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## THEORETICAL ARTICLE

## Examining the Lived Experience of Holding Grudges

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People often hold grudges in response to being wronged by others, but the meaning and aspects of holding grudges remain unclear, as do the theories about how, why, and when they are held. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to hold a grudge, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews designed to uncover the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are essential to holding a grudge. Our sample consisted of participants who were primarily college aged and women, who were recruited from a North American University and were ethnically diverse. After transcribing the interviews, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify common themes from basic level codes, based on participants' own words, and higher-order themes synthesizing and categorizing the lower-order codes and themes. We found six underlying components of holding a grudge: Need for validation, moral superiority, inability to let go, latency (i.e., existing but not manifest), severing ties, and expectations of the future. We also determined that holding a grudge is a cyclical process characterized by persistent negative affect and intrusive thoughts that interfere with one's quality of life. Over time the intensity of these thoughts and emotions abates, leaving individuals in a state of passive acceptance, in which the negativity is lurking in the back of their minds waiting to be summoned when needed. Based on the results, we define holding a grudge as sustained feelings of hurt and anger that dissipate over time but are easily reignited.

**Keywords:** grudge, social motivation, post-transgression response

Maintaining satisfying relationships is an essential aspect of well-being (Loving & Sbarra, 2015; Myers, 2000). Because individuals experience positive outcomes when relationships are going well, and negative outcomes when they are going poorly (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), one of the greatest threats to relationships is the conflict inherent in interpersonal interaction (Cupach, 2000; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Transgressions, in which one person hurts another, are a particularly painful and disruptive type of conflict (Zechmeister et al., 2002). In these situations, the interplay between how the


offending and aggrieved parties respond affects the well-being of individuals (Loving & Sbarra, 2015) and their relationships (Agnew & VanderDrift, 2015). Research had primarily examined forgiving and seeking revenge, with little attention paid to another common outcome of interpersonal conflict: Holding grudges.

### Grudge Theory and Research

Grudges are common as evident in research (Zechmeister et al., 2002), clinical case studies (Wixen, 1971), and history (Joslyn, 2019). For instance, in North American history, one of the most famous grudges is between the Hatfields and McCoys. This family feud has been covered extensively, even dramatized in television and film. Some attribute the beginnings to animosity stemming from the American Civil War, and others blame a dispute over theft of a hog. The origins are less important than the outcome,

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which was years of spilt blood. This example highlights one extreme and well-known instance of the long-standing interpersonal consequences of holding a grudge. Along with empirical research and clinical case studies, it suggests that grudges draw our attention, persist, and may serve some interpersonal function (Struthers et al., 2019).

However, before examining the consequences, researchers must understand what occurs when individuals hold grudges. Grudges are commonly seen as feelings of ill-will or resentment toward a transgressor (Seawell et al., 2014; Struthers et al., 2019; vanOyen Witvliet et al., 2001). However, this oversimplifies the construct by reducing it to a form of negative affect. The corresponding thoughts and behaviors that result from harboring grudges are just as important as the emotional aspects. This problem of definition has hampered much of the already scant research on holding grudges.

One psychoanalyst theorized that holding a grudge was primarily an emotional state of ill-will (Wixen, 1971). The grudge-holder is often defensive, because others see the grudge as disproportionate to the wrongdoing (Wixen, 1971). Grudge-holders experience paranoid thoughts, have trouble maintaining self-esteem, and avoid interaction with the target of the grudge (Wixen, 1971). Another conceptualization maintains that grudges occur when individuals remain in the role of the victim and commit to staying angry (Baumeister et al., 1998). Although doing so has negative intrapersonal consequences, such as poorer physical health and prolonged anger (vanOyen Witvliet et al., 2001; Zechmeister et al., 2002) as well as poorer interpersonal outcomes such as dissolution of relationships (Kato, 2016; Zechmeister et al., 2002), it can make people feel like they are in control (Baumeister et al., 1998). This theorizing is interesting and intuitive, but lacks supporting evidence.

Lack of knowledge impedes our ability to meaningfully interpret existing research on holding grudges. For instance, holding long-term grudges has been linked to greater risk of heart disease, chronic pain, and stomach ulcers (Messias et al., 2010; vanOyen Witvliet et al., 2001). However, holding a grudge was evaluated by having participants indicate whether it was true or false that they have held grudges for years. Given the lack of operationalization, participants responded based on their own individual understanding of what it means to hold a grudge. Thus, it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the association between

holding grudges and poor health. This exemplifies the lack of definitional consensus and understanding that affected existing grudge research, highlighting its reliance on personal, anecdotal, or speculative definitions without attempts to systematically examine the lived experience.

### **Lack of Theory or Knowledge About Holding Grudges**

In its infancy, forgiveness research experienced a similar problem. Researchers relied on personal understanding of forgiveness, which is problematic when attempting to study it as a cohesive construct. This lack of consensus prompted research to properly delineate forgiving. In empirical social psychology, forgiveness is defined as a process in which transgression-specific negativity decreases in favor of positivity toward the transgressor (Lawler-Row et al., 2007; McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 2006). However, definitional alignment between researchers does not ensure alignment with participants, which can invalidate research findings. In light of this, researchers wanted to determine how the general public defines forgiveness. They found that laypeople believe forgiveness has three dimensions: Cognitive, such as understanding and prioritizing the relationship; affective, including kindness, compassion, and tolerance; and behavioral, such as communication, accepting an apology (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), and physical reconciliation with the offender or psychological reconciliation of the situation (Macaskill, 2005). This view both overlaps and strays from how experts define forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), supporting the need to reconcile the two.

### **Defining Grudges**

People often define holding a grudge as the opposite of forgiving (Carmody & Gordon, 2011; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Wade & Worthington, 2003; Worthington, 2006). If forgiveness is a process in which negative sentiment decreases in favor of positive sentiment toward transgressor, the inverse would be a process in which transgression-related negative sentiment increases and positive sentiment decreases. However, the opposite could also be a static state of continual negativity, not necessarily increasing, but not dissipating. Individuals also conflate desiring vengeance and holding a grudge. However, revenge, defined as aggression intended

to restore equity between offender and avenger (Stillwell et al., 2008), is more likely a component of holding a grudge than vice versa. Regardless of whether or not individuals think they can adequately define holding a grudge, there is much work to be done to understand what it actually means to do so.

One possibility is that holding a grudge is similar to unforgiveness. Unforgiveness refers to negative emotions toward a transgressor resulting from angrily ruminating about what happened (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). These negative emotions include resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear. There is also a cognitive component that involves evaluations and reappraisal of transgressors (Stackhouse et al., 2018). Although this incorporates many relevant components, researchers have asked participants to recount instances in which they have not forgiven, which is not the same as asking them to recall instances in which they have held a grudge. Individuals may interpret prompts asking them to recall times they have not forgiven in a variety of ways. In order to probe the intricacies of holding grudges, it is crucial to do so explicitly. Moreover, insofar as unforgiveness has been studied as a catch all construct including anger, resentment, grudge, and vengeful rumination (e.g., Seawell et al., 2014; vanOyen Witvliet et al., 2001), the unique role that each of these psychological mechanisms plays in dealing with specific interpersonal problems is largely unknown. The present study will help to answer the question of whether holding a grudge is distinct from unforgiveness and, if so, how.

Despite common notions of holding grudges, we are unsure where it fits into the conflict resolution literature. In this study, we identified the underlying aspects of holding a grudge using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Taking a qualitative approach allowed us to focus on the nuances of how individuals understand and experience holding grudges. Developing this understanding paves the way for high-quality research that will contribute to and expand the existing conflict resolution and social motivation literature.

## Method

### Researcher Background

The bulk of the research, including interviews and analysis, was conducted by the primary

author, a white woman, in consultation with her coauthors. The primary researcher comes from a social psychology background in quantitative analysis of conflict resolution and post-transgression responding, focusing on forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. This research was designed based on a constructivist paradigm, and the primary researcher adopted a critical realist epistemological orientation in interpreting interview text whereby it is understood there is the potential for participant responses to be interpreted in differing ways depending on social, cultural, historical, and theoretical influences.

Academically, her preconceptions about holding grudges have been partly informed by her past research and the theorizing of her supervisor and collaborators. Based on her academic and personal background, the primary author's personal definition of holding a grudge, prior to conducting this research, was an active state of negative affect involving unfavorable feelings toward the person perceived as having committed the offence resulting from cognitive focus on the offence, including habitual rumination about what happened, why, and its effect. Throughout the process of conducting and analyzing the interviews, the primary author attempted to set this personal bias aside and approach the topic as agnostically as possible. Throughout the project, the primary author took notes on how her thinking about the concept of holding a grudge was evolving as a function of conducting the interviews and synthesis.

The second author is a professor of social psychology who has spent over 30 years developing and testing theories concerning the social motivation of victims and transgressors following negative interpersonal events. He largely uses nonexperimental and experimental research methods and quantitative statistical methods to test hypotheses associated with his program of research. He is a white male in his mid-50s who was the dissertation supervisor of the primary author and is a colleague of the third and fourth authors. Given his significant supervisory and professional relationship with the primary author, he had similar preconceptions concerning grudges.

The third author is a white female clinical psychologist and qualitative researcher in her early 50s who specializes in the study of intimate relationships in the context of illness. She also teaches an introductory, graduate-level qualitative methods course in which the first author participated, and during which, she learned of the first-author's

interest in the phenomenon of grudge holding. Inspired by their ubiquity and the complexity of what it means to bear a grudge, the third author made grudge-holding the focus of her course-based qualitative research project the following year (Levitt et al., 2013). The third author provided methodological guidance to the study upon which this manuscript is based.

The fourth author is an assistant professor of social psychology and primarily studies positive processes in interpersonal (mostly romantic) relationships. She is a white female in her 30s who was a member of the first author's dissertation committee. She did not have strong preconceptions about grudges prior to this work and was not directly involved in the interviews or analyses.

### *Ethics Approval*

This research was approved by York University's Office of Research Ethics—Human Participants Review Committee, which is responsible for reviewing and approving faculty and student research involving human participants prior to the commencement of any research activity, approval certificate # STU 2016-154.

### **Participants**

The sample was 20 undergraduates, five men and 15 women (18–41 years old) recruited through York University's Undergraduate Research Participant Pool. They received course credit for participating. We limited recruitment to only those currently holding a grudge, because they are in the best position to describe the experience. In order to ensure this was the case, we restricted enrolment to students who responded affirmatively to the question "Are you currently holding a grudge against someone?" This question was part of a larger intake questionnaire students complete at the beginning of the school year. We did not specify the number of participants beforehand, instead relying on monitoring and theoretical saturation. Guidelines suggest that theoretical saturation is reached at approximately 12 participants and that 15 is an acceptable best practice (Guest et al., 2006). For this specific set of interviews, our findings aligned with this guideline. Preliminary data coding was conducted as the interviews were being conducted, and after completing 15 interviews, much of the information being uncovered was repetitive of what we heard from previous participants.

Based on an a priori decision to conclude the analysis when it ceased to yield novel information, we decided to discontinue our data collection with 20 interviews—thus erring on the conservative side by verifying saturation with an additional five interviews that continued to yield no new themes for the present researchers.

The majority of participants were of South Asian descent ( $n = 11$ ), and the remaining were East Asian ( $n = 3$ ), White ( $n = 3$ ), and African Canadian ( $n = 3$ ). Participants were holding grudges for a variety of reasons. The majority reported that their grudge was against a friend ( $n = 13$ ), followed by a current or former romantic partner ( $n = 4$ ), a family member ( $n = 2$ ), and a co-worker ( $n = 2$ ).

### **Materials**

#### *Interview Guide*

When constructing the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix), we wanted to address participants' experience of holding a specific grudge. We started the interviews by asking participants how they define a grudge. Next, they were asked to think of a grudge they were currently holding against someone and to speak to the circumstances around what happened and who the grudge was against. They were asked about their state of mind when the transgression occurred (e.g., What was going through your mind when this happened? How did it make you feel?), as well as their current state of mind regarding the transgression (e.g., What are your current thoughts about what happened? What is your relationship with the person like now?). They were also asked some abstract questions that required them to think about the implications of holding a grudge (e.g., What have you gained from holding this grudge? What have you lost?). The interview guide evolved as the interviews were conducted in order to further probe based on emerging evidence.

#### *Transcripts*

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, including disfluencies. The average length of the interviews was 46 min.

### **Procedure**

Before each interview, participants read and signed a consent form. The form assured them

that their data would be anonymous, that they could refuse to answer any questions they did not want to answer, and that they were free to leave at any time without being penalized. Next, participants were informed about the study's goals: To develop a better understanding of what holding a grudge is, including the associated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. After this, participants were asked to recall a specific grudge they are currently holding against someone, and the interviews were completed based on the interview guide and interviewer discretion. All interviews were conducted by the first author in her office located within the Department of Psychology.

### **Analysis**

The first author conducted a thematic analysis, in consultation with the co-authors, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step procedure. All coding and analysis were conducted by the first author. Given the desire to provide an in-depth understanding of what it means to hold a grudge and the level of intimacy with the data required to do so, the authors decided to take this approach rather than have a team of researchers collect, analyze, and collaboratively code the data. However, emergent themes were regularly shared and discussed with respective co-authors to varying degrees at various stages, as a check and balance that the emerging themes and thematic framework were coherent and accurately reflective of the data. When changes were made based on these discussions, they were generally in relation to subtle refinements in wording or organization of themes, rather than as a result of outright disagreement of interpretation. The authors acknowledge this ease in relation to achieving consensus throughout the analysis was in large part likely related to a shared framework for understanding transgressions and related phenomena due to investigators' previous research and interactions, particularly between the first and second authors. All coding was done manually without the assistance of a computer program. The first author went through each of Braun and Clarke's steps for each individual interview before taking a collective overarching lens to the interviews as follows:

#### ***Becoming Familiar With the Data***

The interviewer became familiar with the data through the process of transcribing the

interviews (in addition to having conducted them), followed by reading through each transcript before making any notes or attempting to generate any initial codes. Each transcript was then segmented into portions of text based on separate ideas or topics expressed by the participant during the interview (Giorgi, 1970). After breaking down the transcript, she began jotting down ideas about potential codes and themes.

#### ***Basic Level Coding***

After each interview had been divided into segments of data, basic codes capturing what participants said in each excerpt were generated from participants' own words and keywords developed based on a synthesis of their words.

#### ***Searching for and Reviewing Common Themes Within Codes***

After generating the basic level codes, common themes among the basic level codes were identified and categorized based on more abstract themes that captured the essence of the grouping. This process was iterative, such that, as codes were categorized, themes were refined based on meaningful associations between basic codes.

#### ***Refinement and Definition***

After categorizing and refining the basic level codes and organizing themes, the first author refined each of the themes into global themes, ensuring they were clearly defined and properly exemplified the codes and subthemes they represented.

#### ***Collective Analysis***

Next, the interviewer took the basic codes, organizing themes, and global themes from the individual transcripts and conducted an overarching analysis. Codes that were highly relevant and salient across many participants, or that were particularly informative in explaining or understanding relationships between other codes and themes were retained, whereas those that were deemed less relevant and less explanatory were discarded. She then re-categorized the retained codes based on their associations.

## Results

### Description of the Data

#### *Grudges are Seen as Persistent Negative Affect Due to a Perceived Wrongdoing*

There was considerable overlap in the ways that participants defined what a grudge was. Many mentioned negative affect, such as anger or disappointment. Other commonly noted themes were: Not wanting anything to do with the person, and thinking badly of him or her. Participants also believed that either an inability or unwillingness to move on was a key component of holding a grudge. For instance, according to one participant:

Holding a grudge is probably like keeping a problem that happened between you and someone else a long-term thing. Like just not hearing both sides of the story ... You just want to hate on the person forever or not even have any communication, contact with that person.

Another participant stated that:

To me it basically means that I constantly think in my head about how somebody has done me wrong. I can't let it go ... I either needed to in the past ... or still need to in the future next time I see this person ... say something to rectify it.

### Inciting Incidents

Participants reported a wide variety of transgressions that led to the grudges they were currently holding. The majority of reported offenders were friends of the participants ( $n = 13$ ). For instance, one participant recalled how her friend had hacked into her Facebook account and been monitoring her private messages for years:

She did something behind my back that was really messed up ... she didn't really even try asking for forgiveness. She kind of just denied the whole thing or thought what she did was right. And yeah I guess I've been angry with her for the past 3 years.

Four participants discussed grudges committed by former or current romantic partners. One of the participants recalled how his former girlfriend's behavior was something he couldn't seem to get over.

It's just complicated because it's the emotional factor and mental and even sometimes physical abuse at some points. Like her slapping in the face for so-called cheating allegations even though there wasn't anything, and the experiences of it being like, where it seems like

no matter what I did it wasn't good enough and it will never be good enough

Two participants identified family members as the transgressors. One was holding a grudge against her uncle who was passing judgment on her lifestyle choices:

He's very old fashioned Pakistani ... and he basically came out and said like "you guys are spoiled, you guys are out of control" because we haven't, my sister and I, haven't decided to get married yet and we're older ... because I'm the eldest, I felt that that was an attack toward me. So yeah, ever since that time, I hate that person. I hate my uncle. I don't want to see him. I don't ever want to see him.

Two others talked about grudges they were holding against coworkers. One participant was holding a grudge against a former colleague who he felt had humiliated him in front of the entire company:

There was a job that I was let go for ... and there was someone who ... for some reason thought that it was okay to instant message everyone in the company that I was being let go at that time. So as I'm being let go, everyone's turning around, staring at me as I'm leaving instead of just saying 'oh, he was let go, he wasn't right for the position,' but she felt the need to inform the entire floor.

Regardless of what the transgressions were, there were certain characteristics that ran through participants' experiences, such as feeling disrespected, devalued, and powerless. Regardless of what the transgressions were or who they were coming from, participants felt as though there had been extreme injustice committed against them. All of the transgressions relayed in this study were the result of actions that were seen as deliberate and within the transgressors' control. This perceived intentionality contributed to the impact of the transgression and the feelings of personal invalidation and betrayal participants experienced. The actions of the transgressor called into question not only participants' understanding of their relationship with the transgressors, but the very notion of who the transgressors were as people.

### Experiences of Holding a Grudge

We identified six global themes that captured participants' experience of holding a grudge: (a) seeking validation from all sides, (b) a sense of moral superiority over the transgressor, (c) feeling the need to sever ties with the transgressor, (d) emotional and cognitive powerlessness

over the grudge, (e) the grudge is latent until a triggering event or exposure, and (f) long term expectations of self and other shaped by grudge.

### *Seeking Validation From All Sides*

All participants expressed a need for validation, whether it was of themselves as a person or their emotions after the transgression. There were three specific forms of validation participants sought: Validation from the transgressor, validation from others, and validation from themselves.

**Desiring Validation From Transgressor.** Validation from the transgressor refers to participants' desire for the transgressor to take responsibility and acknowledge that he or she had done something wrong. Transgressors' lack of personal accountability was invalidating through implicit denial of committing a transgression and harming participants. Participants expected they would feel better if transgressors took responsibility and understood why what they did was hurtful. However, even if transgressors took responsibility, participants were unsure if they would forgive. For example, one participant stated how she might feel better but would still not want anything to do with the person:

Maybe I won't be as mad because I feel like a part of my anger is coming from . . . her not accepting what she did . . . But I definitely wouldn't be friends with her or anything like that. But I would be less mad.

In addition to taking responsibility, participants wanted transgressors to express remorse and acknowledge they had made a mistake. This was linked to participants' desire for transgressors to express that they missed having the participants in their lives and that they were doing poorly without them. Some participants felt good, or even smug, when transgressors reached out to re-establish contact. When recalling how she was still upset with an ex-boyfriend for betraying her with another woman, one participant said "I want him to miss me and be like 'Oh my god, I messed up' . . . I don't really want anything with him, I just want him to be like 'Wow, I messed up.'"

Overall, participants' lack of validation from transgressors was described as a driving force behind holding their grudges. Without receiving acknowledgment that transgressors understood that they had done something wrong and why participants were upset, participants discussed how they were left trying to process what had transpired without explanation.

**Desiring Validation From Outside Parties.** Participants also sought validation from others. They wanted reassurance that their reaction was justified, and that others would have reacted in the same way. These affirmations typically came from individuals close to the participants, such as friends and family. Interestingly, participants indicated that, even if they were simply being humored, receiving validation still helped them feel better. When asked in what way talking to friends helps, one participant said:

Just that other people get it, and when I explain to them they get my perspective . . . and they just agree with me . . . I guess it's just reinforcement that I deserve to be this mad. Like it's okay. It's normal.

In regard to discussing the transgression with her sister and her mother, another participant said: "I just feel mirrored. I feel like my feelings are valid . . . I was like okay, it's okay for me to feel angry about it."

By receiving validation from others who were not involved in the transgression, participants were able to confirm their negative beliefs about transgressors and transgressors' actions. By constantly seeking and receiving this form of validation, although fleetingly reassuring, participants outlined how this helped maintain their sense of invalidation from the transgressor alive and well.

**Desiring Validation From Themselves.** In addition to desiring validation from the transgressor and others, participants wanted to prove to themselves that they are worthwhile people in spite of what the transgressor did to them. One participant who felt like her self-worth had been challenged by the transgression stated: "I feel like this person has put me in a place where I feel like I need to prove myself. So I constantly deal with the issue of wanting to prove myself." Participants experienced this as a general desire to succeed and do better in life than the transgressor. For example, one participant said: "I want to do better than him in life and . . . I think I'd rather see him do worse than me." Participants reported this desire even if they knew that the transgressor would never actually know how they were doing.

When a person feels invalidated by what they perceived to be someone else's unwarranted and hostile actions, they can question their own worth and wonder why someone (i.e., the transgressor) would do something like that to them. By proving their own worth to themselves by meeting personal goals and outshining the transgressor,



participants described being able to restore feelings of self-worth that had been jeopardized by the transgression.

Overall, being the victim of the recalled transgressions contributed to these three different forms of invalidation in participants. When participants did not receive validation from the transgressor, they were left to seek it out in other places (i.e., from third parties) and to manufacture it themselves. However, despite seeking validation from other sources, the crux of holding a grudge lies in missing validation from the transgressor. Sometimes this validation is deliberately withheld, and other times transgressors are completely unaware, but as participants described, the key to preventing a grudge from forming is having transgressors acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions.

### *A Sense of Moral Superiority Over the Transgressor*

Participants perceived themselves to be better, more moral people than the transgressors.

**Feeling Righteous in Holding the Grudge.** More specifically, participants felt their anger was righteous, and that any negative sentiments the transgressor might have toward them or the transgression were invalid. For instance, one participant said: "I feel like I have the right to hold it [the grudge] . . . I don't feel like anyone could tell me that I'm in the wrong for holding this grudge because I feel like I deserve it." A third participant recalled how she sometimes feels sad when reminded of the transgressor, but it is quickly replaced with indignation:

Whenever I see something that reminds me of them I do get hurt and I do get sad . . . but then I kind of have to just get angry all over again and realize that I have every single right to be not friends with them anymore.

Participants focused on their own thoughts and feelings about the transgression, reinforcing their anger and outrage about what the transgressor had done to them. They described how feeling entitled to their anger was almost empowering. Rather than experiencing sadness, participants focused on the injustice that had been done and how they were in the right.

**The Transgressor is a "Bad Person".** Similarly, participants felt as though the transgressor was a bad, unlikeable person. Some conceded that there were still positive aspects to the transgressor,

like he or she was a good friend to others or an overall generous person. However, others were unable to see any good in the person at all. For instance, one participant said:

He brings out the worst in everyone . . . he just turned into a demon. Honestly, that's the only way I can understand. It's like . . . he just turned crazy after that . . . I don't know, he's just so sneaky and . . . I don't know, a liar.

In general, most participants seemed to adopt a black-or-white stance regarding the transgressor and described how their previous interactions and relationship with the transgressors were now tainted. By viewing transgressors as irredeemable, bad people, participants were cultivating a me-versus-them mentality that recast the transgressor as the bad guy.

**Transgressors' Motivations Were Incomprehensible.** Another aspect of moral superiority was evident in participants' incredulity over how the person could do what they had done. One person said: "Whatever his perspective was, it allowed him to do whatever he did, and to me it was wrong. So I don't think I would understand his point of view. But that's just my feeling." Participants said they would never do what the transgressor had done. For instance, "I wouldn't do that with or to someone, so I don't understand. There's no reason for it. They tried to give me a reason but I just wouldn't buy it." Most felt the transgression was due to transgressors' personal shortcomings. Despite some participants' ability to take the transgressor's perspective, they felt his or her behavior was inexcusable, implying that he or she was an immoral person and that they, in contrast, were morally superior.

Participants' accounts of how they could not understand why the transgressors did and that there was no reasonable explanation for the transgressors' actions contributed to participants' negative thoughts and feelings surrounding the transgression. This inexplicability was something they would often think about when ruminating about the transgression, and their inability to find a cause made it harder to get over, because they felt they had been wronged for no reason.

**Denying Ill-Will Toward the Transgressor.** Despite their negativity toward the transgressors, almost all participants said they did not want anything bad to happen to them and would never seek revenge. Many said this was because they were not the type of person to do that, elevating their moral

character to a higher plane. When asked if she had thought about trying to get back at the transgressor, one participant said: "It's not in me . . . I don't like to hurt people. I'm not someone who would revenge on anyone . . . that's just not in my characteristics."

Overall, participants said that they did not want anything bad to happen to the transgressors. They recounted how their lack of ill will was because they were not the kinds of people who would wish harm on someone else. This lack of ill will contributed to their self-perception of being better people than the transgressors, whose actions they believed to be completely unjustified and inexplicable, except for the explanation that the transgressor must simply be a "bad person."

### *Feeling the Need to Sever Ties With the Transgressor*

Aside from one participant who was still in a relationship with the person she was holding the grudge against, everyone expressed that they either had cut the person out of their lives completely or wished they could. In some instances, it was unrealistic to do so, especially in the case of family members.

**Creating Distance From the Transgressor.** Participants wanted to end or minimize their relationships with transgressors for three reasons. Some wanted to ensure they were not vulnerable. Avoiding the transgressor was a way of protecting themselves, making it impossible for the transgressor to hurt them again. One participant recounted having nightmares in which she made amends with the transgressor:

Every so often I would have a dream about her trying to get back into my life and I would panic . . . it's almost nightmarish, where we've made amends and I'm always thinking "What the hell am I doing? Why did I let her back in my life, now she's going to ruin it."

Participants also avoided to teach a lesson. They thought it would make transgressors realize that their actions had consequences. For example, one participant felt like blocking all forms of communication from the transgressor was a good lesson.

Finally, participants avoided transgressors to gain the upper hand and restore some of the control they had lost by being victimized. One participant said, "it gave me a way of expressing how I felt without actually doing anything about it or doing something I regret."

Overall, participants described avoiding the transgressor as a simple, yet effective way to make a statement and punish him or her. By cutting off the relationship, participants felt they were also able to minimize triggers that might remind them of the transgression, such as encounters with the transgressor.

**Feeling Better off Without the Transgressor.** After cutting ties with transgressors, participants felt like they were better off and were relieved. They reported more peaceful, less stressful lives. For instance, when asked what they had gained, one individual stated: "God, a peaceful life. Really because there was just so many other toxic stuff with her. But yeah it was a lot more peaceful after that. I was really happy." Another said that not having the transgressor in her life helps avoid negativity.

Participants also felt like they had replaced the transgressor with better things. For instance, many described how they had made new and better friends. According to one participant:

I just think about . . . who I've become and the newer friends I've made. And just how much happier I am without them [the transgressors] . . . like where I've become and who I'm related to or who I'm talking to now, it makes me happier

This feeling of being better off without the transgressor was expressed by all the participants in this study. This is not surprising, given that the transgression made participants see both transgressors and their relationships with them as primarily negative. This type of coping may also make it easier to maintain the grudge. Without the desire to reconcile, participants indicated that they were less motivated to try to resolve the transgression and re-establish a relationship with the transgressor.

Overall, participants attempted to shift their perspective about the negativity of the transgression to focus on the upside of no longer having the transgressor, who they felt was a bad person, in their lives. That aspect of holding a grudge was seen positively as a sign a progress. Participants were able to, in their view, excise a "toxic" person from their lives and proceed without that person holding them back or tearing them down.

### *Emotional and Cognitive Powerlessness Over the Grudge*

Another common theme was the inability to "turn off" the grudge, which highlights the notion

that, overall, participants expressed feeling powerless in the face of the grudge and reminders of the transgressors or transgressions.

**The Grudge as Something That is “Just There”.** Participants felt that the grudge was “just there.” Over time, despite being less emotionally intense, the grudge had its own presence. For example, according to one participant: “It’s just something I have to deal with. It doesn’t really affect me in my day-to-day life anymore but it’s just there. Like it’s always going to be there.”

In spite of the fact that participants were holding a grudge and maintaining negative emotions, the thoughts and emotions were able to recede into the background. Although it had transformed from a white-hot, intense experience to a subdued presence that did not have a strong impact on participants’ lives, participants recounted how the grudge was something that was always in the back of their minds.

**Intrusive Thoughts About the Transgression and Transgressor.** Most participants reported experiencing intrusive thoughts about what happened. One participant recounted: “The fact that it comes in my mind is annoying, and sometimes I can’t control it. Sometimes it overpowers all the other thoughts.” These thoughts could come out of nowhere or result from specific triggers, such as hearing about the transgressor. One participant expressed feeling consumed by the grudge:

I don’t want to think about it, but it takes over and then I start thinking . . . he affected my whole life basically. So consumes me . . . I don’t want to think about it. I wish I wasn’t affected by it

Despite the fact that the negative emotions of the grudge were less salient as time went on, when intrusive thoughts did come to mind, participants were unable to control these thoughts and accompanying emotions, contributing to their feelings of powerlessness.

**Attempting to Control Grudge-Related Thoughts and Emotion.** When experiencing these intrusive thoughts, participants tried to minimize how much they ruminated about what happened. A common technique was distraction, whether by listening to music, watching television, or going for walks. According to one participant: “I started going out whenever, not thinking about it. And it would still bother me but . . . I just started going out with friends and trying to ignore and just let it be.” A third participant recalled trying to shift focus, “I tried not to think about it, keep myself distracted,

understand that I have bigger priorities I have to deal with right now.” However, even when trying not to ruminate, participants were often unable to control their thoughts or emotions. Many felt as though the grudge was like an external entity controlling them.

In spite of their perceived powerlessness, participants made attempts to try to exert some control over their negative thought patterns, primarily through distraction. Sometimes these attempts would work, but, more frequently, the grudge was persistent even when they explicitly turned their attention elsewhere.

**Competing Thoughts and Emotions Surrounding the Grudge.** Participants also experienced competing thoughts and emotions. Many wished that they were not holding the grudge. For example, one participant stated: “I’m wasting the space in my head on something . . . that doesn’t really deserve my attention.” Nevertheless, they felt as though they were unable to just let go. In fact, many participants were able to step back and see their own role in maintaining the grudge, for instance, by ruminating or intentionally talking about it. Many participants also felt silly and immature holding on to it.

Some participants reported bittersweet sentiment, in that they miss the transgressor and the relationship they had with him or her but also dislike the person. One individual said she often felt like her expectations were unreasonable, citing her friend’s busy work schedule as a reason for their friendship being a lower priority: “I’m thinking ‘you’re [the participant] being a terrible friend, you’re being selfish’ . . . I feel like I should be understanding.” However, despite acknowledging this, she still was unable to set aside the hurt she was feeling. Participants acknowledged that they were helping sustain the grudge, but were still unable to let go of it.

In general, participants described how much of the feelings of powerlessness came from the fact that participants want to let go but feel like they do not know how to. This was driven by their sentimental feelings about the transgressor that coexist with feeling like the transgressor is a bad person. When these competing beliefs occurred, it made participants feel weak—why do they harbor this longing for transgressors when they view them as bad people?

When it came to holding a grudge, powerlessness converged in a battle of mind-over-matter for individuals. They described having extreme

difficulty managing their thoughts and subsequent emotions, despite making concerted efforts to do so. Intrusive thoughts took over and crystallized what might have been a short-lived grudge into a long-term axe to grind.

### ***The Grudge is Latent Until a Triggering Event or Exposure***

Although out of their control, participants said the emotional impact of the grudge dissipated over time, but never really went away.

**Time and Introspection Can Help Diminish Negative Thoughts and Emotions.** Time passing and introspection helped participants handle their negative thoughts and emotions. In general, they thought about what happened less over time. One participant recalled how time and circumstance play a role: “Time plays a big aspect into it, as well as growing up and surrounding yourself with people who are way more positive . . . it’s like you kind of learn to prioritize things and not dwell on things”

Many participants felt as though their lives had evolved, and that having different priorities had helped their negative thoughts and emotions become less salient. For instance:

I think with time you have other priorities . . . these days I’m volunteering with the elderly people and it just shows me like eventually you get old and everything else doesn’t matter anymore. with time, you gain new perspective on things. New experiences and new perspectives that can possibly lead you to maybe hold less grudges against people.

Part of the grudge becoming something that is “just there” was time and introspection. In the face of a transgression, being able to just sit with it over time meant for participants that its emotional impact dissipated, but this was particularly true with greater introspection on participants’ part, as well as simply having their lives evolve with new priorities taking center stage.

**Reaching Acceptance of Holding the Grudge.** Although participants acknowledged that the grudges were always in the backs of their minds, they were eventually able to accept what had happened. Overall, they had gotten used to holding the grudge. According to their descriptions, participants were also able to set aside their feelings about what happened. When one participant was asked how she felt about the fact that she was holding this grudge, she said: “I guess I feel okay about it . . . I’m okay with having this over

my head. It won’t ever leave . . . It’s not something that I can forget . . . but I’ve kind of learned to live with it.”

Participants had also adjusted to not having the same relationship with the transgressor as before, whether at all or to the same degree. Essentially, holding the grudge was the new normal state of being for them. For instance, one participant said, “I just got used to not talking to her, to no communication . . . before I used to talk to everyday, but now maybe that I got used to it, I have new friends now . . . I have other preoccupations.”

By not being able to rid themselves of their grudges, participants had no choice but to let them dominate their thoughts or accept that the transgression was something they would not be able to get past. By reaching this state of acceptance, the grudge lost some of its power over participants.

**The Grudge is Easily Triggered.** Despite becoming less salient over time, participants’ grudges were easily rekindled. They reported a variety of triggers, such as hearing a certain song or seeing something that reminded them of what happened. When triggered, their negative thoughts and emotions were similar in strength to when the transgression first occurred. For instance, according to one participant, “little things like that . . . remind me of memories when I had good times with her. Which just makes me upset and pissed off all over again about what happened.”

Another participant thought she had gotten over what happened, but the transgressor contacted her and everything she thought she had moved past was reignited:

It just reminded me how much I hate her, how much pain and how much sadness she brought into my life. I don’t think it ever went away. I just thought about it less . . . it just reminded me that time doesn’t really heal any of this. I’m still really mad and I’m still hurt that she did that and she’s still doing it. It’s like did time really make a difference because I’m this mad again?

The fact that participants’ grudges could be so easily triggered highlights how prominent the grudges are in participants’ lives. Despite the fact that time had passed, perhaps even years, participants described the emotions incited by the transgression as still being very real and impactful, and even if the trigger was something they perceived as minor, it could set off a cascade of thoughts and emotions.

The expression “time heals all wounds” seems partially true in the case of holding grudges. According to participants, it got easier as time passed

for them to set aside their negative thoughts and emotions, however they were not able to banish them completely. Participants had come to view the grudge itself as an entity that exists on its own and that they have no choice but to accept. The grudge can also be easily pushed reignited by the smallest of reminders, in many cases restarting the clock. These ebbs and flows that characterize the experience of holding a grudge showcase the fact that grudges are not static entities, they are psychological and emotional processes that individuals go through on an ongoing basis. A transgression is not experienced as a one-off event, it is something that can be re-experienced and reignited.

### *Long Term Expectations of Self and Other Shaped by Grudge*

Almost all participants had positive expectations for the future. Overall, they trusted others less, but saw it as a good thing that made them less vulnerable.

**Lost Trust in Others as a Result of “Learning” From the Grudge.** One key outcome of holding a grudge was that participants generally trusted others less, especially new people. They were less friendly and open with others for fear of experiencing the same kind of betrayal. For instance, one participant referenced a specific instance with a friend:

I trust people less in general . . . I’m really close with this girl, she calls me her best friend but . . . I just never say it back . . . I just try to hold back because I don’t want to trust someone to that point where they can hurt me that much again.

Another participant recounted how she feels like she cannot trust anyone: “I can’t trust people now. I don’t trust people, I don’t let people in. Even with my friends, if they do one tiny little thing to me . . . I just stop talking to them.” Overall, participants felt that being more guarded and less trusting made them smarter and less vulnerable.

By holding on to a grudge, participants maintained a heightened sense of wariness and vulnerability that they generalized to others. Not only was their relationship with the transgressor harmed, but their relationships with many other close individuals had also been permanently altered.

**Hope Regarding Their Able to Overcome the Grudge.** Most participants expected to eventually let go of the grudge. Many stated that personal achievements, such as getting a good job or getting

married, would help. For instance, when asked if she ever envisioned a time when the grudge would no longer be part of her life one individual said:

Five years in the future I feel like. I’ll just have grown up so much as a person. I’ll have new people in my life . . . I’ll be in a better place. That [the grudge] wouldn’t be a priority for me.

Overall, despite all the negative implications of holding a grudge, both personally and interpersonally, most participants were hopeful that this was something that would not bother them in the future. Holding a grudge was something that had a profound impact on participants, as can be seen not only in how their emotions and expectations were extrapolated from the transgressor to others, but also in their hope for dispensation and a better path forward.

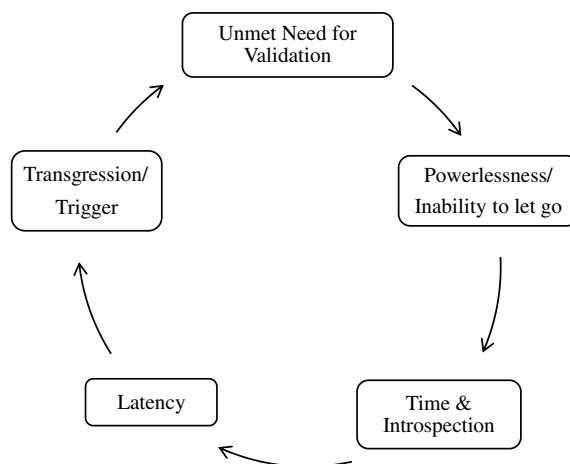
### **A Preliminary Model of Grudge Holding**

Overall, holding a grudge is a process that is cyclical and layered (See Figure 1). In this study, transgressions triggered participants to sever ties or redefine their relationships with transgressors in order to protect themselves, to punish, and to gain the upper hand. Participants rationalized this decision to avoid transgressors, telling themselves they were better off. Participants also felt they were the victims of unjust behavior, seeing themselves as morally superior to transgressors, fostering feelings of righteous anger and indignation. Participants were unable to understand transgressors’ motivations, believing that they themselves would never do the same. In spite of this, participants insisted they had no ill-will for the transgressors.

Participants felt invalidated by the transgressions, needing transgressors to take responsibility and express remorse. They wanted to know that transgressors were also negatively affected. Their feelings of invalidation made participants feel like they had something to prove. They wanted to show transgressors that they were doing well without them, and that they were worthwhile people. Not receiving this validation made it difficult to let go.

With this difficulty letting go and associated powerlessness, participants felt like the grudge was consuming them. Despite trying to control their thoughts and emotions, they could not let go, and the grudge became a presence in their lives. They experienced competing thoughts and emotions, felt immature, wished they were not holding the grudge, but recognized their role in sustaining it. Some also

**Figure 1**  
*The Cycle of a Grudge*



felt bittersweet, because they missed their relationship with the transgressors. During this time, participants sought external validation that their reactions were justified and the transgressors were in the wrong. They also trusted others less as a result of holding the grudge. They felt more guarded, and did not want to be vulnerable, but that they had also learned a lesson. Many were even okay with being less trusting.

With time and reflection, participants' negativity faded and the grudge became latent. As its emotional resonance decreased and participants gained perspective, they found effective ways to cope. As a result, they were able to accept holding the grudge—it was a part of their lives they had adapted to. Participants also adjusted to not having a relationship with the transgressors. Nevertheless, despite this latency, the negativity was never far from their minds, and could be easily triggered. When triggered, participants' negative thoughts and emotions could return almost as strongly as when the transgression was initially committed, possibly for protective purposes when reminded of, or, confronting the, source of the grudge, thus restarting the cycle.

## Discussion

Balancing maintaining valuable relationships with preserving psychological well-being can be difficult in the wake of a transgression. Being hurt by someone can be devastating to one's psychological and social well-being, and it can be

tempting to hold a grudge. However, when holding a grudge, individuals not only suffer the loss of important relationships, they are also affected by persistent negative thoughts and emotions and accompanying feelings of powerlessness. Because past research has suffered from lack of insight into what it means to hold a grudge, a qualitative study designed to uncover the components of holding a grudge was warranted. In this study, we took an inductive approach through which individuals could freely speak about their personal experiences with holding grudges. From this, we developed a thorough and nuanced understanding of what holding a grudge entails.

## Components of a Grudge

### *Seeking Validation From All Sides*

Transgressions can be invalidating for a number of reasons. Interpersonal invalidation occurs when an individual's emotions and thoughts are met with overreactions, rejection, criticism, and neglect (Herr et al., 2015). When people commit transgressions, they signal that their concern for their victim's welfare is unimportant (Petersen et al., 2010). Then, providing further invalidation, when confronted by their actions, transgressors can overreact by criticizing victims' responses and rejecting their right to be upset, or by neglecting to even acknowledge victims' perspectives.

Feeling invalidated can lead to emotion regulation problems (Buckholdt et al., 2009).

This aligns with participants' accounts of holding grudges, in that they felt uncontrollable negative emotions. It also corresponds to past research demonstrating that individuals are more likely to grant forgiveness when a transgressor accepts responsibility in a non-defensive way, expresses shame, and sincerely apologizes (Woldarsky Meneses & Greenberg, 2015). Each of these behaviors represents a form of external validation victims receive from transgressors.

### ***A Sense of Moral Superiority Over the Transgressor***

By forgiving, individuals maintain their victim status, yet elevate themselves morally by pardoning the transgressor (Zechmeister et al., 2002). However, forgiving or pardoning is not necessary for victims to feel morally superior to transgressors. Instead of deriving a sense of morality from forgiving, participants in this study situated themselves morally based on who they feel they are as people, and their belief that they are incapable of hurting others like transgressors. Although people generally evaluate themselves as more moral than others (Tappin & McKay, 2017), when holding a grudge, the focus seems to be on transgressors' moral bankruptcy.

### ***Feeling the Need to Sever Ties With the Transgressor***

Desire to avoid transgressors is fairly common (Barnes et al., 2009). People do this out of anger, which creates the desire to get back at the person or protect oneself from future threat (Barnes et al., 2009). These findings support two of the reasons why participants wanted to end their relationship with transgressors: The desire to punish and the desire to protect themselves. Despite lack of interest in seeking revenge, participants punishing transgressors by withdrawing from the relationship is a subtle form of vengeance (Bone & Raihani, 2015). Punishment also allows victims to restore equity in a relationship that has been imbalanced by a transgression (Marczyk, 2017).

### ***Emotional and Cognitive Powerlessness Over the Grudge***

For many people, it is not as simple as just deciding to let go of a grudge. In this study, most participants were unable to let go and experienced

overwhelming feelings of powerlessness in the face of being unable to just let go of the grudge. Thus, it is important to distinguish between such individuals and those who actively choose to hold grudges.

Rumination affects how easily individuals can move on from a transgression. Participants in this study recounted two maladaptive types of rumination: Brooding, which refers to passively comparing one's current situation to desirable alternatives; and automatic rumination, which is intrusive, repetitive, and negative (García et al., 2017). In addition to being components of holding a grudge, these types of rumination predict experiencing depression and post-traumatic stress (García et al., 2017; Shors et al., 2017).

Although pre-existing psychopathology can contribute to intrusive, event-specific memories; general appraisal style, data-driven processing, and post-event negative appraisals, along with less conceptual processing of the event are also important factors (Marks et al., 2018). This suggests that appraisals and processing are important components that might help reduce intrusive memories of transgressions.

### ***The Grudge is Latent Until a Triggering Event or Exposure***

Participants' grudges were less intense at the time of recall as right after the transgression occurred. The expression "time heals all wounds" is ubiquitous, but not universally applicable. For participants in this study, time helped diminish negative emotions and rumination, but it did not remedy the grudge. Rather than let go, participants accepted and adapted to holding a grudge. Acceptance itself is a form of emotion-focused coping, which addresses thoughts and emotions behind a stressor (Litman, 2006). Acceptance is a functional way to deal with stressors (Carver et al., 1989), such as being the victim of a transgression or accepting the fact the one is holding a grudge. After accepting the situation, the grudge did not affect participants' day-to-day lives the way it once had, but it was always in the backs of their minds, ready to be triggered and brought into the emotional-cognitive foreground.

### ***The Grudge Shaped Long-Term Shaping of Expectations for Self and Others***

Participants felt their ability to trust others had been permanently compromised. Although trusting the transgressor less is normal, diminished trust

is typically relegated to the specific relationship (Chan, 2009), or type of relationship that victims had with transgressors (Lee & Selart, 2015). In this study, participants experienced diminished trust with regard to all social interactions and relationships. They described a general reluctance to open up to others because they expected to be betrayed. This aligns with research on betrayal trauma, showing that, when betrayed by someone they trust, individuals generalize their lack of trust in a specific person to others (Gobin & Freyd, 2014). Interestingly, participants felt that it was a good thing that they were less trusting, or “naïve.” They felt like they had learned a lesson and were protecting themselves.

Counter to their lack of trust, participants hoped they would eventually be able to let go. Individuals are motivated to anticipate their future selves, seen as more rational than emotional, as improvements on their past selves, seen as more emotional and less rational (O’Brien, 2015). This might explain why participants expect that they will be able to let go in the future, despite their inability to do so in the present.

Participants often spoke about letting go when they have moved on with their lives and achieved personal or professional success. This indicates temporal distancing between current and future selves. Adopting a future perspective when thinking about a transgression is associated with less blame, more insight, and forgiveness (Huynh et al., 2016). This indicates that, at the time of the study, participants were likely viewing the transgressions in terms of their current selves. Perhaps if they can relegate the transgression to the past and see it as part of their past selves, they will actually be able to move on.

## Synthesis

Overall, holding a grudge is a complex interplay between individuals’ emotion, cognition, and behavior. It is characterized by persistent negative affect and powerlessness that interfere with quality of life. With time, the emotional intensity abates, leaving individuals in a state of passive acceptance in which the negativity is lurking in the back of their minds ready to be triggered when needed.

### Broad Implications for Definition and Conceptualization

Returning to the definition of forgiveness as a decrease in negative and an increase in positive

transgression-related sentiment, holding a grudge is not its inverse. Like forgiveness, holding a grudge is characterized by a decrease in negativity over time, but to a much lesser degree. This decreased negativity is largely independent of individuals actually trying to let go, which they have trouble doing. In contrast, when one forgives, one is able to let go. The inverse of forgiveness defined as a static state of continual negativity is more aligned with participants’ experiences of holding grudges, however it does not account for the fact that grudges are fluid.

Holding a grudge is more akin to unforgiveness, defined as negative emotions toward a transgressor resulting from angry rumination. There are three primary components of unforgiveness: Cognitive-evaluation, emotional-rumination, and offender reconstrual (Stackhouse et al., 2018). Cognitive-evaluative unforgiveness refers to how individuals make judgments about the transgression and why they are not forgiving (Stackhouse et al., 2018). Emotional-ruminative unforgiveness involves negative emotions and rumination (Stackhouse et al., 2018). Finally, offender reconstrual occurs when individuals see transgressors differently, partly due to attempts to understand what happened and why (Stackhouse et al., 2018). These components map on to some of the themes identified in this study. For instance, participants saw transgressors differently as a result of the transgression, identifying them as bad people. Stackhouse et al.’s (2018) description of emotional-ruminative unforgiveness resembles participants’ inability to let go and persistent negative emotions and intrusive thoughts. However, their cognitive-evaluative component centers on beliefs that the transgression was unforgivable, accompanied by a lack of desire to forgive (Stackhouse et al., 2018). Participants in this study wanted to let go of the grudge for their own sake. This difference has certain implications for both conceptualizations. For one, unwillingness to forgive implies deciding to withhold forgiveness. In this study, participants wished they could let go of the grudge. Their focus was also different. Deciding not to forgive is based on how one evaluates the transgressor and his or her actions, whereas participants’ desire to let go was based on themselves and concern for their own mental health. In sum, despite similarities, there are differences between unforgiveness and holding a grudge. The key distinction may be in the impetus behind each response. Holding a grudge is often incidental and unwanted, whereas unforgiveness may be more of a conscious choice.



Holding a grudge is also quite different from seeking revenge or desiring vengeance. Participants did not want anything bad to happen to transgressors, reporting that they would be unlikely to seek revenge, partly because of what it would say about them as people. Although it seems strange that individuals harboring negative thoughts and emotions do not want vengeance, revenge is actually not common (Schumann & Ross, 2010). Although anger and resentment contribute to both desire for vengeance and holding a grudge (Schumann & Ross, 2010), the cognitive underpinnings are distinct. Similar to unforgiveness, desire for vengeance is transgressor-focused rather than self-focused.

In sum, it is insufficient to use current definitions of better-studied post-transgression responses to define what holding a grudge is or is not. There are many nuances and dimensions not captured by other constructs. This study uncovered some of the intricacies of holding grudges, including thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and consequences.

### Limitations

Although this study provided valuable insight into an understudied post-transgression response, it is not without its limitations. Due to the nature of the study and its instructions, the grudges participants chose to discuss were based on severe transgressions. This allows for understanding a grudge at its worst, but is potentially less informative about more moderate grudges. However, it could be argued that in order to generate the necessary thoughts and emotions, a grudge can only result from a severe transgression, and that resulting negativity from moderate transgressions is something else, perhaps unforgiveness. Future studies should determine whether these results are applicable regardless of transgression severity.

Another limitation is the inability to infer whether holding grudges is more strongly influenced by the transgressions or individuals' personalities. As with any variable, there is a trait component that makes certain individuals more or less likely to hold a grudge. When asked whether they tend to hold grudges, participants' responses were mixed. This may indicate that both forces contribute equally to whether someone will hold a grudge or not, but it is not sufficient to answer whether grudges are more trait or state based. Future research should focus

on this issue and developing state- and trait-based grudge measures.

Another limitation is the representativeness of the sample we recruited. Participants were undergraduate students living in Canada who were primarily South Asian and female. These factors were not considered in our analysis, because we wanted to develop a more context-independent view of holding grudges. However, cultural, gender, and life-stage differences have been shown to contribute to how individuals respond to transgressions. As a result, more research should be conducted to specifically target the influence that culture, gender, and life stage might have on holding grudges. Additionally, given that this paper was attempting to generate a general theory of holding grudges, including examining potential causality, future research could also be undertaken to examine the finer nuances of participants' experiences based on cultural institutional, and historical context.

### Implications and Future Directions

This study provides a foundation for conceptualizing what it means to hold a grudge, in terms of thoughts, emotions, and behavior. We obtained and synthesized rich data from participants into a theory outlining the life cycle of a grudge. The next steps could be to examine grudges on a more specific level, such as by severity. Another opportunity is to examine the trait aspect of holding a grudge based on individuals who are generally more inclined to hold grudges versus those who are not, and how that experience may or may not differ. It would also be informative to examine different kinds of grudges and how they vary based on the source, as well as the interplay of sociopolitical and institutional context. Examining gender differences in holding grudges would also be a valuable avenue for future discovery. The present study was primarily women, therefore a more balanced sample would help highlight these differences if they exist.

### Conclusion

The lack of research on holding grudges and the assumptions that have been made about the construct have limited our knowledge. This study established that grudges have intertwining emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects that vary over time. With this newfound insight, we have taken the first steps toward resolving the problem

of obfuscation and supposition that has plagued our understanding of holding grudges. With that in mind, based on the results of this study, the best way to succinctly define holding a grudge is as sustained feelings of hurt and anger that dim over time without disappearing, and are easily resurrected by triggers.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

- Thank participants for agreeing to be interviewed
- Reiterate that all their responses will remain anonymous, and that they can skip any questions they would prefer not to answer or withdraw from the interview at any time
- Introduce them to the topic—interested in developing a better understanding of grudge holding.
- Let them know they were selected to be interviewed because they're currently holding a grudge
- Explain that a grudge usually begins with an actual occurrence that leads to negative feelings

Start by asking what a grudge means to the interviewee.

Ask them to think of a grudge they are currently holding against someone

1. What were the circumstances and occurrences that led to the grudge?
  - What happened?
2. Who is the grudge against?
  - What is their relationship to the person?

Questions asking about what occurred immediately after the inciting incident:

1. What was going through your mind when this happened?
2. How did it make you feel?
3. How did you react—what did you do?
4. What was your relationship like with the person before this occurred?

Questions about current state of mind:

1. What is your relationship with the person like now?

- Probe why they think their relationship is this way now
2. What are your current thoughts about what happened?
  3. How do you currently feel about what happened?
    - Do they see it any differently than they did at the time it occurred?
    - How so?
    - If yes, what do they think caused this change?
  4. How are you treating that person now?
  5. How is the person treating you?
  6. If you could go back, what would you do differently?
    - Why/why not?
  7. Do you think the person knows that you're holding a grudge?
    - If so, was there any effort made on the person's part to make amends?
    - If not, why is the person unaware of the grudge?
  8. What have you *gained* from holding this grudge? What have you *lost*?
  9. How much control do you have over this grudge?
  10. Would you want things to go back to the way they were before this occurred?
  11. What's your wish for the future of the relationship with this person?
- Finish up by asking if they have any further thoughts about what a grudge means
  - Thank them for contributing to the research

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