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Anger rumination across forms of aggression

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ABSTRACT

Research on correlates of aggressive behavior has examined a wide variety of variables (Collins & Bell, 1997; Dahlen, Martin, Ragan, & Kuhlman, 2004; Joireman, Anderson, & Strathman, 2003). Recently, researchers have attempted to parse the construct of rumination into subcomponents focusing on particular types of affective experiences. Anger rumination, in particular, has been the subject of increased attention (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001). Theoretical accounts suggest that people believe aggressive behavior improves mood, so if anger rumination intensifies anger, such cognitive styles may predispose individuals to aggressive behavior. In this study, we sought to examine the role of anger rumination in trait physical aggression, trait verbal aggression, hostility, and anger. We predicted that global anger rumination scores would predict trait physical and verbal aggression, hostility, and anger scores even when controlling for an extensive list of covariates. Results indicated that anger rumination significantly predicts physical and verbal aggression and hostility, but not anger. These findings imply that anger rumination plays an important role in physical and verbal aggression as well as hostility. Limitations include the use of self-report measures and cross-sectional data as well as a non-clinical sample. Implications include the potential utility in assessing anger rumination in aggressive clients.

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1. Introduction

Buss and Perry (1992) define trait aggressiveness as the propensity to engage in physically or verbally aggressive behavior, to hold hostile cognitions, and to experience and express anger. Trait aggression has consistently been shown to be related to specific acts of indirect and direct aggression (e.g., Archer & Webb, 2006). A multitude of empirical studies using different measures of aggression further supports the hypothesis that individuals high in trait aggression are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). Studies have also found a relationship between trait aggression and both aggressive behaviors and a variety of psychopathological symptoms. Aggression is a common correlate of, for example, axis II personality disorders (Fossati et al., 2004), depressive symptomatology (Bjork, Dougherty, & Moeller, 1997), and death by suicide (Dumais et al., 2005). Trait and state aggression have also been consistently linked to various forms of impulsivity (Dahlen et al., 2004; Joireman et al., 2003; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003).

Recently, researchers have begun investigating the potential role of rumination, the tendency to brood about negative experiences and feelings (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), in aggressive behavior. Collins and Bell (1997) found that rumination predicts aggressive responses to perceived insults. Bushman, Bonacci,

Pedersen, Vasquez, and Miller (2005) reported that rumination about an experimental provocation increased the likelihood of participants exhibiting displaced aggression. Additionally, they found that participants who were instructed to ruminate for 25 min were more aggressive towards an intentionally clumsy confederate than were participants who were instructed to distract themselves for the same length of time. In a follow-up study, the same results were replicated using an 8 h time interval.

The construct of rumination, however, is fairly broad in that it encompasses a tendency to focus on a variety of negative mood states rather than on one particular emotion. In an effort to parse the construct into meaningful subcomponents, some researchers have focused specifically on anger rumination, the tendency to focus on affect related thoughts during an anger episode (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001). These researchers hypothesized that rumination about anger would yield a distinct set of behavioral responses and tendencies, particularly within the realm of aggression. Along these lines, Bushman (2002) and Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips (2001) have posited that anger rumination serves to exacerbate and prolong feelings of anger. In the Bushman (2002) study, participants were placed in a rumination condition, a distraction condition, or control condition. All participants received negative feedback regarding their performance on an essay and were told the feedback was from another individual participating in the experiment, although no other participant truly existed. Individuals in the rumination condition were told to think about the other individual while hitting a punching bag. Individuals in the distraction

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condition were told to think about becoming physically fit while hitting the punching bag. Individuals in the control condition did not interact with the punching bag. The participants in the rumination condition subsequently exhibited greater aggression towards a punching bag and higher levels of anger (relevant to those in the other groups – in this study no baseline of anger was taken, so changes in levels of anger within group were unable to be examined) following their aggression. Although the study did not provide a direct measurement of anger rumination or an operational definition for this particular construct and the exhibited aggression was towards an inanimate object, the results nonetheless provide a compelling basis for investigating the relationship between anger rumination and trait aggression.

None of the work on anger rumination has directly measured its relationship with specific forms of trait aggression, yet this relationship is theoretically plausible. *Bushman et al. (2001)* have suggested that people may engage in aggressive behavior as a way to regulate negative affect. In their study, they also demonstrated that people believed that aggressive behavior had affect regulating properties and used these behaviors as methods of emotion regulation. Given that anger rumination has been demonstrated to intensify anger (*Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998*), these findings suggest that anger rumination may thus motivate some individuals to aggress in an effort to regulate negative affect.

In order to explore the relationship between trait aggression and anger rumination in the current study, undergraduates were asked to fill out a series of questionnaires reporting on cognitive, affective, and behavioral variables. Our goal was to consider the relationship between anger rumination and various forms of trait aggression while taking into account the variance better accounted for by other relevant variables and thus decreasing the potential for spurious findings. We hypothesized participants with higher global scores on the Anger Rumination Scale (ARS; *Sukhodolsky et al., 2001*) would exhibit elevations on all four subscales of the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility), even when controlling for biological sex, depressive and anxiety symptoms, impulsivity, and general rumination. Because of the above mentioned prior findings linking aggression to impulsivity, mental disorders, and affective distress, a variety of covariates were chosen so as to emphasize the unique relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. Depressive and anxiety symptoms were included as covariates in an effort to ensure that the findings do not simply reflect the presence of relevant psychopathology. General rumination was included as a covariate in an effort to ensure that significant findings are specific to anger rumination as opposed to a general tendency to brood over a variety of negative affective states. The four components of the original UPPS Impulsive Behavior Scale were included as covariates in an effort to ensure that significant findings do not simply reflect a tendency to act impulsively, whether motivated by a need to reduce negative affect, experience risk or thrill, diminish boredom, or satisfy a momentary urge. Given this extensive list of covariates and the specificity of the hypotheses, significant findings would serve to provide evidence of an important link between anger rumination and trait aggression. Because general rumination will be included as a covariate, significant findings would indicate that, although rumination in general is maladaptive and plays an important role in aggression, the tendency to ruminate specifically in response to feelings of anger is particularly problematic.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduates at a large southeastern University. All students were enrolled in a general

psychology course and received course credit for their participation. Each student signed an informed consent form before participating in the study. Subjects were told that they would be participating in a study examining their behavior and emotions. In total, 200 participants (68.5% female) took part in the study.

The ethnic composition of the sample was 68.0% White or Caucasian, 15.0% African American, 9.5% Hispanic or Latino, 2.5% Asian American, and 3.0% other. Four participants chose not to indicate membership in an ethnic or racial group. The age range for the sample was 16–25 (mean = 18.32, standard deviation = 1.09).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Predictor variables

The Anger Rumination Scale (ARS; *Sukhodolsky et al., 2001*) is a 19-item self-report questionnaire examining the degree to which individuals tend to focus on angry moods (e.g., “Whenever I experience anger, I keep thinking about it for a while.”). Items utilize a Likert scale ranging from one (“Almost never”) to four (“Almost always”). The alpha coefficient in this sample was .91.

2.2.2. Dependent variable

The Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; *Buss & Perry, 1992*) is a 29-item self-report questionnaire that measures trait aggression. The measure is divided into four subscales. Items utilize a Likert type scale ranging from one (“Extremely uncharacteristic”) to five (“Extremely characteristic”). The Physical Aggression Subscale ($\alpha = .87$) consists measures the degree to which individuals tend to engage in physical confrontations (e.g., “There are people that pushed me so far that we came to blows.”). The Verbal Aggression subscale ($\alpha = .72$) measures the degree to which individuals tend to engage in verbal confrontations (e.g., “I tell my friends openly when I disagree with them.”). The Anger subscale ($\alpha = .76$) measures the degree to which individuals exhibit chronic feelings of anger (e.g., “I sometimes feel like a powder keg ready to explode.”). The Hostility subscale ($\alpha = .79$) measures the degree to which individuals believe that they do not receive fair treatment (e.g., “Other people always seem to get the breaks.”). The Physical Aggression and Verbal Aggression subscales each served as the dependent variable in one of the analyses reported below.

2.2.3. Covariates

The Beck Depression Inventory - II (BDI-II; *Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988*) is a 21-item self-report questionnaire. Items use a Likert type scale (0–3) and examine the degree to which various depressive symptoms have been present over the course of the past two weeks. The coefficient α was .88.

The Beck Anxiety Inventory, (BAI; *Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988*) is a 21-item self-report questionnaire. Items use a Likert type scale (0–3) to measure the degree to which participants have experienced particular symptoms of anxiety over the course of the past two weeks. The coefficient α was .90.

The Urgency, (lack of) Premeditation, (lack of) Perseverance, and Sensation Seeking Impulsive Behavior Scale (UPPS; *Whiteside & Lynam, 2001*) is a 45-item self-response scale that features four subscales: Negative Urgency, Sensation Seeking, (lack of) Premeditation, and (lack of) Perseverance. The scale uses a Likert type scale ranging from one “not true of me” to five “very true of me.” The Sensation Seeking subscale ($\alpha = .81$) measures the degree to which individuals seek out activities that involve a sense of risk or thrill (e.g., “I quite enjoy taking risks.”). The (lack of) Premeditation subscale ($\alpha = .88$) measures the degree to which individuals act without first considering the potential consequences of their actions (e.g., “I usually make up my mind through careful reasoning” (reversed)). The (lack of) Perseverance subscale ($\alpha = .82$) measures the degree to which individuals find it difficult to persist in

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