly critical of any actions on their part that they believed may have precipitated or prolonged the abuse. Kaye and Brittany, both victims of domestic violence, blamed themselves for their choice of partner and for staying in the relationship. Kaye told me, ‘I felt like it was my fault. Nobody forced me to marry him you know. I fell in love with him. I married him’. Brittany shared how even after the relationship was over, she continued to criticise herself about the way she had handled things:

If only he left earlier. If only you’d done this you know. So it’s a lot of self-hate. You’re still kind of putting yourself down afterwards. You’re continuing this guy’s work afterwards you know. You’re continuing to say that stuff to yourself about how you’re not deserving and how pathetic you are.

Victims who believed they were in some way responsible for the harm that transpired also lost faith in their ability to make wise choices in the future. Ashley, a sexual assault victim, told me how her decision to enter into a relationship with a ‘boyfriend’ who turned out to be sadistic made her distrust her decision-making capacities moving forward. When I asked
Ashley to talk about the most significant consequence of the victimisation, she became very emotional. With great difficulty, she shared:

Not trusting myself. I guess self-doubt about decisions I make. [Ashley can barely speak as she tries hard to stem the flow of tears]. Because I stayed in that relationship for that length of time. I felt like I’d I know there were things in place that made it kind of impossible to leave but felt like I’d chosen to be there. That my choices had kind of led me there as well. So I guess probably the biggest one is just trusting myself to make decisions. [spoken very quietly] I feel like I am always making like the wrong decisions.

In some instances, harsh self-judgement and self-blame lingered long after the offence was over, lasting, for one victim, over 30 years. Debbie divulged to me the repeated sexual abuse she experienced when she was in her early teens. She explained that she kept quiet about the abuse because the offender, a married man with a child close to Debbie’s age, had ‘groomed’ her to believe that they were in a loving and long-lasting relationship. Debbie’s belief that she was complicit in the abuse because ‘there was no violence’ resulted in decades of self-blame and self-hatred. I asked Debbie to describe the most significant effect of the crime and she replied:

I think it’s got a lot to do with how I feel about myself now.

Tamera: Which is?

Debbie: The self-loathing and the um [pauses at length] and uh the sort of sense of failure somewhere. That … you know whether my life would have been different well undoubtedly it would have been different because relationships would have been different. Relationships even with other people—with my parents feeling that I’d disappointed them.

The following narratives revealed how, in some cases, personal fault-finding extended beyond the victim’s feelings of culpability in their own harm to self-criticism for the way they coped (or did not cope) with the after-effects of victimisation as they believed they

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16 The offender threatened Ashley’s safety and that of her family if she told anyone about the abuse.
should have. For instance, Rebecca said she felt ‘frustrated’, ‘ashamed’ and ‘weak’ when, two years after the armed robbery, she still suffered PTSD symptoms. She explained:

I just tried to fight it myself. Because there’s that sense of feeling weak and why can’t I cope with this? Nobody really understood or they did for a certain amount of time and then it was come on, it’s been three months now, that sort of stuff.

Kaye told how she had begun counselling after leaving her abusive husband, but that her fears of losing her children caused her to refuse further mental health support. She related a conversation she had with her solicitor that led to her concerns about such support:

I said, is it possible for someone to come and knock at the door and take my children away? He said, I’ll be honest with you Kaye, yes. If he’s able to make a case that you’re not a fit person, a fit mother, so drinking, drugs that sort of thing. He said, then yes you might get a knock on the door. The police would come. This is what we’d do, we would then have to go to court. We would have to make a case that—so I thought, well, if I go to counselling and then I have to stand in court and tell people that I’m not coping then [breaks down in tears] they’ll take the children away. So I didn’t go. So I just dealt with it.

Kaye was terrified that others would perceive the mental health counselling she received in the aftermath of the abuse as evidence that she was psychologically unfit to take care of her children. Rather than risk such a stigmatising judgement and potentially lose her children, Kaye quit going to counselling.

These narratives illustrate how the victims’ identities were threatened through the devaluation of self. A number of victims were highly critical of their behaviour and often blamed themselves—if not for the crime itself, then for the way they responded during and after it. The result of such harsh self-j judgements was either diminished or unfavourable self-conceptions.

4.4.2 Conflicting Identities

My conversations with victims revealed a second way in which victimisation posed a threat to the victim’s identity. This included creating an identity that was in conflict or incompatible
with the one they held prior to the crime. Half the victims shared that they struggled to accommodate their pre-victimisation identities (i.e., the people they believed they were) with the victim identity or who they became following the crime. For instance, Esther, a victim of numerous crimes, fled the violence of her home country and relocated to Australia to be closer to her grown children. Though Esther had been subjected to horrific terror in the course of many of the crimes she experienced, it was not this effect she described when I asked her to relate what she felt was the most significant consequence of victimisation. She shared, ‘I think the financial loss and the loss of coming here and being completely impoverished’.

Numerous times throughout the interview, Esther mentioned how the loss of her and her husband’s financial independence was an especially egregious outcome of the crimes, particularly as they were forced to rely on their children for financial support when they moved to Australia. For Esther, being impoverished and dependent on her children conflicted with her self-view that she was independent and able to take care of herself.

Some victims related examples of how even seemingly minor life changes following the crime threatened their perception of the person they were prior to the crime compared with who they became. For example, Kaye, a victim of domestic violence, shared how she lived in a busy metropolitan city and had for years easily and skillfully reverse parked her car, but that she lost ‘spatial awareness’ after her husband’s final brutal attack on her. The result was a sudden inability to reverse park that, for Kaye, was more than inconvenient—it appeared to challenge the identity she held of herself as a strong and capable woman. She explained, ‘I was very capable and competent [said with a bold authoritative voice]. I’m an educated woman! I can do all this stuff you know. I’m the responsible person’.

For some victims, their new offence-related identity was so antithetical to the one they previously held that I was not surprised they became distraught when confronted by it. This was especially evident in the tension that Philcott, a victim of home invasion and assault, experienced when his identity as a pastor and self-described ‘turn the cheek kind of guy’ and ‘peaceful person’ came face-to-face with the self that created violent retributive fantasies against the offender. When I asked Philcott about the things that were going on in his mind in regards to the offence, he told me that for months afterwards, he constantly thought to
himself ‘How could I have done this better?’ ‘How could I have been more violent?’ ‘How could I have been more effective?’ ‘If I’d of only done this I could of killed him.’ ‘If I’d only done that.’ Philcott was frustrated and disturbed by these thoughts: ‘That’s very much not the person I want to be … so there’s a real resentment that this person [the offender] got me to this place you know. I mean I’m a preacher. I’m a counsellor.’

The dichotomy between the victim and police officer identities illustrated in the following narrative offers further evidence of the challenge victims faced when confronted with starkly incompatible identities. Brittany, a victim of domestic violence, shared her desire to become a police officer. She said, ‘for me a police career is like the be all end all. It’s something I’ll take very seriously and will be a forever job for me’. Brittany highlighted her many personal qualities that she believed would serve her well in her chosen vocation: ‘I pride myself on my honesty’, ‘I’m very good at my job’ and ‘I’m a very compassionate person. That’s why I’ve always wanted to be a cop. I want to help people’. Brittany struggled to reconcile these positive self-conceptualisations with a victim identity that suggested, in some respects, that she was actually the opposite of what she believed:

I’m a really strong person and so dealing with the fact that to a point I let that happen to me makes me feel like … and you never think that will happen to you ever! You never going into a relationship [think] that’s going to happen to you. If it hasn’t happened to you it’s not something you think about. So now I kind of stress a lot about that … I’m someone that bad things happen to.

For one victim, the tension surrounding conflicting identities did not occur between their pre- and post-victim identities, but rather between the person she thought she was during the offence compared with how she viewed herself afterwards. Debbie, a sexual assault victim, believed she was in love with the abuser, her swim coach. Debbie’s perception of being a person who was ‘privileged’ or ‘chosen’ while in this abusive relationship who was then reduced to ‘nothing’ after it ended was revealed when she shared her thoughts about the effect the offence had on her future relationships:

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17 Brittany worked for two years as a parole officer. At the time of the interview, she was a criminology student.
I guess I’ve always felt insecure in relationships. There was always that threat. And I guess even with him there was always that threat it would go away. That he’d go … not me … he’d go. Yet it was me in the end. Going from one of privilege ’cause I was the privileged the chosen one sort of … then being nothing … that’s the way he made me feel. You know all the presents all the things that he did. You know just little things. You know a sly look or whatever or the hug before [the swim].

These narratives indicate how many victims experienced conflicting identities, as the identity they held prior to (or during) the crime vastly differed from the one they took on as a result of their victimisation. Victims shared how previous notions they held of being strong, capable or moral individuals were undermined by a victim or other offence-related identity suggesting that they were actually weak, dependent, unable to protect themselves or perhaps not as righteous as they once thought.

**4.4.3 Stigmatised Identities**

From my interviews with victims, I learnt that the stigma of the offence was a third way in which that offence presented a threat to the victim’s identity and self. A stigmatised identity refers to certain attributes a person possesses that diminishes them, as Goffman (1963) describes, from ‘a whole and usual person to a tainted, discredited one’ (p. 3). Five victims (42%) said they felt stigmatised by their status as a crime victim. Some noted how the physical injuries they sustained during the offence were stigmatising. For instance, Kaye, a domestic violence victim, told me how she had been ashamed of the black and blue marks on her face, which she feared would cause others to judge her as ‘a stupid woman’. She talked about the frustration she felt over the critical attitudes she encountered from people who had no understanding of the particular issues surrounding domestic violence:

You hear that all the time. You hear people make that judgement [mimics a sarcastic critical voice] Oh why do they stay? I wouldn’t stay. And I think you don’t know. You don’t know. And you don’t live with someone who is violent 24/7. You live with someone who is the person you fell in love with who is the father of your children who occasionally behaves badly who you can usually blame it on the drink and who also is extremely good at apologising.
Kaye and Brittany both attempted to mitigate the stigma of domestic violence victimisation by reframing their identity or the offence. Kaye related a conversation she had with a friend that helped her replace the victim identity with that of a survivor: ‘She [friend] said Kaye we all choose. We choose whether we are a victim or whether we are a survivor. [Whispers] What are you gonna choose? I went that’s a good idea. I’ll be a survivor.’

Like Kaye, Brittany attempted to throw off the stigmatising victim label and the associated pity it drew. Brittany explained to me that even when she was no longer in the abusive relationship, she avoided telling most people about the abuse she had experienced because their responses undermined her attempts to cultivate a more positive self-view:

You’re trying to recover! You’re trying to build yourself back up. The last thing I needed personally was someone to be going you poor thing. You OK? You know? Oh my God and it was like and I felt bad because that’s a very natural response from anyone to say I’m so sorry but I needed people to be able not only to handle what I was telling them but also to be like you’re going to be OK rather than let’s bring up all the bad stuff that’s happened and grieve over that … Like I get it but and I forgave them for that but it also meant that I didn’t talk to them about it really moving forward.

Sometimes, the stigma victims said they experienced came from people they hoped would be understanding and helpful. For example, Ashley was barely a teenager when she was sexually assaulted by an older teenage boy. She recalled how her mother’s response to the news of the abuse was very hurtful:

She would say things like it takes two like all the time and because some things happened in her house without her knowledge she was angry about that. So she was almost more concerned with … like what I’d done against her then what he’d done against me.

This theme reveals the victims’ perceptions of the ways in which victimisation threatened their identities and sense of self. First, the offence threatened the victims’ identities through the devaluation of self. The victims’ critical self-judgement and self-blame for the harm caused many to view themselves in a negative light. Next, victims told how they struggled with conflicting identities, as their conceptions of who they thought they were prior to the
crime were challenged by their new, offence-related identity. Lastly, victims’ identities were threatened by the stigmatisation of the crime or their status as a crime victim to such an extent that some sought to mitigate the effect of this by reframing their identity in a more positive manner.

The following section presents the next theme identified through my interviews with victims, *Lost Belief in a Just World*. Here, I examine how some victims’ perceptions of the world as being fair and just was challenged when they became a victim of crime.

**4.5 Lost Belief in a Just World**

Most people hold a set of fundamental assumptions regarding the way the world operates and how they see themselves within that world. These beliefs have been described in the literature as a) the world is benevolent; b) justice or fairness prevails; and c) the self is worthy (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). People often lose their belief in a just world when their assumptions are challenged or shattered as a result of distressing or traumatic events. As a case in point, when Brittany stated, ‘you never think that [the crime] will happen to you ever!’, she gave a perfect example of how the offence caused her to lose belief in a just world. In my conversations with the victims of crime, I learnt that half of them, in some respect or another, had lost their sense of the world as being fundamentally just, fair, safe or good. For example, the armed robbery that Rebecca experienced undermined her belief that the world was a safe place. Rebecca’s narrative suggested that her life, until the moment of the crime, had been such that she felt safe and protected; a belief that she said was forever shattered by the offence: ‘I came from a very sheltered, small community sort of thing. So I guess that changing—the world isn't such a good place after all.’

Rebecca said that her lost sense of safety was the most significant result of the crime, as she realised that crime can ‘happen to anybody and sometimes we have no control over it’.

For Bruce, the victim of two road-related incidents, the way in which the second ‘offender’ responded to him after the offence was what shattered his assumption of how he believed he deserved to be treated as the victim. Bruce told me how he accidentally hit a pedestrian who,
engaged in a conversation on his mobile phone, walked out in front of his car. Bruce stated that he was ‘traumatised’ when he saw the man go ‘over the hood’ and then angry that he, as the victim, had to deal with the harm done to his car when the offender refused to pay for the damages (the pedestrian was ticketed by police as being responsible for the accident). Bruce appeared incredulous when he told me that he could not understand how the man refused to take responsibility for the damage when it was only because of Bruce’s good driving skills that the man was still alive: ‘I couldn’t fathom it. You’re lucky to be alive because somebody else is a good driver and you’re going to punish them. You’re going to make their life difficult by not wanting to pay a bill.’

Bruce’s expectation that offenders, not victims, are held accountable for the wrongdoing was challenged by this offender’s continued refusal to take responsibility. The fact that Bruce had to ‘deal with his [the wrongdoer’s] mess’ left him angry and further traumatised.

In my conversation with Steve, a paramedic who was twice assaulted on the job, I learnt how the crimes attacked his sense of self and shattered his previous sense of invulnerability. In the first incident, Steve had blood spat on him by a patient. A number of times throughout the interview, Steve stated in a tone of disgust and incredulity, ‘[He]. Spat. Blood. On. Me’. In the second attack, Steve and his partner ran from a man who threatened them with a knife. Steve said when he made it to the safety of their vehicle, he was ‘a mess’ as he realised how close they had come to losing their lives:

And then I think that hit me and like I’ve been a paramedic for 20 years and I’ve been verbally assaulted you know and it’s just part of the job. But this was twice where I’d actually been physically assaulted so it was like well … hang on. And ahh, that affected me and I actually had … about six weeks off work. I was diagnosed with acute stress … it’s different when … you know we go to patients that have been assaulted all the time. But when suddenly it’s a paramedic being assaulted it’s something very different.

Steve’s narrative makes clear the way in which the assaults upended his views of how the world was supposed to function. While he acknowledged that a threat of harm was technically
‘part of the job’, the assaults were indicators of a personal vulnerability Steve had only now come to realise. As he reflected, ‘we’re not bulletproof anymore’.

In some cases, it was the offenders themselves who shattered the victim’s sense of the world’s order or predictability, as they found that the wrongdoers were not always who they expected. For instance, Rebecca explained how the ‘normal’ appearance of the armed robber contested her view of what a violent offender should look like.

Rebecca: He was so normal. He was just a normal guy. He didn’t—there was nothing …

Tamera: He just didn’t walk in and look like a bandit.

Rebecca: No! So you have those images of what certain people look like or criminals—he wasn’t covered in tatts, he didn’t have a balaclava on. Nothing. He had new shoes and all this sort of stuff. So there was no—so I guess because then I didn’t know who you could trust. So everyone looked potentially dangerous, I guess … So I lost trust, I guess, in myself as well as sense of safety. I still—I have everything back except that sense of safety. So I still don’t feel safe.

In speaking with Ashley, a victim of sexual assault, I found that her assumptive world was overturned when those she expected to have her best interests at heart failed to protect her from harm. Ashley held two ‘offenders’ responsible for the sexual abuse she suffered: the 17-year-old from her church youth group who actually perpetrated the abuse, and the church that, in her view, allowed him to have access to her. Ashley explained that she was angry at her church for not protecting her, as they were aware of the offender’s prior history of sexual assault at another congregation:

Ashely: The church enabled it to happen. They knew his history and they also knew it was happening to me and they didn’t do anything.

Tamera: They did know it was happening?

Ashley: They did know but they also knew that if it came out in the open it would also reflect badly on the church so they didn’t—when they would speak to both of us and say that we had to end the relationship they never knew anything—well they knew that sexual
things were going on but they never wanted to say it. They knew it was happening but pretended that they didn’t.

Ashley believed that the church never explicitly addressed the sexual relationship to mitigate their culpability in not reporting it to authorities. Ashley said she also believed that ‘damage control’ was the reason the church encouraged her to forgive the offender, a topic explored in more detail in Chapter 6. Ashley revealed:

They [the church] were discouraging me from taking it to court. They said I would ruin his life if it went to court and I should just forgive him and move on. So it is very hard when they didn’t protect me to forgive him when that’s them kind of covering their backs as well. So I think a lot of almost more of my anger now is probably directed at the church than at him.

Therefore, overall, this theme explains how some victims’ perceptions of the world as being fundamentally just, safe and good were challenged when they became a victim of crime. In large part, victims’ beliefs that the world was not ‘such a good place after all’ emerged when they realised that they were someone to whom ‘bad things’ could happen, or that they were not invulnerable to harm or ‘bulletproof’ as they once supposed. In some cases, victims’ belief in a just world was challenged when they realised that even ‘normal’-looking people could be offenders, or when offenders were people they thought they could trust.

4.6 Unmet Justice Needs

The fourth major theme identified in my conversations with victims of crime was Unmet Justice Needs. Unmet justice needs occurred when the criminal justice system did not respond to the victim, the offender and/or the criminal case in the manner that the victim had hoped or expected. My interviews with victims revealed that for over two-thirds of them, the criminal justice system’s responses to the offence, and/or the outcomes of the criminal justice system response did not meet all their justice or personal healing demands. Ashley, a victim of sexual assault, told me that she had ‘mixed feelings’ regarding the criminal justice system’s handling of her case—while she was ‘very happy and grateful’ that the offender’s guilty plea meant she ‘got a conviction’ and ‘didn’t have to give evidence’, because the
offender did not receive a prison sentence, she was fearful for the safety of other young girls with whom he worked in his job at McDonalds. When I asked Ashley if she gave a victim impact statement in court, she struggled to hold back tears as she recounted how she was advised not to share the emotional effects of the sexual abuse.

Ashley: I’m trying to remember what I wasn’t allowed to say.

Tamera: Oh they gave rules as to what you could say?

Ashley: Yeah it had to be more how it impacted on my life technically in the sense that it disrupted my schooling and relationships but [becomes very emotional—on the verge of tears] less about how I felt … I guess I could say that it gave me PTSD and diagnosed with symptoms but not I guess thoughts and feelings that I had.

Finally, in a very raw and painful recollection, Ashley also shared with me both her feelings of glad expectation and overwhelming anguish when the court proceedings did not lift the burden of the offence in the way she had hoped:

I had this expectation in my mind because I’d waited for court. I was told it would happen in six months and it took two years to get through court and it kept on being adjourned and adjourned and adjourned and getting like different mentions and I’d get that … I’d prepare myself OK the next time it’s going to go to court and then he’d adjourn it because he’d say I haven’t got this yet and that was extremely upsetting. And then going to court there was an actual sentencing date. I expected that I’d feel this massive relief and that life would just be so much easier and that it would all just lift off me. And probably within a week of it going to court I just had like a big breaking point [breaks down in tears]. ’Cause I guess I like expected it to be better. [Nearly choking on tears] I’d been on so high alert before going to court that I thought I guess I could come down from that and life would be more normal again and I guess I had a moment when I realised that it [barely able to say the words through her tears] wasn’t any better. [Whispers] It didn’t change what happened.

Like Ashley, Debbie was also a victim of sexual assault when she was a young teenager. However, unlike Ashley’s case, the criminal justice case against the swim coach who abused Debbie did not reach court for 30 years. Debbie explained that she came to the decision to
report the crime to the police decades after the abuse in the hope that by making the abuse public, other children would be protected—the offender was still working as a swim coach—and that it would also help her to heal from the psychological and emotional effects of the crime (e.g., alcoholism).

The outcome of taking the offender to court brought Debbie mixed emotions. She was pleased with the way she faced the offender in the courtroom, saying, ‘I was quite sort of brave in the court in that I would look at him and I could and yeah he couldn’t look at me’. Nonetheless, she was not as happy with other aspects of the case. For example, Debbie told me that in retrospect she wished she had been ‘tougher’ in her testimony against the offender when the judge asked her how she felt about him now. She explained that she wished she had said, ‘well I think he’s a coward or something like that not I don’t know how I feel about him’. In addition, Debbie seemed to have mixed feelings about the offender’s conviction. She said, ‘it [jail] wasn’t going to fix him if he was going to do it again or had done it again. It was just um yeah it was never going to be rehabilitative to him’. Debbie also said the conviction was not going to ‘fix’ what happened—she seemed more interested in hearing the offender ‘admit it’ during the trial and appeared to be very disappointed when that did not happen.

I found in my conversations with both victims of domestic violence that each articulated very similar experiences with the criminal justice system—experiences that left them feeling ‘dismissed’, ‘unimportant’ and ‘judged’. For instance, Kaye recalled an encounter with a police officer who responded to her husband’s last assault:

I remember this police officer and this big police woman big girl she was she could be in her twenties or thirties. She was a big strong-looking girl walking in and she looked me up and down. It was a Friday night I don’t know I remember thinking I must have been so low on their priority list and she looked me up and down and she said [mimics the officer’s stern voice], well you better go clean yourself up before we talk to you. And I’m like [whispers] OK alright. I just felt like dirt. I felt like I was number 500 on their list and like [mimics what she imagines the police are thinking—spoken in a dismissive voice] Ahh so you know so you think you’ve had a bad life ah shhhh!
Kaye shared with me a vivid account of the ongoing embarrassment and humiliation she endured when she went to the police station to fill out a complaint against her husband the morning after the last assault:

I remember walking in there and seeing that the sergeant behind the desk was one of my army reserve sergeants. I’m thinking oh that’s somebody I know. That’s a bit embarrassing but you know that’s OK. Anyway he said you know *can I help you?* I’m here to make a report and I was … one side of my face was just black and blue. I said I would like to report an assault. And I’ll never forget he said *do you really want to do this?* He said *because people do this all the time and then they come back and withdraw their compliant.* He said [mimics an impatient tone of voice] *so there’s a lot of paperwork in this for us you know.* [Whispers] OK well OK. I said yes yes, I do. And um … I said I do I do. **Everything** he did his whole manner way [begins acting out how the police officer would slap the paper and then the pen down on the desk. All movements showed extreme annoyance]. [Said by the officer] All right then.

With the exception of two ‘lovely’ community police officers who assisted her in filing an intervention order against her husband, Kaye\(^\text{18}\) felt that others in the criminal justice system were ‘dismissive’ of her because of the stigma surrounding domestic violence:

It wasn’t that I wanted to be important but it was dismissive in a way that I was **unimportant**. Almost as if it was—common—or you know because it’s got this word domestic around it. I felt like if I’d been walking down the street and somebody beat me up it would have been an entirely different thing. People would have been **interested** and **caring**. *Oh how dreadful!* But all of a sudden because it’s your husband it’s your own fault.

Brittany shared a very similar story with me. She said the ‘massive’ stigma attached to being the victim of domestic violence left her feeling judged and unheard by the police she contacted:

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\(^{18}\) Kaye’s experiences with police occurred in the 1990s.
The police particularly didn’t help. So I called them numerous times and I went to the police station the time where he cut my eye and um I was really really scared … and the police were highly critical of me for that. They got frustrated with me because like I’d gone to make a statement … and I get it … they’ve got a job to do and they don’t want people to waste their time. I get that … so the police were very judgemental. They were kind of like oh I don’t know why she’s staying there. It’s her fault she’s staying there sort of thing. Because they’d say to me why don’t you just leave? I felt unheard ’cause I told them how terrified I was and in their defence they did put a PFVO out, a Police Family Violence Order. They did do that. But that doesn’t mean anything. That doesn’t stop anything. A piece of paper won’t stop him from rocking up to my house.

Brittany strongly believed the police department needed to be more educated on how they handle cases of domestic violence\(^{19}\). She felt the ‘government’ (i.e., criminal justice system) let her down with their ‘toughen up princess’ attitude:

I was already being drilled home what a horrible person I was by [partner] but if the police department had just gone for a second you’re better than this. You can actually get out of this. Putting more of a positive spin on it then oh here’s another one. She’s another number and why she’s crying? It’s still quite a raw topic but the inspector said to me as well you understand that domestic violence is the biggest thing we’re called to as if to say that was my fault that that’s an issue! I looked at him like … he was saying to a victim do you realise that you’re contributing to a problem.

Brittany said she looks forward to the day when she is a police officer and can help other officers better understand how to best assist victims of domestic violence.

Some victims disclosed to me that their participation in restorative justice processes addressed their needs for personal healing. For example, Esther and Rebecca shared their experiences with the Sycamore Tree Project, an in-prison program where crime victims meet with groups of unrelated offenders to talk about the effects of crime and how to make things right for victims. Esther, the victim of numerous violent crimes, shared how she became aware of the project when she was a prison chaplain, and that her subsequent involvement

\(^{19}\) Brittany’s experiences with the police occurred within the past eight years.
helped her confront the negative emotions that still lingered even when she thought she had forgiven her offenders.

Esther: I didn’t realise that there was still resentment and how the resentment was building up. I thought I’d forgiven but when I still went and did the Sycamore Tree Project and seeing the remorse, seeing it, just was … I could minister to them with a free heart—because when you start telling your story and you still start crying, you know that there’s still something bothering you and that all came out … having done the Sycamore Tree Project has helped me enormously going into the prisons every week [Kaye is a prison chaplain]. It humbled me.

Tamera: How do you think it humbled you?

Kaye: It humbled me to see some of the terrible things these men have gone through and to know that what I’ve actually experienced is nothing in comparison to what some of them have gone through. Nothing. Yes, they’ve done bad things too but haven’t I and who am I to judge whether mine is worse or better than theirs? It’s no longer, I’m better than you. There was a slight bit of that, I’m better than you before the Sycamore Tree Project. I’m better than you. You’re the perpetrator. I’m not the perpetrator and then I discovered my unforgiveness was actually a form of perpetrator. I’m not the judge.

Esther said her participation in Sycamore Tree helped her no longer judge the offenders. She said that her new perspective became, ‘you are a human being and I’m a human being and I’m here to help you’.

Like Esther, Rebecca, a victim of armed robbery, took part in the Sycamore Tree Project years after the offence. Since both robberies, Rebecca had gone to university and was working in the youth justice system where she heard about the program. Rebecca shared how the Sycamore Tree Project ‘enriched’ her life:

It was very empowering—one part of it was telling your story. But the other part was hearing the prisoners who—I mean they were—some of them were quite hardcore prisoners, and a lot of them have done exactly—most of them—most of them had done—at some point in their life have done an armed hold up. But the majority of them have done
that. So for them to see—and respectfully listen and respond—that was—yeah, that moment was gold. It was really—it was just validating I guess and them showing remorse. Even in breaks coming up and saying *I'm really sorry that that happened to you.* Just things like that was really—yeah, I really admire them to show that humility and that empathy.

Rebecca explained how she went into the program thinking that she was going ‘help these guys’ and was surprised to find that she gained ‘an enormous amount’.

However, the following account by Jordan illustrates that restorative justice processes do not always give the victim a satisfying outcome. Jordan, an assault victim, first shared with me his frustration at the police for their initial reluctance to pursue a case against a juvenile offender when Jordan was an adult:

> It wasn’t worth the paperwork to them. Yeah they said that to us in person that if he was 18 we would be more than happy to do this for you. It would be worth our time but ’cause he’s a minor we know he’s going to get a slap on the wrist. We’ve got better things to do.

Jordan recalled that it was only after outraged community members wrote to the local newspaper ‘bagging at the cops’ (complaining) about how they no longer felt safe that the police stopped ‘sweeping it under the rug’. Jordan said the case was eventually referred to a youth justice conference where he and his friend (who was also injured in the attack) met with the offender. Jordan said, ‘he had to face us and like we had to work out a punishment for him’. When I asked Jordan how the offender acted in the conference, he replied:

> At conference he was very smug. Like he knew where he stood that he was for the most part going to get away with it. He knew there was no real legal repercussions coming as well as no financial repercussion coming so he was being quite smug. He knew he was protecting all his friends and that was worth more to him than anything else.

These narratives make it clear that the victims benefited from restorative justice encounters that involved respectful listening, empathy, remorse and respect—but in the absence of offender remorse and meaningful consequences, restorative justice did not meet victims’ justice needs.
This theme exemplifies how some victims felt that the criminal justice system failed to meet their needs for justice and/or personal wellbeing. The narratives of some victims suggest that an actual conviction also did not necessarily address their desire for psychological healing. In addition, victims of domestic violence were particularly frustrated and deeply offended by the responses they encountered from police officers, which they deemed stigmatising and judgemental. Nonetheless, a few victims found a measure of personal healing from their participation in a restorative justice program. The storytelling element of the Sycamore Tree Project was perceived as empowering by one victim, while another credited it with helping her eliminate negative emotions regarding victimisation and offenders in general. However, this view was not universal, as one victim was dissatisfied with the way the offender acted during a restorative youth justice conference.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented four themes that emerged from my conversations with victims of crime. Each theme illustrated the victims’ perceptions of the effects they experienced as consequence of the offence. I first revealed how Traumatic Effects were experienced by nearly all victims—these were the initial effects, such as shock, confusion and terror, that many victims said began from the moment the crime occurred. Nearly all victims divulged how their lives were significantly disrupted and altered as a result of serious mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, PTSD and suicidal ideation. Over half the victims said they also behaved differently after the crime. Some acted in ways to protect their physical safety, whereas others responded to victimisation with self-destructive behaviours. The somatic effects victims noted were also egregious—these were grave physical effects that occurred at the time of the crime and subsequent illnesses that victims blamed on the stress and trauma of the offence they experienced.

In discussing the second theme, Threats to Identity and Self, I revealed how victims’ sense of the person they were prior to the offence was challenged and undermined by their victim identity or other offence-related identity. For some victims, the crime threatened their identity through the devaluation of self, as many either blamed themselves or critically judged their
own actions (or perceived inactions) regarding the offence. Victims also struggled with conflicts of identity, as their victim status threatened their previous conceptualisations of the person they thought they were (e.g., competent, strong, caring). Additionally, for some victims, the stigma of the crime they experienced or their identity as a crime victim was what threatened their sense of self.

In discussing the third theme, *Lost Belief in a Just World*, I explained how for some victims, the crime subverted their belief that the world was just and meaningful and the self was worthy of experiencing good things. Such fractured beliefs were illustrated in comments such as, ‘you think it will never happen to you’, ‘the world is not such a good place’ and ‘we have no control over it [victimisation]’. For some victims, their faith in a just world was undermined when they realised they were not as invulnerable or ‘bulletproof’ as they once thought. For others, the offender challenged their belief in a just world, making the victims realise that not all criminals looked like criminals. In some cases, victims were dismayed to find that offenders were those they mistakenly assumed had their best interests at heart.

Lastly, in discussing the final and fourth theme, *Unmet Justice Needs*, I disclosed how some victims felt that the criminal justice system failed to meet all their needs for justice and/or personal wellbeing. Some victims had mixed feelings about the outcome of the criminal case against the offender. While many of the offenders received convictions, this did not provide many victims with the outcomes they most desired, such as psychological healing or admission of guilt. Victims of domestic violence were particularly aggrieved by the way they were treated by police officers, recalling that their requests for law-enforcement assistance were met with judgement or a ‘toughen up princess attitude’ that left them feeling dismissed, unimportant and ‘like dirt’. A few victims found a measure of personal healing when they participated in a restorative justice program called the Sycamore Tree Project. One felt empowered by telling her story of victimisation to offenders who had perpetrated similar types of crime, while another said her participation helped her confront lingering negative emotions around the crime(s) and enabled her to stop being judgemental towards offenders.

However, satisfaction in a restorative justice process was not ubiquitous, as one offender’s
lack of remorse and ‘smug’ attitude during a youth justice conference proved unsatisfactory for the victim.

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to examine the lived experience of offence-related effects for 12 victims of crime. In so doing, this chapter answered RQ1: What are offence-related effects for victims? The following chapter examines the offenders’ perceptions of the ways in which their criminal behaviours affected their lives.
Chapter 5: Offenders’ Experiences of Offence-Related Effects

5.1 Introduction

As previously discussed, the purpose of this thesis is to explore the lived experience of offence-related effects and perceptions of forgiveness for crime victims and offenders. In Chapter 5, I present the findings gathered from 19 in-depth interviews with criminal offenders regarding their perceptions of the effects they experienced as a result of their crimes; all offenders had been charged and convicted for their offence. This chapter thus answers RQ1, which asks: What are the offence-related effects experienced by offenders? From my interviews with offenders, three key themes emerged that illustrate their perceptions of the harm they incurred consequent to the offence. In discussing the first theme, Challenged Lives, I explore how offenders’ minds, emotions and futures were challenged as a result of their offending behaviour. Next, in discussing the theme Impression Management, I reveal the offenders’ self-perceptions and the strategies they employed to manage their identities. Lastly, in discussing the theme Blame Talk, I examine how offenders worked to either accept or reject and deflect blame for the crimes they committed.

Before I present the findings, it is important to provide biographical sketches of each of the offender participants to contextualise their experiences.

5.2 Offenders’ Stories

1. Allegra is a woman in her early thirties who was convicted of petty theft when she was a 20-year-old single mother. Allegra is the only offender in this study who denied having committed the crime for which she was charged. She shared with me how her toddler son had grabbed some ‘pretty, shiny’ bellybutton rings from a basket at the store and put them in his pram when she was not looking. Allegra said that when she left the store after paying for her purchases, the security alarm sounded and the jewellery was subsequently found.
2. **Austin** is a university student in his early twenties who was convicted on child pornography charges. He explained how when he was a young teenager, his internet ‘friend’, an adult male paedophile, encouraged him to create a fake Facebook page posing as a teenage girl. Using his online female persona, Austin said he began to ‘friend’ different teenage boys and ask them to send ‘her’ sexually explicit photographs and videos that Austin then sent to his friend. Austin was arrested three years after the offending began and sentenced to community service and five years on the sex offender registry.

3. **Boone** is a middle-aged man who had ‘four or five’ convictions on various drug possession charges and drink-driving offences for which he pled guilty and received a fine.

4. **Bully** is a middle-aged male with a criminal history involving drug use, possession, stealing and drug trafficking spanning over 25 years. Bully was incarcerated many times, but has now been out of prison for over a decade. It was at his request that I used the pseudonym Bully. When I told him that I would prefer to not use a name that has a negative connotation, he said it is a nickname that he considers more a term of endearment.

5. **Claire** is a middle-aged woman who, 20 years previously, was convicted of driving under the influence (DUI). Claire told me how she had been drinking alcohol at the home of some friends when, after a heated argument, she got in her car and took off at high speed. She said she had only driven a short way down the street when she ran into a parked car and rubbish bins set out on the curb. Claire said she viewed the DUI as a turning point in her life, as she lost her license for 15 months as well as a place to live, the car she had only recently paid off and her boyfriend (who used the accident as an excuse to break up).

6. **Crazy** is a middle-aged man who was convicted of theft and B&E. Crazy said he received six months in jail for the theft of thousands of dollars of musical instruments and 16 months in jail for the B&E of a home. As with Bully, I tried to discourage Crazy’s choice of pseudonym, but he insisted, stating that with such a distinctive name, he would be easily remembered.
7. **Daisy** is a middle-aged former prostitute who was charged with stealing and work cover fraud.\(^{20}\) Daisy was convicted in the work cover case and sentenced to pay back $17,000. Daisy told how she left her home and family after she caught her husband cheating on her. She said she worked in a factory until her room in the boarding house was robbed and her rent money stolen. Daisy said her neighbour (a prostitute) offered to help her ‘make up the rent’ and took Daisy with her to walk the street. Daisy shared that as the new girl on the street, she was ‘flavour of the month’, and made so much money that she quit her factory job and worked solely as a prostitute.

8. **Daniel** is an older man who, as a teenager, was convicted of traffic offences resulting in a person’s death. Daniel explained that he was driving on a divided road around dusk when he simultaneously noticed a movement in his peripheral vision and felt a bump. He said when he looked back, he saw a figure by the road and he realised he had hit a pedestrian (who later died). Though the pedestrian was found to be drunk when he stepped into the road, Daniel was convicted of driving an unregistered car, driving without a licensed driver in the car (Daniel did not have a license) and various other traffic offences. The outcome of Daniel’s case was that he was required to join the military, as he had planned prior to the offence.

9. **Darrin** is a former English teacher in his early thirties who was convicted of two counts of sexual assault perpetrated against one of his students, a 15-year-old girl. He said he spent 13 months in prison and, at the time of the interview, was close to completing his 18 months of parole. Darrin explained that he was bi-polar and experiencing delusions at the time of the offence that caused him to believe he was in love with his student. After a six-week relationship that involved sexual relations, Darrin said the victim told her parents and he was arrested.

10. **Gabriel** is a middle-aged man convicted of numerous crimes, the most serious being manslaughter. He was sentenced to nine years and paroled after four and a half. Gabriel said the murder occurred when a man he knew from prison came to his house and raped a ‘Sheila’

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\(^{20}\) Work cover fraud or fraudulent workers’ compensation refers to a situation where an employee inaccurately claims that they are unable to work in order to receive financial benefits. Daisy maintained that she was injured on the job and had complied with all the rules.
(i.e., a woman) in front of him. Gabriel explained that when he intervened in the rape, the ‘rapist’ pulled a knife and a fight ensued. When Gabriel ended up in possession of the knife, he stabbed the man in the heart, killing him.

11. **Hope**, a middle-aged university student, was incarcerated for a number of offences, including drug trafficking and fraud. Hope explained that she ‘lost the plot’ and went into ‘self-destruct mode’, taking to drugs and alcohol, when she discovered that her husband had cheated on her. Hope said she became an addict and ‘cook[ed]’ drugs to support her habit. Hope was burned and subsequently arrested when her drug lab caught fire.

12. **Hugo** is a man in his late thirties who was incarcerated for 14 years on two counts of second-degree murder, a crime he committed when he was a teenager. Hugo explained that he was introduced to the victims by a mutual acquaintance who knew that Hugo was looking for roommates to help pay the rent. Hugo said when he realised one of the men was a gang-affiliated pimp and the other a schizophrenic, he asked them to leave his home. When they refused, Hugo said he feared for his life and shot each of them once as they sat across from him in his living room.

13. **Inga** is a university student in her late twenties who was convicted of simple assault against her uncle after an alcohol-fuelled family argument. She was given a good behaviour bond and an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO), which prohibited her from having any contact with certain family members for one year. Inga explained that she turned herself into the police following the assault because, as a criminology student, she felt she should take responsibility for her actions.

14. **John** is a middle-aged man who has spent nearly half his life in prison for a host of offences including armed robbery, serious assault on police, and B&E. John explained that most of his offences were committed in order support his drug addiction.

15. **Lars** is a middle-aged man with a 20-year history as a crystal methamphetamine (ice) addict. Lars said all of his offences have been drug-related, and he has spent only one month
in jail. He also immediately admitted that he had done a lot of damage to his mind as a result of his years of drug use.

16. Mick is a middle-aged man who was convicted and imprisoned for a number of drug-related offences, including trafficking. Mick said his problems with substance abuse began when he started drinking alcohol at the age of 11. He shared that he was using cannabis by the age of 14 and that his drug use escalated from there as he moved onto methamphetamine, heroin, LSD and cocaine.

17. Patrick is a middle-aged former neo-Nazi who ran a computer-operated voicemail system that disseminated hate propaganda for a number of far-right organisations across four continents. Patrick told me that when he refused the government’s order to shut down his operation, his case went before two Human Rights Tribunals and the Supreme Court. Patrick said he was ultimately found guilty of contempt and sentenced to three months. He mentioned that he was also charged for assault a number of times, but only convicted once, as he and his co-defendants commonly intimidated witnesses into not showing up to court. Patrick said he walked away from the skinhead movement after the birth of his first child.

18. Real is a middle-aged man who served four federal prison sentences totalling over 30 years for a variety of offences, including kidnapping, armed robbery, weapons charges and first-degree murder. He is currently on parole.

19. Bob is a recent university graduate in his thirties who served time in prison for armed robbery. He explained how twice in one week, he robbed the same chemist to secure drugs to feed his addiction.

As is evident from these descriptions of the offenders, the crimes they were convicted of varied greatly. I found that the interviews I conducted with these offenders reflected the ‘lived experience’ of criminal offending with respect to how they experienced or understood the effects that occurred in their lives as a consequence of their offending behaviour. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, three key themes emerged that I use here to explicate the offence-related effects experienced by offenders.
5.3 Challenged Lives

A prevailing theme that emerged from my conversations with offenders had to do with the ways in which their lives were challenged by their criminal behaviour. Every offender had a story (or many stories, as was often the case) to share with me, and these stories demonstrated the various ways their criminal behaviour wrought havoc in their lives. Here, I first share how some offenders experienced *Mental Challenges* consequent to their offending, such as rumination, severe stress and depression. Next, I reveal the *Emotional Challenges* that many offenders encountered and further consider how anger and emotional detachment precipitated and/or attended the crimes in some cases. (I should note that I have made a distinction between the categories of mental and emotional effects primarily for ease of reporting the findings; however, it was rare for the offenders to make such a distinction, as they commonly answered questions about what they were thinking at the time of the crime with descriptions of their emotional state and vice versa.) Lastly, I discuss the offenders’ perceptions of the most significant effects of their crimes in the *Challenged Futures* section.

5.3.1 Mental Challenges

To better understand what offenders were thinking when they committed crime and to ascertain whether they were psychologically affected as a result of their criminal behaviour, I asked questions such as, ‘Do you recall the thoughts that were going on in your mind at the time you were committing the offence?’ and ‘Can you talk to me about any psychological affects you experienced as result of your crimes?’ I learnt that over two-thirds (68%) of the offenders were in some way mentally challenged because of the crime they committed. Seven offenders (37%) told me how they ruminated, sometimes for years, on the crimes they perpetrated and/or the victims they hurt. For instance, Darrin, a teacher convicted of sexual assault against his teenage student, had this to say about his inability to stop dwelling on the offence: ‘Over time I’ve been thinking about it [the offence] non-stop and I actually see three different therapists. One’s a psychologist, a psychiatrist and a mental health nurse so I’ve had a lot of time to think.’
In some cases, the faces of the victims lingered in offenders’ minds. For example, when I asked Bob if he could describe the victim, the chemist he robbed, he said it was the look of fear on the man’s face at the time of the crime that he recalled: ‘He freaked! I’ll never forget that expression on his face. You know his eyes went wide.’ Bob explained that he did not pay attention to the victim’s fear at the time—it was only later when he reflected on the offence that he thought to himself, ‘oh shit! Oh shit! I did scare this guy’. Hope, a woman convicted of drug offences, similarly recalled how family photographs in a house she robbed stayed in her mind over the years. Hope told me how she came across a wedding invitation when she was rifling through a stranger’s mailbox looking for credit cards. Making note of the date (on the assumption that these people would attend the wedding), Hope said she returned on the date of the wedding and broke into their home, stealing pieces of what she believed to be expensive heirloom jewellery. Hope said she was ‘tormented’ by this crime, as she recalled the faces of the family from the photographs and wondered who they had blamed for the theft. She explained ‘that one incident itself played back on me over and over to the point where I was still thinking about it maybe once a week. I would lose sleep over it or dream about it’—however; similar to Bob, Hope said these ruminations did not occur until much later. Drawing on these experiences, it appears that even when offenders do not consider the well-being of the victim when they commit the crime, they may later have difficulty putting the offence or the victim out of their mind.

I learnt from my conversations with offenders that those who kill or are blamed for someone’s death do not easily forget their role in that offence. For instance, when I asked Mick, a convicted drug trafficker, to talk about any feelings of shame or guilt he may have carried with respect to his crimes, he told about the occasion when the family of one of his drug clients blamed him for their loved one’s suicide—this man had taken his life after Mick refused to sell him drugs. Mick said that the man’s death was ‘hard to take’ and that he still thinks about it. Another offender described the long-lasting effects of the murder he committed. Gabriel, convicted of manslaughter in the stabbing death of a man he witnessed raping a woman, often seemed cold and hard-hearted when he spoke about killing the victim, but the following exchange powerfully suggests the psychological toll his actions took on him:

122
Gabriel: Even when the parole finishes in 2019 you think that I will be free still? No, I won’t because this will be firmly stuck in my head for the rest of my life. So I’m going to pay for this shit for the rest of my life.

Tamera: The actual offence?

Gabriel: …by the law I’ve already done what they expected. By 2019 it’s all finished. But for me it’s not finished. So I’ve got to live with that for the rest of my life for something that really [said quietly] I shouldn’t have to … you know.

Tamera: So if his actions hadn’t pulled you into that …?

Gabriel: I wouldn’t have killed him yeah.

Tamera: So it sounds like there may be a bit of resentment towards him for putting you in that position?

Gabriel: Yes. Yes, I have got resentment! Not for the jail period and shit like that but the fact that I’ve gotta go through this shit for the rest of my life because of him. Or I got to wear this in my head for the rest of my life.

Tamera: Is it the seeing it or just knowing that it occurred that stays with you?

Gabriel: Knowing that it occurred and that I was responsible for it alright, you know.

Gabriel appeared to despise the victim–rapist not only for putting him into a situation where he believed he had no choice but to kill him, but for creating a situation that has life-long psychological consequences in the form of rumination on the killing.

Findings further reveal that some offenders were psychologically traumatised by their crimes and/or its aftermath. Hugo, a man convicted of two counts of second-degree murder, told me how even the general subject of murder had the power to reduce him to tears because, as he stated, ‘the trauma was there for years, really strong’. Hugo also explained that he was in ‘shock’ after he killed the men and that he may have ‘dissociat[ed]’, as the murders did not seem real to him, then or now:
I have to say for me honestly and even now like I—it’s like it doesn’t seem real. It never seemed real. Like it was so crazy like and it was so fast and so you know like there was no real gore and blood and guts stuff like that. It was two shots. Nothing like that. It just didn’t seem real.

While the trauma of committing crime caused one offender to go into shock and mentally detach from their crime, for another, the humiliating consequences of their wrongdoing led to self-harm and suicidal ideation. Daisy explained how she became depressed and started ‘slic[ing]’ after she became a prostitute. She shared a disturbing account of how she tried to commit suicide after being recognised by one of her regular customers at a family gathering:

I was at a big restaurant ... celebrating her [daughter’s] birthday. And then to have a fella in the middle of the crowd go ‘So who brought the prostitute?’ ‘The whore?’ And you can hear a penny drop and everybody’s looking at me. And there he is. He’s one of my regular customers. I didn’t even see him. And my daughters and my husband [ex-husband] said [in a whisper] get the fuck out of here. We never want to see you again. Ever. So I lost contact with my kids for two-and-a-half years … that night I put myself in front of a truck. So it touched me.

These narratives suggest that for some offenders, the crimes they commit are personally traumatic. I also learnt from my interviews how the stress of the criminal justice outcomes for offenders’ cases or their impending imprisonment was a further source of psychological distress. For instance, Daniel, convicted of traffic offences resulting in death, told how he anxiously awaited news about how his case would be disposed in the court:

I think everyone concluded that it was an unfortunate accident, but notwithstanding that I had committed a number of offences. So it then was decided whether or not to proceed to a trial with jury. Our solicitor’s view was that if it were to go to that, it was very likely that

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21 ‘Slicing’, also referred to as ‘cutting’, is a non-suicidal self-injury defined as the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent.
I would be found guilty and possibly [get] three years’ imprisonment. So you can imagine that there was tension in me. I was stressed for that eight or nine months, fearing the worst.

Darrin, a convicted sex offender, revealed during the interview that while he was ‘shocked’ and ‘depressed’ over the fact that he had sexually assaulted his student, his thoughts at the time were primarily focused on issues of personal safety in prison. He then explained:

For one I never previously thought that I would ever do such a thing. That sort of thing blew me away and I guess the second thing is you know being put in prison immediately after with that sort of crime meant that I wasn’t able to really deal with the issues of actually having committed the crime ’cause I was more worried about dealing with the issues of being safe

Tamera: Were there issues with that when you were inside?

Darrin: Oh yes! Physical safety is a stressful thing especially for those sorts of crimes.

Tamera: Right. Were you kept in any type of protective unit or custody?

Darrin: Ah yeah they do have protective units although in a twist of irony the protective units are often the more dangerous units in the prison system. Because the same protective unit that holds someone of my type of crime also holds the people who murder each other as drug dealers or are on the run from pretty horrible other violent crimes. So you are putting the most violent people with the people who are most despised.

These narratives demonstrate the ways in which the offenders’ criminal behaviours caused them to experience various mental afflictions. A number of offenders described how they ruminated on the crime and/or the victims long after committing the offence. In some cases, the frightened faces of the victims lingered in the offenders’ minds; photographs of victims even caused one offender to lose sleep and dream about the crime. Nor was a victim’s death easily forgotten, as one offender said he expected the murder to be ‘firmly stuck’ forever in his mind. Some offenders disclosed that they were depressed, traumatised and even suicidal as a result of their offences. For others, concerns and fears regarding the outcome of their case in the criminal justice system or their impending imprisonment were distressing.
In the following section, I examine the various emotional challenges experienced by offenders in the context of the harm they caused. Additionally, I explore how anger and emotional disconnection may precipitate and/or attend offending behaviours in some cases.

5.3.2 Emotional Challenges

As I spoke with offenders, I discovered that the emotional after-effects of their criminal behaviour were egregious. While offenders often mentioned their feelings about their crimes and its effects in general, I sometimes prompted them to consider the emotional repercussions by asking, ‘Do you remember and/or can you talk about what you were feeling at the time you committed the crime?’ and ‘Was there an emotional effect either at the time or after the offence that you recall experiencing?’ Over half (52%) said they felt guilty or ashamed. For example, after Crazy, with much laughter, related how he had stolen tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of musical instruments and committed a B&E while sleepwalking,22 I asked him whether he was ever bothered by the crimes he perpetrated. He quickly became serious and answered, ‘Yeah I felt guilty’. ‘Did you?’ I asked. ‘Yea, I did’ Crazy stated. ‘Everything I done I felt guilty for. I’m still payin’ for it … but anyway it’s my fault … I did it.’ For Hugo, convicted of a double murder, the feelings of guilt settled in fairly rapidly after the crime. Hugo talked about his feelings of guilt and the spiritual experience that led him to write both a confession letter to the court and letters of apology to the families of the victims. This account began when I asked Hugo whether anyone had encouraged him to write the letters. He responded:

No. I knew I had to do it. I knew I had to do it. And the one thing I will say too is what really like … Like I was … how do I put this … the magic for me was that in the cell I was in I found a blue New Testament and it had this smell. It smelt like the Frankincense incense. I didn’t know that’s what it was at the time but I smelt it and I read through it and I was reading through it and the one the story of the coins where the coin gets lost but it’s still [of] worth that told me that I was still a person or something. There was still worth for

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22 Crazy told me that he was shocked when he woke up in the morning and saw a stereo and other items in his home, as had no recollection of committing the B&E. He believed he committed the crime during an episode of sleepwalking that occurred as a result of his taking a mixture of drugs and alcohol.
me and that I should try. But I just … I felt so bad like I had to tell them that I was sorry. I told them that their sons didn’t do anything **wrong** and you know that this was all **me** [unclear audio] a bad situation you know like … within the same day that I wrote the confession I wrote the letters [to the families] and I gave them to the police at the same time … because it was yeah a **huge guilt. Huge guilt** like I should have never done that.

Feelings of guilt, like rumination on the offence, sometimes did not manifest for years after the offence. Unlike Hugo, a number of offenders did not feel guilty when they committed a crime. When I asked Bully, a convicted drug trafficker, if he ever regarded the people he sold drugs to as victims, he answered, ‘**I never did, until now**’.

**Tamera:** At the time you were doing it you didn’t feel like they were victims?

**Bully:** No. No, I didn’t care. I was givin’ people their first shots. Like I was a real asshole. Now I think to myself, oh my God how many lives did I destroy? No, at the time I didn’t care.

In my interview with Darrin, a teacher who had unlawful sex with his underage student, I asked him to talk about the feelings he experienced when he committed the crime. Darrin explained how he was in a bi-polar-induced delusional state at the time and that the offence made him feel liberated from the laws of society: ‘just freedom. The idea of I no longer feel connected to law. I no longer feel connected to society and it’s kind of freeing.’ However, Darrin’s feeling of ‘freedom’ was short-lived: ‘Afterwards when I—you know the delusion ended I felt extremely guilty and I felt very depressed when I realised that … you know I’d done such a thing.’

Some offenders described how feelings of shame were particularly painful. For instance, Claire, a woman convicted of DUI, revealed that shame ‘was driving everything’ she did from the moment she ploughed her car into a parked vehicle and rubbish bins at the curb. First, Claire recalled that she sat in her car crying while she waited for the police to arrive: ‘I could barely even talk. I was so upset and so embarrassed and ashamed … couldn’t get out of the car.’ Shame was also evident in Patrick’s disturbing account of an assault he committed as a neo-Nazi. Knowing that Patrick had committed various offences, I asked him if he could
identity a particular incident or victim in relation to which or whom he could discuss the emotions he felt at the time. Taking a deep breath, he stated:

It was um … it was the bashing of a gay man. And we were down by the aquatic centre and there’s a parking lot there and it’s where gay guys would go cruising. They call it the ‘fruit loop’. That’s the nickname for that … that spot. And I think we were 17 … 16, 17 at the time and we were sitting there drinking and some gay guy walked by and you know we called him names and threw beer cans at him and he told us to fuck off and that was like OK that was the … yeah it’s on.

Patrick described how he and his friends chased the man into a construction site, where they cornered him under the ‘crawl space’ of a building. When they could not reach the man, they began to pelt him with rocks ‘like kids at the lake skipping stones’. Patrick continued:

And you could hear it skip skip skip and hit the foundation at the far side. It was maybe 20 feet 25 feet under there. There was nothing but darkness and it would be like clack clack clack clack it hit the front edge and there’d be clack clack clack and then you’d hear like a howl of pain. That’s how you knew when you hit [him]. And that’s probably the … you know one of the events that … you know I carry the most shame about.

It appears from these narratives that feelings of guilt and shame were a distressing after-effect of committing crime—although, with the notable exception of Hugo, whose guilt prompted confession and apology soon after the murders, most offenders did not feel guilty or ashamed about their crimes at the time of committing them. In many cases, such feelings did not arise until after the offenders’ mental health issues or addictions were addressed.

To follow are illustrations of the ways in which the emotion of anger, or a total disconnection from their emotions, either precipitated or attended some offenders’ criminal behaviours. From my conversations with offenders, I learnt that for several (37%), the emotion of anger, prompted by life experiences, came prior to or during the crime. As a case in point, when I asked John, who was convicted of drug offences and armed robbery, about the emotions he experienced when he committed crime, he explained how his criminal trajectory was triggered by the anger he felt over his father’s death:
Well … I … went … through … my father committed suicide when I was 14 so I sort of flew off the rails. I really didn’t care what was going on. Where I was in life. Umm I was doing a lot of offending you know like I was breaking and entering. I was stealing cars and then it sort of progressed from there into you know more violent charges ’cause I was angry and … you know hatin’ the world and everyone in it and myself.

Patrick, a former neo-Nazi, told me how, as a child who had been bullied his whole life, he was drawn to the ‘angry and defiant’ ‘punk’ culture of the 1980s: ‘It just really vibed with me.’ Patrick pointed to a relationship between unresolved anger and violence that he used to explain why, as a skinhead, he enjoyed provoking fights:

[Laughs] Well it gave me a sense of power when I had none right. When I talk to kids [Patrick is now a motivational speaker] I talk about [how] unresolved anger always expresses itself as violence … I chose and gravitated to a youth subculture and the skinhead thing that glorified, encouraged and justified it and later went on to an ideology that gave justification and permission to commit that violence.

While feelings of anger appear to have triggered the crimes committed by some offenders, it is clear from the following excerpts given by Allegra and Daniel that their feelings of anger were a response to the treatment they received from the criminal justice system. Allegra, convicted of petty theft, told me how she felt ‘let down’ by this system. She first likened the treatment she experienced in jail to ‘torture’, as she said she was denied the use of a toilet for seven hours and then placed in solitary confinement after male prisoners in an adjacent cell became unruly. Next, Allegra revealed how she annoyed the judge when she told him that while she would accept ‘responsibility’ for the fact that her toddler took the jewellery, she would not plead ‘guilty’. Most of all, Allegra was angry at what she felt was an excessive fine:

So for me I was furious! Furious at the justice system ’cause seriously whether I was guilty or innocent or putting it in my own thing and walking out with it it’s 16 dollars! You’ve blown it way out of proportion! You know I can see a couple hundred dollars fine or some volunteer work for someone who’s 20 you know but 800 some odd dollars and time in jail
that’s a way overboard … so they just weren’t reasonable and so really I felt let down by the justice system.

Similar to Allegra, Daniel’s feelings of anger centred on the insensitivity he was shown by the police. He said he felt like they took ‘pleasure’ in telling him that the pedestrian he hit with his car had died and that he would be facing a charge of manslaughter.

Daniel: But there was, after the initial fear and feeling miserable, there was anger; anger with the police for being so callous.

Tamera: In the way that they mentioned it to you, or was there more to that?

Daniel: Oh there was more to that. They deliberately talked about it so that I could overhear them and prior to that I had just assumed I’d clipped a pedestrian and that he was OK. But then when they went and discussed it, it was something along the lines of, this little bugger will soon find out that he’s killed someone and he’s going to be in a lot of trouble. So I thought that it—and given that I’d had a few little scrapes with the police, I already had a jaundiced view of them. That just reaffirmed in my mind that they weren’t a sympathetic bunch.

These narratives exemplify the affective experience of committing crime. While a number of offenders identified feelings of guilt, shame and anger in relation to their offences, this was not true for all of them. From my interviews with the offenders, I learnt that many (68%) were emotionally disconnected or had no regard for the victim at the time they perpetrated the offence. When I asked offenders what they were thinking or feeling when they committed crime, seven (37%) told me that they were focused only on themselves and their own needs. As John, who was convicted of drug offences and armed robbery, put it, crime was all about ‘survival on the streets’. Mick, a convicted drug trafficker, had this to say about the feelings he had when he was selling drugs: ‘That if I didn’t do it someone else would do it. It’s a way of … I should be able to make a lot of money out of this … umm and I’ll get free drugs from it.’

Though Mick was clear that his key focus was on himself when he sold drugs, he did, when prompted by me, acknowledge that his actions harmed others. The following exchange was
a response to my question regarding whether Mick thought there were any ‘victims’ of his crimes and, if so, who they would be:

Mick: Umm well [coughs] ... I think all the people I was dealing with and a—the general community as well.

Tamera: Did you have any sense at the time that this was going on that you were hurting anybody?

Mick: [coughs] Um I did every now and then but I figure if I didn’t sell it to ’em someone else would and that was sort the attitude I tried to take but I did notice a lot of people you know weren’t um … weren’t coping too well.

Tamera: Because of their addiction?

Mick: Yeah [coughs] and because it was easy to access because I was working with ’em it sort of made it a umm sort of I suppose easier for me to think I wasn’t really hurtin’ ’em. But when I look back on it I can tell that I was.

Mick’s apparent nervous cough seemed to indicate that he was very uncomfortable talking about victims or those who were harmed because of his drug trafficking. Like Mick, Bully and Crazy both confessed that while committing crime, their concerns were with their own interests. Bully, also convicted of drug trafficking, said, ‘I didn’t care about anything or anybody or the consequences of anything until I got caught’. Crazy, convicted of B&E and theft, similarly stated, ‘I didn’t think about the consequences I just thought about me and what I needed’. Bob, a convicted armed robber, brashly stated that he had not ‘lost any sleep feeling bad’ about his crimes. He further explained how his singular focus was on personal repercussions of his criminal convictions:

I suppose it seems self-centred a little bit because it’s all been about going to prison and being on parole and what the criminal record’s going to do for me you know down the track getting jobs stuff like that. So being a little bit more worried about myself rather than umm … thinking well it was a bad thing that I’d done.
As some offenders reflected on their criminal behaviours, they said they came to realise that they had been able to victimise people because they had felt no emotional connection to them. For example, Real told how he purposefully killed a fellow inmate to ‘set the mood’ for a ‘climate of fear’—a move that would position him at the top of the prison hierarchy. Real described what he felt at the moment of the crime:

Well it was pretty much a very controlled right. Just turn everything off. Basically that’s just what we did. It’s just how I felt things I pretty much ahh just numb. Because you know um when you’re getting when you’re getting in the state of a having to go into a cell and to kill somebody um basically um you know you turn everything off. You turn the emotions off. And basically that’s what I did.

Real went on to explain that his lack of regard for both himself and the victim also enabled him to commit such a brutal crime:

And for me I have to say that I saw the victim as myself. Somebody that didn’t matter. Because he was doing life … And for me it was who cares if this person dies like I didn’t hold any value to him. And my first victim was the same way actually too. I see my victims as I see myself. People that didn’t matter.

Hugo also narrated how his lack of emotional connection to the victims (as he knew them for only one week) played a part in the killings:

If I would have connected with him I wouldn’t have shot him. You know like if I had known them as people I wouldn’t have been able to shoot them. But I was able to demonise [one victim] because he was telling me bad things about himself. Trying to pick up 12-year-old girls [for the purpose of prostitution] and so I was able to demonise him. And so that was in my mind was OK, OK and then the other guy was his buddy and do that to him and if I don’t do that to him he’s going to get me and in my 19-year-old mind that’s what I’m thinking. So you know like I say if I would have known them I wouldn’t do anything.

When I asked Patrick, a former neo-Nazi, to talk about the most significant effect his criminal action had on his life, he thought for a moment before answering that it had to do with the cyclical nature of becoming disconnected from himself and others when he committed crime:
The more I did it [crimes] the more I dehumanised myself. The more I became disconnected from my own humanity and the more the violence escalated the more I had to disconnect from my own … um … humanity in order to keep … to keep doing it and what I was getting as a reward for doing it was … it was a sense of power. A sense of safety, comradery you know acceptance.

Tamera: Did you buy into the ideology as much as just these other things that you’re mentioning?

Patrick: Absolutely! And I think you know it is in my own introspection and healing work and stuff that I’ve done and what I’ve kind of learnt is that … that um the only way that we can hold on to an extremist ideology of any kind is to be disconnected from our hearts. ’Cause the foundation of all of those ideologies is the lie that we believe that we come into this world and we’re alone and we’re separate and we’re disconnected from anything and anyone. And that … you know once the ego and intellect becomes untethered from the heart it’s capable of rationalising and justifying anything.

Drawing on these above views from the offenders, it may be argued that there is an important emotional component to committing crime in terms of the expression or absence of emotions. Offending behaviour creates distressing feelings of guilt and shame, though not necessarily immediately. Anger can be viewed as both a cause and an after-effect of criminal wrongdoing and, in these cases, emotional disconnection from others and/or self appeared to pave the way for committing acts of violence.

5.3.3 Challenged Futures

The third aspect I identified in the Challenged Lives theme is a concept I call challenged futures. I found from my conversations with offenders that each was able to identify ways in which their criminal behaviour irrevocably challenged and/or changed their futures. The following accounts are offenders’ answers to my question, ‘What do you consider to be the most significant affect this offence/your crimes has had on your life?’ First, a number of offenders (16%) told me how their criminal history challenged the aspirations they had for
their future careers. For instance, Allegra was 20 years old when she was convicted of petty theft. She explained to me how the offence has followed her throughout her life:

Obviously the immediate kind of aftermath which was you know the eating thing23 like I said and having to pay that back. But a long-term effect is definitely having to apply for jobs in the finance industry and umm wondering do I straight up in an interview say oh I have a criminal history of petty theft and then not getting called back for an interview or do I just not admit that and then when they do my criminal check and it comes up um then explain it ... there’s always that worry that when you do apply for a new job in the finance industry especially or you’re in a trusted position dealing with money that they’re just gonna say ‘mmm petty theft. No! Goodbye’ and that’s my livelihood.

In another case, Bob spent over a year in prison for two armed robberies that he committed in one week against the same chemist. After being released from prison, Bob went to university and received a degree in social science, which he hoped would lead to a good job. When I asked Bob to talk about the most significant effect of his crimes, he took a deep breath and said, ‘Umm I suppose I’m more worried about the impact it’s going to have on me in the future having a criminal record and trying to find work’. Austin similarly stressed frustration that his criminal behaviour had ruined his future plans. Austin was a teenager when he was convicted on charges related to child pornography. Prior to this, he said he was an ‘elite athlete’ with a ‘respectable position’ in a sport he had played for many years. Austin explained the feelings he had after his crimes cost him his place on the team:

I just started making [national] teams so it definitely was a horrible impact but understandable and I’m not saying that oh God I don’t deserve this and blah blah blah. I did the wrong thing so obviously—consequences but it’s just sort of like I was so close to … if only I could have just [little laugh] had the hindsight or had the strength to just be like OK move this [offending behaviour] aside. That’s not important. Let’s go here [towards goals].

23 Allegra explained how the court-imposed fine was a hardship on her as a single mother. She said she often went hungry so that her own children, and those she took care of in her home daycare centre, were able to eat.
Austin told me that his criminal history also posed a challenge to the way he conducted himself in public:

Definitely freedom in terms of what I can and can’t do and how I act ... if I go to the pool I make sure that I’m with people. If they go to the toilet I go to the toilet with them just to make sure that I always have sort of like a safety blanket ... I don’t want to be seen at a pool by myself because someone can quite easily say ‘he touched me’ and then I’ve got no backup. I’ve got nothing because I have this history and who are they going to believe the person who’s got the history or the person who’s there? Which of course makes me feel horrible.24

Austin’s account raises the significant social and relational challenges a number of offenders said they faced as a consequence of their crimes. Nearly half (47%) of offenders cited the loss of meaningful family relationships from the past (discussed further in Chapter 7) and those they had hoped to cultivate in the future as the most significant effect of their criminal actions. As a case in point, Bully talked to me about how drugs used to be more important to him than ‘thinkin’ about family and feeding my family’. The consequence of this was losing a good relationship with two of his three children:

I think most of it [the significant effect] was just what my elder children thought of me. Because I wasn’t there for most of their lives and all that sort of stuff. I was always in and out of jail.

Daisy revealed that the most significant affect her prostitution had on her life was also the loss of her family:

Now they don’t talk to me at all. Nobody talks to me. I’ve got five grandbabies and I caught up with them all ahh it would have been year over a year and a half two years ago going on two years.

Tamera: You don’t have contact with your kids at this point in time?

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24 Austin was convicted on child pornography charges as a result of his role in obtaining pornographic images at the behest of a paedophile he met on the internet. He was sentenced to five years on the sex offender registry.
Daisy: No. No. They’ve given me the … the big shove and you know what I’ve never forgotten? I’ve never forgotten birthdays. I’ve never forgotten my grandbabies’ birthdays and birthdays and Christmas and you know I’ve never had a mother’s cake. I haven’t had a Mother’s Day card in five years so I just brush it off now.

Some offenders told me that their crimes had most affected their lives by spoiling their chances for future meaningful relationships. For instance, Mick said his offending behaviours ‘ruined’ his life:

[It had] a huge impact. Because I haven’t been really able to achieve my life’s goals that I set when I was younger … basically get married. Have kids. Buy a house. Feel like I’ve achieved something. And it’s not that I haven’t had the opportunity. I’ve had lots of opportunity to do that. But I just ah … frittered it away.

Like Mick, Boone, who was convicted of drug offences and drink-driving, also lamented the loss of a future family. Boone spoke with me at length about his father’s abuse and how he turned to drugs and alcohol to cope. When I asked him what he considered the greatest effect these experiences had had on his life, he replied: ‘Um being single most of my life. Not getting into a relationship and having kids at some stage. Probably work situations. Work relationships and those sorts of things.’

For a number of offenders, the loss of meaningful relationships meant social isolation. In their interview, two offenders shared with me how social isolation was a significant after-effect of their crimes. Lars, convicted of drug crimes, told how his 20 years as an ice addict substantially impaired his memory and led him to become more solitary. When I asked about the most notable outcomes of his drug offending, he explained:

My memory. Just all the brain cells I’ve killed. You know I don’t think straight anymore and really don’t have much of a life. I sit here and watch TV all day. I come in here [community centre where the interview was held] when it’s open on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. Other than that I just don’t I really don’t have a life you know. I’m not good at making friends. I don’t like to talk to people. I’m very reserved.

Tamera: Were you that way as a youngster before the drugs got involved?
Lars: No, not really.

Hope was convicted of several crimes, including manufacturing drugs, fraud and theft. Like Lars, Hope pointed to self-imposed social isolation as the most significant effect of her criminal behaviours. I found this a very surprising transformation and most certainly a significant effect, as Hope spent much of the interview sharing numerous stories of her criminal exploits that positioned her as an extrovert. In this detailed narrative about going to ‘work’, Hope described herself as someone who found crime adventurous and who especially liked the recognition she received from her criminal peers:

Black jeans. Black shirt. Had my hair platted. I had the backpack. The screwdriver the wrench all those things that may become handy. Set of keys and I say to [partner] it used to be just a common thing I’d go to work. He’d go, ‘alright be careful’. Yeah. No worries and off I’d go and that’s what I would call it ‘work’. I’d be off and I’d be scouring the streets and I’d be looking for opportunities. Things to come to. Businesses that might have windows that [had] been opened. Places that I walked past that you can see the safe from the front door. All those things. And it was a community. You’d go out and you’d run into other people. Dude! Hey! Yeah! And it was other people out walking the same time as you. I’d go to high-rise complexes which takes a jimmy bar and [unclear] set of keys and you slip it and get downstairs. Awesome opportunities for all sorts of things. People hide their keys for their units that kinda stuff and you would run into other people that you know. You were the dangerous element. It was very funny. Now you go out and you’re worried about that dangerous element when you go out. When you’re on the other side you are the dangerous element. And it’s funny you’re not scared of anything because the people that you run into that do you over are the people that you know from your circles. Yeah, it was adrenaline! It was excitement plus fun fun fun! That’s all it was about. Let’s go! It was never about even really about the money. It was about an achievement I guess. I got an ego. I had a really big ego. Especially being a female that used to run amuck on the coast.

Hope’s following account of her current preference for isolation stands in stark contrast to her previous description of the joy she once took in the social comradesy of her criminal ‘community’:
I don’t go out places. I don’t like being out places. I especially don’t like running into people that I used to know. So … I don’t drink. I don’t smoke. I don’t go out … like I would love to go nightclubbing with my son. But that idea of running into people and yeah no so it’s affected me a lot that way. It’s made me—I used to be very—I know I sound like an extrovert but I’m really not anymore. It’s yeah I’ll come out and I’ll shine for these moments and then I’ll crawl back into my shell and that’s me. I’m quite happy. I’d be quite happy to live in a little desert island alone with nobody for the rest of my life. So that is a major outcome of it all.

Clearly, Hope’s life dramatically changed in the aftermath of her crimes and subsequent imprisonment. The notoriety Hope enjoyed and thrill of crime she experienced when she was running ‘amuck’ had been replaced with a desire to disconnect from others.

It is important to note that when I asked offenders to talk about the most significant effect their crimes had on their lives, six (32%) pointed to ways their lives had been positively affected. Most of these stories are shared, at least in part, in the subsequent chapters on forgiveness (see chapters 6 and 7); however, I conclude this section with the following narrative from John, who was convicted of numerous offences, including armed robbery and assaulting a police officer. While John’s answer does not appear to highlight a positive effect of his offending, he spoke these words with a sense of awe. He looked and sounded as though he was not only amazed that he had lived to tell his story, but that the experiences he was relating were important lessons he had learnt:

I’ve seen a lot of things that a lot of people in life wouldn’t see. I’ve been in and out of jail all of my life. I’ve been a heroin addict for 10 years. I was an ice addict for a while. You know tried cocaine. Tried heroin. Tried … ahh … ekkies you know trips acid you know. MDMA you know all that sort of stuff you know. Smoked pot. Did the lot you know what I mean and I’ve watched people like … like I say I’m 40 years of age but I’ve probably seen the life of an 80-year-old. You know what I mean I’ve watched people die in front of me. I’ve watched people come and go. I’ve watched people in and out of jail come and go. I’ve watched people go from bein’ hectic and bad and in trouble all the time to finding a nice girlfriend and having a family and settling down and you know like there is a path of
life that we all lead. Sometimes you take the easy road or sometimes you learn the hard way. I learnt the hard way all my life you know so yeah.

In addressing the overarching theme *Challenged Lives*, I shared offenders’ perceptions of the ways in which their crimes challenged their lives. Several offenders identified mental or psychological challenges consequent to their offending. Some ruminated on their crimes and lost sleep or dreamt about their offences. Those who killed the victim said the murder would be forever in their minds. Many offenders talked about being depressed, traumatised and even suicidal as a result of their criminal actions. In some cases, the stress of the criminal justice system outcomes of their case or their looming imprisonment was particularly upsetting. They also noted emotional challenges, particularly feelings of guilt or shame. In addition, a number of offenders described feeling angry or disconnected from their emotions either prior to or during the crime. Lastly, many offenders explained that the most significant effects their crimes had on their lives were those that posed a challenge to their futures. For some, their crimes damaged current meaningful relationships and ruined their hopes for future ones. At other times, offenders became more withdrawn and socially isolated because of their crimes, or their criminal history threatened their future career aspirations. Yet, there were also offenders who viewed the personal effects of their offences as positive, at least in some respects, as they had perhaps been taught important lessons.

In addressing the following theme, *Impression Management*, I explore the various narrative strategies offenders used to help them uphold a positive self-identity.

### 5.4 Impression Management

In his classic book *Spoiled Identities*, Goffman (1959) explains that human beings engage in a controlled presentation of self to manage the impressions that others have of them. From my conversations with offenders, I noticed that all explained their lived experience as a criminal offender in a manner that allowed them, to some extent, to ‘save face’. Whether offenders were remorseful about their crimes or not, all (100%) gave accounts of their behaviour that allowed them to reframe their wrongdoing or self-perceptions to the degree that they could maintain an identity as an essentially good person. I found that offenders
employed one or more of three narrative strategies to these ends, which I take up in turn here: 1) tales of decency; 2) tales of victimisation; and 3) tales of heroism.

5.4.1 Tales of Decency

Over half (58%) of the offenders I interviewed wove a narrative around their offending that stated, in effect, *I am a decent person*. By way of illustration, Crazy compared his criminal self, the person who once felt ‘good’ about getting away with stealing, with his identity as a new, reformed man:

As I’ve got older I’ve just noticed that that sort of stuff just doesn’t work you know like … I don’t need to do that to get good in life. It’s up to me whether I wanna get good. I’ve got to earn it and you can’t take from people. You can’t hurt people. Well I never hurt anybody but yeah that’s how I feel you know. I would never—I would never commit an offence now. **Ever**. I wouldn’t steal a candy bar from the shop you know.

In my conversation with Daisy, a former prostitute, she told me how she held her head high despite being a former sex worker. Knowing that Daisy had been suicidal at one point when she was prostituting, I asked her what she thought enabled her to do this. Daisy mentioned a number of things that appeared to help affirm her self-worth. First, she said she quit walking the street after she passed a physical exam and was certified ‘clean’. She explained that this certification opened the door to working in more lucrative and legal parlours. She also shared how she looked after prostitutes who were ‘on the nod’ or drug-addicted to make certain that other prostitutes did not ‘raid’ or rob them. In addition, Daisy seemed proud of the fact that her work allowed her to live debt-free:

I used to do tiny skirts and everything and a lot of people would [lowers voice] judge you and I’m like [sounding incensed] well at least I’m out **working**! You know and they go ‘well that’s not **work**’. People would say ‘ah you’re a **whore**’. ‘You’re a **slut**’. I’m like umm well everything that **I own**. **I own**. You know I’m not in **debt** to anybody.

While Daisy’s self-narrative of decency encompassed her work and identity as a prostitute, Bob, an addict who robbed the same chemist twice in one week to obtain drugs, attempted to
distance himself from a deviant identity. Bob became very animated when he told me how he walked into the shop with a hypodermic needle as his weapon. He exclaimed: ‘I didn’t know what I was doin’! I’m not a practised arm robber or anything. It was me first go. On the job training, I suppose.’

When I asked him whether he would have stuck the chemist with the needle, he asserted:

I’ve always maintained that if he [the chemist] had a said to me, ‘get out of my shop you goose’ I probably would have left. Umm year ahh I’ll always maintain that yeah.

Tamera: So when you saw the victim … was this a fellow or a lady?

Bob: It was a bloke. It was a bloke yeah. I’m not sure I would have been able to do it to a woman.

Bob first positioned himself as a decent person when he painted a picture of his criminal behaviour as something that fell outside the norm of his character. Bob also inferred that he was not a committed criminal when he suggested that a sharp word from the chemist would have caused him to flee. Moreover, he maintained that he would not have committed the offence if the chemist had been a woman. Here, Bob touched on an issue that was raised by other offenders regarding a rule of moral conduct (i.e., a convict code) or ‘ethical’ system of norms and values, wherein certain groups such as women, children and the elderly are considered off-limits for victimisation. Real, who was convicted of numerous violent crimes, including murder, explored this issue in detail. He told how he was taught the ‘golden rule’ that ‘you don’t touch women or children’ when he was in juvenile detention. Real credited this ‘rule’ with giving him the ‘common sense’ to choose his victims wisely:

For me it was just like you know I thank God that I’ve always had that common sense to choose my victims and this is for any violence that I chose over the years. Like I said I would never hurt a child and I would never hurt a woman. But that’s because of where I lived and how I was brought up … we talk about institutionalisation. I’ve been in the system

25 ‘Bloke’ is an Australian slang term used to denote a man.
since the age of 11 so I know these kind of rules that we had within ourselves. You know like you never hurt a woman and you never hurt a child.

Real ultimately took responsibility for his crimes yet, by drawing a line between the type of victims he chose (the right victims) versus the victims chosen by other offenders (the wrong victims), he was able to uphold a decent or moral view of himself even in midst of evidence (i.e., violent offences) to the contrary.

Like Real, Gabriel spent much of his formative years in juvenile detention, where he too learnt the ethical code of conduct that forbade harming women and children. Gabriel was clearly enraged as he shared with me how his victim, an ex-con he knew from prison, had only days prior to the murder ‘degraded’ (raped) the same woman at Gabriel’s home that he then attempted to rape again. Gabriel said, ‘he broke every cardinal rule that I believed in! And he did it on my property!’ Gabriel vividly shared how the man’s actions ‘breached’ and ‘compromised’ the set of values upon which Gabriel staked his reputation and very life:

If I had of allowed what I’d see to take place and let it keep going and she had got raped again then I’ve broken my honour. I’ve broken my respect. I’ve broken my integrity … right and therefore I might as well put a bullet in me own mouth.

From Gabriel’s account, it was clear that the rape of a woman at his home, and attempted rape days later, threatened not only his ethical values, but Gabriel’s identity, which was apparently established upon these principles.

This section demonstrates that the offenders wove narratives around their offending behaviour that allowed them to still view themselves as decent people. Some offenders were quick to affirm that they had reformed or had not been committed to a deviant lifestyle. For example, former prostitute Daisy said she held her head high and was not ashamed of her ‘job’, as it kept her out of debt. A number of other offenders crafted tales of decency by stating that they followed the ‘ethical’ values of the convict code when committing crime—a code that, in particular, repudiated the harm of women and children.
5.4.2 Tales of Victimisation

In my interviews with offenders, I noted that over half (53%) framed their criminal behaviour and/or identity using a narrative that implicitly stated *I am a victim*. This is not to suggest that these offenders denied committing the crime, but rather that the explanation they gave for their crimes positioned their behaviour as a response to being victimised themselves by others—an action that, to some degree, protected them from assuming a totally deviant identity. For example, Boone, convicted of drug offences and drink-driving, told me that he engaged in ‘risky’ behaviours (e.g., drugs, alcohol) because of ‘where I come from’. Boone explained that his father’s verbal abuse towards him taught him that ‘I’m not good enough. Not worthy’. Boone said he abused alcohol and drugs because ‘I don’t particularly care about life too much. Don’t care about myself’. Like Boone, Austin pointed to an action from his father that precipitated his crimes. When I asked Austin, who was convicted on child pornography offences, if he could help me understand what he was thinking and feeling at the time of his crimes, he said that ‘the seed that grew into everything’ was his father’s response to his attempt to ‘come out’ to him about his sexuality:

> When it all started I actually tried to come out to my father as bisexual. And he got a bit angry so I sort of withdrew and there was a lot of self-sort of hatred and [I was] uncomfortable with myself.

Austin said he also felt alienated from his peers, as the sport he played had a ‘homophobic environment’. He explained how these factors led him to spend more time on the internet, where he befriended a man—a paedophile—whom he described as ‘completely accepting. Completely open to anything being said [about] emotions and feelings’. Austin told me that fear, loneliness and a desire to be accepted drove him to comply with his internet friend’s suggestion that he pose online as a teenage girl and request sexually explicit photographs and videos from teen boys:

> So definitely fear was a thing. I guess early on it was being lonely. It was being sort of secluded and being the only one as it often feels at that age in this sort of circumstance. You’re like well you are the only one because no one else is being brave enough to do it
[admitting to being bisexual or gay]. So you’re not going to be the one to do it … so there was a lot of the fear of coming out but also the loneliness of not being able to come out. And not being able to feel accepted amongst your group. Even though I was quite accepted there was part missing.

In another case, Hugo, who was convicted for a double murder, told me how the victimisation he experienced from his mother and his fear of being victimised by the men he killed caused him to commit the murders. He first articulated how the specific cause of the murders was his fear of being harmed when he told the two victims he wanted them to get out of his house:

    This guy [victim 1] for a week is telling me that he’s from [town] and he’s an OG [gang affiliation] and he’s been trying to instil in me this idea that’s he’s, you know, he’s black and that he’s a gangster from [town] and he’s up here being a pimp. And so I’m a 19-year-old kid and he’s a 30-year-old and he’s telling me all this stuff so I didn’t want to piss him off! You know so it was like. There was that element of fear. There was this huge element of stress and of overwhelming anxiety about this whole situation you know what I mean. It’s like I felt like this [the murders] was a way out.

Though Hugo was obviously afraid of the victims and responded violently to this fear, he said it was the stresses, financial and otherwise, placed on him by his mother that ultimately ‘broke’ him and were ‘the main cause of the offence’. Hugo continued:

    I was raised by my mom’s parents and my mom came to [town] to [said sarcastically] rescue me. Took me to [town] and basically I became like her indentured servant. And I got a job and she just figured all kinds of ways to guilt-trip me and scam me out of my money. And then they [mother and stepfather] set me up in their house and they moved into a bigger house and they got me to pay all the bills.

It appears that Hugo viewed the murders he committed as a response to both the victimisation he experienced from his mother and his fears of becoming the victim of the men he killed.

Patrick, a former skinhead convicted of assault and disseminating hate propaganda, said he could trace the roots of his violent behaviour to the bullying he was subjected to as a youth. Patrick told me that from the day when, at age 10, he walked in on his dad in bed with another
woman, he became defiant, his grades declined and he started getting into trouble at school. He recalled how his parents and teachers tried to ‘beat’ him into raising his grades:

> So if I didn’t get an A or B on a major test or assignment I was to be caned. And the first time it was twice. The second time it was four times then it was six times and then every time after that which there was lots of times it was just eight. Then it was like a yardstick on the rear end … I think even to this day I never ever felt more powerless than I did on those visits to that office [the school principal]. And it didn’t work.

Patrick stated that his ‘bullying survival strategy’ was ‘befriend the bully; become the bully’. This led him to become involved in a neo-Nazi organisation, where he said gained ‘a sense of safety, comradesy [and] acceptance’.

In this section, I shared examples of how a number of offenders were able to uphold their identity as an essentially good person by placing their crimes in a narrative of personal victimisation. Some said they committed crime after being rejected, betrayed and bullied by those close to them. One said their fear of being victimised caused them to commit the offence, while another said feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and a need to feel safe precipitated their crimes.

**5.4.3 Tales of Heroism**

A hero is generally considered a person who possesses extraordinary courage, strength and determination. They are viewed as protectors, defenders and champions and perform acts that are noble or daring. The heroic tale is, at its core, a story of good triumphing and evil failing and of redemption, not unlike the stories shared by some of the offenders I interviewed. From my conversations with them, I found that nearly three-quarters (74%) wove a narrative around either themselves or their offending behaviours that implied I am heroic. I must specify that not one offender used the word ‘hero’ or ‘heroic’ in relation to themselves or their crimes—in most cases, it was more of an implicit, rather than overt, sense of heroism that came through. These offenders crafted accounts that endowed them and/or their crimes with certain heroic qualities such as courage, strength, overcoming challenges, determination
and altruism, particularly with respect to the lessons learnt because of their experiences as a criminal offender and the positive changes they made in their lives as a result.

For example, Bully, a convicted drug trafficker, said he ‘woke up’ during his last prison sentence. He stated that he overcame his drug addiction and left the criminal lifestyle because ‘I was sick of bein’ a loser. Sick a bein’ reliant on drugs all that sort of thing. I just wanted a better life you know’. Like Bully, Daniel, convicted of traffic offences resulting in death, described this incident as a ‘good wake-up call’. He shared that in the aftermath of the offence, he ‘knuckled down’ to prove that he could be a good person. For Bully and Daniel, this heroism was self- rather than other-directed, which is perhaps more common among the offenders I interviewed. Implicit in their comments was the idea that though the odds may have been stacked against them (e.g., drug addiction, stigma), they not only listened to the ‘wake-up call’ created by their crimes, but heroically responded by working hard to turn their lives around. When I asked Austin to discuss how he had changed as a result of his experience as a convicted sex offender, I was surprised when he said he became a more confident person:

I know I might not seem too confident now and I’m by no means a confident person but I’ve changed a lot in confidence since everything’s happened. I’ve had to because that was almost like a survival instinct. If I didn’t have the confidence to keep working and keep doing uni and keep doing that where would I be? I’d still be at home. By myself. Probably on the computer still which would have just not reinforced the offending behaviour but reinforced the isolation.

As with Bully and Daniel, Austin seemed proud of the strength and courage that he displayed in the aftermath of his conviction on child pornography charges. Rather than isolate himself, his determination to keep working and going to university, even in the face of ridicule and threats, gave him a new confidence in himself and his abilities.

A few offenders were pleased that their experiences as a criminal offender had been of benefit to those who knew them or knew of their crimes. As a case in point, John, convicted of drug offences and armed robbery, told me he was ‘proud’ that his criminal lifestyle had been an object lesson that served to deter his younger brother from wrongdoing:
The good thing about it is my younger brother ‘cause of my upbringing and where I’ve been in life it sort of rubbed off on him and he doesn’t smoke cigarettes. He doesn’t take drugs … like you know the runnin’ around you know and hangin’ out with the boys and getting in trouble and all that sort of stuff and getting in trouble with the law … has sort of deterred him and so I’m very proud of that fact that I’ve … and like Mum says ‘he idolises the ground you walk on man’ you know and I’m like yeah I know so I try and be a good role model now for him.

Similarly, Patrick, a former skinhead, believed that his experiences as an offender benefited others, particularly youths who might be enticed to join the neo-Nazi movement. When I asked Patrick how he had changed since he left the movement, he first said, ‘There’s certainly a lot less anger there’. He then elaborated by relating a conversation he had with his mother after she came to one of his public lectures:

I was speaking at a school and it was the first time my mum and my daughter sat in the audience. And then [to] my mum afterwards I said, well how did that make you feel? She said, ‘well I feel ashamed that I was responsible in some way for creating all of that’. And I said well look at it this way I said if it wasn’t for all of that I wouldn’t be standing here in front of 500 high school students talking about compassion and forgiveness and my story wouldn’t have the same impact on them as it did. And you know whatever happened happened but the end result of it is this platform from which to inspire compassion and forgiveness and I think she looked at it a bit differently.

For John and Patrick, the heroic act was their story of criminal offending. Each man used their experiences as a criminal offender as an object lesson or means of saving others from making similar mistakes.

Lastly, from my interviews, I found two instances where offenders tried to make their crimes appear more heroic. For example, Crazy had been convicted of the B&E of a residence and theft of thousands of dollars’ worth of musical instruments from a music shop. I asked him if he could identify and talk a little about the victims in either case:
There was no victims involved. Ahh there was. The person that run the shop. But everything’s insured anyway. That’s why I picked them jobs because it’s not hurting anybody.

Tamera: Oh, it was OK?

Crazy: I think of it’s insured. They’re happy! Because they get the money. They’d be shaking my hand like yeah yeah.

Tamera: OK, so that played a big part?

Crazy: Yeah it’s good for them. They still get somethin’ out of it as well yeah so.

It would appear that Crazy considered the music shop owner to be a victim by definition only, and that Crazy saw himself more as a benefactor than a thief. Crazy imagined that the shop owner was happy about the theft and would thank him for the insurance company payout.

Gabriel, convicted of manslaughter, crafted a story around the offence that positioned him more in the role of protector and defender than murderer. Gabriel clearly saw his crimes as a defence of the ethical values he held dear (i.e., the criminal code), which in part stated that women should not be harmed. Gabriel shared a harrowing account of his victim’s actions and ensuing fight that culminated in the murder:

[It was] just degrading what he was doing and I was sitting like we’re sitting now. And he was doing it on my steps in front of me. Pulling her top up. Pulling her panties aside. And there was other people there too. And I said to him [related in a menacing-sounding voice] get the fuck off my steps. And he laughed and shit. Next thing he pulled a knife on me. So he cut me in the hand. Kicked the chair out in front of him. He dropped the knife. The knife fell on the place where you sit. Picked it up stood there and looked at him for about a minute and then slammed it in through his heart.

Gabriel further explained that he had already given his victim a ‘second chance’ when he warned him previously about his behaviour. Gabriel provided further insight into why he was committed to defending his code of ethics:
I was not going to allow this to happen again. Not on my watch. If he had a done it somewhere else right. Wouldn’t have been my problem. And it wouldn’t have affected my honour or my integrity. It would have been somebody else’s that was getting compromised not mine. But because he done on my place it was mine my integrity my respect had been breached and no no not happenin’ and he was warned not to do it.

Gabriel clearly saw his victim’s behaviour as a threat not just to the ethical values themselves, but to his identity as a man of integrity, honour and respect—attributes it seemed he attained through his adherence to, and defence of, these values.

In addressing the theme Impression Management, I explored the three narrative strategies that offenders used to reframe themselves and/or their crimes, thus enabling them to maintain a more positive identity. First, a number of offenders employed what I call tales of decency to frame their experiences as a criminal offender in such a way that they could still be viewed as a decent or good person. Some offenders made comparisons between their old offending self and their new, reformed self. Others stated their criminal behaviours were outside the norm of how they usually behaved. A number of offenders attempted to hold onto their identity as a decent person by espousing their adherence to the ethical values of the criminal code. I found that the second way offenders were able to uphold a positive identity was through tales of victimisation. In these cases, offenders explained their crimes as a response to the hurtful actions of others. Some said their deviance was the result of rejection, bullying and betrayal; in another case, the crime occurred because of the offender’s fear of being victimised. Lastly, I found that a significant portion of offenders crafted tales of heroism that endowed them or their offences with certain heroic qualities such as the strength, courage and determination, thus allowing them to cultivate a more positive self-identity. Some offenders described the effect of their offences as a ‘wake-up call’ that set them on a law-abiding trajectory. Others said they learnt important lessons that would keep them from committing crime in the future. Some offenders told how they shared their experiences as a criminal in the hope that they could save others from making similar mistakes. In a very few cases, offenders sought to make themselves appear more heroic. This occurred when they
believed their crime had benefited the victim or been committed in the defence of higher principles.

In addressing the final overarching theme, *Blame Talk*, I explain the ways in which offenders sought to either accept or deflect blame for their crimes.

**5.5 Blame Talk**

A common theme evident throughout the offenders’ narratives centred on the ways they either accepted or deflected blame for their crimes. A handful (11%) of offenders unequivocally took the blame for their actions, while the same number (11%) emphatically refused to admit they were at fault. I found that most offenders (74%) ‘straddled the fence’, as they often admitted their wrongdoing but then added an excuse or rationalisation. For example, Gabriel readily admitted that he committed the murder, but deflected blame to the victim for having brought on and *caused* the murder. Similarly, Darrin admitted that he was wrong to cultivate an inappropriate sexual relationship with one of his students, yet simultaneously blamed his actions on the ‘delusions’ of his bi-polar disorder and on his employer for refusing to allow him the time off from work that he needed to seek mental health support. In another case, Austin acknowledged that it was wrong of him to solicit pornographic images from teenage boys, but when the subject turned to his thoughts about the victims, he began deflecting blame to them and to the internet paedophile. When I asked Austin if it ever occurred to him at the time that these boys were victims or that he was victimising them, he replied:

> No. And again it was rationalised by this external figure [online paedophile ‘friend’]. I never sought photos from or videos from anyone that said no. It was only people that would almost *initiate it* or would *ask* for it basically or if I suggested it were more than willing. So that aspect of it sort of made it feel *less* of an invasive thing and more of a … consensual thing.

Another offender who alternated between accepting and deflecting blame was Real, who was convicted of numerous violent offences, including murder. Real made a number of
comments, such as ‘I’ve always had the choice. I’ve never been pressured to do anything I’ve done. But I’ve always chose to do it’ and ‘I wasn’t drunk. I wasn’t mad. I didn’t lose it. You know I remember every act that you know I could have backed down each time and I didn’t’, which seemed to indicate that he accepted the blame for crimes. This made his explanation for killing a fellow inmate all the more puzzling to me: when I asked Real, ‘What happened in that instance exactly?’, he said, ‘Um well basically um we had trapped him in his cell and a … he died’. By using the phrase ‘he died’ rather than something like ‘I/we killed him’, Real removed himself as an actor in the crime, which, in effect, shifted the blame onto happenstance at the very least and perhaps even onto the victim (he died).

Crazy was one of a few offenders who owned their crimes but blamed their actions on their addictions. Crazy stole thousands of dollars’ worth of musical instruments and committed the B&E of a home, ostensibly during a ‘sleepwalking’ episode that occurred after he ingested a mixture of drugs and alcohol. He admitted it was ‘low’ to steal from people, and told me that he had to ‘cop that’ (i.e., accept blame or punishment). Yet he went on to put the blame for his crimes on his drug use:

I’ve always been on something. It’s always been somethin’ that caused me to do it. It’s been a drug or I’m not someone who can do something straight. I can’t. But if I’m on something well it’s a different story.

Like Crazy, Bob explained that he committed the armed robbery of a chemist to obtain the drugs he needed for his addiction. First, Bob contextualised his crime by stating that he was ‘high’ at the time. Then, when I asked him to set the scene of how the crime occurred, he admitted to committing the offence, relating the steps he took—stealing a car, picking an unknown chemist and bringing a weapon—but stopping short of accepting blame with the statement that the crime ‘wasn’t really a planned thing. It sort of … just happened’. Whether Bob admitted to me that he accepted blame or not, I believe the following narrative regarding an apparent war he had with his conscience seconds before the robbery sheds light on the self-blame he experienced. When I asked Bob how he felt at the time of the crime, he appeared to thoughtfully reflect, and then answered, ‘I suppose that little voice raised saying don’t do it’. Bob recalled that he told the voice, ‘ahhhhh stop it! Just go ahead and do it’. He
said he then ignored the ‘little niggling voice’ in his head that told him what he was doing was wrong and committed the armed robbery.

I found from my interviews with offenders that only a few accepted full blame for the crimes they committed. As a case in point, while Bully readily admitted to me that he was a drug addict and that his drug offences—including drug trafficking—were undertaken so he could support his habit, he never appeared to use his addiction as an excuse for having committed the crime. Bully said he viewed all his drug clients as ‘victims’ and regretted the harm he caused to others. Bully shared, ‘I see the mess they’ve made of their lives and I just think that’s my fault’. From my conversation with Daniel, I noticed that he accepted blame from the moment the offence occurred. He first revealed to me the thoughts going through his mind the instant he struck a pedestrian with his car:

   Everything in my system was telling me to get the hell out of there. But something clicked. I mean I did hit the accelerator and sped off and then about a couple of hundred metres down the road I thought, no, no. I need to go back and provide some sort of assistance. So I stopped, my friends kept telling me ‘keep going!’ and I just felt that I needed to be more responsible. It was my fault. I had done something, I needed to go back.

Daniel further recalled feeling miserable in juvenile detention, but again told me that he accepted blame for those circumstances:

   At the time, the thoughts that were going through my mind, the juvenile facility was very confronting. I met young criminals who I wasn’t very impressed with. I thought to myself, is this what I’ve got myself in to? I realised I was the only person responsible for my actions so I couldn’t blame anybody else.

Throughout his account of the offence, Daniel explicitly accepted blame for his behaviour. Even when he felt sorry for himself and wondered ‘why me’, he said he always understood his actions had been ‘stupid’.

I also found that a small proportion of offenders refused to accept any blame for their crimes. For instance, in my conversation with Allegra, she steadfastly refused to accept blame for the
theft of $16 worth of costume jewellery that she said her toddler had taken. Allegra blamed the store clerk for directing the anger she had towards her old boss (Allegra’s husband, who had recently fired her) at her by pressing charges:

I think the woman who was working there [the jewellery store clerk] made it out to be a much bigger offence than it actually was and you know ’cause she obviously didn’t like my ex-partner now and so she wouldn’t like me so she wanted to get back and I’m sure she made it into a much worse thing than it actually needed to be sort of thing.

Allegra appeared determined to maintain her innocence, to the extent that she said she provoked the judge’s ire when she told him that while she would accept responsibility for her child’s actions, she would not enter a guilty plea (a decision that Allegra admitted backfired, as she suspected her harsh sentence reflected the judge’s ‘annoyance’ at her).

In a similar case, Daisy, a former prostitute who was charged with stealing and convicted of work cover offences, positioned herself as the aggrieved party. At no time during our conversation did she take the blame for any of her offences. Regarding the charge for stealing, Daisy said she turned in the purse she found to the store clerk, and with respect to the work cover offence, she asserted that she had complied with all their rules. Likewise, Daisy blamed others for her entrance into prostitution. First, she blamed her husband for cheating on her, as this caused her to move to the city without the means to support herself. Daisy told her husband, ‘I probably wouldn’t have been a prostitute if you’d behaved yourself and kept your dick in your pants you know?’ Daisy also blamed men in her boarding house for robbing her of her rent money the day before it was due, and a neighbour for introducing her to prostitution. When I asked Daisy to talk about her thoughts and feelings around being a prostitute, she stated, ‘I was led into prostitution’. Daisy also recounted the conversation she had with her neighbour that led to her becoming a prostitute:

I was just sitting on my bed and just crying and I said tomorrow’s rent and I don’t have the rent and I don’t get paid ’til the Saturday again so. I said I had all the money … I put it in my pillow slip and [the neighbour] said, ‘well I’ll see if you can earn some money tonight. I’ll take you out and you can maybe make up the rent’. I said, Ah whadayou do? She said, ‘well, I’m a lady of the night’. And I went … so whadayou do? You know like?
And she goes, ‘have you ever hocked your box before?’ And I went you’re going to have to explain this to me! [bursts out laughing] I’m a country girl. I **don’t know anything**! I come from the country. Moved to the city. You know, left my husband. And she went ‘**your vajui!** [sic] **Your vagina! You’ve got one of those haven’t ya?**’ And I said [spoken in a timid voice] yeah. She goes, ‘OK well’, she said, ‘men will pay you’. And I said, ahhh! Haaa! [sounding horrified] **Oh! A prostitute!** She goes, ‘don’t say it so loud. Don’t make it sound dirty’. No, it just dawned on me. I’m so sorry. She goes, ‘that’s what I do and I make a very good living at it’. I went oh, I’m not putting you down. I’m just like I never thought about **using me box before**! [starts laughing]

Daisy held tightly to her story of personal blamelessness for the offences she committed. The somewhat humorous juxtaposition that Daisy made in the above narrative between her ‘country girl’ innocence and the worldliness of her neighbour allowed her to deflect the blame for actions onto the more streetwise woman who introduced her to prostitution.

In addressing the theme **Blame Talk**, I explored the offenders’ accounts of accepting and deflecting blame for their criminal behaviours. The vast majority of offenders conceded that they committed the crime, but added an excuse or rationalisation to their narrative that mitigated their own blame. A number of offenders removed the blame from themselves by deflecting it elsewhere, including onto the victim, their own addictions or others whose behaviour they believed was responsible for leading them into the crime. Very few offenders accepted full blame for their crimes; those that did acknowledge the harm they caused others understood they only had themselves to blame for effects of their actions.

### 5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the offenders’ perceptions of the various ways in which their criminal behaviours had affected their lives. To this end, I identified three overarching themes that best described the ‘lived experience’ of offence-related effects for criminal offenders. First, I outlined the three ways in which offenders said their criminal behaviour **challenged their lives**. Over two-thirds of offenders said their crimes presented a **mental challenge**, such that many ruminated or thought ‘non-stop’ about their offences. Some said it was the victims’
faces that stayed with them; others said they dreamt about and lost sleep over their crimes. I noted that offenders who killed the victim did not forget what they had done, nor did they ever expect to do so. Additionally, offenders experienced depression, self-injury, trauma and suicidal thoughts and behaviours consequent to their crimes. For some, the criminal justice system process and outcomes, including impending prison sentences, caused them mental distress, as they ‘feared the worst’.

A number of offenders were also *challenged emotionally* as a result of their criminal behaviours. Over half the offenders said they felt guilty or ashamed because of their crimes. In some cases, the guilt emerged soon after the crime, prompting one offender to write letters of confession to the police and of apology to the victim’s families. At other times, guilt and/or shame occurred years after the offence as the offenders realised, often after beating their drug addictions, the harm they caused. Further, the emotion of anger and a total disconnection from all emotions were two ‘emotional states’ found to either precipitate or occur in conjunction with the crimes of many offenders. Some offenders said that feelings of anger over perceived unfairness in life led to their crimes; others expressed anger over perceived injustices in the criminal justice system’s response to them and/or their case. A number of offenders were devoid of all emotions at the time of their crimes, a disconnection that many said enabled them to act violently.

Criminal offending also *challenged the futures* of each of the offenders in the study, as all acknowledged aspects of their futures that had been altered as a consequence of their crimes. Some pointed to career aspirations that were thwarted or undermined by their criminal record. Many more regretted the destructive effect their crimes had on past meaningful relationships and relationships they had hoped to build in the future. For some offenders, social isolation was the key after-effect of their crimes, as they purposefully distanced themselves from others; however, some offenders said that their offending behaviours had ultimately positively affected their futures by teaching them valuable lessons.

*Impression Management* was the second key theme that emerged from my interviews with offenders. First, I noted that many offenders told *tales of decency*, wherein they wove a
narrative around their offending behaviours that in effect stated that they were decent people regardless of their behaviour. Some offenders suggested that they were reformed or painted their behaviour as being outside the norm for them. Other offenders strictly aligned themselves with the values of the ‘convict code’, which decries the harm of women and children. Over half the offenders employed tales of victimisation to frame their criminal behaviour in a narrative that implicitly stated they were victims. Not feeling good or worthy, not caring about life, not feeling accepted, being bullied, fear of future victimisation and a feeling of powerlessness were explanations some offenders gave for their crimes that positioned their behaviour as a response to the victimisation of others. In addition, nearly three-quarters of offenders used tales of heroism to craft a narrative that imbued themselves or their crimes with certain heroic qualities, such as strength, courage or determination. A number of offenders said they learnt important lessons about the person they ought to be. Some said they ‘woke up’ and left the criminal lifestyle or ‘knuckled down’ by making positive changes to their lives. Others were happy that the deleterious experiences they had experienced in life as a criminal offender had a deterrent effect on others. In a few cases, offenders positioned themselves as having acted heroically at the time of their crimes. One viewed himself more as a benefactor than a thief, while another saw himself acting as a protector and defender of women.

In addressing the third and last theme, Blame Talk, I shared how accepting and/or deflecting blame was a key component of offence-related effects for offenders. When it came to either taking or averting blame, I found that the majority of offenders took the middle ground—most admitted that they committed the crime, but provided an excuse or rationalisation as to why. Some offenders deflected the blame for their behaviours onto the victims, personal mental health issues and addictions. Others did not deny they perpetrated the offence, yet removed themselves altogether as the principle actor in the crime by stating that it ‘just happened’ or, in relation to the victim, ‘he died’. A handful of offenders accepted full blame for their crimes. In these cases, they acknowledged the harm done to victims and their role in the offence. An equally small proportion of offenders refused to accept any blame, viewing themselves as the wronged party and steadfastly maintaining their innocence.
In summary, Chapter 5 answered RQ1, which asked, What are the offence-related effects for criminal offenders?, by focusing on the ways in which offenders’ lives were affected as a consequence of their crimes. First, offenders experienced various challenges to their lives as a result of their offences. Second, they employed a number of impression management strategies to explain their criminal behaviours, which partly enabled them to ‘save face’. Lastly, offenders primarily walked a middle ground between accepting and deflecting blame.

Chapter 6 tackles the topic of forgiveness by answering RQ2, which asks, What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they effected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others? This is achieved by exploring how victims’ and offenders’ understand forgiveness in terms of how they define or make sense of it. In addition, Chapter 6 examines the degree to which these understandings were, or were not, affected by the forgiveness victims and offenders gave or received from others.
Chapter 6: Victims’ and Offenders’ Perceptions of Forgiveness

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore how victims and offenders understand forgiveness in terms of how they define or make sense of this concept in relation to their experiences of offending and victimisation. I also examine the degree to which these understandings were, or were not, influenced by the forgiveness they gave or received from others. Chapter 6 thus answers RQ2, which asks: What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they effected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?

The first half of the chapter addresses victims’ conceptualisations of forgiveness. I show that victims understood forgiveness as having either victim- or offender-focused benefits. To follow, I discuss how restoration and transformation are the two primary functions (or effects) of forgiveness that victims identified. I then examine the offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness. First, I explain how offenders’ understandings of forgiveness were found within the interplay of giving and receiving forgiveness, which I use to explain that offenders often viewed forgiveness from the perspective of one who has been hurt or from a victim’s standpoint. Next, I discuss how offenders defined giving forgiveness within three dimensions: letting go, empathetic understanding and grace. Further, I show how offenders’ perceived receiving forgiveness as either conditional or unconditional. I conclude the chapter by examining offenders’ narratives in the ways they explained how forgiveness, both given and received, helped release the pain of the harm caused by their own wrongdoing or that of others, a concept I call moving forward in terms of how forgiveness opened the door to more promising and fulfilled futures.

6.2 Victims’ Understandings of Forgiveness

As discussed previously, the initial research questions for this work focus on victims’ (and offenders’) understandings and experiences of forgiveness. My interview questions were ‘What does the word forgiveness mean to you?’ and/or ‘How would you describe
forgiveness?’ To begin a conversation about the victims’ understandings of forgiveness, I asked them to tell me how they would explain forgiveness to someone who had never heard of the word before and had no idea what it meant. What emerged from these interviews was a clear sense of the victims’ conceptualising or making sense of forgiveness in terms of what they saw as its benefits, for themselves and for others.

**6.2.1 Victim-Focused Benefits: ‘Letting Go’**

The majority of victims I interviewed (92%) explained that forgiveness had brought them several benefits: it helped them to ‘let go’ and be ‘set free’ from hurtful thoughts and feelings they carried as a result of the offence they experienced. For example, Esther shared how she had been traumatised and deeply embittered after she and her elderly husband were the victims of two violent home invasions in South Africa. Esther decided that she needed to forgive after suffering a number of ailments that she attributed to the negative feelings and stress she was holding onto because of her victimisation. In my interview with her, she noted that ‘forgiveness means to me, letting go. Letting it go’. For Esther, the ‘it’ that she let go by forgiving was the lingering resentments and judgements she held towards many of the offenders, and the anger and hatred, the ‘catch them, put them in prison and throw away the key’ feeling she had about the men who perpetrated the home invasions.

I also found that some victims conceptualised forgiveness as helping them let go of hatred and vengeful desires they felt towards the offender. To illustrate, Kaye had been in an abusive marriage for over 13 years. In our conversation, she explained that she left her husband and decided to forgive him for the sake of her future and that of her children. Kaye described forgiveness as ‘not hating’ and as relinquishing any desire to exact retribution. Forgiveness, she said, was ‘accepting that it had happened. That I was hurt but that I had to go forward’. Kaye explained why she found it important to forgive her husband:

*I thought if I did something bad to him then I would deserve to have something bad done to me. It was like no, I’ve always tried to do the right thing. I’ve always tried to do the good thing and I don’t want the children to ever look at me and go [in shock] Mum! I wanted to be the good role model. I wanted to continue to do the right thing and so no
matter what he did—he wasn’t going—he wasn’t going to make me do something that wasn’t me. It was like, no, I hold this bit inside and it’s been badly beaten and disappointed but I’m not a bad person no matter what you do. I won’t be a bad person. That’s wrong. What you’re doing is wrong and I don’t want to do that.

My interviews with victims also revealed that not all of them understood forgiveness in terms of forgiving others. The following narratives from two sexual assault victims, Brittany and Ashley, indicate that they perceived forgiveness more in terms of self-forgiveness and its capacity to help them let go of self-blame for being or staying in the relationship. For example, Brittany, a victim of physical and sexual violence from her partner, had this to say about the importance of self-forgiveness:

For me under this circumstance it was forgiving myself and letting myself know that it wasn’t my fault that this happened. I was naturally a—well I am naturally a compassionate person. A very empathetic person and he took advantage of that. And he knew what he was doing. And those were his choices and I had no control over that. So it was a matter of yeah just saying, you’re not to blame Brittany and it’s OK that you stayed. Because the truth is that’s the person that you are.

Debbie also perceived forgiveness as the need to ‘let go’ of feelings of self-blame and self-loathing for the sexual abuse inflicted on her by her swim coach. Yet unlike Brittany, 30 years after the offence, Debbie still felt overwhelmed and unable to abandon these feelings. Debbie frequently fought back tears as she told me how she blamed herself for the abuse. Her comments about the offender being a ‘stupid’ man who acted on his physical attraction to a 14-year-old made it seem as though she gave him a ‘pass’ or somehow absolved him of full responsibility. While Debbie understood the need for forgiveness to be self-directed, she explained why she found this impossible:

It’s probably more that I should forgive myself more than him … I don’t know that I’d ever forgive myself in terms of knowing that you should [pauses for a moment to compose herself] or how to do it ’cause it’s always there. And he’s always there [begins to cry]. He’s always there in my head [gestures to a spot over her right shoulder to indicate the offender’s presence].
In my interviews with some victims of sexual assault, they understood forgiveness more in terms of the importance of forgiving themselves for their perceived culpability in the offence rather than in terms of forgiving the offender. Both Brittany and Debbie believed that self-forgiveness addressed personal feelings of blameworthiness—however, from Debbie’s comments, it appeared that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to forgive oneself once you had let the offender ‘off the hook’.

Two victims I interviewed conceptualised forgiveness in light of their own religious beliefs. Bill, a victim of child abuse, shared with me that he viewed forgiveness from both a ‘human’ and a ‘spiritual’ perspective. He said that while his personal perspective of forgiveness was, ‘I forgive you. Don’t do it again type thing’, forgiveness according to his religious understanding was ‘because God’s forgiven me, I forgive you’. Philcott, a victim of multiple crimes, including a home invasion and assault, was also a pastor and a prison chaplain. He explained that forgiveness meant letting go of ‘bad feelings’, such as retributive desires, towards the offender. But most important to Philcott was his understanding of forgiveness as a ‘sacred law’:

I have to forgive. I can’t carry it around. No sense in me punishing myself. And if I don’t forgive I’m not living up to my own standards and I’m carrying something around that I don’t need. My basic approach—my basic theology says that God built the world to work in a certain way and if you violate that it’s like violating the law of gravity. Nobody breaks the law of gravity. You break yourself on it. So thou shalt not steal and thou shalt not murder aren’t rules there to be enforced. They’re things there to keep you from destroying yourself on them. And the piece about not hating is again not just a rule it’s something to keep me from destroying myself. You know love your enemy. Don’t hate your enemy. That keeps me from destroying myself on that.

Drawing on Bill’s and Philcott’s explanations, forgiveness from a religious perspective is a ‘sacred law’ that, when obeyed, holds considerable benefits that can ameliorate the distressing after-effects of harm and offer protection from the destructive repercussions of unforgiveness.
These narratives exemplify how nearly all the victims crafted a meaning of forgiveness that accentuated the positive elements it held for their personal wellbeing. In the following section, I show how some victims conceptualised forgiveness as, to some degree, holding significant benefits for the offender.

6.2.2 Offender-Focused Benefits: Empathising with the Offender

In my conversations with victims, I learnt that not all of them perceived forgiveness solely in terms of the benefits it offered them. One-third of the victims also perceived forgiveness or similar concepts (e.g., compassion, empathy) as being at least partially what I call ‘offender-focused’. For example, Bruce explained how he was purposefully run over while riding his bicycle by a man who was enraged that Bruce had touched his car. Bruce said that the offender’s ‘off his face’ level of anger caused him to believe that he, the offender, had his own life history of painful experiences that enabled Bruce to view the man with compassion and empathy. He told me, ‘I was more concerned about what had been done to him [the offender] and where his life was going. I was happy with me. I’d survived. [It’s] [i.e., forgiveness] separating an action from the person’.

In my interview with Ashley, a victim of sexual assault, she asserted that forgiveness took into consideration the fact that the offender had ‘stuffed up’ but, as a human being, deserved the ‘second chance’ that forgiveness provided: ‘What he’d done was wrong but everyone deserves I guess the chance to start over and should be given the opportunity to become a better person. People should be allowed to change—be given the opportunity to change.’

Victims’ perceptions of forgiveness sometimes fluctuated because of changes in their own life or as a result of actions by the offender or others. Ashley made a point of telling me that the offender’s lack of remorse and pressure from her church to forgive him made it difficult for her to continue holding onto the idea of forgiveness that focused on the offender’s wellbeing:

I held that belief for I guess a while and I had to fight myself a lot to keep believing that when I found out he wasn’t remorseful or anything. I just kind of found it too hard. He
wasn’t sorry. I guess it’s hard to forgive someone who’s not sorry. Yeah then I probably felt more of a duty to forgive him rather than something I actually wanted to do because I was getting a lot of pressure to forgive him.

My interviews with victims revealed that they perceived forgiveness as holding benefits for both themselves and for offenders. As they sought to describe forgiveness, they did so more in terms of what it looked like in action (e.g., ‘letting go’, ‘being set free’, ‘second chance’) rather than using a one-dimensional definition of what it is. To describe what forgiveness is, victims first had to ground its meaning in what it does or did for them—how it functioned in their lives and their experiences. This functional aspect of forgiveness is discussed in detail in the following section.

6.3 Function of Forgiveness

The function of forgiveness was a significant theme present in nine of the 12 victims’ narratives. Participants often sought to express their understanding of forgiveness by describing it in accordance with its function. That is, victims framed the function of forgiveness in the context of how they believed their lives had (or, in some cases, had not) been restored or transformed by their decision to forgive or refrain from forgiving.

6.3.1 Restoration

I learnt from my interviews with victims that over half (58%) considered forgiveness to hold powers of restoration that helped them recover from the harms they suffered as a result of the crime. In some cases, victims credited forgiveness with freeing them from the ruminative thoughts that bound them to the distress of the offence. For example, Bill, a victim of child abuse, told me that when he was a child, he forgave his dad for beatings and verbal abuse because he was able to differentiate his sober dad (a man with good qualities) from his drunk and violent dad. Though Bill said he found it harder to forgive his father as an adult, he still believed forgiveness had the power to free him from continual thoughts of the abuse that kept him ‘chained to the hurt that happened’. Bruce, who was purposely run over while riding his
bicycle, had this to say about how forgiveness released him from painful ruminative thoughts of the offence:

If I hadn’t of forgiven the other guy I think I would have focused on the thought that I nearly died. By forgiving him it meant I didn’t have to focus on what could have happened instead. Could have killed me quite easily. That was a near-death experience. But by forgiving him by moving away from it and moving on I don’t have to focus on the fact that I nearly died.

Philcott, a victim of a home invasion and assault, shared with me how forgiveness freed him from his bitter thoughts and plans for revenge and released him from the spiritual consequences of his own sins:

I mean if I’m constantly wrapped up in bitterness if I’m constantly trying to figure out how I can get this guy when he comes out or whatever that’s another form of slavery. I really don’t need it. And so for me it’s being set free. Having the grace to be set free. I mean the fact of the matter is I’m not an innocent person. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not going to admit to you [said laughingly] or to a whole lot of other people! Things I would just as soon the average person didn’t know about. And I’m sure most of us are there. If I can be forgiven for those things and I believe I have. Then probably I need to be forgiving other people for the things they’ve done to me. That’s the nature of grace and it’s a two-way street. You receive grace … you give grace because you received it.

Three victims talked about the ways forgiveness brought a sense of restoration to their lives through by allowing them to release the painful psychological and emotional burdens they carried as a result of the crimes. Kunley, a victim of child abuse, said forgiveness put an end to the fear and distrust he had of others. He said forgiving his mother smoothed out the ‘oscillation’ of his emotions and was ‘the only way to remain sane’. Esther, a victim of numerous crimes; the last being a violent home invasion, spoke to me about the outrage she felt at being maltreated and how forgiveness removed these feelings:

It’s healing. It’s brought healing. The forgiveness has brought healing. Yes, I still remember the incidents but as you can see now, I don’t remember them with any—I don’t
feel hard done by any more. I don’t feel loss, that sense of loss of injustice, that sense of this is unfair. That’s—forgiveness has done that. It’s taken that away. It’s no longer unfair.

As I mentioned in the previous section, self-forgiveness was more important to some victims than forgiving others. Brittany, a domestic violence victim, told me how her life was restored once she let go of negative self-talk and forgave herself for staying in the relationship:

If you actually listen to what you’re saying to yourself it’s about you. You’re not really blaming them. You’re not going oh how dare you hit me! You’re like oh how did I let that happen? You know. Again there was that self-esteem and that self-forgiveness more so than about forgiving [ex-partner]. And in finding that I found peace with [ex-partner]. I don’t know if I could use the word forgive but I definitely found peace with it and I’m at peace with him and I’m at peace with what’s happened so yeah and I think that’s important.

Based on the perspectives of these victims, it may be suggested that forgiveness is a response to wrongdoing that brings restoration to the lives of those who forgive. Some victims believed that forgiveness eliminated distressful ruminative thoughts surrounding the harms they suffered, while others credited forgiveness with psychological and emotional healing, receiving God’s grace and experiencing renewed feelings of peace and self-worth.

6.3.2 Transformation

From my conversations with victims, I also found that forgiveness held transformative as well as restorative powers for over one-quarter of them. At its core, personal transformation entailed the victims becoming in some way new or different to who they were prior to forgiveness. Some victims shared stories of their lives nearly instantaneously transforming the moment they made the decision to forgive, while for others, such as Kaye, forgiveness changed her life as she lived it over time. Kaye told how, with two young children in tow, she left her abusive husband after 13 years of marriage. She explained that she made the decision to forgive (i.e., not hate) her ex-husband for the sake of her children’s future wellbeing—she never wanted them to think badly of themselves because of who their father was:
I could never hate him. One of the reasons I think I couldn’t hate him is because if I hated him then I had to look at my children [begins to cry] who were 50% him and so I couldn’t. How do you go that man over there is evil but you’re OK?

Kaye said that over the years since leaving the marriage, she steadfastly refused to speak ill of her ex-husband and allowed her children to form their own opinions of their father. Kaye credited forgiveness with putting control for her wellbeing back into her own hands and with keeping her from becoming insular and controlling with her children. She said forgiveness protected her from adopting a ‘poor me’ mentality, which enabled her to more deeply appreciate the ‘blessings’ in her life, including fulfilling relationships with her now-grown children and a new, ‘normal’ (i.e., non-abusive) husband.

For some victims, forgiveness occurred more immediately, as when Esther prayed that God would help her let go of unforgiveness. She stated, ‘I went before the Lord and I just had to let it go. It felt like something break. A steel band snap and it just left. I was on my face on the floor and I was forgiving’.

For Rebecca, forgiveness was the point at which she said her life pivoted, as it instantly transformed her from a deeply traumatised person to a woman who felt enthusiastic about her future. Rebecca said she ‘stopped living’ for two years following the armed robbery. She suffered PTSD and depression and her husband, weary of all her problems, eventually left her. Rebecca said that a turning point came in her life when she took a trip to Ayers Rock, which is known to the traditional custodians of Australia—Indigenous Australians—as Uluru. Rebecca explained her feelings about climbing on this sacred land:

So I feel guilty about climbing it because you’re not supposed to climb it. So I didn’t know back then actually to be honest I didn’t. Yes, I guess I feel guilty that I did because it’s traditional land and they don’t like you climbing it. They don’t want you to climb it but people do and I was one of them. But I still—Ayers Rock for me is central. It’s where my heart is.

Rebecca went on to share with me how forgiveness fundamentally changed her life by removing the ‘burden’ she carried as a result of the offence:
I still remember climbing up and not even thinking about it. I’d really struggled with being on medication and feeling like a failure. All that stuff. I just remember standing on top of Ayers Rock and just 360 view around the world—or over the world, that was an amazing feeling … I just looked around the world and thought there is some beauty in the world. I need—I want some of that back. I don’t want to see the bad side anymore … I just sucked in that world I guess and sucked it all in and just said I need to release this and I need to forgive this person. That was my turning point. My life moved from that point on.

Though each of the victims conceptualised forgiveness as an action that had potential functional benefits for either themselves and/or the offender, three victims were unwilling or unable to forgive. Two said it was the offender’s failure to repent or show contrition that contributed to their decision to withhold forgiveness. For example, Ashley, a victim of sexual assault, told me that she wrestled back and forth with forgiveness: ‘I did want to forgive him. [I] even went through a period of where I did forgive him and that’s lessened now because I know he’s not remorseful.’

Though Ashley had a strong desire to forgive, she was unable to maintain forgiveness after the offender put derogatory comments about her on social media and showed no remorse for the offence.

I learnt that victims found an offender’s lack of remorse to be especially egregious when the crime occurred when they were trying to help the offender. Steve told me that he could not understand why two men assaulted him when, as a paramedic, they needed his assistance. Steve explained how he forgave one man for spitting on him the first time because he understood that the man’s mouth was full of blood, but said ‘the forgiveness [was] gone’ after the man turned and spit at him a second time without saying he was sorry.

I also found that victims sometimes had difficulty determining whether they had forgiven the offender. For example, at the start of my interview with Debbie, she said she had not forgiven her swim coach for sexually abusing her as a child, noting that ‘as to forgiving him, no, I don’t think I ever would because basically he’s a paedophile’. Later in the interview, she
commented, ‘I suppose in a sense I do forgive him in terms of I’d hate to hear he was dead or whatever. So I don’t bear him any malice but I bear that that was wrong’.

It appears that while Debbie considered the offender an unforgiveable paedophile, there was still a part of her that felt compassion towards him—at least to the extent that she did not wish him ill.

The majority of victims identified the primary functions of forgiveness as restoration and transformation. Many shared how forgiving the offender restored their lives, as it healed feelings of injustice and self-blame and freed them from distressing ruminative thoughts and emotional upheaval. Others articulated powerful stories of how forgiveness transformed their lives, either immediately or over time, by lifting many of the psychological and emotional burdens caused by the offence. However forgiveness was not perceived as relevant to all victims—even those who desired to forgive the offender often found that desire confounded by the behaviour (or non-behaviour) of the offender.

6.4 Offenders’ Understandings of Forgiveness

Through my conversations with offenders, I found that forgiveness as a concept was not easy to define. My question ‘How would you describe forgiveness?’ was sometimes met with a long pause, a considered stare or a drawn out ‘ummmm’. One said, ‘that’s a good good question’, and another, ‘it’s hard one isn’t it’. Most offenders grounded their depictions of forgiveness in the deeply personal and painful narratives of their lived experience of victimisation and/or criminal offending. When offenders viewed forgiveness from a victim’s perspective, their understandings of it were similar to those held by the victim participants. When offenders described forgiveness from a wrongdoer’s perspective, their perceptions centred on what receiving forgiveness or being forgiven looked like.
6.4.1 Giving Forgiveness

6.4.1.1 Letting Go

The majority of offenders (68%) contextualised their understandings of forgiveness from the perspective of their own victimisation. Like the victim participants in my study, nearly half (47%) of the offenders I interviewed defined giving forgiveness as ‘letting go’ of negative thoughts and feelings such as grudges, bitterness and hate and ‘getting over’ hurts and wounds. Some offenders shared with me heartbreaking personal stories of victimisation that framed their perceptions of forgiveness. For example, Hugo, incarcerated for 14 years on two counts of second-degree murder, revealed how he struggled to let go of the animosity and pain he felt towards his mother for abandoning him as a child:

I can say from my experience because I’ve forgiven my mother that it just is letting go of her behaviour. Not taking it personal anymore at all you know. Like that’s just the way she is. And so forgiveness to me is whatever I was offended by that other person realising that it’s a result of their own inner feelings and so it has nothing to do with me really. And if I hold any animosity or grudge or any bad feelings or pain that’s me doing that all on my own and it’s detrimental to my own self.

Hugo’s account of relinquishing the pain of his mother’s hurtful behaviour highlighted the relationship between empathy, understanding and forgiveness. Hugo explained that he was able to forgive his mother once he realised that her behaviour was caused by her own issues and problems and not because of anything he had done. Another compelling depiction of forgiveness told from a ‘victim’ perspective came from Hope, who was convicted of numerous crimes, including drug offences and theft. She was devastated by the murder of her partner during a drug deal gone wrong, and told me her feelings about the man who murdered her partner prior to seeing him in court: ‘I was angry. I wanted him to hurt. I wanted him to die. I wanted all of those things.’ In fury, Hope confronted the man in court, but forgave him when he responded to her outburst in a manner she had not expected:

I screamed out in court when I was there. I said, but are you sorry? Are you fucking sorry? ’cause he hadn’t said anything. He turned around looked at me and said of course I’m sorry.
And he turned around and kept walking. And that hit me ’cause until then I wanted to kill him. I thought you’re not saying anything you arrogant prick. You don’t care one little bit and then he said of course I’m sorry. Ahhh! … took the breath away from me! And I really wanted to write to him to say you took someone from my life who’s never coming back. You hurt me beyond belief. But I forgive you. So forgiveness to me means that I can I harbour no grudges whatsoever. I could talk to him. I could sit down I could even try and help soothe him and heal his wounds and try and help him by saying it’s OK you know. Forgive yourself.

Hope’s account is notable in two ways. First, it illustrates the association between apologies and forgiveness. Hope was bitterly angry and vengeful towards the man who killed her partner until he said he was sorry. The offender’s apology not only precipitated forgiveness, but stirred in Hope a desire to help the offender. Second, Hope perceived forgiveness as being action-oriented. For Hope, forgiveness meant becoming personally invested in the offender’s life by helping to mend his psychological and emotional wounds.

As evidenced by these accounts, offenders conceived forgiveness as an action or process involving letting go of negative thoughts and feelings regarding the offence. Because offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness frequently intermingled or overlapped rather than falling solely into one conceptual stream, in the following section, I continue characterising forgiveness as the empathetic understanding first described by Hugo and Hope.

6.4.1.2 Empathetic Understanding

In my interviews with offenders, five (26%) conceptualised forgiveness as ‘empathetic understanding’. In these cases, the offenders’ descriptions came from the standpoint of a wrongdoer or from an ‘offender perspective’. They described forgiveness as tolerance, respect and the ability to not only understand the offender’s motivations, but to see them as someone whose worth was not solely defined by their crimes. The following offenders’ narratives suggest that their perspectives of forgiveness may reflect the manner in which they hoped to be treated. For instance, Daniel, convicted of traffic offences resulting in death, shared with me how he was angered by what he believed was unfair judgement directed at
himself as a person (i.e., you are ‘bad’) by the police and even by his father. He explained that forgiveness proscribed a tolerant rather than judgemental view of the wrongdoer, remarking, ‘I often say there but for the grace of God, go you’ (i.e., it could happen to you). In Daniel’s view, forgiveness was the ability to put oneself in the offender’s place, and an understanding that people should not be judged by one incident.

Two other offenders divulged that the stigma of their sex crimes underpinned their perceptions of forgiveness. For example, in my conversation with Darrin, a married middle-school teacher, he revealed how he cultivated an improper and illegal sexual relationship with a 15-year-old student. Darrin talked with me about the shock he felt over his own behaviour, stating, ‘I never previously thought that I would ever do such a thing’ and describing the deep feelings of shame he carried that caused him to cut ties with many friends and relatives because he could not bear to face them. He continued, ‘for me the definition of forgiveness is accepting that the person has done harm to you but still respecting that person as a person and not figuring that person’s entire identity by that harm’.

Like Darrin, Austin, a 20-year-old convicted of the possessing, distributing and procuring child exploitation material, spoke about the stigma he experienced as a sex offender. Austin explained how he viewed forgiveness as an effort made by the forgiver to better understand the factors that motivated the offender’s behaviour:

I would almost define it [forgiveness] as understanding. I think it’s pretty hard to not forgive someone if you can understand where they were at the point. I think that’s why forgiveness is such a hard thing for a lot of people because if you haven’t been in the situation how do you know how they were feeling? Or how do you know what emotions are happening in their body and yeah so understanding is sort of how I see it.

It was apparent from the offenders’ accounts that for some, empathetic understanding was perceived as fundamental to forgiveness. Offenders felt that forgiveness flowed from the release of a judgemental attitude and from a realisation that all people had the capacity to do wrong. Based on the interviews, it seems likely that for some of the offenders, their understandings of forgiveness were rooted in the way they hoped to be forgiven. In the
following section, I explore the religious conceptualisations of forgiveness that some offenders held, which stipulated that one *should* forgive others.

6.4.1.3 *Grace*

My conversations with offenders revealed that a few (16%) held conceptualisations of forgiveness that accorded with their religious beliefs. For instance, Daisy told me how she left her husband and turned to prostitution after she found her best friend and husband in bed together. Taking the victim perspective, Daisy explained that she forgave them by letting go of the bitterness she held and by what she referred to as ‘show[ing] a better hand’. Daisy said she later told that friend, ‘we’ll never be great friends but I forgive you because God tells me I have to forgive you’. An essential element of the Christian understanding of forgiveness is the perception of it as the embodiment of grace.²⁶ Lars, convicted of a number of drug-related charges, volunteered at a faith-based organisation that brought ministry to ex-offenders. He described to me his understanding of forgiveness as ‘a form of grace’, stating that ‘yeah we’re sort of in a way expected to show the same grace that we’ve been shown … the forgiveness from God, yeah that’s what it’s all about’. In view of the preceding accounts, there is a sense that those who viewed forgiveness through a religious lens perceived it as an obligation—something they ‘have to’ or are ‘expected to show’—because God requires it and because they have received God’s forgiveness.

In this section, I illustrated how a majority of the offenders understood forgiveness from a victim perspective, wherein *they* were the forgivers. These offenders understood giving forgiveness as letting go of grudges, bitterness and hate and caring for the offender’s welfare. Some offenders understood forgiveness as decreased judgement and increased tolerance towards the wrongdoer and the ability to imagine oneself in the offender’s place, a stance that required empathy and compassion and likely reflected the manner in which these offenders desired to be forgiven for their own crimes. For other offenders, forgiveness meant

²⁶ Grace has been referred to as a ‘free gift’ from God. See LG Jones (1995), ‘Embodying forgiveness: A theological analysis’. 

172
treat the wrongdoer better than they treated you; from a Christian viewpoint, forgiving others was a response to God’s forgiveness.

6.4.2 Receiving Forgiveness

6.4.2.1 Receiving Conditional Forgiveness

My interviews with offenders also revealed that some (22%) perceived receiving forgiveness as being integrally connected with offender accountability and reparation. These offenders viewed forgiveness as a conditional process whereby the wrongdoer had to take certain actions before forgiveness was given. For example, Mick, a convicted drug trafficker, proposed three actions that he believed an offender had to take to receive forgiveness. These were an apology, reparative actions and future law-abiding behaviour:

All I can think about is sorta saying sorry. Um and tryin’ to—ah—make amends for my actions by becoming a better person. Steering clear of my old behaviour and I suppose try and help people that are in the same predicament as I had been and trying to influence them in that way.

As with Mick, Real explained how his understandings of forgiveness centred on actions that he believed the offender should make. Real spent over 25 years in prison for a variety of violent offences, including kidnapping, armed robbery and first-degree murder. While serving two life sentences for murder, Real was introduced to restorative justice, which he credited with helping him make positive changes to his behaviour. Real expressed his opinion on the steps that offenders should take prior to receiving forgiveness:

Well you know forgiveness is first you have to admit that you’ve done something wrong. Well for me that’s a very well it’s a no-brainer [chuckles]. I’m not the shiniest penny in the pond but I know that [laughs] OK. That’s a no-brainer. I have done some extremely wrong OK.27 Not only towards other people but towards myself OK as a result. And another thing after that is what are you doing to change that behaviour to make sure that this doesn’t happen again? Because that’s very important because sorry doesn’t mean **nothing** if you

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27 English is a second language for Real.
don’t change the behaviour you know. You can say sorry until you’re blue in the face but you know if you keep on doing it over and over again you know what … you’re a dumb ass OK you know. And I’ve met people like that they’re always saying sorry. After a while you can’t hear it no more. So that’s the second OK. And the third one is actually reactionable. Is behaving OK. How you live your life. Well for me it has been a very very long process.

These offender narratives indicate that forgiveness was part and parcel of offender remorse and accountability. Two other offenders believed that the reparative steps the wrongdoer must take be made with the specific goal of restoring the injured relationship. For example, Allegra, convicted of petty theft, told me that the process of forgiveness started at the point of an offender’s apology and continued with their efforts to earn back the victim’s trust. At this point, she said the victim forgives the offender and both parties make an effort to mend the ‘fractured’ relationship. Darrin, a convicted sex offender, told how he received his wife’s forgiveness as his actions, over time, proved that he was worthy of her trust. When asked how he knew that his wife forgave him, Darrin replied:

Both saying it in words but also the fact that we’ve been able to grow our relationship and even though you know there are trust issues there and she is cautious as you would expect her to be she makes efforts not to hold what happened against me and she makes efforts to continue to develop trust again in me. So rather than saying ‘I’m never going to trust you anymore’ she’s letting me earn trust back.

According to these accounts, some offenders understood that receiving forgiveness was, in large part, predicated on their own behaviours following their offence. To be forgiven or to enhance the likelihood of receiving forgiveness, these offenders recognised that they must not only make an apology, but back up that apology with honourable or decent actions that proved to the victim that the offender was worthy of being forgiven.

6.4.2.2 Receiving Unconditional Forgiveness

‘Unconditional’ was a word some offenders used to describe forgiveness. This notion of forgiveness was rooted in their understanding of love—they explained how unconditional
forgiveness was given not because of any meritorious actions on their part, but simply because they were loved by the one giving forgiveness. Two offenders shared with me how they experienced forgiveness through their mother’s love. John, convicted of drug offences and armed robbery, said his mother ‘played harsh’, but he knew she forgave him: ‘she’d love me no matter what you know’. Another offender, Crazy, convicted of B&E and theft, called himself ‘the black sheep of the family’. He angrily spoke about the pain of being rejected by his siblings and uncles because of his addictions and criminal lifestyle—but from the way Crazy spoke about his mother, it seemed their relationship was an altogether different story. Crazy said his mother forgave him because he was, as he described, her ‘golden child’. When asked to describe what his mother’s forgiveness felt like, he exclaimed:

Love! She’s always given me love. She’s never turned her back on me. She would never do it. There’s no way in the world she would ever do it. I know that about her. She would never turn her back on me no matter what I did.

It was apparent that John and Crazy never doubted their mother’s forgiveness. They both believed that their mothers loved them to such a degree that no action on their part would ever separate them from that love.

Two other offenders described unconditional forgiveness by contrasting it with conditional or questionable forgiveness. Bully, a convicted drug trafficker, perceived forgiveness as being able ‘to forgive somebody for anything, no matter what it is’. Bully found it difficult to tell if he was forgiven because, as he said, ‘There’s two types of forgivers. There’s genuine ones and there’s people that try to forgive ya’. When I asked Bully how he could tell the difference between these two, he answered:

Well, a lot of people—ahh how to say it—a lot of people say they forgive ya but deep down they don’t and that’s always in the back of yer mind that—oh no! Look what I’ve done. Whereas if you truly forgive someone it doesn’t matter what they’ve done. You’re forgiven.

Bob, convicted of armed robbery, also saw true forgiveness as unconditional. However, unlike Bully, Bob did not believe that humans were capable of giving true forgiveness. In his estimation, God was the only one who offered unconditional forgiveness:
Forgiveness for me, come[s] from a Christian background is the only way I can describe it. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. Everyone has sort of fallen short of what God’s expected of us. Being forgiven generally happens through the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. An understanding of forgiveness from that perspective. I don’t know I suppose forgiveness from people is a little bit fleeting. More the theological side of it is—what’s the word for it—unconditional love whereas forgiveness from a person is I see it as conditional.

Tamera: You see it as conditional when it is from a person?

Bob: Yeah, I mean, everyone is human they’re going to reserve—there’s going to be some reservation or hurt from what’s happened. I mean that’s like I said I’d like to go and say sorry to the guy [the victim of his armed robbery] but he’s probably not going to want to see me so even in trying to get forgiveness from him he might say, ‘yeah I forgive you’ but it’s not going to be unconditional. He’s going to reserve some sort of ‘screw you buddy’ [little laugh]. Yeah—the only way I can see getting forgiven is through you know like taking that you know everything I’ve done, not just the robbery ’cause I’ve done a lot of other things too—that I haven’t been caught for—so God knows about it. You take it all—or they say you take it all to the cross. That’s why Jesus died for everything that we will ever do.

According to some offenders, love was the essential characteristic of unconditional forgiveness. True forgiveness did not hold any hurt in reserve, and covered all types of offences. In the opinion of one offender, only God is capable of forgiving unconditionally; people may say they forgive when in fact they still hold negative thoughts and feelings towards the wrongdoer.

6.4.2.3 Antithetical Perceptions of Forgiveness

Some offenders perceived forgiveness in ways contradictory to meanings commonly associated with it, such as the phrase ‘forgive and forget’ or the assumption that forgiveness is equated with reconciliation. While some offenders understood forgiveness as a means of reconciliation or re-establishing relational bonds, others disagreed with such assessments.
For example, Claire, convicted of DUI and a domestic violence victim, shared with me how she struggled with the meaning of forgiveness because of its connection to reconciliation:

Forgiveness is complicated. Because when I think about my abusive ex that’s not a word I can use. So I don’t hold resentment [or] anger. But at the same time it doesn’t feel right to use forgive[ness] the way that I think we often use it. Because I think there’s too much about that forgiving and then wanting to embrace the person and that’s the last thing ... I don't want that person in my life or anything to do with me or the kids. So I find it complicated.

Though Claire said that she no longer held ill feelings towards her ex-partner, she was unable to say she forgave him if, by forgiving, that meant reconciliation.

Two other offenders repudiated the well-worn ‘forgive and forget’ adage. Allegra, convicted of petty theft, rejected this notion because she believed that it was not only impossible for people to ‘forget’ the offence, but that it was unhealthy to do so. She said that when people ‘pretend’ to forget the offence, the hurt and offending behaviour remained unresolved: ‘you can push it to the back of your mind but you always know it’s there.’ Even when the phrase ‘forgive and forget’ was viewed from an ‘offender’ rather than a ‘victim’ perspective, offenders said it was an unrealistic expectation. Real, a convicted violent offender, explained, ‘I have to live with what I’ve done for the rest of my life OK. Whether they forgive me or not I still have to live with what I’ve done ... I can never forget what I’ve done OK’.

From the perspective of Clare, Allegra and Real, ‘forgive and forget’ was neither possible nor beneficial.

In a final example, one offender perceived forgiveness in a manner that severely narrowed the window of opportunity wherein it could be justifiably given. Gabriel was convicted of manslaughter in the stabbing death of a man who raped a woman at Gabriel’s home and in his presence. For Gabriel, an ex-con, the rape was a clear violation of his code of ethics, which condemned harming women. Gabriel said he understood forgiveness strictly in terms of whether the offender’s behaviour was warranted or unwarranted. That is, if, according to Gabriel, he had a right to commit the crime (e.g., to uphold a personal code of ethics), then
granting him forgiveness was not justified, and more importantly not desired, because the action was not, in and of itself, wrong. Gabriel gave an example of a circumstance where forgiveness would be permissible:

Like um if I’s to call you a nasty name… and I had no right to call you that … alright then or I did somethin’ to you that I had no right to do then that is where I’d be needin’ you to forgive me.

Gabriel articulated a key qualifier injustifying forgiveness: it was only warranted or justified when the offence occurred for reasons that the offender did not consider legitimate.

6.5 Moving Forward: The Effect on Offenders of Receiving Forgiveness

A prevailing theme throughout my conversations with offenders was how forgiveness, both given and received, opened the door for more promising and fulfilling futures by releasing the pain of the harm their own wrongdoing or that of others had caused. Offenders commonly talked about the effect of forgiveness on their lives in the context of the discussion about their perceptions of forgiveness. However, I often asked follow-up questions, such as ‘What did it mean to you to be forgiven?’, ‘What does forgiveness look or feel like?’ and/or ‘What has been the most significant effect of being forgiven?’ In my interviews with offenders, it was clear that for many, forgiveness created the possibility for them to ‘move on’ with their lives by ‘lightening’ the psychological and emotional ‘weight’ or ‘burden’ of their offence. Other offenders conceptualised moving forward through the capacity of forgiveness to facilitate personal growth and healthy relationships.

6.5.1 Moving On

In my interviews with offenders, I found that a number of them (42%) linked forgiveness with the ability to ‘move on’. For example, Mick, convicted of drug offences, said the best thing about receiving forgiveness was that it lessened feelings of guilt, which allowed him to move on with his life. Daniel said that forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness, helped him move on after he accidently killed a man: ‘if you’re beating your own back you get nowhere in life.’ For some offenders, the words ‘I forgive you’ did not necessarily have to be spoken
for them to feel forgiven and move on. For example, Claire, convicted of DUI, said that prior
to her conversation with the victim, she was consumed by thoughts of the crash and feelings
of guilt and shame. She explained that while forgiveness was not a word the victim used
when they spoke to her on the phone, the concern they showed for Claire’s wellbeing was an
unexpected kindness that had a positive effect on her life: ‘his attitude on the phone was such
a relief … and I thought was very generous … it was like, OK, I can move on now.’ Boone,
convicted on drug and drink-driving charges, took a victim perspective, stating, ‘if you
forgive somebody you can help yourself get over what happened to you … and move on’.
Drawing on these offender perspectives, it appears that prior to receiving and/or giving
forgiveness, the offenders may have felt stuck or unable to let go of the distressing after-
effects of their own wrongdoing, such as feelings of guilt, shame and self-condemnation, or
the harm they experienced at the hands of others. This suggests that acts of wrongdoing,
whether one’s own or inflicted by others, lead to destructive consequences that thwart the
individual from moving forward, and that by alleviating these burdens, forgiveness enables
the individual to move on with their life.

6.5.2 Lightening the Load

Four offenders (22%) talked with me about the beneficial effects of forgiveness in terms of
how it ‘lightened the load’ or ‘lifted the weight’ of the negative thoughts and feelings they
carried as a result of their own crimes or the harm they suffered because of the behaviour of
others. Bob, a convicted armed robber, described receiving forgiveness in terms of having a
physical weight removed. He said it felt like ‘a foot’s come off your chest’. Daisy, a former
prostitute, stressed the same thing about giving forgiveness: ‘it feels good! You know you
don’t have this [said in the voice of one struggling under terrible weight] heeaavvyy
heaviness on your shoulders anymore.’ Other offenders told how being forgiven reassured
them that they were still good people in spite of their wrongdoing. For example, Austin, a
convicted sex offender, told how forgiveness by the parents of some of his teenage victims
reaffirmed in him a positive self-perception that had been severely damaged by the stigma of
his crimes: ‘I guess it gave me the confidence to accept that I wasn’t a bad person. That I did
a bad thing but I wasn’t a bad person.’ In view of these accounts, it seems as though
forgiveness, both given and received, mitigated the oppressive psychological and/or affective burden of criminal offending and/or ill treatment that weighed heavily on offenders.

6.5.3 Personal Growth

Seven offenders (37%) explained how giving and/or receiving forgiveness was a crucial component of their personal growth that arose in the aftermath of their crimes. A few said they were more forgiving towards others as a result of being forgiven for their own crimes. Bully said his family’s forgiveness made him a ‘better person’. Darrin said his wife’s forgiveness helped him believe that he could still be a contributing member of society. Daisy said this about the association between giving forgiveness and personal growth:

Life throws all these curves at you and if you don’t forgive along the way you can’t progress you know. In order to grow you have to forgive and I do … there are hurdles that you still have to go over. Yeah and I think it’s good yeah you gotta forgive! You gotta forgive! You just can’t be a grumblebum28 for the rest of your life!

In my conversation with Hugo, he claimed that receiving forgiveness changed the trajectory of his life. He shared how he was astonished and deeply touched by the letters of forgiveness he received from the families of the two men he murdered. He said their forgiveness lifted the burden of ‘huge guilt’ that he had carried, and created a drive in him to make positive changes in his life:

They had said they forgive me and I was like, oh wow! And so I’m going to move now. I’m going to grow from here. I’m going to keep going. When I read the victim impact statements and I felt their forgiveness that was huge for me. I mean I really have to say it was. I know I cried when I read them but you know I was just amazed too that it was like a weight lifted off the shoulders.

28 ‘Grumblebum’ is an affectionate Australian term for a person who is always grumbling and complaining.
While imprisoned, Hugo embarked on a spiritual quest by studying various faith traditions. He said he also took part in various restorative justice workshops and talking circles as well as completing a course that prepared him for work in the community upon his release.

According to these offender accounts, forgiveness received and/or given promoted their personal growth. There was a clear sense that being forgiven increased the offenders’ feelings of self-worth and, in some, prompted determination to not only accept the gift of forgiveness, but to build on it by changing the focus of their lives to one that fostered worthwhile progress and growth.

6.5.4 Restored Relationships

From my interviews with offenders, it was clear that many (22%) believed receiving forgiveness significantly improved the relationships that were important to them. For instance, Lars, a drug offender, spoke about the social isolation he experienced as a consequence of two decades of addiction. Rejected by most of his family, Lars became involved with a faith-based community centre. He told me about when the staff at the community centre ‘extended grace’ (i.e., forgiveness) by dropping the charges against him when, high on ice, he stole the centre’s vehicle. I asked Lars how he felt about receiving their forgiveness and he said, ‘[it gave me] a sense of belonging sort of as much as community’. Similarly, Bully’s family cut contact with him during the years he was in and out of prison for drug trafficking. He explained how his family forgave him when, after his release from prison, they witnessed the efforts Bully made to overcome his addictions and be a good parent. Bully said receiving forgiveness greatly improved his family life and made his young daughter happier, as she benefited from the love and care of extended family members. Forgiveness also brought reconciliation to a relationship one offender thought he may have lost because of his conviction for sexual assault. For Darrin, the greatest effect of forgiveness was his continued relationship with his wife:

I can feel like I can move on with the relationship. To know that I not only still have it but that it can improve. That it could end [up] being an extremely positive relationship despite what happened to it.
The offenders’ words evidence their deep appreciation for the ways in which receiving forgiveness restored meaningful relationships that had once been lost or threatened. Some offenders claimed that the benefits of forgiveness also positively affected the lives of those close to the forgiven person, while another felt more rooted in a supportive community because of their forgiveness. These themes are taken up in more detail in Chapter 7.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored victims’ and offenders’ understandings and perceptions of forgiveness and the degree to which they were (or were not) affected by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others. I first noted that victims’ perspectives of forgiveness were divided between victim- and offender-oriented benefits; the majority of my participants illustrated how forgiveness had personally benefited them. In addition, I found that most of the victims defined forgiveness as ‘letting go’ of the painful thoughts and emotions such as hatred, resentment, anger, sadness, self-blame and retributive motivations they harboured as a consequence of the crime. A few victims conceptualised forgiveness according to their religious tenets, which highlighted the eternal personal benefits of God’s forgiving grace. Those victims who held offender-focused perceptions said forgiveness meant that one took a compassionate and empathetic stance towards the wrongdoer. Some victims believed that forgiveness meant showing concern for the offender’s well-being and giving them the opportunity to turn their lives around.

Victims often shared poignant and compelling stories that demonstrated the powerful ways in which forgiveness brought restoration and transformation to their lives. Victims credited forgiveness with restoring their psychological and emotional wellbeing by releasing them from, or reducing, the distressing after-effects of the crime they experienced, which included fear, distrust, ruminative thoughts and outrage—in effect, breaking the chains that kept them bound to the pain of their victimisation. Some victims also credited forgiveness with having transformative effects on their lives, as they became profoundly changed from who they were prior to granting forgiveness. In some cases, the transformation was said to have occurred slowly as, year after year, they continued to be forgiving, one day realising that their lives
had improve in numerous ways because of that decision to forgive. Other victims believed that forgiveness instantaneously transformed their lives as, freed from the pain, they were ready to face the world. However, not all victims were able or willing to forgive. For some, the offender’s lack of remorse was too big a hurdle to overcome.

The second half of the chapter examined the ways in which offenders understood forgiveness and the effect receiving forgiveness had (or not) on their lives. Offenders presented depictions of forgiveness that were strikingly similar to those of the victims. This should not surprise, as the majority of the offenders understood forgiveness from a victim-oriented or forgiving perspective. In the forgiving role, offenders, like most victims, understood forgiveness as letting go of hurt and pain. Some offenders also understood granting forgiveness as empathetic understanding, tolerance and respect that came from putting oneself in the proverbial ‘shoes’ of the offender. A small group of offenders viewed forgiveness according to their religious beliefs, and said that giving forgiveness was the appropriate response to receiving ‘God’s grace’. When forgiveness was conceptualised from the recipient’s perspective, offenders viewed it as being either conditional or unconditional. Conditional forgiveness was seen as provisional, whereby the offender should take certain steps (e.g., apology, reparation) to be forgiven. Conversely, unconditional forgiveness was perceived by some offenders as the domain of love, where, for example, God and mothers forgave all offences. Finally, some offenders articulated antithetical or contradictory perspectives of forgiveness that went against some common understandings of it, such as equating it with reconciliation.

The effect of offenders receiving forgiveness was explored in the theme Moving Forward. Offenders told how receiving forgiveness allowed them to move forward or ‘move on’ with their lives by alleviating or ‘lightening the load’ of painful thoughts and emotions, such as the guilt and shame they carried as a result of their crimes. Some found that receiving forgiveness helped them move forward by motivating personal growth. They described how being forgiven helped them be more forgiving themselves and more tolerant of others, and gave them the determination to become productive members of society. Forgiveness helped
other offenders move forward, as it restored lost and severely damaged relationships. These themes are taken up in more detail in the following chapter.

In sum, victims and offenders held remarkably similar perceptions of forgiveness, primarily because many of them perceived it through a ‘victim’ lens or perspective. Additionally, both victims and offenders commented on the salience of offender remorse and apology. Victims, as would be expected, found it more difficult to forgive when these factors were not present. What is unexpected is that some offenders viewed offender remorse and reparative steps as a condition of being forgiven. Forgiveness was also experienced similarly by victims and offenders, as both groups identified comparable effects. Most notably, victims and offenders credited forgiveness with helping them move forward with life by reducing the deleterious consequences of the harm they suffered and/or perpetrated.

In Chapter 7, I present the final findings, which illustrate the offenders’ perceptions regarding the forgiveness that matters most.
Chapter 7: Forgiveness That Matters

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 7, I explore the theme *Forgiveness That Matters*. I delve further into the significance offenders placed on receiving forgiveness by exploring whose forgiveness mattered most to them. In this chapter, I answer RQ3: How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparted forgiveness? Offenders often discussed receiving forgiveness when they shared with me their account of its meaning and effect. However, to move the conversation in that direction, if needed, I asked questions such as, ‘What did and/or would it mean for you to be forgiven?’, ‘How did you know that you were forgiven?’ ‘Is there anyone whose forgiveness you would like?’ and ‘What are your thoughts about self-forgiveness?’

In exploring the theme *Forgiveness That Matters*, I identified three expressions of forgiveness that I address in turn: 1) in discussing *Self-forgiveness*, I show how some offenders considered self-forgiveness to be particularly salient and why others refused to forgive themselves; 2) in discussing *Forgiveness from family*, I illustrate how offenders greatly valued the forgiveness they received from loved ones and why they were deeply wounded when it was not forthcoming; and 3) in discussing *Forgiveness from victims*, I reveal how some offenders sincerely appreciated forgiveness they received from the victim (or the victim’s representative) and why others vehemently rejected their forgiveness. Chapter 7 concludes with a summary of the findings and a consideration of any similarities or differences in how offenders perceived forgiveness across the three expressions.

7.2 Self-Forgiveness

In my interviews with offenders, I found that over half (58%) viewed self-forgiveness as an important element in their efforts to better understand, address and overcome the harm they caused as a result of their offences. What was immediately obvious from these conversations was that self-forgiveness did not come easily for offenders. Most wrestled with feelings of
guilt and negative self-worth, which they said made self-forgiveness a challenging process. For those offenders who placed value on forgiving themselves, a number credited self-forgiveness with helping them separate their worth as a person from the ‘bad’ act they committed. Others believed self-forgiveness diminished the tendency they had to ‘beat’ themselves up over their wrongdoing, or that self-forgiveness fostered their determination to act responsibly in the future. In one case, the offender credited self-forgiveness with helping him better understand the issues behind his offending behaviour. Austin was sentenced to community service and five years on the sex offender registry for procuring, possessing and distributing child pornography. Part of his rehabilitation program was psychiatric counselling and participation in a court-ordered sex offender program. He told how learning self-forgiveness was a key aspect of his rehabilitation process, as it taught him to critically reflect on the underlying causes of his behaviour: ‘when you forgive yourself then you can be more honest with it.’ Austin further related how self-forgiveness helped him cope with the challenges and stigma of being an offender.

The stigma associated with Austin’s sex offences had an egregious effect on his life and that of his family. He told me how one person came to his job and said, ‘the death penalty should apply to you you f-ing f word’. Austin said he lost close friends and his family’s finances were severely affected when the clients of his mother’s home beauty business felt uneasy coming to their home. Austin told me that a significant portion of the stigma he experienced came from the criminal justice system:

in court you’re not Austin Jones [pseudonym] you’re ‘the offender’, which is really reinforcing wording that you’re not a person anymore. You’re this offender. You’re this bad entity. So I think that the hardest part of getting past for self-forgiveness was separating the offence from me as a person.

Like Austin, Darrin was another convicted sex offender who talked about the stigma of his crime and the importance of self-forgiveness in addressing that stigmatisation. Darrin, incarcerated for the sexual assault of his 15-year-old student, told me that the stigma attached to his offence was the most significant personal effect he experienced:
it’s harder to believe that I can continue as a useful member of society especially with the stigma of my crime. I find it really difficult to believe that the rest of society would want me to be part of it.

Darrin further explained that while self-forgiveness was an important element of his treatment protocol, it was a subject that had to be continually revisited during sessions with his counsellor because of his feelings of guilt and negative self-view:

Probably every time I sit down with my psychologist the majority of the talk is about that [self-forgiveness]. I already had that issue with non-criminal aspects of my life. Like I’ve always felt guilty even for things that a normal person wouldn’t feel guilty for. But for me the biggest hurdle I’ve had to overcome is stop beating myself up over it basically. The big thing that my psychologist has been helping with is realising that yes I did something wrong but that doesn’t make me wrong. It was the action that was bad. It wasn’t the person that was bad. There’s still good things about me which means I can still do good actions. It’s not so much about trying to balance the scales as much as realising that yep something went wrong but that doesn’t make me evil.

Austin’s and Darrin’s stories show how they disentangled their perceptions of self-worth from their crimes by learning to forgive themselves. Similarly, for Daniel, who accidently killed a pedestrian with his car, self-forgiveness repudiated his deviant or criminal label by giving him the opportunity to live an honourable life. Daniel, now 70, was only 17 when he was convicted of traffic offences that resulted in death. Daniel explained that he viewed the victim’s death as a tragic accident (albeit the result of a number of wrong choices, such as driving without a license) and was deeply offended by the efforts of the police and even his own father to stamp him with the label of ‘damaged goods’. It was clear from our conversation that Daniel knew he could not engage in self-flagellation if he was to move forward with his life:

What is done is done. It depends on how you react to it and how you move forward that determines what people’s perceptions of you are and what you think of yourself. It you’re beating your own back you get nowhere in life. I was determined to prove certain people
wrong that I wasn't the bad person that had been suggested. So for the rest of my life, I guess I knuckled down to prove that I could be a good person.

Daniel went on to join the army and served in Vietnam. He got married, had a family and joined the Foreign Service, where he served as a successful diplomat until his retirement.

For these offenders, self-forgiveness helped them to at least challenge, if not totally repudiate, the degrading labels affixed to them because of their crimes. Inga, who was convicted of assault, she credited self-forgiveness with giving her the determination to act more responsibly in the future. Inga explained that she was taking criminology classes at the time she assaulted her uncle. She told me how she really wanted a career out of her degree and was keenly aware of the effect a criminal conviction could have on these plans. Inga shared how self-forgiveness gave her the ‘mental’ and ‘emotional’ room to ‘get on with other things’. She further explained:

I could have really, really screwed it up. So there was like a bit of needing to forgive myself in that sense. I would just accept the fact that essentially I’m responsible for what happens to me and if this is what I want to do then there are other sacrifices that I have to make, like I can’t do things that I know are going to get me into trouble. I can’t go out and drink excessively, or I can’t hang around certain people. It just made me realise that I needed to really take care of myself better.

While some offenders believed self-forgiveness opened the door to a better future by helping them address and stay away from the issues that caused them to offend, others believed that self-change should precede self-forgiveness. For example, in my interview with John, who was convicted of drug offences and armed robbery, he claimed that he had to get his ‘life back in order’ before he could get to the point of forgiving himself. John believed that once he got his life in order by avoiding offending and drugs and having more positive ‘input into the community’, self-forgiveness would automatically occur.

A number of offenders credited self-forgiveness with helping them effectively address many of the negative personal ramifications of their criminal actions. Yet, even when they understood the importance of self-forgiveness, some offenders told me that they believed it
would be a life-long quest. From my conversation with Real, incarcerated for nearly half his life for a string of violent offences, I found that he believed self-forgiveness was interminable: ‘so forgiveness for myself for what I’ve done to myself you know I can never say that I’m coming to an end of that no.’ John, convicted of a number of charges, including serious assault, called self-forgiveness ‘an ongoing journey’, while Bob, convicted of armed robbery, said it was a ‘day-to-day’ process. These excerpts illustrate the cautious attitude a number of offenders adopted in relation to self-forgiveness. It appears that even when offenders are amenable to the idea of forgiving themselves, they anticipate that it will be a continuous process.

Based on the above narratives, it may be proposed that self-forgiveness is a challenging and often ongoing process of intensive self-reflection and pro-social behavioural changes. I also found that for offenders who were able to expend the significant effort necessary for it to be accomplished, self-forgiveness held substantial benefits. Additionally, and of particular note, offenders forgave themselves, not the crime.

7.2.1 Self-Unforgiveness

While the majority of offenders I spoke with recognised the efficacy of self-forgiveness, some were unforgiving of themselves. I found that those who refused to forgive themselves often did so either because of their perceptions of what they were actually forgiving during the process of attempted self-forgiveness, or because of concerns over their personal wellbeing that could occur as a result. For those offenders who rejected self-forgiveness (22%), most did so because of strongly held convictions that, under most circumstances, it was the wrong course of action for them to take. As a case in point, Real, incarcerated for four federal offences, including kidnapping, armed robbery and two counts of first-degree murder, made a clear distinction between what he believed was acceptable and unacceptable self-forgiveness. Real was quite adamant in his rejection of self-forgiveness for the crime when he stated:

I don’t believe that I have the right to forgive myself for what I have done to other people. OK. Because I find that would be extremely arrogant and actually very cruel. OK so and
as far as asking forgiveness from them I don’t believe it. I don’t think that’s appropriate either because I wouldn’t want to open wounds that they are trying to heal.

Real further explained that the only acceptable form of self-forgiveness was one focused solely on the harm he did to himself as a result of his crimes:

Forgiveness that I’ve been looking at is you know the person that has created the most damage to myself and my life is probably unfortunately me. OK because I always have the choice of doing that like I mentioned before. I’ve always had the choice of doing what I did. Yes or no. I wasn’t drunk. I wasn’t mad. I didn’t lose it. You know I remember every act that you know I could have backed down each time and I didn’t. So when I look at it is how do I forgive myself for ruining my own life? Because basically that’s what it is.

It was clear to me from Real’s account why some offenders found it incredibly difficult to forgive themselves for their crimes. When they believed that self-forgiveness indicated that they did not take their crimes seriously or was undertaken to mitigate personal responsibility, it became harder for them to forgive themselves.

In a similar example, Hope, who was convicted of numerous offences, including drug trafficking and fraud, shared with me that no matter how many times her counsellor told her that she should acknowledge the many positive changes she had made in her life since being released from prison, she found this impossible:

My psychologist kept saying Hope enough! You have given and given and given [this is in reference to the ways Hope contributed to the community since her release from prison]. It’s time to forgive yourself. And I keep going ahh yep ahh yep yep. No! Doesn’t happen. I don’t think there’ll be the day when I can say I’ve given. I haven’t. I … had a session last week. He said to me when are you going to stop flailing yourself? And I said you can’t. You never do. I don’t think I will ever forgive myself. Even if I met those people and they forgave me it wouldn’t wash. It would bring me to tears and I’d still be guilty. I haven’t forgiven myself. I tell the psych that I have. And I tell other people that I have but I haven’t. I bury it. I lock it away in a box.
It is clear from Hope’s narrative that unrelenting feelings of guilt over the crimes she committed and those she hurt as a result caused her to relinquish any possibility of self-forgiveness. As with Hope, Crazy, who was imprisoned for B&Es and theft, shunned any possibility of self-forgiveness. When I asked Crazy to explain what forgiveness felt like (we had been talking about his mother’s forgiveness), he abruptly stated that he committed the crimes and would have to pay for them the rest of his life:

I don’t think **I’ll ever** forgive myself for that. I don’t believe that I can be forgiven. Yeah I can’t. I can’t forgive myself so. It’s never going to happen. I’ve got to live with that for the rest of my life so that’s just the way it is.

Tamera: You don’t think there’s anything that you could do to try and forgive yourself?

Crazy strongly interjected ‘No! No!’ a number of times when I asked him if he thought there would ever be a time when he could forgive himself. He exclaimed, ‘I gotta cop that. It’s my fault. No one else did it. But I did it!’ Again, this demonstrates how offenders were apt to reject self-forgiveness when they associated it with letting themselves off the hook. In the following narratives, offenders share how they rejected self-forgiveness out of fear that it posed a threat to their personal wellbeing.

Boone, convicted of drug and drink-driving offences, was verbally and perhaps physically abused by his father as a child. When I asked Boone to share his thoughts about self-forgiveness, he told me that he was ‘not really wantin’ to go down that track’ out of a concern that self-forgiveness could unearth further traumatic experiences he had buried:

Part of it is because I’m not sure what else is lying underneath there and other things might come out and may just drag me right down into a cesspool somewhere with sadness and that sort of thing. So I’m sort of scared of it a little bit.

Tamera: So you’re concerned that being self-forgiving or kind to yourself could bring some problems on?
Boone: Yeah might bring up more memories and stuff so for example with my old man I’m not sure if he ever beat me up or anything but I’ve got I’ve got things in my head that maybe did happen but I feel like um I might have blocked that out at a young age.

While Boone declined to forgive himself for fear that the self-reflection and introspection that is part of the self-forgiveness process could trigger painful memories of childhood abuse, another offender rejected self-forgiveness for fear that it could mute what he called, the psychological ‘tension’ or awareness he needed to guard against future offending behaviour. Hugo was 19 years old when he killed two men whom he believed threatened his physical safety. Hugo shared with me his concern that self-forgiveness could diminish his ability to stay alert to the factors that had motivated his previous behaviour:

What I feel right now is that it’s not so much that I need to forgive myself. I need to hold that awareness that I have to be aware of myself and that this happened because I was allowing other people to pressure me and I was buckling under pressure. So I feel like if I say that I forgive myself that I am allowing myself to enter into that and that now I have to always be aware just be vigilant that there are people around me that for whatever reason or conditioning they might think that it’s fun to you know use or manipulate me and so I have to be aware of that. And if I forgive myself it might slacken that off … I feel that there’s a little bit of tension there but I need that little bit of tension so that I can be aware of it and be like hey look I don’t need to be involved in this person’s stupidity right.

My interviews with offenders reveal that the majority of them believed that self-forgiveness mattered because it benefited them in their efforts to better understand and address their crimes and the aftermath of those crimes. Some offenders credited self-forgiveness with helping them quit ‘beating’ themselves up and allowing to positively move forward with their lives. Others said it enabled them to separate their worth as a person from the ‘bad’ act they had committed. I found that self-forgiveness was not easy for many offenders and was, for most, an ongoing process. A significant impediment to self-forgiveness occurred when offenders viewed it as crime- rather than people-focused. Offenders who believed self-forgiveness diminished personal responsibility or who were weighed down with guilt vehemently rejected self-forgiveness; offenders who believed it had the potential to unearth
traumatic memories or diminish their capacity to diligently guard against criminal ways of thinking and acting in the future also repudiated self-forgiveness.

7.2.2 Forgiveness from Family

My discussions with offenders indicate that forgiveness from family members was especially prized for over half of them (53%). In what at first seemed counterintuitive to me, most offenders were not interested in receiving their family’s forgiveness for the crimes they committed. Rather, they said they desired to be forgiven for the years of grief they put their families through as a result of other problems, such as addictions. For instance, Bully, a convicted drug trafficker, told me how he was estranged from his mother and siblings for years after he stole from them to fund his drug habit:

I did some pretty shitty things to her [mum] over the years. You know like stealin’ her cars and riding off … just driven ’em around and high that sort of thing and I’d prang [crash] ’em and she’d be stuck without a car and all that sort of stuff.

Bully described his mum as ‘the best mother in the world’ and said that her forgiveness was the most meaningful to him. He said her forgiveness made him a ‘better person’ and benefited his whole family by bringing them back together. Bully was especially touched by the fact that his family now told him where they lived, as they had previously hid their whereabouts from him.

Tamera: You’re feeling like you have been forgiven by your mum?

Bully: Yeah and my brothers and my sisters.

Tamera: OK, you now have a relationship with them.

Bully: Yeah and they all tell me where they live too which is great! You know like before they would never tell me which suburb they lived in. ’Cause I’d drive around lookin’ for ’em. No it was really bad.

Bully said he was thankful not only for the restoration of family relationships that came from being forgiven by his mother and family members, but for his family’s confidence that he
was a man who could now be trusted. Bob, convicted of armed robbery, also was a drug addict who regretted mistreating his parents. When I asked if his parents’ forgiveness would be meaningful to him he said no, not with respect to his crime:

I’m more worried about the problems I put ’em through ’cause of my drug use rather than actually getting forgiven for the offence. I’d rather be forgiven for umm the money I’ve taken from them over the years and the problems of me being a drug addict at home sort of thing you know. Yeah putting a lot of stuff in their face.

Bob said he apologised to his parents through the jail’s visiting room window and that he was touched by their forgiveness: ‘I suppose it was a bit of a bonding moment even though there was four inches of Plexiglas between us.’ As Bully’s and Bob’s narratives illustrate, forgiveness from loved ones is paramount to many offenders—particularly forgiveness for the hurt and mistreatment to which they subjected their family members over the years.

In my interviews with offenders, I learnt that not all who desired their family members’ forgiveness actually received it. For those from which forgiveness was withheld, the feelings of rejection they experienced were especially acute. For example, Crazy, convicted of B&Es and theft, explained to me that he perceived forgiveness as familial acceptance and love, two things he deeply missed: ‘forgiveness means I wish I’d get my family back. The family that I’ve lost. I wish they could love me.’ Crazy basked in what he believed was his mother’s enduring love for him, but even that did not stop him from longing for the forgiveness of other family members:

All me brothers and sisters I just wish they weren’t so disappointed in me. It really hurts. It does hurt a lot. I can’t ring ’em up and talk to them. I can’t Facebook ’em. I can’t. I don’t do anything so I don’t have any contact with ’em at all.

Like Crazy, Real also mourned the estranged relationship of a sibling and desired that sibling’s forgiveness. Real shared the story of how he had involved his brother (who was also incarcerated in the same prison) in a prison house murder that saw them both serving life sentences. Real said that during the time he spent in the Special Housing Unit, with his brother in the cell next door, he came to deeply regret that his behaviour had harmed his
brother. Real described how he was dismayed when his brother severed their relationship after being released from prison. When I asked Real whose forgiveness was (or would be) most meaningful to him, he said it was his brother’s forgiveness he wanted most:

You know [brother] cut ties with me. You remember that I believe. He cut ties with me in 2008. And for me that was the hardest breakup that I had in my life and um … I’ll never say anything bad about [brother]. I’ll never bad mouth him because I love him. He’s a very wonderful person. I always loved him. Umm [brother] has nothing to be forgiven for. I again it’s again my doing and to hear [brother] say he forgives me um I think that touches a little more home than the actual victims you know.

These narratives suggest that offenders missed having a relationship with siblings and were sorely distressed when they were not forgiven by those siblings. However, from the following example, we can see how a parent’s unforgiveness created deep and long-lasting wounds. Daniel was 17 years old when he accidently hit and killed a pedestrian who stepped off the footpath in front of his car. Daniel was charged with negligent driving because he was not licensed to drive. I asked Daniel whether he felt like he had been forgiven for the offence and he responded:

Not for a long time by my father. In one way my mother and I grew closer. My father and I went further apart. I don’t know, I guess I felt a sense of betrayal.

Tamera: By your dad?

Daniel: By some of the things he’d said to me when I was probably really down. At the time I thought who are you to judge me given that I’m not very impressed of how—your habits. It took me a long while, but I don’t think I’ve ever quite forgiven him. I believe he forgave me. I believe he became quite proud of what I became and what I achieved, but I never quite ever forgave him for that. For my father, I haven’t been as forgiving as a lot of other people I have met in life.

Clearly, Daniel viewed his father’s unforgiveness as a betrayal. He shared that because he was never able to fully reconcile the thought that his father should have been more supportive
of him during this traumatic time, it set the two men at odds for many years and made Daniel less forgiving towards his father.

Undoubtedly, many offenders treasured and deeply desired the forgiveness of their family members. They stated that the forgiveness they desired was focused more on the years of pain their drug-fuelled behaviours caused their families than for the actual crimes they committed. Offenders told how forgiveness from family members strengthened familial bonds that had been previously estranged and made them feel loved, accepted, trusted and supported. It was equally clear that when forgiveness from family members was withheld, offenders felt terribly hurt, rejected and betrayed, which in turn made them less forgiving towards those who withheld forgiveness. In the following section, I explore the offenders’ thoughts about receiving forgiveness from the victims. I found that even though offenders most valued forgiveness from loved ones, they still appreciated the victims’ forgiveness, viewing it as an unexpected and pleasant surprise.

7.2.3 Forgiveness from Victims

Through my interviews with offenders, I found that over half (58%) viewed the victim’s (or a representative of the victim, such as a family member) forgiveness as meaningful. Of interest is that only six (32%) were actually forgiven by the victim. In large part, the offenders’ appreciation stemmed from the fact that the victim’s forgiveness was completely unexpected. For example, Claire, convicted of DUI, talked about the expectation she had that the victim would ‘abuse’ her when she spoke to him about repairing the damage she caused to his property. Claire explained how she was pleasantly surprised when the victim spoke kindly to her and was glad that she was not hurt, an attitude that, to Claire, felt like forgiveness. In another case, Mick, a convicted drug trafficker, was pleased that some of his old drug clients (whose lives he believed he irrevocably harmed) were still happy to call him a friend. Hugo also told how he was surprised and touched by forgiveness that the families of the two men he murdered expressed in their victim impact statements, saying, ‘It felt good’.
From the following narrative by Patrick, a former neo-Nazi, we see that forgiveness was just as meaningful when it came from individuals wholly unconnected to him or his crime except by group association. Patrick shared with me how he had assaulted a number of people when he was a ‘skinhead’, including a young gay man whom he and his mates targeted. Patrick said this attack left him deeply troubled and ashamed years after he left the organisation. As it happened, years after the attack, Patrick met a group of gay men at a St Patrick Day’s party. He told how he sought and received their forgiveness for harming a member of their ‘community’:

I told them what I did. And I said I know that … although I personally didn’t do anything to you because of your sexuality, others did. I can’t say sorry for that but I mean … I … can you forgive me for what I didn’t just do to this man but what I did to your community. They were crying. I was crying. It was really emotional … emotional thing. But nobody I don’t think anybody had ever really said sorry to them for all of the shitty things that had been done to them by other people. And I think that’s how they took it.

Some offenders desired, but did not receive, forgiveness from the actual victim. John said that he wished for the victim’s forgiveness after she testified in court about how he traumatised her during the armed robbery—a realisation that had not occurred to him previously. While Bully made it clear that it was his mother’s forgiveness he most appreciated, he also said that forgiveness from his drug crime victims would be meaningful:

I’ve got a lotta regrets. But you know I’m sorta working towards them. I still see some of the people that I gave their first shot to 15, 20 years ago and they’re still in the game and they’re still so yeah. They’re all victims.

Tamera: Would their forgiveness mean anything to you?

Bully: Ah yea! Yes, yeah it would! Ahh I don’t associate with any of them anymore but I do occasionally see them and you know I see the mess they are they’ve made of their lives and I just think that’s my fault, you know.

There was a sense from Bully and John’s descriptions that their desire to be forgiven was prompted by an understanding that it was their fault that the victims were ‘traumatised’ or
damaged. This perhaps suggests that for the victim’s forgiveness to be meaningful to offenders, they must first appreciate how their actions harmed the victim.

With Patrick as the exception, I found that offenders often did not ask for forgiveness from victims even when it was most welcomed. In my conversation with Hope, she expressed what I understood to be an internal war: she desired victims’ forgiveness, but was afraid to seek it for fear it would be refused. Hope told a story of how she lost sleep and dreamt about certain crimes she committed, such as stealing elderly couple’s car and pieces of heirloom jewellery in another crime. When asked if there was anyone whose forgiveness she would like, Hope quietly said, ‘yeah those people I stole the rings from and they don’t even know about it’.

Tamera: So forgiveness from them would be something that would have some meaning to you?

Hope: Very much so. Very much so. Those people whose car I burned. These are people I don’t know and I’ll never have the opportunity to be forgiven from them because they don’t know. And you know at the end of the day I don’t even know if I could really do it because there’s that off chance they may not forgive me.

Tamera: And what would that do?

Hope: That would crush me. That would … that would … so crush me. That would so crush me I don’t think … I’d find that very hard to get over.

Here, Hope identified what was likely a common reason for the offenders’ failure to ask for forgiveness: the fear that their petition for forgiveness would be rejected by the victim.

In my interviews with offenders, over half disclosed that they placed importance on receiving the victim’s forgiveness. Offenders shared how the victim’s forgiveness was meaningful to them in large part because they had neither expected nor dared hope for it. Offenders told how they deeply appreciated (or strongly desired) the victim’s forgiveness, especially when they understood the magnitude of the harm they caused that victim. Though some offenders desired the victim’s forgiveness, few actively sought to be forgiven. As Hope related, this was likely out of fear that their request would be spurned.
7.2.4 Rejected Victim Forgiveness: The Offenders’ Victim Self-View

Interestingly, I found from my interviews with offenders that not all desired the victim’s forgiveness. The following narratives demonstrate how offenders who took the victim identity for themselves (rather than seeing themselves as an offender), along with its prerogative of forgiveness, often rejected the victim’s forgiveness. For instance, Allegra, convicted of petty theft, said she had no desire for the victim’s (i.e., store clerk) forgiveness. She steadfastly maintained in her police statement and testimony to the judge that her toddler had placed the shiny pieces of costume jewellery in his pram. Allegra said she forgave the woman because ‘there’s no point in being like ahh I hate that person! I don’t even know that person’. Allegra also said she forgave the clerk for being unreasonable and spiteful by pressing charges against her, as she believed the woman was expressing her anger and frustration at Allegra’s husband (her previous boss) for firing her.

From my conversation with Hugo, it was apparent that holding a ‘victim’ self-view had the potential to make the offender furious when others tried to forgive them. For example, Hugo, convicted for two counts of second-degree murder, believed his aunt should have helped him escape the stress and burdens that ultimately led to the murders. When Hugo was 19, he was living in a home owned by his stepdad. Hugo told me that he confided in his aunt about the financial stress he was under and asked her to speak to his mother (her sister) about his problems. When she refused, Hugo said he put out word that he was looking for some roommates to help pay the bills. Two older men (the victims) answered his ad; Hugo said he asked them to leave after a week. When they refused, Hugo said he felt threatened and shot them. Hugo shared how he was hurt when his aunt turned her back on him after the killings and was furious when, years later, she said she forgave him:

I’m like forgive me? I asked you for help and you didn’t trust me. You couldn’t help me. I’m like you’re forgiving me? Like I felt like what do you mean? Don’t worry about it then you know. And I love her but I felt like … I don’t know I felt like she was saying she forgives herself because like why do you forgive me you know?
From Hugo’s description, we can see how forgiveness was especially despised when the one doing the forgiving was viewed as culpable in the crime. Daisy, a former prostitute, was similarly shocked and infuriated by the audacity of her cheating ex-husband for saying *he* forgave *her* for becoming a prostitute. Firmly adopting the victim self-view, Daisy told me how she countered her ex’s attempt to forgive her by quickly and vehemently forgiving *him*. She said that she told him, ‘you have the nerve to forgive me! Well I forgive you for being an asshole and for then turnin’ the kids against me!’ Daisy further told him,

   You’ve got a cheek haven’t ya there. I said so what are you forgiving *me* for? He said, ‘well you know for being a prostitute’. And I said, well isn’t that funny I probably wouldn’t have been a prostitute if you’d behaved yourself and kept your dick in your pants you know. I said you know shoes on the other foot ’cause I forgive *you* for playing around with her.

It is clear that in those cases where the offender switched roles and saw themselves as the victim, any attempt by others to forgive them was not only rejected by the offender, but deeply resented.

Another powerful example of an offender’s rejection of victim forgiveness came from Gabriel, who not only adopted the victim status in his offence, but also he claimed the moral high ground in the commission of the crime. Gabriel shared with me a harrowing and brutal account of how he stabbed and killed a man who had ‘disrespected’ and ‘dishonoured’ him by sexually assaulting a woman in front of him. Gabriel lived his life according to the ‘convict code’; a set of rules regarding appropriate behaviour that many offenders follow (Trammel, 2012). Gabriel said the man violated his code of ethics, which clearly delineated women as one of the protected groups (along with children, the elderly, etc.). Gabriel laughed, but was nonetheless serious when he told me that he did the community a service when he killed this man. He asserted, ‘he’s just an intimidating bastard. So sooner or later he had to be stopped. But nobody had the balls to stop it.’ When I asked Gabriel to share with me his thoughts about forgiveness in that case, he said, ‘I’ve done my job, I think … at the end of the day I’ve done what was required.’ I pressed Gabriel further and asked him if forgiveness from the victim’s family would be meaningful to him. He surprised me when he said, ‘No, they also think he deserved what he got’. Gabriel believed that forgiveness was only worthwhile when
it was given by the right people (i.e., those not deserving of the harm). He maintained, ‘the bastards that I’ve assaulted I don’t expect their forgiveness. I don’t want it. They can punch that up their ass. Because as far as I’m concerned it falls on deaf ears anyway’. Again, we see that when the offenders perceived themselves as victims and, as in Gabriel’s case, also claimed a moral high ground for performing the offence, any notion of the victim’s forgiveness was vehemently rejected.

Some offenders told how they rejected the victim’s forgiveness because they believed it would not significantly affect their wellbeing. Real was incarcerated for over 25 years for a number of violent offences, including murder. He explained that he did not seek forgiveness from the victims, as he believed it would not alleviate the burdens he carried:

To be honest with you Tamera I don’t think for me it’s important. OK because I have to deal with my own shit. I have to live with what I’ve done for the rest of my life. OK whether they forgive me or not I still have to live with what I’ve done.

Real said that if the victims benefited by forgiving him, then he was happy for them to do so. However, as for receiving their forgiveness, he said, ‘I don’t need to hear it’. Bob, convicted of the armed robbery of a chemist, looked at the victim’s forgiveness in a manner similar to Real. Bob said, ‘I don’t think him actually forgiving me would do anything for me’. Even so, Bob said he would like to apologise to the victim not for the purpose of receiving his forgiveness, but as a way of saying ‘hey, I’m sorry man. I mean just for the sake of it so he doesn’t walk around for the rest of his life feeling that he’s a target’.

Based on the views of the above offenders, it appears that those who perceived themselves as the victim, saw the forgiver as culpable in the offence and/or believed the victim deserved the harm not only rejected being forgiven, but resented all attempts by others to do so. Not surprisingly, the victim’s forgiveness was also rejected by offenders who believed it would have little positive effect on their lives.
7.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how offenders' perceptions of forgiveness differed depending upon who was the forgiver and which forgiver mattered most. Addressing the theme *Forgiveness That Matters*, I explained how the three expressions of forgiveness, *Self-forgiveness, Forgiveness from family* and *Forgiveness from victims* had relevance for offenders. Over half the offenders said self-forgiveness had particular salience, as it aided their efforts to understand, address and overcome the distressing effects of their crimes. Many offenders described a painstaking process of learning to forgive themselves, while others felt the process of self-forgiveness would never end. Offenders who were able to forgive themselves described the profound benefits of this process—for some, it helped them alleviate the negative thoughts and feelings they carried, while it allowed others them to separate their criminal actions from their worth as a person. However, self-forgiveness was not ubiquitous. Offenders who believed that the crime, not themselves, was being forgiven could not forgive themselves. Offenders who experienced unrelenting feelings of guilt and the need to 'cop it' or self-punish were also unable to forgive themselves.

I further showed that over half of the offenders’ especially prized forgiveness that came from members of their family. Some offenders shared how forgiveness from loved ones restored family bonds and made them feel accepted, welcomed and loved. Conversely, some offenders expressed that they felt saddened and betrayed when family members withheld forgiveness. In one case, forgiveness withheld from a family member created an unforgiving attitude in the offender towards the person who refused to forgive them. Lastly, I revealed that a number of offenders appreciated the victim’s (or their representative’s) forgiveness, in large part because it was completely unexpected. While some offenders said they desired the victim’s forgiveness, few dared to ask for it out of fear that their request would be denied. Fear of rejection was a particular issue that emerged in the offenders’ accounts—some were deeply pained if they were disowned by family and left unforgiven. Even when offenders wanted to receive forgiveness, few had the nerve to ask for it for fear they would be rejected. In cases where the offender viewed themselves as the victim or claimed a moral high ground in their
commission of the crime, the victim’s forgiveness was not only undesired, but forcefully rejected.

In conclusion, offenders’ perceptions of the meaningfulness of forgiveness in some respects differed little between the three expressions of Self-forgiveness, Forgiveness from family and Forgiveness from victims. First, offenders perceived both self-forgiveness (those who accepted self-forgiveness) and forgiveness from family as being oriented towards personal harms rather than focused upon the crime itself. Additionally, both these expressions of forgiveness restored the offenders’ relationship with self and others. Self-forgiveness helped the offender separate the ‘bad’ act they had committed from their worth as a person, whereas their family’s forgiveness helped them feel accepted and renewed family bonds. However, with respect to the victim’s forgiveness, offenders said little about why it was greatly appreciated or deeply desired. Offenders often cited the unexpected and pleasant surprise of the victim’s forgiveness, especially when they anticipated and felt deserving of the victim’s abuse. Although not explicitly stated, perhaps the victim’s forgiveness did or would go a long way in reducing the offenders’ feelings of guilt.

Some of the differences I observed were those regarding the factors motivating offenders to reject self-forgiveness and the victim’s forgiveness. Offenders who rejected self-forgiveness did so primarily because they held ‘low’ self-perception, wherein they believed they were altogether undeserving or unworthy of being forgiven. Some offenders rejected self-forgiveness because of deep-seated feelings of guilt, the need to self-punish and the belief that it was arrogant, cruel and harmful to self-forgive. Conversely, offenders who rejected the victim’s forgiveness did so out of the belief that they held a ‘higher’ status than the forgiver. In the minds of these offenders, they were the victims and, having (consciously or unconsciously) stripped the victim of their status and right to forgive, they furiously rejected any gestures of forgiveness made by these individuals. In sum, a number of offenders appreciated and gratefully received forgiveness as it was expressed by themselves and victims. It was clear from these offenders’ emotional accounts that forgiveness from family members was what mattered most to them.
My thesis now turns to a discussion of the study findings. In chapters 8 and 9, I draw on the relevant criminological, philosophical and forgiveness literature to explore the victim and offender findings.
Chapter 8: Discussion of Victim Findings

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 8, which focuses on victim perspectives of crime and forgiveness, I argue that victimisation was a traumatising experience and that forgiveness had ameliorative capacity in addressing the offence-related effects of crime. In some ways, my argument supports existing knowledge on these questions, for example in relation to the trauma-related effects of victimisation and beneficial outcomes related to giving forgiveness. In other ways, however, my findings contradict existing knowledge by suggesting that victims may benefit from withholding forgiveness, particularly in the absence of reparative actions on the part of the offender.

Prior to this discussion I provide a brief review of the study aims, research questions and themes. Next, I draw on the extant psychological, criminological, philosophical and restorative justice literatures explored earlier in this thesis to frame my discussion of the offence-related effects of crime and understandings of forgiveness held by victims.

My study aims to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of how crime victims and perpetrators experience criminal offending and, importantly, the meaning and salience they attach to giving and receiving forgiveness in crime’s aftermath. Crime causes a wealth of destructive affects in the lives of those it touches (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1991; Beck et al., 2011; Condry, 2013). The manner in which individuals respond to adverse life events holds crucial implications for how they are able to cope and ultimately move forward with their lives (McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). In this thesis, I first explored how victims experience crime by asking, ‘What are the offence-related effects for victims’ (RQ1)? Then, to ascertain the victims’ perceptions of forgiveness and its meaning in their lives, I asked, What are the victims’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others’ (RQ2)? Through the analytic process of IPA, for the 12 victims that I interviewed for my
study, I next identified seven constitutive themes that illustrate the essential elements of: (a) offence-related effects, and (b) understandings of forgiveness.

In this chapter, I frame the discussion of the experience of victimisation and victim perceptions of forgiveness in the context of each of the four offence-related themes. I first discuss how trauma is central to the experience of victimisation and explain why forgiveness, in many cases, restored and transformed the lives of the victims I interviewed by ameliorating the traumatic after-effects of crime. Second, I address how the victim identity and associated stigma conflicted with the victims’ more favourable self-conceptualisation and presentation of self, and why forgiveness assisted victims in constructing a positive self-identity. Third, I investigate how victimisation shattered the beliefs held by many victims that the world was benevolent and just, and explain why forgiveness helped some victims rebuild the assumptive world. Fourth, I discuss how the victims’ justice needs were largely unmet by the criminal justice system and why, in some cases, forgiveness and participation in restorative justice process met those needs.

8.2 Offence-Related Effects and Salience of Forgiveness for Victims

In this section, I discuss the offence-related effects for the victims in my study. After addressing each theme, I delineate how forgiveness mitigated (or did not) the distressing after-effects of crime experienced by victims.

8.2.1 Victimisation and its Traumatic Effects

My thesis corroborates assertions that crime victimisation is a traumatic experience (Armour, 2002; Herman, 1997; Newton, Burns, Miller, & Fernadez-Botran, 2016). All victims in my study experienced traumatic effects that challenged their psychological, behavioural and/or somatic wellbeing. Nearly half suffered from depression, anxiety and other stress-related infirmities, including PTSD. Victims who experienced PTSD endured a range of distressing symptoms, such as nightmares, panic attacks, disassociation and self-injury. These findings are consistent with a number of studies on the deleterious after-effects of traumatic life
events, particularly those that have found that crime victims, overall, experience high rates of PTSD (Kilpatrick & Acierno, 2003; Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992).

Behavioural changes were also common among the victims in my study: some became more wary and cautious, while others engaged in self-destructive behaviours such as risk-taking, substance abuse and increased aggression. These findings mirror those of Wirtz and Harrell (1987), who found heightened self-protective behaviours in victims of rape and burglary, and the findings of Miller, Downs, Gondoli and Keil (1987) and Stepakoff (1998), who identified higher substance abuse and suicidal ideation in victims of sexual abuse. Behavioural changes are common following adverse life events, as people respond in ways that help them cope with the experience (Olff, Brosschot, & Godeart, 1993). The literature suggests that self-destructive behaviours serve to distract the victim’s attention from the distressing effects of the trauma and act as a form of emotion regulation by lowering negative affect and increasing positive feelings (Ben-Zur & Zeidner, 2009; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003).

Nearly all victims in my study sustained painful somatic effects that were either a direct result of the crime (e.g., bruises, damaged teeth, genital injuries) or that they attributed to the cumulative results of ongoing stress and trauma (e.g., disease, surgeries). These findings align with a wealth of prior research showing that the psychological and affective consequences of traumatic experiences (i.e., anxiety, depression, anger, PTSD) may lead to a variety of deleterious health outcomes (Flett, Kazantzis, Long, MacDonald, & Millar, 2002; Garnefski, vanRood, deRoss, & Kraaij, 2017; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002).

8.2.2 Forgiveness: Addressing the Traumatic Effects of Victimisation

My thesis lends support to previous assertions put forth in the literature that forgiveness is a response that may ameliorate a number of the traumatic after-effects of victimisation (Orcutt et al., 2008; Worthington, et al., 2007; Ysseldyk et al., 2007). As mentioned in Chapter 6, the majority of the victims I interviewed understood forgiveness as a response that mitigated the distressing effects they suffered as a result of the offence. Again, these findings are consistent with previous research noting that people who forgive generally do so for the sake of their
own wellbeing (Strelan, McKee, Calic, Cook, & Shaw, 2013; Younger, Piferi, Jobe, and Lawler, 2004).

A common conceptualisation of forgiveness is that of ‘letting go’. When defining forgiveness, some of my study subjects used phrases such as ‘let go’ and ‘set free’ to describe how forgiveness liberated them from ruminative and vengeful thoughts, hatred, resentment and judgement regarding both the offence and the offender. According to Sells and Hargrave (1998), the most common conceptualisation of forgiveness ‘involves some aspect of release or letting go over time’ (p. 22) of negative thoughts and feelings towards the offender (Enright et al., 1998; North, 1987). Victims of violent crime in Field, Zander and Hall’s (2013) study similarly defined forgiveness in terms of helping them let go of the ‘shackles’ of fear and the ‘crutch’ of hurt feelings and victimhood, while family survivors of homicide in a study by Hourigan (2016) said forgiveness enabled them to relinquish feelings of pain, bitterness, sorrow, hatred and self-pity. For a number of victims in my study forgiveness was perceived in terms of its ability to help them relinquish many of the painful aftereffects of crime.

Some victims in my study also framed forgiveness within a religious context, as some based their decisions to forgive (or not) on their religious beliefs and experiences. When victims viewed forgiveness as a ‘sacred law’ or ‘duty’, it was seen to offer the forgiver protection from the spiritual consequences of their own sins and from the negative psychological and emotional after-effects of the offence (i.e., it reduced bitterness and vengeance). These findings of my study are consistent with religious writings that command adherents to be forgiving (e.g., Matthew 6:14‒15 of the New Testament), and resonate with depictions of forgiveness in the psychological literature that describe it as a relinquishment of negative feelings and thoughts (Enright et al., 1998). Importantly, my findings differ from the conceptualisations of forgiveness in the philosophical writings of Hampton (1988) and others (see Griswold, 2007; Murphy, 1988a)—these scholars perceive forgiveness as a moral virtue that involves the forgiver’s ‘change of heart’ towards the wrongdoer. While a few victims in my research viewed forgiveness in relation to having compassion for the wrongdoer and the benefits that held for offenders (e.g., ‘second chance’), most understood forgiveness as a
response that held personal restorative benefits for themselves in terms of released ruminative and vengeful thoughts and increased feelings of peace, healing and self-worth.

From my interviews with victims, I suggest that the quality or the essence of forgiveness given out of a sense of ‘duty’ is decidedly different than forgiveness that occurs as a result of a heartfelt decision made freely by the victim. The victims in my study who spoke of forgiveness as feelings or an emotional experience (e.g., ‘I was on my face forgiving’) also tended to speak about the effects of forgiveness as emotional (e.g., ‘The forgiveness has brought healing’). Those who explained forgiveness as feeling duty-bound or pressured to forgive, as Ashley was by members of her church, either chose not to forgive or spoke about forgiveness in a manner that appeared more matter-of-fact than heartfelt (e.g., Philcott: ‘I have to forgive—it’s something to keep me from destroying myself’).

Self-determination theory may explain why the victims in my study who felt duty-bound to forgive seemed to perceive and/or experience forgiveness differently than those who forgave of their own accord. Prior research suggests that people experience more positive benefits when they view their behaviour as ‘originating’ from their own volition (i.e., autonomous motivation) than when they feel like a ‘pawn’ to outside forces (i.e., controlled motivation) (deCharms, 1968; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Cox, Bennett, Tripp and Aquino (2012) found that employees who felt ‘forced’ to forgive their co-workers because of a lack of other alternatives or because they feared displeasing God reported poorer health and greater stress than those who forgave because they believed it was the right thing to do. Similarly, Huang and Enright (2000) found in their study of Taiwanese adults that those who felt obligated to forgive because of an accepted philosophy to which they adhered experienced more residual anger (reflected in masking smiles, casting eyes down and experiencing higher initial levels of blood pressure) than those whose forgiveness was based on moral love. My conversations with victims suggest that forgiving because one wants to had greater emotional resonance for victims and more positive benefits in terms of helping them overcome many of the traumatic effects of victimisation than forgiveness given out of a sense of external obligation.
In my research, victims of sexual assault and domestic violence generally conceptualised forgiveness as the need to forgive themselves. On the whole, they experienced these offences as deeply shameful, and many carried a great degree of self-blame for personal actions and/or inactions they believed caused or sustained the harm. Feelings of self-blame, guilt and responsibility are common in sexual assault and domestic violence victims (Frazier, 1990; Herman, 1997; Hill & Zautra, 1989). Negative cognitive and affective states directed towards the self may result in psychological distress (Breitenbecher, 2006; Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Turner, & Bennett, 1996; Frazier, 2000), particularly if an individual believes they could or should have done something to stop the abuse, as Debbie felt when she failed to report her ‘relationship’ with her swim coach. Some victims said they had a difficult time forgiving themselves, yet research suggests that self-forgiveness holds benefits in the form of more positive feelings, behaviours and beliefs about the self and release from excessive guilt and remorse (Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1996; Turnage, Jacinto, & Kirven, 2003). Indeed, self-forgiveness brought marked improvements in the life of Brittany, a victim of domestic violence. For Brittany, self-forgiveness was the outcome of taking a more benevolent view of her decision to stay with her (ex) violent partner. Brittany experienced diminished self-loathing and increased self-esteem when she replaced critical self-judgement (i.e., ‘how pathetic you are’) with a new self-narrative that defined her as a person who was caring and compassionate and who did not easily give up on people.

In sum, in this section I discussed why victimisation was, for many victims in my study, a traumatic experience that negatively affected their psychological, behavioural and somatic well-being. In particular, I explained how traumatic stress disorders are a common outcome of victimisation and why behavioural changes may be viewed as a coping response to the traumatic aftereffects of crime. I related how victims commonly perceived forgiveness in terms of its ability to help them relinquish painful thoughts and feelings regarding the crime and offender. I further discussed why forgiveness given (or attempted) because of external motivation (i.e., an expectation from God or others) did not appear as heartfelt or result in the same healing as forgiveness freely given. Finally, I explained why feelings of guilt and self-blame caused sexual assault and domestic violence victims to conceptualise forgiveness with a focus on the need to self-forgive.
8.2.3 Victimisation Threatens Identity and Sense of Self

Victimisation threatened the victims’ identity through devaluing the self and creating stigmatised identities that conflicted with the victims’ more positive self-views. In Chapter 4, I explained how the victims in my study described feelings of worthlessness, lack of self-trust, self-loathing and self-blame consequent to the crime. Such descriptions align with Murphy’s (1988a) depictions of wrongdoing as a ‘moral injury’. Murphy (2003) states that the offender, by their act of wrongdoing, conveys an insulting or morally injurious message to the victim that suggests that they are of less worth and may be used according to the offender’s desire. The stories that victims in my research told of feeling weak at their inability to cope with the traumatic effects of crime, pathetic for staying in destructive relationships, shameful because of believing they were responsible for the harm and carrying a sense of being a failure and ‘not worth much as a human’ indicates that victimisation is a moral injury that causes victims to identify themselves as diminished and devalued.

The crime and, in some cases, the victims’ responses to it (e.g., violent retributive fantasies, self-doubt, self-blame) created new identities that conflicted with victims’ previous, more positive self-identities. This finding in my thesis of conflicting identities aligns with what Charmez (1994) and Dunn and Creek (2015) refer to as identity dilemmas. Identity dilemmas happen as a result of losing valued and positive identities (Charmez, 1994), and occur in situations where ‘multiple and often contradictory identities are in play’ (Dunn & Creek, 2015, p. 263). In the case of the victims I interviewed for my study, these identity dilemmas were distressing, as the victims struggled to make sense of and integrate into their sense of self the perception of who they thought they were (i.e., independent, peaceful, competent, strong) with a new, victim-related identity that inferred the opposite traits (i.e., reliant, violent, incapable, weak).

The presentation of self, as explained by Goffman (1959), may be crucial to understanding the identity dilemma that victimisation posed for many of the victims in my study. Goffman states that people do not simply live—rather, they ‘act’ or play a character that they have composed for themselves, a character that may or may not be an accurate portrayal of who
they are as people. The impression of reality fostered by this portrayal is, as Goffman states, ‘delicate’ and ‘fragile’; it can easily be shattered by events that seemingly contradict the person’s presentation of self, which may result in ‘immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation’ (p. 59). Crime can be seen as disrupting the victim’s portrayal of their chosen character by supplanting it with a contradictory identity. In the case of my study, this is particularly evident in the dismay and frustration that Philcott, who described himself as a ‘preacher’ and ‘counsellor’, felt when the violent retributive fantasies he had about hurting the offender contrasted with his ‘presentation of self’ as a ‘peaceful’ man of God.

The stigma attached to victimisation was a further source of identity threat for some victims in my study (Best, 1997; Lamb, 1999)—sexual assault and domestic violence were two crimes that were especially stigmatising. My findings align with a great deal of prior research conducted with victims of violent crime (see Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Harrison & Esqueda, 1999; Lutenbacher, Cohen, & Mitzel, 2003) and, notably, corroborate the work of Minow (1992) and Leisenring (2006), who contend that victims find it difficult to reconcile a positive self-image with the image of a weak, passive, powerless and defeated victim. Victims of crime in my research told me how they resented what they believed were unfair and stigmatising judgements, such as those portraying them as ‘stupid’, culpable in their victimisation or objects of pity. Some victims believed that their recovery from the harmful effects of crime depended on their ability to shed the stigma of victimisation.

8.2.4 Forgiveness: Constructing a Positive Self-Identity

Many of the victims in my study explained how they could use forgiveness to help them transform a self-identity associated with trauma and victimhood into a conceptualisation of self that exhibited strength and integrity. Forgiveness eased identity dilemmas for some victims in my study, since it affirmed that, contrary to the negative implications of their victim-related identity, they were in fact people who acted in accordance with ‘good’ and ‘peaceful’ values. Forgiveness also eliminated critical self-judgement and negative self-talk (e.g., ‘how did I let that happen?’) and increased self-esteem. Some victims credited their
forgiveness of the offender with protecting them from staying in a negative ‘poor me’ or ‘victim’ identity and for putting control of their own wellbeing into their own hands. These findings support prior research by Freedman and Enright (1996), who found that victims of incest experienced heightened self-esteem and improved self-view (i.e., more confident) following their participation in a forgiveness intervention. It also supports prior research by Reed and Enright (2006), who found that victims of spousal emotional abuse significantly improved in measures of self-esteem, depression, environmental mastery (i.e., everyday decision making), finding meaning in suffering, forgiveness and post-traumatic stress compared with those who took part in an alternative treatment.

In my research, for many victims, forgiveness restored a more positive self-view because it invalidated the ‘moral injury’ or demeaning message associated with the crime, which stated they were worthless, and contested the stigma of the victim label and its insinuations of weakness and ‘stupidity’. Griswold (2007) states that a forgiver identity projects a picture of ‘courage’ (p. 17) and thus stands in contrast to the victim identity, which is steeped in attributes of weakness, powerlessness and helplessness (Leisenring, 2006). As Marietta Jaeger (1998), a woman who forgave her daughter’s killer, points out, ‘Forgiveness is hard work. It demands diligent self-discipline, corraling of our basest instincts, custody of the tongue, and a steadfast refusal not to get caught up in the mean-spiritedness of our times’ (p. 12). Forgiveness enabled some of the crime victims in my research to relinquish the victim identity and its negative associations by replacing it with a forgiver identity, which carries attributes of courage, strength and resilience.

To summarise, I discussed how victims experienced crime as a threat to their identity, since they struggled to make sense of and reconcile their more positive and preferred ‘presentation of self’ with the discredited victim identity. I explained how, for a number of offenders, forgiveness restored a more positive identity by challenging and annuling the stigma and moral injury associated with victimisation.
8.2.5 Lost Belief in a Just World

Crime victimisation posed a significant and painful challenge to the assumptive world of many of the victims in my study. Assault, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault and robbery were seen by many victims as indisputable evidence that the world is not always good, people are not always trustworthy and one must literally watch one’s back. These findings lend further support to the seminal work of Lerner and Miller (1978) and Janoff-Bulman (1989), who propose that assumptive beliefs help individuals adapt to their environment. It is more comforting to believe that people deserve what they get and get what they deserve (Lerner & Miller, 1978) than to believe that the world is unpredictable and cruel to good people. These findings also align with previous studies on traumatised populations, such as that by Magwaza (1999), who found that victims of human rights violations (e.g., death of a loved one, personal torture and detainment) subsequently regarded people and their environment as less benevolent and the world as less meaningful compared with a non-traumatised group. Research by Wickie and Marwit (2001) also found that parents of murdered children held significantly more negative views regarding the benevolence of the world compared with parents who lost a child to sudden accidental death. A number of crime victims in my research felt out of control, fearful and vulnerable, as their experience of victimisation taught them that they could no longer assume they would be safe in the world.

8.2.6 Forgiveness: Rebuilding the Assumptive World

Forgiveness assisted a number of the victims in my study in rebuilding their assumptive world following the crime. Because of the psychological threat attached to the belief that the world is unsafe, people are often motivated to engage in various coping responses that enable them to mitigate or modify the stress response (Park, 2010; Worthington et al., 2016; Wright, Crawford, & Sabastian, 2007). In my study, forgiveness was a mechanism for stimulating two primary coping responses that fostered, in some victims, a more positive worldview. First, forgiveness was an emotion-focused coping strategy that reduced the stress of the offence by helping the victims release their disturbing feelings of shame, fear and distrust of others and tormenting ruminative thoughts (see also Worthington & Scherer, 2004). When
victims relinquished these distressing thoughts and fears, the world began to appear less threatening.

For other victims in my study, forgiveness was a meaning-making coping strategy. In the wake of traumatic experiences, people try to make sense or meaning out of what occurred. Park and Ali (2006) state, ‘Meaning making involves coming to see or understand the situation in a different way and reviewing and reforming one’s beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency among them’ (p. 393). For a number of victims, forgiveness enabled them to see beyond the painful aspects of the offence, such as trauma and feelings of victimhood. As victims reflected upon the crime and the toll it had taken on their lives, many decided that they were no longer willing to pay the ‘costs of victimisation’ in terms of the damage it caused to their overall wellbeing, their relationships and their hopes and dreams for the future. These findings confirm prior research indicating that forgiveness is a coping strategy that not only enables victims to better handle the painful cognitive and affective ramifications of the offence (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), but has been associated with resilience and recovery following harm (Gupta & Kumar, 2015; Isaak et al., 2015; Worthington et al., 2016). Forgiveness may inspire resilience by enhancing psychological wellbeing, reducing rumination and crafting meaning-making narratives that allow victims to reconstruct the offence in a manner that focuses on finding deeper meaning or positive outcomes in the experience (Janoff-Bulman & Morgan, 1994; Park, 2010; Worthington et al., 2016).

In sum, in this section, I discussed how victimisation shattered the assumptive beliefs of a number of victims in my study. I explained why victims found it difficult to understand and adjust to a new reality where they no longer felt safe or knew who they could trust. I described how forgiveness was an emotion-focused and meaning-making response to harm that assisted some victims in rebuilding their assumptive world through releasing negative thoughts and emotions about the crime and facilitating a view of their experience that focused on acknowledging the harm in a way that allowed them to move on with their lives.
8.2.7 Unmet Justice Needs

Criminal justice system responses to and/or outcomes of the crime failed to meet the justice or personal healing needs of a significant portion of the victims in my study. Some victims said they rode a rollercoaster of emotions, as feelings of being on ‘high alert’ in anticipation of upcoming court dates tumbled into anger and frustration each time the court delayed or postponed the case. One of the most noteworthy findings of my study is that even when offenders were convicted, most victims said it did not bring the psychological or emotional ‘relief’ they expected. Prior research suggests that criminal justice system responses (i.e. offender punishment) provide results that bring ‘closure’ to some victims (Bandes, 1999; Gross & Matheson, 2002). However, the data in my research suggests that criminal convictions, though appreciated by victims in my study, did not ‘fix’ what had happened. Such a finding aligns with other research in the field: for example, Herman (2005) notes that even successful legal outcomes may not satisfy victims when their needs are not met. In her interviews with victims of sexual and domestic violence, Herman found that few victims who pursued justice in the criminal justice system obtained what they perceived as a satisfactory outcome. In their eyes, justice had less to do with retribution and more to do with validating their harm, the community condemning the crime, receiving a genuine apology, exposing the offender and assuring personal safety.

These findings also align with restorative justice literature, which has explored in great depth, and across varying offence types, victims’ unmet needs. Using Toew’s (2006) framework of justice needs to understand the unmet justice needs of victims before and after their participation in restorative justice (i.e., victim-offender conferencing), Bolitho (2015) found that every victim (n = 74), even when there were guilty findings in their court case, had at least one unmet justice need. Bolitho (2015) found that taking part in restorative justice provided victims with a ‘deeper sense of justice’, as a majority of articulated unmet justice needs were met in 95% of cases. Armstrong (2012) similarly found that participation in restorative justice met a number of victim justice needs such as those articulated by Toew (2006). Interviews with victims revealed that taking part in restorative justice brought victims increased ‘peace of mind’, empowerment, access to information (i.e. the need to understand
why) and fulfilled the need to be heard. Victims in my study who participated in restorative justice identified similar benefits in terms of the meaningfulness of sharing their story.

My thesis findings also lend support to the claim that contact with the criminal justice system can be especially egregious for victims of domestic violence (Bell & Goodman, 2001; Stephens & Sinden, 2000). The embarrassment and humiliation that some victims in my study already felt about the abuse they experienced was further heightened by the responses of the police officers who took their reports. The words and mannerisms of the police suggested to victims in this study that the officers were extremely impatient and frustrated by the victim’s emotional state, and annoyed about the amount of paperwork they had to undertake to process the case. These findings are consistent with the literature on secondary victimisation, which holds that victims may suffer further injustices following the initial crime—in some cases, this may be more painful and traumatic for them than the initial offence (Brown, 1991). As Hattendorf and Tolerud (1997) explain, ‘secondary abusers are those sought out by victims as sources of trust, protection or therapeutic intervention. Their response is one that not only refuses support but also designates blame, leaving the victim to feel betrayed once more’ (p. 17). Secondary victimisation left domestic violence victims in my study feeling like ‘dirt’, a ‘low priority’, stigmatised, unheard and judged.

Therefore, it is not surprising that several victims held negative perceptions of the police or other justice professionals. These findings align with past research by Leisenring (2012), who reports that domestic violence victims were frequently unsatisfied with responding police officers. Like the victims in my study, the attitudes and behaviours of the police left the victims in Leisenring’s study feeling like the police thought they were ‘stupid’, ‘inconvenient’ or ‘just a lot of paperwork’ (p. 154). Similarly, victims in Stephens and Sinden’s (2000) study stated that police showed a lack of concern or compassion towards them or their situation. Many said the attitudes of the police made them feel as though they were not believed or that their problems were underserving of police time or effort.
8.2.8 Forgiveness and Restoration: Addressing Victims’ Justice Needs

While there is burgeoning literature on the efficacy of forgiveness in restoring a victim’s sense of justice that the offence has undermined (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010), in my study, only Esther, a victim of numerous crimes, including two violent home invasions, explicitly stated that forgiveness removed her feelings of ‘this is unfair’. For others, such as Kaye and Brittany, victims of domestic violence, forgiveness balanced the scales of justice for them by refuting the degrading message, inherent in the offence, that the victim is less worthy than the offender and thus can be used as the offender sees fit (Murphy, 2003). Forgiveness may be perceived by victims as a strong statement that the offender and the offence no longer dominated their lives. Zehr (2005) contends,

Without this experience of forgiveness, without this closure, the wound festers, the violation takes over our consciousness, our lives. It, and the offender, are in control. Real forgiveness, then, is an act of empowerment and healing. It allows one to move from victim to survivor. (p. 47)

Forgiveness is a direct challenge to the crimes’ insulting message of weakness and disempowerment. The courage and strength that victims in my study manifested when they forgave may be seen as the weight that brings the scales of justice back into balance.

There is much debate regarding what restorative justice is (Johnstone & VanNess, 2007; McCold, 2000) and whether the Sycamore Tree Project, a prison-based restorative justice program that brings together a group of ‘unrelated’ or surrogate victims (i.e., they are not the direct victims of offenders they meet) and offenders to discuss issues of crime and justice, is really a true restorative process (Guidoni, 2003). What is certain is that for two victims in my study, participating in the Sycamore Tree program resulted in outcomes that they perceived as restorative. These victims were deeply touched by the supportive and respectful attitudes shown by the offenders as they told their stories of victimisation. Victims said they felt ‘validated’ by the men’s expressions of remorse and gestures of apology for what they, the victims, had gone through and for their own crimes. These findings were similarly found in Van Camp and Wemmers’ (2013) interviews with victims of violent crime who were asked
to describe how they experienced their participation in a restorative process (i.e., victim–offender mediation, family group conferencing, victim–offender encounters involving surrogate victims and offenders). Similar to the victims in my study who took part in the Sycamore Tree Project, victims in Van Camp and Wemmers’ (2013) study spoke of the healing effects related to their taking part in restorative process. Victims regarded voice, or the opportunity to share with offenders their story of victimisation and its effects on their lives, as especially meaningful. Victims further described the experience of restorative justice as one that brought closure to the crime and where they felt liberated, valued, reborn, affirmed and empowered. While neither of the victims in my research directly attributed their participation in the Sycamore Tree Project with forgiveness, Rebecca referred to sharing her story with offenders as a ‘golden moment’. Esther said she gained empathy and forgiveness for offenders in general as result of her participation.

However, in my research, I found that the benefits of restorative justice processes were not ubiquitous. Jordan, a man who was the victim of a ‘King’ punch assault by a teenage boy, was dissatisfied after taking part in a youth justice conference. The offender’s ‘smug’ (i.e. arrogant) and unremorseful attitude, in addition to the offender’s lack of financial remuneration for Jordan’s medical bills, contributed to Jordan’s dissatisfaction. Prior research has identified negative attitudes and behaviours on the part of the offender, such as lack of engagement in the process and failure to apologise or accept responsibility for their actions, as factors that contribute to victim dissatisfaction with restorative justice processes (Strang, 2002; Van Camp & Wemmers, 2013). Jordan’s decision to forgive years after the offence, when the offender approached him on the street and apologised for the harm he caused, confirms the relationship between apology and forgiveness found in previous studies (e.g., Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Hayes, 2006).

In sum, I discussed why the criminal justice system response failed to provide the healing that many victims in my study hoped for or desired. I explained why victims of domestic violence experienced the disrespect of police and other justice officials as a secondary victimisation. I noted that victims need to be heard, validated and respected was, in some cases, met through their involvement in restorative justice programs. I also detailed how
forgiveness was an act of courage and strength that balanced the scales of justice by refuting the factor responsible for unbalancing the scales in the first place: specifically that factor is the message inherent in the crime that the victim was beneath the offender in status.

8.2.9 Choosing Not to Forgive

It should be highlighted that granting forgiveness was not unanimous. Some victims chose not to forgive, or found forgiveness too difficult or painful to accomplish or sustain. A few victims told me they made the decision to withhold forgiveness primarily because of the offender’s lack of remorse. Even when victims strongly desired to forgive or tried to understand the cause of the offender’s actions so that they could forgive, the offender’s failure to repent made such forgiveness unattainable. Prior research suggests that offender apologies and/or other conciliatory behaviours on the wrongdoer’s part are important to victims (Martin, 2010) and are directly associated with their willingness to forgive (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Jeter & Brannon, 2017; McCullough, Pederson, Tabak, & Carter, 2014). Victims who withheld forgiveness may have also been influenced by offender and/or offence characteristics. Prior research has found that victims have difficulty forgiving repeat offences, and in cases when they believe the offender acted intentionally (Rapske, Boon, Alibhai, & Keong, 2010). This may explain why Steve, a paramedic assaulted on the job, was able to forgive the man who spat blood on him the first time, but withdrew that forgiveness after the man did it again. It might also explain why Ashley could not forgive the boy who sexually abused her for over three years. These findings indicate that even when victims are motivated to forgive, the offender’s failure to engage in reparative work makes forgiveness untenable.

8.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, in this chapter, I discussed how the lived experience of victimisation was one characterised by numerous egregious traumatic effects that influenced victims’ psychological, behavioural and somatic wellbeing. I explained how the trauma of victimisation had long-lasting and destructive effects on victims’ mental health and why, in some cases, increased self-protective and self-destructive behaviours were responses that
helped victims cope with the psychological and emotional aftereffects of harm. I indicated how the somatic effects of crime were experienced by victims in terms of physical injuries as well as chronic and acute illness and disease associated with the accumulated stress and trauma of victimisation. I also related how most victims credited forgiveness with healing many of the traumatic effects of victimisation. Forgiveness enabled victims to relinquish or ‘let go’ of distressing thoughts and feelings consequent to the crime. In addition, I addressed apparent differences between victims’ experiences and perceptions of forgiveness given willingly compared with forgiveness offered out of a sense of duty. I utilised the theoretical framework of self-determination theory in order to explain how forgiveness given out of a sense of obligation did not resonate emotionally with victims or have the same benefits as it did when victims forgive because it is what they desire.

I next discussed why crime victims struggled to maintain a positive self-identity, as victimisation was experienced as a moral injury that threatened their fundamental perceptions of who they are as people. I explained that crime created identity dilemmas and shaped new victim-related and stigmatised identities characterised by weakness and powerlessness—identities that were foreign and distressing to victims as they conflicted with their prior, more positive self-conceptualisation. I noted how, for many victims, forgiveness aided in their construction of a new and valued forgiver identity. Because the forgiver identity is associated with courage, strength and resilience, it invalidated the victim identity for many of the victims in my study.

Further, I discussed how the experience of victimisation changed the ways that many victims in my study perceived the world. I explained how victims’ belief in a world that was safe and where people were trustworthy could not survive the irrefutable evidence of victimisation. I discussed how, for some victims, forgiveness was an emotion-focused and meaning-making coping strategy that assisted in restoring their assumptive world. Relinquishing negative thoughts and affect regarding the crime and shaping a new perception of their experience that allowed them to reclaim a sense of meaning in life enabled victims to move forward.
Lastly, I discussed how victimisation created needs for justice and personal healing that went beyond the outcomes of the victims’ court cases. I explained why justice system process or attitudes of justice officials that ignored the psychological and emotional after-effects of crime victimisation or left the victim feeling demeaned and stigmatised resulted in secondary victimisation. I noted how, for some victims, forgiveness and/or participation in restorative justice programs had restorative outcomes in terms of meeting the victims’ need for voice, validation and respect.

Overall, victimisation was a distressing ordeal that significantly impaired the lives of all victims in my study. For many victims, forgiveness was a response that enabled them to move forward because it ameliorated the harmful effects of victimisation.

I now move to Chapter 9 where I provide a discussion of the offence-related effects for offenders and their perceptions of the meaning and relevance of forgiveness in their lives.
Chapter 9: Discussion of Offender Findings

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter I analyse data from my findings on offender perceptions of offence-related effects and understandings of forgiveness. In my analysis of the offender interview data I identified seven key themes that depict the lived experience of criminal offending and offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness. In the present chapter, I first discuss the offence-related effects of criminal offending on offenders themselves and the three themes that emerged through my analysis of the data. This is then followed by a section discussing the four themes related to the offenders’ understandings of forgiveness. In presenting a discussion of the offence-related effects of criminal offending I note that many offenders, like victims, are traumatised by their criminal behaviour, particularly when their actions violate their values of right and wrong. I next explain how offenders manage their stigmatised offender identity and handle their distressing emotions. I further discuss the challenges that offenders face to their future well-being as a consequence of their wrongdoing. I then turn to a discussion of the offenders’ understandings of forgiveness. I discuss how offenders view forgiveness from both a victim and an offender perspective and how they, like victims, see giving and/or receiving forgiveness as a beneficial response to the harm they received and/or perpetrated. Lastly, I discuss that while a number of offenders appreciate being forgiven by their victims it is self-forgiveness and forgiveness from loved ones that matters most to offenders.

9.2 Offence-Related Effects for Offenders

While not to diminish the negative consequences that crime causes for victims, one of the main findings that emerged in my study is that offenders also experienced negative consequences as a result of their wrongdoing—consequences that went beyond those they experienced at the hands of the criminal justice system. While justice system responses (i.e. incarceration, probation) to offending generally have a termination date, the challenges to the offender’s mental, emotional and future well-being were frequently long-lasting and
egregious. These findings align with those of Bloom (1999), who asserts that the physiological nature of human beings is such that to harm others is to harm oneself: ‘[one] cannot hurt anyone … without setting the stage for revenge that will be enacted either upon themselves, upon others, or both’ (p. 3). Through my analysis of interviews with offenders, I found that the ‘revenge’ offenders inflicted upon themselves as a result of their criminal actions was extensive, and took the form of years of ruminative thoughts regarding their crimes, depression, self-condemnation and self-harm. Many of the offenders in my study were tormented by feelings of guilt and shame—they lost sleep and families and faced diminished opportunities for future success because of the stigma of their criminal history.

9.2.1 Perpetration-Induced Harm: Moral Injury and Trauma

Criminal offenders in my study experienced damaging psychological ramifications as a result of the harm they inflicted on others. These findings are consistent with Evans et al.’s (2007) study on offenders’ memories of crime, which found that distressing intrusive memories and ruminations related to the offence were common in a sample of young offenders convicted of violent offences. Likewise, Kerig, Chaplo, Bennett and Modrowski’s (2016) found in their study that gang members, compared with youth who were not members of a gang, displayed significantly higher rates of trauma exposure overall and perpetration-induced trauma in particular. In addition, youth gang members, compared with non-gang members, were more likely to meet the criteria for a diagnosis of full or partial PTSD and exhibit substantially heightened levels of post-traumatic dissociation and emotional numbing.

The concept of perpetration-induced trauma may be useful for understanding why a number of the offenders in my study faced serious challenges to their mental wellbeing as a result of the harm they inflicted on others. Perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) is a form of PTSD where symptoms may result from killing or committing violence (MacNair, 2015; Maugen et al., 2010; Vogt et al., 2017). My findings confirm MacNair’s (2015) assertion that there are ‘natural psychological consequences’ for harming others such that offenders do not ‘escape their actions with impunity’ (pp. 280–281). Even when offenders did not cause serious harm to others (e.g., Claire caused property damage while driving drunk; Daisy
engaged in prostitution), most still said they experienced profound feelings of sorrow and regret over the damage they caused others and their own lives. While the majority of offenders in my study suffered some degree of mental distress as a consequence of their criminal behaviour, those who committed violent offences experienced the most egregious trauma symptoms.

The relationship between criminal offending and perpetration-induced traumatic stress occurs when the offender perceives their action as a moral injury (MacNair, 2015). Moral injuries are defined as the psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioural and social effects of perpetrating, failing to prevent or witnessing acts that are at odds with deeply held moral and ethical beliefs and expectations (Litz et al., 2009; Maguen & Litz, 2012). Moral injuries create dissonance or inner conflict, as they violate the individual’s fundamental beliefs about right and wrong and assumptions regarding how the world works, how people ought to be treated and the worth of self (Litz et al., 2009). When perpetrators are unable to reconcile the experience with their own moral beliefs and values, they may feel deep feelings of guilt and shame and may even view themselves as ‘immoral, irredeemable, and unrepairable’ (Litz et al., 2009, p. 698). Data from my research indicate that the reason many of the offenders suffered grievous psychological and emotional ramifications as a result of the crime is that they likely experienced their criminal behaviour as a moral injury. Many offenders in my research expressed that they were often shocked by their own criminal actions, as they could not fathom that there was a side of them capable of causing such harm. One felt her crimes ‘robbed’ her of all ‘honour and dignity’, as they stood in stark contrast to the religious beliefs with which she was raised. Many experienced profound feelings of shame and guilt stemming from the revulsion they felt over their actions. Only Allegra, who denied committing theft, did not appear to view the offence as a moral injury. In her mind, she was innocent, and therefore there was no action to cause a moral conflict. In alignment with previous research (e.g., Evans et al., 2007; MacNair, 2001; Pollock, 1999), these findings suggest that traumatic experiences, even when they are self-induced, have the power to create painful and long-lasting effects.
9.2.2 Moral Disengagement

Many offenders in my study described their crimes in ways that allowed them, to some degree, to disengage morally from the harm. Moral disengagement refers to the offender’s efforts to constrain their negative self-sanctions that occur as a response to their ‘reprehensible conduct’ (Bandura, 1999, p. 194). As a rule, people judge their behaviour in relation to perceived moral standards and tend to forgo acting in ways that will breach these standards and cause self-condemnation. In the event that one’s actions cause self-recrimination, the individual is thus motivated to respond in a manner that enables them to maintain a positive sense of self-worth. Wrongdoers may fortify a positive self-image by taking responsibility for their behaviour, apologising and seeking to make amends, or they may attempt to bolster their self-worth by disengaging from their moral self-sanctions.

According to Bandura (1999), offenders seek to morally disengage from their wrongdoing through moral justification and dehumanising the victim. Moral justification is a portrayal of the offence as socially worthy or a moral imperative. It was a disengagement practice used most notably by Gabriel, when he said that his killing of the man who raped a woman in front of him was not only a defence of his personal code of honour, but, more broadly, a service to the community. By characterising the victim as an ‘intimidating bastard’ and the murder as a public service, Gabriel was able to redefine his actions in a manner that allowed him to maintain a morally decent self-perception. Trammell and Chenault (2009) found similar justifications of violence used against child molesters in their interviews with prison inmates. Like Gabriel and other offenders in my study (e.g., Real, Bob) who view protecting women and children as the ‘golden rule’, inmates in Trammell and Chenault’s (2009) study also referred to ‘the code’ of inmate conduct that not only justified their assault of child molesters, but demanded that they ‘take these guys out’. By positioning their crimes as morally just, the offenders in my study were able to raise their status from that of despicable criminal to someone with heroic qualities (Trammell & Chenault, 2009).

Most of the violent offenders in my study also morally disengaged from their behaviours by dehumanising the victim. Dehumanising strips a victim of human qualities and makes the
victim’s ill-treatment more palatable to the offender’s conscience (Bandura, 1999). Prior to committing murder, Real viewed his fellow inmate as a person without value, while Hugo ‘demonised’ the pimp he killed as a man who threatened the wellbeing of young girls in the community. Even Patrick, a white supremacist, was able to dehumanise the homosexual man he and his mates assaulted. Bolstering other research (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004), the findings of my study suggest that human connections and relational bonds appear to be a protective factor against the perpetration of violence. For example, Inga assaulted her uncle in a drunken rage, but did not disparage him as a person. Rather, Inga saw her uncle as a person with substantial flaws, but one with whom she still had a familial bond.

Bandura (1999) states that humanisation occurs when ‘people’s recognition of the social linkage of their lives and their vested interest in each other’s welfare help to support actions that instill them with a sense of community’ (p. 202). Offenders in my research who viewed their victims as people devoid of human worth were able to weaken, if not altogether eliminate, the self-censure that would normally preclude acts of violence.

9.2.3 Blame Talk: Neutralising Personal Responsibility

The majority of offenders in my study wrestled with and sought to reconcile feelings of blame. Most offenders admitted that they committed the crime, but deflected blame through various neutralisation techniques. Like moral disengagement, neutralisation techniques are self-serving cognitive distortions that allow people to justify behaviours that conflict with their moral beliefs and self-concepts (Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010; Sykes & Matza 1957). Denying responsibility, denying injury, denying the victim, condemnation of the condemners and appealing to higher loyalties were five neutralisation techniques used by offenders in my study as a means of mitigating distressing and uncomfortable feeling of blame they experienced (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Denying responsibility was the primary neutralisation strategy used by nearly all the drug offenders in my study. Offenders who were addicts or who manufactured, trafficked or sold drugs blamed their crimes on their addiction. Most drug offenders also denied the victim (they did not force people to buy drugs), unless I specifically asked who had been harmed by
their crimes. Some offenders would then concede that their drug clients or their own families were the victims. Condemnation of the condemners was another neutralisation strategy used by a few offenders in my study, such as Daisy, who blamed her prostitution on her husband’s infidelity. By turning the fingers of blame pointed towards them back at their accusers, offenders were able to deflect the blame away from themselves. Gabriel also appealed to higher loyalties when he justified the murder of a rapist as a defence of his code of honour.

Similar findings were noted by Cromwell and Birzer (2012) in their case study of a career criminal convicted of numerous serious offences. They found that ‘George’ consistently distorted his criminal behaviours to make them appear more socially acceptable. Like a number of the offenders in my study, ‘George’ believed his victims had done something to deserve the crime; he also said his crimes should be viewed as good deeds worthy of a medal in much the same way as Crazy, an offender in my study envisioned his crime. Crazy stated the manager of the shop he burgled should shake his hand to thank him for the insurance payout. When offenders rationalise their crimes, they protect themselves from self-blame and from the blame and judgement of others (Sykes & Matza, 1957). For nearly all offenders in my study, admitting guilt came more easily than accepting blame. Perhaps inherent in the acceptance of blame is the sense that one is also accepting a portrayal of the self as deeply flawed and ‘spoiled’ (Goffman, 1963). In my study, I found that when an offender’s self-image or sense of worth was threatened by accepting blame, there was a strong incentive for them to manage their identity through portrayals of self that not only neutralised the blame, but assisted them in creating an essentially good identity.

9.2.4 Impression Management: Constructing a Morally Good Self

A criminal identity is a ‘spoiled’ or stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963). Many offenders in my study sought to manage the stigma of their offender identity by crafting narratives around their crimes that positioned them as people who were essentially heroic or decent, or whose own victimisation was the cause of their crimes. Human beings tell tales; people use stories to put their experiences and emotions into words (Pennebaker, 2000), and they also use
stories to construct their identity. According to Presser (2004), identities are embedded in stories of the self, particularly those people create to account for their behaviour.

A number of offenders in my research narrated tales of heroism that placed their personal agency front and centre in their story of how, against all odds, they worked hard and made something good of their lives. Offenders talked of beating drug addictions, ‘knuckling down’ to be a good person, going to university, helping others who were similarly struggling and leaving behind their life of crime. Tales that emphasise a negative life story transitioning into one with a positive outcome or a positive attribution of self are called redemption sequences (McAdams, 2013). Redemption narratives speak to an individual’s difficult life experiences from which they have learnt and that have shaped their current, good self. Stone (2015) found similar narratives of redemptive suffering in her interviews with drug-addicted pregnant women—those who crafted redemptive stories narrated their struggles and weaknesses as strengths. Research has identified that telling redemption narratives has been associated with individuals who experience positive growth in the face of challenging life events. Adler, Skalina and McAdams (2008) found that former psychotherapy patients who narrated ‘heroic stories in which they bravely battled their symptoms and emerged victorious in the end’ (p. 235) then experienced better psychological health. Heroic tales were a means by which offenders in my study crafted and affirmed an identity characterised as strong, resilient and morally decent.

Some offenders in my study constructed narratives affirming that they were either newly reformed and now decent, or that they always contained what Stone (2016) calls a ‘good core self’ (p. 964), even in the midst of their offending. Newly reformed offenders contrasted the way they used to think and act (e.g., Crazy: ‘It was a good feeling to get away with it’) with the good person they had become (e.g., Crazy: ‘I never ever ever do anything wrong now’). Violent offenders in my research, who were often socialised while in prison in the criminal code of honour that forbids harming women and children, commonly drew on their strict adherence to the criminal code as evidence that they were men of integrity with a core self that was good and decent. By positioning their violent behaviour in the larger context of acting ethically (e.g., choosing the right victims: men, other convicts, men who break the
code) and acting to defend an ideological value embedded in their culture, offenders upheld if not the crime itself as decent, then themselves as honourable and essentially good.

In my research, I found that some offenders also appropriated a victim identity in their efforts to manage their discredited identity. Offenders’ tales of victimisation were, in essence, attributions of blame. Attributions of blame serve a self-exonerative purpose (Bandura, 1999), as wrongdoers are able to portray themselves ‘as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation’ (Bandura, 1999, p. 203). Many offenders in my study portrayed their crimes as a response to harms they received or to the wrongful actions of others. Offenders identified aggravating factors such as an employer’s refusal of mental health leave, being forced to drive drunk and the victim’s failure to stop the offence as culpable features in their crimes. More often, offenders pointed to dysfunctional family, past and present, and behaviours that occurred in the home, such as physical and sexual abuse, addictions, family unacceptance of one’s sexuality, bullying, abandonment and cheating partners as the genesis of and justification for their offending behaviour. This is not to suggest that their stories were untrue, as many studies link criminal offending with family dysfunction and abuse (Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Smith & Thornberry, 1995). It is simply to state that in the minds of many offenders, they were essentially decent people who committed crime as a response to previous personal harm. By adopting a victim identity, offenders in my study positioned themselves as worthy of sympathy and compassion rather than blame and condemnation.

In sum, in this section, I discussed why the mental health of many offenders in my study was profoundly and negatively affected by the crimes they committed. I explained how many offenders experienced the harm they caused to others as a moral injury when their acts of wrongdoing stood in stark contrast to their more normative values regarding right and wrong. I noted that while nearly all offenders identified painful psychological effects consequent to their crimes, violent offenders were at particular risk for developing symptomology consistent with PITS. I also detailed how many offenders in my research, in an effort to resolve the psychological discomfort they experienced as a result of their crimes, engaged in
moral disengagement and neutralisation strategies and narrated identities that positioned them as people who, in spite of their crimes, were morally good.

9.2.5 Emotional Challenges

Emotions (or lack of any emotion) are not only drivers of criminal offending—for many offenders in my study, they were painful and enduring remnants of the wrong they committed. Anger, emotional disconnection, guilt and shame were the primary affective responses experienced by offenders in my research. At first glance, depictions of anger as a motivating factor for the crime (e.g., John: ‘I was angry and … you know hatin’ the world’) appeared to be little more than the offenders’ attempts to attribute blame to other people or forces outside their control. However, looking beyond the offenders’ rationalisations, their anger-fuelled crimes may be seen as responses to broken and alienated relationships, such as the pain of a father’s suicide and the demoralisation of a father’s bullying. As Zehr (2002) states, ‘the outer world reflects the inner world. If we don’t deal with our traumas, we are prone to re-enact them’ (p. 13). Research suggests that substance abuse, breaking and entering, stealing cars, acts of violence and ideologically justified ‘bullying’ (e.g., neo-Nazi violence) performed by offenders in my study were reflections of their own trauma that they subsequently enacted on the world around them (Van der Kolk, 1989).

The feelings of anger experienced by some offenders in my study also had a relational aspect, as that anger was rooted in a sense of being treated unfairly and/or disrespectfully. Offenders who felt that justice officials treated them callously (e.g., police took ‘pleasure’ in reporting the victim’s death) or disrespectfully (e.g., police refused offender the use of the toilet; ‘unreasonable’ judge), or that they or their criminal case was handled unfairly (e.g., $800 dollar fine for $16 dollar theft), experienced potent feelings of anger and ‘fury’. Disrespectful treatment is viewed as a common source of anger, as it fosters feelings of injustice (Miller, 2001). Acts of disrespect are experienced as injustice because they not only deprive people of the dignity to which they feel entitled as human beings, but subject them to a social imbalance that they feel they don’t deserve (Bourdieu, 1965; Miller, 1993). These findings are also consistent with research on procedural justice indicating that when people perceive
that a justice process has been conducted unfairly, it results in distrust and negative emotions such as frustration and anger (Barkworth & Murphy, 2015; Murphy & Tyler, 2008). Such negative emotions then have the negative consequence of reducing one’s willingness to comply or cooperate willingly with the authority’s decisions and rulings (Barkworth & Murphy, 2015; Murphy & Tyler, 2008; Tyler, 2006). Procedural justice is also important, as it leads to the outcome being perceived as fair (Greenberg & Folger, 1983). Anger was a distressing affective outcome for some offenders in my research who felt that the justice system had grievously mistreated them or mishandled their case. Though none stated that their sense of being treated poorly or with procedural unfairness led to future non-compliant behaviour (Murphy & Tyler, 2008), for many offenders, these experiences fostered a lingering disappointment and distrust of the justice system.

Emotional disconnection or detachment from either the victim, oneself or both was the hallmark of the affective experience of crime for nearly all offenders who were convicted of drug or violent offences. Offenders who trafficked drugs or committed other crimes to support their addiction (e.g., Bob was an addict convicted of armed robbery) were singularly focused on their own needs and not the welfare of victims or other people in their life. Even when offenders were aware that their crimes were hurting others (e.g., through victim statements, ruined lives of drug clients) none said they felt bad (at the time of the crime) thinking about how their crimes affected others. These findings align with prior research suggesting that individuals in the throes of active addiction tend to be self-centred and ‘permeated with self-related concerns’ (Sachs, 2009, p. 199). It seems apparent that substance abuse and the need to feed their addiction overruled any affective feelings and concerns that offenders in my study may have otherwise had for the victims or those around them. This lack of emotional connection to others’ wellbeing dulled the offenders’ awareness of, or at least enabled them to ignore, the magnitude of the harm they caused.

Data from my research indicate that murder and other acts of violence appeared to occur mostly among violent offenders who had a lack of emotion. To kill or violently assault their victims, offenders spoke of disconnecting from their emotions. Some purposefully ‘turn[ed] off’ emotions, while others ‘demonised’ the victim prior to the murders. One associated his
violent acts with becoming disconnected from his own humanity and ‘untethered’ from his heart. Emotional detachment may also be viewed as a lack of empathy. Empathy is defined as ‘an effective trait which facilitates the experience and the understanding [emphasis in the original] of the emotions of another person’ (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006, p. 540). Simply put, empathy is ‘feeling with’ another person (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987, p. 5). Violent offenders in my study appeared to inherently understand that they had to refrain from any empathetic connection with the victim to enact the level of violence they planned. Long and Brecke (2003) state, ‘empathy implies a realistic understanding resulting from feeling with (not for) another, and affiliation is a basic human motivation, a desire for belonging with another’ (p. 28). Since the desire to connect with others is strong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it appears that offenders in my research consciously or unconsciously disengaged from those mechanisms that foster a human connection in order to harm another person.

A lack of empathy in offending populations is common. Prior studies have found differences in levels of empathy between offenders and non-offenders. For example, Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) found, from self-reports of offending in a group of adolescents, that males who bullied frequently were deficient in both affective and total empathy, and that those who bullied violently (e.g., physically hit or kicked) also had low empathy. They further noted that males who committed any offence had lower affective empathy than those who did not, and that both males and females who committed violence had lower empathy than those who had not committed violence (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007). According to Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek (2007), empathy has implications for moral behaviour in three key ways. First, empathetic responses to the distress of others often elicits feelings of concern for their wellbeing. Second, empathy also prompts behaviours that assist the distressed person. Finally, empathetic feelings tend to inhibit behaviour that would be injurious. Pepinsky (2008) contends that ‘empathy is the emotional glue that binds people together in respect and dignity’ (p. 188). The findings from my research suggest that deficits in empathy may have opened the door for some offenders in my study to act violently.

In the aftermath of their crimes, a number of offenders in my research were overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and shame. Shame caused offenders to hide or avoid disclosing their offences.
and led to their isolation from peers and family members. Such responses reflect Tangney et al.’s (2007) depiction of shame as a ‘shrinking’ feeling of *I am a bad person*, which leads to withdrawal and avoidance (p. 349). Shame is one of a group of emotions that occurs when one sees the self negatively or perceives it as diminished in the eyes of others because of a real or imagined moral transgression (Scheff & Retzinger, 2000). Shweder (2003) describes shame as

> a terror that touches the mind, the body, and the soul precisely because one is aware that one might be seen to have come up short in relationship to some shared uncontested ideal that defines what it means to be a good, admirable, attractive, or competent person. (p. 1115)

Though feelings of shame initially motivated some offenders in my study to hide and escape, it did not necessarily prevent them from taking steps to address their undesirable behaviours or seek to make amends (e.g., Claire apologised to her victim and made financial restitution; Darrin worked to earn back his wife’s trust). These findings are more in line with research that links amend-making behaviours with feelings of guilt (Proeve & Howells, 2006; Stuewig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, & McColskey, 2010; Tangney et al., 2007).

In further contrast to the literature, few offenders in my study who said they felt guilt for their crimes actually took steps to make amends. While feelings of ‘huge guilt’ prompted Hugo to write letters of apology to families of his murder victims and a letter of confession to the court, others who said they felt guilty were not similarly motivated to act. The explanation for this may be that offenders are using the terms ‘shame’ and ‘guilt’ interchangeably; these emotions are commonly mistaken for each other (Parker & Thomas, 2009) and often experienced simultaneously (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Offenders who described their feelings of guilt in terms of ‘I can’t bring myself to be in front of them’, ‘How many lives did I destroy’ and ‘I should have never done that’ appear to be more aptly describing the ‘bad self’ of shame (Lewis, 1971) than guilt focused on the bad action. If it was truly guilt and not shame they were experiencing, it seems likely that they would have been induced to take steps to put right the wrong, which would have perhaps
alleviated, if not altogether eliminated, the painful feelings that many continued to carry as a result of their crimes. Shame is considered an emotion that is difficult to resolve. According to Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007), ‘Shame—and shame-fused guilt—offers little opportunity for redemption. It is a daunting challenge to transform a self that is defective at its core’ (p. 353). Shame also carries a ‘heavy cost’ (Tangney et al., 2011), as studies have found that proneness to shame is consistently related to anger-arousal, suspiciousness, resentment and a tendency to blame others (Tangney et al., 2011; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), and disrupts an individual’s ability to form empathetic connections with others (Tangney et al., 2011). In light of these findings, it appears likely that shame, rather than guilt, was the predominate effective consequence for many offenders in my study in the aftermath of their crimes. This may explain why so many of them, ‘desperate to escape painful feelings of shame’ (Tangney et al., 2011, p. 352), were unable to accept blame for their wrongdoing and sought instead to morally disengage from their crimes by providing various justifications and rationalisations for their behaviour.

Therefore, the affective experience of crime perpetration for offenders in my research was one rooted in feelings of alienation, disrespect and disconnection from others. In this section, I explained how anger was both a cause and effect of wrongdoing. I noted that some offenders unleashed their feelings of anger over family dysfunction and abuse on others through their crimes, while some experienced anger as a by-product of disrespectful and unjust treatment that they experienced at the hands of justice officials. I also discussed why emotional disconnection from others and self and a lack of empathy facilitated horrific acts of violence, including murder. Lastly, I shared why shame, with its focus on the ‘bad self’ and feelings of being diminished in the eyes of others, led many offenders in my study to avoid and isolate themselves rather than take reparative steps that would allow them to restore or create positive and healthy relationships with the victim or others in their community.

9.2.6 Challenged Futures

Criminal offenders often face bleak futures in terms of career prospects, finding employment, loss of meaningful relationships and social withdrawal and isolation (Clarke, 2017; Mills &
Codd, 2008; Kinner, 2006). Because of the stigma of having a criminal history, a number of offenders in my study faced significant barriers to gaining employment, particularly in fields where they had once worked, such as finance or education. The stigma of a criminal background poses a moral dilemma for offenders, as they must choose between concealing their offences and taking the risk of being caught after gaining employment, or disclosing their crimes upfront and not getting the job (Robbers, 2009). A number of offenders in my research worried about the effect their criminal record would have on their ability to find work, which crowded out thoughts of the fact that they had done something wrong. Prior research suggests that offenders in my study who were anxious over finding employment had just cause for concern: in a longitudinal study of 238 released prisoners in Australia, 84% were unemployed (Kinner, 2006). While none of the offenders in my study cited a specific incident of a time when they were denied employment because of their criminal record, it was a concern that weighed heavily on the minds of many, as they believed it would negatively affect their future.

In my interviews with offenders, I found that loss of meaningful family relationships was also a devastating consequence of criminal behaviour that many offenders saw as a threat to their future happiness. The years that offenders spent enmeshed in addictions, living on the streets, committing crime and going in and out of prison put a severe strain on many relationships and severed others entirely (Mills & Codd, 2008). Offenders were not only pained over losing past close relationships—a number were deeply aggrieved over wasted opportunities, years lost on criminal behaviour that they wish they had spent taking care of the families they had and/or pursuing relationships that would bring future happiness (see also Clarke, 2017). These findings align with a great deal of research on the benefits of being socially connected. The human desire to form social attachments is a fundamental drive, like the need for food and water (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Walsh (2016) states that people long for home, family and a place of belonging, particularly in times of difficulty. Family and friends are a rich source of social capital on which offenders often draw for moral and emotional support (Mills, 2005). Family relationships are a powerful source of meaning in life (Lambert et al., 2010), while feeling socially connected is associated with increased feelings of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and belonging (Lambert et al., 2013).
For a number of offenders, losing connections with loved ones was not only a bitter regret, but led to a life of loneliness.

Some offenders experienced social isolation and withdrawal as a consequence of their criminal behaviours. Social isolation was imposed primarily by the ostracism of family members and as a result of addiction and/or mental health impairments that made it difficult for some offenders to form relationships with others. A few offenders purposefully withdrew from others because of feeling stigmatised (i.e., Gabriel did not like people staring at his menacing appearance) or being fearful of running into old criminal cohorts in the community. Feeling isolated or not belonging holds significant negative effects in terms of psychological and physical wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In studies using variations of a ball-toss game, Williams (2007) found that five minutes of being excluded from the game had a large effect on negative affect, anger and sadness. In addition, self-reports of belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence were significantly lower for those ostracised compared with those included. Ostracism has long-term destructive consequences, as people who have been shunned tend to self-ostracise to avoid further rejection. Those who self-ostracise report high rates of depression, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, eating disorders and short-term promiscuity (Williams, 2007). Social isolation was painful for offenders in my study—many had been estranged from family and community for years.

In sum, in this section, I discussed how perpetrating crime posed a number of significant challenges to the futures of many of the offenders in this study. I shared how offenders’ criminal history posed a significant challenge to their future wellbeing in terms of finding employment, and why many offenders deeply mourned the loss of family relationships they considered important to their future happiness. Lastly, I detailed how social isolation and withdrawal was a consequence of offending that had distressing effects for some offenders.

9.3 Offenders’ Perceptions of Forgiveness

In the previous sections of Chapter 9, I addressed the effect of crime on criminal offenders. This section now turns to the offenders’ understandings of forgiveness and its perceived relevance to their lives. I discuss how offenders took various perspectives of forgiveness and
note that overall, most viewed giving and/or receiving forgiveness as having benefits in terms of helping them move on from the offence. I further illustrate that forgiveness has greater or lesser relevance to offenders depending upon who is doing the forgiving.

9.3.1 Giving Forgiveness: From a ‘Victim’s’ Perspective

In my research, I found that offenders most commonly understood forgiveness from a forgiver’s viewpoint, or from the perspective of someone who had themselves been the victim of harm. Like the victim participants in my study, many offenders described giving forgiveness in terms of an effort made to ‘let go’ or ‘get over’ the grudges, bitterness, hatred, hurts and wounds that they suffered (see section 8.2.2)—harms that included parental abandonment, betrayal of a partner, sexual and physical abuse and murder of a partner. These findings align with previous research which finds that the lives of offenders are commonly marked by trauma and victimisation. For example, in Courtney and Maschi’s (2013) study of incarcerated adults, approximately 70% had a history of traumatic life experiences (i.e., domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, neglect) that often began in childhood. Similarly, youth offenders in Paton, Crouch and Camic’s (2009) phenomenological study described a wide range of adverse and traumatic life events, including exposure to violence in the community and at home and living in an unstable and impoverished environment. The personal experiences of mistreatment and victimisation experienced by a number of offenders in my study had egregious and long-lasting effects on their lives that framed their understandings of forgiveness. For many of these offenders forgiveness was, first and foremost, viewed as a response that they may (or may not) have chosen to give to those who hurt them.

Similar to the victim participants, a number of offenders in my study also drew on religious and spiritual beliefs when conceptualising the giving of forgiveness. Some offenders used the word ‘grace’ to describe giving forgiveness to others in response to receiving forgiveness from God. Also like the victims, some offenders depicted grace not as a change of heart or the adoption of pro-social motivations towards the wrongdoer, but as an ‘expectation’ that must be fulfilled (e.g., Daisy slapped her husband’s mistress and then said, ‘God tells me I
have to forgive you’). The connection between giving forgiveness as a response to receiving God’s past and future forgiveness is noted in the literature (see section 8.2.2). For example, in Macaskill’s (2005) study on the meaning of forgiveness for Christian clergy (compared with a community sample), she found that clergy members frequently referred to divine forgiveness in their efforts to explain its meaning. Clergy members described forgiveness as ‘taking] place whether or not the forgiver feels compassion’ and as ‘about grace and therefore limitless’ (pp. 1247‒1249). Like victims, offenders in my study who perceived forgiveness as a religious duty or obligation appeared to have less of an emotional connection with the person they forgave. Rather than a gift of benevolence to the offender, forgiveness given to fulfil a religious obligation seemed to focus more on benefits for the forgiver in terms of receiving God’s forgiveness now and in the future.

Finally, a number of offenders in my research described giving forgiveness as taking an empathetic or understanding stance towards a wrongdoer. In contrast with the previous victim perspective, some offenders in my study defined forgiveness as ‘empathetic understanding’ by situating its meaning in the context of their own crimes. Empathetic understanding entailed showing the wrongdoer tolerance rather than judgement, putting oneself in the proverbial shoes of the offender to understand ‘where they were at the point’ (of the offence) and separating the offender’s worth as a person from the bad act they committed—representations of forgiveness that reflected how they, as offenders, wished to be viewed and treated. Empathetic understanding, while not forgiveness per se, is a facilitating factor of forgiveness (Novitz, 1998). According to Novitz (1998), an integral part of the ‘task’ of forgiveness entails an effort to ‘identify imaginatively’ with the offender’s situation or seeking ‘the other side of the story’ to understand what motivated them, a process North (1998) calls ‘reframing’ (p.23).

Data from my research indicate that a number of offenders equated forgiveness with the ability to put oneself in the offender’s shoes. Daniel, who hit and killed a pedestrian with his car, appealed to what Garrard and McNaughton (2003) refer to as a sense of common humanity in his explanation of forgiveness when he told me, ‘There but for the grace of God, go you’. Rather than being an excuse for his action, Daniel’s statement prompts others to
acknowledge that had they been in the same position as he, it is possible that they may have acted similarly. Forgiveness recognises our ‘common human frailty’ (Gerrard & McNaughton, 2003, p. 57) and acknowledges that because all people have the capacity to do both good and bad, a person’s worth should not be defined by their wrong behaviours. This separation of the wrongdoer’s worth from their ‘bad act’ is a fundamental aspect of Braithwaite’s theory of reintegrative shaming (see section 2.2.4). For a number of offenders in my study, forgiveness in the expression of empathetic understanding both acknowledged the wrongfulness of their actions and communicated respect for their worth as a fellow human being.

In this section, I discussed how most offenders, as a consequence of their own history of victimisation, commonly framed their understandings of forgiveness from a victim viewpoint. Offenders, like the victim participants in my study, thus perceived giving forgiveness in terms of its ability to help them ‘let go’ of the painful and destructive thoughts and emotions regarding the harm they suffered in their lives. I explained how offenders who viewed forgiveness as fulfilling a religious expectation gave no indication that they experienced a change of heart regarding the wrongdoing. Rather, grace was to be given to others as a response to the grace they had received (and hoped to receive) by God. Lastly, when offenders took a wrongdoer’s perspective, they view forgiveness in terms of empathetic understanding; forgiveness was the recognition of a shared humanity between victim and offender that eliminated judgemental thoughts and feelings and separated the worth of the offender from their ‘bad’ acts.

9.3.2 Receiving Forgiveness: Perspectives on Unconditional and Conditional Forgiveness

When offenders in my study viewed receiving forgiveness from the perspective of the wrongdoer, they viewed it in one of two ways: receiving forgiveness was either predicated on fulfilling certain preconditions, or it was a gift given unconditionally. Unconditional forgiveness came without any strings attached; it was given simply because of who the offender was and what they meant to the person giving forgiveness. Offenders in my study
perceived unconditional forgiveness as love—love from a mother who would never turn her back on her wayward child ‘no matter what’, and love from God, a heavenly parent. An association between relationship quality and forgiveness has been noted in prior research: McCullough et al. (1998) found that forgiveness not only occurs more often in the context of close and committed relationships, but is also related to restoring relational closeness following interpersonal transgression.

Not all offenders in my research perceived forgiveness as a gift given unconditionally. Most offenders believed that forgiveness should be granted only after the wrongdoer took certain steps, such as accepting responsibility, making a sincere apology, helping other offenders get their lives on track and desisting from criminal behaviours. This variance of offender viewpoints regarding unconditional versus conditional forgiveness reflects arguments taken up by various scholars. For example, North (1987) asserts:

If I am to forgive I must risk extending my trust and affection, with no guarantee that they will not be flung back in my face or forfeited again in the future. One might even say that forgiveness is an unconditional response to the wrongdoer, for there is something unforgiving in the demand for a guarantee. (p. 505)

In contrast, Murphy (2003) argues that forgiveness must await repentance or a change of heart shown by the offender. When forgiveness is given without that change of heart on the offender’s behalf, what Murphy (2000) refers to as ‘hasty forgiveness’ (p. 1359), it can harm both the forgiver and the forgiven. In the absence of repentance, 29 which, if genuine, would indicate a change of heart, forgiveness may be perceived as the victim’s failure to show self-respect and may deprive the offender of not only the inducement to receive forgiveness, but the moral growth that may accompany such efforts.

In consonance with a number of preconditions of forgiveness outlined by offenders in my study (see paragraph 2 in the present section) previous empirical research has also described

29 According to Murphy (2003), ‘Repentance is the remorseful acceptance of responsibility for wrongful and harmful actions, the repudiation of one’s character that generated the actions, the resolve to do one’s best to extirpate those aspects of one’s character, and the resolve to atone or make amends for the harms that one has done’ (p. 41).
similar offender responses that some victims require prior to forgiving. For example, Nyarko and Punamäki (2017) found in their interviews with 13 victims of war that they required the offender to recognise their crimes, issue a public apology and display genuine commitment to peacebuilding before they would consider forgiveness. As one participant in this study stated, ‘Forgiveness is the key, but the door to forgiveness should be genuine repentance and sincere apology’ (p. 168). Data from my research indicate that some offenders, like victims, believed that receiving (or hoping to) forgiveness was fundamentally related to expressions and evidence of positive change on their part.

As discussed in this section, unconditional forgiveness was viewed by a number of offenders in my study as a genuine expression of love and acceptance that covered all acts of wrongdoing and reflected a close and committed relationship between the wrongdoer and the forgiving. The view of forgiveness as conditional signified the offender’s recognition that they had work to do before receiving (or hoping to receive) forgiveness.

### 9.3.3 What Forgiveness is Not: Reconciliation and ‘Forgive and Forget’

Some offenders in my research contextualised their understanding of forgiveness more in terms of what it is not rather than what it is. Forgiveness and reconciliation were commonly associated in meaning by offenders who were grateful that they had been reconciled with loved ones who forgave them (e.g., Steve and his wife; Bully and his mother and siblings). However, for Claire, a woman convicted of DUI who was also a past victim of domestic violence, the association between forgiveness and reconciliation made her understanding of forgiveness ‘complicated’. She had no desire to forgive her ex-partner if forgiveness meant reconciliation. The assumption that reconciliation must follow forgiveness is often at the heart of criticisms of forgiveness. For example, prior research suggests that forgiveness in abusive situations may be ‘unwise’ (Hargrave, 1994) and inappropriate (Forward, 1989). Though forgiveness has been found to hold potent benefits for victims of abuse (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996; Reed & Enright, 2006), the literature nonetheless makes crucial distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Enright, Freedman, & Rique (1998), forgiveness ‘is one person’s response to injury. Reconciliation involves two
people coming together again’ (p. 44) and depends on the offender’s behaviour and intent to change (Freedman, 1998). Though the literature clearly supports understandings of forgiveness that do not conflate it with reconciliation, it is not surprising that offenders who see reconciliation as a key component of being forgiven are also those who desire to maintain a relationship with the forgiver. It is also equally understandable that offenders who have been subject to victimisation, like Claire, are not inclined to have a conceptualisation of forgiveness that entails allowing the abuser back into their lives. Thus, according to the data from my research, offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness tended to reflect the desires and expectations each had regarding how they wanted their life to move forward after forgiveness.

The common adage ‘forgive and forget’ is a perspective of forgiveness also rejected by a number of offenders in my study. Some believed that forgetting offences, even those that had been forgiven, was unrealistic (e.g., Real: ‘I can never forget what I’ve done’) and detrimental to both the victims’ and offenders’ psychological and emotional wellbeing. Ignored or ‘forgotten’ offences were thought to linger in the back of one’s mind. Some offenders believed it was better to address the harms and work to repair the relationship. These findings align with prior research suggesting that negative thoughts or ruminations about distressing experiences and feelings is a maladaptive cognitive response (Carson & Cupach, 2000), and one associated with a number of damaging outcomes, including ongoing PTSD (Ehlers & Clark, 2000) and developing and maintaining depression (Lyubomirsky & Tkach, 2004). In opposition to the colloquialism ‘forgive and forget’, data from my research indicate that in the estimation of some offenders, it is better to acknowledge and address the pain caused by the harm.

In summary, here, I discussed how two common conceptualisations of forgiveness, forgiveness as reconciliation and ‘forgive and forget’, were views of forgiveness that some offenders in my study rejected. I explained how forgiveness was associated with reconciliation by offenders who wanted to maintain a relationship with the forgiver, whereas offenders who were victimised dismissed views of forgiveness that equated it with allowing the wrongdoer back into their life. Lastly, I noted why some offenders rejected the adage
‘forgive and forget’ as both unrealistic and detrimental to the wellbeing of victims and offenders.

9.3.4 Rejecting Forgiveness

The desire to receive forgiveness for the crimes they committed was not ubiquitous among offenders in my study. Those who vehemently rejected forgiveness either felt they were not at fault for their crime or, in some respect, saw themselves as a victim. When offenders believed the victim(s) deserved the harm (e.g., rapist murdered by Gabriel) or that they were the wronged party and should be the one giving forgiveness (e.g., Daisy believed she should forgive her cheating husband, not the other way around), they fought against the notion that receiving forgiveness applied to them. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that receiving forgiveness may hold undesirable effects for offenders. Unsolicited forgiveness may add to feelings of guilt held by the offender (Kelln & Ellard, 1999) or leave the offender feeling ‘indebted’ or ‘morally obliged’ to the forgiver (Strelan, Crabb, Chan, & Jones, 2017, p. 10). For Gabriel and Daisy, rejecting forgiveness may have been a way of rejecting blameworthiness. To accept forgiveness would, in some measure, have been a distressing acknowledgement of their culpability and an admission that they had committed a wrong in need of being forgiven.

In sum, forgiveness was rejected by some of my offenders who believed their crime was warranted or who saw themselves as the victim. According to my findings, offenders may reject forgiveness when its acceptance is associated with also accepting blame or guilt.

9.3.5 Effects of Forgiveness: Moving Forward

Receiving forgiveness and even simply feeling forgiven enabled a number of offenders in my study to move on with their lives in the aftermath of their offence(s). Forgiveness assisted offenders in this way by releasing tormenting emotions of guilt and shame and reducing ruminative thoughts about the crimes they committed. These findings align with research by Gassin (1998), who found that wrongdoers who receive forgiveness experience a release of guilt and an increase in empathy towards the victim as well as heightened feelings of joy and
relief. Guilt is an uncomfortable emotion that causes offenders to feel isolated from themselves and others (Todd, 1985). According to Todd (1985), the offender’s confession of their wrongdoing and acceptance of forgiveness relieves their ‘moral exile’, as they are ‘reconciled and welcomed back into the arms of humanity’ (p. 41). The fact that many offenders in my study were able to ‘move on’ with their lives after being forgiven strongly suggests that unreconciled feelings of guilt and shame leave offenders feeling ‘stuck’: stuck with the shameful memories of their crimes, stuck in a socially isolated existence and stuck with a criminal identity that they desperately wish to shed. According to my findings, forgiveness liberated offenders from the debilitating thoughts and feelings regarding their criminal behaviour, allowing them to move forward in life in a less psychologically and emotionally encumbered manner.

Receiving forgiveness also ‘lifted the weight’ and ‘lightened the load’ of the grievous thoughts and emotions that some of the offenders in my research carried as a result of the harms they perpetrated. These findings align with prior research noting that giving and/or receiving forgiveness often creates a physical response. For example, participants in both Browne’s (2009) study of perceptions of forgiveness in individuals taking part in forgiveness therapy, and in Gassin’s (1998) study on the experience of being forgiven, identified physical dimensions of forgiveness in terms of having ‘a big weight’ or the ‘weight of the world’ lifted from their shoulders when they either gave or received forgiveness. The relationship between forgiveness and/or unforgiveness and psychological, affective and somatic wellbeing is well substantiated in the literature. For instance, unforgiveness of others and self is positively related to depression and anxiety (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; Mauger et al., 1992), whereas forgiveness of oneself and others is negatively related to psychological distress and positively related to life satisfaction (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that thoughts and feelings are reflected in bodily sensations. Just as depression is characterised by sad facial expressions, a furrowed brow and curved or stooped shoulders (Canales, Cordás, Fiquer, Cavalcante, & Moreno, 2010), data in my research indicate that wrongdoing, as expressed through feelings such as guilt, shame and self-loathing, is experienced as a physical weight pressing down on the shoulders of some offenders. Being forgiven ameliorated the persistent and distressing negative thoughts and
emotions such as guilt and shame that offenders in my study carried as a result of their wrongdoing, which, in turn, allowed their body as well as mind to seem lighter.

Forgiveness also appeared to open the door to personal growth for many offenders in my study. Some credited the forgiveness they received with improving their lives, such that they are now better people than they were prior to being forgiven. Some saw themselves as more forgiving of others and filled with a new determination for self-improvement, personal growth and progress. These findings lend support to those in Gassin’s (1998) study on the effects of receiving forgiveness. Gassin notes that the process of receiving forgiveness is both educative and associated with the offender’s moral growth. First, by apologising and amend-making efforts, offenders learn responsibility and a commitment to justice. In addition, offenders gain self-discipline by addressing personal weaknesses and refraining from further wrongdoing. Like many in my study, offenders in Gassin’s research also reported a desire for self-improvement and the intent to be more forgiving of others after they were forgiven. As Darrin, a convicted sex offender, felt when his wife forgave him, receiving forgiveness conveys to offenders that they are capable of positive change and that they are people of worth who still have the capacity to make a positive contribution to society. Receiving and/or giving forgiveness helped a number of offenders in my study overcome the ‘curves’ and ‘hurdles’ of difficult life circumstances, enabling them to grow as people and progress in life.

For several offenders in my study, it was forgiveness from loved ones that allowed them to move forward with their lives. Forgiveness enhanced family functioning by strengthening the degree of trust and closeness that offenders had with their families. Being forgiven also restored to offenders a sense of ‘community’ or belonging that could be seen to benefit their entire family, particularly their children. These findings are consistent with studies suggesting that resolving family conflict and coping positively with adverse life experiences is important to the health and wellbeing of families (Battle & Miller, 2005). The Brown Forgiveness and Families Study found that families who reported forgiving recent incidents of wrongdoing within the family also reported better individual psychological wellbeing and higher levels of family functioning (Battle & Miller, 2005). Further research suggests that the willingness to forgive and receive forgiveness is one of the 10 most important
characteristics of stable, happy marriages (Fennell, 1993). Similarly, Sheldon, Gilchirst-Petty and Lessley (2014) found in their study on relational partners’ response tendencies following transgression that married couples who scored higher on the tendency to forgive were more satisfied with their relationship. The forgiveness that offenders in my research received from family and close others paved the way for restoring and, in some cases, improving relationships that had been battered and lost as a result of the offender’s wrongdoing. Though many offenders had once been socially isolated because of their past criminal behaviours, receiving forgiveness from loved ones brought increased feelings of love and acceptance and the sense that they could now move forward with their lives.

As discussed here, forgiveness received and/or given assisted a number of offenders in my study in their efforts to move forward in life. Forgiveness received helped offenders to release feelings of guilt and enhance feelings of relief and joy, allowing the offenders’ minds and bodies to feel lighter. Forgiveness both given and received fostered personal growth, as it helped some offenders overcome life’s ‘hurdles’ and focus on self-improvement. Forgiveness received from family and other loved ones helped many offenders move forward in their lives by strengthening familial bonds and feelings of connectedness to their community.

9.3.6 Forgiveness That Matters

Data from my research suggest that the perceived relevance of forgiveness was dependent upon who the forgiver is. For a number of offenders in my study self-forgiveness was particularly salient as many offenders believed self-forgiveness was critical to their ability to quit ‘beating’ themselves up over their crimes. In the psychological literature, self-forgiveness is defined as ‘a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one’s own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself’ (Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1996, p. 115). Self-forgiveness is a ‘difficult’ and ‘profound” process (Bauer et al., 1992, p. 154). Like forgiveness given by others, self-forgiveness does not mean the offender condones, excuses or forgets their actions. Rather, through a process that involves taking responsibility for their actions, gaining
understanding into the issues that led to their wrong, learning self-compassion, committing to future moral behaviour and desisting from seeing themselves as a ‘moral monster’ (Griswold, 2007), offenders undergo a change of heart. Having morally improved, the offender is now able to legitimately forgive themselves (Murphy, 2003). For some offenders in my study the need to first set their lives in order or become morally improved led them to refrain, for the time being, from self-forgiveness.

The most beneficial aspect of self-forgiveness for several offenders in my study came from its capacity to help them repudiate and overcome the stigma and feelings of low self-worth that were reinforced by others, themselves and the criminal justice system. According to Hampton (1988), self-forgiveness refutes the offender’s belief that they are ‘cloaked in evil’ and ‘infected with moral rot’ (p. 86). She continues:

> perhaps the greatest good forgiveness brings is the liberation of the wrongdoer from the effects of the victim’s moral hatred … [forgiveness] may enable wrongdoers to forgive themselves by showing that there is still enough decency in them to warrant renewed association with them. It may save them from the hell of self-loathing. (pp. 86‒87)

The process of self-forgiveness is arduous, and many offenders in my research believed it would involve an ongoing journey of self-reflection. A number viewed self-forgiveness as a stepping stone to self-redemption, as they were determined to not only lead law-abiding lives, but to focus on achieving goals they found personally meaningful.

However, some offenders in my study decidedly refused to forgive themselves. The decision to spurn self-forgiveness centred on the belief that it was wrong: ‘cruel’ and disrespectful to the victim, and a sign of ‘arrogance’ on the offender’s part. While one offender left the door open for the possibility of self-forgiveness that focused only on the harm his behaviour caused him personally, most believed that they must ‘pay’ for their crimes by not letting themselves off the hook or by letting down their guard against various factors that facilitated their wrongdoing in the past. These findings align, in part, with Murphy’s (2003) assertion that ‘a certain degree of self-hatred is appropriate for people who have done grave wrong’ (p. 72). However, Griswold (2007) argues that wrongdoers may be too merciless towards
themselves: ‘A failure to forgive oneself when forgiveness is due, such as upon repentance, amend-making, or following a change of heart, may lead to destruction of one’s own capacity for agency, and even to self-annihilation’ (p. 122). Though a change of heart on the offender’s part is seen as a legitimate precursor to self-forgiveness (Murphy, 2003), for a few offenders in my study, the change of heart they experienced was responsible for their decision to not forgive themselves. When offenders underwent a change of heart, it resulted in a focus on the needs of the victim and stricter self-discipline in terms of desisting from crime.

A similar debate exists in the empirical literature regarding the efficacy of self-forgiveness. In a sample of students who said they forgave themselves for hurting another person, Wohl, DeShea and Wahkinney (2008) found that self-forgiveness was associated with lower levels of depressive affect, and that participants who forgave themselves were more likely to think and act constructively towards the self and believe the self to be worthy. By contrast, Zechmeister and Romero (2002) found in their study of the autobiographical narratives of victims and offenders that while offenders who forgave themselves expressed feelings of regret and self-blame for their actions, they also tended to blame the victim for causing the offence. Furthermore, offenders who forgave themselves described feelings of anger, and justified their actions more often than did offenders who did not self-forgive. It is important to note that the self-forgiveness described in Zechmeister and Romero’s (2002) research appears more indicative of pseudo-self-forgiveness (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013; Worthington, 2005) than legitimate self-forgiveness. The offenders in my study who rejected self-forgiveness did so more as a gesture of respect to the victim and out of a sense of unworthiness rather than an attempt to justify, minimise or blame others.

While self-forgiveness was identified as important to some offenders in my study, data from my research continue to affirm the significance of forgiveness received from loved ones—for many offenders in my research it was family forgiveness that mattered the most to them. Receiving forgiveness from family members was responsible for re-establishing family relationships that, in some cases, had been estranged for years. Family members who once hid their whereabouts from their offender relatives now opened the door to them. Forgiveness from family rarely focused on the crimes for which the offender had been convicted, but
rather on the many ways in which the offender had hurt and mistreated their loved ones over the years. Many offenders viewed their family’s forgiveness as evidence of their acceptance, trust and love, and credited forgiveness with strengthening family bonds and making them better as people. These findings further support the idea that families are an important anchor in the lives of offenders, particularly those transitioning from prison to the community (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001). Family ties provide offenders with much-needed emotional and psychological support (Mowen & Visher, 2015). Families, as a rule, are more accepting of their relatives’ criminal history and less likely to view them as stigmatised (Eckland-Olsen, Supancic, Campbell, Lenihan, 1983). Importantly, family may serve as catalysts for desistance from crime (Cid & Marti, 2012). For several offenders in my study, forgiveness from family members brought reconciliation and increased feelings of acceptance and love.

It is important to mention that the offenders I interviewed who desired their family’s forgiveness but did not receive it were devastated. Family unforgiveness precipitated feelings of hurt, betrayal and alienation that fostered, in some offenders, their own feelings of anger and unforgiveness towards family members. Menninger (1967) contends, ‘our deepest satisfaction come or do not come through our ability to love and be loved’ (p. 636). The loss of supportive families is not just disappointing to offenders, but may also have consequences in terms of offenders’ overall wellbeing. Research suggests that people do not flourish in isolation (Fincham, 2000). Across four studies, Stillman et al. (2009) found that social exclusion, compared with control and acceptance conditions, reduced one’s sense of purpose, efficacy, value and self-worth, which led to the perception that life was less meaningful. Battle (1997) argues, ‘we need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness, we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence’ (p. 35). The longing for family acceptance and inclusion was strong for most offenders in my research, and those who failed to receive forgiveness from family were bitterly disappointed over the loss of familial support and love.

In my research, I found that victim forgiveness was also meaningful for some offenders. However, this form of forgiveness appeared to matter less to them than the forgiveness imparted by loved one or self-forgiveness. Those who received forgiveness from the victim
or their representatives (e.g., parents in cases of murder) were grateful and deeply touched by their unexpected kindness. While the victim’s forgiveness reduced feelings of guilt, shame and regret for some offenders, these same feelings caused others to resist seeking the victim’s forgiveness for fear the victim would reject their effort. In some cases, victim forgiveness motivated offenders to move forward with their lives in a manner that would facilitate personal growth. These findings align with research that associates affective benefits with seeking and receiving forgiveness. VanOyen-Witvliet, Ludwig and Bauer (2002) found that participants who imagined seeking forgiveness and receiving benevolent responses (forgiveness and reconciliation) from the victim felt less sad and angry, experienced less guilt about the transgression and less shame about themselves and felt more gratitude, hope, empathy and forgiveness compared with mental imagery that focused on the transgression and the victim’s unforgiving response. The unexpected generosity of the victim’s forgiveness prompted a number of offenders in my study to seize the opportunity it offered—to put their crimes in the past and dedicate themselves to creating a future focused on personal growth.

In sum, I found that the forgiveness that mattered most to offenders in my research was the kind they struggled to give themselves. Many viewed self-forgiveness as an ongoing journey that held the potential for personal redemption by eliminating self-repudiation. Offenders who rejected self-forgiveness did so out of respect for the victim and as a means of holding themselves accountable for their crimes. Many offenders also longed for forgiveness from family members; those who received it felt accepted, trusted and loved, while those who desired, but did not receive, this forgiveness felt devastated, betrayed and unloved. Some offenders found the victim’s unexpected gesture of forgiveness meaningful. Offenders who were touched by the victim’s generosity and relieved of the burden of guilt and shame were motivated to turn their lives around.

9.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, I established here that most offenders were grievously affected by the crime they committed, and that forgiveness given and/or received was considered beneficial in addressing the prior harms they received (as victims) or perpetrated against others. In many
cases, criminal offending represented a moral injury, as it violated offenders’ normative values of right and wrong. Offenders sought to mitigate the trauma of the moral injury through morally disengaging and neutralising blame. To manage their discredited criminal identity, offenders created new identities that portrayed them as morally decent or heroic, or victims of others mistreatment. Anger, emotional disconnection from victims and guilt and shame were the affective consequences of criminal offending. Further, criminal offending threatened the offenders’ futures by compromising their ability to obtain employment and causing them to lose meaningful relationships and experience social isolation.

I found that offenders viewed forgiveness through both a victim and offender lens. When offenders framed giving forgiveness in the context of personal experiences of victimisation, they viewed it as a response that helped them ‘let go’ of the pain of the hurts they received and move on in life. When offenders viewed forgiveness from a wrongdoer’s standpoint, they understood it as empathetic understanding—a perspective that separated the offender’s worth from the wrongdoing and prompted them to reflect on how they would like to be treated. Offenders held conflicting viewpoints on whether forgiveness was given conditionally or unconditionally—some believed that for forgiveness to be ‘true’, it had to be given categorically, whereas others asserted that change on the wrongdoer’s part was a necessary prerequisite for giving and/or receiving forgiveness. Lastly, the forgiveness that was most meaningful to offenders was self-forgiveness and forgiveness from family. While victim forgiveness was sincerely appreciated, it did not appear to hold the same emotional significance to these offenders as it did for those who most valued family forgiveness.

In Chapter 10, I provide a summary of the findings and explain the main contributions of my thesis. In Chapter 10, I also address the study limitations and consider avenues for future research. Finally, I outline the practical implications of my research for how victims and offenders might overcome the harms of crime and conclude my thesis.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to gain a richer understanding of the lived experience of crime victims and offenders, their perceptions of offence-related effects and the meaning and salience they attach to forgiveness. To address these aims, I interviewed 12 victims and 19 offenders and analysed their stories using IPA. In analysing the interview data, and to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of crime for victims and offenders and their perceptions of the meaning and relevance of forgiveness, my analysis attempted to answer three overarching research questions.

- RQ1: What are the offence-related effects for victims and offenders?
- RQ2: What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness, and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?
- RQ3: How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparts forgiveness?

This concluding chapter pulls together the major conclusions that could be drawn from the analysis. The major findings are summarised and discussed, including how the research questions have been addressed. This is followed by the applied implications of the findings, the study limitations and the five major contributions this thesis makes.

10.1 Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The first research question my thesis asked was, ‘What are the offence-related effects of crime for victims and offenders?’ My study concludes that crime causes numerous egregious effects in the lives of victims and offenders. First, I found that victims suffered *trauma-related effects* such as PTSD, and underwent adverse behavioural changes, somatic injuries and stress-related disease. Victims became fearful, anxious, vulnerable and distrustful, as crime challenged their prior assumptive views regarding the benevolence of the world and expectations of safety. Second, offenders also suffered distressing psychological and affective disturbances, including guilt, shame and perpetration-induced traumatic stress.
(PITS), when their criminal behaviour contradicted their normative values regarding right and wrong. To mitigate the torment of the moral injury and its attendant feelings of self-condemnation and shame, offenders morally disengaged, rationalised, justified and attributed blame to the actions of others.

Third, crime threatened the identities of victims and offenders, as their prior more positive identities were spoiled or stigmatised by the crime. Victims struggled to maintain a positive self-image in the face of a victim identity characterised by weakness and powerlessness; offenders managed the stigma of their criminal identity by crafting self-exonerative narratives of themselves and/or their crimes that positioned them as victims or decent individuals with heroic attributes. Fourth, victims had justice needs that the criminal justice system was unable to effectively address, such as the desire to be heard, to receive meaningful reparation and to be treated with compassion and respect. Fifth, the most grievous offence-related effect faced by offenders in terms of emotional implications was the loss of relationships that were meaningful to them. Offenders became estranged from family and friends as a result of dysfunctional family upbringing, drug addiction, years enmeshed in crime and living on the streets or in prison and as a result of mistreating their family. I found that meaningful relationships were important to offenders, and many deeply regretted the years they wasted on crime—years they wished they had spent nurturing old and creating new family bonds.

My second research question asked, ‘What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness and how are they affected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?’ I conclude that while participants held diverse understandings of forgiveness, most believed that giving and/or receiving forgiveness was beneficial, as it helped them, in large part, recover from the pain of wrongdoing and move forward in life. Overall, the most common description given by both victims and offenders was that forgiveness was a beneficial response that helped them ‘let go’ and ‘move on’ from the traumatic effects of the offence. Victims primarily viewed forgiveness in terms of the benefits it held for them personally. Forgiveness dispelled the stigmatised victim identity by portraying the forgiver as a survivor, and assisted in rebuilding their assumptive world, mitigating their fears and
distrust of others and facilitating a reappraisal of the offence that focused on finding deeper meaning in the experience. Offenders viewed forgiveness from the vantage point of a victim and offender. Like the victims in my study, offenders understood giving forgiveness as a response that helped them ‘let go’ or ‘get over’ harm they experienced when they were wronged. Offenders viewed receiving forgiveness in terms of empathetic understanding, and empathetic forgiveness as an effort by the forgiver to put themselves in the offender’s ‘shoes’ and as an action that separates the worth of the offender from the ‘bad act’ they committed. Whether given or received, forgiveness enabled offenders to positively move forward in life by alleviating distressing thoughts and feelings of their wrongdoing.

I further conclude that giving and/or receiving forgiveness is not always salient. Some victims chose to withhold giving forgiveness to offenders, and some offenders rejected receiving it. Victims who were otherwise amenable to forgiveness withheld it when they felt pressured by others to forgive and when the offender showed no remorse. Offenders who saw themselves as victims vehemently objected to being forgiven.

The third research question of this thesis asked, ‘How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparts forgiveness?’ I establish that the forgiveness that mattered most to offenders was (1) self-forgiveness (i.e., that which they struggled to give to themselves) and (2) that which they received from family and loved ones. While some offenders sincerely appreciated forgiveness from victims, it did not appear to hold the same emotional resonance as the other two forms of forgiveness. Offenders regarded self-forgiveness as an ongoing, perhaps lifelong, journey of self-reflection and self-improvement focused on uncovering and addressing the factors that led them to commit crime. Many saw self-forgiveness as crucial to their ability to quit ‘beating’ themselves up over their crimes and overcoming feelings of low self-worth. Offenders longed for and cherished forgiveness from family and loved ones. The destructiveness of the crime committed belied the fact that most offenders, like most people, held a desire for connection and belonging. Family forgiveness represents acceptance, trust and, most importantly, love; because of these aforementioned qualities offenders were devastated when it was withheld.
10.2 The Main Contribution of the Thesis

In drawing these conclusions from my data, it is apparent that my thesis makes five significant contributions to knowledge. First, it adds confirmatory evidence to the body of literature on the devastating effects of criminal victimisation and the ameliorative capacity of forgiveness in addressing this harm. Second, my thesis further confirms the notion that victims should not be compelled to forgive, but that forgiveness must emerge as a result of the victim’s change of heart for it to have meaning or be long-lasting. Third, the findings of my thesis also bolsters understanding that victims may benefit from withholding forgiveness, particularly in cases where there is evidence that the offender has not experienced a change of heart.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, my thesis makes a unique contribution to the criminological and forgiveness literature, as it is one of few studies that I am aware of to focus on the offenders’ perceptions of the effects of their crimes and their understanding of forgiveness and its meaning in their lives. With the notable exception of MacNair’s (2001, 2002a, 2015) research on PITS, until now, little has been comprehended about how offenders are affected by their crimes. My thesis is thus a crucial step in understanding that offenders, even those whose offences are not violent, inflict egregious harm on themselves when they perpetrate crime. Lastly, my thesis advances knowledge through findings indicating that offenders, like victims, benefit from forgiveness, especially the kind they give themselves and receive from family. Self-forgiveness helps offenders overcome stigma and low self-worth, while forgiveness from family offers reconciliation and increased feelings of acceptance and love.

10.3 Study Limitations Study and Avenues for Future Research

While this thesis has made several unique contributions to our understanding of forgiveness in the lives of victims and offenders, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The first limitation involves the size and homogeneity of the sample. This thesis is a qualitative study focused on obtaining an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of offence-related
effects and perceptions of forgiveness in a relatively small, predominately Australian, sample of crime victims and offenders. The qualitative method of interpretive phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to use for the study objectives. However, this methodology limits the applicability of these findings to other populations. While the purpose of qualitative methods is not to generalise findings to the larger population, future research could seek to extend the study findings by drawing on a larger and more diverse sample and deploying statistical analysis. Gender proportionality is acknowledged as another limitation—the sample comprised nearly twice as many men as women. While there was an even distribution between men and women in the victim sample, the offender participants were predominately male (five women and 14 men). Consequently, the offender findings may be more reflective of male offenders’ experiences and perceptions than they are of women’s, although it should be noted that men overall are overrepresented in offending statistics. A third limitation is that my interviews were focused on retrospective memories. Retrospective recall of events raises concerns regarding false memories or memory deficits. However, it is generally acknowledged that this limitation can be mitigated to a degree by focusing on events that are relatively memorable. Overall, victims and offenders appeared to have very clear recall about the effects of the crimes and their associated thoughts and feelings.

In building on the current research, future studies may seek to explore whether receiving forgiveness is related to offender desistance in the future. High rates of reoffending suggest that retributive responses do not diminish offending rates (Lacey & Pickard, 2015)—therefore, it may be useful to understand whether forgiveness is an effective risk-reduction strategy. To better predict and effectively respond to violent behaviour, future research could consider whether certain attributes, such as social disadvantage, personality traits, dysfunctional family life or intellectual or social skills, are associated with the emotional disconnection observed in violent offenders in my study prior to their offence. Increasing numbers of women are in the criminal justice system (Bloom & Covington, 1998)—studies with a female sample of offenders would thus facilitate examining gender differences in how male and female offenders view offence-related effects and forgiveness that may inform policies and programs that better target female offenders’ needs. Further, future studies could address the ‘lived experience’ of being related to an offender. The extant literature paints a
clear and distressing picture of the issues faced by many relatives of criminal offenders, including social stigma and isolation (Condry, 2013), threats and harassment (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) and mental health problems (King, 1993). It is thus important to understand the personal and societal effects borne by these families and the perceptions they have regarding the salience of giving and/or receiving forgiveness.

10.4 Implications for Applied Practice and Conclusion

My thesis clearly contributes to our academic understanding of how criminal offending affects the lives of both victims and offenders. It also provides in-depth understanding of how important forgiveness can be to those who have experienced criminal offending by helping them address the deleterious consequences and move on with their lives. In terms of applied knowledge, my thesis findings may also benefit those such as clinicians, service providers and criminal justice professionals involved in the treatment or custodial care of both victims and offenders by enabling them to create and implement treatment programs and protocols. Such knowledge may assist them in better addressing the complex needs of those who have experienced destructive effects following harms they have received and/or perpetrated. First, there continues to be a need for therapies or interventions that address the effects of crime experienced by victims. The findings of my study suggest that forgiveness holds significant ameliorative capacity in helping victims ‘let go’ and ‘move on’ from many of the deleterious effects of crime. Therefore, victims may benefit from therapies that identify forgiveness as one of a range of options they have to address the harm. Interventions that promote forgiveness should be clear about the specific construct of forgiveness they use. As my study indicates, the meaning of forgiveness is subjective; therefore, it is important to advise victims that while academic definitions of forgiveness situate it as an other- or offender-oriented response to interpersonal harm, it is more commonly viewed as a response undertaken for the forgiver’s own wellbeing. This understanding may be important for victims who are uncertain if they want to forgive for the offender’s sake. In addition, victims may benefit from programs where their story of victimisation will be respectfully heard and acknowledged, as such programs may better address their justice needs. Lastly, in light of the findings that domestic violence victims felt disrespected and further traumatised as a
result of their treatment by justice officials, there may be a need for further police training in the sensitive handing of domestic violence victims. Alternatively, a response team of officers solely dedicated to assisting domestic violence victims through each step of the criminal justice process could give victims moral and practical support by helping them navigate a system that may be confusing and intimidating.

My findings may also be useful for those who work with offenders and their families. First, it is important to recognise that offender efforts to morally disengage, justify or rationalise their crimes or attribute blame to others may reflect their trauma and feelings of shame. This suggests a need for both trauma-informed therapies and programs that assist offenders in dealing with any unacknowledged shame. The study findings that identify the tendency for violent offenders to ‘turn off’ their emotions and dehumanise the victim suggest that these offenders may benefit from programs such as the Sycamore Tree Project that teach and encourage perspective-taking and victim empathy. My study also finds that forgiveness may be a therapeutic tool for offenders as well as victims. Interventions that promote seeking forgiveness from others and the self should focus on addressing the attributes that promote forgiveness, such as a sincere apology, reparative actions and other evidence of a change of heart. Offenders and their families may also benefit from interventions that focus on strengthening family bonds and building forgiving attitudes.

To conclude, the lived experience of criminal victimisation and offending is a painful ordeal characterised by an array of devastating and traumatic effects that significantly impair the lives of victims and offenders, often for years. While forgiveness was not a panacea for the harms experienced by all participants in my study, it was for many—like Rebecca, who said, ‘I’m ready to face the world now’ after forgiving the man who robbed her—a way to move forward in life, as it freed them from the hurt and pain that kept them ‘chained’ to the past.
Appendix 1—Recruitment Flyer

Offence-related effects and perceptions of forgiveness: Experiences of victims and offenders

Looking for individuals to take part in a study about the effect of crime on victims and offenders; and to learn what they think about giving or receiving forgiveness

Types of volunteers needed

We are seeking men and women aged 17 or older who (at least once in their lifetime):

1. Were a victim of a formally charged criminal offence, and/or
2. Were formally charged with a criminal offence.

What would I be asked to do? How much time would it take?

Participate in an audio-recorded semi-structured interview of 30 to 60 minutes long either in person or via Skype. If you prefer not to be visually identified, you can request that our chat is audio only and keep your video turned off. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and is voluntary and confidential. You are free to stop the interview at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions.

Your identity will remain confidential, and your anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (false names) and by the aggregation (combining of information to remove all possible personal identifiers) of data if necessary. You will not be asked your name, student number or address. We will not record your computer’s IP address.

What’s in this for me?

The opportunity to tell one’s story in a personal interview setting has been found to be therapeutic, healing, and empowering, and one that creates a sense of purpose and satisfaction in helping others. It is anticipated that this study will also benefit the wider participant community, that ‘community of care’ which includes the supporters of the victim and offender as they gain greater insight into the effect of the harm experienced by their loved ones and the ways in which they can assist them in their healing and personal growth.

As a special thank you!
All research participants will receive a voucher for two movie tickets ($30 value)

**How can I volunteer or find out more?**

Contact research team at t.jenkins@griffith.edu.au or by phone 04 3222 9231

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

PhD Candidate

Protocol Number (2014/693) Variation approval
Appendix 2—Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet

Title of Study

Offence-related effects and perceptions of forgiveness: Experiences of victims and offenders

Research Team

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Why is the research being conducted?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the effect that criminal offending has on victims and offenders and their views regarding the giving and/or receiving of forgiveness. This research is being conducted in fulfillment of a Doctor of Philosophy in Criminal Justice and Criminology at Griffith University, Mt Gravatt, Queensland Australia. The results of this study will be published as a PhD Thesis and may be presented at future conferences.

What you will be asked to do?

1) Agreed to participate in an audio-recorded semi-structured interview lasting 30 to 60 minutes scheduled at your convenience. You may decide whether the interview is conducted in person or via Skype.

The basis by which participants will be selected or screened

In order to participate in this study you must be an adult (age 17 and over) who at least once in your lifetime:

1. Were a victim of a formally charged criminal offence, and/or
2. Were formally charged with a criminal offence

The expected benefits of the research

Benefits to you: The opportunity to tell one’s story in a personal interview setting has been found to be therapeutic, healing, empowering, one that creates a sense of purpose and satisfaction in helping others.
Additional benefits: It is anticipated that this study will also benefit the wider participant community, that “community of care” which includes the supporters of the victim and offender as they gain greater insight into the effect of the harm experienced by their loved ones and the ways in which they can assist them in their healing and personal growth.

Risks to you: There is a potential that the sharing of personal stories regarding painful experiences may retrigger distressing emotions. In order to manage this risk we may take breaks during the interview or change the subject for a few moments if needed. The interview will conclude with an opportunity to share and reflect on any negative emotions that may have surfaced. In the unlikely event that feelings of distress occur after the interview you are provided the name of free counselling support services.

Lifeline 24 Hour Crisis Support phone number 13 11 14
Crisis support chat line www.lifeline.org.au

Your confidentiality

Your identity will remain confidential, and your anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (false names) and by the aggregation (combining of information to remove all possible personal identifiers) of data if necessary. If you prefer not to be visually identified, you can request that our chat takes place via Skype and keep your video turned off. We will not record your computer’s IP address. The research team will be the only ones to have access to study information, notes and data and it will be stored under lock and key. All raw data will be destroyed at the conclusion of this project. In order to further protect your identity please be aware that any spontaneous disclosures regarding personal or third party illegal behaviour is undesirable and could potentially be used as evidence in legal prosecutions, therefore, any such disclosures will be disregarded and deleted from the audio-recordings of the interview.

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right at any point to stop the interview. You also have the right to ask that the recorder be turned off or to not answer a question. It is your right to withdraw your consent to participate in the study without penalty at any point.

The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research project please contact Manager of Research Ethics on 3735 54375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au
Privacy statement-non disclosure

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan or telephone (07) 3735 4375.

Questions/further information

If you have any questions you may contact the research team at t.jenkins@griffith.edu.au or by phone 04 3222 9231

As a special thank you

All participants will be given a voucher for two movie tickets ($30 value).
Appendix 3—Informed Consent

Offence-related effects and perceptions of forgiveness: Experiences of victims and offenders

Griffith University School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Phone 07 3735 5781

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Purpose of the research

This study is being conducted in order to better understand the effect that criminal offending has on victims and offenders and their views regarding the giving and/or receiving of forgiveness. This study is being conducted in fulfilment of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University, Mt Gravatt, Queensland. The results of this study will be published as a PhD thesis and may be presented at future academic conferences.

What you will be asked to do

1) Participate in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes scheduled at your convenience. You may decide whether the interview is conducted in person or via Skype.

The basis by which participants will be selected or screened

In order to participate in this study you must be an adult (age 17 and over) who at least once in your lifetime:

1. Were a victim of a formally charged criminal offence, and/or
2. Were formally charged with a criminal offence

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right at any point to stop the interview. You also have the right to ask that the recorder be turned off or to not answer a question. It is your right to withdraw your consent to participate in the study without penalty at any point.

The expected benefits of this research
**Benefits to you:** The opportunity to tell one’s story in a personal interview setting has been found to be therapeutic, healing, empowering, one that creates a sense of purpose and satisfaction in helping others.

**Additional benefits:** It is anticipated that this study will also benefit the wider participant community, that ‘community of care’ which includes the supporters of the victim and offender as they gain greater insight into the effect of the harm experienced by their loved ones and the ways in which they can assist them in their healing and personal growth.

**Risks to you**

There is a potential that the sharing of personal stories regarding painful experiences may retrigger distressing emotions. In order to manage this risk we may take breaks during the interview or change the subject for a few moments if needed. The interview will conclude with an opportunity to share and reflect on any negative emotions that may have surfaced. In the unlikely event that feelings of distress occur after the interview you are provided the name of free counselling support services.

**Lifeline 24 Hour Crisis Support phone number 13 11 14**

**Crisis support chat line** [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Your confidentiality**

Your identity will remain confidential, and your anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (false names) and by the aggregation (combining of information to remove all possible personal identifiers) of data if necessary. If you prefer not to be visually identified, you can request that our chat takes place via Skype and is audio only. We will not record your computer’s IP address. The research team will be the only ones to have access to study information, notes and data and it will be stored under lock and key. All raw data will be destroyed at the conclusion of this project.

**Participants will receive a voucher for two movie tickets ($30 value) as a thank you gift.**

**Privacy statement-non disclosure**

*The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at [http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan](http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan) or telephone (07) 3735 4375.*

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understand the above information and in particular have noted that:
● I understand what my participation in this project involves;
● I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
● I understand the risks involved;
● I understand that the personal interview will be audio-recorded;
● I understand that I will receive a gift voucher for two movie tickets for my participation in this research (approximate value $30);
● I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
● I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
● I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without explanation or penalty;
● I understand that I can contact Manager Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee at 07 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
☐ I agree to participate in the project
☐ I agree to inclusion of my de-identified personal information in publication or reporting of the results from this research project.

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Appendix 4—Interview Schedule

RQ1 What are the offence-related effects for victims and offender?

Offender

1. I will let you tell me your story of what happened and then I will have some questions.
2. Can you share with me what you were you thinking a feeling during and immediately following the offence?
3. Please tell me how you felt about the victim/yourself after the offence.
4. Please tell me how the offence effected your life since it happened.

Victim

1. I will let you tell me your story of what happened and then I will have some questions.
2. What were you thinking a feeling during and immediately following the offence?
3. Please tell me how you felt about the offender/yourself after the offence.
4. Please tell me how the offence effected your life since it happened.

RQ2 What are the victims’ and offenders’ understandings of forgiveness and how are they effected (or not) by forgiving attitudes expressed by themselves or others?

Offenders

1. What does the word forgiveness mean to you? How would you define or describe forgiveness?
2. What would it mean to you to know that you were forgiven for the offence?
3. How can you tell if someone forgives you? What does forgiveness look or feel like?
4. Do you feel as though you have been forgiven for the offence? Is so, by whom?
5. What did they do or say that makes you feel that way?
6. In what ways have you changed since you were forgiven? Or how do you imagine you would change?
Victims

1. What does the word forgiveness mean to you? How would you define or describe forgiveness?

2. What are your thoughts about forgiveness with respect to the offender?

3. What does forgiveness look like? Feel like? Did you forgive the offender? If so, how did you express your forgiveness?

4. Are there certain ‘ingredients’ needed to forgive?

5. Please tell me about the ways your life has been effected (or not) by your decision to forgive (or not) the offender.

RQ3 How do offenders’ perceptions of forgiveness differ depending on who imparted forgiveness?

Offenders

1. What kinds of thoughts/feelings about the victim/yourself do you currently hold?

2. Whose forgiveness means the most to you? Why?


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