A factor analysis study has identified seven components of the construct of forgiveness which are relatively distinct: Relationships, Healing, Guilt Reduction, New Beginning, Legal, Religious, and Condoning (Scobie & Scobie, 1996). However, the question of the relationship between these components has not been addressed. In other words, might a person forgive in terms of Relationships but not Guilt Reduction or New Beginning? Would the profile of the seven components vary according to the nature of the relationship between dyads and the type of offence?

In the previous research (Scobie, Scobie, & Kakavoulis, 2001) the forgiveness event has been accessed by requesting the participants to think of an incident in which they acted in the role of forgiver, or forgiven. This technique has several drawbacks. For example, the severity of the event, the amount of time that has passed since the transgression, and the offender's responsibility may all vary between participants. An alternative approach is to use scenarios, i.e. short descriptions of transgression situations which could invoke a forgiveness response. Thus the transgression, although artificial, would have the advantage of being constant across all participants. As a consequence, scenarios would also provide a useful method of investigating the multidimensional nature of the forgiveness construct.

If forgiveness is unidimensional rather than multidimensional, then there should be no significant difference for the component responses for each scenario. All of the hypothesised components should move in the same direction according to scenario. While individual scenarios may elicit more or less agreement responses for forgiveness, each component should have the same responses for any given scenario, and be in the same relationship to other responses across all the scenarios.

One of the major problems is the selection of appropriate scenarios. Scobie and Scobie (1996, 2001) have found that the construct of forgiveness is fairly robust showing only minor variations for gender, religiosity, mode, willingness to forgive, self-esteem, locus of control, and attachment. As a consequence, scenario depictions of transgressions must be sufficiently realistic to rouse a forgiveness response as a potential option, and an appropriate response. Thus, scenarios must have a high level of severity of outcome, a high level of intentionality, and a high level of perceived responsibility to produce a forgiveness response. Events which are regarded as minor, accidental, or where the other is not held to be responsible, do not fall within a forgiveness perspective. The appropriate response would be an apology; either apology-automatic or apology-dependent (Scobie & Scobie, 1998).

Scenarios have been used in a number of research contexts. For example, Gonzales, Manning, and Haugen (1992) use scenarios in their study of ac-
counts. They looked at offences from the perspective of the offender and noted that similar situations have been labelled predicaments (Schlenker, 1980), incidents (Goffman, 1961, 1967), and account episodes (Schonbach, 1980, 1985, 1990). The authors used three levels of blameworthiness and three levels of consequence. Their study focused on the kinds of accounts offered by the transgressor in response to various transgressions (the scenarios), that is concessions, excuses, justifications and refusals. At the end of their paper Gonzales et al. commented: “Research on victims’ evaluations of and reactions to accounts is no less important than research on the predictors of accounts themselves.” (p. 968). The point they are making is that the perspective of the offended is also important, that is, how they react to the offender’s account and this seems to be ignored in the literature.

The scenarios of Gonzales et al. (1992) provided a useful starting point for producing forgiveness scenarios. However, other variables needed to be taken into account. For example, the nature of the relationship between dyads could be important. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) suggested four types of relationships within the social exchange model: sampling, bargaining, commitment, and institutionalisation. The first two types of relationships are characterised by keeping account of costs and rewards. The last two devote more attention to the relationship. However, it is at the institutional stage that forgiveness strategies would be most important as the norms and mutual expectations of the dyads are established. Sternberg (1987) quotes the case of a married couple where one partner has an affair and the other continues to bring up the transgression until they feel there is no other choice but to quit the relationship. This is an example of the accountant approach characteristic of equity theory where a record of offences is kept. However, the possibility of forgiveness as an alternative to ending the relationship is not mentioned by Sternberg. This approach fails to see an alternative to the endless quest for “balance”.

Similarly, Hinde (1987) in his eight dimensions for understanding and describing relationships has a category labelled “interpersonal perception” which describes how each person views the other’s character and actions, whereas “commitment” involves the degree to which they are committed to the relationship. If, in fact, “… close friendships and marriages or other partnerships need quite a lot more effort” (Hayes, 1993, p. 88), dealing with offences will be a key factor in maintaining these relationships.

Dindia and Baxter (1987) found that couples who had been married a long time tended to adopt fewer maintenance strategies than those whose relationship had been for only a short duration. The comment was made that they “simply didn’t notice them any more” (p. 89). A more likely explanation than one which postulates automatic and unconscious responses is that they had a forgiveness strategy in place which allowed renegotiation. Fennell (1993) reported that willingness to forgive and be forgiven was one of the 10 most important characteristics of stable, happy first marriages. “If forgiveness is not available in the marriage, an unpleasant tension may permeate the relationship. Moreover, if a spouse is un-