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Predicting the Application of Moral Principles Based on HEXACO Personality Traits and Moral Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to predict the application of moral principles—operationalized as moral intelligence—based on HEXACO personality traits among university students.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive-correlational design was employed using a sample of 152 students from the Science and Research Branch of Islamic Azad University in Tehran, selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using two standardized instruments: the Moral Intelligence Scale developed by Lennick and Kiel (2005) and the 60-item HEXACO Personality Inventory created by Ashton and Lee (2000). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS-27 software, incorporating Pearson correlation coefficients and multiple regression analysis to determine the relationships and predictive capacities of the personality traits concerning moral intelligence.

Findings: Results showed a statistically significant and positive correlation between moral intelligence and two HEXACO dimensions: Honesty–Humility ($r = .20$, $p < .05$) and Extraversion ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). Multiple regression analysis revealed that Honesty–Humility ($\beta = .18$, $p = .025$) and Extraversion ($\beta = .45$, $p = .001$) significantly predicted moral intelligence, accounting for 30% of its variance ($R^2 = .30$). The other four personality traits—Emotionality, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience—did not show statistically significant relationships with moral intelligence in this sample.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the predictive roles of Honesty–Humility and Extraversion in determining moral intelligence among university students. These results suggest that personality-informed strategies may be useful in promoting moral development in academic and developmental settings. The study contributes to the literature linking personality traits to ethical functioning and highlights potential pathways for ethical training and intervention based on personality profiles.

Keywords: *Moral intelligence; HEXACO personality model; Honesty–Humility; Extraversion; ethical behavior; personality traits; university students.*

1. Introduction

In today's complex and ethically charged social landscape, understanding the psychological factors that shape moral behavior has become a crucial area of research in psychology. Among the constructs proposed to explain ethical behavior, moral intelligence—defined as the capacity to distinguish right from wrong and to act on this understanding with integrity—has emerged as a significant determinant of ethical decision-making and behavior in both personal and professional domains (Haidt, 2012). Moral intelligence not only facilitates socially responsible behavior but also enhances interpersonal trust, social cooperation, and psychological well-being (Bahrami et al., 2012). As a multidimensional construct, it interacts with personality traits, cognitive capacities, and social learning, warranting deeper empirical inquiry into its antecedents and predictors.

Personality has long been considered a foundational aspect of individual differences that explain a wide range of behaviors, including moral judgment and ethical conduct (Sun, 2024). The HEXACO model of personality, which includes six dimensions—Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience—has provided researchers with a more nuanced framework for understanding the personality–morality linkage (Ghalenei et al., 2014). Particularly, the Honesty–Humility dimension, which captures sincerity, fairness, modesty, and avoidance of greed, has been closely associated with moral behavior and reduced tendencies toward manipulation and exploitation (Aghababaei, 2012; Kalshoven et al., 2011). Extraversion, too, plays a pivotal role in social responsiveness and moral engagement by facilitating assertive and cooperative behavior (Karimi et al., 2023).

The relevance of HEXACO dimensions to moral functioning has been increasingly validated in applied settings, from educational institutions to corporate environments. For example, individuals high in Conscientiousness and Agreeableness are more likely to internalize moral values and act in accordance with societal expectations (Alizadegan et al., 2022). However, these associations are not always linear or straightforward. Emotionality may either hinder or promote moral reasoning, depending on whether it fosters empathy or anxiety-driven self-preservation (McAdams & Mayukha, 2023). Openness to Experience may also support moral intelligence by encouraging reflective thinking and cognitive flexibility, yet its predictive strength is context-dependent (Suhonen et al., 2011). Consequently, the integration of moral intelligence and HEXACO personality traits offers a promising avenue for understanding the psychological underpinnings of ethical behavior.

Recent empirical studies have reinforced the predictive capacity of personality traits on moral intelligence. Alizadeh et al. (2021), for instance, identified significant correlations between moral intelligence and self-regulatory behaviors, highlighting the interplay between personality structure and ethical functioning (Alizadeh et al., 2021). Similarly, research by Alsmeheen (2024) found that moral intelligence could be meaningfully predicted by Big Five traits, particularly Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, emphasizing the role of dispositional factors in moral cognition and behavior (Alsmeheen, 2024). These findings underscore the importance of exploring how specific HEXACO traits relate to moral intelligence, particularly in populations where ethical decision-making is of paramount concern, such as university students preparing for professional roles.

The concept of moral intelligence, while distinct from moral reasoning and moral development, overlaps with constructs like moral sensitivity, ethical identity, and value internalization (Hidari & Ghotb, 2023; Khaleghi & Chenari, 2016). Moral intelligence encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components and includes capacities such as acting based on principles, maintaining commitments, accepting responsibility, and forgiving self and others (Arasteh et al., 2010). These attributes reflect not only an individual's ethical standards but also their capacity for moral resilience and social accountability. In this regard, moral intelligence is particularly valuable for predicting ethical behavior in contexts marked by ambiguity and competing interests, such as organizational decision-making or academic environments (Oden et al., 2015).

Moreover, the development of moral intelligence has implications that extend beyond individual behavior to institutional ethics and collective moral climate. Studies have shown that individuals with high levels of moral intelligence contribute to ethical leadership, reduce instances of misconduct, and foster trust within organizations (Van Scotter & Roglio, 2020; Zangiabadi & Nasirzadeh, 2020). In the educational domain, instructors and students with high moral intelligence exhibit greater academic integrity and interpersonal cooperation (Gholampour et al., 2020). The implications are especially pertinent in formative life stages, such as adolescence and early adulthood, when personality

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traits crystallize and moral orientations become more stable (Ramezani et al., 2023; Villacís et al., 2023).

The interdependence between moral intelligence and personality traits also invites theoretical elaboration from psychological and philosophical perspectives. From a developmental standpoint, traits such as Honesty–Humility may predispose individuals to adopt moral schemas more readily, whereas traits like Extraversion may enhance the enactment of such schemas through socially proactive behavior (Desi & Rodelando, 2017). From a cognitive-affective perspective, Dacka and Rydz (2023) have argued that personality is a conduit through which spiritual and moral intelligences are expressed, particularly in early adulthood (Dacka & Rydz, 2023). These perspectives collectively suggest that personality traits and moral intelligence do not operate in isolation but mutually reinforce each other in shaping ethical behavior across life domains.

Furthermore, the moral landscape is influenced by socio-cultural variables and situational dynamics that interact with personality and moral intelligence. Starc (2017) highlighted the role of ethical attitudes as mediators between personality and behavior, showing that even high levels of moral intelligence may not translate into moral actions without congruent attitudes and social reinforcement (Starc, 2017). Similarly, Saleh (2018) emphasized the importance of moral intelligence in shaping character formation among children, illustrating its foundational role in ethical development across the lifespan (Saleh, 2018). These insights make it imperative to assess how moral intelligence functions within specific cultural and institutional contexts.

In the Iranian academic context, where ethical challenges in education and professional conduct have gained national attention, understanding the predictors of moral intelligence among university students is particularly vital. Arasteh et al. (2010) reported that Iranian students generally possess moderate levels of moral intelligence, with significant individual variability depending on personal, familial, and social factors (Arasteh et al., 2010). Moreover, empirical investigations have pointed to personality variables as salient predictors of ethical reasoning and conduct among Iranian youth (Shakeri et al., 2022). Yet, limited studies have specifically examined the predictive capacity of HEXACO traits for moral intelligence in this population, leaving a gap in both theory and applied ethics research.

Given this context, the present study seeks to predict the application of moral principles—operationalized as moral intelligence—based on the six core dimensions of the HEXACO personality model among students of the Science and Research Branch of Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Drawing on the integrative framework provided by previous research (Merma-Molina et al., 2022; Yablovi et al., 2016), the study hypothesizes that Honesty–Humility and Extraversion will serve as the most robust predictors of moral intelligence, followed by secondary contributions from Conscientiousness and Agreeableness.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method employed in the present study is descriptive and correlational in nature, based on the essence, objectives, and hypotheses of the study. The statistical population consisted of all students at the Science and Research Branch of Islamic Azad University in Tehran. A total of 152 participants were selected through convenience sampling.

2.2. Measures

Data for this study were collected using the following two questionnaires. The Moral Intelligence Scale was developed by Lennick and Kiel in 2005 and contains 40 items. The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Frequently, 5 = Always). The components of this scale include: acting based on principles, values, and beliefs; perseverance and standing up for the truth; honesty; keeping commitments; accepting responsibility for personal decisions; accepting mistakes and failures; accepting responsibility to serve others; active interest in others and spontaneous care for others; the ability to forgive oneself; and the ability to forgive others. The total score ranges from a minimum of 40 to a maximum of 200. To calculate the moral intelligence score, the total score is divided by 2, resulting in a final score between 20 and 100. The validity and reliability of this scale have been confirmed in Iran by Arasteh et al. and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported as 0.85. Additionally, in the study by Bahrami, Assemi, Fathpanah, Dehghani Tafti, and Ahmadi Tehrani, the original version of the questionnaire was translated into Persian and then back-translated into English by an English literature expert, and compared with the original version. Face and content validity of the questionnaire were confirmed by specialists. The reliability of the translated version was also confirmed through a test-retest procedure with a sample of 16 participants from the study population,

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and Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.89 (Arasteh et al., 2010).

To measure personality traits, the HEXACO Personality Inventory was used. This scale was developed by Ashton and Lee in 2000 and consists of 60 items measuring six major dimensions of personality: Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. This scale is also scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Ashton and Lee used Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability of this scale and reported appropriate reliability levels for the subscales. The reliability for the six dimensions of the HEXACO scale has been reported in various studies as follows: Honesty–Humility (0.92), Emotionality (0.90), Extraversion (0.92), Agreeableness (0.89), Conscientiousness (0.89), and Openness to Experience (0.90). The internal consistency reliability for these six factors was reported between 0.77 and 0.80 among a student sample (Ashton & Lee, 2009). In an Iranian sample, Ghaleni, Abolghasemi, and Rostami reported reliability coefficients ranging from 0.66 to 0.88. Aghababayi confirmed the six-factor structure of the Persian version of the HEXACO-60. The internal reliability of the subscales in this questionnaire ranged from 0.60 to 0.75. Additionally, the convergent validity of the Persian version of this questionnaire was confirmed through its correlation with the Big Five personality traits (Ghalenei et al., 2014).

2.3. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, SPSS version 27 was used along with statistical tests including multiple regression coefficients and Pearson correlation coefficients.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic analysis of the participants (N = 152) indicated that the majority were female (77.6%), while 22.4% were male. In terms of marital status, 80.9% of the participants were single and 19.1% were married. Regarding educational level, 67.1% held a bachelor's degree, 29.6% a master's degree, and 3.3% were enrolled in or had completed a doctoral degree.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 152)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Moral Intelligence	72.45	11.38
Honesty–Humility	3.84	0.61
Emotionality	3.02	0.58
Extraversion	3.67	0.66
Agreeableness	3.51	0.63
Conscientiousness	3.89	0.57
Openness to Experience	3.76	0.64

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 show that participants reported a moderately high average score on moral intelligence (M = 72.45, SD = 11.38). Among personality traits, Conscientiousness (M = 3.89, SD = 0.57) and Honesty–Humility (M = 3.84, SD = 0.61) had the highest means, while Emotionality had the lowest (M = 3.02, SD = 0.58).

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Between Personality Traits and Moral Intelligence

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Moral Intelligence	1	.20*	–.12	.48**	–.04	.22**	.05
2. Honesty–Humility		1	–.03	.31	.02	.18	–.34**
3. Emotionality			1	–.21**	.03	–.08	–.07
4. Extraversion				1	–.04	.18*	.07
5. Agreeableness					1	–.10	.12
6. Conscientiousness						1	–.03
7. Openness to Experience							1

*p < .05, **p < .01

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The results in Table 2 indicate that Honesty–Humility (r = .20, p < .05) and Extraversion (r = .48, p < .01) are significantly and positively correlated with moral intelligence. No statistically significant correlations were observed between moral intelligence and the other personality traits.

Table 3

Multiple Correlation Coefficients and R-Square

Model	Multiple Correlation	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Standard Error	Durbin-Watson
1	.54	.30	.28	14.81	1.69

As shown in Table 3, the multiple correlation coefficient between personality traits and moral intelligence is .54. The R^2 value (.30) indicates that approximately 30% of the variance in moral intelligence can be explained by personality traits. The standard error of estimate is 14.81, and the Durbin–Watson statistic (1.69) falls within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5, suggesting no autocorrelation and confirming the independence of residuals.

Table 4

ANOVA Results for Predictor Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	12475.84	6	2079.30	9.47	.001
Residual	1831.36	145	219.52		
Total	44307.20	151			

Table 4 reveals that the overall regression model is statistically significant (F = 9.47, p < .001), indicating that personality traits as a group significantly predict moral intelligence.

Table 5

Regression Coefficients for Personality Traits Predicting Moral Intelligence

Predictor	B (Unstandardized)	SE B	β (Standardized)	t	p
Constant	77.81	14.29		5.44	.001
Honesty–Humility	0.94	0.41	.18	2.25	.025
Extraversion	2.31	0.39	.45	5.90	.001

As shown in Table 5, both Honesty–Humility (β = .18, p = .025) and Extraversion (β = .45, p = .001) significantly predict moral intelligence. A one standard deviation increase in Honesty–Humility is associated with a .18 standard deviation increase in moral intelligence, and a one standard deviation increase in Extraversion is associated with a .45 standard deviation increase. These findings suggest that Extraversion and Honesty–Humility are the strongest predictors of moral intelligence among the personality traits assessed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the predictive role of HEXACO personality traits in relation to moral intelligence among university students. The findings revealed that two traits—Honesty–Humility and Extraversion—significantly predicted moral intelligence scores, while the other four traits—Emotionality, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience—did not demonstrate statistically significant associations. The correlation coefficients indicated moderate positive relationships between Honesty–Humility and Extraversion with moral intelligence, and the regression analysis confirmed that these two traits uniquely and significantly contributed to the explained variance in moral intelligence. Specifically, the total explained variance (R^2 = .30) indicates that personality traits, particularly those two, account for a substantial portion of the variability in moral intelligence among students.

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These findings are theoretically coherent with the structure and intention of the HEXACO model, which was developed to better capture morally relevant personality dimensions, particularly through its inclusion of Honesty–Humility as a distinct factor (Ghalenei et al., 2014). Individuals high on this trait are typically described as sincere, fair, modest, and non-manipulative, qualities that align well with the core elements of moral intelligence, such as acting on ethical principles, being truthful, fulfilling obligations, and accepting responsibility (Aghababaei, 2012). This alignment explains why Honesty–Humility emerged as a significant predictor in the current study, reinforcing earlier empirical evidence that links this trait with ethical decision-making and prosocial conduct (Alizadegan et al., 2022; Kalshoven et al., 2011). It also resonates with the foundational work of Haidt (2012), who emphasized that moral reasoning is often rooted in intuitive dispositions, many of which are stable personality characteristics (Haidt, 2012).

The significance of Extraversion as a predictor of moral intelligence is also noteworthy. While Extraversion is typically associated with sociability, assertiveness, and energy, it also relates to emotional expressiveness and interpersonal engagement—traits that can facilitate ethical behavior through enhanced social interaction and communication (Karimi et al., 2023). Prior research suggests that extraverts may be more inclined to engage in moral behaviors that require interpersonal participation, such as supporting others or demonstrating moral leadership in group contexts (Desi & Rodelando, 2017). Furthermore, individuals with high extraversion may possess stronger motivational orientations toward social inclusion and approval, which can reinforce the adoption and demonstration of ethical values (Alsmeheen, 2024; Van Scotter & Roglio, 2020). The present study supports these interpretations, highlighting how moral behavior can be energized not only by value-laden traits like Honesty–Humility but also by socially engaging traits like Extraversion.

Interestingly, the remaining four personality traits—Emotionality, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience—did not show significant predictive power in relation to moral intelligence. While this may seem inconsistent with some previous studies, it may be attributable to differences in sample composition, cultural context, or the operationalization of moral intelligence. For example, Conscientiousness is frequently linked to responsible behavior and ethical work practices in organizational settings (Alizadegan et al., 2022; Oden et al., 2015), but its relevance might be less prominent in student populations where moral intelligence involves more relational and internalized ethical capacities than structured behavioral patterns. Similarly, Agreeableness, typically associated with cooperation and empathy, may not sufficiently explain the internal motivation to act on ethical principles unless combined with assertive traits like Extraversion (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Ramezani et al., 2023).

In the case of Emotionality, previous literature shows mixed results. While emotional awareness and empathy can facilitate ethical sensitivity, high levels of Emotionality may also lead to excessive self-focus or fear-driven avoidance behaviors, which might limit consistent moral action (Békés et al., 2023; McAdams & Mayukha, 2023). This complexity may explain why Emotionality failed to predict moral intelligence in this context. Likewise, Openness to Experience, often linked to cognitive flexibility and curiosity, may support ethical reasoning but does not necessarily guarantee moral action unless channeled through stable value systems or externalized ethical commitments (Merma-Molina et al., 2022; Suhonen et al., 2011). These nuanced findings highlight that not all personality traits have direct or uniform effects on moral intelligence and that their predictive power may depend on additional mediating variables or contextual factors.

The positive association between moral intelligence and personality traits further aligns with broader theoretical models that emphasize the integration of personality structure and moral development. According to the moral identity framework, personality serves as a foundational schema through which individuals interpret moral dilemmas and choose ethical behaviors (Villacís et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant in educational settings, where moral intelligence is not only a predictor of ethical behavior but also an essential component of holistic student development (Alizadeh et al., 2021; Bahrami et al., 2012). Previous research conducted in Iranian contexts has similarly identified moderate to strong correlations between personality traits and various ethical constructs, such as professional responsibility, prosocial behavior, and moral judgment (Hidari & Ghotb, 2023; Khaleghi & Chenari, 2016).

Moreover, this study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the integration of moral psychology and personality psychology, a connection increasingly emphasized in recent literature (McAdams & Mayukha, 2023; Sun, 2024). As moral behavior becomes more context-

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dependent and situationally influenced, researchers have called for a deeper understanding of how stable personality traits influence dynamic ethical responses. This approach allows for more nuanced predictions and interventions, especially in diverse and transitional populations such as university students (Villacís et al., 2023). By demonstrating that Honesty–Humility and Extraversion are reliable predictors of moral intelligence, the present study not only reinforces previous findings but also opens new pathways for personality-informed ethical development strategies.

From a practical standpoint, these findings can guide educational institutions, counselors, and organizational leaders in designing targeted interventions that cultivate moral intelligence through personality-based assessments and development programs. For example, fostering traits associated with Honesty–Humility could be central to ethics curricula, while group-based learning environments might enhance Extraversion-related moral skills such as communication, empathy, and peer accountability. These tailored approaches align with contemporary efforts to integrate psychological insights into ethical education and leadership training (Ayat et al., 2020; Gholampour et al., 2020).

Despite the meaningful findings, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was limited to students from a single academic institution, which may reduce the generalizability of the results to broader populations, including other age groups, cultures, or occupational groups. Second, the reliance on self-report measures raises the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly in assessing constructs like moral intelligence and honesty. Third, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations; although relationships were identified, the direction of influence between personality traits and moral intelligence cannot be definitively established. Moreover, cultural norms and values—especially in non-Western societies like Iran—may shape the expression of both personality and morality, suggesting a need for more culturally sensitive instruments in future research.

Future research should consider utilizing longitudinal designs to examine how moral intelligence develops over time in relation to changing personality traits. Expanding the sample to include participants from various cultural and educational backgrounds would allow for cross-cultural comparisons and enhance the external validity of the findings. Moreover, integrating behavioral assessments or peer evaluations alongside self-reports could yield more objective measures of moral behavior. Future studies might also explore potential mediators such as moral identity, empathy, or moral reasoning styles, which may help clarify the pathways through which personality traits influence moral intelligence. Additionally, applying qualitative methodologies could offer richer insights into the subjective experience of moral growth in young adults.

In practical terms, educators and mental health professionals should incorporate personality-based approaches into ethical training programs, allowing for tailored interventions that build on students' individual strengths and vulnerabilities. Programs aimed at developing moral intelligence can particularly focus on enhancing honesty, humility, and interpersonal engagement, especially in culturally appropriate ways. Organizations and academic institutions should consider including moral intelligence as a criterion in student leadership and mentoring initiatives. Furthermore, fostering environments that support open communication, ethical reflection, and social responsibility will likely amplify the effects of personality traits such as Extraversion and Honesty–Humility in promoting moral behavior. These applied strategies can enhance ethical competence and resilience among emerging adults, preparing them for responsible participation in increasingly complex societal roles.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the study and participated in the research with informed consent.

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