



On the willingness to admit wrongness: Validation of a new measure and an exploration of its correlates[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Wrongness admission is the act of a person publicly acknowledging that they held an inaccurate belief or attitude. Some people seem more willing to engage in wrongness admission than others. These individual differences may be important in understanding the prevention of wrongness admission. The purpose of these studies was to develop and validate a measure of the willingness to admit wrongness. In three studies ($N_{total} = 579$), we created a 7-item scenario-based measure (“WAW”) and found that it was correlated with agreeableness, honesty/humility, and, to a lesser extent, openness to experience. Furthermore, those who scored higher on the WAW were more likely to indicate that they would publicly admit they are wrong on Facebook and were more likely to admit wrongness in daily life. This measure will be helpful as theories of wrongness admission develop, but also when considering interventions that may increase wrongness admission and intellectual humility in the general public.

1. Introduction

People do not like to be wrong and especially do not like to admit when they are wrong. This fact is apparent in everyday life. For example, imagine that a person suggests to his/her friend that former president Barack Obama promised that no one would lose his or her preferred doctor under his health care reform. Their friend might reply that the former president never made such a promise. The first person could then show their friend a video of Barack Obama making that exact promise. In this scenario, the friend has three options: (1) ignore the video proof and continue believing their own false attitude, (2) justify their attitude by adding nuance (e.g., “yeah, but that is not what he meant”), or (3) admit that he or she was wrong to their friend. People often engage in the former two options, but seem less comfortable with the latter option. In fact, Tavris and Aronson (2008) wrote a book describing the many ways – psychological science has discovered – people avoid acknowledging their wrongness to others.

Although it seems to occur less frequently, people *will* sometimes admit wrongness to others. Further, it is probable that certain people are more willing to admit their wrongness than others. If it is true that individuals vary in their willingness to admit wrongness to others, then

understanding the systematic differences between such people would be beneficial for understanding the causes and consequences of wrongness admission. More importantly, understanding these differences could provide insights as to how to increase the likelihood of wrongness admissions when appropriate. Thus, the purpose of the current investigation was to create an individual difference measure of the willingness to admit wrongness, explore its correlates, and establish it as a unique construct.

1.1. The causes and consequences of wrongness admission

We have defined wrongness admission as a public disclosure that one has been wrong about a belief or attitude and has subsequently changed that attitude or belief (e.g., Fetterman, Muscanell, Covarrubias, & Sassenberg, 2018; Fetterman, Rutjens, Landkammer, & Wilkowski, 2018). This wrongness admission construct has two important features: attitude accuracy and the public nature of admission. For the former, as opposed to an apology – the expression of remorse for a past behavior (Schumann, 2018) – wrongness admission is focused on the accuracy of beliefs and attitudes that can be refuted by facts. As such, there is no moral component or behavioral act (e.g., treating

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someone poorly) underlying the “wrongness”. For the latter issue, for this to be an “admission,” it must be public or to another person, otherwise it is merely attitude change (admitting to oneself). While there is ample research on apologies (e.g., Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro, 2011; Howell, Turowski, & Buro, 2012; see also Tangney, 1995 and Schumann, 2018 for reviews), attitude change (e.g., see Petty & Briñol, 2015 for review), and being wrong (e.g., see Tavis & Aronson, 2008 for review), scant research has focused on wrongness admission.

Aside from a few studies in the 1970s (Braver, Linder, Corwin, & Cialdini, 1977; Cialdini & Mirels, 1976), wrongness admission has not received much attention. There has, however, been a renewed interest in this area. For example, Kreps, Laurin, and Merritt (2017) investigated the outcome of a leader changing their moral stance, finding that people negatively viewed leaders who do so. Other work still, has focused more directly on wrongness admission. As an example, Fetterman and Sassenberg (2015) examined wrongness admission among scientific researchers after a convincing failed replication of their own work. Results suggested that the researchers feared a failed replication would negatively impact their reputations and also underestimated the positive reputational consequences of wrongness admission.

In another set of studies, Fetterman, Muscanell et al. (2018), Fetterman, Rutjens et al. (2018) found that wrongness admission positively impacted others' perceptions of the admitter in the areas of competence and communion. Importantly, these findings were replicated across several scenarios, including arguments on Facebook (stranger admitting), in a university lecture (professor admitting), and at the workplace (supervisor admitting). Drawing from the Dual Perspective Model of Agency and Communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014), Fetterman, Muscanell et al. (2018), Fetterman, Rutjens et al. (2018) concluded that people avoided wrongness admission because they were worried that others would see them as incompetent – the common focus of impression management strategies (Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011). However, wrongness admission not only led to more positive competency ratings, it had an even stronger positive impact on communion ratings – the common focus of impression formations (Asch, 1946). These findings suggest that people perceive wrongness admitters as friendlier and more agreeable.

The recent work on wrongness admission and impression formation/management is a major step toward understanding the causes and consequences of wrongness admission. However, if an aim of this work is to encourage wrongness admission, then it is first necessary to understand why some people are more willing to admit wrongness than others. Although studies have shown that admitters are perceived as friendly, no studies have yet examined how differences in personality can contribute to wrongness admission.

1.2. Willingness to admit wrongness

It is important to understand psychological and behavioral phenomena on an individual differences level to develop a theory of the cognitive, motivational, social, and emotional processes involved (Kenrick & Funder, 1988; Kosslyn et al., 2002; Underwood, 1975). Thus, it is critical to understand the individual differences associated with wrongness admission to fully understand this phenomenon. Although there are likely existing personality and individual differences factors associated with the willingness to admit wrongness, none of these factors are directly focused on wrongness admission. Thus, we seek to add to the literature on wrongness admission by creating a direct measure of one's willingness to admit wrongness to others. Further, we endeavor to confirm the theoretical correlates of wrongness admission willingness as assessed with this new measure, as well as establishing it as a unique construct. To this end, we investigate the correlations of this measure with agreeableness and honesty/humility.

Agreeableness has been defined many ways, and by many researchers (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997). In general, though, agreeable people tend to try to get along with people by avoiding, or being

judicious in, conflict (Graziano & Tobin, 2002). Further, they are cooperative and polite (Graziano, Hair, & Finch, 1997), prosocial (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997), and more likely to apologize (Dunlop, Lee, Ashton, Butcher, & Dykstra, 2015; Howell et al., 2011). By its very title, the trait of “agreeableness” inherently reflects a tendency to agree with others. This would, presumably, include the tendency to agree in an argument. Indeed, the fact that agreeable people tend to be more judicious and compliant in conflict suggests that they might be more likely and willing to admit wrongness. Further, the results of Fetterman, Muscanell et al. (2018), Fetterman, Rutjens et al. (2018), mentioned above, suggest that admitters are at least perceived as more agreeable.

We make the same predictions regarding the HEXACO dimension of honest/humility (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Ashton and colleagues describe this factor as one measuring individual differences in sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014). Like agreeableness, honesty/humility is associated with proclivities toward apologies (Dunlop et al., 2015). Again, like agreeableness, the very title of “humility” suggests that someone high on this trait would be less likely to place their self-image above facts. As such, someone who is humble – especially intellectually humble, which includes facets of humility and open-mindedness (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse, 2016) – should be more likely and willing to admit they are wrong. Again, the results of Fetterman, Muscanell et al. (2018), Fetterman, Rutjens et al. (2018) do suggest that this is how admitters are perceived.

While agreeableness and honesty/humility likely account for some variation in the willingness to admit wrongness admission, we hypothesize these associations to be only modest in size. In addition, we hypothesized that agreeableness and honesty/humility would only be modest predictors of actual wrongness admission. Although several general personality traits may be associated with WAW, our interests regarding the validation of this measure focused on traits with other-oriented components (i.e., interpersonal traits), as opposed to self-oriented components (e.g., The Dark Triad). We did so because as wrongness admission involves other-oriented behavior. Further research should explore whether self-oriented traits are likewise related to WAW.

2. Current investigation

The purpose of the current investigation was to create and validate a willingness to admit wrongness measure. Instead of using a typical personality measure structure – in which one agrees or disagrees with relevant statements about the self – we created a measure in which people respond with their expected behavior across a variety of scenarios. Because there are several situational factors that may affect willingness to admit, we felt that a scenario-based approach was best suited for this measure. For instance, some people might be more likely to admit they are wrong to a friend than to a stranger. Further, wrongness admission willingness may be dependent on argument topic. For example, if people are arguing about the last person to wash the dishes, they may be more likely to admit they are wrong than if they were arguing about the best parenting strategy.

Instead of a scenario-based measure, a behavioral recall measure (e.g., “in the last two weeks, I admitted I was wrong [yes/no]”) might seem more intuitive. However, this sort of behavioral measurement restricts the variance involved in wrongness admission and does not capture the mental arithmetic one goes through when deciding to admit wrongness. We wanted our instrument to measure the variance between those who are more willing to admit in most situations, compared to those who are less willing to admit or are more choosy with whom and when they admit. As such, our interest is more in the psychological realm than the behavioral realm, even though our measure should clearly predict overall behavioral tendencies.

Our goal was to create a single factor measure predicting an overall willingness to admit wrongness across situations. Even so, we allowed the data in Study 1 to guide decisions on any factors that we might

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