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## PERSONALITY TRAITS AND TWO DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVINGNESS

Although personality characteristics have been conceptualized as influencing individuals' propensity to forgive, the findings in this field are inconsistent and require further studies. The five-factor model has been explored most frequently, and personality traits, especially agreeableness and neuroticism, have been found to be related to forgiveness. This study investigated the relationships between five personality domains and different aspects of dispositional forgiveness, termed *forgivingness*, namely positive and negative dimensions of forgivingness of oneself, other people, and situations beyond anyone's control. Data were collected from 153 adults aged from 20 to 55 years. The participants completed the NEO-FFI Personality Inventory and the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). Correlation and regression analyses were performed. The results demonstrated that personality traits explained variance in most HFS subscales. Neuroticism, agreeableness and extraversion were significant predictors of different dimensions of forgivingness. Neuroticism negatively predicted the overall level of forgivingness and overcoming unforgiveness of self, others, and situations. Extraversion along with neuroticism also negatively predicted total forgivingness as well as overcoming unforgiveness in general and towards others. Agreeableness was significantly related to positive forgivingness in general and towards others.

**Keywords:** personality; five-factor model; forgivingness; forgiveness; overcoming unforgiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

Interest in the psychological aspects of forgiveness has increased over the last twenty or thirty years. This was associated with several events. The key ones were: the introduction of the first measures of forgiveness, developed by teams cooperating with Enright (Subkoviak et al., 1995) and McCullough (McCullough et al., 1998), as well as financial support for research on forgiveness. A notable research support initiative was undertaken in 1997 by the John Templeton Foundation in the form of the Campaign for Forgiveness Research (see Exline, Worthington, Hill, McCullough, 2003), and subsequently by other agencies, such as the National Science Foundation or the National Institute for Mental Health (see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). A turn towards positive psychology that was taking place at the very same time was also of considerable significance. Its representatives pointed out that psychology neglected phenomena that let people live a productive, fulfilled life and develop their well-being (see Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006). They observed that one of the key elements that contribute to optimal functioning and satisfying life is forgiveness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Finally, in 2006, American Psychological Association (APA) publicly announced an outline of contemporary psychological research significant for the United Nations mission. Forgiveness was mentioned, again, as one of the major issues (American Psychological Association, 2006).

After decades of debate, forgiveness is now commonly defined as an individual's conscious decision to abandon hostile and vengeful thoughts, feelings, and behavior towards the perpetrator (Exline et al., 2003). It may, but not have to, be accompanied by an increase in positive forms of regard towards the wrongdoer, such as kindness, generosity, sympathy, or re-approaching actions (Enright, 1996; Sells & Hargrave, 1998; McCullough et al., 1998; Rye et al., 2001; Wade & Worthington, 2003; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Thompson et al., 2005). Previous research has actually revealed many important benefits of forgiveness conceptualized in this way, including recovery after severe injuries or traumas (Orcutt, Pickett, & Pope, 2008), strengthened interpersonal relationships (Fincham et al., 2004), better physical (Lawler-Row, Karremas, Scott, Edlis-Matityahou, & Edwards, 2008) and mental health (Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004), and enhanced individual's psychological well-being (Thompson et al., 2005; Rye et al., 2001; Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008). Therefore, forgiveness appears to be a significant and desirable aspect of human functioning.

In order to promote forgiveness, it is important to expand knowledge about its predicting factors (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). A precise

identification of the variables favoring forgiveness is all the more important, since researchers have pointed out that forgiveness might be seen as a state response or as a disposition (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). The distinction between episodic forgiveness (as a state), which refers to a particular guilt of an individual wrongdoer, and a disposition, i.e. a relatively stable trait or ability to forgive – *forgivingness* (Roberts, 1995; Berry, Worthington, Parrott III, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Mullet, Neto, & Riviere, 2005), was justified, inter alia, by the observation that different predictors are related to these two types of forgiveness (e.g., Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Fehr et al., 2010; Mróz & Kaleta, 2017). It also appears that forgiveness of a specific offence does not necessarily stem from the fact that someone is a forgiving person in general, and the other way round – a disposition to forgive does not necessarily mean that the person will forgive all particular wrongs (Thompson et al., 2005; Eaton et al., 2006; Kaleta, Mróz, & Guzewicz, 2016). What is more, scholars have pointed out positive and negative aspects of forgiveness, seen both as a state and a trait, in its two different dimensions. According to them (Worthington & Wade, 1999; Fincham et al., 2004), forgiveness cannot be seen solely through the prism of a one-dimensional structure, with forgiveness on the one end of the continuum and unforgiveness on the other. A fuller, two-dimensional approach places positive aspects associated with forgiveness on one dimension and negative aspects on the other dimension. The positive perspective is related to the experience of positive feelings, thoughts, and motivations towards the wrongdoer, whereas the negative dimension of forgiveness (i.e., overcoming unforgiveness) focuses on emotions, thoughts, or motives associated with the willingness to take revenge or to avoid the wrongdoer and on diminishing them (Worthington & Wade, 1999; Fincham et al., 2004). Different motives for granting forgiveness are mentioned, positive or negative in nature. Finally, forgiveness might be directed towards different objects. One may forgive other people, oneself, or even a situation beyond one's control (Thompson et al., 2005). In this study we investigate dispositional forgiveness and its positive and negative dimensions targeted on oneself, other people, and situations beyond anyone's control.

Personality traits are one of the most important factors that favor different aspects of forgiveness as they have great influence on every person's actions. People with different personality characteristics may think about themselves, other people and situations in various ways. They might be positive or hostile, they might ignore people's faults or exaggerate them, nurture anger or easily calm down. All these characteristics affect the ability to forgive, which is a way

to heal a difficult interpersonal situation and maintain well-being (Abid, Shafiq, Naz, & Riaz, 2015). Among different traits, five personality domains have been the most frequently explored in the context of forgiveness (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Mullet et al., 2005). The five-factor model (Costa & McCrae, 1992, 1995) including neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, seems to be very helpful in explaining willingness to forgive. Neurotic individuals are characterized as vulnerable and inclined to experience negative emotions. Extraverted people are energetic, assertive, active, and sociable, and they tend to experience positive emotions. Openness to experience is defined by such qualities as open-mindedness, divergent thinking, and creativity. Agreeableness implies such traits as warmth, trust, and cooperativeness. Finally, conscientiousness is a trait of individuals who are well-organized, responsible, reliable, thorough, and hardworking (Costa & McCrae 1980; McCrae & Costa, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1995).

All five personality traits have been conceptualized as influencing propensity to forgive (e.g., Berry et al., 2001). Especially agreeableness and extraversion have been assumed to foster forgiveness because they predispose individuals to maintain more positive interpersonal relations. On the other hand, neuroticism has been perceived as a barrier in the process of forgiving because it involves bias towards anxious rumination and an impaired emotion regulation capacity. However, the findings are inconsistent and require further studies. There have been few studies showing significant associations between all five personality factors and forgiveness (Abid et al., 2015; Hafnidar, 2013), but most often only some traits corresponded to forgiveness.

Neuroticism is a well-documented factor inversely correlated with both state and trait forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; Hill, Allemand, & Burrow, 2010; Kamat, Jones, & Row, 2006; Koutsos, Wertheim, & Kornblum, 2008; Maltby et al., 2004; Maltby et al., 2008; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Rey & Extremera, 2014; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). In turn, agreeableness has shown a positive association with both types of forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Brose et al., 2005; Brown, 2003; Hill et al., 2010; Kamat et al., 2006; Koutsos et al., 2008; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Rey & Extremera, 2014, 2016). In the case of other personality traits, only few studies have confirmed their relationships with forgiveness. Conscientiousness correlated positively with forgiveness (Balliet, 2010; Berry et al., 2001; Kamat et al., 2006) and episodic forgiveness (only with the dimension of motivation to take revenge; Rey & Extremera, 2014, 2016). Extraversion has been found to be significantly related to situational (Maltby et al., 2004) and dispositional

forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Ross, Kendall, Matterns, Wrobel, & Rye, 2004). General openness to experience is a trait that has been the least strongly associated with forgiveness (Abid et al., 2015; Hafnidar, 2013). More subtle associations have been revealed when personality was measured not only in domains but also in facets. Moreover, the five personality factors were differently related to different aspects of forgiveness. For instance, as regards the positive and negative dimensions of episodic forgiveness, all facets of neuroticism correlated with the absence of negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior towards the wrongdoer, while only angry hostility and vulnerability were related to the presence of positive attitude, and only one facet of conscientiousness – i.e., competence – correlated with the negative dimension of forgiveness (Brose et al., 2005). Research on self- and other-forgiveness in the five-factor model (Ross et al., 2004) showed that self-forgiveness negatively correlated with all facets of neuroticism, whereas other-forgiveness was related only to hostility. Forgiveness of others correlated positively with all facets of agreeableness, while forgiveness of self was related positively to trust and negatively to modesty. Both types of forgiveness were associated with two facets of extraversion, warmth and positive emotion, but only self-forgiveness correlated with gregariousness. There were also negative relationships between other-forgiveness and the values facet of the openness to experience domain as well as the order facet of the conscientiousness domain. Self-forgiveness correlated positively with competence, achievement striving, and self-discipline, and negatively with order in terms of the conscientiousness domain.

However, it is important to note that the majority of previous studies have measured overall forgiveness, conceptualized primarily as the lack of negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior towards an offender. Most of them did not explicitly distinguish between negative and positive dimensions or between forgiveness of self, of others, and of situations. The ambiguous findings of prior studies examining personality traits and forgiveness may have been due to the use of measures that tap varying levels of other-forgiveness and less often of self-forgiveness. These studies relied on the use of one or two measures of forgiveness rather than multiple measures of the construct (Ross et al., 2004). In our study, we focused on dispositional forgiveness and explored the distinctiveness of negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness of self, of others, and of situations beyond anyone's control. Little consideration has been given to the assessment of these constructs, and, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies simultaneously examining all these aspects of forgiveness in the

context of the five-factor model. Based on previous investigations, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Neuroticism will be negatively related to the overcoming unforgiveness dimension.

Hypothesis 2: Agreeableness will be positively associated with both the negative and positive dimensions of forgivingness.

We did not anticipate significant correlations between other personality traits (extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness) and the tendency to forgive oneself, others, and situations. However, we expected that the whole five-factor model of personality would significantly predict different aspects of forgivingness. Thus, the aim of our study is not only to examine the relationship between personality traits and forgivingness in the Polish sample, which has never been done before, but also to expand previous research by including a multiple assessment of the ability to forgive.

## METHOD

### Participants and data collection procedures

The sample consisted of 153 participants from Southern Poland (Kielce area). The respondents were requested to participate in the study voluntarily – no remuneration was offered to them. They were given paper-and-pencil questionnaires, asked to answer all the questions in private, and then to return the completed questionnaires. Overall, 170 questionnaires were distributed and 156 were returned. Three participants were excluded from further analyses because they failed to complete all instruments. Women accounted for 89.5% ( $n = 137$ ) of the sample and men for the remaining 10.5% ( $n = 16$ ). The subjects' age ranged from 20 to 55 years, with a mean of 35.33 ( $SD = 9.70$ ). As regards education level, 46.4% of the participants had completed secondary education, 19.6% had college education, whereas 32.6% had higher education; 62.7% of the respondents were married, 3.2% were widowed, 5.8% were divorced, and the remaining 28.3% were single. A vast majority of the participants (96.1%) were economically active.

### Measures

To measure *personality traits*, we used the Polish adaptation (Zawadzki, Strelau, Szczepaniak, & Śliwińska, 1998) of the NEO-FFI Personality Inventory

by Costa and McCrae (1992). The inventory measures five basic personality traits included in the five-factor model: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. It consists of 60 items, 12 items per each dimension of adult personality. The respondents are asked to indicate to what extent they agree with each item using a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). For the present study, the values of internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of the scales were as follows: .79 for N, .78 for E, .68 for O, .71 for A, and .73 for C.

*Disposition to forgive* was measured with the Polish adaptation (Kaleta et al., 2016) of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson & Snyder, 2003; Thompson et al., 2005). HFS is a multi-dimensional tool assessing dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations beyond anyone's control. Participants rate their responses to 18 items on a 7-point scale (ranging from *absolutely false* to *absolutely true*). Example items include: *With time I am understanding of myself for mistakes I've made; If others mistreat me, I continue to think badly of them; I eventually make peace with bad situations in my life*. The original version consists of three subscales (Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, and Forgiveness of Situations). The Polish version comprises two scales that allow measuring forgiveness in two separate domains – negative (N scale, measuring the reduction of hostile thoughts, feelings, and behaviors – namely, overcoming unforgiveness) and positive (P scale, measuring benevolent thoughts, feelings, and behaviors), and six subscales with the distinction between forgiveness of self, others, and situations (N-self, N-others, N-situations, P-self, P-others, P-situations). Higher scores on a particular subscale reflect a higher level of forgivingness in a particular domain. The Total HFS score indicates how forgiving a person tends to be. The reliability and validity of the tool were satisfactory. For the present study, the values of Cronbach's alpha (internal consistency) were as follows: .74 for overall HFS, .80 for N scale, .69 for P, .74 for N-self, .64 for N-others, .72 for N-situations, .50 for P-self, .50 for P-others, and .61 for P-situations.

### Data analyses

We tested Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 using bivariate correlations to examine the relationship between personality factors and forgivingness. Subsequently, we performed regression analyses to identify significant personality predictors of forgivingness. We conducted several separate multiple regressions to examine the extent to which each personality predictor explained

dispositional (general, negative, and positive) forgiveness of self, others, and situations beyond control. Five personality factors were entered into the equation regression as predictors, while different facets of forgiveness served as dependent variables.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents correlation coefficients between personality traits and different aspects of disposition to forgive. Neuroticism correlated negatively with overall forgiveness and all aspects of overcoming unforgiveness. Extraversion was inversely related to overcoming unforgiveness of others. Finally, agreeableness was positively associated with total forgiveness as well as its positive dimension, especially toward others.

Table 1  
*Pearson Correlations Between the Analyzed Variables*

	Overall forgiveness	Overcoming unforgiveness				Positive forgiveness			
		General	Self	Others	Situation	General	Self	Others	Situation
Neuroticism	-.27*	-.30*	-.16*	-.17*	-.33*	-.04	.02	.01	-.11
Extraversion	-.04	-.08	-.05	-.18*	.06	.03	.09	-.01	-.00
Openness to experience	.04	.03	-.03	.08	.03	.02	-.09	.01	.13
Agreeableness	.22*	.11	.01	.10	.14	.20*	.11	.23*	.09
Conscientiousness	.12	.07	.04	.05	.07	.09	.14	-.05	.13

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

To determine the personality predictors explaining dispositional forgiveness, we performed a series of multiple analyses. Table 2 presents the aspects of forgiveness that revealed significant predictors among the five personality traits.

All five traits accounted for 10% to 13% of variance in disposition to forgive. When all personality factors were entered into the regression equation, neuroticism, extraversion, and agreeableness turned out to significantly predict different aspects of forgiveness. The overall level of forgiveness was predicted negatively by neuroticism and extraversion, and positively by agreeableness. All the aspects of overcoming unforgiveness were predicted negatively by neuroticism, and extraversion predicted the tendency to overcome unforgiveness in general and towards others. This set of personality factors revealed that the more neurotic and extraverted individuals were, the less capacity to relieve resentment they presented, especially against others. Additionally, agreeableness displayed a significant relationship with positive forgiveness in general and towards others, indicating that higher agreeableness scores predicted a greater ability to forgive people in diverse contexts.

Table 2  
*Regression Results Predicting Forgivingness*

Personality traits	Overall forgivingness	Overcoming unforgiveness				Positive forgivingness	
		General	Self	Others	Situations	General	Others
Neuroticism	-0.34**	-0.40**	-0.22*	-0.28**	-0.37**	-0.03	-0.01
Extraversion	-0.23*	-0.27*	-0.16	-0.34**	-0.11	-0.02	0.00
Openness to experience	0.00	-0.01	-0.05	0.06	-0.02	0.01	0.01
Agreeableness	0.21*	0.12	0.02	0.11	0.14	0.19*	0.25*
Conscientiousness	0.10	0.08	0.05	0.10	0.02	0.06	-0.09
$R^2$	.16	.16	.05	.13	.14	.04	.04
Adjusted $R^2$	.13	.13	.02	.10	.11	.01	.01
$F(5, 143)$	5.36**	5.43 **	1.47 n.s.	4.29 **	4.60**	1.28 n.s.	1.13 n.s.

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , n.s. = non-significant.

## DISCUSSION

The study examined the five-factor personality model for predicting the positive and negative dimensions of the capacity to forgive. The findings suggest that personality affects dispositional forgiveness, though different traits are related to various aspects of forgivingness.

In line with our Hypothesis 1, significant relationships were revealed between neuroticism and the negative dimension of forgivingness, but not with the positive one. Highly neurotic individuals reported dispositional difficulty in overcoming unforgiveness of self, other people, and situations beyond anyone's control, which is consistent with previous findings (Berry et al., 2001; Brose et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2010; Kamat et al., 2006; Koutsos et al., 2008; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Neurotic people overreact to negative stimuli and are inclined to feel anxiety, distress, and anger in response to their induction (Costa & McCrae, 1980, 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1991). They tend to perceive themselves as victimized by life and experience hostility towards others (Costa & McCrae, 1995). All this makes them vulnerable to harm and likely to nurture resentment (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Maltby and colleagues (2008) showed that neuroticism, particularly anger/hostility, was the only personality trait that predicted episodic forgiveness – the aspect of revenge and avoidance motivations – two and a half years after the original transgression. The previous as well as our results are consistent with Worthington's (1998) assertion that neuroticism is an inhibitory characteristic of forgiveness.

As postulated in Hypothesis 2, we found a positive association between agreeableness and the positive dimension of the ability to forgive – especially to forgive others. Because of their inclination to be more trusting, more empathetic, and more motivated to maintain conflict-free relationships, more agreeable people are thought to have a greater tendency to forgive others (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Our findings are consistent with the study conducted by Ross and colleagues (2004), who found that agreeableness was the best predictor of other-forgiveness.

Finally, a surprising result was found in the case of extraversion, usually thought to be related positively to forgiveness because of its relation to positive emotions and social support seeking (Worthington, 1998). It is worth noting that only few studies have confirmed the linkage between extraversion and forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Brown, 2003; Ross et al., 2004), while other studies have failed to detect such an association (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Although we did not expect

a significant association, in our study extraversion combined with neuroticism negatively predicted overall forgivingness and the ability to overcome unforgiveness, especially the reduction of grudge against other people. A reasonable interpretation of the significant effect of these two traits taken together (i.e., extraversion together with neuroticism) makes conceptual sense if we think about neuroticism as hostility, impulsiveness, and vulnerability, and if we think about extraversion in terms of assertiveness and activity. This combination of personality traits reflects the extrapunitive style of a person who seeks vengeance, holds grudges, and blames others for apparent transgressions (Ross et al., 2004; see Gruszecka, 2012). It is possible that a person characterized by such a pattern of traits might instantly act in revenge, which may further deteriorate the relationship with the offender and hinder forgiveness.

Summing up, the five personality domains showed significant relationships with forgivingness, which varied depending on the positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness; this is consistent with other researchers' suggestions and findings (Brose et al., 2005; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). However, although personality predicted a disposition to forgive, the amount of explained variance was relatively small in our study. This shows that forgivingness is not just an expression of personality traits, but always involves an interplay of factors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic to individuals (Koutsos et al., 2008). Moreover, the five-factor model does not allow for the explicit assessment of many important traits that are related to forgiveness, such as religiousness, empathy, social desirability, narcissism, emotional intelligence, dispositional gratitude, optimism, and hope (Berry et al., 2001; Brose et al., 2005; Eaton et al., 2006; Mróz & Kaleta, 2017; Rey & Extremera, 2014; Toussaint, Owen, & Cheadle, 2012). It would certainly be interesting to compare the effect sizes of different personality factors.

Despite the above-mentioned reservations, our research serves as a preliminary study to expand prior work on the differential role of personality qualities in forgivingness. The main strength of the study is its novelty in Polish psychological research, due to the fact that most studies on forgiveness have been carried out in the United States. Moreover, the Polish adaptations of the scales measuring dispositional forgiveness have shown a different structure when compared to their American versions (Charzyńska & Heszen, 2013; Kaleta et al., 2016). This suggests that the understanding or experience of forgiveness might be specific among Polish participants because of their historical and cultural conditions. For instance, we found an interesting combination of neuroticism and extraversion that was negatively related to forgivingness, which had not been

previously found. Thus, further efforts towards the conceptualization of forgiveness and the exploration of its relationships with appropriate variables might be very fruitful.

### LIMITATIONS

Considering our findings, a look at the study's limitations is certainly warranted. First, the sample in our study was composed mainly of women, whereas forgiveness is sometimes related to gender (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008). This may have an impact on the relationships between different variables and the ability to forgive. For instance, Rey and Extremera (2014) found that gender moderated the linkage between agreeableness and motivation for revenge. Thus, our results may not necessarily be generalized to male participants. In addition, our data is clearly cross-sectional, while the disposition to forgive changes over lifetime (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001); changes in the five personality domains are also possible, especially in agreeableness and conscientiousness (Allemand, Zimprich, & Hendriks, 2008). It would be valuable to determine the extent to which personality predicts forgiveness in longitudinal research. Another weakness of our study is assessment of personality traits only in domains, not in facets. Some associations between the five factors and forgiveness have been previously found only in the level of facets (Brose et al., 2005; Ross et al., 2004; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). It is also reasonable that future studies should examine more advanced models rather than simple basic relationships between personality traits and forgiveness. For instance, Koutsos and colleagues (2008) tested mediational pathways and found that disposition to forgive mediated the relationship between individuals' agreeableness and their forgiveness reported in a specific situation.

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