Please accept my sincere and humble apologies: The HEXACO model of personality and the proclivity to apologize

Patrick D. Dunlop [a,*], Kibeom Lee [b], Michael C. Ashton [c], Shannon B. Butcher [a], Amy Dykstra [b]

[a] School of Psychology, The University of Western Australia (M304), 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia 6009, Australia
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive, Northwest Calgary, AB T2N 1N4, Canada
[c] Department of Psychology, Brock University, 500 Glenridge Avenue, St Catharines, ON L2S 3A1, Canada

ABSTRACT

We investigated the links of the HEXACO personality factors and facets with the proclivity to apologize for transgressions, using self- and observer-reports of personality in two adult samples. The proclivity to apologize showed its strongest correlations with the honesty–humility factor, whether evaluated by the self or a knowledgeable observer. Agreeableness was a positive correlate of the proclivity to apologize in one sample only. In both samples, self-reported conscientiousness was positively associated with a proclivity to apologize. We also obtained self-reports on the guilt and shame proneness scales, given the strong conceptual link between guilt and apology. The proclivity to apologize was associated positively with facets of guilt (especially Negative Behavior Evaluation) but negatively with one facet of Shame (Withdrawal).

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1. Introduction

Much research has examined the factors that determine a victim's willingness to forgive a perpetrator for a transgression (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Worthington, 2005) but comparatively little research has considered the factors that predict *forgiveness seeking* behavior on the part of a perpetrator (Sandage, Worthington, Hight, & Berry, 2000). The provision of a sincere apology is, however, an effective means to elicit forgiveness from others (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997) and reduces the chances and extent of retaliation (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). Nevertheless, researchers have only recently sought to understand the dispositional and situational predictors of apology behavior. In the present studies, we aim to investigate the personality predictors of a dispositional willingness to apologize using both self- and observer-reports on the HEXACO dimensions of personality. The HEXACO model – particularly its honesty–humility factor – holds particular conceptual relevance to a dispositional willingness to apologize.

Sandage et al. (2000) defined forgiveness seeking as "a motivation to accept moral responsibility and to attempt interpersonal reparation following relational injury in which one is morally cul-

pable" (p. 22). Sandage et al. noted that forgiveness seeking requires a perpetrator to understand the perspective of the victim, empathize with them, and feel a sense of guilt or sorrow for the harm done to them. Recently, attention has turned toward the specific forgiveness-seeking act of apologizing, defined here as "a combined statement of acknowledgment of wrongdoing and an expression of guilt" (Leunissen, De Cremer, Reinders Folmer, & van Dijke, 2013; p. 316). In two sets of studies, Howell et al. (Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro, 2011; Howell, Turowski, & Buro, 2012) presented a measure of the proclivity to apologize (PAM); that is, a measure of "individual differences in the inclination to apologize when one has engaged in an interpersonal transgression" (Howell et al., 2011; p. 510). In their original work, Howell et al. (2011) observed a negative association of the PAM with Big Five neuroticism ($r = -.29$) and a positive association with Big Five agreeableness ($r = .28$). Correlations between the PAM and narrower personality measures also conformed to a similar pattern, with generally positive associations being observed with measures that indicate positive well-being (e.g., self-esteem, positive affect) and consideration of others (e.g., the "moral foundation" of Care/Harm and the capacity for compassion and love).

Research into the links between the PAM and broad personality factors has been limited to the Big Five personality model. However, some features of the HEXACO personality model are likely to hold important implications for the understanding of apology

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 8 6488 7614.
  E-mail address: patrick.dunlop@uwa.edu.au (P.D. Dunlop).

proclivities in the terms of broader personality factors. The HEXACO model emerged from the results of lexical studies of personality structure conducted in various languages (Ashton & Lee, 2007), which showed six recurring factors: honesty–humility (H), emotionality (E), extraversion (X), agreeableness (A), conscientiousness (C), and openness (O). The most distinguishing feature of HEXACO model, as compared with the Big Five, is the H dimension, which is defined by such traits as sincerity, fairness, modesty, and avoidance of greed versus disingenuousness, fraud, self-importance, and ostentation. Since the lexical research of Ashton et al. (2004), many studies have shown that the H factor uniquely accounts for variance in important outcomes including delinquency (Dunlop, Morrison, Koenig, & Silcox, 2012), unethical business decision making (Lee, Ashton, Morrison, Cordery, & Dunlop, 2008), and strategic cooperation (Hilbig, Zettler, & Heydasch, 2012). A second critical difference between the HEXACO and the Big Five lies in the configuration of the HEXACO emotionality and agreeableness factors versus the Big Five neuroticism and agreeableness factors. The HEXACO E factor subsumes content regarding the tendency to form emotional bonds and seek emotional support from others, whereas within the Big Five, this content is to some extent subsumed by agreeableness. Conversely, the HEXACO A factor subsumes (at its low pole) the tendency toward anger, whereas this content is captured by the neuroticism factor of the Big Five (Ashton & Lee, 2007).

1.1. HEXACO and the proclivity to apologize

The act of apologizing for a transgression is likely to be motivated by a desire to reduce guilt and to maintain relations with the victim (Lazare, 2004) and there are strong conceptual reasons to suspect that a disposition to apologize for transgressions would be positively associated with the H factor. First, apologizing requires an acknowledgment that the perpetrator has indeed transgressed (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). Low-H individuals are relatively more inclined to take advantage of people (i.e., exhibiting low levels of fairness), and thus would probably rarely see a need to apologize for a transgression. Second, the act of apologizing is a humbling experience that requires a person to put themselves in the hands of another who is in a relative position of power. Low-H individuals, given their relative sense of self-importance and attraction to high social status (i.e., low modesty), are likely to be reluctant to put themselves in a position where their perceived status is being undermined. Finally, low-H individuals, believing themselves to be entitled to special treatment, are likely to be disproportionately offended by the transgressions of others (cf. narcissism; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). And, given the tendency of low-H persons to engage in antisocial behavior (e.g., Dunlop et al., 2012), such individuals are arguably more inclined to seek vengeance so as to "get even" (independently of low A; Lee & Ashton, 2012), thus they might expect to suffer retaliation in response to an apology. For all of these reasons, we hypothesize that H will be positively associated with the proclivity to apologize (H1).

HEXACO A may also have conceptual ties to a proclivity to apologize. At its low pole, the HEXACO A factor captures a propensity to be unforgiving, to be harsh on others, to be ill-tempered, and to be stubborn or inflexible. A person showing these tendencies may be relatively more inclined to blame a victim for transgressions, or perhaps 'dig one's heels in' rather than apologize, particularly in cases where the transgression was the consequence of some disagreement or conflict. We therefore hypothesize a positive association between HEXACO A and a proclivity to apologize (H2).

HEXACO emotionality (E) appears to have a complex conceptual relationship with apology. The desire to maintain close emotional bonds with others that is symptomatic of high E individuals (expressed via the dependence and sentimentality facets) is indicative of empathy toward others, and thus a likely positive correlate of apology (Howell et al., 2012). By contrast, the influence on apology proclivities of fearfulness and anxiety, also characteristic of higher levels of E, is less clear. On one hand, anxious or fearful individuals may tend to avoid going through the potentially awkward process of offering an apology, but on the other, individuals higher on these traits may be more motivated to apologize for a transgression as a means of alleviating anxiety associated with feelings of guilt. It is therefore difficult to specify any a priori hypothesis regarding the link between the broader HEXACO E factor and the proclivity to apologize.

1.2. Guilt proneness and apology

We also examined the PAM in relation to the guilt and shame proneness scales (GASP; Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011), which are of close theoretical relevance to the proclivity to apologize (see Sandage et al., 2000). Specifically, the GASP's two guilt subscales capture the extent to which an individual who has committed a transgression would feel bad about one's actions (Negative Behavior Evaluation; NBE) and be motivated to correct one's behaviors in the future (Repair). The Shame subscales of the GASP capture the tendencies to feel bad about oneself (Negative Self Evaluation; NSE) and to avoid contact with others (Withdrawal) after having committed a transgression. The GASP guilt scales are expected to be positively associated with the PAM, due to the urge to correct a transgression, but one of the Shame scales (i.e., Withdrawal) is expected to be negatively associated with it, due to the urge to escape the situation as a means to relieve shame (a pattern of results observed by Howell et al., 2012).

1.3. Contributions of the present study

The present study contributes to our understanding of the proclivity to apologize for transgressions against others in several key ways. It represents the first attempt to understand the relationship between broad personality traits and a proclivity to apologize using the HEXACO model, which includes the theoretically relevant H factor. Second, it also examines the PAM in terms of narrow facet scales included in the HEXACO and the GASP to provide a more fine-grained description of the PAM—personality association. Third, this study introduces observer reports of personality to the study of apology proclivities and personality. The use of observer reports of personality is an important addition to the study of apology, one that eliminates common method variance as an alternative explanation for relationships among dispositional variables.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

2.1.1. Sample 1

Data from this sample were collected in 2011. A total of 154 participants were recruited (68% women, mean age = 31.6 years, SD = 13.6). 34 were undergraduate psychology students at an Australian university, who participated in exchange for course credit, and 120 were recruited via social networking sites, email, and word of mouth (no remuneration was granted). All participants were asked to recruit another person whom they had known for at least 12 months so as to obtain observer reports. In total, observer reports were available for 139 individuals. Participants knew their respective 'observers' for a median of 6 years (mean = 11.1, SD = 11.2). The participant pairs comprised romantic partners (44%), friends (37%), work colleagues (10%), or relatives (8%).