



Predicting appraisals of romantic revenge: The roles of Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and vengefulness

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether personality factors are associated with people's appraisals of the costs and benefits of romantic revenge. Our goal was to extend our understanding of variables that influence individuals' decisions to get even with romantic partners. Undergraduates ($N = 130$) completed the HEXACO personality inventory, the Vengeance Scale, and questionnaires examining people's beliefs about revenge in romantic relationships. Honesty–Humility predicted individuals' judgments of revenge as more desirable when appraising its benefits and less undesirable when appraising its costs, whereas Agreeableness only predicted benefit appraisals. Furthermore, vengefulness predicted individuals' scores on the benefits- and costs-appraisal indices controlling for Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness. These findings provide a first step towards determining whether certain people may be quicker than others to see the benefits of romantic revenge while minimizing its costs.

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1. Introduction

Relational problems are among the most common reasons individuals seek psychological counseling (Pinsker, Nepps, Redfield, & Winston, 1985) and can pose serious threats to partners' physical and mental health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Acts of revenge may represent—or serve as one basis for—the development of such problems. Accordingly, as individuals display a greater tendency to transgress against those with whom they have a close and intimate rather than a distant relationship (Richardson & Green, 2006), and as romantic partners do not always “forgive and forget” each others' offenses, romantic revenge may be a phenomenon worthy of considerable research attention because of its possible implications for individuals' (and couples') health and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, despite a clear need for research on this topic, only a handful of studies have investigated revenge in romantic relationships (see Boon, Alibhai, & Deveau, 2011; Boon, DeVeau, & Alibhai, 2009; Yoshimura, 2002). Although this research suggests that romantic revenge may produce both destructive and constructive outcomes (Boon et al., 2011), examination of people's judgments concerning whether the costs of getting even make revenge more undesirable and its benefits make revenge more desirable would extend our understanding of the processes by which individuals decide to get even with romantic partners. The more value individuals attach to the positive outcomes that may

follow revenge and the less weight they attach to its negative outcomes, the quicker they may be to respond to a partner's wrongdoing with revenge. Understanding whether personality factors are associated with the nature of people's appraisals of the outcomes of romantic revenge, then, may prove beneficial in enabling us to determine whether certain people may be predisposed to view revenge in a favorable or unfavorable light.

The present study examined the extent to which personality predicts individuals' appraisals concerning whether the costs and benefits of revenge make getting even with a romantic partner more desirable (in the case of benefits) and less undesirable (in the case of costs). We also investigated whether the disposition to be vengeful predicts such appraisals while controlling for broader personality traits.

1.1. The HEXACO model of personality

Although the Big Five and Five Factor Model (FFM) are the most widely used personality models (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987), recent lexical investigations of personality structure suggest that personality is better represented by a six-factor model, the HEXACO, which includes the following factors: Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Importantly, some of the HEXACO factors are quite different from their FFM counterparts. Specifically, the HEXACO Agreeableness and Emotionality factors represent rotational variants of the FFM dimensions (for a review, see Ashton & Lee, 2007). Additionally, the Honesty–Humility factor represents a unique contribution of the HEXACO model.

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In the present paper, we utilized the HEXACO model of personality to examine the extent to which certain individuals may be more likely than others to view revenge as desirable based on an appraisal of its benefits and less undesirable based on appraisal of its costs. The answer to this question may have important implications for understanding whether people will choose to act upon their desires for revenge.

Although research has yet to examine the association between the HEXACO model and revenge, findings from several lines of inquiry justify doing so. Below we conceptualize HEXACO Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness and examine past research which suggests that these personality factors should relate to individuals' appraisals of the costs and benefits of revenge. Then we conceptualize vengefulness and examine its role in predicting such appraisals.

1.2. Honesty–Humility and revenge

The HEXACO Honesty–Humility factor represents fairness, sincerity and honesty (Lee & Ashton, 2004) versus pretentiousness, conceitedness (Ashton et al., 2004), and narcissism (Lee & Ashton, 2005). Those who score high on Honesty–Humility tend to treat others fairly and cooperate with others even when they could exploit them without suffering retaliation (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Conversely, low scorers exploit others through subtle manipulations (Ashton & Lee, 2007), feel superior to others, and lack sincerity within interpersonal relationships (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Thus, with respect to revenge, the characteristics that depict the negative side of Honesty–Humility suggest that low scorers may be more likely than high scorers to view revenge as more desirable when appraising its benefits and less undesirable when appraising its costs as they tend to feel motivated and entitled to profit by exploiting others.

Despite these conceptual reasons for expecting an association between Honesty–Humility and revenge, researchers have not yet examined this link. Nevertheless, past research provides indirect support for such an association. For example, *narcissistic entitlement*, one aspect of Honesty–Humility, has been examined in relation to revenge. Entitled narcissists are easily offended following transgressions, more willing to defend their rights, and highly concerned with saving face (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). Further, they insist on being provided with repayment following offenses and attempt to obtain such repayment by taking revenge (see Bishop & Lane, 2002). Recent research has also established that narcissistic entitlement is negatively related to forgiveness and positively associated with seeking retribution (Exline et al., 2004). Consequently, those scoring high on narcissistic entitlement may be prone to retaliating in an effort to save face and protect their self-image following offenses and may thus view revenge as a viable response to transgressions. Extrapolating from these findings, and based on the fact that narcissism is a characteristic of Honesty–Humility, we predict that Honesty–Humility will be associated with individuals' appraisals of the costs and benefits of revenge.

In addition to narcissistic entitlement, researchers have also assessed a pair of constructs called positive and negative reciprocity (Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003). Positive reciprocators attempt to ensure fairness in outcomes, whereas negative reciprocators possess a desire to punish others for their negative behaviors and are more concerned with 'getting even' (Perugini et al., 2003). In their study, Perugini and colleagues demonstrated that negative reciprocity was negatively associated with "Fairness/Non-Exploitation", a construct broadly similar to Honesty–Humility, whereas positive reciprocity was positively associated with this construct. In addition, other research has shown that negative reciprocators are more likely to react with heightened anger and

unfavorable treatment towards individuals who belittle them (Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004). Because Honesty–Humility is conceptually similar to Fairness/Non-Exploitation, these findings again suggest that low scores on Honesty–Humility should be associated with perceiving revenge as more desirable and less undesirable based on appraisals of its outcomes.

Finally, Shepherd and Belicki (2008) found that Honesty–Humility was related to measures of trait forgiveness, with correlations ranging from .14 to .45. Many researchers believe that, to forgive, individuals must forego the opportunity to seek revenge following transgressions (e.g., McCullough, 2001; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). To the extent that this assumption presumes that forgiving is incompatible with revenge, Shepherd and Belicki's results lend additional indirect support to our prediction of an association between Honesty–Humility and revenge.

In sum, on the basis of the research outlined above, we predict:

Hypothesis 1. The lower their scores on Honesty–Humility, the more participants will judge romantic revenge a desirable response in light of its positive outcomes and the less they will judge it undesirable in light of its costs.

1.3. Agreeableness and revenge

The HEXACO Agreeableness factor is represented by the tendency to be tolerant, patient, and calm rather than harsh, irritable, and argumentative (Lee & Ashton, 2004). The Agreeableness factor is also defined by the temperamentalness, anger, and irritability content that resides within the FFM's Neuroticism factor (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Low scorers on HEXACO Agreeableness may become easily angered and tend to hold grudges against individuals who have offended/exploited them (Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2004) whereas high scorers may be more forgiving and tolerant of others even when they have been offended/exploited (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The content of the HEXACO Agreeableness factor thus strongly suggests that low scores on this factor should be associated with revenge appraisals. Specifically, the negative side of Agreeableness encompasses angry, irritable, and quarrelsome behaviors, which may lead people to view the costs of getting even as making revenge less undesirable and the benefits of getting even as making revenge more desirable.

Past research provides indirect support for this association. For example, in the study described earlier, Perugini and colleagues (2003) found that negative reciprocity was negatively related to "Forgiveness/Retaliation", a construct conceptually similar to Agreeableness in the HEXACO model. To the extent that low scores on Agreeableness thus indicate a tendency toward negative reciprocity, and thereby a willingness to retaliate against wrongdoers, Agreeableness should be associated with the tendency to retaliate. These findings provide a basis for predicting that low scores on HEXACO Agreeableness will be associated with judging revenge to be more desirable when evaluating its benefits and less undesirable when evaluating its costs.

Additionally, Shepherd and Belicki (2008) showed that higher scores on HEXACO Agreeableness were strongly related to greater trait forgiveness, with correlations ranging from .29 to .73. To the extent that victims must forego the opportunity to seek revenge (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997) in order to forgive, Shepherd and Belicki's results suggest that measures of Agreeableness should be negatively related to revenge if they are positively associated with trait forgiveness. The logic behind this prediction is bolstered by the presence of irritability and temperamentalness content in the HEXACO Agreeableness factor, as irritability and temperamentalness may generate negative emotions towards a transgressor and inhibit the development of positive emotions (Shepherd & Belicki, 2008).

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