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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Personality Traits as Predictors of Forgiveness and Gratitude

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### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore personality traits in relation to the forgiveness and gratitude. Furthermore, it was also aimed to investigate the impact of personality traits on these two phenomenons. For this purpose, data of 403 undergraduates and post-graduate students (110 males and 293 females) of Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan was collected. Three scales including Big Five Inventory, Forgiveness Scale and Gratitude Questionnaire were used to assess personality traits, forgiveness and gratitude respectively. The findings revealed positive effect of some personality traits such as extrovert, agreeableness and conscientiousness on forgiveness ( $r=0.994$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $r=0.994$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $r=0.991$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) respectively and gratitude ( $r=0.973$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $r=0.973$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $r=-0.984$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) correspondingly whereas other traits like neuroticism and openness showed negative impact on forgiveness ( $r=-0.989$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $r=-0.989$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) and gratitude ( $r=-0.980$ ;  $p<0.001$ ;  $r=0.971$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). In conclusion, the relationship between gratitude and forgiveness was observed to be positively correlated. Hence, people who are outgoing, social and helping tend to show more characteristics of forgiveness and gratitude.

### INTRODUCTION

Personality is considered as a combination of different qualities which makes an individual distinct from others, it predicts the way of one's actions and reactions. The different traits of personality relate to various constructs and forgiveness is assumed to be one of them (Neto, 2007).

Forgiveness is a general term which can be classified into: forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others. Forgiveness to others is taken as surrendering one's right of taking revenge from other and self-forgiveness is seen as a capability of letting go one's moments of being guilty. It is often seen that these aspects of forgiveness are usually correlated with the various traits of personality (McCullough et al., 2001a).

Extroverts incline towards more forgiving attitude and thus live comparatively happier life. They are usually positive, hyperactive and courageous people who like taking risks and make friends. Introverts on the other side are quiet, reluctant and non-social beings (Costa and McCrae, 1992).

Gratitude, like forgiveness, has been shown to have positive associations with well-being, positive affect, emotions and happiness. Gratitude is the feeling of

thankfulness for what one possesses (Mullet et al., 2003). There are various studies (McCullough et al., 2002; Bartlett and De Steno, 2006) supporting the relationship between forgiveness and gratitude but in the present study, personality traits have also been taken into consideration along with forgiveness and gratitude.

Association of personality traits with forgiveness and gratitude is considered in the present study. Significant predictors in enduring resentment were found to be agreeableness and neuroticism (Roberts, 1995; Neto, 2007). Less revengeful feelings are experienced by highly agreeable and emotionally stable individuals, whereas agreeableness was only found to be significant predictor of forgiveness. Individuals with agreeable traits are seen to be having various pro-social traits and are more optimistic for maintaining positive relationships. This could be the reason that they are merciful over the wrong doings of others. Emphasis has been laid on interpersonal (e.g. altruism, tenderheartedness) as well as intrapersonal (e.g. trust, patience) nature of forgiving others because of the strong relation of forgiveness to agreeableness (Brose et al., 2005). While studying trait forgiveness, gratitude was found to be a significant predictor. In the

hierarchical models gratitude contributed an important ratio of variance for forgiveness which is beyond personality. In enduring resentment, gratitude did not add significant portion of the variance beyond personality domains. Researches on five – factor model and forgiveness have always been conscious about the traits which are linked to forgiveness (Ashton et al., 1998; Ross et al., 2004)

Willingness to forgive is influenced by social solidarity needs and these are largely linked to the type of personality one possesses. There is no previous study done in this region to notice how personality impacts forgiveness and gratitude. This work assisted in the exploration of specific personality type leading to the degree of forgiveness and being grateful (Neto, 2007; McCullough et al., 2001b; Saucier and Ostendorf, 1999). Personality of an individual no doubt is an essential factor to be considered while studying for forgiveness because individual human traits contribute majorly to the level of forgiveness. This study aimed to explore not only the effect of personality traits on forgiveness but also of gratitude. The relationship of gratitude and forgiveness would also be considered.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Target population

A total of 403 young adults (293 females and 110 males) of age range between 20-25 years (Mean age=23.43; SD=2.75) were randomly selected from Faculty of Social Sciences (including Department of Psychology; Sociology; Institute of Management sciences; Institute of Social Sciences and School of Economics), Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan. Sample was taken through Convenient sampling technique and participants belonged to the same socio- economic class.

### Survey questionnaires

Measures of forgiveness, personality, and gratitude were taken to conduct the research. For the analysis of data, Statistical Package for social sciences (version 21) was used to do regression analysis and finding correlation.

Heartland forgiveness Scale (Thompson and Synder, 2003) comprising 18 items, was equally divided into three parts (six items each) and was used to measure forgiveness. Dispositional forgiveness of oneself was measured by the very first items followed by measure of others and then dispositional forgiveness of situations. 7-point likert-scale was used to made responses. Accepting reliability of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale is (as = 0.72–0.87) and there is no reverse scoring of the items of this scale.

Six item gratitude Questionnaire was extracted from original thirty nine items questionnaire (GQ-6;

McCullough et al. 2002). Questionnaire utilizes 7-likert scale to obtain answers with 2 items being reverse scored. Internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.82$ ) and construct validity (McCullough et al., 2002) help in providing evidences of correlational analyses.

Oliver and Benet-Martinez (Benet-Martinez and John, 1998) developed 44 item test measures score of each of the personality traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, extroversion and intellect or openness). The items measuring extraversion traits are 1, 11, 16, 26, 36 including 6, 21 and 31 being reversed scored. Items of Agreeableness are 7, 17, 22, 32, 42 and reverse scored are 2, 12, 27 and 37. Conscientiousness is measured by 3, 8R, 13, 18R, 23R, 28, 33, 38 and 43R. Items measuring Neuroticism are 39, 29, 19, 14, 4 and reverse scored are 9, 24 and 34. Openness is measured by 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35R, 40, 41R and 44.

### Data collection

Data regarding forgiveness, personality and gratitude was collected considering ethical guidelines of American Psychological Association. The participants were requested to be honest and they were ensured that their data would be kept totally confidential and anonymous. Participants were approached during university timings and instructions about questionnaire filling were given to them by the researcher.

## RESULTS

Inferential analysis of the data was done by utilizing Inter-correlation matrix for the conclusion and interpretation of results.

Results depicted extrovert ( $r=0.0994$ ), Agreeableness ( $r=0.994$ ) and conscientiousness ( $r=0.991$ ) traits have highly significant positive relationship with forgiveness and extrovert ( $r=0.973$ ), agreeableness ( $r=0.973$ ) and openness to experience ( $r=0.971$ ) traits showed significantly positive relationship with gratitude. On the other hand, openness to experience ( $r=0.989$ ) and neuroticism ( $r=-0.989$ ) traits of personality has significant negative relationship with forgiveness. Moreover, neuroticism ( $r=-0.980$ ) and conscientiousness ( $r=-0.984$ ) personality traits have significant negative correlation with gratitude. (Table 1) Result depicts that Agreeableness ( $\beta=0.428^{**}$ ) and Extrovert ( $\beta=0.994^{***}$ ) shows high impact on Forgiveness whereas Openness ( $\beta=-0.059$ ) shows negative impact. The value for Neuroticism is ( $\beta=0.007$ ) and Conscientiousness ( $\beta=0.171$ ). The impact of Personality on gratitude shows that extrovert ( $\beta=0.962^{***}$ ) shows a positive link whereas Conscientiousness ( $\beta=-0.449^{***}$ ) and Neuroticism ( $-0.238^*$ ) shows negative impact. The value of agreeableness is ( $\beta=-0.171$ ) and openness ( $\beta=-0.031$ ) (Table 2).

**Table 1: Matrix of Pearson Correlational Coefficient on the scores of Subscales of Big Five Inventory, forgiveness and gratitude**

Sr. No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Extrovert	1	1.000**	-.991**	-.993**	.998**	.994**	.973**
2	Agreeableness		1	-.990**	-.983**	.996**	.994**	.973**
3	Openness			1	.995**	-.989**	-.989**	.971**
4	Neuroticism				1	-.991**	-.989**	-.980*
5	Conscientiousness					1	.991**	-.984*
6	Forgiveness						1	.962**
7	Gratitude							1

Note. N = 403 \*\*p<0.01

**Table 2: Impact of Personality traits on Forgiveness and Gratitude**

	Model I (Impact of personality traits on Forgiveness)		Model II (Impact of personality traits on Gratitude)			
	B	SE	B	b	SE	β
Constant	3.225	.568		2.153	.668	
Agreeableness	1.350	.150	.428**	-.106	.092	-.171
openness to experience	-.013	.017	-.059	-.003	.011	-.031
Neuroticism	.021	.187	.007	-.255	.115	-.238*
Extrovert	.364	.002	.994***	.367	.005	.962***
Conscientiousness	-.674	.171	-.234**	-.042	.105	-.449**
R <sup>2</sup>		.988			.969	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.931			.963	
F		8.282			7.536	

Note. p< = 0.01 \*p< = 0.05, \*\*\*p< = 0.001

## DISCUSSION

The negative correlation of neuroticism with forgiveness is confirmed as supported by various studies. Individuals scoring high on neuroticism experience more feelings of depressed mood, anxiety, anger and guilt which become hurdle in their tendency to forgo other’s shortcomings.

Numerous studies have stated the same recurring result that lesser range of neuroticism lead to greater range of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2001a,c; McCullough and Hoyt, 2002; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002) with the effect size of testified correlations fluctuating from small (e.g., r = .21; McCullough and Hoyt, 2002) to extreme (e.g., r = .52)

The idea of Worthington (1998) that neuroticism is a prominent factor of forgiveness did not succeed to get a highlighted place (Ashton et al., 1998; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002). A major hurdle for forgiveness is noticed to be the annoyed hostility and bitterness of Neuroticism (Kaplan, 1992; McCullough et al., 2001c). Relationship of openness with forgiveness is negative. Openness is defined by those individuals who are risky enough to try new things and they do not hesitate exhibiting their emotions which may be a factor leading to being less forgiving as they are daring to say how they have been hurt.

Finding a link between forgiveness of others and openness to experience has not been easy for various studies (Ashton et al., 1998; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002; Ross et al., 2004) still there happens to be a

satisfying aspect of forgiveness in regard to openness as narrated by Worthington (1998). Walker and Gorsuch (2002) also quoted negative association between openness and forgiveness of others

Study replicates that individuals with high tendency to forgive mostly belong to emotionally stable and agreeable personality trait. The researches already steered in the US (McCullough et al., 2001a) does match a lot with this study. Whereas findings of Watkins and Regmi (2004) are in opposition to it, which were conducted on Nepalese sample and indicated no relationship between forgiveness and personality traits. Social oriented factors (e.g., relationship harmony) in collectivist societies as indicated by Fu et al. (2004) forecasted much about forgiveness than the personality measures developed in Western cultures.

Individuals who are agreeable are seen to be very cooperative, soft hearted, empathetic, warm and helping and they hold positive remarks about others. They tend to believe that most people are trustworthy, sober and honest, which could be a reason for their high tendency of being forgiving. Agreeableness is mostly seen to have positive association with various forgiveness measures observed across researches (McCullough and Hoyt, 2002).

Additionally, higher levels of forgiveness are seen noticeably and correlate with higher ranges of extraversion (Berry et al., 2001) and this study coincides with it. Extroverts are very easy going and friendly and they get their energy from people around

them. They like gathering and meeting with different individuals. Thus they are very much concerned about their relation with others and tend to exhibit more forgiveness so that they are liked by most. (Costa and McCrae, 1992).

Next objective of the study resulted in positive association of conscientiousness with forgiveness. Conscientiousness have a spontaneous conduct, they plan each and everything and work accordingly towards their goals. Finding an association between conscientiousness and forgiveness resulted in failure in most of the studies (Ashton et al., 1998; Ross et al., 2004; Walker and Gorsuch, 2002). However, current results are consistent with Walker and Gorsuch (2002) who succeeded in getting a positive link between forgiveness and conscientiousness (getting God's forgiveness and forgiveness of others).

Positive relationship of forgiveness with gratitude was found significant in the study. Individuals more prone to forgive are thought to be from trait agreeableness which crop up the notion that gratitude may be associated with this trait. There are various people present who feel thankful for the presence of certain people in their surrounding whom they think contributed to the pleasant conditions in their life. This paves a path for the belief that forgiveness and gratitude are highly related (McCullough et al., 2002).

“The pro-social nature of gratitude suggests the possibility that the grateful disposition is rooted in the basic traits that orient people toward sensitivity and concern for others” (McCullough et al., 2002). It was noticed by Saucier and Ostendorf (1999) that thankful has been a trait related to agreeableness as individuals who assumed themselves and others to be grateful were listed as being agreeable.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Extroverts (personality type) tend to show high levels of forgiveness and gratitude as they are concerned about their social image. Agreeableness and Conscientiousness personality types also exhibit positive relationship with these constructs whereas neuroticists who go deep into the details scored low on forgiveness and trait gratitude along with individuals of openness personality.

The research can be more meaningful if the other sub divisions of forgiveness are also studied. Because it will provide a better understanding of the underlying causes of seeking forgiveness. Sample size should be increased for further research in this area. This study only tells about young adults, different age groups could be taken to see the age differences in showing trait forgiveness and gratitude.

### Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally in the preparation of this manuscript.

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