



Anger and impulsivity in non-clinical women

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Abstract

There are well-established links between negative affective states and internally directed impulsive behaviours (such as self-harm), but it is unclear whether there is also an association with externally directed impulsive behaviours (such as sexual promiscuity or theft). Using standardised measures, the present study examined the associations between the different facets of anger and a wide range of impulsive behaviours in a non-clinical group of women. It was found that internally directed impulsive behaviours were more closely associated with components of anger than externally directed impulsive behaviours. The key elements of anger were anger expression, trait anger and externally directed anger. It is concluded that individuals who engage in internally directed impulsive behaviours are more likely to experience and to express anger relatively frequently, and without specific provocation [Spielberger, C.D. (1996). *State-trait expression inventory: professional manual*. Odessa: Psychological Assessment Resources]. Thus, those women who report higher levels of internally directed impulsive behaviours appear to be particularly likely to exhibit anger-proneness as a personality trait. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

It is recognised that negative affective states can serve to trigger impulsive behaviours, and that those behaviours reduce or block awareness of such states (e.g. Evans & Lacey, 1992; Favaro & Santonastaso, 1998; Welch & Fairburn, 1996). Such behaviours include: self-harm (e.g. Shapiro, 1987; Suyemoto, 1998); suicidal gestures (e.g. Stein, Apter, Ratzoni, Har Even & Avidan, 1998); overeating and bingeing (e.g. Lacey, 1993; Root & Fallon, 1989); and drug abuse (e.g. Sussman, Dent & Galaif, 1997). Some studies suggest that anger may be a particularly important affective

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precipitant of some impulsive behaviours (e.g. Arnow, Kenardy & Agras, 1992, 1995; Simeon, Stanley, Frances, Mann, Wincher & Stanley, 1992; Soloff, Lis, Kelly, Cornelius & Ulrich, 1994). However, there are two major weaknesses in the literature. First, research has tended to focus on internally directed impulsive behaviours (such as self-harm and bulimia), with less attention given to more externally directed behaviours (such as 'daredevil' behaviour or theft). Consequently, it is not known whether anger plays a precipitating role in impulsivity generally, or only in those behaviours that are internally directed. Second, it is problematic that studies have not always conceptualised anger in the same way. Some have treated anger as unitary (e.g. Arnow, et al.), whereas others have focused on related concepts such as aggressiveness (e.g. Åsberg, Schalling, Träskmann-Bendz & Wägner, 1987; Chowanec, Josephson, Coleman & Davies, 1991). It is clearly important to understand the multi-faceted nature of anger. Anger can be conceptualised either as an emotional *state* (which varies in intensity) or as a *trait* (a relatively stable personality characteristic) (e.g. Spielberger, 1996; Spielberger, Jacobs, Russell & Crane, 1983). Additionally, individuals can vary in the extent to which they will suppress or express their anger (Spielberger).

Given these gaps in the existing literature, the present study of a non-clinical population of women has two central aims. First, it will explore whether anger is generally associated with impulsivity. The second aim is to explore whether different components of anger are associated more specifically with internally directed or externally directed impulsive behaviours.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Subjects

Data were collected from 83 female volunteers, mostly drawn from an undergraduate population. Their mean age was 21.3 years (S.D. = 4.78; range = 18–50). Subjects were told that the study was an exploration of the links between emotion and general attitudes and behaviours.

2.2. Measures and procedure

Each woman completed the questionnaires in the following order, during individual testing sessions which lasted up to half an hour.

2.2.1. State-trait anger expression inventory (STAXI; Spielberger, 1996)

The STAXI is a 44-item self-report questionnaire, which measures the experience and expression of anger. It consists of six primary scales. The *Trait anger* scale measures individual differences in the disposition to experience anger. [This scale has two subscales — *Angry temperament* (measuring a general tendency to experience and express anger without specific provocation) and *Reaction to criticism* (the disposition to express anger when criticised or treated unfairly by others).] *State anger* measures the intensity of angry feelings at a particular time. *Anger control* assesses the frequency with which individuals control the expression of anger. *Anger suppression* measures the extent to which angry feelings are held in. *Externally directed anger* measures the expression of anger toward other people or objects in the environment. Finally, *Anger expression* (derived from the previous three scales) provides a general index of the expression of anger. Using four-point

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