Four Confessions From a Big Fiver About a Six-Dimensional Model of Personality Traits

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Abstract: In this commentary, I make four confessions. First, although I prefer the Big Five, I don’t really object to the HEXACO framework. Second, I was initially surprised by the HEXACO Honesty-Humility dimension’s emphasis on selfish and antisocial (broadly defined) behaviors. Third, some collaborators and I tried, and failed, to develop a supplemental Honesty-Humility domain scale for the BFI-2; however, we eventually succeeded in developing an Honesty-Humility facet subscale to supplement the Agreeableness domain. Fourth, these experiences have changed my understanding of relations between the Big Five and HEXACO frameworks. © 2020 European Association of Personality Psychology

FOUR CONFESSIONS FROM A BIG FIVER ABOUT A SIX-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF PERSONALITY TRAITS

In their target article, Ashton and Lee (2020a) address a number of potential objections to the HEXACO model of personality traits. To illustrate one such objection—regarding whether Honesty-Humility is a unipolar or bipolar construct—they cite a couple of my Twitter posts (Soto, 2019b, 2019c). In this commentary, I’d like to expand on those Tweets by making four confessions.

Confession #1

My first confession is that I don’t really object to the HEXACO model. Although I prefer the Big Five, I think that the HEXACO framework provides a reasonable way to conceptualize and measure personality traits. To the best of my recollection (and having searched my computer files and emails to double-check), I have never criticized anyone for using the HEXACO framework. So to any readers inclined to use it: there’s no need to stop on my account.

Confession #2

When I first looked closely at the content of the HEXACO model’s Honesty-Humility trait domain, I expected (given its label) that it would primarily focus on prosocial behaviors such as telling the truth and showing modesty about one’s accomplishments. I was wrong.

As noted by Ashton and Lee (2020a), the lexical Honesty-Humility dimension includes more adjectives describing selfish and antisocial characteristics (broadly defined; e.g. arrogant, dishonest, greedy) than prosocial ones.
Even more strikingly, questionnaire measures of Honesty-Humility include almost no direct references to prosocial behaviors. For example, the IPIP-HEXACO’s 40-item Honesty-Humility scale includes only two direct references to prosocial behavior (“Try to follow the rules,” and “Return extra change when a cashier makes a mistake,” Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2007), and the HEXACO-PI-R’s 16-item Honesty-Humility scale doesn’t include any such references (Lee & Ashton, 2018). Instead, these scales’ positively keyed items are mostly negations of selfish and antisocial behaviors (e.g. “Don’t pretend to be more than I am,” “Would never cheat on my taxes,” “Don’t think that I’m better than other people;” Ashton et al., 2007; emphasis added).

Note that this is not an objection to the HEXACO model: antisocial characteristics can be just as important as prosocial ones. However, I suspect that it’s a common misconception about the Honesty-Humility domain, and I agree with the suggestion that adopting an alternative label, such as Selfishness (Diebels, Leary, & Chon, 2018) or Haughtiness-Hypocrisy (to preserve the HEXACO acronym), would more clearly communicate this domain’s emphasis on deceitful, arrogant, and greedy behaviors rather than honest, humble, and generous ones (Soto, 2019b).

Confession #3

I thought it would be pretty easy to measure Honesty-Humility as a sixth, independent trait domain beyond the Big Five. Wrong again.

Some collaborators and I recently attempted to develop an Honesty-Humility domain scale to supplement the Big Five Inventory-2 (BFI-2; Soto & John, 2017). Unfortunately, we failed (Denissen, Soto, Geenen, John, & van Aken, 2020; Soto, 2019c). Although we were able to construct a preliminary domain scale that converged with lexical and questionnaire measures of Honesty-Humility and the Dark Triad (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013), this scale didn’t form a sixth factor beyond the Big Five. Moreover, when we tried to identify lexical content that related more strongly with HEXACO Honesty-Humility than with Big Five Agreeableness (so that we could revise and strengthen our preliminary scale), we couldn’t find any such content. Specifically, when we asked participants to rate themselves on more than 200 lexical markers of Honesty-Humility and the Dark Triad drawn from previous research (e.g. Ashton, Lee, De Vries, Perugini, Gnisci, & Sergi, 2006; Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2018), we failed to find any adjectives that correlated much more strongly with Honesty-Humility (as measured by either the HEXACO-PI-R or our preliminary scale) than with Agreeableness (as measured by the standard BFI-2).

Based on these results, we reluctantly conceded that it didn’t seem possible to develop a full Honesty-Humility domain scale for the BFI-2. We therefore shifted to a backup plan. Specifically, we tried to develop a supplemental Honesty-Humility facet subscale to extend the BFI-2’s Agreeableness domain. This time, we succeeded. (Whew!) Our supplemental facet subscale showed expected patterns of convergent, discriminant, and structural validity in relation to the standard BFI-2 scales, as well as established measures of Honesty-Humility and the Dark Triad. It therefore gives researchers an optional way to expand the BFI-2’s coverage of Honesty-Humility content, and allows the BFI-2 to serve as a “one-stop shop” for efficiently measuring both the consensus Big Five and the selfish, antisocial characteristics central to HEXACO Honesty-Humility (Denissen et al., 2020).

I want to emphasize that the outcome of this project was not preordained. As my collaborators can attest, I was sincerely optimistic that we could develop a full Honesty-Humility domain scale to supplement the standard BFI-2. But as we all know, the data don’t always conform to our expectations.

Confession #4

My final confession is that these recent experiences digging into the HEXACO literature, and developing a supplemental Honesty-Humility scale for the BFI-2, have changed my thinking about relations between the Big Five and HEXACO frameworks. Specifically, these experiences have led me to the position that (a) from a Big Five perspective, Honesty-Humility is better conceptualized as a facet of Agreeableness than as a separate trait domain (Crowe et al., 2018), and therefore (b) the HEXACO model is not a straightforward extension of the Big Five, because clearly distinguishing Honesty-Humility as an independent domain requires shifting other domains, especially Agreeableness, away from their standard Big Five definitions (Ashton, Lee, & De Vries, 2014). Others have arrived at these insights before me. But better late than never.

Personality Structure: Who Cares?

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Abstract: Models of personality structure are not correct or incorrect. Instead, they are either useful or not for some purpose. As a result, a researcher’s choice of a model will depend on their priorities. Possible priorities include