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Forgiveness as Praxis: A Religious and Philosophical Perspective on Restorative Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of forgiveness in restorative social work through the intersecting lenses of philosophy and religion. In an era marked by systemic inequities and interpersonal trauma, forgiveness remains an underexplored yet vital dimension of restorative social work. This article interrogates forgiveness as a multidimensional praxis through the lenses of religious wisdom and philosophical inquiry, arguing that its ethical integration into restorative practice demands critical engagement with power, culture, and structural violence. Employing a qualitative systematic literature review and guided by the Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory, a framework synthesizing critical theory, restorative justice, and Ubuntu philosophy, the study reveals forgiveness as a contested process fraught with tensions between individual healing and systemic accountability. Key findings highlight the role of cultural and religious frameworks in shaping forgiveness narratives, the gendered and racialized dynamics of forgiveness discourse, and the ethical risks associated with coercive or depoliticized reconciliation. The analysis emphasizes the importance of survivor-centered, culturally humble approaches that connect interpersonal repair to structural change. Recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers include embedding reparative justice in restorative programmes, centering marginalized epistemologies, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Through bridging ancient wisdom and modern praxis, this study advances a vision of forgiveness that transcends individualism, offering pathways to heal fractured communities while challenging the systems that perpetuate these fractures.

Keywords – Forgiveness, Social Work, Restorative Justice, Religion, Ubuntu

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INTRODUCTION

With growing social disintegration, institutionalized injustices, and interhuman trauma in our time, the language of forgiveness has become an essential yet neglected field of restorative social work. Formerly confined to religious or ethical language, forgiveness is today a redemptive practice, a performative method of healing interpersonal and communal traumas in socially fragmented environments.[1] This paper presents forgiveness as a complex concept rooted in spiritual insight and philosophical thought, arguing that its application in restorative social work can foster reconciliation, empower marginalized individuals, and break retributive cycles of justice. Through the integration of theological understanding into modern analyses of power relations, this critique aims to produce a praxis-based contribution to forgiveness that transcends individualistic frameworks, repairing structural harm while acknowledging the agency of both

[1] D. O'Mahony and J. Doak, *Reimagining Restorative Justice: Agency and Accountability in the Criminal Process* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 53, no. 2 (2008): 169–88.

survivors and perpetrators. Forgiveness, as both a moral imperative and a psychosocial process, occupies a contested space in restorative social work. Philosophically, it has been theorized as a voluntary relinquishment of resentment,[2] a performative act of moral imagination, and a paradoxical commitment to justice without recourse to vengeance.[3] These debates intersect with religious traditions that frame forgiveness as a sacred duty, for example, Christianity's emphasis on *agape* (self-emptying love) and redemption,[4] Islam's integration of forgiveness with restorative accountability (Quran 42:40), Judaism's concept of *teshuvah* (repentance) as a precondition for reconciliation,[5] and Buddhism's teachings on compassion (*karuna*) as liberation from suffering.[6] Such traditions collectively affirm forgiveness not as elimination of harm but as a reorientation toward relational repair.

Restorative justice has recently garnered attention among social workers as an alternative to punitive approaches, emphasizing dialogue, responsibility, and community healing.[7] Critics note, however, that unreflective invocation of the language of forgiveness, particularly where structural violence is compelled, silences survivors or obliterates structural responsibility.[8] Feminist academics complicate forgiveness even more by being gendered and placing disproportionate burdens on subordinated subjects.[9] These complexities necessitate the development of forgiveness praxis based on intersectional models that recognize survivors' agency and decenter power relations. More recently, scholarship suggests promise in theologically reflexive and philosophically nuanced models that confront these complexities. For instance, Desmond Tutu's study of Ubuntu in post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates that group-based confessions can spur social change. Empirical research also links interventions focused on forgiveness with lower recidivism rates and improved mental health outcomes in restorative justice settings.[10] Through its efforts to raise questions about the political, cultural, and ethical dimensions of forgiveness, this article makes a contribution to a critical reconceptualization of restorative social work, which seeks to unite ancient wisdom and modern praxis to construct strong, equitable communities.

Forgiveness has traditionally been considered a profoundly intimate or religious act, a private process of emancipation or blessing. In social work, however, forgiveness assumes further significance; it becomes an ethical practice, a potential therapeutic technique, and a pathway to justice and reconciliation.[11] As social workers of every stripe increasingly work with traumatized populations, populations that have been structurally hurt and morally wounded, the question becomes one of how forgiveness could function not just as a virtue but as a praxis, a deliberate, conscious means of social change. Across philosophy and religious discourse, forgiveness is not a passive affair. For philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, forgiveness is a powerful human faculty that enables action and renewal, shattering the chain of because that otherwise holds people fast to past harm.[12] Paul Ricoeur built upon this proposition, positioning forgiveness as a narrative redirection of identity, which is essential to the healing of moral wounds.[13] From a religious point of view, religions like Christianity, Islam, and many

[2] Gila Amitay and Natti Ronel, "The Practice of Spiritual Criminology: A Non-Doing Companionship for Crime Desistance," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 67, no. 4 (2023): 420–41.

[3] J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (Routledge, 2001).

[4] M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996); Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated* (Simon and Schuster, 2015).

[5] Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

[6] Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Shambhala Publications, 2007).

[7] Amitay and Ronel, "The Practice of Spiritual Criminology: A Non-Doing Companionship for Crime Desistance"; Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*.

[8] S. Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

[9] A. Norton, " Gender, Forgiveness, and Power: Rethinking Care Ethics in Post-Trauma Interventions," *Feminist Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2023): 33–55.

[10] E. L. Worthington et al., *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health* (Springer, 2020).

[11] Ari Kohen, "The Personal and the Political: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Restorative Justice," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2009): 399–423.

[12] Fatima Khan, "Does the Right to Dignity Extend Equally to Refugees in South Africa?," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 22, no. 2 (January 27, 2023): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2020/v20n1a10.

[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Indigenous spiritualities have solid, if diverse, theologies of forgiveness, not merely as forgiveness by God but as social and communal action.[14]

In social work, forgiveness is often viewed as crucial in restorative justice and trauma-informed practice. Clients present with moral wounds, extreme violations of their right and wrong, typically stemming from violence, betrayal, or engaging in morally reprehensible actions.[15] These wounds must be treated clinically, but they also require moral consideration. Likewise, communities fractured by historical trauma, intergenerational violence, or systemic oppression confront collective healing, where truth-telling, accountability, and potential forgiveness are core issues. However, for all its potential, forgiveness remains under-theorized in the social work literature overall, often being too readily discredited as either too religious or too theoretical. This study argues that forgiveness, a nuanced, pragmatic, and context-sensitive concept, holds transformative potential when integrated into restorative practices. It is an invitation to rethink forgiveness, not some sentimental gesture, but an impassioned intervention from philosophical ethics and religious discernment. It is in so doing that it encourages social workers to reclaim forgiveness as a transformative force for justice and healing in a divided world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory

This study is situated in the context of an Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory (ICRT), a theory that integrates critical theory, restorative justice, and Ubuntu philosophy. Collectively, ICRT integrates these viewpoints, viewing forgiveness as a redemptive praxis that transcends the sites of power, relationality, and cultural context in restorative social work. Interdisciplinary in its foundation, it provides a subtle and nuanced framework of forgiveness that transcends individualist or politics-free explanations to address both interpersonal healing and social transformation. Critical theory, as defined by authors such as Freire, is a supporting pillar of ICRT.[16] This methodology resists the manner in which systemic inequalities traced by race, class, gender, and colonialism contribute to cycles of harm and make forgiveness work more complicated. Moreover, by highlighting oppressed voices and turning the dominance of oppressive systems on their head, critical theory resists hegemonic narratives, undermining forgiveness as a privatized ethical act that is disconnected from institutional responsibility. Feminist criticism, for example, documents how gendered positions tend to push survivors of violence, especially women and minority groups, to forgive too soon, suppressing their complaints and legitimating systematized violence.[17] Critical theory, in this way, allowed for the researcher to take a critical look at power disparities within social work settings, for instance, between practitioners and clients, and opt not to engage in neoliberal forgiveness models that individualize forgiveness without masking structural blame. The framework further protects against "cheap forgiveness," a phrase theologian Miroslav Volf used to describe performativity that pronounces forgiveness without addressing resultant injustices, such as racism or economic exploitation.[18]

Restorative justice principles, as advanced by Zehr, constitute the second pillar of ICRT.[19] This approach shifts the focus from punitive justice to relational repair, emphasizing dialogue, accountability, and communal participation. Restorative justice aligns with forgiveness praxis by framing it as a process rather than an endpoint, one that involves truth-telling, empathy-building, and reparative actions. For example, Indigenous and faith-based models of communal healing, such as the Ubuntu ethic of interconnectedness ("I am because we are"), demonstrate how restorative practices can foster collective resilience.[20] Notably, by integrating these principles, the researcher highlights the significance of survivor

[14] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Random House, 1999); M. Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (University Press of Florida, 2003); Michael Hart, *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping* (Fernwood Publishing, 2020).

[15] Brett T Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.

[16] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herter and Herter, 1970).

[17] Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*; Norton, " Gender, Forgiveness, and Power: Rethinking Care Ethics in Post-Trauma Interventions."

[18] Miroslav Volf, "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (2000): 91–113.

[19] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*.

[20] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

agency and voluntary engagement in forgiveness processes, thereby countering critiques that equate forgiveness with coercion or the erasure of harm. Restorative justice also provides practical tools, such as peace circles or victim-offender dialogues, which social workers can adapt to facilitate reconciliation while honoring survivors' autonomy.[21] The third pillar of ICRT draws on the Ubuntu philosophy, an African ethic that posits individual well-being as intricately linked to communal harmony. Ubuntu reframes forgiveness as a collective responsibility to restore social bonds fractured by injustice, challenging Western individualism that often dominates social work theory. This philosophy resonates with religious teachings, such as Christianity's agape (self-emptying love) or Buddhism's karuna (compassion), which emphasize interdependence and mutual obligation. For the researcher, Ubuntu provides a critical counterpoint to Eurocentric models, validating non-Western epistemologies and enriching restorative practices with culturally rooted concepts of healing. It also bridges spiritual and secular ethics, offering a framework to integrate faith-informed forgiveness rituals into secular social work without essentializing religious traditions.

Combining these fundamentals in ICRT places forgiveness as a praxis of transformation, intended to reconcile idealism with structural analysis. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa, for example, is a typical model of ICRT practice. Ubuntu-grounded restorative practice enabled survivors to engage in candid dialogue with perpetrators, envisioning forgiveness as a collaborative endeavor that fosters trust-building.[22] However, critical theory cautions against this idealism by recalling the TRC's limitations, such as its preference for reconciliation over economic redress, and thus highlights the necessity of balancing interpersonal healing with structural change. In restorative social work, ICRT educates practitioners to create interventions that recover from both close hurts (like family betrayal) and structural damage (like racial trauma). It also provides them with the capacity to navigate moral dilemmas, for example, arguing on behalf of victims' rights to outrage as well as sympathy for perpetrators, and to work together with philosophers, theologians, and communities in creating ethically sensitive models of care. ICRT finally presents a justice-directed yet compassion-sensitive vision of forgiveness. In situating restorative social work in this integrative paradigm, the research avoids simplistic explanations and provides practical routes to restore broken people and societies together.[23]

Conceptualization of *Forgiveness as Praxis: A Religious and Philosophical Perspective on Restorative Social Work*

The concept of forgiveness has long occupied a complex and contested space within academic discourse, straddling the intersections of theology, philosophy, psychology, and social justice. Its application to restorative social work, however, demands a critical synthesis of these disciplines to address the interplay of individual healing, communal reconciliation, and systemic transformation. This review examines existing scholarship on forgiveness as a praxis, highlighting its religious and philosophical foundations, its alignment with restorative justice principles, and the tensions that arise when integrating it into social work practice amid structural inequities.

Forgiveness in Religious and Philosophical Traditions

Forgiveness is rooted in religious cultures, typically as a moral obligation connected with spiritual freedom and ethical responsibility. Forgiveness is central to Christian agape, or self-emptying love, and the theory of redemption, as discussed by scholars like Miroslav Volf, who views forgiveness as an act of revolution in accepting the "other" without diminishing personal responsibility. In the same way, Islamic doctrine invokes 'afw (forgiveness) with restorative accountability, as embodied in the Quranic precept to "repel evil with that which is better" (Quran 41:34). Jewish faith dictates teshuvah (repentance) as necessary for reconciliation, forcing transgressors to accept damage and to reform.[24] Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism, position forgiveness within the expansion of karuna (compassion) as a means of liberating both the victim and the offender from the cycles of pain.[25] Collectively, these traditions reject forgiveness

[21] Worthington et al., *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health*.
[22] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate."
[23] Rustono Farady Marta and Joshua Fernando, "Dialectics of Forgiveness between Ethnic Communities for West Kalimantan Harmony," *Jurnal The Messenger* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.
[24] Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*.
[25] Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*.

as a reductionist form of pardon. Instead, it is framed as a relational activity that involves moral courage and collective work. Philosophical examination continues to challenge the notion of forgiveness as situated within arguments over justice, agency, and human fallibility. Jacques Derrida forthrightly asserted that forgiveness, if contingent on something else, ceases to be forgiveness, a position in opposition to restorative efforts requiring accountability.[26] Nussbaum, on the other hand, places forgiveness as a "narrative art" that re-narrates harm in a compassionate manner, while Judith Butler positions it in accordance with the ethics of deconstructing hierarchies that render marginalized peoples "less-than-human."[27] These attempts highlight forgiveness as a praxis dialectic, swinging between individual transformation and public accountability.

Restorative Justice and the Turn to Forgiveness in Social Work

Restorative justice has become a standard social work paradigm that prioritizes the restoration of the harm over punishment.[28] Its principles, dialogue, accountability, and healing based on community correspond with the praxis of forgiveness when there is interpersonal violence, family conflict, and historical trauma. Experimental evidence supports that restorative interventions like victim-offender mediation decrease recidivism and improve psychological well-being by promoting empathy and understanding.[29] Indigenous frameworks, including Māori whakapapa (genealogical relatedness) and the Ubuntu-based South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), demonstrate ways in which forgiveness rituals for groups can start group healing.[30] However, critics caution against simplistically transplanting the concept of forgiveness into social work contexts. Lamb cautions that incitements to forgive can retraumatize survivors, especially in gendered or racialized spaces where structural power disparities continue to exist.[31] Feminist theorists contend that forgiveness discourse too frequently burdens marginalized groups with disproportionately forcing them to sublimate their anger as "unproductive" and idealizing conformity as moral goodness.[32] In the same vein, critical race theorists note the danger that postcolonial forgiveness accounts pose in silencing calls for reparative justice, such as criticism of the TRC's failure to address economic redistribution.[33] Such criticism highlights the importance of situating forgiveness within intersectional frameworks that prioritize both survivor agency and structural accountability.

Bridging Religious Wisdom and Critical Praxis

Recent studies seek to reconcile religious and philosophical conceptions of forgiveness with the demands of anti-oppressive social work. Gobodo-Madikizela's work on post-apartheid trauma, for instance, demonstrates how Ubuntu ethics, emphasizing interconnectedness and shared humanity, can inform culturally responsive interventions that honor survivors' agency while fostering communal repair.[34] Similarly, interdisciplinary studies explore the integration of mindfulness-based practices (rooted in Buddhist traditions) into trauma-informed care, framing forgiveness as a pathway to emotional liberation.[35] Yet tensions persist, Faith-based models risk marginalizing non-religious clients or reinforcing hegemonic norms if applied without cultural humility. Conversely, secular frameworks may overlook the spiritual resilience that religious narratives offer marginalized communities. Theologian Volf bridges this divide by advocating for forgiveness as a "double vision" that simultaneously confronts injustice and refuses to perpetuate cycles of retribution, a stance echoed in social work calls for radical empathy.[36] While existing literature richly theorizes forgiveness across disciplines, few studies

[26] Jack Reynolds, "Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010.
[27] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*; J. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (Verso Books, 2020).
[28] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*.
[29] Worthington et al., *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health*.
[30] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*; Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate."
[31] Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*.
[32] Norton, " Gender, Forgiveness, and Power: Rethinking Care Ethics in Post-Trauma Interventions."
[33] Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
[34] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate."
[35] Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*; S. Gambrell, "Trauma, Silence, and Spiritual Bypassing: When Mindfulness Isn't Enough," *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education* 2, no. 1 (2021): 55–72.
[36] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*.

holistically integrate religious, philosophical, and critical perspectives into restorative social work praxis.[37] This review highlights a critical gap: the need for frameworks that acknowledge and respect cultural and spiritual diversity while centering structural critique, particularly in contexts of systemic violence. Through synthesizing these threads, the current study contributes to an emerging body of work that reimagines forgiveness not as a panacea but as a contested, context-dependent praxis that holds space for anger, accountability, and radical hope in equal measure.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review design, guided by a critical interpretive synthesis approach, to analyze existing scholarship on forgiveness as a praxis in restorative social work. Aligning with principles of desktop research, the methodology involves the systematic collection, evaluation, and thematic analysis of peer-reviewed academic texts, including journal articles, books, and theoretical frameworks. The process adheres to established guidelines for rigorous literature reviews,[38] ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and critical engagement with interdisciplinary sources. Data collection proceeded through a multi-phase search strategy across four major academic databases: *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *PubMed*, and *ATLA Religion Database*. Keywords were tailored to capture intersections between forgiveness, restorative justice, and social work, incorporating primary terms such as "forgiveness praxis," "restorative social work," and "Ubuntu ethics," alongside secondary terms like "reconciliation" and "decolonial approaches." The search was limited to English-language publications from 1990 to 2023, prioritizing contemporary debates while also including seminal works.[39] To ensure interdisciplinary breadth, the scope spanned theology, philosophy, social work, and critical race studies. A snowballing technique identified additional sources from reference lists of key texts, such as Gobodo-Madikizela and Lamb.[40] Following the screening of 215 initial records, 78 sources met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis.

Inclusion criteria required sources to explicitly engage with forgiveness as a theoretical or applied concept in restorative social work, faith-based practices, or philosophical ethics, particularly those addressing interpersonal, communal, or structural harm (e.g., racial trauma, post-conflict reconciliation). Works integrating critical, religious, or decolonial lenses were prioritized. Exclusion criteria eliminated non-empirical or non-theoretical texts, such as opinion pieces, and reductionist frameworks that reduced forgiveness to psychological "self-help" without structural analysis. Data extraction followed a structured template to catalog theoretical foundations, definitions of forgiveness, and tensions or critiques. Thematic analysis guided the coding process, with initial codes like "forgiveness as resistance" and "spiritual resilience" refined into overarching themes through an inductive-deductive approach.[41] Rigor was ensured through peer debriefing with two independent researchers to verify coding consistency and resolve conflicting interpretations.[42]

Ethical considerations, though minimal in desktop research, were addressed through representational equity by prioritizing marginalized scholars (e.g., Black feminist theorists, Indigenous researchers) to counter Eurocentric biases. Source credibility was assessed using the CASP Qualitative Checklist,[43] and reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging the researcher's positionality within Western social work paradigms while engaging non-Western epistemologies. The Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory (ICRT), developed in the theoretical framework, served as the analytical lens for synthesizing findings. Themes were mapped onto ICRT's pillars, critical theory, restorative justice, and Ubuntu philosophy, to identify convergences and contradictions. For example, feminist critiques of forgiveness were contrasted with theological models to explore tensions between survivor autonomy and

[37] Hart, *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping*.
[38] Mathieu Templier and Guy Paré, "A Framework for Guiding and Evaluating Literature Reviews," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* 37, no. 1 (2015): 6.
[39] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*.
[40] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate"; Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*.
[41] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.
[42] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*.
[43] Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, " CASP Qualitative Checklist," 2018, https://casp-uk.net/.

communal reconciliation.[44] Limitations include language bias due to the exclusion of non-English texts, temporal constraints in capturing 2023 discourses on decolonial forgiveness, and the interdisciplinary complexity that risks oversimplification. Academic sources underpinning the methodology, such as Braun and Clarke for thematic analysis and Fairclough for discourse critique, ensured methodological rigor.[45] This methodology provides a transparent, systematic synthesis of knowledge, laying the foundation for the subsequent findings and discussion sections. Using an integrative interdisciplinary perspective, the study advances a concrete understanding of forgiveness as both a liberatory praxis and a site of ethical contention in restorative social work.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the literature reveals four central themes that elucidate the complexities of forgiveness as a praxis in restorative social work: (1) the tension between individual healing and structural accountability, (2) the role of cultural and religious frameworks in shaping forgiveness narratives, (3) the gendered and racialized dynamics of forgiveness, and (4) the ethical risks and transformative potential of integrating forgiveness into restorative interventions. These themes highlight forgiveness as a contested, context-dependent process that demands critical engagement with power, culture, and justice.

Tension Between Individual Healing and Structural Accountability

Forgiveness emerges as a dual-edged praxis, oscillating between personal liberation and systemic complicity. Religious and philosophical traditions, such as Christianity's *agape,* [46] and Ubuntu's communal ethics,[47] frame forgiveness as a pathway to individual and collective healing. However, critical theorists caution that emphasizing interpersonal reconciliation without addressing structural violence, such as racism, poverty, or colonialism, risks perpetuating "cheap forgiveness."[48] For example, in post-apartheid South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) facilitated public reckonings between survivors and perpetrators, yet its neglect of economic redistribution left systemic inequities intact.[49] Similarly, feminist scholars argue that therapeutic models of forgiveness in social work often prioritize individual "closure" over demands for institutional reform, silencing survivors of gendered violence.[50]

Cultural and Religious Frameworks as Sites of Resilience and Conflict

Indigenous cultures, such as Māori whakapapa (genealogical responsibility), also incorporate forgiveness into their narratives and land-based reconciliation.[51] Unqualified importation of religious models threatens the exclusion of secular or non-religious clients. For example, Buddhist-informed mindfulness interventions, [52] which are useful for developing self-compassion, disempower clients who equate spirituality with traumatic history.[53] Alternatively, secularized social work models neglect the religious story that constructs spiritual resilience among marginalized groups, e.g., the Islamic construal of 'afw (forgiveness) as dehumanization resistance.[54]

In South Africa, African traditional religious and cultural systems, specifically those founded on the Ubuntu philosophy, have been of importance in influencing the way that societies deal with forgiveness, justice, and healing following violence and trauma. Ubuntu, literally "I am because we are," emphasizes interdependence, respect for individuals, and shared humanity. This view informed the post-

[44] Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*.
[45] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology"; Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, vol. 270 (London: Routledge, 2003).
[46] Melina Porto and Leticia Yulita, "Is There a Place for Forgiveness and Discomforting Pedagogies in the Foreign Language Classroom in Higher Education?," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 49, no. 4 (2019): 477–99.
[47] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.
[48] Porto and Yulita, "Is There a Place for Forgiveness and Discomforting Pedagogies in the Foreign Language Classroom in Higher Education?"
[49] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate."
[50] Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*; Norton, " Gender, Forgiveness, and Power: Rethinking Care Ethics in Post-Trauma Interventions."
[51] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
[52] Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*.
[53] Gambrell, "Trauma, Silence, and Spiritual Bypassing: When Mindfulness Isn't Enough."
[54] R. Abdullah, *Islamic Ethics of Forgiveness: Resistance and Renewal in Muslim Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where forgiveness was not passive acquiescence, but moral fortitude to restore community harmony.[55] In this case, the victims were encouraged to share their truth, and the perpetrators were encouraged to confess their offenses, not to punish, but to reintegrate citizens and heal collective wounds. This Ubuntu-informed process differed significantly from Western retributive legal systems and individual justice, emphasizing relational repair instead. Traditional Xhosa or Zulu conflict resolution, for instance, involves community-brokered dialogues, apologies, and symbolic acts of reconciliation. A criminal may be asked to slaughter a goat as part of the purification ceremony and confront the family of the victim, actions that humiliate all those who are around at the time in terms of dignity and have as their aim the restoration of social equilibrium.[56] These same cultural systems may also generate tensions and ethical contradictions, especially when collective values take precedence over individual emotional preparedness.

Female and child survivors of gender-based violence in certain South African cultures are coerced into forgiving their perpetrators for preserving family honor or harmony while they remain vulnerable or disempowered.[57] Group harmony for the sake of individual justice can silence the victims since it maintains abusive power relations under the cover of reconciliation. This is a necessary tension for Ubuntu because, while it fosters restorative justice, it stifles individual healing or justice at other times, particularly within patriarchal rural society, where tradition is imagined so as to reinforce male domination.[58] In addition, appropriating Christian forgiveness stories, a legacy of colonial missionaries, has also had its part in the complexities of indigenous trauma responses.

South Africans must navigate a hybrid moral environment, where Ubuntu coexists with Christian teachings on unconditional forgiveness.[59] Together, they can be powerful, but at the same time, they may overwhelm survivors with moral imperatives to forgive too early, even when unwise or unwanted reconciliation is not safe or desired.[60] Alternatively, however, there are some post-conflict grassroots healing initiatives that have reclaimed pre-colonial Ubuntu philosophies to re-energize survivors, rather than silencing them. For example, Eastern Cape community healing circles employed storytelling, drumming, and purification rituals with contemporary psychosocial assistance to allow survivors to cope with their trauma as well as restore their dignity.[61] These local practices, underpinned by local systems of knowledge, are powerful forms of healing that are neither religious nor secular, but culturally rooted. Collectively, South African local models, such as Ubuntu, are rich and communal models of resilience, particularly in post-conflict reconstruction and trauma recovery. Nonetheless, practiced in non-traditional contexts or hijacked by religious or patriarchal authority, they can become sites for coercion and violence. Because Buddhist or Islamic frameworks can exclude individuals who have more complex religious histories, Ubuntu-infused frameworks need to be contextual, adaptive, and survivor-led in not re-doing violence in the name of unity or forgiveness.

Gendered and Racialized Forgiveness Dynamics

Forgiveness is not a genderless, universally freeing act; it is frequently deeply embedded in gendered and racialized power relations that determine who ought to forgive and why. Feminist scholars have, for some decades now, contended that the burden of forgiveness falls overwhelmingly on the shoulders of women and other subordinated peoples, a phenomenon based on patriarchal conceptions of femininity as passive, nurturing, and self-denying.[62] Women, and women living in abusive relationships, are often coerced by religious communities, legal authorities, and, at times, even social workers into "forgiving and moving

[55] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*; M. B. Ramose, "The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy," in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (Routledge, 2002), 230–38.

[56] Ann Skelton, "Restorative Justice as a Framework for Juvenile Justice Reform: A South African Perspective," *British Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 3 (2002): 496–513; F. Mangena, " Restorative Justice and Ubuntu Philosophy in Southern Africa: A Convergence," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2016): 251–63.

[57] G. Nicolson, " The Weaponisation of Forgiveness: How Christian and Cultural Traditions Can Trap Abuse Victims," *Daily Maverick*, 2019.

[58] Kopano Ratele, "Subordinate Black South African Men without Fear," *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 53, no. 209–210 (2013): 247–68.

[59] A. Meiring, " Ubuntu and Reconciliation in South Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26, no. 3 (2005): 729–47; Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, "Trust and the Problem of National Reconciliation," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32, no. 2 (2002): 178–205.

[60] Gambrell, "Trauma, Silence, and Spiritual Bypassing: When Mindfulness Isn't Enough."

[61] Adrian D Van Breda, "Developing the Notion of Ubuntu as African Theory for Social Work Practice," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 55, no. 4 (2019): 439–50.

[62] Norton, " Gender, Forgiveness, and Power: Rethinking Care Ethics in Post-Trauma Interventions."

on" for the sake of maintaining family harmony or showing moral strength. These injunctions often tend to overlook the survivors' own experiences and contribute to the maintenance of prevailing structures of domination. For instance, Lamb established that survivors of intimate partner violence often find "forgiveness talk" from experts dismissive and retraumatizing, particularly if it is not accompanied by acknowledgment of harm or perpetrator responsibility.[63] In such conditions, forgiveness is no longer a healing process, but rather a means of silencing and erasure.

The same applies to the racialized processes of forgiveness. Forgiveness in post-coloniality comes to be championed as a political and moral necessity that gets invoked to whitewash gross structural inequalities without venturing into the material repercussions of violence or the root causes of violence. The discourse of reconciliation has a tendency to sideline justice, reparations, and calls for accountability, according to critics from critical race theory, rendering demands for accountability fragmented or reactionary.[64] For example, following the Rwandan genocide, Mamdani was critical of the international forgiveness model that characterized peacebuilding agendas. He claimed that global North institutions propagated a model of reconciliation through forgiveness and not justice, erasing the West's own involvement in the war and hegemonic power relations. The resulting debate centered on "moving forward" and avoiding discussions on how to address restitution and structural transformation.[65]

In South Africa, too, such criticisms have been raised about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Although the TRC is traditionally hailed as a paradigm of restorative justice, there have been overall questions among Black South Africans as to whether national reconciliation and amnesty, at the cost of substantial socio-economic reparations, had been ensured.[66] The TRC asked victims to forgive in public, with little guarantee that perpetrators would be punished or that communities would be compensated for rebuilding. Forgiveness was presented here as a moral triumph, but it was also a political move to legitimize the state and prioritize reconciliation over redress. Without intersectional analysis, forgiveness easily becomes a means of moral domination, imposed in disproportionate measure on those least able to refuse.

Ethical Challenges and their Transformative Potential

Research on forgiveness in the literature identifies it as a controversial psychological and moral terrain, which simultaneously holds the promise of release and poses danger. Here, forgiveness serves as a powerful restorer when it stems from survivor agency and is integrated into trauma-informed care.[67] Practices like restorative justice conversations, in which the offender and victim participate in a mediated discussion, have shown promise in areas such as reducing recidivism rates, fostering empathy, and repairing broken relationships.[68] Such models are grounded in humanizing the two individuals and bringing accountability in a manner that does not recreate punitive structures. Where such practices are formalized without adequate attention to power relations and survivor control, however, they become coercive all too rapidly. Critic Zehr warns against sentimentalizing reconciliation, particularly within legal or religious frameworks that coerce survivors into forgiving, often to facilitate closure or preserve social order.[69] If this happens, forgiveness ceases to be a gift but rather an exhibition of strength imposed on the survivor. This ethical dilemma is felt strongly within environments where restorative strategies are implemented in patriarchal or religiously conservative environments.[70] The author further argues that survivors can be compelled to forgive due to social norms, religious shame, or fear of being ostracized. In

[63] Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility*.
[64] D. Hook, " The Politics of Forgiveness: South Africa and the TRC," *Theory & Psychology* 14, no. 2 (2004): 147–60; W. Verwoerd, *Seeking Reconciliation: The Politics of Forgiveness in a Divided World* (Wipf and Stock, 2020).
[65] John M. Janzen and Mahmood Mamdani, "When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda," *Contemporary Sociology* 32, no. 4 (July 2003): 486, https://doi.org/10.2307/1556580.
[66] A. Krog, *Begging to Be Black* (Random House, 2008); Fiona C Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (Pluto Books, 2002).
[67] M. Porto, " Agape in Teaching: Revolutionary Love for a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) World.," *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 2025, 1–20.
[68] Worthington et al., *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health*.
[69] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*.
[70] Jarosław Horowski, "Educational Dimension of Acts of Political Forgiveness," in *Defending the Value of Education as a Public Good* (Routledge, 2024), 66–80.

some Christian cultures, for instance, forgiveness is blended with obeying God, and there is little space for anger, grieving, or accountability.[71]

However, within the same religious tradition, forgiveness can be sublated as a practice of resistance. In the history of African American churches, for example, forgiveness has served historically not as resigned submissiveness but as a radical act of moral rebellion. Douglas traces how Black churches prior to and following the era of Jim Crow redefined forgiveness as a "moral weapon," a resistance to being spiritually annihilated by white supremacist ideology, and a mode of asserting dignity in the face of systematized dehumanizing conditions.[72] Likewise, global interfaith peacebuilding has reframed forgiveness rituals to focus on community voice and historical accountability, balancing spirituality with justice, not substituting for it. These instances illustrate the possibility of forgiveness to transform when its roots lie in collective empowerment. The task of practitioners and theorists is to find space for both the ethical dangers and the freedom possibilities of forgiveness, acknowledging that its meaning and purpose are always inextricably formative of cross-cutting power relations of gender, race, class, and faith.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings affirm that forgiveness in restorative social work is neither consistently liberatory nor consistently oppressive; its moral worth depends on context, intentionality, and critical praxis. Bringing out the themes in the light of Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory (ICRT), this discussion draws out three central implications for theory, practice, and future research. ICRT's synthesis of critical theory and restorative justice offers a model for reconciling individual healing with systemic change. For example, social workers could pair trauma-informed forgiveness therapies (e.g., narrative therapy) with policy activism to promote reforms targeting cause-level harm perpetrators, such as housing insecurity or racial profiling. This combined strategy is reminiscent of Volf's "double vision" hypothesis, which involves engaging in the fight against injustice without creating cycles of retaliatory harm.[73] Nonetheless, professionals need to protect against collapsing structural accountability through performative allyship, a trap evident in TRC-type efforts that prioritize symbolic niceties over material reparations.[74]

The findings advocate for culturally humble frameworks that elevate Indigenous and Global South epistemologies. Ubuntu's emphasis on communal repair, for example, challenges Western social work's reliance on individualistic models of forgiveness. Similarly, integrating *teshuvah* (Jewish repentance rituals) into mediation processes could deepen perpetrator accountability by linking forgiveness to tangible acts of restitution.[75] However, this requires resisting the exoticization of non-Western traditions. As Smith warns, "decolonial" approaches must avoid reducing indigenous knowledge to a toolkit for Eurocentric institutions.[76] The tension between honoring survivors' right to anger and fostering relational repair remains a central ethical dilemma. ICRT resolves this by framing forgiveness as a *voluntary* praxis that centers survivor autonomy. For example, Holloway's concept of "radical empathy" encourages practitioners to validate anger as a legitimate response to injustice while creating spaces for voluntary reconciliation.[77] This aligns with Derrida's paradox of forgiveness, which posits that its purity lies in its impossibility, acknowledging that forgiveness cannot be demanded but can only be offered freely.[78] While this study highlights the potential of ICRT, gaps persist. The research confirms that forgiveness, as it is implemented in restorative social work, is context-specific, intentional, and morally conditioned. Its emancipatory or oppressive potentiality is contingent on the manner in which it is enacted within systems of injustice and survivor agency. Grounded in Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory (ICRT), which integrates critical theory's emphasis on structural oppression and restorative justice's emphasis on relational repair,[79] this approach connects personal healing with social transformation. For example, restorative interventions such as narrative therapy, where survivors are enabled to re-author their accounts,

[71] Porto, " Agape in Teaching: Revolutionary Love for a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) World."; Douglas E Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (McFarland, 2015).
[72] K. B. Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis Books, 2015).
[73] Volf, "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition."
[74] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate."
[75] Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*.
[76] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," 2012.
[77] M. Holloway, *Radical Empathy: A Guide for Social Workers in Structural Justice* (Policy Press, 2019).
[78] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*.
[79] Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*.

can be coupled with policy activism that challenges sources of harm, including housing injustice or racist policing. This two-pronged approach is an embodiment of Volf's "double vision," which demands facing off against systemic injustice but not reciprocating with spirals of retaliation, a balance required to end entrenched powers without igniting violence. Practitioners must therefore resist collapsing structural accountability into shallow allyship. In a few instances of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), symbolic gestures of reconciliation end up overwriting material reparations, thus reinscribing earlier erasures.[80] This critique emphasizes the importance of grounding forgiveness praxis in distributive justice rather than performative solidarity.

The research also proposes culturally humble methods that center on Indigenous and Global South epistemologies, countering the individualism inherent in Western theories of social work. Ubuntu, an African philosophy enunciated by Tutu in the context of post-apartheid reconciliation, emphasizes restoration at a communal level, "I am because we are," and thus transforms forgiveness into a collective activity.[81] Likewise, *teshuvah* (Jewish repentance ceremonies) connects forgiveness with concrete forms of restitution, such as monetary recompense or a public apology.[82] These epistemologies counter Western inclinations to depoliticize forgiveness by detaching it from systemic transformation. But integrating such epistemologies in synthesis involves countering colonial logics that orientalize non-Western knowledge. As Smith warns, decolonial processes must counter reproducing Indigenous practices as extractable "tools" of Eurocentric institutions, but rather honor the sovereignty of the marginalized groups.[83] Cultural humility, when conceptualized by Tervalon and Murray-García, requires constant self-awareness and sharing of power to avoid epistemic violence.[84] The ethical tension present in this one is honoring survivors' right to righteous indignation and being engaged in relational repair. ICRT resolves this through its articulation of forgiveness as voluntary, survivor-initiated praxis. Holloway's concept of "radical empathy" strikes a nice balance in resolution, encouraging practitioners to acknowledge anger as appropriate outrage regarding oppression while also establishing an open space for voluntary reconciliation.[85] This is consistent with Derrida's paradox that forgiveness, in order to maintain its moral integrity, must be granted gratuitously even to the "unforgivable."[86]This position resists the coercive narrative that pressures survivors to forgive and endangers victims, retraumatizing them. Rather, it maintains survivor agency, noting healing may take the form of forgiveness, resistance, or both. Without ICRT's promise, there are gaps. Future research would be beneficial in examining intersectional applications of forgiveness praxis, such as how race, gender, and colonialism are intertwined in survivors' lives.[87] Experimental research is also necessary to test the efficacy of ICRT in diverse environments, thereby circumventing the universalization of hypotheses. As restorative social work expands, it must be self-reflective and allow those most affected by systemic harm to have a voice, without reinforcing the structures that perpetuate it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the findings and discussion, this study proposes actionable recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, educators, and researchers to ethically integrate forgiveness praxis into restorative social work. Grounded in the Integrative Critical-Restorative Theory (ICRT), these recommendations prioritize structural accountability, cultural humility, and survivor agency while addressing the tensions identified in the literature. Policymakers should mandate that restorative justice initiatives pair interpersonal reconciliation with systemic redress. For example, social work agencies addressing racial trauma should consider integrating community reparations alongside victim-offender dialogues, ensuring forgiveness processes do not absolve institutional culpability. Governments and

[80] Gobodo-Madikizela, "Trauma, Forgiveness and the Witnessing Dance: Making Public Spaces Intimate"; Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*.
[81] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.
[82] Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*.
[83] Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples."
[84] Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia, "Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education," *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9, no. 2 (1998): 117–25.
[85] Holloway, *Radical Empathy: A Guide for Social Workers in Structural Justice*.
[86] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*.
[87] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminist Legal Theories* (Routledge, 2013), 23–51.

NGOs should allocate resources to grassroots organizations designing culturally specific forgiveness models. For instance, grants could support Indigenous communities in revitalizing traditional practices, such as healing circles or organizations focused on reconciliation. Funding criteria should require survivor leadership in program design to avoid top-down, neoliberal co-optation of forgiveness narratives.

Practitioners need to strike a balance between cultural competence and critical reflexivity. Training systems need to prepare social workers to practice alongside faith leaders, elders, and community healers in applying religious forgiveness rituals to secular practice. This will involve humility in not appropriating or misconstruing sacred traditions. Interventions should be supplemented with resources such as forgiveness readiness assessments, enabling practitioners to assess survivors' readiness for restorative processes. Intersectional models need to be employed to organize interventions in order to avoid the retraumatization of gendered, racialized, or colonial power dynamics. New programs should integrate individual therapy with advocacy. For instance, a domestic violence intervention could blend narrative therapy (to work through individual trauma) and community organizing (to confront patriarchal ideologies that inform abuse). Such approaches articulate a double vision, which requires working simultaneously with both individual and political aspects of forgiveness. Social work education needs to free itself from Eurocentric theory on forgiveness. Universities must collaborate with Indigenous academics and universities from the Global South to codify Ubuntu ethics and other non-Western schools of thought, as well as courses on these topics. Philosophy departments and theological seminaries can provide double modules to promote interdisciplinary debates. Forgiveness praxis workshops should challenge students through exercises that prompt them to question their own prejudices. For instance, role-play scenarios can uncover how implicit racist or gendered prejudices shape expectations of "forgiveness" by marginalized clients. Researchers need to employ participatory approaches, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR), to document oral histories and Indigenous forgiveness practices that are often omitted from academic literature. Collaborative research involving refugee, LGBTQ+, and disability populations can uncover how forgiveness is negotiated in the context of intersectional oppression.

Longitudinal research is necessary to determine whether restorative practices lead to lasting structural changes or merely provide temporary emotional relief. For example, does a reentry based on forgiveness for the convicted decrease recidivism while addressing police racism? Comparative research could also examine how globalization affects norms of forgiveness, for example, the trend toward "apology tourism" following conflict. Forgiveness as praxis can transform restorative social work only if it is examined critically, situated within its cultural context, and aligned structurally. Taking up these recommendations on behalf of stakeholders, a justice-engaged model of forgiveness can be formulated that is more effective than individualistic models, healing fractured communities while working to eradicate the fracturing systems that split them.

CONCLUSION

This study locates forgiveness not as a silver bullet against social disunion nor as a naive moral elixir but as a context-dependent, root-level praxis requiring moral imagination and structural critique. In the ICRT synthesis of religious, philosophical, and critical theories, the study situates forgiveness as a double-edged sword: it has the power to liberate individuals and groups from self-sustaining cycles of revenge, but it can also be an accomplice to systemic injustice when embraced without reflection. The conflict between interpersonal redress and structural justice arises as a leitmotif, pushing restorative social work beyond Euro individualism and into culture-infused models of redress, such as Ubuntu's communitarian ethic or Indigenous peoples' communitarian storytelling practices. The results warn against depoliticized accounts that force marginalized groups, including women and racialized people, to forgive without institutional accountability for harm. Conversely, they ensure the redemptive power of forgiveness when it is grounded in survivor agency, willing consent, and intersectionality. Recommendations for policy, practice, and education endorse hybrid models that integrate trauma-informed care with support for systemic change, ensuring that forgiveness processes do not negate systemic responsibility. Ultimately, this study contributes to a vision of restorative social work as a profession that draws on ancient wisdom to address modern struggles for justice. Through embedding cultural humility, critical reflexivity, and reparative ethics at its core, practitioners can deploy forgiveness as a lived praxis, rather than a destination, asking

societies to confront the past, negotiate the present, and construct lasting futures. Such is how forgiveness is less an issue of absolution and more an act of grand rehumanizing in a broken world.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers a critical interdisciplinary analysis of forgiveness as praxis in restorative social work, several limitations constrain the generalizability and depth of its findings. First, the reliance on English-language publications risks reinforcing epistemic biases inherent in Western academia. Non-Western perspectives, particularly those articulated in Indigenous languages or non-academic formats (e.g., oral histories, community rituals), may be underrepresented, potentially obscuring culturally specific forgiveness practices.[88] For instance, Latin American *sanación colectiva* (collective healing) or Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions, which often operate outside formal academic discourse, may not be fully captured, limiting the study's decolonial aspirations. Second, the temporal scope (1990–2023), while designed to prioritize contemporary debates, may overlook historical or pre-colonial frameworks of forgiveness that predate modern restorative justice paradigms. For example, ancient Indigenous conflict-resolution practices, such as Navajo peacemaking, are rooted in intergenerational wisdom that could further nuance the study's theoretical claims.[89] Similarly, rapidly evolving discourses on decolonial forgiveness in 2023, such as those emerging from Palestinian or Kurdish contexts, may not be comprehensively represented due to publication lags. Third, the qualitative systematic review methodology, though rigorous, inherently relies on secondary data. This limits the study's ability to engage directly with the lived experiences of survivors or practitioners, whose narratives might challenge or complicate the theoretical frameworks analyzed. These limitations highlight avenues for further inquiry. Ethnographic studies that partner with Indigenous and Global South communities could document oral forgiveness traditions that are often excluded from academic texts. Mixed-methods research, combining quantitative measures of forgiveness's psychosocial impacts with qualitative explorations of structural barriers, would deepen the evidence base for ICRT. Longitudinal evaluations of restorative programs could assess whether forgiveness praxis leads to sustainable societal change or merely symbolic reconciliation. Ultimately, interdisciplinary collaborations among theologians, social workers, and philosophers are necessary to refine ICRT into a practical toolkit for addressing both interpersonal and systemic harm.

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