



Forgiveness within the Big Five personality model

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Abstract

Research has begun to explore the relationship of dispositional forgiveness to personality traits [McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K. C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington Jr., E. L., Brown, S. W., & Hight, T. L. (1998). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships II: theoretical elaboration and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(6), 1586–1603.]. Personality research has generally focused on the Big Five model of personality, but there is evidence that prediction in personality is aided by using the underlying primary factors of the Big Five. This study examined, in students from religious and public universities, the relationships of five and 16 factors of personality to four dimensions of dispositional forgiveness — forgiveness of others, receiving others' forgiveness, forgiveness of self, and receiving God's forgiveness. The results confirmed that personality, particularly neuroticism versus emotional stability, correlates with many aspects of dispositional forgiveness, and that the use of a greater number of personality factors aids in understanding dispositional forgiveness. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Personality and social psychologists have begun to develop a framework to explain the dynamics involved in the relational phenomena of interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997). Forgiveness theorists have suggested that forgiveness research begin to examine dispositional forgiveness (McCullough, 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999), which personality may better predict than individual acts of forgiveness due to the principle of aggregation (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977).

Previously, a relationship between the Big Five factors of agreeableness and neuroticism versus emotional stability and a forgiveness factor which was labelled “forgiveness/non-retaliation” was found in one published empirical study (Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes & Jackson, 1998). Forgiveness has not yet been investigated with lower bandwidth measures of personality, but the use of lower level more detailed measures such as those found in 16 factor models of personality may

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increase specificity in prediction of real life behavior (Goldberg, 1999, Mereshon & Gorsuch, 1988; Panounen, 1998; Saucier & Ostendorf, 1999). The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between dimensions of dispositional forgiveness and personality using both the Big Five and 16 primary factors advocated by Cattell (Cattell, Saunders & Stice, 1949) and Goldberg.

1. The Big Five model of personality

Personality research has centered upon five factors, termed the Big Five (Cattell, 1956; Digman & Inouye, 1986; Goldberg, 1990; Gorsuch & Cattell, 1967; Hogan, 1986; McCrae & Costa, 1987; Norman, 1963; Tupes & Christal, 1961). This model proposes that personality consists of five factors which summarize more detailed personality traits: Neuroticism versus Emotional Stability, Surgency/Extraversion, Openness to Experience/Intellect, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

The Big Five model of personality, though pervasive, has come under criticism in recent years from personality theorists who suggest that the use of five global factors to describe personality loses valuable information available from the primary factors underlying the Big Five (e.g. Block, 1995; McAdams, 1992). Empirical studies have supported this claim, generally finding that the use of primary factors predicted greater variance than the Big Five alone (Mereshon & Gorsuch, 1988; Panounen, 1998), leading Saucier and Ostendorf (1999, p. 623) to conclude that “measures of the Big Five alone under specify the domain of meaningful personality attributes”. Thus, in this study we sought to answer two questions: first, is dispositional forgiveness significantly predicted by personality, and second, whether primary factors of the Big Five were more predictive of forgiveness than the Big Five themselves. With those goals in mind, we offer the following hypotheses concerning personality and dimensions of forgiveness.

2. Hypotheses regarding personality and forgiveness

Forgiveness theorists have suggested that the experience of forgiveness is different if one is forgiving another, receiving another’s forgiveness, forgiving oneself, or receiving God’s forgiveness (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1996; Wahking, 1992; Walker and Dover-spoke, 2001). However, across each of these dimensions, forgiveness is generally considered to be a combination of affect, cognition, and behavior that motivates an individual to seek reconciliation following real or imagined wrongs. McCullough et al. (1998) hypothesized that the experience of forgiveness might be influenced by personality variables by enabling some individuals to experience pro-forgiveness relational styles, cognitions, or affect.

Thus, we summarize the expected findings as follows. First, due to the tendency for individuals high in Neuroticism versus Emotional Stability to ruminate following an offense (McCullough et al., 1998), it is anticipated that individuals who score high on Neuroticism versus Emotional Stability will have the most difficulty with forgiveness of others, forgiveness of self, and receiving others’ forgiveness.

Second, because persons scoring high on Agreeableness, by definition, are trusting and sympathetic, it is anticipated that there will be a positive association between Agreeableness and both forgiveness of others and receiving others’ forgiveness. Third, due to the strong relation between Surgency/Extraversion and both positive affect and support seeking, proactive forms of behavior

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