

Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description

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Experiencing Grace: A Thematic Network Analysis of Person-Level Narratives

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0108>

received March 31, 2020; accepted April 22, 2020

Abstract: The aim of the present study is to clarify the lay experience of grace through person-level narratives. This empirical qualitative study follows a bottom-up approach, not restricted by specific theoretical assumptions, and includes a large and heterogeneous group of Belgian participants. The sample (recruited online) was composed of 456 participants (64% women, mean age = 50.04, age range from 18 to 93 years). Data consisted of 456 written narratives describing the experience of grace. They were analysed using a thematic analysis and thematic network approach with the help of a qualitative data management package Nvivo 12 pro. The resulting thematic network visualizes the experience of grace in the flow of time with (a) antecedents, grace can happen anywhere and anytime, but difficulties often precede grace; (b) the core experience is one of receiving an unmerited free gift in response to failure or brokenness or as an encounter with goodness and beauty, and this can be given by the divine or by other people and lastly (c) consequences entails a transformation at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and/or situational level. Our approach allows for an ecological and bottom-up understanding of grace as experienced nowadays in a secularized country and can empirically inform future studies about the connection between grace and psychological flourishing.

Keywords: gift, Nvivo, heteronomy, character development, virtue, awe, giving and receiving, psychology of religion, divine and human grace, transformation, forgiveness, positive psychology

1 Introduction

Sin, redemption and grace are three fundamental ideas in Christianity. In classic theology, grace (Lt. *gratia*, gr. *charis*) is in general described as a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures (persons, angels) for their eternal salvation.¹ The emphasis is on the total gratuity of grace with God as the ultimate source and purpose.² In this vein, grace summarizes the essence of God's relationship with humans.³

The psychiatrist William Meissner stated that a psychology of grace must explore the relations between grace and a person's attitudes, behaviour, emotional experience, values and ideals. He posed the question of what kind of changes may occur in the nature of man under the influence of grace.⁴ He made

¹ Meehan, *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

² *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 658.

³ Lacoste, *Dictionnaire Theologie*, 501.

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an anthology of 11 psychologists combining their insights together into a starting point for further consideration of a psychology of grace. He, furthermore, was convinced that the experience of grace can positively influence man's capacity for self-realization. In his work, grace is seen as the energizing and dynamizing principle that works through the resources of the ego and makes spiritual and moral growth possible. The psychologist Mark Graves also links grace with personality and especially virtue development.⁵ The psychologist Robert Emmons proposed that grace is comparable to a vital psychological need held by all people, such as the Rogerian notion of "unconditional acceptance".⁶ He concluded that psychological studies related to grace should be shaped by empirical findings about the definition of grace. These psychologists call in other words for thorough research into the psychology of grace because they believe that grace can be a positive energizing source in life that can help people with their character development and virtue development and can possibly be a source of sustaining connectedness. However, in order to address this call, it is first needed to gain insight in how grace is experienced, especially in a secularized West-European context where the concept of grace seems virtually absent.

William James, the founding father of empirical research on the human experience of religious feelings and religious impulses, stated that to:

the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution. It would seem, therefore, that, as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of those religious propensities. If the inquiry be psychological, not religious institutions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject.⁷

James documented subjective feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in relation to what they consider to be divine. His focus was on the psychological study of individual private religious experiences especially the exaggerations and perversions, striving for a better understanding of the essence of these phenomena.⁸ In this study, we are very much in line with James since we are interested in the description of the subjective experiences of a concept well-known in theology, namely, grace. We also differ in two ways from James: first we are interested not only in very articulated subjective experiences but also in less evolved and mainstream accounts; and second we do not solely focus on experiences in relation to the divine but also on the possibility of an experience of grace without linking this to a religious or divine context.

The experience of grace can be compared with a diamond: multi-faceted and multi-layered. It has a very long and profound theological and philosophical history; we however choose to limit ourselves in this manuscript to one specific facet of grace, namely, the subjective and personal experience of grace that we can assess through empirical studies.

1.1 Empirical outlook on the experience of grace

The attempt to assess grace in an empirical way is very recent. Very few instruments are therefore available, and they focus on different aspects of the experience of grace. The *Grace Scale*, for example, tries to capture the experience and expression of grace, both divine and human (e.g. "As a child I was confident that at least one of my parents loved me no matter what").^{9,10} The *Amazing Grace Scale*

⁴ Meissner, "Foundations for a Psychology of Grace," 6.

⁵ Graves, "Grace and Virtue."

⁶ Emmons, "Psychological and Theological Reflections on Grace," 276.

⁷ James, *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹ Payton et al., "Measure of Grace."

¹⁰ Spradlin, "Shame, Grace and Spirituality," 29.

emphasizes the feelings experienced and (re)cognitions about God's gracious deeds (e.g. "God is working in my life. I have a long ways to go, but I am at peace because I can count on God").¹¹ Others focus more on the understanding and impact of grace, like the *Richmont Grace Scale* (e.g. "The harder I work, the more I earn God's favor").¹² An integration of these previous scales resulted in the *Dimensions of Grace Scale* with five factors, namely, experiencing God's grace, costly grace, grace to self, grace from others and grace to others.¹³ All these scales were constructed from a top-down perspective, namely, based on predefined conceptualizations and/or doctrines of grace. Next to this quantitative close-ended measures, some qualitative bottom-up studies focus on the person-level descriptions of the experience of grace.

In her empirical theological work, Versteegen studied the meaning of grace as experienced by Catholic women (Dutch nationality) by means of in-depth interviews.¹⁴ The interviews showed that grace is personally experienced by individuals and thus not only a theoretical construction. All women in her study described very concretely how they experienced grace in daily life. It was obvious for the respondents, a religious sample, that grace comes from God, but the participants added that people can also be mediators of grace. The interviewees also stressed the importance of the transformative power of grace both on an inner level (e.g. attitude and insight) and as in the outer world (changing of situations). Grace was very often encountered in problematic situations, but situations where beauty and wonder were involved were also perceived as graceful. Furthermore, the women made a distinction in regard to the time span of the experience: some experiences were precisely defined in time (e.g. a sudden change) and others were in a more lasting form (e.g. continual supporting presence). Regarding the gratuitous nature of grace, the attitude of openness was mentioned as really important. On the other hand, the nature of the experience was broadened by adding that you sometimes have to fight to make the most gracious things happen ("gratuity with a bite"). Experiences of disgrace are also mentioned and characterized by ambiguity and insolubility.

Another recent inquiry of the experience of grace is made by the Indian psychologists Tungalut Thangbiackching and Eric Soreng and consists of a single-case thorough phenomenological analysis of grace in the life of a Christian middle-aged individual.¹⁵ The authors identified the following as important aspects of grace: acclamation and expression of faith; blessing and guidance received; healthy intra- and interpersonal relation; change of heart and yearning; humility and support and living in the Lord and belief in heavenly abode.

Within the contexts of the USA, psychologists Jacelyn Bronte and Jenny Wade interviewed 15 women and 10 men about the experience of grace as divine assistance.¹⁶ Participants were selected among volunteers who attributed a positive change in their lives to a supernatural force within the last 3–24 months. Most of the participants (22) had grown up with some religious affiliation. At the time of the study, six of the participants described themselves as spiritual but having no religious affiliation, four as Unitarian, three Roman Catholic, three Buddhist, two Protestant, two Sufi, two eclectic, one Jewish and Christian/Buddhist. All participants were engaged in meditation and/or prayer at the time of the study, but two were not engaged in spiritual activities or affiliations of any kind before their experience of grace. Thematic analysis of these in-depth interviews resulted in four shared components. They reported a certain mode of transmission (e.g. other people or felt presence), a subjective impulse to change (e.g. guided movement), emotional experience (e.g. surprise) and external effects (e.g. synchronicity).

In a phenomenological study, USA psychologists Paul Gowack and Valerie Valle examined how grace was felt while serving the terminal ill.¹⁷ Eight women and four men (individuals and co-researchers) who had the experience of "feeling graced" while serving were selected. Six participants had volunteered in a home or other settings and six co-researchers had served as volunteers in a hospice or hospital setting. The analysis revealed 7

¹¹ Bassett, "Empirical Consideration of Grace," 45.

¹² Watson, "Grace and Christian Psychology;" Blackburn *et al.*, "Hope and Forgiveness as Mediators of Enacted Grace in Christians;" Sisemore *et al.*, "Grace and Christian Psychology."

¹³ Bufford, "Dimensions of Grace," 63.

¹⁴ Versteegen, *Geleefde Genade*, 181–247.

¹⁵ Thangbiackching, "Grace of God."

¹⁶ Bronte, "Experience of Grace."

¹⁷ Gowack, "Experience of Feeling Grace."

themes across all 12 protocols: feeling present in the moment, often with heightened awareness; feeling blessed and/or loved; feeling guided; feeling energized; feeling joy; feeling peace and feeling oneness or connection.

From the short review above, three key findings emerge. People who experience grace (a) first, feel enriched and blessed and report different kinds of eudaimonic feelings; (b) second, experience a transformative power of grace on the intra- and interpersonal connection level and (c) third, mention God or the divine as the source of grace (except Gowacks). The women in Versteegen's study added other people as mediators of grace too.

1.2 Aim of this study

In our study, we aim to broaden and elaborate further on the previous studies and more specifically on four domains: (1) the studies mentioned above were conducted with people who already described certain experiences in their life as grace and connected this experience in most of the cases with a divine source. We want to reach out to a more differentiated and heterogeneous population in a strongly secularized country as Belgium. (2) Aforementioned studies worked with very small sample sizes, but we aim to work with a large sample of personal narratives about grace. (3) Most studies and all psychometric developments were conducted in the USA, and the study of Versteegen is the only European one. We aim to examine how Western European citizens describe the experience of grace. (4) All studies had an explicit starting point in choosing their participants defined by their own point of interest in examining the experience of grace, namely, grace experienced by women, in Christian daily life, as transforming power and while serving the ill. In sum, we aim to investigate the experience of grace from a bottom-up approach, not restricted by specific theoretical assumptions or specific populations and including a large and heterogeneous group of participants. The objective of the present investigation is thus to clarify the lay experience of grace through person-level narratives.

2 Method

The characteristics of grace that we are interested in will emerge from the narratives of our participants. Our researcher perspective is that of an involved meaning maker and thus a high level of transparency in the description of all phases of the study is pursued.¹⁸ This study is preregistered at the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/jb2vh>). The study is approved by the ethics committee of KU Leuven (SMEC ID G-2018 05 1237).

2.1 Data collection procedure

We choose for a web-based questionnaire since it is an efficient and accessible way to reach a broad population. Participants were recruited via social media (e.g. LinkedIn and Twitter) and via email (i.e. convenient snowball sampling), and sampling became purposeful when preliminary analyses showed an underrepresentation of young adults. By clicking on a link, participants were redirected to our questionnaire on the Lime Survey platform. Following informed consent, the open question about the experience of grace was part of a longer survey on positive psychological concepts. Gift vouchers of 20 euros were raffled among the participants.

¹⁸ Savin-Baden, "Qualitative Research;" Elo et al., "Trustworthiness;" Levitt, "Reporting Standards."

2.1.1 Instrument

Based on similar research about the experience of positive psychological concepts (see Glück on experienced wisdom and Lawler-Row on the experience of forgiving), one open question was asked in order to obtain full descriptions of the personal experience of grace: “In order to better understand what grace means for you, it would help us if you could give an example of an experience of grace and/or lack of grace.¹⁹ Please note down whether this is a personal experience or an experience from someone else”. They were asked to write their narrative in a text box (without word limit).

2.2 Data analysis

With respect to our research question, thematic analysis was ideally suited since it is directed to analyse narrative material of life stories. After all, it enables to work in both descriptive and interpretative manner to create an integration of manifest and latent contents.²⁰ This means that we can create descriptive codes close to the manifest words of our participants, thus close to the literal content of their writings and at the same time develop interpretative codes that connect with the underlying latent meaning of their narrative based on our understanding of the description. When coding, e.g. “I experience grace in knowing that I will always remain welcome and will always receive another”, our initial descriptive code adapted to the manifest content was “new chance” and in our next coding round, our interpretative code where we tried to tune in to the latent meaning was “unconditional acceptance”. In general, initial codes are more descriptive, whereas overarching themes become more interpretative trying to adjust to the core meaning of the narratives.

Qualitative analysis is a constant moving back and forward between data reading, coding, reflecting, reading, recoding and interpreting. Researcher triangulation, reflexive journaling, documentation of all team meetings, peer debriefing and team consensus accompanied our coding process along the iterative way.²¹ Team diagramming, a way of visual analysing and reflecting together, proved to be very useful, especially in stages 3, 6 and 7.²² It helped us not only to share ideas in a quick and visual manner but also to arrange and re-arrange our ideas, codes and themes in relation to each other. Quick sketches, schemes, tables and sticky notes helped us to obtain clear understanding of each other’s ideas and interpretation. In this way, we developed every theme and relationship till complete team consensus. To describe our thematic coding process as transparent and trustworthy as possible, Table 1 shows the different stages of the analytic process with a summary of our coding activities.

3 Results

3.1 Sample

After exclusion of 52 participants who did not adhere to the inclusion criteria (Belgian nationality, mother tongue Dutch and minimum age of 18) a final sample of 456 adults was obtained with an age range from 18

¹⁹ Glück, “Wisdom of Experience;” Lawler-Row, “Forgiveness Experience.”

²⁰ Vaismoradi, “Content and Thematic Analyses,” 399–400.

²¹ Levitt et al., “Reporting Standards Qualitative Research Psychology,” 38–40; Nowell et al., “Thematic Analysis: Trustworthiness Criteria,” 4.

²² Finfgeld-Connett, Knowledge-building and Theory-generating, 342, 345–348, 350; Keller, “Why sketch?”

Table 1: Description of the stages in the data analysis^a

Stage	Description of the process
1 Familiarization	Coding salient features and memoing
2 Generating initial codes	Independent open coding (10%) by the three authors
3 Development of a thematic coding framework	Collating initial codes into basic and organizing themes
4 Coding the entire data set	Coding (QSR Nvivo Pro version 12) by the first author
5 Testing the coding framework and coding process	Inter-reliability check (10% by trainee) and search for new themes, discussion till complete agreement
6 Construction of thematic networks	Creating a network of connections in accordance with the overall story valuable for the research question
7 Defining and naming themes	Refining the specifics and definitive naming and connections of the themes
8 Reviewing thematic network	Checking whether the thematic network fits coding corpus by backcoding (random 10%)
9 Final analysis	Multidisciplinary (theology and psychology) checking of analysis, finalization of network figure
10 Producing the report	Selection of illustrative examples and writing

^aBased on a combination of the phases in thematic analysis²³ and the steps used in thematic network analysis.²⁴

to 93 years (mean age = 50.04; standard deviation [SD] = 18.34; 64% women). Most participants (64%) were in a relationship, 22% single, 6.5% divorced, 3% widowed and 4.4% otherwise. Educational level was rather high, with 29% college degrees, 45% university degrees, 10.3% higher secondary education, 2.2% lower secondary education and 13.4% missing. This sample is higher educated than average, considering the fact that 32.2% of the population in Belgium has a higher degree.²⁵ With regard to the level of religious activity, 37.1% of the participants reported weekly church attendance, 9.9% monthly, 23% only for celebrations or once in a few years and 8.8% reported that they never attend religious activities. Regarding worldview, 51.1% identified as Roman Catholic, 10.3% as Christian, 3.7% Protestant, 3.3% other Christian (e.g. Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc.), 0.4% Muslim, 9.2% as Humanistic and 10.3% as other (e.g. Jewish, Atheist, Spiritual, etc.).²⁶ Compared to Flemish statistics wherein 47.9% indicate not having a religious belief, non-believers are underrepresented in our sample.²⁷ In addition, with regard to the religious descriptive, a considerable amount of data was missing, more precisely 11.6% on worldview and 21% on frequency of religious activities. This might be due to the location of these questions in the survey (i.e. at the end of the survey).

²³ Braun et al., “Thematic Analysis in Psychology;” Pope et al., “Analysing Qualitative Data.”

²⁴ Attride-Stirling, “Thematic Networks.”

²⁵ Statbel (2017). Onderwijsniveau van de Belgische bevolking vanaf 15 jaar en ouder 2017. Retrieved 14 March 2019, from <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/werk-opleiding/opleidingen-en-onderwijs/onderwijsniveau#figures>

²⁶ Belgium has Catholic roots in origin, but since the 1970–1980’s there has been a substantial growth of Protestant and Evangelical churches. Cultural and personal believing Catholics will indicate they are Catholic but Protestant/Evangelicals/Pentecostals/..., they prefer to identify themselves as *Christian* or even *other* when they want to note down their specific domination. Next to these different denominations, there are also Catholics who prefer not to be associated with the Roman Catholic church anymore, and they prefer to call themselves just Christians, not Catholic because in Dutch the term Catholic is more linked with Roman Catholic than universal Christianity.

²⁷ Corijn, “Flanders Statistics,” 7.

Table 2: Experiencing grace: organizing and basic themes with examples of the narratives

Organizing theme	Basic themes	Examples
Context	Family – Friends – Network Work – School Asymmetrical Religious	Marital life – Friendship – Neighbours - Colleagues (work, study) Judge – Teacher – King - Prayer – Pilgrimage – Saints -
Transformation	Intra-personal Inter-personal Situational Emotions Cognitions	Heart – Mind - Reconciliation (work, love,...) - Finding a job – a home - Joy – Relieve – Wholeness – Peace - Insight – Wisdom – Clarification -
Unconditional Acceptance	Forgiveness big mistakes Forgiveness daily mistakes Understanding & chances	Adultery – Murder - Forgetfulness – Insults – Break Deal - Comprehension – New Beginning -
Unmerited Gift	Connection & love Help & support Awe-inspiring daily & Awe-inspiring exceptional Happy coincidence	Blessed marital love – Connecting conversation - Practical – Material – Emotional - Sunset – New Life – A child - Mystic experience – Medical healing - Meeting right people in right timing -
Difficult situations	Pain in relationships (Mental) Health Hard times & problems	Divorce – Humiliation - Depression – Panic – Trauma - Disabled Child – Cancer – Misery -
Missing Grace	Withholding grace by superior Societal injustice Unforgiveness	Excessive penalties – Criticism - Exploitation – Refugee politics - Bitterness – Harshness -

3.2 Themes

Participants reported very different and varied stories. The answers ranged from one word to 1,570 words with an average of 53 words per narrative. The familiarization process was an enriching experience as such. The narratives were very personal, honest and sometimes also vulnerable written accounts of experiences which marked an important change (in most of the cases) or an important state of being in their lives.

After following the first three analysis steps (Table 1), six organizing themes with three or four basic themes each emerged from the data and are shown in Table 2 with some clarifying examples to get a feeling of the narratives.

3.3 Secondary analysis with regard to worldview

To be careful in regard to our skewed distribution with an overrepresentation of believing participants, we proceeded with complementary analyses to reveal potential differences in the narratives about experiences of grace. We explored this potential discrepancy between secular and believing participants (who identified themselves as believing in a transcendent reality), analysing the prevalence of the different themes (Table 2) for both groups. The comparison (performed with the cross-tab function of Nvivo pro 12) showed that all organizing and almost all basic themes were mentioned by as well believing as non-believing participants. Only two aspects were not mentioned by non-believers: the situational change as important transformation in life through grace

and two subthemes of undeserved gift, namely, the awe-inspiring daily gift and happy coincidence. In comparison with believing people, non-believing people wrote relatively more about legal contexts, about new chances and forgiveness and about the giving aspect of grace. They also gave more examples of missing grace. They recounted less religious experiences and also relatively less emotions, less gifts in general (except the forgiveness gift), less on difficult situations and a lot less on intrapersonal change.

In sum, we may argue that our themes are robust even when taking into account our skewed distribution. As expected, believing in a transcendent reality influences the kind of experiences participants describe, but themes are recognized by both believing and non-believing participants albeit not experienced in the same domains of life and at the same intrapersonal subjective emotional involved manner.

3.4 Secondary analysis in regard to the active and passive aspects in the experience of grace

Since many (a third of the narratives) references are made regarding decisions about forgiveness, actions and consequences of forgiveness, we decided to further investigate whether specificities shown in the empirical forgiveness literature are present when describing grace as well. More specifically, psychological studies on forgiveness show a distinction between *experiencing* forgiveness (by others, God, oneself) and *granting* forgiveness (to oneself, to others, to God/situation). Until now, psychological research predominantly focused on granting forgiveness.²⁸ We therefore were especially interested whether a similar distinction holds for grace as well (thus giving grace and receiving grace) and whether most narratives were related to giving of grace or to receiving of/asking for grace. We, therefore, assessed the content of each narrative and coded for receiving of/asking for grace, giving grace or not fitting in one of those categories. This *post hoc* analysis revealed that in general more than twice as many people ($n = 218$) wrote about receiving grace compared to giving grace ($n = 95$). When taking into account the differences between believing and non-believing participants, it turned out that non-believing participants mentioned giving grace equally as much as receiving grace, whereas believing participants reported three times more receiving grace. We may argue that the experience of grace is clearly characterized with a giving and receiving side and that the receiving part is experienced more often by the believing participants.

3.5 Reordering in thematic network

Aware that there is more than one logical arrangement between the themes, our research question served as a guiding principle to decide on the final design of the thematic network. In the process of reordering, we arranged all emerged themes in the flow of time, being a common lens to study human behaviour and experiences. Not all of the participants described every time frame in the experience, but all the experiences could be placed in one or more aspects of the following network (see stage 8 in the coding process).

With regard to the antecedents, when and where does grace happen, participants gave us a wide range of places, moments of the day and relational contexts. Our findings showed that the experience of grace most often happened in a relational setting, for example, in romantic and family life but also in work and school settings. A third of the experiences addressed experiences in a religious context so to speak in a relational connection with the divine. Participants described being grateful for receiving forgiveness of sin time and again and eternal life, but even more mentioned were undeserved blessings of all kind (faith, insight,

²⁸ Brown, "Tendency to Forgive;" McCullough et al., Forgiveness;" Tucker, "Defining Forgiveness in *Forgiveness and Health*, Toussaint et al. (eds), 13–28;" Worthington, "Forgiving and Reconciling;" Worthington, "Handbook of Forgiveness;" Worthington et al., "Psychology of Unforgiveness."

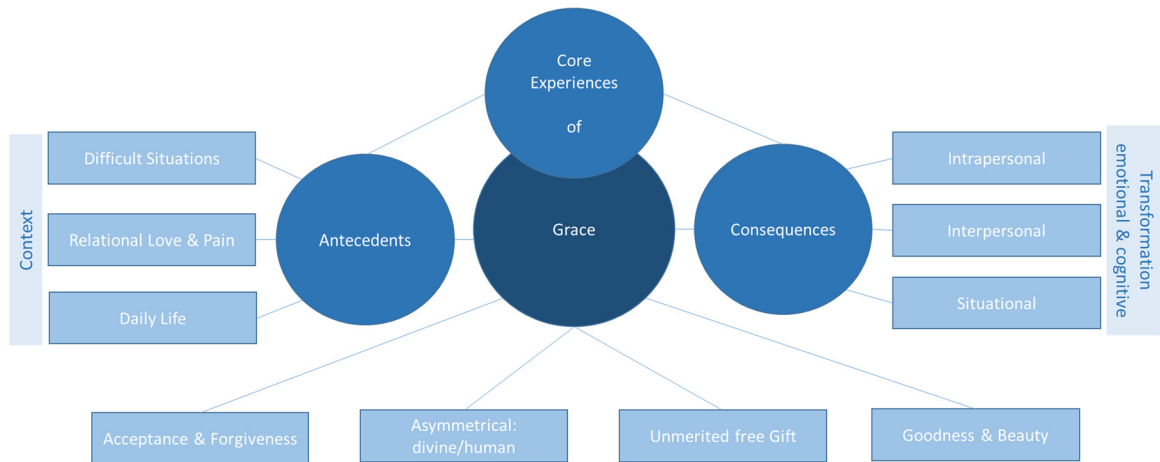


Figure 1: Experiencing grace: thematic network.

mystical experience, being used for Gods work, etc.). Noteworthy is the fact that around half of the participants referred to difficult situations. They felt, for example, desperate, powerless, abandoned or lonely. These feelings could be linked with relational difficulties but also with personal struggles and misfortune like sickness and unemployment. But grace not only appeared in the brokenness, it was also experienced in the beauty of nature, the warmth of love and the richness and light felt in spiritual experiences. Overall, most of the experiences found place in a relational context but not necessary. Other contexts like nature, art, love and life itself turned out to be powerful doors to experiencing grace when participants were on their own.

Grace can happen anytime, anywhere, in any circumstances, with anyone, but the core experience is one of being touched. This touch can happen in an infinite number of ways, overwhelmingly and silently, clearly and subtly, suddenly or growing, directly from heaven or mediated by people or situations. Religious participants experienced God as the ultimate source of grace but also confirmed that people can be merciful to one another following God's example. Humanity can, as it were, reflect some core characteristics of the merciful nature of God: forgiveness, unconditional acceptance, love, help and connectedness. Religious participants described both the vertical (transcendental) and horizontal (immanent) dimensions of receiving and giving grace. Participants who identified as non-believing described grace almost exclusively as an undeserved favor between people in the form of forgiveness or legal mercy. Overall, in the experience of grace, emphasis is placed on the dependent aspect of the recipient. Grace cannot be demanded, and it cannot be claimed. You can ask for it and some people dare to expect grace, but it is not enforceable. You are in a vulnerable position, especially the non-believers emphasize the hierarchical aspect of the relationship, for example, king-servant, layman-pupil, president-citizen. The focus lies on the unmerited, uncontrollable, unattended nature of the experience. The experience of grace is not something you have planned or directed. Maybe you hoped for it, but it was outside your domain of control. It happened to you, sometimes in very unexpected ways and through unforeseen events and even with people you have never met before.

Finally, let's look at the consequences. Grace seemed to be a transforming, liberating force. Grace is described as bringing outcome in impasses and healing intrapersonal wounds and interpersonal connections, but not always. It was also described as a soothing and empowering force in the midst of painful events. Participants described how they received courage and perseverance in very hard times, for example, when abandoned with three young children and high loans or when fighting a severe disease or in taking care of someone who's very hard to handle. They experienced grace as a loving presence and inspiring power to go on. Afterwards they felt carried by grace and were filled with gratitude. They experienced amidst their misfortune an intrapersonal change at the level of hope, inner power, motivation and positivity. Sometimes the intrapersonal change was accompanied with situational changes as encountering new friendships, a better fitting job or cure from disease. The situational change was then in itself experienced as a gift of grace. With regard to the interpersonal changes, more than a third of the stories were dedicated to retell how relationships were damaged

and broken and how they revived or were able to keep going after loving acceptance, forgiveness and/or reconciliation. The descriptions revealed a clear difference between daily mistakes taken care by unconditional acceptance and (big) failures which needed forgiving. In regard to the dimensions altered by grace, participants described the impact of grace on an emotional and cognitive level. Emotions most mentioned in and following the grace experiences were peace, gratitude, joy, awestruck, being touched and happiness. Many people also described transformations on a cognitive level reported as receiving insight, wisdom, clearly led by intuition, clarification, shift in understanding, change from an I-perspective to a larger whole perspective and becoming aware of the ordinary not being evident. In sum, we see grace described as a liberation from external difficulties like finding interesting work in times of unemployment and a right person in the right place, so that an impasse is lifted. But even more participants told about an inner liberation where people are healed from their anger and can be forgiving, where people get courage and strength to persevere in difficult circumstances and where people receive wisdom and insights that showed them the way to continue their lives meaningfully and hopefully.

4 Discussion

4.1 Previous research

The present study confirmed the findings from previous empirical research about grace. All categories mentioned in previous studies were reaffirmed in the narratives of our participants: (a) positive states and feelings as being present, blessed, guided, energized, oneness and connectedness; (b) the transformative power of grace on the intra- and interpersonal levels and (c) the immanent and transcendent dimensions in the giving and receiving of grace.²⁹ Even our organizing theme of missing grace is consistent with the findings of Versteegen.³⁰ However, our results go beyond previous reports, showing that not only believing people experience grace but also people who do not see life through a religious lens can connect with the concept of being graced and being in need of grace, albeit at a human level only. In addition, although we asked an open question without any theoretical framing, we still found the same categories and the overall spontaneous framing of grace amidst of difficulties and pain as in the previous theoretically framed studies. Furthermore, the age range of our sample was considerably larger, included much younger and much older participants than the previous studies and, furthermore, held more male participants. Overall, our method and aim of the study to clarify the experience in a broad European sample confirmed and broadened our insight in the experience of grace in a secular society.

4.2 Nature and attribution of the experience

4.2.1 Appraisal and attribution

Our results illustrate that grace is not limited to a certain kind of experience. Grace is a transforming power, given to people, which they can also give to others. Whether and how this experience is framed as grace depends on the participant's appraisal and attribution. The basic assumption of appraisal theories is that a person's evaluation of the circumstances leads to the experiences of and differences in his emotions.³¹ The relevance of an experience and the accompanied emotions are co-defined by how relevant and important the incident is perceived in regard to, e.g. one's own values and motivations. Next to this

²⁹ See footnotes 9–12.

³⁰ Versteegen, "Geleefde Genade," 237–9.

personal appraisal process, attribution theories help us to understand how people make sense of their experiences. Kelley and Michela described how antecedents as information, beliefs and motivation influence how people will make meaning of a certain situation and attribute certain causes to what happened.³² These attributions influence in their turn the consequences of the person's behaviour, affect and future expectancy. Spilka, Shaver & Kirkpatrick already highlighted the importance of this psychological processing with regard to the psychology of religion.³³ As we can see in our results, religious people attribute the perceived cause of grace more to God, whereas non-believers attribute this to happy coincidence, serendipity or the goodwill of others. And with regard to the appraisal part, believers will use the word grace more easily in describing fortune in their life compared to non-religious people.

4.2.2 Kintsugi

The results of the experience of grace can be compared with Kintsugi, which is literally translated as golden connection. It is an old Japanese art technique to give broken porcelain or ceramics a second life.³⁴ The pieces are glued together with Urushi lacquer and a powder layer of precious metal, gold, silver or platinum is sprinkled, creating precious compounds. Usually one tries to make a repair invisible. Kintsugi does just the opposite: the fracture lines are part of the story of an object. Its history makes the object dear, and the repair is a gold joint that emphasizes the fracture lines. The object becomes firmer and more valuable than before. The golden connection does not exist in its own, it needs a carrier, i.e. something broken. Grace like the golden joint heals and empowers our broken nature and broken hearts. Grace is not a thing standing on its own, it can only be received and recognized. Like in Kintsugi, the experience of grace makes us stronger, and the healed ruptures and changed brokenness are witnesses of hope, love and light along our way of life.

4.2.2.1 Heteronomy and awe

Awe is conceptualized as an emotion in response to a perceptually vast stimulus that transcends current frames of reference.³⁵ Keltner and his team showed that awe can result in a diminishment of the individual self and the individual's concerns and increases prosocial behaviour.³⁶ Some of our participants referred literally to awe as an emotion felt in encountering grace. The experience of grace was interpreted by some as given by God and by others as a happy coincidence. But it seems they agree on one thing: something happens to them which was beyond their own control, and they couldn't have managed it on their own. It seems that in the experience of grace, one can experience in analogy with awe something that transcends their own frame of control. They reported that their life or the life of others were changed for the better with the help of benevolent people and/or situations. Maybe the experience of grace can help people to get in touch with their own limits and the awareness that autonomy needs heteronomy.³⁷ From this point of view, it can be considered that the experience of grace can effect prosocial behaviour in similar ways as other awe experiences.

³¹ Scherer, "Appraisal Theory," 637.

³² Kelley et al., "Attribution Theory," 459.

³³ Spilka et al., "Attribution Theory for the Psychology of Religion."

³⁴ Hammill, "Kintsugi."

³⁵ Keltner et al., "Approaching Awe," 297.

³⁶ Piff et al., "Awe and Prosocial Behavior."

³⁷ Dupont, "Genade Volgens Augustinus;" Steiner et al., "From Autonomy to Heteronomy."

4.3 Limitations

Our study offers more insight in the experience of grace as a personal and subjective experience of a large group of individuals within a secularized society. Despite the novelties of this study, some limitations need to be taken into account. A first limitation in our study involves the issue of language. The semantics and pragmatics of the word “grace” are not the same as those of the word *genade* in Dutch.³⁸ As stated in the introduction, we limit ourselves here to the facet of grace as a subjective experience. By focusing the investigated semantic area on the field of experience, we find an interlingual common ground of meaning in regard to grace. Our analysis provides the same major themes in comparison with the studies conducted in English, proving that the language issue might be less impacting than expected.

Next, the sampling method utilized (snowball with auto selection based on the title of the study) suffers from the limitation that we attracted participants who are more religious and higher educated. Because of this limitation, we explicitly used the sociodemographics and religious background information in coding, analysing, creating themes and interpreting the data. Our secondary analysis regarding worldview also demonstrated the robustness of our themes. We would also argue that the size of the sample minimizes the potential adverse effects here.

Finally, next to our broad and varied sample of written narratives, it will be very interesting to do in-depth interviews about the transformation experiences and processes infused by grace. These kinds of profound psychological qualitative elaborations are not only interesting but significant and vital for future psychological theory building about the psychology of grace.

5 Conclusion and future research

To our knowledge, this is the first report about experiencing grace in such a large and varied sample in a secularized country. This research adds to a growing corpus of empirical studies (e.g. forgiveness, self-compassion, gratitude, etc.) showing that religious concepts and ancient wisdom are worthwhile to study from a psychological perspective so they can be validated and contribute even more to the flourishing of humanity.

We would argue that grace may be considered a promising concept in regard to (a) its empowering and deliberating effect on the intrapersonal level, (b) its healing qualities on the interpersonal level and (c) its humbling effect in regard to seeing ourselves in our real size and dependency from others/the Other. Future investigations are necessary to validate this type of conclusion.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Eva Buelens, Laura Dewitte, Lindsay Desmet and Sophie Gouwy for their assistance in the data analysis. A special word of gratitude to all our participants who thoughtfully shared their personal story about their experiences with grace in such personal descriptions. In fact, we felt very privileged to read and study them. Thank-you all for your sharing of hope, trust and gratitude.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

³⁸ In English *grace* and its derivatives are more frequently used than *genade* in Dutch. Grace is more present in everyday language, given its different meanings: it could describe “divine assistance”, for example, grace as divine favour or approval; grace can also be used to describe a person as charming; “saying grace” refers to expressing gratitude to God before a meal and “grace” can also be used as a title, e.g. “his Grace”. In Dutch, similar words have descended from the Latin root *gratia* and Greek root *charis*, for example, *graciously* indicating an elegance or *gratie* as favour and approval, but these have developed as different terms to “*genade*”.

Funding: The authors are funded by an interdisciplinary seed grant from the Group Humanities and Social Sciences of the KU Leuven (Belgium).

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