

Research Article

Responses to Transgressions: Grudges or Forgiveness?

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Abstract: Virtually everyone can relate to the experience of being wronged by someone else. Responses to these transgressions include seeking revenge against the transgressor, forgiving the offender, or holding a grudge against the individual. Although substantial research has examined revenge-seeking and forgiveness, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the study of grudges, the purpose of the current study. In an exploratory study, 344 participants completed a survey on Qualtrics. After writing about a time when they were wronged and completing questions about this experience, participants indicated whether they had forgiven this person or still held a grudge against them. Most grudge-holders indicated that the transgression had occurred some time ago, that they were not motivated to resolve the grudge, and that they had been unable to obtain closure from the transgression. People who forgave the transgressor indicated that, among other reasons, they often did it for intrapersonal reasons. Implications of the transgressions, grudge-holding, and forgiveness for interpersonal relationships will be discussed.

Keywords: grudges, forgiveness, transgression

1. Introduction

Being wronged is a common experience to which nearly every person can relate. Transgressions by others are often beyond the realm of one's control; however, choosing to remain in the victim role is a conscious decision of the injured party (Struthers et al., 2008). Research suggests that the decision to remain in a victim role may be the root of grudge-holding (Baumeister et al., 1998), defined by Struthers et al. (2017, p. 2) as “hanging on to negative sentiment and negative judgments toward transgressors by ruminating or repetitively thinking about the transgression.”

Alternative responses to being wronged include seeking revenge against the transgressor or forgiving the wrongdoer (Struthers et al., 2017; Struthers et al., 2019). Whereas seeking revenge and holding grudges may make the wronged individual feel better at least in the short-term, these responses may lead to the dissolution of the relationship with the transgressor. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is a more prosocial response chosen by the wronged individual (Struthers et al., 2019). Forgiveness is defined by some wronged individuals as “no longer seeking revenge” or “the disappearance of a grudge” (Wu et al., 2021, p. 2281). Ironically, even though revenge and grudge-holding may be undertaken to thwart future transgressions by the offender, research suggests that transgressors actually respond to forgiveness in a way that suggests a lower likelihood of transgressing again (Wallace et al., 2008).

Forgiveness involves a person's attempt to lessen the negative emotions caused by a transgressor's wrongdoing (Sanjay et al., 2019). Forgiving must be an intentional decision to mentally and emotionally release feelings of ill will towards the transgressor and behave accordingly (van Monsjou et al., 2023). Grudge-holding, on the other hand, consists of holding on to feelings of ill will towards the transgressor. In reality, however, people who "forgive" may have simply ceased ruminating over the wrongdoing but not completely relinquished their negative feelings toward the wrongdoing or the transgressor. Thus, rather than being in opposition to one another, researchers have suggested that grudges may be more similar to, yet still distinct from, *unforgiveness*, defined as "negative emotions toward a transgressor resulting from angrily ruminating about what happened" (van Monsjou et al., 2023, p. 62; see also Berry et al., 2005).

According to some researchers (Baumeister et al., 1998; Struthers et al., 2019; van Monsjou et al., 2023), the response chosen in reaction to a transgression may be influenced by whether or not the transgressor apologizes and takes responsibility for his/her wrong-doing. The choice of response may also be dependent on the depth of the relationship between the transgressor and the victim. The closer two people are, the greater the cost of holding onto a grudge and not forgiving the wrong-doer (Finkel et al., 2002). Although revenge and forgiveness have received quite a bit of attention in the literature, surprisingly little research has been devoted to the topic of grudge-holding (Struthers et al., 2019). The limited research that has been conducted on this topic focuses on grudges and grudge-holding largely in the context of consumer grudge-holding (e.g., Aron, 2016; Aron et al., 2007; Beverland et al., 2009; Thota & Wright, 2006). Thus, it remains unclear why some people consciously ruminate and hold grudges against their transgressor whereas others choose to forgive the transgressor and move on from the wrongful event.

A grudge typically emerges from some form of interpersonal conflict, most often involving close relationships such as friends, family, and romantic partners (van Oyen Witvliet et al., 2001; Wixen, 1971). Possible reasons why someone might hold a grudge include benefitting from a moral high ground, fearing perceived weakness, wanting to protect oneself from being hurt by the transgressor again in the future, and wanting the offender to hurt (Struthers et al., 2008; Struthers et al., 2017). Common emotions associated with holding grudges are anger, sadness, shame, and regret (Struthers et al., 2008; van Oyen Witvliet et al., 2001). People who hold grudges may ruminate about the transgression, resulting in prolonged negative mood states, increased uncertainty, and potential avoidance of the transgressor (Struthers et al., 2017; see Watkins & Roberts, 2020, for a discussion of rumination). Prolonging these feelings can lead to increased vulnerability to physiological issues, including high blood pressure, decreased cardiovascular health, stomach ulcers, and an increase in pain disorders (Messias et al., 2010; van Oyen Witvliet et al., 2001).

One of the reasons why grudges are linked to physical and psychological health problems is that, unlike revenge, which is typically taken out on the transgressor, grudges are more intrapsychic and may even remain unknown to the transgressor him- or herself (Neckel, 2023). Although some people may choose to disclose their grudges to close friends and/or family, people are often reluctant to disclose the grudge(s) they hold directly to the transgressor, allowing for further rumination (Neckel, 2023).

In one of the most extensive studies on grudge-holding to date, van Monsjou et al. (2023) conducted interviews with 20 college-aged students regarding their experiences with grudges. Van Monsjou et al. (2023) defined grudge-holding as "a cyclical process characterized by persistent negative affect and intrusive thoughts that interfere with one's quality of life" (p. 60). They defined a grudge as "sustained feelings of hurt and anger that dissipate over time but are easily reignited ... feelings of ill-will or resentment toward a transgressor" (p. 60). In their interviews, van Monsjou et al. (2023) found that most grudge-holders felt disrespected and devalued as a result of the transgression. All grudge-holders perceived the behaviors of the transgressor to be deliberate, leading to feelings of anger, disappointment, and negative perceptions of the transgressor. Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews yielded six themes: (1) the need for validation from the transgressor taking responsibility for their actions, from others validating the feelings of the victim, and from the victim him- or herself recognizing they were still good people in spite of what had been done to them; (2) moral superiority whereby the grudge-holder felt that their anger toward the transgressor was justified and the wrong-doing by the transgressor was irrational; (3) emotional and cognitive powerlessness over the grudge, implying that they were unable to stop thinking about the grudge due to intrusive thoughts about the transgression; (4) latency, referring to the fact that the grudge is dormant until some event or situation triggers its memory; (5) severing ties with the transgressor completely if possible or avoiding the wrong-doer; and (6) expectations for the future including a loss of trust in others due to the actions of this one transgressor.

Because of the limited research on grudges as a response to transgressions, the purpose of this study was to

conduct an exploratory study on responses to transgressions with a particular focus on grudges. Although the study was exploratory, based on previous literature we generated a few hypotheses (Hs). Consistent with research by van Oyen Witvliet et al. (2001), we hypothesized that most transgressors would be friends or someone else close to the respondent, such as a family member (H1). In addition, we hypothesized that participants would experience negative emotions following the transgression (H2). Although our methodology differs from that used by van Monsjou et al. (2023), we hypothesized that some of the same themes would emerge, such as the desire for the transgressor to take responsibility for his/her actions and the presence of triggers that remind the grudge-holder of the offense (H3). Also consistent with van Monsjou et al.'s research, we hypothesized that being wronged would lead participants to feel that they did not matter to the wrongdoer (H4). Expanding upon this research and these hypotheses, however, we also wanted to examine the effects of transgressions on relationships and how these effects may differ between individuals who have forgiven the transgressor and those who continue to hold a grudge. The following broad research questions are advanced. Research question 1 (RQ1) asked "What are the perceived effects of transgressions on relationships?" Research question 2 (RQ2) asked "Do the perceived effects of transgressions on relationships differ between individuals who have forgiven the transgressor and those who continue to hold a grudge? For example, do people who hold grudges have lower ratings of closeness in their relationships with transgressors than people who have forgiven the offender?"

2. Method

2.1 Participants

A total of 344 people participated in the study. Post hoc power analysis indicated that this size sample provides a power of .95 with $d = .3$. Sixty-four of these individuals responded to an invitation posted on various social media platforms including Facebook, GroupMe, Instagram, Twitter (currently known as X), and Snapchat. A snowball sampling procedure was used so that individuals who responded to the recruitment invitation were encouraged to share the announcement with other people. Additionally, 300 workers on Prolific clicked on the Qualtrics link to complete the survey. Participants in Prolific were paid \$5 for their participation. Twenty of these individuals failed to respond to more than a few questions and their data were removed from further analysis, leaving a total of 280 responses from Prolific workers. Almost half of the total sample was male (48.0%), with 49.4% being female, 1.7% non-binary, 0.3% other (transmasculine nonbinary), and 0.6% preferred not to answer. The largest percentage of respondents were White (82.8%), followed by Black/African-American (8.4%), Asian (8.1%), Other (2.3%), and American-Indian (0.3%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.3%), or preferred not to answer (0.3%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 83 ($M = 38.95$; $SD = 14.18$). The study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB2022-0800). To be included in the study, participants had to be at least 18 years of age.

2.2 Procedure

After clicking on the link to the Qualtrics survey, participants read a consent document and agreed to participate. With the exception of the Rye Forgiveness Scale described below, the survey and participant instructions were created ad hoc for the purposes of this study.

2.3 Measures

The survey began with a series of demographic items, including age, gender, and race. Following this, participants wrote a narrative about a time in their lives when they felt like they were wronged by another person or persons, providing as much detail as possible while leaving out the names of those involved. Participants were then asked several questions regarding the primary (main) transgressor in the situation they wrote about and the event in general. These questions included "How long ago did this event occur?" (1 = *Within the past day*; 6 = *Over 5 years ago*), "How severe do you perceive this transgression to be?" (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*), "How rational do you perceive your feelings about the wrongful event to be?" (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*), "How frequently do you still interact with the primary transgressor?" (1 = *Never*; 5 = *A great deal*), and "What is the gender of the primary transgressor?". Participants then rated the extent to which they felt each of the 33 emotions at the time the transgression occurred using a 5-point

response format (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*). Examples of emotions presented include frustration, anxiety, disrespect, and resentment. Three additional questions examined how hurt participants' feelings were when they were wronged, how hurt they still felt, and how likely they were to forget about the transgression. All three questions were answered using a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*). Respondents were also asked to indicate if they had been able to get closure from the situation they described (*No/Yes*), and, if so, to provide an open-ended response regarding how they had been able to do so. Two final questions asked whether they felt any responsibility for the wronged event (*No/Yes*) and whether they believed you must forgive someone in order to let go of negative sentiment toward them (*No, you can let go without forgiving; Yes, you must forgive to let go*).

To examine people's responses to the transgression they wrote about (i.e., grudge-holding or forgiveness), participants were presented with a question asking whether they felt "a persistent feeling of ill will or resentment toward the person who wronged them (grudge)". If participants answered, "*Yes, and I have not forgiven them and still hold a grudge*," display logic took them to a set of questions inquiring about the grudge. If the participants answered, "*Yes I did hold a grudge, but I have since forgiven them*," they were transferred to a set of questions asking why they had forgiven the transgressor. Participants who answered "*No*" to this question were then taken to questions about their relationship with the transgressor. The relationship questions were also completed by all other respondents after they completed their respective questions about holding a grudge or forgiving the transgressor. Responses to this question allowed us to set up the conditions of grudge-holding versus forgiving in some analyses reported later in the paper.

Grudge-holders. Participants who answered "*Yes, and I have not forgiven them and still hold a grudge*" were asked questions about their grudge specific to the wrongdoing they outlined earlier in the survey. These questions included "How often do you think about the grudge?" (1 = *Close to never*; 5 = *All the time*), "How many people have you told about the grudge?" (1 = *No one*; 5 = *Almost everyone*), "Who have you told about the grudge?" (*Friends; Family member; Romantic partner; Coworker or classmate; Stranger; Therapist; Other*), "How much does this grudge interfere with your daily life?", "Does the person who wronged you know that you are holding this grudge?" (*No/Yes/ I'm not sure*), "How motivated are you to resolve this grudge?" (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*), "Have you confronted the primary transgressor about this specific grudge?" (*No/Yes*), and "Do you foresee yourself being able to forgive the person against who you hold a grudge?" (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*). Two questions examined if there was one thing that the transgressor could have done (a) "immediately" or (b) "currently" that would have kept the respondent from holding a grudge? (*No/Yes*). Participants who responded affirmatively to each of these questions were then provided with the opportunity to explain how they had gotten closure (a) immediately after the transgression and/or (b) currently. Participants were also asked, "Did you/will you seek revenge?" (1 = *I have not yet but am planning on it*; 2 = *I have sought revenge*; 3 = *No, I will not seek revenge*). Among participants who said that they planned to seek revenge, they were asked if they planned to seek emotional revenge or physical revenge and, depending on the response to these items, to describe the emotional and/or physical revenge they planned to seek.

Forgivers. Participants who said they had held a grudge but had since forgiven the person completed a separate set of questions inquiring about their forgiveness of the offender they had described earlier including an open-ended question asking why they forgave the transgressor. They were then asked if the transgressor had done anything to prompt them to forgive (*No/Yes*), and, if yes, what the transgressor had done. They also indicated whether, following the initial grudge, they had held subsequent grudges against the transgressor (*No/Yes*). Participants were asked if they received any benefits from forgiving the transgressor (*No/Yes*), and, if so, what those benefits were. Related to this, they indicated whether they had learned anything from holding the grudge and forgiving it and, if so, what they had learned.

Relationships. All participants, whether they were grudge-holders or forgivers, completed a relationship block in the survey examining perceptions of their relationship with the primary transgressor in the wronged event they described. They first indicated the nature of their relationship with the transgressor at the time of the wrongdoing (*Family; Friend; Romantic partner; Coworker; No prior relationship; Roommate; Other*), as well as how close they were to the transgressor prior to the incident as well as currently, the latter two questions answered using 5-point scales (1 = *Not very close*; 5 = *Extremely close*). Participants were asked if they believed the transgressor's intent was to hurt them (*No/Yes*). If they said no, they completed an open-ended question asking what they perceived the transgressor's intent to be. Four questions examined mattering between the transgressor and the respondent: How much did the transgressor matter to you prior to the event? How much does the transgressor matter to you now? How much did you believe you mattered to the transgressor prior to the event? How much do you believe you matter to the transgressor now? All four

questions were answered using 5-point scales (1 = *Not at all*; 5 = *Extremely*). Two final questions examined whether the transgressor had asked for forgiveness (1 = *No*; 2 = *Yes because they had to*; 3 = *Yes and it was genuine*).

Rye Forgiveness Scale (Rye et al., 2001). The Rye Forgiveness Scale was used to measure participants' propensity to forgive a person who has wronged them. Participants respond to each of the 15 items using a 5-point response format (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). Although the Rye Forgiveness Scale can be broken down into two subscales, an Absence of Negative Subscale and a Presence of Positive Subscale, we chose, after reverse-scoring, to use the entire scale as the measure of forgiveness in the current study. Representative items include "I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this person" and "I feel resentful toward the person who wronged me." Higher numbers indicate a lower propensity to forgive.

2.4 Statistical analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted on all measures. Where appropriate, repeated measures and between-subjects univariate analyses were conducted to test mean differences. For categorical data, chi-square analyses were conducted.

For each open-ended question that was coded, responses were examined for common themes. Once these themes were established, posts specific to an open-ended question were coded by six teams of two raters each. Any discrepancies between raters were resolved by consultation with a third rater. In all cases, a particular post could be coded as belonging to more than one category. Due to the specificity of the responses, additional open-ended questions (e.g., What benefits did you receive from forgiving the transgressor?) were not coded for particular themes, but sample posts are included in this paper. Data are available at <https://osf.io/s7hdu/>.

3. Results

Participants' narratives describing a time when they were wronged were examined for common themes about which people felt wronged. A total of 13 themes emerged (see Table 1). The percentages reported in the table reflect the percentage of posts that fell within a particular category. Therefore, total percentages across categories could add up to more than 100% due to multiple coding. Open-ended responses to *why* the participants perceived this as wrong-doing were used for context but were not coded. The greatest percentage of transgressions focused on disrespect ("A time that I was wronged was when I was screamed at for no reason at work. The manager screamed at me and personally attacked me even though I did nothing wrong. This made me upset and made me less enthusiastic about work."), trust ("I had a friend that I considered my best friend. I had told her some private information about my home life thinking I could trust her. We had been friends for many years so I thought she was trustworthy. Anyway, she blabbed what I had told her to our friend group. I was pissed and embarrassed. Obviously, I knew from then on that I couldn't trust her."), unmet expectations ("I was promised a rate of pay and a vehicle stipend at a job. After taking the position, the pay rate changed from salary to hourly and no stipend was provided. I argued with my boss that I was promised this and he said that things changed. I said it was unfair, he said too bad. I quit the job and found a better place to work."), and abandonment ("my ex-partner left me to be with someone they had just met after us having been together for 3 years.").

Table 1. Categories of wrongdoing

Category	Definition	Percentage
Disrespect	Being treated less than one's perceived value; treating people as though they don't matter	23.2%
Trust	A compromise of faith and/or reliability in someone or something; includes deception	14.5%
Unmet expectations	Disappointment resulting from disconfirmed expectations	13.9%
Abandonment	Feeling as if one has been left behind or disowned by someone important to them.	11.3%
Defamation	Lying about someone's character, potentially damaging their reputation	10.0%
Stealing/Theft	Someone taking what doesn't belong to them without permission or borrowing something with permission but failing to return it.	9.6%
Infidelity	Being unfaithful to a significant other, such as cheating	6.4%
Violence	The act or threat of physical, verbal, or emotional aggression	5.8%
Discrimination	Unfair treatment on the basis of an identity (e.g., age, race, sex, orientation)	3.2%
Exclusion	Being ostracized or intentionally left out	3.2%
Other	All other posts that do not fit other categories	2.3%
Job termination	Being let go from your job	1.7%
Legal issues	Any situation related to legal issues or obligations	< 1%

3.1 Perceptions of being wronged

For the majority of participants, the transgression occurred some time ago ($M = 4.68$; $SD = 1.36$), with 30.2% saying it occurred over a year ago and 35.5% indicating it occurred over 5 years ago. Less than 2% (1.7%) said it had occurred within the past day. Participants also perceived the wrongful event to be severe ($M = 3.73$; $SD = .94$). Severity and length of time since the transgression correlated positively with one another, $r = .23$, $p < .001$. Over 80% of participants (80.8%) felt they bore no responsibility for the transgression. A comparison of how rational participants thought they versus others viewed their feelings regarding the transgression revealed that participants felt their feelings about the wrongful event were very rational ($M = 4.13$; $SD = .87$), but perceived that others would perceive them as moderately to very rational ($M = 3.94$; $SD = .93$), the two mean ratings differing significantly, $F(1, 343) = 21.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

The gender of the transgressor was mixed with half being male (50.0%), 47.4% female, and 2.6% other (non-binary, other, preferred not to answer). A chi-square analysis examining the relationship between the gender of the participant and the gender of the transgressor was significant, $\chi^2(4) = 25.60$, $p < .001$. Among male respondents, in 60.5% of the cases, the transgressor was also male. Similarly, among female participants, the transgressor was also female in 62.6% of the wrongdoing cases.

Implications for relationships. The largest percentage of transgressors were friends (27.3%), followed by co-workers (19.5%), family (15.1%), roommates (13.4%), romantic partners (11.0%), individuals with whom they had no prior relationship (12.2%), and other (1.5%). Even though most respondents had some type of relationship with the offender prior to the wrongdoing, three-fourths of the respondents (75.9%) indicated that, since the transgression occurred, they *never* or *occasionally* interact with the transgressor (RQ1). Respondents reported being moderately close to the transgressor prior to the incident ($M = 2.81$; $SD = 1.54$); however, a repeated-measures analysis revealed these ratings of closeness dropped significantly after the transgression with current ratings of closeness being *not very close* to *slightly close* ($M = 1.51$; $SD = 1.07$), $F(1, 343) = 241.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$. Similarly, within-participant ANOVAs revealed that perceptions of mattering changed significantly because of the transgression. Participants indicated that the transgressor mattered significantly less to them now ($M = 1.91$; $SD = 1.26$) than they did prior to the incident ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 343) = 197.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$. They also thought that they mattered significantly less to the transgressor currently ($M = 1.82$; $SD = 1.20$) than prior to the incident ($M = 2.69$; $SD = 1.38$), $F(1, 343) = 149.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$.

Emotions. Participants reported feeling very hurt when they were wronged ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 1.08$), although a

repeated-measures ANOVA showed these feelings of hurt had attenuated significantly since the incident occurred ($M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.18$), $F(1, 343) = 388.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .53$. More than half (55%), however, did indicate that certain things still trigger the emotions that they felt when they were wronged. Among the most salient emotions that participants reported feeling when they were wronged were frustration ($M = 4.22$; $SD = .99$), anger ($M = 4.01$; $SD = 1.18$), disrespect ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 1.16$), disregarded ($M = 3.66$; $SD = 1.27$), and annoyance ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 1.14$). Importantly, vengeance ($M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.44$) was not a strongly endorsed emotion.

Intentions. Most participants (61.5%) did not believe that the intention of the transgressor was to hurt them, attributing the intent instead to factors such as greed, financial gain, and laziness. Perhaps for this reason, two-thirds of the respondents (66.9%) who still held a grudge had not confronted the transgressor about the specific grudge. Half of the respondents (51.7%) were also unsure whether the person against whom they held the grudge knew that they were doing so. Only 24.6% responded affirmatively that the transgressor did know.

Many of the transgressors had not asked for forgiveness ($M = 1.25$; $SD = .60$). Nor had most (89.7%) done anything to prompt forgiveness by the target.

Over half (60.2%) of the participants indicated that they had not been able to get closure from the situation in which they were wronged. Among those who did, a variety of different responses for how they had been able to do so were offered, many specific to the transgression. For example, one person stated “I divorced them. I went to years and years of counseling, and have a wonderful relationship with the child we share together.” Another stated that “I had to understand that some people are so desperate for attention they will cross anyone to get it. You never trust people fully no matter how long you have known them because humans are flawed.” A crosstabs analysis of the extent to which participants had gotten closure and the extent to which they had forgiven or still held a grudge toward the transgressor was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 44.22$, $p < .001$. Among people who stated that they still held a grudge, 83.9% had not been able to get closure compared to 53% who had no feeling of ill will or 43.7% of those who had forgiven the transgressor. Participants indicated that they were unlikely to forget about the incident ($M = 1.81$; $SD = 1.04$). Over half (53.8%) also did not equate letting go of the negative sentiment toward the person with forgiving the person.

3.2 Grudge-holders

To determine self-perceptions of whether they hold a grudge against the person who wronged them, respondents were asked if they felt a persistent feeling of ill will or resentment toward the person who wronged them. Over 70% (70.9%) of the respondents indicated that they did hold a grudge, with 36.6% of these saying they had forgiven the person and 34.3% saying they had not forgiven the person. Among those respondents who reported still holding a grudge and not forgiving the transgressor, they indicated that they sometimes think about the grudge ($M = 2.20$; $SD = .96$), but that it interferes with their daily life only a little to a moderate amount ($M = 1.49$; $SD = .84$). Most had discussed the grudge with a couple of people ($M = 2.97$; $SD = .84$), most notably friends (23.3%), family members (22.7%), romantic partners (17.2%), and coworkers or classmates (10.2%). In most cases, participants perceived the transgressor to be unaware (23.7%) that they were holding a grudge or they were unsure (51.7%) whether the transgressor knew. This is not all that surprising given that only 33.1% had confronted the transgressor about the specific grudge. This failure to confront may have stemmed from the fact that grudge-holders indicated little motivation to resolve the grudge ($M = 1.88$; $SD = .88$) and foresaw that they had only slight chances of being able to forgive the person who wronged them ($M = 1.75$; $SD = .93$). Nevertheless, 63.6% of the grudge-holders indicated that there was one thing that the transgressor could have done that would have kept them from holding the grudge. Participants' responses to the open-ended question asking what the transgressor could have done immediately after the wrong-doing that would have kept them from holding a grudge fell into seven categories with the transgressor: apologizing (49.3%), taking responsibility for their actions (22.5%), making reparations (22.5%), being truthful (14.1%), seeking reconciliation (14.1%), providing an explanation (9.9%), or changing their future behavior (9.9%). A much smaller percentage indicated that there was anything the transgressor could do now to alleviate their grudge (38.1%). Among the 61.9% who responded affirmatively, the responses centered around apologizing (57.7%), seeking reparations (28.8%), seeking reconciliation (17.8%), taking responsibility (11.1%), changing future behavior (6.6%), providing an explanation (6.6%), and being truthful (6.6%).

Most participants (89.8%) who held a grudge did not plan on seeking revenge. Among those who did, all of them planned on or had sought emotional revenge, with 33.33% also planning to seek physical revenge (e.g., restraining order; court-ordered asset seizure). Examples of emotional revenge include “I want him to see me move on better than

him”; “Distancing myself from them as much as possible”.

Interestingly, addressing RQ2, respondents who reported still holding a grudge gave lower ratings of closeness with the transgressor both prior to the transgression ($M = 2.48$; $SD = 1.51$) and subsequent to being wronged ($M = 1.15$; $SD = .55$) compared to those who didn’t report ill will (prior: $M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.56$; currently: $M = 1.71$; $SD = 1.23$) or those who had forgiven the offender (prior: $M = 3.00$; $SD = 1.51$; currently: $M = 1.69$; $SD = 1.21$). These latter two conditions did not differ significantly either prior to, $F(2, 343) = 4.19, p < .02$, or after the transgression, $F(2, 343) = 10.72, p < .001$.

3.3 Forgivers

Some participants indicated that they previously held a grudge but had since forgiven the person. An ANOVA by grudge-holding was conducted on the Rye Forgiveness Scale. Participants who said that they did not hold a grudge ($M = 2.13$; $SD = .57$) or who indicated that they had held a grudge but had since forgiven the person ($M = 2.24$; $SD = .52$) differed significantly from those who said they held a grudge and had not forgiven the person ($M = 3.21$; $SD = .56$), $F(2, 341) = 134.95, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$.

Coding of participants’ responses for why they chose to forgive the person indicated eight common themes, with some responses falling into more than one category: intrapersonal (33.6%; “I did it for me”); resignation (24.8%; “It did no good to hold the grudge”); understanding/empathy (14.4%; “They had to do what they needed to do for business”); time (12.8%; “It was time”); relationship (12.8%; “She is my mother”); minimizing (8.0%; “It wasn’t that big of a deal”); positive actions by the transgressor (3.2%; “The transgressor apologized and made a point to always be on time from that point forward”); and, other (4.8%; “Her evilness eventually caught up to her. She was doing a lot of bad things that eventually became known and she was fired”).

In most cases (89.7%), the transgressor had done nothing to prompt the respondent to forgive. Among those who indicated that the transgressor had done something, the most common responses included the transgressor apologizing or changing their behavior. Examples include: “The person invited me to lunch to reconnect”; “The transgressor apologized and took corrective actions with their behavior”. Most participants (85.7%) who had forgiven the transgressor reported that, following the initial grudge, they did not have subsequent grudges against the transgressor. They also perceived benefits from forgiving the transgressor including finding peace and letting go of their anger. Representative responses include: “A burden being lifted off my shoulders”; “I got to keep my best friend”; “Regaining my peace of mind”. Over half (58.7%) also reported having learned something from holding the grudge and forgiving it. Among the things they indicated learning were: “I learned if you hold grudges you are welcoming negativity into your life. You can’t have a positive life with so much negativity in it.”; “That you can’t let resentment or hatred hold on to you, you must at some point let it go if you want to live a fulfilling life.”

4. Discussion

The current study explored people’s responses to interpersonal transgressions, with a particular focus on grudges. Most closely mirroring research by van Monsjou et al. (2023), which conducted interviews with 20 college-aged students, the current study adopted a survey-based approach with over 300 respondents from a more diverse sample base. Additionally, the current study examined the perceived impact of interpersonal transgressions on relationships. While some respondents in the current study felt no ill will toward the person who had wronged them, a large percentage of the participants did. Some of these respondents had chosen to forgive the transgressor, however, whereas others continued to hold a grudge. Data from the study suggest that interpersonal transgressions can be damaging to relationships (RQ1), particularly among those who hold grudges (RQ2). This stems in part from the inability of people who hold grudges to get closure and move past the experience where they were wronged.

4.1 Transgression

Participants in the current study had no trouble describing a time when they felt wronged by someone else. The greatest percentage of posts describing the wrongdoing of another fell within the categories of disrespect, lack of trust,

abandonment, and unmet expectations. These categories appear to reflect a certain level of closeness between the respondent and the transgressor. It is difficult to break the trust or have high expectations of someone with whom you have no relationship. In support of this, most of the transgressions were perpetrated by friends, consistent with H1 (van Monsjou et al., 2023; van Oyen Witvliet et al., 2001; Wixen, 1971). Additionally, the transgressions were most often perpetrated by people of the same sex as the participant. Given the time that had elapsed for many of the respondents since the transgression occurred, the relationships with the transgressors may have been formed much earlier in life when shared activities with same-sex friends are common. This finding also raises an interesting question for future research regarding how people conceptualize transgressions perpetrated by same- and other-sex others.

Addressing RQ1, despite most of the transgressions being perpetrated by friends, the transgression had clear detrimental effects on relationships, with many of the participants reporting never or occasionally interacting with the transgressor following the wronged event. Consistent with this, participants rated their closeness with the transgressor as significantly lower following the wronged event, as compared to their ratings of closeness before the event. This was particularly true for those who reported still holding a grudge. All wronged individuals also reported that the transgressor mattered less to them following the wrongdoing and that they perceived they mattered less to the transgressor (H4). According to van Monsjou et al. (2023, p. 72), “when people commit transgressions, they signal their concern for their victim’s welfare is unimportant”. A distancing from the transgressor and a minimization of the relationship may be a means for the respondents to protect themselves against further harm and to reduce feelings of negative affect associated with the experience (Struthers et al., 2008; Struthers et al., 2017). Distancing themselves from the transgressor may explain why targets reported that the hurt they currently felt was less severe than the hurt they felt at the time they were wronged. These findings support H2 that negative emotions often follow interpersonal transgressions. However, prior studies have shown that, while not going away entirely, the negative affect surrounding grudges dissipates over time (van Monsjou et al., 2023). Given that almost 40% of the respondents reported that the wrongful event occurred over five years ago, they had had time for the negative affect to dissipate. Nevertheless, more than half of the respondents indicated that certain things could trigger the emotions that they felt at the time they were wronged, which coincides with the latency theme found by van Monsjou et al. (2023) (H3). This is especially important due to the negative health outcomes that have been linked to holding a grudge over time (Messias et al., 2010; van Oyen Witvliet et al., 2001).

Importantly, victims of the wrongdoing had an interesting take on the experience. They did not perceive they bore any responsibility for the wrongdoing. They also perceived that their feelings were extremely rational while acknowledging that others might perceive them as less rational. This highlights the actor-observer bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) within interpersonal transgressions. Respondents are attributing blame to the transgressor him- or herself for the wrongdoing while absolving themselves personally of any responsibility or fault. Consistent with this, most of the respondents did not perceive that the transgressor’s intent was to hurt them. Rather, they made internal attributions to the transgressor’s laziness, selfishness, or desire to achieve some financial gain. Others were more magnanimous in assigning intent, saying things such as “they were hurt themselves.”

4.2 Grudge-holders

Over 70% of the respondents in the sample indicated that they either had held or currently hold a grudge, a common response to the experience of being wronged. However, only a third of the grudge-holders reported that they had not forgiven the transgressor. Most of the current grudge-holders were not motivated to resolve the grudge, perhaps because it interfered little with their daily lives. On the other hand, most did not desire to seek revenge but also saw little chance of forgiving the transgressor in the future. Compared to the other groups, most of the grudge-holders appeared unable to get closure from the event. However, many of the people who held grudges mentioned that they might have been able to gain closure if the transgressor had taken responsibility for their actions or apologized for the wrongdoing (Exline et al., 2007; van Monsjou et al., 2023). The catch-22 of such situations is that the transgressor may be unaware that they have done anything wrong or that the target felt wronged. This would account for the finding that the majority of the grudge-holders were unaware or unsure of whether the transgressor knew that they currently held a grudge. Many of us are completely unaware of the grudges that others may hold against us. If we are aware of our wrongdoing, even if we fail to apologize, we may assume that the person has moved on. Indeed, some of the respondents who said they had forgiven the transgressor indicated that they had done so for intrapersonal reasons, such as wanting to let go for their own good, or through minimization, claiming that “it wasn’t that big of a deal”. This potential misunderstanding creates

an issue as observed through the persistent feelings of ill will against the transgressor because the grudge-holder feels entitled to have this sentiment and that the wrongdoing warrants some form of apology or repentance.

The results obtained with the grudge-holders also suggest that there may be a bit of hindsight bias at play (Roese & Vohs, 2012). Compared to respondents who felt no ill will or those who forgave the offender, grudge-holders gave lower ratings of closeness to the offender both prior to and after the transgression, addressing RQ2. It is possible that, with hindsight, grudge-holders minimized the closeness of the relationship after reflecting on the transgression. Participants who responded that they had forgiven the transgressor reported a closer relationship with the transgressor prior to the incident. This is consistent with the findings from Exline et al. (2007) stating that individuals with a stronger relationship are more likely to forgive the transgressor, such as those that are family members.

4.3 *Forgiveness*

Intriguingly, among respondents who indicated that they had held a grudge against the transgressor, 2.2% more reported forgiving their transgressor than actively holding a grudge. People may feel more inclined to forgive to relieve themselves of the negative emotions caused by thinking about or being around the transgressor. In fact, when we asked participants why they forgave their transgressor, almost a third reported intrapersonal factors that motivated them to forgive. These intrapersonal reasons for forgiveness included responses such as “I forgave them because hate was ripping me apart”, “Not healthy for me to hold a grudge”, and “God commands me to forgive”. Forgiving for intrapersonal purposes may help the victim of a transgression find peace, promote physical and mental well-being, and fulfill a greater sense of religious duty.

In addition to intrapersonal reasons, we found seven other reasons why people choose to forgive, including passage of time, personal relationship with the transgressor, minimization of the grudge, resignation from the grudge, understanding or empathizing with the transgressor, positive actions done by the transgressor after the transgression, and other. Resignation was the second-most prevalent category of forgiveness. Many of those who felt resigned to forgiveness mentioned that holding a grudge was not worth the stress. Resignation seemed almost like a default to some participants once they realized there was nothing they could do to change what happened, it was out of their control (“I realized that holding that grudge wasn’t doing anyone any good, nor would it change anything”). Viewed this way, control over the situation (or lack thereof) may play an important role in whether a person decides to forgive or not.

Some respondents indicated their reason for forgiving was related to understanding or empathizing with the transgressor. Whether or not the participant was able to understand the reasons behind the actions of the transgressor seemed closely tied to relationships. Some responses in the understanding/empathy category mentioned having a close relationship with the transgressor (“Family member with lots of issues going on in their immediate family”). The level of closeness and the relationship itself may not only indicate how likely a person is to forgive but also how willing the person is to empathize with their transgressor or see the reasons behind the transgressor’s actions.

Previous research suggests that forgiveness is a conscious and intentional decision to let go of resentment and ill will towards the transgressor (van Monsjou et al., 2023). However, some of the responses to the question asking “why did you forgive the transgressor?” indicate that forgiveness may not be a completely conscious or intentional decision. This is consistent with our findings in that some forgivers had let go of their negative feelings toward the transgressor because of time. People may unconsciously forgive someone as their negative feelings and resentment naturally dwindle as time passes or they grow more physically distant from the transgressor (“I decided to forgive the transgressor because we were young at the time and enough time has passed that I let it go. I have also never seen him since he moved”). A person may suddenly realize that they have indeed forgiven their transgressor when prompted or suddenly reminded about the event.

Only a small percentage of participants that reported forgiving the transgressor, responded that the transgressor had done something that prompted them to forgive. The overwhelming majority of responses to the open-ended question of what the transgressor did to prompt forgiveness were related to apologizing. This finding is consistent with research showing that apologies can encourage forgiveness of the transgressor (Exline et al., 2007). It is clear that apologies are an important aspect preceding forgiveness. Apologies may provide a chance for the target to accept closure of the situation. Similarly, an apology from the transgressor may also help the target to move past the transgression and move forward with a relationship with the transgressor in a positive light.

When individuals were asked what they learned from forgiving the transgressor, one individual said “I learned that

it's always important to look at things with perspective and that I have probably made others feel this same way before. How can I expect others to forgive me if I cannot forgive others?" Another stated "I learned how forgiving people is often more beneficial to you than to the person. My friend had no idea that I felt hurt until I communicated that to her. I learned that holding onto a grudge fuels your pride but ultimately hurts relationships. The hard thing is to humble yourself and forgive the other person, regardless of how severe their action/inaction was." Many of the lessons learned are reflective of the intrapersonal reason why participants reported forgiving the transgressor stating they "...would have been miserable..." or that it was "...not worth the stress.", and they were aware of the psychological toll associated with grudge-holding, thus prompting them to forgive.

4.4 Implications

The results of this study suggest that people's responses to transgressions can have negative or positive effects on their mental health and their relationships with others. Participants reported experiencing emotions such as frustration, anger, and disrespect after they were wronged. Many people who held grudges seemed unable to let go of these feelings as attested by their inability to get closure, suggesting that grudge-holding may have negative effects on mental health. Alternatively, participants who forgave learned from the experience, found peace, and gained perspective, according to their self-reported benefits. This is consistent with research by van Oyen Witvliet et al. (2001), who found a positive correlation between forgiveness and mental health. Participants who forgave also rated their relationships with the transgressor as closer than those who continued to hold grudges. This highlights the importance of encouraging people not to prolong negative mood states caused by rumination because it can lead to worsened mental and physical health and the possible dissolution of relationships.

4.5 Limitations and future research

Although this study contributes to our very limited understanding of grudges in interpersonal interactions, there are some limitations associated with the current study. First, the framing of the survey questions was variable throughout the study, with varying response formats used. Future research could adopt a more consistent survey format throughout. A second limitation is that the narrative responses were limited to only what was provided in survey responses. It is difficult to get a full picture of the transgressions and responses from the limited context the participants provided. Future research could conduct interviews with respondents to gather more in-depth information about their experiences with wrong-doings and grudges. Additional research is also needed to explore in more detail many of the findings obtained in the current study. For example, the influence of relationship closeness on grudge-holding and forgiveness warrants additional investigation. Related to this, more specific and standardized measures of relationship quality, such as interdependence, could be investigated moving forward. Additional research is also needed to explore the effects of grudge-holding on mental health. Finally, additional research is needed to examine gendered patterns of behavior regarding grudge-holding.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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