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**The Identification and Measurement  
of Barriers to Forgiveness  
Following an Interpersonal Transgression**

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Heather Shanti Pearce

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## Abstract

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Research has revealed forgiveness to be a useful pro-social tool for responding to interpersonal transgressions, with a multitude of intra- and interpersonal benefits for both victims and offenders. Despite this, many victims experience difficulty overcoming transgressions and moving towards forgiveness. Thus, to enable and encourage the process in applied and personal settings, it is important to investigate *why* such individuals do not forgive. To date, ample research has investigated the various social-cognitive, relational, and individual difference variables that may inhibit forgiveness, yet few studies have directly examined the *rationalisations* behind the unforgiving response, an oversight that presents a substantial gap in the literature. By investigating the reasons victims provide for not forgiving their offenders, research may shed light on barriers to forgiveness that transcend information provided by forgiveness predictors alone. Such research may improve treatment outcomes within applied settings by helping facilitators identify and target the specific cognitions underlying their client's unwillingness, or inability, to forgive.

Accordingly, this thesis aimed to identify salient barriers to forgiveness following interpersonal transgressions, based on past theoretical and qualitative work, and operationalise them into a valid and reliable self-report *Barriers to Forgiveness* (BTF) measure. The BTF was developed across three studies, utilising 894 participants. Studies 1 and 2 involved the development and refinement of a seven-factor BTF, and the assessment of the measure's reliability and validity against theoretically-relevant state and trait variables. In addition, Study 2

investigated the factorial invariance of the seven-factor BTF against two independent samples differing in the obligatory nature of the victim-offender relationship. Results from the two studies suggested that the barriers may differ in the purposeful nature of the unforgiving response, with three barriers reflecting an inability to forgive the offender, caused by their blameworthy role in perpetrating a severe, immoral norm violation; and three others reflecting an intentional withholding of forgiveness, in order to punish the offender and protect themselves from future harm and ego damage. Accordingly, the three data sets were reanalysed within Chapter 4 to determine the accuracy of this hierarchical *Can't Forgive-Won't Forgive* structure in explaining BTF interrelationships, and identify the variables that best predict endorsement of the two superordinate barriers. Study 3 investigated endorsement of the superordinate barriers within an experimental setting, manipulating the severity of the transgression—theorised to differentiate the two barriers—and investigating the impact of barrier endorsement on victim forgiveness.

Results across the studies suggested that both the seven-factor BTF and the hierarchical *Can't Forgive-Won't Forgive* model are valid and reliable self-report measures of situational barriers to forgiveness, which effectively assess unforgiving cognitions. Results also indicated that the barriers may be differentially related to transgression characteristics and vengeful victim characteristics, and may differentially impact forgiveness outcomes. Findings from this thesis therefore shed light on the causes of unforgiving responses and the impact of known predictors on their endorsement. These findings may help practitioners better understand the cognitions underlying clients' unforgiving responses and accordingly target their approach, for more successful treatment outcomes.

## Declaration

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I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name at any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Heather Pearce

27/3/2014

Date

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