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MALTBY, John, WOOD, Alex M., DAY, Liza, KON, Tabatha W.H., COLLEY, Ann and LINLEY, P. Alex

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Personality predictors of levels of forgiveness two and a half years after the transgression.

John Maltby

University of Leicester

Liz Day

Sheffield Hallam University

Alex Wood

University of Warwick

Tabatha Kon

Sheffield Primary Care Trust, National Health Service

Ann O. Colley

University of Leicester

and

P. Alex Linley

Centre for Applied Positive Psychology

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John Maltby, School of Psychology, University of Leicester, England, UK. LE1 9HN. Email: jm148@le.ac.uk. Tel: +44 (0)116 229 7198. Fax: +44 (0)116 229 7196

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to expand current knowledge on the relationship between personality and forgiveness by examining two different temporal points in the forgiveness process. A sample of 438 adults, who reported experiencing a serious transgression against them, completed measures of avoidance and revenge motivations around the transgression and five factor personality domains and facets at time 1, and measures of avoidance and revenge motivations two and a half years later. The findings suggest that personality factors continue to influence revenge and avoidance motivations two and a half years later, with neuroticism, specifically hostility, influencing avoidance and revenge motivations, and agreeableness, specifically trust, influencing revenge motivations.

KEY WORDS: Forgiveness, Personality, Neuroticism, Agreeableness.

There is a growing literature which is beginning to define key contributing factors and processes within the dynamics of forgiveness. A significant distinction has been drawn between forgiveness as an intra-personal process, involving changes within individual cognitions about a transgression and forgiveness, and an interpersonal processes, in which on-going relationships between the people involved in a transgression are assessed and acted upon (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000; Pargament, McCullough & Thoresen, 2000). A further distinction can be drawn between negative and positive reactions to the transgression. Sometimes those failing to forgive are unable to resolve issues with the perpetrator of the offence, however, positive processes can be involved in forgiveness; with deliberate attempts made to not avoid the perpetrator of the offence with reconsideration and reinterpretation of the feelings and thoughts around the event. (Gordon, et. al, 2000; Pargament, et al., 2000)

Studies of the relationship between forgiveness and personality have generally been explored within a taxonomy for the basic dimensions of human personality using the three and five factor trait models of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). Across a number of studies from the US and Europe, a consistent finding, that is often the most significant, is that higher levels of forgiveness are significantly predicted by lower levels of neuroticism (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Additionally, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience and conscientiousness have all been found to be positively related to higher levels of forgiveness (Hull, Tedlie & Lehn, 1995; Larsen, 1992).

Specifically, Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois and Ross (2005) examined the relationship between a series of dispositional and situational forgiveness measures (presence of positive forgiveness thoughts, feelings, absence of negative forgiveness thoughts, feelings and behaviour and forgiveness likelihood (Rye et al., 2001) and the broad and specific facet

domains of the five factor personality. Brose et al. (1995) found that all forgiveness measures were negatively correlated with neuroticism and positively correlated with agreeableness, while extraversion was positively related to one forgiveness measure. None of the forgiveness measures were related to Openness or Conscientiousness. Several facets of the five-factor domains were significantly correlated with forgiveness, but demonstrated inconsistent relationships. Forgiveness likelihood was negatively correlated with all neuroticism facets while presence of positive forgiveness was only negatively related to angry hostility and vulnerability facets of neuroticism. All forgiveness measures were positively correlated with the positive emotions facet from the extraversion domain and positively correlated with the trust facet from the agreeableness domain.

While research in this area has been concentrated on personality correlates of forgiveness, theoretical developments have emphasised the need to understand forgiveness as a process, e.g. the Enright Model of Forgiveness (Hebl & Enright, 1993). However, direct measurement and theoretical conception of the forgiveness process has been developed by McCullough, et al (1997, 1998), who provided a two factor motivational system of individuals' responses to interpersonal offences and transgressions; avoidance (to avoid personal and psychological contact with the offender) and revenge (seek revenge or wish to see harm come to the offender). McCullough et al. used this distinction to propose three systems contributing to the interpersonal forgiveness process. The first is a Closeness-Empathy system, in which empathy is seen as a central factor in the development of forgiveness. The second is a Rumination system, in which the rumination, which emerges after the personal transgression and exacerbates interpersonal distress, is important in the prediction of revenge motivations. The third is the Restoration of Interpersonal Closeness, in which the inhibition of avoidance behaviours and the facilitation of conciliatory behaviours (such as co-operation) are crucial (Komorita et al., 1991; McCullough et al, 1997).

What the aforementioned Brose et al. (2005) study demonstrates is that examining the relationship between forgiveness and both domain and facet aspects of the five factor model can contribute to the understanding of forgiveness. Equally useful then is to understand how these aspects translate to the forgiveness process and to examine the relationship at different temporal points of the forgiveness process. The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between the five factor model of personality and motivational states for avoidance and revenge around transgression at two temporal points.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 438 full time university undergraduate students (217 males, 221 females, aged from 18 to 30 years, Mean Age = 22.21 years, SD = 2.8 years). The ethnicity of respondents was White (n=322), Indian (n=66), Black (n=28) and Other Asian (n=22).

Measures

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998).

The scale comprises two subscales: Avoidance and Revenge motivations. The seven-item TRIM-Avoidance subscale measures the degree to which the offended party intends to reduce contact with the transgressor (e.g., "I keep as much distance between us as possible"). The five-item TRIM-Revenge subscale measures the degree to which the offended party intends to seek revenge on the transgressor (e.g., "I'll make him/her pay"). All items were measured with 5-point scales (where 1=*strongly disagree* and 5=*strongly agree*). Acceptable Cronbach's alphas of .88 for the TRIM-Avoid and .87 for the TRIM-Revenge have been reported, and the validity of the scale has been demonstrated through expected relationships with a variety of relationship-related measures including relationship satisfaction, closeness,

apology and rumination about the offence (McCullough et al., 1998). Higher scores on each scale represent a higher level of motivation for avoidance and revenge (therefore lower scores represent forgiveness).

Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The 240-item NEO-PI-R is one of the most widely used measures of the five-factor model of personality and assesses five major domains: Neuroticism, Extroversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Each domain is further represented by six lower level facet scale scores (listed in Table 2). Responses are scored on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) for each domain. Internal reliabilities range from $\alpha = .86$ to $\alpha = .95$ for the scales. There is strong consensual validity between self, peer, and spouse reports of the test and the validity evidence for the scales has been suggested with personality and mental health domains (Costa and McCrae, 1992).

Procedure.

Respondents were sought from 1st year undergraduate students on two university campuses who had experienced an event within the last month in which a person had personally transgressed against them. Respondents were told the study involved 2 data collections over 30 months. From this 879 individuals came forward. Respondents were asked to rate on a 5 point scale (1='Not at all serious', 2='A little serious', 3='Quite Serious', 4='Very Serious', 5='Extremely Serious') how serious they felt the transgression was compared to other transgressions that they had experienced. Of these respondents, 659 respondents rated their serious transgression as either very, or extremely, serious. These respondents were asked to complete the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale and the NEO-PI-R.

Respondents were also asked to write down the personal transgression, which were sealed and given an identifier.

From the original respondents, 438 respondents took part in a second data collection 30 months later. Respondents were given their sealed account of the transgression and were asked to complete the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale.

RESULTS

As a validity check for levels of changes in forgiveness over 30 months; mean scores on both the avoidance and revenge scales of the *Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale* were statistically compared between time 1 and time 2. For avoidance motivations, scores for Time 1 (Mean = 25.62, SD = 7.8) were statistically significantly higher ($t = 27.71, p < .001$) than scores for 30 months later (Mean = 15.65, SD = 2.9). For revenge motivations, scores for Time 1 (Mean = 18.53, SD = 5.4) were statistically significantly higher ($t = 30.91, p < .001$) than scores for 30 months later (Mean = 11.12, SD = 2.2).

Table 1 shows the Pearson product moment correlation coefficients between the five factor domains and avoidance and revenge motivations scales at time 1 and 2. At time 1, all five factor domains, with the exception of conscientiousness for avoidance motivations, share a statistically significant relationship with avoidance and revenge motivations. On this occasion the effect size of correlations are typically small ($r \leq .37$). At time 2, all five factor domains, with the exception of openness, share a statistically significant relationship with avoidance and revenge motivations. On this occasion the effect size of the correlations are smaller, with the exception of neuroticism and revenge motivations. Where statistically significant relationships occur, avoidance and revenge motivations are accompanied by higher neuroticism, lower extraversion, lower openness, lower agreeableness and lower

conscientiousness.

Regression statistics for avoidance and revenge motivations across time 1 and time 2 were calculated, with avoidance and revenge motivations used as a dependent variable, and the five factor personality domains alongside sex and age used as independent variables.

For Time 1, the regression statistic (R) was significantly different from zero for both avoidance ($F(7, 430)=11.68, p < .001; r=.40; r^2=.16; \text{adj } r^2=.15$) and revenge motivations ($F(7, 430)= 16.78, p < .001; r=.46; r^2=.22; \text{adj } r^2=.20$). On this occasion, higher neuroticism ($B=.05; \text{Beta}=.13; p < .05$), lower extraversion ($B=-.08; \text{Beta}=-.21; p < .01$), lower openness ($B=-.04; \text{Beta}=-.10; p < .05$) and lower agreeableness ($B=-.07; \text{Beta}=-.16; p < .01$) account for unique variance in avoidance motivations, and higher neuroticism ($B=.05; \text{Beta}=.19; p < .01$), lower openness ($B=-.04; \text{Beta}=-.14; p < .01$), lower agreeableness ($B=-.08; \text{Beta}=-.28; p < .01$) and lower conscientiousness ($B=-.04; \text{Beta}=-.13; p < .01$) account for unique variance in revenge motivations

For Time 2, the regression statistic (R) was significantly different from zero for both avoidance ($F(7, 430)=4.59, p < .001; r=.26; r^2=.07; \text{adj } r^2=.05$) and revenge motivations ($F(7, 430)= 7.52, p < .001; r=.33; r^2=.11; \text{adj } r^2=.10$). On this occasion, higher neuroticism ($B=.02; \text{Beta}=.17; p < .01$) accounts for unique variance in avoidance motivations and higher neuroticism ($B=.02; \text{Beta}=.22; p < .01$) and lower agreeableness ($B=-.02; \text{Beta}=-.13; p < .01$) account for unique variance in revenge motivations.

Table 2 shows the Pearson product moment correlation coefficients between the five factor facet scores and avoidance and revenge motivations scales at time 1 and 2. Generally the direction of statistically significant relationships between avoidance and revenge motivations and the personality facets follow the pattern with the main personality domains.

In examining all facet scores of each of the five factor domains in predicting avoidance and revenge motivations, regression statistics for avoidance and revenge

motivations across time 1 and time 2 were again calculated including sex and age. For Time 1, the regression statistic (R) was significantly different from zero for both avoidance ($F(32, 405)=3.86, p < .001; r=.48; r^2=.23; \text{adj } r^2=.17$) and revenge motivations ($F(7, 430)= 4.98, p < .001; r=.53; r^2=.28; \text{adj } r^2=.23$). On this occasion, higher hostility ($B=.28; \text{Beta}=.18; p < .01$), lower assertiveness ($B=-.20; \text{Beta}=-.12; p < .05$), lower straightforwardness ($B=-.32; \text{Beta}=-.20; p < .01$) account for unique variance in avoidance motivations and higher hostility ($B=.15; \text{Beta}=.14; p < .05$), lower activity ($B=-.20; \text{Beta}=-.14; p < .01$), lower positive emotions ($B=-.14; \text{Beta}=-.14; p < .05$), lower ideas ($B=-.16; \text{Beta}=-.17; p < .05$) and lower trust ($B=-.19; \text{Beta}=-.17; p < .01$) account for unique variance in revenge motivations.

For Time 2, the regression statistic (R) was significantly different from zero for both avoidance ($F(7, 430)=1.59, p < .05; ; r=.33; r^2=.11; \text{adj } r^2=.04$) and revenge motivations ($F(7, 430)= 2.71, p < .001; ; r=.42; r^2=.18; \text{adj } r^2=.11$). On this occasion, higher hostility ($B=.11; \text{Beta}=.18; p < .01$) accounts for unique variance in avoidance motivations and higher hostility ($B=.08; \text{Beta}=.19; p < .01$) and lower levels of trust ($B=-.06; \text{Beta}=-.15; p < .05$) account for unique variance in revenge motivations.

Discussion.

Generally the pattern of relationship between avoidance and revenge motivations and personality are consistent with expected findings. Around the time of the transgression (time 1), avoidance motivations around the transgression are typified by higher neuroticism, lower extraversion, lower openness and lower agreeableness, and specifically, higher hostility, lower assertiveness and lower straightforwardness, the latter two facets being particularly illustrative of avoidant thoughts, feeling and behaviours. Also on this occasion, revenge motivations are accompanied by higher neuroticism, lower openness, lower agreeableness and specifically higher hostility, lower activity, lower positive emotions, a greater ability to generate ideas (suggesting a tendency to think of ideas for revenge) and lower levels of trust

account for unique variance in revenge motivations. This is consistent with a number of previous findings looking at the relationship between forgiveness measures and personality. All five dimensions of the five factor model of personality, neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience and conscientiousness, have previously been found to be positively related to higher levels of forgiveness (Hull, Tedlie & Lehn, 1995; Larsen, 1992; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002) Moreover, the findings are comparable to Brose et al.'s (2005) findings that emphasise the possible importance of hostility, positive emotions and trust facets of personality as being particular to forgiveness.

However, the new finding here is in regards to those personality factors that predict levels of forgiveness about the transgression two and half years after the transgression. Neuroticism, and specifically hostility, are important in predicting both avoidance and revenge motivations at this time. The relationship between neuroticism, hostility and forgiveness two and half years after the transgression can be explained within McCullough et al.'s theoretical approach by linking the finding to the Rumination System. Within this system, the rumination that emerges after the personal transgression exacerbates interpersonal distress and is important in the prediction of revenge motivations. What is important here is that looking across the correlation and multiple regression analysis the amount of variance accounted for between revenge motivations and neuroticism and hostility is larger at Time 2 than at Time 1. The later emergence of this stronger relationship is unlike the other relationships between personality and forgiveness in the study, for which the effect size of the relationship diminishes (albeit only sometimes slightly) over time. The current findings suggest that over time revenge motivations are increasingly influenced by hostility.

Furthermore, agreeableness, and particularly trust, are important in predicting revenge motivations two and half years after the transgression. Within a theoretical context these findings can be examined within the different systems identified by McCullough et al

(1998). The relationship between agreeableness and, specifically, trust and avoidance forgiveness over two years suggest that they can be considered within two of McCullough's systems, the Closeness-Empathy System, in which feelings about the loss of a relationship and closeness to the individual facilitate forgiveness, and the Restoration of Interpersonal Closeness, in which the facilitation of conciliatory behaviours are important to forgiveness. Here, the agreeableness traits of trust would encourage the closeness and empathy that are necessary in order to influence forgiveness (McCullough et al, 1997).

The present findings suggest that the five factor personality domains and facets not only predict levels of forgiveness at the time of the transgression but also two and half years later. This is a considerable amount of time and suggests that personality can explain some of the available variance in forgiveness process. The role of this contribution from personality measures can be understood within existing theoretical perspectives of the forgiveness process, specifically the context of McCullough et al's three systems of contributions to interpersonal forgiveness.

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Tables

Table 1:

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients between all the five factor domain scales and avoidance and revenge motivations at time 1 and 2.

	α	Mean	SD	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Neuroticism	.81	94.78	21.4	-.291**	.058	-.111*	-.177**	.193**	.188**	.228**	.278**
2 Extraversion	.75	113.47	20.1	1	.397**	.207**	.038	-.321**	-.136**	-.170**	-.170**
3 Openness	.78	116.07	20.0		1	.273**	.148**	-.226**	-.049	-.228**	-.049
4 Agreeableness	.85	110.82	19.1			1	.124**	-.255**	-.145**	-.368**	-.176**
5 Conscientiousness	.89	101.35	20.4				1	-.074	-.103*	-.225**	-.129**
6 Avoidance Motivations (Time 1)	.75	25.62	7.8					1	.282**	.329**	.329**
7 Avoidance Motivations (Time 2)	.72	15.65	2.9						1	.348**	.558**
8 Revenge Motivations (Time 1)	.78	18.53	5.4							1	.388**
9 Revenge Motivations (Time 2)	.80	11.12	2.2								1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients between all the five factor facet scales and avoidance and revenge motivations at time 1 and 2.

	<i>Avoidance Motivations</i>	<i>Revenge Motivations</i>	<i>Avoidance Motivations</i>	<i>Revenge Motivations</i>
	<i>(Time 1)</i>	<i>(Time 1)</i>	<i>(Time 2)</i>	<i>(Time 2)</i>
Neuroticism				
Anxiety	.118(*)	.062	.083	.140(**)
Hostility	.255(**)	.352(**)	.221(**)	.305(**)
Depression	.150(**)	.160(**)	.133(**)	.208(**)
Self Consciousness	.124(**)	.065	.150(**)	.147(**)
Impulsiveness	-.044	.112(*)	.039	.179(**)
Vulnerability	.190(**)	.221(**)	.166(**)	.206(**)
Extraversion				
Warmth	-.328(**)	-.282(**)	-.154(**)	-.180(**)
Gregariousness	-.185(**)	-.100(*)	-.080	-.115(*)

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Assertiveness	-.138(**)	.034	-.073	-.087
Activity	-.186(**)	-.131(**)	-.087	-.136(**)
Excitement	-.206(**)	-.046	-.070	-.060
Positive emotions	-.280(**)	-.174(**)	-.101(*)	-.132(**)
Openness				
Fantasy	-.110(*)	-.041	.043	.043
Aesthetic	-.138(**)	-.131(**)	-.014	-.049
Feeling	-.200(**)	-.197(**)	-.025	.018
Actions	-.162(**)	-.112(*)	-.082	-.077
Ideas	-.191(**)	-.257(**)	-.071	-.111(*)
Values	-.136(**)	-.198(**)	-.070	-.025
Agreeableness				
Trust	-.251(**)	-.293(**)	-.154(**)	-.236(**)
Straightforwardness	-.039	-.281(**)	-.101(*)	-.127(**)
Altruism	-.295(**)	-.331(**)	-.147(**)	-.181(**)
Compliance	-.153(**)	-.313(**)	-.085	-.154(**)

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Modesty	-.087	-.100(*)	-.059	.045
Tendermindness	-.231(**)	-.169(**)	-.037	-.059
Conscientiousness				
Competence	-.121(*)	-.217(**)	-.111(*)	-.131(**)
Order	.055	-.070	-.013	.007
Dutifulness	-.102(*)	-.204(**)	-.097(*)	-.129(**)
Achievement Striving	-.109(*)	-.143(**)	-.109(*)	-.137(**)
Self-discipline	-.060	-.205(**)	-.101(*)	-.123(**)
Deliberateness	-.012	-.164(**)	-.038	-.073

* p < .05; ** p < .01