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Forgiveness and personality traits

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Abstract

Using a sample of 275 college students, this study examined the relationship between forgiveness of others (i.e., situational and dispositional) and the five-factor model of personality. All forgiveness measures were negatively correlated with Neuroticism and positively correlated with Agreeableness. Extraversion was positively related to one forgiveness measure. None of the forgiveness measures were related to Openness or Conscientiousness. However, Conscientiousness showed suppression effects and was negatively correlated with one situational and one dispositional forgiveness measure when included in multiple regression equations. Several facets of the five-factor domains were significantly correlated with forgiveness in the expected direction. The five-factor domains uniquely contributed to the prediction of forgiveness beyond demographics, empathy, religiousness, and social desirability.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have begun to examine how personality relates to forgiveness. Emmons (2000) argued that the relationship between personality and forgiveness can best be understood when

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personality is conceptualized as a multi-level construct including personality traits (level 1), strategies used to achieve major life goals (level 2), and life narratives (level 3). This study focused on the trait level (level 1) from this taxonomy. Specifically, this study examined how forgiveness relates to the five-factor model of personality. This study also explored whether the five-factor model of personality predicts forgiveness beyond other empirically established predictors such as religiousness (Poloma & Gallup, 1991; Rokeach, 1973; Shoemaker & Bolt, 1977) and empathy (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Most other researchers have focused on how dispositional forgiveness relates to personality traits (e.g., Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, & Jackson, 1998; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). In contrast, this study examined how personality traits relate to both dispositional forgiveness and forgiveness of a specific offender. Unlike previous research, this study also examined how personality variables relate to the following aspects of forgiving an offender: Absence of Negative (i.e., overcoming negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward an offender) and Presence of Positive (i.e., developing positive thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward an offender).

1.1. The five-factor model of personality

Worthington's (1998) assertion that Neuroticism is an inhibitory characteristic of forgiveness has received empirical support (Ashton et al., 1998; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Not surprisingly, angry hostility, an important facet of Neuroticism, has been implicated as a consistent barrier to forgiveness (Kaplan, 1992; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). On the other hand, Worthington (1998) identified Agreeableness as a fostering characteristic of forgiveness. Empirical research generally supports this hypothesis, finding positive correlations between Agreeableness and forgiveness of others (Ashton et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 2001; Ross, Kendall, Matters, Wrobel, & Rye, 2004). However, the research findings are not entirely consistent. For instance, Walker and Gorsuch (2002) found that Agreeableness was significantly related to receiving forgiveness from others and God but was not related to forgiving others.

There are mixed findings regarding how other five-factor domains relate to forgiveness of others. For example, Worthington's (1998) suggestion that introversion is an inhibitory characteristic of forgiveness is supported by Ross et al.'s (2004) finding that forgiveness of others was positively related to Extraversion and the associated facets of warmth and positive emotions. Although Walker and Gorsuch (2002) found that individuals who were introverted were less likely to receive forgiveness from others, they found no relationship between forgiving others and the Surgency/Extraversion domain.

Worthington (1998) also posited that Openness to Experience is a fostering characteristic of forgiveness. However, several studies have failed to find a relationship between Openness to Experience and forgiveness of others (Ashton et al., 1998; Ross et al., 2004; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). It should be noted that Walker and Gorsuch (2002) found a negative correlation between the imagination facet of Openness to Experience and forgiveness of others. Several studies have also failed to find a relationship between forgiveness of others and Conscientiousness (Ashton et al., 1998; Ross et al., 2004; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). However, Walker and Gorsuch (2002) found a positive correlation between the dutifulness facet of Conscientiousness and forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness of others and receiving God's forgiveness).

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