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

Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University,
Palmerston North,
New Zealand

Tomoko Yamaguchi

2009

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

During my four years of the doctorate study, I have encountered many difficult challenges. Without support, encouragement, patience and guidance from my supervisors, colleagues, friends and my family, my PhD study would have been impossible to complete.

Firstly, I would like to show my appreciation to my supervisor and mentor, Professor Ian M. Evans, who has guided me during my post-graduate years at Massey University. His helpful suggestions and expertise were always helpful and inspiring. I would also like to thank Dr. Juliana Raskauskas for being available to be my co-supervisor for my PhD study. Juliana's experience working with schools helped me to work collaboratively with a number of schools.

My studies would have been impossible to carry out without having the warm support of my colleagues. I would like to show my appreciation to Dr. Shane Harvey for his advice during the early stage of my first study, and especially the preparation of a research proposal for the Families Commission Blue Sky Fund. My second study was conducted in Wellington and I had the opportunity to work with my colleagues from the CHERUBS lab group, at Massey University, Wellington. I would like to show my appreciation to Ms Maria Ulloa for her support in the final phase of my research project and Ms Celia Falchi for her kindness inviting me to stay with her family during my data collection. I also would like to thank my colleagues from the Evans Lab in Palmerston North for their encouragement and support during the past few years.

I have visited a number of schools in Palmerston North and Wellington during my PhD research project. I would like to send my warm regards to all the school principals and teachers who participated in my research and for offering me the opportunity to visit their schools and providing me with a venue to conduct the interviews. I would like to thank the parents and children who participated and shared with me their ideas and life experiences, through this research project. I especially appreciate the staff members and children in the ASAP, Fielding, for helping me to conduct a number of pilots.

I would like to thank my friends and teammates from MUCOUS Ultimate Frisbee for cheering me up when I was feeling pessimistic about completing my PhD. I especially thank my two good friends, Miss Angeline Yang and Mr Yang Yang for their support. Angeline has brightened up my gloomy days with her randomness. Yang has helped me to see the bright side of undertaking a PhD and supported me to have less grumpy days.

Last but not least, I share this great achievement with my family. I thank my mother, Astuko Yamaguchi, for her unconditional support and love and my stepfather, Seiji Yamaguchi, for his patience. I would like to show my special appreciation to my grandmother, Mistuko Akimoto who taught me to do my best whatever I do in my life, for her spiritual guidance when I need to get through a number of difficult times. Finally, my special acknowledgement goes to my younger sister, Yasuyo Yamaguchi. She has seen me up and down during my post-graduate years. I thank from bottom of my heart for her patience, tolerance, and unconditional support. Without her and her art work, my research project would have been impossible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
FOREWORD.....	15
CHAPTER 1	
GENERAL INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF UNFAIRNESS AND FEELINGS OF HOSTILITY.....	22
<i>Designing and Piloting the Procedures</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Materials and Procedure</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Findings</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Summary and Conclusion</i>	<i>31</i>
CHAPTER 2	
STUDY 1: EXPLORING CHILDREN'S ORIGINS OF FORGIVENESS	33
Introduction	33
<i>Conceptualisation of Forgiveness</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Forgiveness in Children</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Origins of Children's Willingness to Grant Forgiveness</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Rationale for a New Study</i>	<i>46</i>
Study 1.....	47
Method.....	48
<i>Decisions Concerning Method</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Pilot Work.....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Ethical Consideration</i>	<i>52</i>

<i>Participants</i>	53
<i>Participant Recruitment</i>	54
<i>Materials and Measures</i>	56
<i>Procedure and Design</i>	68
Results: Quantitative Data.....	72
Child Measures	72
<i>General Observations</i>	72
<i>Children’s Basic Judgement of Fairness or Unfairness</i>	72
<i>Ratings of Unfairness</i>	73
<i>Nature and Strength of Feelings in Response to Unfairness</i>	75
<i>What Would You Do if You Were in a Similar Situation?</i>	77
<i>Children’s Willingness to Forgive</i>	81
Parent Measures.....	84
<i>Parent Attributions Regarding Children’s Common Misbehaviour</i>	84
<i>Parental Descriptions of How They Would Respond to Misbehaviour, Before and After the Child Apologises</i>	85
<i>Parents’ Suggestions for Their Children to Deal with the Experience of Negative Emotions</i>	89
<i>The Relationship Between Parents’ Willingness to Grant Forgiveness and Children’s Tendency to Forgive</i>	91
Results: Qualitative Data.....	94
Children’s Verbatim Responses	94
<i>Children’s Awareness of Their Kin System</i>	94
<i>Children’s Willingness to Give Latitude to the Mother</i>	95
<i>Being Respectful of a Parent</i>	96
<i>Children’s Strong Sense of Justice</i>	96
<i>Punishment as Justice</i>	97
<i>Punishment as Revenge</i>	98
<i>Weighing Up the Options</i>	99
<i>Children’s Responses to Apology</i>	100
<i>Children’s Experiences of Granting Forgiveness</i>	107
<i>Children’s Understanding of Forgiveness</i>	111
Parents’ Responses	114
<i>Parents’ Responses to Children’s Common Misbehaviour</i>	114

Discussion.....	125
Child Measure	125
<i>Children’s Judgement of Fairness</i>	125
<i>Children’s Feelings about Unfairness</i>	126
<i>Children’s Willingness to Grant Forgiveness as Opposed to Expressions of Hostility</i>	127
Parents’ Measure	131
<i>The Relationships between Parenting Behaviour and Children’s Willingness to Grant Forgiveness</i>	134
<i>Children’s Understanding of Forgiveness</i>	135
<i>Strengths and Weakness of the Study</i>	136
Summary and Conclusion	137

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 2: EXPLORING CHILDREN’S HOLDING OF GRUDGE	139
Introduction... ..	139
<i>Conceptualisation of Grudge-Holding</i>	141
<i>Grudge-Holding in Children</i>	142
<i>Rationale for a New Study</i>	143
Study 2.....	144
Method.....	144
<i>The Pilot Work</i>	144
<i>Ethical Consideration</i>	146
<i>Participants</i>	147
<i>Participant Recruitment</i>	149
<i>Materials and Measures</i>	150
<i>Procedure and Design</i>	159
Results: Quantitative Data.....	163
<i>General Observation</i>	163
<i>Children’s Basic Judgement of Fairness and Unfairness</i>	163
<i>Ratings of Fairness and Unfairness</i>	165
<i>Nature and Strength of Feelings in Response to Fairness and Unfairness</i>	167

<i>Children's Mean Levels of Hostility Towards the Mother and the Best Friend as a Result of Fairness and Unfairness</i>	171
<i>Children's Mean Levels of Hostility Towards the Mother and the Best Friend Over the Two Time Periods</i>	175
<i>Children's Levels of Grudges Against the Mother or the Best Friend as a Result of Fair and Unfair Treatment</i>	180
<i>What Would You Do or Say If You Were In a Similar Situation?</i>	185
Results: Qualitative Data	190
Children's Verbatim Responses	190
<i>Children's Verbatim Responses Concerning Fairness and Unfairness Treatment</i>	190
<i>Children's Hostile Responses towards the Mother as a Result of the Unfairness</i>	192
<i>Children's Hostile Responses towards the Best Friend as a Result of Unfairness</i>	195
<i>Children's Comments on Grudge-Holding as a Result of Unfair Treatment</i>	196
<i>Children's Forgiving Responses towards the Mother, Despite of Her Unfairness</i>	197
<i>Children's Forgiving Responses towards the Best Friend, Despite of Unfairness</i>	200
<i>What Does Forgiveness Mean to You?</i>	202
Discussion	206
<i>Children's General Judgement of Fairness</i>	206
<i>Children's Feelings about Fairness and Unfairness</i>	207
<i>Children's Levels of Hostility</i>	209
<i>Children's Levels of Grudge-Holding</i>	212
<i>Children's Understanding of Forgiveness</i>	213
<i>Strengths and Weakness of the Study</i>	214
Summary and Conclusions	216
CHAPTER 4	
GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	217
<i>General Background to the Present Research Project</i>	217

<i>Findings of the Present Research Project</i>	221
<i>Implications</i>	226
<i>Strengths and Weakness of the Preset Research Project</i>	227
<i>Suggestions for Future Research</i>	230
Conclusions	231
POSTSCRIPT	233
REFERENCES	234
APPENDICIES	246
Appendix A: Information Sheet for Children	246
Appendix B: Letter of Introduction to School Principals.....	248
Appendix C: Letter of Introduction to School Parents.....	251
Appendix D: Information and Consent Brochure Sent to Parents	253
Appendix E: The Unfairness Scenarios and the Accompanying Pictures	255
Appendix F: Tasks Assess Forgiveness vs. Hostility	261
Appendix G: Parent Questionnaire.....	267
Appendix H: Information Brochure Sent to Parents.....	275
Appendix I: Information Brochure Sent to Children	277
Appendix J: Consent Form for Parents	279
Appendix K: Consent Form for Children.....	280
Appendix L: Letter of Introduction to School Principals	281
Appendix M: The Unfairness and Fairness Scenarios and the Accompanying Pictures.....	284
Appendix N: Tasks to assess Hostility vs. Forgiveness.....	296

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 <i>Scenarios of Unfairness</i>	57
Table 2 <i>Overview of the Parents' Questionnaire</i>	66
Table 3 <i>Children's Responses to the Question, 'What Would You Do If You Are in the Similar Situation?'</i>	78
Table 4 <i>Intercorrelations Between the Three Tasks and the Total Forgiveness Scores in the Parent Scenarios</i>	82
Table 5 <i>Intercorrelations Between Three Tasks and the Total Forgiveness Scores in the Friend Scenarios</i>	82
Table 6 <i>Parent's Levels of Punitiveness Through to Forgiveness</i>	86
Table 7 <i>Intercorrelations Between Parents' Willingness to Grant Forgiveness and Children's Forgiveness Tendency</i>	93
Table 8 <i>Main Theme of Scenarios Concerning Fairness or Unfairness</i>	151
Table 9 <i>Children's General Judgement of Fairness and Unfairness During Times 1 and 2</i>	164
Table 10 <i>Intecorrelations Between the Three Imaginary Tasks and the Total Score of Hostility Towards the Mother During Time 1</i>	171
Table 11 <i>Intercorrelations Between the Three Imaginary Tasks and the Total Score of Hostility Towards the Mother During Time 2</i>	172
Table 12 <i>Intercorrelations Between the Three Imaginary Tasks and the Total Score of Hostility Towards the Best Friend During Time 1</i>	172
Table 13 <i>Intercorrelations Between the Three Imaginary Tasks and the Total Score of Hostility Towards the Best Friend During Time 2</i>	173
Table 14 <i>Overview of the Scenario Types for the Four Experimental Groups</i>	176
Table 15 <i>Children's Responses to Their Own Mother's or Their Best Friend's Unfair Treatment</i>	186

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1.</i> Frequency distribution of the ratings grouped into five categories of unfairness in both parent and friend scenarios.....	73
<i>Figure 2.</i> Mean ratings of unfairness for the two different themes in both parent and friend scenarios.....	74
<i>Figure 3.</i> Frequencies of the types of feelings associated with the experiences of unfairness.....	76
<i>Figure 4.</i> Mean strengths of the four types of negative feelings in both parent and friend scenarios.....	76
<i>Figure 5.</i> Children’s initial responses to their own mother’s unfair treatment ...	77
<i>Figure 6.</i> Children’s initial responses to their friend’s unfair treatment	81
<i>Figure 7.</i> Parental attributional judgements regarding to children’s five types of misbehaviour (mean likelihood scores).....	84
<i>Figure 8.</i> Parental attributional judgements over children’s five types of misbehaviour (mean likelihood scores).....	85
<i>Figure 9.</i> Parents’ degrees of punitiveness in response to children’s common misbehaviour.....	87
<i>Figure 10.</i> Parents’ responses to children’s common misbehaviour before and after receiving children’s apologies (low scores indicate punitiveness, high scores indicate a willingness to forgive or use as a learning opportunity).....	88
<i>Figure 11.</i> Parents’ frequencies of using the three types of strategies to help their children’s experiences unfairness	89
<i>Figure 12.</i> Mean scores of the parents’ use of the three strategies to help their children’s feelings of unfairness (high score = more likely to use). ..	90
<i>Figure 13.1.</i> Children’s mean degree of perceived unfairness during both Times 1 and 2	166
<i>Figure 13.2.</i> Children’s mean degree of perceived fairness during both Time 1 and 2	166
<i>Figure 14.1.</i> Children’s frequencies of reported feelings as a result of fairness or unfairness during Time 1.....	167

<i>Figure 14.2.</i> Children’s frequencies of reported feelings as a result of fairness or unfairness during Time 2.....	168
<i>Figure 15.1.</i> Children’s mean degree of feelings as a result of fairness or unfairness during Time 1.....	169
<i>Figure 15.2.</i> Children’s mean degree of feelings as a result of fairness or unfairness during Time 2.....	170
<i>Figure 16.1.</i> Children’s mean level of hostility towards the mother and the best friend during Time 1	174
<i>Figure 16.2.</i> Children’s mean level of hostility towards the mother and the best friend during Time 2	175
<i>Figure 17.1.</i> Group 1 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the mother and the best friend over the two periods of time.	176
<i>Figure 17.2.</i> Group 2 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the mother and the best friend over the two periods of time	177
<i>Figure 17.3.</i> Group 3 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the mother and the best friend over the two periods of time	178
<i>Figure 17.4.</i> Group 4 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the mother and the best friend over the two periods of time	179
<i>Figure 18.</i> Mean differences of children’s levels of hostility towards the mother and the best friend between Time 1 and Time 2.	180
<i>Figure 19.1.</i> Comparison between Group 1 and Group 4 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the mother over the two periods of time.....	182
<i>Figure 19.2.</i> Comparison between Group 1 and Group 4 children’s mean levels of hostility toward the best friend over the two periods of time.....	183
<i>Figure 19.3.</i> Comparison between Group 2 and Group 3 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the mother over the two periods of time.....	184
<i>Figure 19.4.</i> Comparison between Group 2 and Group 3 children’s mean levels of hostility towards the best friend over the two periods of time	185
<i>Figure 20.</i> Children’s possible response repertoire to unfairness from the mother and the best friend across the two periods of time.....	189

FOREWORD

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 Zealand¹. 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

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 2008² 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 1st 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.