The barriers to forgiveness scale: A measure of active and reactive reasons for withholding forgiveness

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	It is important to be able to identify the reasons that victims provide for not forgiving. We theorized that people do not forgive for both reactive reasons (the offence is too hurtful and morally repugnant) and active reasons (deliberately refusing to forgive to protect the self from power and identity threats). We developed a 20-item Barriers to Forgiveness Scale (BFS) to measure these two factors. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis across two correlational recall studies (*N*s = 235, 403) indicated good factor structure. We found support for theorizing about [a] relations between the barriers and forgiveness measures; and [b] the differential relations between transgression-specific and power-relevant variables and each of the barriers. A third experimental study (*N* = 114) manipulated severity, providing further support for our theorizing that reactive barriers reflect responses to the moral severity of an offence, whereas active barriers reflect power concerns. We discuss the theoretical and applied implications of the BFS.

1. Introduction

A large literature demonstrates that forgiveness is usually an efficacious response to transgressions, serving to restore valued relationships (for a review see McCullough, 2008) and personal wellbeing (for a review see Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). Yet, despite these positive outcomes, people still do not always forgive. Presumably laypeople, researchers, and practitioners alike would benefit from knowing what prevents people from forgiving.

Researchers have already established a multitude of social-cognitive, affective, relationship-specific, and dispositional predictors of forgiveness (for a review see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). However, such relations do not explain how victims rationalize their unforgiving responses. After all, people are motivated to assign causality for their own and others' behavior to make sense of and effectively manage the events in our lives (e.g., Heider, 1958). Knowing the reasons victims provide for not forgiving may be just as beneficial as knowing the circumstantial, affective, relationship-specific, and dispositional factors that reduce forgiveness.

Previous theorizing and research provides some insight into victims' posthoc rationalizations for not forgiving. Victims may not forgive because they experience the hurt associated with a transgression so keenly—often because it lingers (e.g., Rapske, Boon, Alibhai, & Kheong, 2010). Relatedly, transgressions, by definition, violate perceived shared values and norms, whether at interpersonal or societal levels.

Therefore, victims may not be able to forgive because of what the action itself represents, or what the action says about the offender's own moral character (e.g., Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004). Further, longitudinal (e.g., McNulty, 2011) and experimental (Strelan, McKee, & Feather, 2016) studies show that, in terms of wellbeing, victims who forgive undeserving transgressors may as well not forgive at all.

Meanwhile, grudge theory (Baumeister et al., 1998) proposes there are functional psychological benefits to withholding forgiveness, including maintaining the perceived 'right' to compensation; asserting moral superiority; and exerting influence over the offender (see also Lamb & Murphy, 2002; Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016). Additionally, there is evidence that withholding forgiveness enables victims to manage self-presentation and self-protective concerns (Williamson, Gonzales, Fernandez, & Williams, 2014), and restore power that was lost or threatened by the transgression (e.g., Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Strelan, Crabb, Chan, & Jones, 2017).

These disparate theoretical and empirical accounts suggest there may be two main psychological barriers to forgiving. One is reactive; some victims are unable to forgive due to bearing the deleterious affective weight of a subjectively severe and therefore morally reprehensible transgression. The other is active; victims may be capable of forgiving but purposefully choose not to, to achieve some end, primarily self-protection.

We distinguish these barriers in two other ways. First, reactive

barriers are backward-looking, while active barriers are forward-looking, albeit only in the sense that refusing to forgive reflects a concern for negative ramifications downstream if one did forgive (and therefore active barriers are not to be confused with a concept such as approach orientation). Second, reactive barriers tend to reflect deeply affective responses to harm-doing, whereas active barriers tend to reflect more instrumental responses.

1.1. Reactive barriers to forgiveness

Forgiveness refers to a process in which victims' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and motivations towards offenders are transformed from negative to positive (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Worthington, 2001). Forgiveness becomes relevant when one has been sufficiently hurt.

A variable fundamental to understanding barriers to forgiveness is perceived transgression severity (e.g., Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). Transgressions hurt because they communicate disrespect for the victim (Miller, 2001), presumed shared values (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2011), and relationship-specific norms and implicit rules (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002), thereby threatening fundamental need states of identity (van Dellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011), power and control (e.g., Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), esteem (Heider, 1958), and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For all these reasons, transgressions hurt also because they represent a betrayal of trust (see Finkel et al., 2002). Trust is essential to functional relationships, and trust is arguably the key facilitator of forgiveness in close relationships (Strelan, Karremans, & Krieg, 2017). Whereas prior levels of trust in another person typically provide a buffer against those occasions where trust is broken, extremely hurtful transgressions may destroy trust (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 2009), thereby making it harder to forgive.

Crucially, transgressions convey condemnatory information about a transgressor's moral character. The greater the perceived severity of the transgression, the more victims experience contempt, anger, and disgust towards offenders (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Victims' sense of derogation and moral outrage is further amplified if they perceive offenders have acted intentionally. Finally, offenders who do not appear to take responsibility for their actions, or fail to engage in acceptable reparative effort, provide additional evidence of their apparently flawed moral character (see Carlsmith & Darley, 2008).

In short, victims may not forgive because the subjective severity of the offence makes salient its moral repugnance, and, by extension, perceptions of the offender as a failed moral actor. Such moral indignation prevents victims from forgiving; they cannot forgive.

1.2. Active barriers to forgiveness

As we have already noted, transgressions communicate disrespect, thereby threatening valued psychological need states of identity, status, power, and control. Actively withholding forgiveness is one way victims may restore power, identity, status, and control. More specifically, active barriers to forgiveness reflect motivated self-protection on two connected fronts, that is, against further damage to one's self-identity, and against future harm at the hands of the offender and, potentially, others (for a review, see Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

Purposefully withholding forgiveness may signal several important messages to an offender, and to others—in particular, that the transgression was not acceptable; the offender will not be allowed to get away with what he/she did; and the victim is therefore assertive and strong (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998). In turn, victims claw back power and control within their relationships, reassert status (e.g., Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), and restore a positive self-concept. Withholding forgiveness also serves as a form of punishment, functioning to restore equity in a relationship, but also communicating deterrent intent, that is, notifying the offender (and others) of the aversive consequences of

repeating the behavior or engaging in similar behaviors (e.g., Strelan & Van Prooijen, 2016). Withholding forgiveness may have the further benefit of inducing or amplifying offender guilt, which may promote more positive relationship-specific behaviors by the offender in future (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994).

1.3. Differential predictors of reactive and active barriers

The reactive barrier reflects an inability to forgive, due to the press of a situation. Accordingly, the reactive barrier is more likely to be associated with transgression-specific variables that typically predict forgiveness, for example, the perceived severity of a transgression; the presence (or otherwise) of offender reparative efforts; state anger; and perceived offender intentionality (for a meta-analysis, see Fehr et al., 2010).

Conversely, the active barrier reflects an unwillingness to forgive. An implicit aspect of this barrier is that victims refuse to forgive despite the presence of conditions that would normally promote forgiveness (e.g., offenders behaving reparatively). Accordingly, and as we have implied above, the active barrier reflects a concern with power, specifically, restoring power and identity that was lost or threatened because of the transgression. Victims unwilling to forgive are therefore more likely to be those who attend closely to power-relevant situations, and/or who are sensitive to the implications of threatened or lost personal power. Thus, the active barrier is more likely to be predicted by person variables—although, we hasten to add, not exclusively so—that reflect such a preoccupation. For example, victims who actively withhold forgiveness are more likely to value power and score higher on power-relevant person variables such as trait vengeance.

1.4. Aims, hypotheses, and overview of studies

We developed a scale to measure reactive and active barriers to forgiveness, referred to hereafter as the BFS (Barriers to Forgiveness Scale). We report the results of three studies. Studies 1 and 2 employed correlational designs and focussed on testing factor structure and construct validity. We tested construct validity in these studies in two ways. First, we hypothesized that both barriers would be negatively associated with measures of state-level forgiveness. Second, we hypothesized that certain features of a transgression and certain trait-level variables would predict the extent to which victims are more likely to endorse one barrier relative to the other. Variables reflecting the severity of a transgression and the diminished moral character of an offender (e.g., manifested in a failure to make amends) are likely to relate more strongly to reactive barriers. Conversely, variables reflecting victim power concerns are likely to relate more strongly to active barriers.

In Study 3 we employed an experimental design and manipulated perceived transgression severity to provide causal evidence for the delineation of reactive and active barriers.

1.5. Item development of the BFS

Following Clark and Watson (1995), we initially created a large, overly-inclusive item pool to measure each barrier. We aimed to produce two subscales, each with as few items as possible to maximize the uptake of the BFS by researchers and practitioners. There were several iterations of item selection leading to a final *N* of 20 items, including pilot testing, which we do not report here due to space limitations.

2. Study 1

2.1. Participants

We advertised for people who had still not forgiven a transgressor. We recruited participants from an undergraduate Psychology