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FAIRNESS, FORGIVENESS AND GRUDGE-HOLDING: 
EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL 
CHILDREN IN NEW ZEALAND

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University, 
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ABSTRACT

Fairness, forgiveness and grudge-holding are concepts which underlie many aspects of our interpersonal relationships. Fairness is the foundation of our day-to-day communication with others and forgiveness is concerned with a positive strategy used to manage negative emotional experiences of underserved unfair treatment. Grudge-holding results as an accumulation of negative feelings, which are associated with the original experience of unfairness. Two experimental studies investigated children’s perceptions of, feelings about, and reactions towards the unfair behaviour of a mother and a friend, by individually inviting the children to scenario-based interview sessions, which included three imaginary tasks. The children were asked to judge the fairness of a mother and a best friend’s treatment towards a child protagonist and to report their associated feelings, after listening to a scenario that described an interaction between a child and a mother and an interaction between a child and a friend. They further responded to three scenario-based experimental tasks, regarding their willingness to grant forgiveness, as opposed to expressions of hostility. In the first study, the children’s willingness to forgive, as a result of unfairness, was explored with 82 local primary school children in Palmerston North, New Zealand, whose ages ranged from 8- to 11-years-old, in addition to 50 parents of these participating children. The parents also completed a questionnaire about their approaches to their children’s common misbehaviours. The study found that the children were typically willing to grant forgiveness to a mother, even though she had been unfair. Their forgiveness tendencies were not related to aspects of parental disciplinary behaviour. However, an examination of the
children's verbatim responses through the use of thematic analysis revealed the complex nature of the relationship between parent and child concerning tolerance for mistakes. In the second study, I explored on whether the children’s repeated exposure to unfairness would contribute to their display of grudge-holding against a mother or a best friend in the scenarios and this investigation involved 55 local primary children, whose ages ranged from 8- to 12-years-old, in Wellington, New Zealand. The children participated in individual scenario-based interview sessions, which included three imaginary tasks over the two time periods, one week apart from each other. The children’s levels of grudge-holding was measured by analysing the possible increase in hostility, which the children expressed from Time 1 to Time 2. The study showed that a repeated experience of unfairness had a noticeable effect on the children’s level of hostility towards the person who was unfair and especially towards the best friend. The children’s verbatim comments also suggested some evidence of accumulated negativity in their responses to an unfairness experience. Thus, this study proved to be a suitable paradigm for operationalising grudge-holding in children.
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Unfairness, unfortunately, takes place within our social interactions. We are occasionally confronted with situations where some groups of people are treated better or worse than others, because of their cultural backgrounds, gender, professions, or age groups. On a more personal level, some people receive advantageous or disadvantageous treatment merely because of their intellectual level or having a certain type of personal characteristic. Throughout our daily communications with others, we certainly realise how judgemental and critical we can be towards people who are unfair to us. At the same time, surprisingly, we are also aware of how upsetting those experiences of unfairness might be for us.

We implement a number of strategies to manage our negative emotional experiences of unfairness. Some people may try to put those negative feelings of unfairness into a positive frame, whereas other people tend to keep those negative feelings to themselves. Similarly, some people may choose to forgive a person who hurts them, in order that they can let go of their angry feelings and then they can move on. Some people may bear a grudge towards a person who has hurt them, in order to protect themselves from further harm. How people manage their negative emotional experiences varies a great deal.

As much as we (as adults) are aware, experiences of unfairness may be a common occurrence in children’s daily lives and it is something about which children are particularly critical. In New Zealand, in particular, a weekly TV programme called *Fair Go* discusses a variety of issues related to fair treatment in our day to day lives. For just over three decades, many episodes have been
broadcast, which have stimulated people’s perspectives of fairness. New Zealand is certainly a nation where people are familiar with making fair judgements — and children are no exception.

One Fair Go episode was particularly useful for me to gain some insights into children’s perceptions of the fairness of adults’ behaviour. The main issue was raised by a young primary school child who spoke about their right to wear a pair of long trousers, instead of wearing netball skirts, when they were playing a netball game on a cold winter’s day. She talked about how difficult it had been for children to play a game well when they were feeling cold and how unfair it was for them to not be allowed to wear something warm, when they were feeling so cold. Her arguments sounded fair enough for many people in the audience — including myself. However, one of the coaches who expressed the importance of following rules and regulations made an interesting comment: Whilst children were expressing how unreasonable it was for them to play well under difficult weather conditions, the adults were trying to teach the children about the importance of following rules and regulations. From this episode of Fair Go I learned about some children’s views of fairness during their daily experiences. Children question adults’ decisions on a number of topics and they are more than capable of voicing their opinions on unfairness to children in relation to some of those adults’ decisions. It is clear that children are able to offer reasonable reasons, in order to justify their judgement of fairness.

My investigation of children’s perceptions of fairness began about six years ago, after a discussion with Ian Evans regarding my research interests about the effects of parental disciplinary practice on the development of children’s personalities. At first, fairness was difficult to understand as a
psychological construct and it seemed to be less relevant to my general research interests. However, as I read a series of experimental studies carried out by Evans and his colleagues, I realised that fairness is something that could be incorporated into my research project concerning parental disciplinary practice, particularly in relation to rewards and punishments.

Evans has suggested that the perception of fairness can be investigated under four conditions: (a) unfair punishment for something one did not do; (b) unfair rewards for something one did not do; (c) unfair (i.e., absence of) punishment for something one did do; and (d) unfair (i.e., absence of) reward for something one did do. These four classifications were helpful ways for me to recall some of the situations that I had personally experienced. My notions of unfairness possibly arose as I traced back to my personal memories of unfairness; I was certainly able to relate to the idea of unfair disciplinary practice. Based on this idea of the unfairness of adult disciplinary practice, I began to wonder about how children actually think and feel about their mother’s disciplinary behaviour, during their everyday lives.

Following earlier studies carried out by Evans and his colleagues, and guided by my own personal interests and experiences, I began to focus on children’s perceptions of unfair punishment and particularly their emotional responses to the maternal disciplinary practice of unfair punishment. I emphasised listening to children’s voices, rather than parents’ self-reports concerning their disciplinary practices. Parental disciplinary practice is an area of psychological research in which a large number of studies have investigated parents’ own judgement of their disciplinary behaviour. In addition, there a number of studies that have observed how parents interact with their own
children. Although these studies are interesting and helpful, in order to learn about parents’ perceptions of their children’s behaviour and their own attitudes towards their children’s misbehaviour, they are less likely to include the children’s perceptions of their parents’ or caregivers’ parental disciplinary behaviour. Following my identification of this limitation, I began to focus on an investigation into children’s voices, relating to their parents’ disciplinary behaviour. It is thought that, if we are to give effective help to the development of children’s emotional well-being, it is important to gain an insight into children’s perceptions of parental behaviour.

The importance of listening to children’s voices was one of the take-home messages I received from attending an early childhood conference in Porirua, New Zealand in 2006. At this conference, I had an opportunity to listen to one of the keynote speakers, Dr. Freda Briggs, who is best known for her expertise in the area of child protection. She was presenting her recent work concerning children’s early experience at schools in Australia and New Zealand. Her studies consisted of individual interviews with children about their experiences at school. A number of interesting topics were covered in the interviews, including fairness/justice. One of the episodes concerning fairness that she had shared with us was about children’s views of their school principal: the children commented that it was unfair for their school principal to pick up rubbish that s/he had not thrown on the ground. This example illustrated how perceptively and sensitively children judge the fairness of others’ behaviour.

Listening to children’s voices and learning about their perceptions of and their emotional reactions to experiences of unfairness was the main motivation.

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1 More detail of this study is published as Potter, G., & Briggs, F. (2003), Where children talk about their early experiences at school. *Journal of Australian Research in Early Childhood*, 28, pp. 44-49.
for the present thesis. I hoped to tap into children’s real life experiences of unfairness and the strategies they use to manage the emotional experiences of these incidents. The first study, concerning children’s origins of forgiveness, is one of the main themes that emerged from my earlier Master’s thesis research, children’s responses to unfair punishment by a mother. Forgiveness has been studied by a number of disciplinary groups and people have been seeking the nature of, significance of, and practice of forgiveness. I had an opportunity to attend an international conference in Salzburg, Austria, in 2008\(^2\) and I learned how widely the concepts of forgiveness have been examined by diverse groups of international scholars. One of the main discussions, amongst a group of philosophers, was about investigations into the real meanings of forgiveness. They were passionately discussing the origins of forgiveness and how these might have evolved over the centuries. Perhaps more realistic views of forgiveness have been discussed by sociologists and psychologists, who deal with the significance of and practice of forgiveness in our day to day lives.

In some nations, people hold lingering memories of genocide, torture and terrorism. Does practicing forgiveness help people to heal their deeply hurt emotions and to be able to move on into the future? It might take a long time, but it might be possible. A study carried out after the 9/11 incidents in the USA showed that forgiveness may be one of the coping strategies, whereby some people are able to deal with psychological distress and responses to stress (Rhoades, McIntosh, Wadsworth, Ahlkvist, Burwell, Gudmundsen, Raviv, & Rea, 2007). On a more personal level, we are sometimes confronted with interpersonal disputes involving betrayal or disloyalty. Some people may have

\(^2\) 1\(^{st}\) Global Conference Forgiveness: Probing the Boundaries, Salzburg, Austria, March 2008.
the benefit of learning forgiveness as a strategy to heal their emotional wounds. Forgiveness is a complex psychological construct, which is rarely investigated, in relation to the socialisation of children. In a classic book on children’s understanding of justice, Piaget (1932) only briefly discussed how ideas of forgiveness might be accumulated, in relation to the cognitive maturation of children. In theory, in order for children to practice forgiveness, cognitive maturation plays an important role. However, more realistically speaking, I believe that children practice forgiveness to some degree in all their daily interpersonal interactions, particularly at the time of interpersonal conflicts with family members or friends. Accepting an apology may be one of the examples where children learn to: see the perspective of others; to manage their negative feelings towards an offender; and rebuild their interpersonal relationships. I believe that it is possible for children to use forgiveness as a strategy to deal with the negative emotional experience of unfairness, in the same way as some adults try to manage their negative emotional experiences by extending their forgiveness to people who have hurt them.

Although offering forgiveness helps us to reduce certain levels of negative thoughts associated with feelings of unfairness, it does not necessarily mean that certain levels of negative feelings (associated with the original unfair incident) will not linger on, which could lead someone to hold a grudge towards the people/person who had been unfair to them. This idea led me to consider the second experimental study. This study was designed to explore grudge-holding, in relation to experiences of unfairness. Grudge-holding is another complex psychological construct and it has rarely been investigated with adults or with children. One of the challenges of this investigation would be to
objectively define the construct of grudge-holding. Although the idea of grudge-holding is familiar to many of us, we are yet to understand what it actually means to us in our interpersonal relationships. It is understood that certain situations/behaviours are difficult to accept and to forgive even after receiving an apology. I believe that children have similar experiences. In fact, we occasionally hear episodes or incidences, where a group of children are fighting over something that happened to them a while ago. I believe that forgiveness may be an ideal way of managing the negative emotional experience of unfairness, although, in order to gain a whole picture of what we really mean by forgiveness, an investigation into grudge-holding appears to be necessary.

The present thesis, *Fairness, Forgiveness and Grudge-Holding*, is concerned with children’s perceptions of, emotional responses to, and behavioural reactions to experiences of unfairness. Unfairness is a common occurrence in our daily lives. I believe that forgiveness is a personal choice and (if we are willing to practice it) it could have a positive impact on our well-being. At the same time, I also feel that we need to acknowledge that certain incidents, no matter how large or small they might have been, are occasionally difficult to let go and the negative feelings associated with these incidents can remain with us. Thus, what I hope to discuss in this thesis is children’s perceptions of feelings about and behavioural reactions to unfairness in their every day lives. I further hope to explore children’s displays of forgiveness and grudge-holding, as being strategies they use to manage the negative emotional experiences associated with experiences of unfairness.