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Cognitive appraisals associated with high trait anger

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Abstract

This study compares the cognitive processes of high and low trait anger individuals in terms of the appraisal components and core relational theme of blame identified in the Smith and Lazarus (1993) appraisal theory. Participants were asked to rate two social interaction scenarios, both of which resulted in negative consequences. The intent of the antagonist in the video was varied, as was the cognitive load of the participants. High trait individuals blamed the antagonist more, more readily identified another person as an antagonist, more readily identified circumstances as being of relevance to their own interests, and responded more angrily to the same events, than low trait anger individuals. These appraisal biases are more marked for high trait anger individuals when there is some ambiguity as to the deliberateness of the provoking event. Cognitive load did not affect appraisals. The implications of these findings for therapeutic interventions are discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Anger; Appraisal; Cognitive; Arousal

1. Introduction

The emotion of anger has been the subject of increasing theoretical analysis and clinical application in the last 15 years, but the empirical literature investigating the nature of anger remains relatively scant. At the same time, the clinical application of theoretical models of anger has burgeoned, arguably at a faster rate than the fundamental research required to support such an application. Meta-analytic (Edmondson & Conger, 1996; Beck & Fernandez, 1998) and narrative (Howells, 1998; Novaco, 1997) reviews of the effectiveness of anger management treatments have suggested that such methods are promising in reducing problematic anger, though a number of obstacles to intervention, particularly with more severely disturbed clients, (Novaco, 1997; Howells, Watt, Hall & Baldwin, 1997; Howells, 1998) have been identified.

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Clinical applications are likely to be predominantly directed at individuals with high trait anger (Deffenbacher et al., 1996). Such people have, typically, engaged in problematic behaviour (aggression, domestic violence etc) or experienced distress or illness as a consequence of their high level of trait anger. In principle, excessively low anger levels of trait anger ('overcontrol') might also be targetted in anger management, but few, if any, outcome studies have been reported with this group. High trait anger, therefore, in practice, is a precondition for consideration for clinical intervention. It follows that a key task is to determine the nature of, and contributory factors for, high trait anger.

Studies of the antecedents for state anger in response to a provocation (for example, Ellis, Howells & Day, 2000) may provide a guide to what factors distinguish high and low trait anger individuals, but they do not demonstrate conclusively that these factors are important. For example, high physiological arousal may be an important antecedent for the state experience of high anger, but it does not necessarily follow that high and low trait anger individuals differ in their level of physiological arousal.

1.1. Appraisals and anger

Appraisal is a central concept in current emotion theory (Frijda, 1993a,b). The link between perception and emotion is thought to be an appraisal: an evaluation of the significance of the change in relation to the person (Smith & Ellsworth, 1987). Appraisals are considered to take place immediately prior to, and to determine the subsequent emotion (Sonnemans & Frijda, 1995; Reisenzein & Hofmann, 1993).

Smith and Lazarus (1993) identify appraisals at the individual component level, and at a molar level that combines individual appraisal components into a summary dimension of a core relational theme. The individual components are primary appraisals (motivational relevance and motivational congruence), which are concerned with how the encounter is relevant to the person's well-being, and secondary appraisals (accountability, either self or other, problem focused coping potential, emotion focused coping potential and future expectancy). Smith and Lazarus (1993) propose that anger elicitation is related to a reduction in motivational congruence, an increase in motivational relevance and an increase in other-accountability. The core relational theme of anger is regarded as other-blame. Blame combines the primary appraisals of increased motivational relevance and reduced motivational congruence with the secondary appraisals of other-accountability. Lazarus (1993), (postscript, in Smith & Lazarus, 1993), later refined the model to include the role of ego involvement in the maintenance of self-esteem (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher & Gramzow, 1992; Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996) and high coping potential in anger elicitation.

1.2. High and low trait anger and anger intensity

In a series of studies, Deffenbacher et al. (1996) were able to differentiate between individuals who experienced high trait anger or anger-proneness on a number of anger characteristics. Whilst high and low anger individuals did not differ in the range of provocative situations that they encountered, high trait anger individuals tended to report 'more anger in every type of situation' (p.137). For the purposes of the present study, it was predicted that high trait anger subjects would show greater cognitive biases on the core relational theme of blame and the appraisal

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