



## The role of personality and blame attribution in prisoners' experiences of anger

Jane Wood<sup>a,\*</sup>, Anna Kristín Newton<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent at Canterbury, Canterbury CT2 7NP, UK*

<sup>b</sup>*The Prison and Probation Administration, Litla-Hraun, Borgartún 7, Reykjavík, Iceland*

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### Abstract

The emotion of anger has gained researchers' interest in recent years [Novaco (1994) In: J. Monahan & M. J. Steadman (Eds.), *Violence and mental disorder: developments in risk assessment*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; (1997) *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 2, 77]. However, it is still unclear what influences the expression of anger. The current study investigated the relationship between anger, personality and blame attribution in Icelandic prisoners. Sixty-nine male offenders completed the Gudjonsson Blame Attribution Inventory, the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire and the Novaco Anger Scale. No differences were found in the anger levels of violent/non-violent offenders. Results indicated that recidivism, psychoticism and neuroticism were predictive of anger levels, but no relationship was found between blame attribution and anger. The findings of this study suggest that in terms of anger management programmes in prison, it might be advantageous to target repeat offenders and take into account personality factors that seem to influence anger.

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The examination of anger is a growing area of research (Novaco, 1997, 1998; Towl & Crighton, 1996); consequently the identification of factors that facilitate it is in its early stages. It has been suggested that variables such as personality and blame attribution may influence the experience of anger and possibly the implementations of anger management programmes (McFatter, 1998; Quigley & Tedeschi, 1996). In order to identify prisoners most in need of anger management programmes, the aim of the current study was to explore the relationship between anger, personality and blame attribution in prisoners held in the Icelandic prison system where, to date, no group work has been introduced.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44-1227-823-037; fax: +44-1227-827-032.

*E-mail addresses:* j.l.wood@ukc.ac.uk (J. Wood), annan@tmd.is (A.K. Newton).

Anger can be defined as a response to an aversive state consisting of both cognitive and physiological components (Novaco, 1997). It is a normal and often functional response to negative situations, protecting self-esteem, instigating action, energising and defending individuals against psychological or physical harm (Towl & Crighton, 1996). Alternatively, anger can be destructive, physically and mentally harmful and can lead to the onset of various problems such as depression and cardiovascular complications (Novaco, 1994; Stein, Trabasso, & Liwag, 1993).

Novaco's (1978) model of anger suggests the emotional expression of anger is an interaction between external events, cognitive arousal and behavioural factors. Novaco's (1978) theory indicates that it is individual interpretations of aversive situations through personal scripts and schemas that mediate the transformation of information into behavioural actions. In particular, if a situation is perceived as negative or threatening to the individual's self-image then it becomes likely that anger will result (Novaco, 1978, 1997).

Anger only becomes problematic when its expression becomes a frequent, inappropriate and/or disproportionate reaction to events (McDougall, Venables, & Roger, 1991; Novaco & Chemtob, 1998; Towl & Crighton, 1996). It has been proposed that aggression is often a consequence of anger arousal (Cooke, Baldwin, & Howison, 1990) and many studies indicate anger as a significant predictor of aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992; Novaco, 1997, 1998). Both anger (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997) and aggression (Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989) have been shown to predict offending behaviour.

Although anger may not always lead to aggressive behaviour, studies on populations with high anger levels show that aggressive behaviour is a frequent outcome of anger arousal (Chemtob, Novaco, Hamada, & Gross, 1997) and elevated anger levels, coupled with aggressive behaviour, are often observed in forensic patients, offenders and post-traumatic stress syndrome patients (Chemtob et al., 1997; Watt & Howells, 1999). As anger can predict aggression, which in turn, may result in offending behaviour, anger management programmes have been introduced in prisons throughout Europe and the USA (Hollenhurst, 1998). The objective of these programmes is not to eradicate anger, but rather to regulate it by challenging maladaptive and irrational beliefs relating to the function and nature of anger (Howells, Watt, Hall, & Baldwin, 1997). Other aims include a heightened awareness of the negative outcomes that anger can have and the development of the ability to regulate anger experiences (HM Prison Service, 1995). The underlying principle of anger management programmes is that if offenders learn how to control their anger, this may lead to a reduction in aggressive behaviour (Dowden, Blanchette, & Serin, 1999) and consequently a reduction in further offending (Feindler & Ecton, 1986).

Obviously not all offenders have problems controlling their anger (Howells, 1993). Deciding which offenders would benefit from anger control programmes may logically lead to the selection of offenders incarcerated for violent rather than non-violent crimes. Hence, research indicates that most anger control programmes in prisons focus on violent offenders (Dowden et al., 1999). Although selecting participants for anger management programmes on the basis of violent or non-violent crimes seems rational, to date there is little research suggesting that violent and non-violent offenders differ in terms of anger and/or levels of aggression. Accordingly, there is no real evidence suggesting that only offenders with histories of violence are in need of anger management.

Indeed, it could be argued that other groups of offenders would benefit from inclusion in Anger Management programmes. Research notes how people will differ in their reaction to the

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