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## Personality traits predicting anger in self-, ambiguous-, and other caused unpleasant situations

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### Abstract

This study examined how the experience of anger is differentially related to self-esteem, trait anger, and empathy depending on who is responsible for the anger-eliciting event. Participants engaged in a directed imagery task in which they reported on their anger experience in response to six scenarios that depicted unpleasant situations in which oneself is responsible, in which responsibility is ambiguous, or in which someone else is responsible. The results demonstrated that a low self-esteem predisposed participants to experience anger only when oneself was responsible for the unpleasant event. Anger experience was related to trait anger in all studied situation types, but most strongly in situations that were ambiguous with respect to who is responsible for what has happened. Finally, empathy was found to be most strongly related to anger experience in unpleasant situations in which someone else is responsible. These findings demonstrate the importance of taking into account contextual information for predicting emotional experience on the basis of traits and illustrate how emotional experience is the result of the interaction between person and situation.

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## 1. Introduction

A common critique on personality traits is their limited predictive power for concrete behaviour and responses (Mischel & Shoda, 1998). One reason that has been advanced for their limited predictive power is that they may only affect an individual's behavior and reactions in specific, trait-relevant situations (e.g., Kenrick & Funder, 1988), situations that draw on particular sensitivities or vulnerabilities associated with the trait. As a result, the predictive power of personality traits may be limited to or highest in such specific, trait-relevant situations. A key task for personality psychologists, then, is to identify those situations in which particular personality traits most strongly influence an individual's reaction to the event.

In the present study, we present an analysis of traits that predispose people to experience the emotion of anger in reaction to specific contexts or events. Anger is an emotion that is frequently experienced by most individuals and that can have major interpersonal, societal, and even health consequences (e.g., Spielberger et al., 1985). Identifying which traits predispose individuals to experience anger in which situations can provide useful information for prevention and intervention programs aimed at altering the disruptive impact of anger. In what follows, we will first discuss the concept of responsibility which we expect to play a crucial role in qualifying the experience of anger, followed by a discussion of personality traits—self-esteem, trait anger, and empathy—which we expect to be differentially related to anger in events characterized by specific instances of responsibility.

## 2. Responsibility

One of the crucial factors in qualifying the anger response is that of blame or responsibility for an unpleasant event (e.g., Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, & De Boeck, 2003). An assignment of blame is assumed to lie at the core of the experience of anger, directing the mobilized energy that accompanies it towards the source of frustration (e.g., Frijda, 1986). Although anger is prototypically regarded as resulting from someone else's wrongdoing, people can also experience anger when oneself is responsible for a frustrating event (e.g., Ellsworth & Tong, *in press*; Mikulincer, 1988). Furthermore, situations can be ambiguous with respect to who is responsible for what has happened. Such circumstances are considered to be highly diagnostic for individual differences in angry and aggressive responding (e.g., Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002).

The dispositional processes that are implicated in producing higher or lower levels of anger in these different types of circumstances can be assumed to be of a different nature. Depending on whether oneself or someone else lies at the cause of an unpleasant event, or the cause is ambiguous, different personal sensitivities and habitual traits may act to predispose an individual to experience anger or not or in a more or less intense way. In particular, in cases of anger towards oneself, personality aspects or sensitivities related to the self may prove to be especially relevant for predicting anger. In this respect, we will consider self-esteem, a central facet of personality that concerns the self. Likewise, in cases of anger towards others, interpersonal personality traits may be particularly relevant. In this respect, we will examine the role of empathy. Finally, in situations that are ambiguous with respect to specific response-eliciting features, corresponding trait-levels

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