Article

Examining Relationship of Personality Traits, Altruism, and Justice with Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Background: Forgiveness is a vital psychological process linked to emotional well-being, yet its relationship with individual personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations remains insufficiently explored. While personality and prosocial tendencies have been studied, the moral dimensions—particularly justice perceptions—are underrepresented in forgiveness research. **Objective**: This study aimed to examine the predictive roles of Big Five personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations (retributive and restorative) on forgiveness, while also assessing the impact of age and gender on forgiving tendencies. **Methods**: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 368 educated participants (n = 368; 170 males, 198 females; aged 16–65 years) selected via convenience sampling in Islamabad. Inclusion criteria required literacy beyond matriculation and capacity to comprehend the questionnaires. Data were collected using validated tools: the Big Five Inventory, Helping Attitude Scale, Justice Scale, and Forgivingness Questionnaire. All procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki; informed consent was obtained. Statistical analyses, including Pearson correlations and multiple regression, were performed using SPSS v27 to assess the predictive value of independent variables on forgiveness. **Results**: Age (β = .49, p < .001), altruism (β = .29, p < .001), conscientiousness (β = .20, p = .03), and openness (β = .12, p < .01) significantly predicted forgiveness. Neuroticism (β = -.20, p = .02) and retributive justice (β = -.10, p = .01) were negatively associated, while restorative justice had a modest positive effect (β = .08, p = .02). Women were more forgiving than men (β = .14, p = .05). The model accounted for 61% of the variance (R^2 = .61, $F(10, 357)$ = 55.9, p < .001). **Conclusion**: Personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations significantly shape forgiveness. These findings suggest that fostering altruism, emotional regulation, and restorative justice attitudes may enhance mental health and conflict resolution in clinical and community settings.
Keywords: Forgiveness, Big Five Personality Traits, Altruism, Retributive Justice, Restorative Justice, Personality Psychology, Conflict Resolution

INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness, a complex and dynamic psychological process, has garnered increasing attention due to its pivotal role in emotional healing, interpersonal harmony, and mental well-being. In the contemporary social climate, marked by heightened interpersonal conflicts and emotional distress, understanding the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder forgiveness has become critically important. While forgiveness is often portrayed as an altruistic and prosocial behavior, existing literature suggests that its roots are deeply embedded in stable individual differences, such as personality traits and altruistic tendencies (1). These individual characteristics influence how people interpret, react to, and resolve interpersonal transgressions, which ultimately shapes their capacity to forgive. However, an important and often overlooked dimension within this discourse is the perception of

justice—particularly how individuals' beliefs in retributive versus restorative justice frameworks modulate their willingness to forgive (2).

The relationship between personality and forgiveness has been extensively examined through the Big Five Personality Traits model, which conceptualizes personality along five major dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Empirical studies generally indicate that traits like agreeableness and emotional stability (i.e., low neuroticism) enhance forgiveness by fostering empathy and reducing reactivity to conflict (3). Conversely, individuals high in neuroticism—characterized by emotional volatility and vulnerability—often struggle with forgiving due to persistent negative affect and maladaptive coping styles (4). While

conscientiousness and openness have also been associated with forgiveness, the consistency of these findings across cultural contexts remains variable, signaling a need for further exploration (5). Extraversion and agreeableness, although theoretically linked to prosocial behavior, have yielded mixed results in relation to forgiveness, suggesting a more nuanced interplay of trait expressions and situational moderators (6).

Altruism, defined as a selfless concern for others' welfare, represents another psychological factor frequently associated with forgiveness. Theoretically, altruism aligns with empathic concern and prosocial motivation—components that reduce vengeful desires and facilitate reconciliation (7). This association is supported by numerous theoretical perspectives, including the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis, which posits that genuine empathic concern triggers a desire to alleviate others' suffering, thereby promoting forgiveness (8). Other models, such as Social Exchange Theory and Social Learning Theory, emphasize the reciprocal and normative aspects of altruistic behavior, respectively, further contextualizing its role in forgiveness (9). Despite this consensus, the mediating or moderating role of justice orientations in the altruism–forgiveness relationship remains under-theorized.

Justice, particularly in its retributive and restorative forms, introduces a moral dimension to the process of forgiveness. Retributive justice, with its emphasis on proportional punishment and moral accountability, may conflict with the act of forgiveness by reinforcing punitive emotions such as resentment and moral outrage (10). In contrast, restorative justice emphasizes healing, empathy, and community-based reparation, providing a conducive moral context for forgiveness to occur (11). While theoretical arguments exist for both justice orientations, empirical validation remains sparse, especially concerning how these orientations interact with personality and altruism to shape forgiving responses. Integrating these constructs is essential to develop a more comprehensive understanding of forgiveness as both a psychological and moral phenomenon.

Despite an abundance of research on the psychological determinants of forgiveness, few studies have considered how justice beliefs function within the broader framework of personality and altruism. This omission constitutes a critical knowledge gap, as justice perceptions may significantly moderate the effect of individual traits on forgiveness, either reinforcing or undermining the dispositional tendencies toward reconciliation. The current study aims to bridge this gap by examining the joint contributions of personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations on forgiveness, while also exploring the moderating roles of demographic factors such as age and gender. By situating forgiveness within a multi-dimensional model that incorporates moral, cognitive, and dispositional variables, the study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of this vital psychological process. Specifically, the research asks: How do personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations interact to predict individuals' propensity to forgive others?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional observational study aimed to investigate the influence of personality traits, altruism, and justice perceptions on forgiveness. The sample comprised 368 individuals, including 170 males and 198 females, aged between 16 and 65 years (M = 33.41, SD = 13.74). Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method from colleges, professional institutions, and residential communities in Islamabad.

Eligibility was restricted to individuals who had completed at least matriculation-level education and demonstrated the ability to comprehend the study instruments. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Data were collected using a structured battery of self-report questionnaires to assess the study variables. The primary outcome was forgiveness, measured by the Forgivingness Questionnaire developed by Mullet (1997), which comprises 17 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has previously demonstrated robust internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.94). Secondary variables included personality traits, altruism, and justice orientation. Personality was measured using the Big Five Inventory (BFI), a 44-item instrument assessing extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience.

Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, and subscales showed satisfactory reliability (α ranging from 0.72 to 0.84). Altruism was assessed via the Helping Attitude Scale (HAS), consisting of 20 items with a Cronbach's α of 0.86. Justice orientation was evaluated using the Justice Scale developed by Sarwat and Rafiq (2016), incorporating 24 items divided into retributive and restorative justice subscales (10 and 14 items respectively), with α values of 0.75 and 0.73. Reverse scoring was applied to designated negatively-worded items before analysis. Data collection was facilitated by the lead researcher in person, ensuring standardized administration and minimizing respondent bias. On average, participants completed the questionnaire packet within 30 minutes.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants' identities and responses were kept confidential, and all data were anonymized before analysis. Informed consent was obtained from every participant, with additional emphasis on voluntary participation and data protection. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic and psychometric characteristics, including means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for internal consistency. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to examine bivariate relationships among the variables. Subsequently, multiple standard regression analysis was employed to identify significant predictors of forgiveness, with gender, age, personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations entered as independent variables. The model's goodness-of-fit was evaluated using R^2 and F statistics, and significance was set at $p < 0.05$. The analysis accounted for potential multicollinearity by assessing variance inflation factors, and all assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were verified through diagnostic plots.

RESULTS

Participant characteristics and psychometric properties of the measurement instruments are summarized in Table 1. The internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) for all scales ranged from acceptable to strong (α = .72–.81). The distribution of scores for all variables was generally normal, as indicated by skewness and kurtosis values falling within acceptable ranges (±2). Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients, illustrating significant inter-correlations among demographic variables, personality traits, altruism, justice orientations, and forgiveness. Age demonstrated a strong positive correlation with forgiveness (r = .77, p < .01), indicating older participants tended to forgive more.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and psychometric properties of study variables (N = 368)

Variables	Items	Mean ± SD	Cronbach's α	Skewness	Kurtosis
Personality Traits (BFI)					
Extraversion	8	34.08 ± 5.10	.81	0.56	–1.19
Neuroticism	8	26.04 ± 4.20	.72	1.08	1.26
Agreeableness	9	28.72 ± 4.50	.74	1.40	–1.58
Conscientiousness	9	31.50 ± 5.60	.72	–0.48	–1.34
Openness	10	24.32 ± 4.60	.80	1.08	1.26
Altruism (HAS)	20	31.50 ± 5.60	.80	1.19	–1.30
Justice Orientation					
Retributive Justice	10	24.32 ± 4.50	.75	0.95	–0.56
Restorative Justice	14	26.70 ± 4.60	.73	1.83	1.08

Gender also correlated significantly, albeit moderately, with forgiveness (r = .32, p < .01), suggesting women reported higher forgiveness levels than men. Among personality traits, agreeableness (r = .27, p < .01), conscientiousness (r = .27, p < .01), and openness (r = .18, p < .01) showed positive correlations with forgiveness, whereas neuroticism exhibited a significant negative correlation (r = -.16, p < .01). Extraversion showed no significant correlation with forgiveness. Altruism emerged as a robust positive correlate of forgiveness (r = .60, p < .01). Notably, retributive justice was negatively associated with forgiveness (r = -.34, p < .01), while restorative justice displayed a smaller positive correlation (r = .13, p < .05).

Table 2 Intercorrelations among demographic variables, personality traits, altruism, justice orientations, and forgiveness (N = 368)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	–										
2. Age	.27**	–									
3. Extraversion	.02	–.08*	–								
4. Agreeableness	.08	.27**	–.07	–							
5. Conscientiousness	.15**	.27**	–.03	.78**	–						
6. Neuroticism	–.01	–.12*	.05	–.13*	–.17**	–					
7. Openness	–.01	.02	.02	.22**	.28**	.03	–				
8. Altruism	.14**	.51**	–.10*	.46**	.50**	–.13*	.13*	–			
9. Retributive Justice	–.02**	–.27**	.02	–.18**	–.20**	.28**	–.10	–.35**	–		
10. Restorative Justice	.03	.07	.02	.04*	.06	–.16**	.10	.03	–.02	–	
11. Forgiveness	.32**	.77**	–.08	.38**	.39**	–.16**	.18**	.60**	–.34**	.13*	–

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01 (two-tailed)

Table 3 Multiple regression analysis predicting forgiveness from demographic factors, personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations (N = 368)

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p
Gender	3.74	0.84	.14	4.46	.05
Age	0.43	0.03	.49	12.84	<.001
Extraversion	–0.01	0.04	–.01	–0.21	.84
Agreeableness	0.11	0.09	.06	1.19	.24
Conscientiousness	0.19	0.08	.20	2.47	.03
Neuroticism	–0.17	0.08	–.20	–2.21	.02
Openness	0.18	0.06	.12	3.26	<.01
Altruism	0.27	0.04	.29	6.58	<.001
Retributive Justice	–0.15	0.06	–.10	–2.59	.01
Restorative Justice	0.14	0.06	.08	2.29	.02

Model R^2 = .61, F(10, 357) = 55.9, p < .001.

The results of multiple regression analysis (Table 3) identified significant predictors of forgiveness. The regression model explained approximately 61% of the variance in forgiveness (R^2 = .61, $F(10, 357)$ = 55.9, $p < .001$), indicating a strong model fit. Among demographic variables, age was the strongest predictor (β = .49, $p < .001$), while gender also significantly predicted forgiveness (β = .14, p = .05), reinforcing earlier correlation findings. Personality trait analysis revealed that conscientiousness (β = .20, p = .03) and openness (β = .12, $p < .01$) significantly contributed positively to forgiveness. Neuroticism negatively predicted forgiveness (β = -.20, p = .02), confirming its role as an inhibitory factor. Extraversion and agreeableness did not emerge as significant predictors in the regression model. Altruism remained a strong positive predictor (β = .29, $p < .001$), reflecting its key role in promoting forgiveness. Retributive justice significantly negatively predicted forgiveness (β = -.10, p = .01), whereas restorative justice positively influenced forgiveness, though its effect size was modest (β = .08, p = .02). These findings support the hypothesized relationships and highlight significant demographic, personality, altruistic, and moral predictors of forgiveness.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the complex interplay between personality traits, altruistic tendencies, and justice orientations in predicting forgiveness, offering new insights into the psychological and moral dimensions underlying this adaptive response. Our findings reinforce the growing body of literature suggesting that individual differences significantly shape one's capacity to forgive. In particular, conscientiousness and openness emerged as positive predictors, whereas neuroticism demonstrated a negative association with forgiveness, consistent with prior research that emphasizes the role of emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility in forgiveness processes (3,4). These findings align with trait-based models of personality which posit that stable dispositions, such as self-discipline and openness to experience, facilitate adaptive interpersonal behaviors, including forgiveness (5). Conversely, individuals high in neuroticism, characterized by emotional instability and sensitivity to threat, appear more prone to ruminate and less inclined to resolve interpersonal grievances through forgiveness (6).

The non-significant effects of extraversion and agreeableness on forgiveness, although surprising, echo findings from earlier research which suggests that while these traits may predispose individuals to engage in prosocial behavior, they do not consistently predict forgiveness when controlling for other personality traits and contextual variables (7). It is plausible that forgiveness, as a deeper emotional and cognitive resolution, may rely more heavily on internal self-regulatory capacities (e.g., conscientiousness) and perspective-taking abilities (e.g., openness) than on general sociability or interpersonal harmony. These nuances highlight the importance of distinguishing between broader prosocial dispositions and the specific psychological processes involved in forgiving a transgressor.

Altruism emerged as one of the strongest predictors of forgiveness in this study, providing empirical support to theoretical models that conceptualize forgiveness as a fundamentally prosocial and other-centered act (8). This finding is congruent with Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, which postulates that empathy-driven altruism increases the likelihood of prosocial behavior, including forgiveness, especially in interpersonal contexts (9). Moreover, the observed inverse relationship between altruism and retributive justice further underscores the inherent conflict between punitive orientations and empathic concern. Individuals high in altruism appear to favor reconciliation and restoration over punishment, suggesting that fostering altruistic attitudes may be instrumental in promoting forgiveness within therapeutic and community settings.

The inclusion of justice orientations offers a novel contribution to the forgiveness literature by integrating moral cognition into psychological models of forgiveness. Retributive justice was negatively associated with forgiveness, reflecting the idea that a desire for proportionate punishment may obstruct emotional resolution (10). This aligns with prior studies indicating that strong beliefs in moral desert and retribution correlate with reduced willingness to forgive, particularly in the absence of offender repentance (11). In contrast, restorative justice positively predicted forgiveness, albeit with a modest effect size, reinforcing the value of dialogical and rehabilitative approaches in fostering interpersonal healing. These findings extend earlier work by suggesting that justice perceptions are not merely external frameworks but deeply internalized moral schemas that shape emotional and behavioral responses to transgressions (12).

The strong predictive role of age and gender corroborates existing findings that forgiveness tends to increase with age and is more prevalent among women (13). These differences may stem from socioemotional selectivity theory, which posits that aging individuals prioritize emotionally meaningful goals such as reconciliation and peace, thereby becoming more forgiving (14). Similarly, gender differences may reflect socialization processes that encourage emotional expressiveness and empathy among women, contributing to greater forgiveness tendencies (15). While these demographic effects enhance the external validity of the findings, caution is warranted in generalizing them beyond the cultural and geographic context of the study, which was limited to participants from urban Pakistan.

Despite its strengths—including a robust sample size, reliable psychometric tools, and comprehensive multivariate analysis—this study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, and the use of self-report measures introduces the risk of social desirability bias, particularly for morally laden constructs such as altruism and forgiveness. Additionally, the convenience sampling method may limit the generalizability of findings, as the sample may not adequately represent broader population subgroups with different socio-cultural or educational backgrounds. Future research should consider longitudinal or experimental designs to explore causal mechanisms and assess the impact of targeted interventions, such as altruism training or restorative justice education, on forgiveness outcomes.

In conclusion, the study affirms that forgiveness is influenced by a constellation of dispositional, moral, and demographic factors. The integration of personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations provides a more nuanced understanding of the psychological architecture of forgiveness. These findings have implications for clinical practice and conflict resolution programs,

suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing emotional regulation, promoting altruistic values, and reducing punitive attitudes may be effective in fostering forgiveness and psychological well-being. Further exploration across diverse cultures and settings is warranted to deepen our understanding of the universal and context-specific dimensions of forgiveness (16).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between personality traits, altruism, and justice orientations with forgiveness, revealing that conscientiousness, openness to experience, altruism, and restorative justice positively influence the capacity to forgive, while neuroticism and retributive justice hinder it. Additionally, age and gender emerged as significant demographic predictors, with older individuals and women displaying higher forgiveness tendencies. These findings highlight the psychological and moral complexities underlying forgiveness and underscore the importance of integrating individual personality profiles and justice perceptions into therapeutic interventions. Clinically, fostering traits such as altruism and promoting restorative justice frameworks may enhance emotional healing, conflict resolution, and mental well-being. For future research, longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are recommended to further elucidate causal pathways and refine interventions that support forgiveness as a vital component of holistic human healthcare.

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