# Trait forgiveness and traitedness within the HEXACO model of personality

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## ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to establish how trait forgiveness relates to broad personality factors as defined by the HEXACO model of personality, as opposed to the Big Five/Five-Factor models of personality. Since the HEXACO model differs from the Big Five model, different correlations were predicted to emerge, thus highlighting the importance of specific content in predicting trait forgiveness. Secondly, it was proposed that isolating cross-situationally consistent forgivers would lead to stronger correlations between forgiveness and various traits traditionally associated with trait forgiveness. The results found that Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and Emotionality, as well as various facets of the Extraversion and Conscientiousness factors, were related to trait forgiveness. Due to differences in content between the HEXACO and the Big Five, specific content relating to trait forgiveness could be identified. However, isolating consistent forgivers did not yield stronger correlations between personality and trait forgiveness.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a growing body of psychological literature devoted to studying trait forgiveness (or "forgivingness"), which attempts to understand peoples' general tendency to forgive or to not forgive across situations (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Brown, 2003; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Specifically, researchers have been concerned with identifying the basic personality dimensions that are associated with forgiveness in order to better predict forgiving behaviour, and to understand the personality-based mechanisms that are behind it (McCullough, 2001). While much of this research has been conducted using the Big Five/Five-Factor model (FFM) of personality (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987), the current study will instead utilize the recently developed HEXACO model of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2004). We also examine whether or not individuals differ in the consistency of their forgivingness across situations, and whether or not differences in consistency moderate the relations between personality and forgivingness.

Five-Factor models of personality propose that personality is comprised of five superseding factors that in combination form narrower personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1987). These factors include Neuroticism (vs. Emotional Stability), Extraversion, Openness to Experience/Intellect, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987). More recently, Lee and Ashton (2004) have proposed that personality is better summarized using a six-factor model instead. Their six-dimen-sional HEXACO model of personality includes the following factors: Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, ConScientiousness, and Openness to Experience. This model represents a re-rotation of the traditional Five-Factors, plus the addition of the new Honesty–Humility factor. There are several advantages to the HEXACO model that have been illustrated in a number of studies (for a review, see Ashton & Lee, 2007). Therefore, the current study is primarily concerned with establishing a relationship between trait forgiveness and various factors of the HEXACO model.

### 1.1. The HEXACO model of personality and forgiveness

In attempting to predict how the HEXACO model will relate to trait forgiveness, it must be noted that several of the HEXACO's factors are different from those of other models, despite sharing similar names and some similar content. The content of Agreeableness and Neuroticism/Emotional Stability in the Five-Factor models is re-rotated and dispersed among the HEXACO's Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and Emotionality factors. According to Lee and Ashton (2004), Honesty–Humility represents a tendency to be fair, sincere, and unassuming versus being sly, greedy, and pretentious. Agreeableness is characterized by being calm, cooperative, and easy-going, as opposed to being harsh, temperamental, and critical. Therefore, The HEXACO's Agreeableness factor is partly characterized by the irritability and temperamental content that normally resides within the Big Five's neuroticism factor. The HEXACO's Emotionality factor is then characterized by sentimentality, sensitivity, fearfulness, and anxiety, as opposed to toughness, bravery, and self-assurance.

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The remaining factors in the HEXACO model are generally unchanged from their Five-Factor counterparts (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Extraversion is characterized by sociability and cheerfulness versus shyness and passivity. The HEXACO's Conscientiousness factor includes being thorough and hardworking versus being sloppy and impulsive. However, this factor is void of any moral content. Finally, Openness to Experience is characterized by inquisitiveness and unconventionality versus conventionality and a lack of creativity.

While no previous research has attempted to investigate trait forgiveness using the HEXACO model, there are studies that provide some direction in predicting how they will relate to one another. Specifically, previous research suggests that Agreeableness, Emotionality, and Honesty–Humility should correlate with trait forgiveness.

FFM Agreeableness is perhaps one of the most well supported correlates of forgiveness (see Mullet, Neto, & Rivière, 2005 for a review). FFM Agreeableness is associated with being good-natured, selfless, flexible, sympathetic, and forgiving (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Intuitively, Agreeableness (in all of its forms) should therefore relate to forgiveness, since forgiveness is seen as a prosocial and altruistic act (Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, & Jackson, 1998; McCullough, 2001) that is associated with empathy and goodwill (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Numerous empirical studies have supported these intuitive and conceptual links (Mullet et al., 2005). The connection between forgiveness and agreeableness is so much so that the HEXACO includes forgiveness as one of the facets that make up its Agreeableness factor.

It is also important to mention that the HEXACO's Agreeableness factor should also benefit from gaining the irritability, anger, and temperamentalness content that is typically found in neuroticism. After all, if forgiveness is effortful and deliberate (Neto & Mullet, 2004), and represents an inhibition of vengeful thoughts or retaliation (Ashton et al., 1998; McCullough, 2001; McCullough et al., 1997), then it would be expected that anger and negative affect impede this process. Therefore, HEXACO Agreeableness should be a powerful predictor of forgiveness.

In addition to Agreeableness, Emotionality should also relate to trait forgiveness. While neuroticism (Emotionality's quasi-equivalent factor in the Big Five model) has been found to negatively correlate with forgiveness (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; Brown, 2003; Brown & Phillips, 2005; Neto & Mullet, 2004; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002), the potential relationship between Emotionality and forgiveness should be established on its own merits. Firstly, emotionality is related to empathic concern and kin altruism (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Therefore, given the established relationships between empathy and forgiveness (for review see Belicki, Rourke, & McCarthy, 2007), and altruism and forgiveness (Ashton et al., 1998; McCullough, 2001), a positive correlation between Emotionality and forgiveness might be expected. However, there are qualities that define the negative pole of Emotionality that should also relate to higher levels of forgiveness, such as self-assurance and lower levels of anxiety. Based on this particular content, one would instead expect a negative relationship between Emotionality and forgiveness, as is predicted in the current study. Specifically, it is predicted that the anxiety facet of Emotionality will be negatively related to forgiveness. This is based on the consistent finding that anxiety acts as a barrier to forgiveness (see Mullet et al., 2005). Secondly, because the negative pole of Emotionality's dependence facet is defined by self-assurance and being able to cope with difficulties, it is predicted that this facet will also be negatively related to forgiveness.

Finally, the content of the Honesty–Humility factor largely suggests that those who score high on this factor should be more forgiving, as high scorers on Honesty–Humility tend to be loyal, truth-loving, altruistic, fair, and sincere in interpersonal relationships (Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2004). In connection with this, past studies have illustrated that higher levels of cooperativeness (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004), a willingness to share resources (McCullough, 2001), and gratitude (Mullet et al., 2005) all relate to trait forgiveness. Furthermore, Worthington (1998) identifies a humility component to forgiveness, and suggests that a certain level of modesty and sincerity (both facets of the Honesty–Humility factor) are necessary to see one's self as being imperfect and capable of forgiving.

Correspondingly, characteristics that represent the negative end of Honesty–Humility, such as pretentiousness, conceitedness, greed (Ashton et al., 2004), and narcissism (Lee & Ashton, 2005) have been shown to act against forgiving behaviour. For example, Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, and Finkel (2004), found that those who scored high in narcissistic entitlement (characterized by expecting special treatment and seeking-repayment for personal harm) were especially concerned with saving face. Therefore, they downplayed the virtues of forgiveness, and perceived it as a risk to one's pride and self-image. This extreme protection of one's self image then drives individuals away from forgiving and toward retribution. Similarly, Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, and Ercolani (2003) have identified a construct (conceptually similar to low forgiveness) called "negative reciprocity", which captures this heightened need to punish others for their negative behaviour. It was found that negative reciprocity showed a substantial, negative correlation with "Fairness/Non-exploitation", which is conceptually similar to Honesty–Humility.

Based on this research and the content that defines Honesty–Humility, it is expected that this factor will be positively related to forgiveness. Specifically, Honesty–Humility should show stronger correlations with measures that contain vengeance-seeking content (such as the Trait Forgiveness Scale, and the "forgiveness of others" subscale of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale, which will be described later in this article). This prediction is based on the aforementioned finding that aspects of Honesty–Humility, such as valuing fairness and condemning exploitation, are negatively related to seeking punishment against others (Perugini et al., 2003). Conversely, (low) Honesty–Humility shares much in common with narcissistic entitlement, which is positively related to seeking retribution, and negatively related to forgiveness (Exline et al., 2004). In making these predictions regarding Honesty–Humility and forgiveness, we hope to show that Honesty–Humility can uniquely contribute to our understanding of trait forgiveness (see Ashton & Lee, 2007 for a review of how the HEXACO model may better account for certain personality variables above and beyond the Big Five/FFM).

In addition to examining trait forgiveness within the space of the HEXACO factors, a second goal of the current study was to examine whether or not individuals vary in how consistently they forgive across situations. Bem and Allen (1974) suggested that certain traits are only relevant to some people, who then show more consistent behaviour across situations (traitedness). Conversely, others rely more on situational factors, and are therefore more difficult to predict using global trait measures (see Cucina & Vasilopoulos, 2005 for a more recent statement of this argument). We therefore assessed individuals' consistency in forgivingness across situations and examined whether this moderated the relations between measures of forgiveness and the HEXACO.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 178 undergraduate students, 146 women and 32 men, participated in the current study. The modal age of participants was 18, with a mean age of 19.49 ($SD$ = 3.82). Age ranged from 18 to 50 years old.