



# From anger to verbal aggression: Inhibition at different levels

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Received 5 July 2006; received in revised form 25 October 2006; accepted 1 November 2006

Available online 14 December 2006

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## Abstract

A factor-analytic-based method to measure the inhibition of three verbally aggressive behaviours was investigated in two studies on self-report data. Inhibition was subdivided into two types: inhibition of the tendency to become verbally aggressive and inhibition of the verbally aggressive behaviour. In Study 1, it was investigated whether both kinds can be separated and measured by using a factor-analytic model. In Study 2, the approach was validated by relating both types of inhibition to broad and specific trait measures, either related to behaviour regulation or not. Inhibition of the *tendency* to become verbally aggressive was negatively related to Extraversion and Anger Out, and positively to hostility and a general inhibition measure. The inhibition of verbally aggressive *behaviour* was positively related to Agreeableness, Anger In (keeping anger inside) and anger out control (control of outward expression of anger), and negatively to Verbal Aggression and Anger Out.

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*Keywords:* Verbal aggression; Inhibition; Self-report method

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## 1. Introduction

Anger and verbal aggression are two closely related processes. Anger is often conceived as the emotion which motivates aggression. However, not all aggressive inclinations a person experiences

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are expressed (Averill, 1983). One may withhold an aggressive reaction for several reasons, often even without any conscious reflection, for example because the other person has a higher social rank (Allan & Gilbert, 2001), to avoid negative consequences (Averill, 1983; Beatty & McCroskey, 1997), or to avoid an aggressive counterreaction (Deffenbacher, Oetting, Lynch, & Morris, 1996). We will focus on two different kinds of inhibition related to verbally aggressive (VA) behaviour: the inhibition of the tendency to become verbally aggressive, called Action-tendency Inhibition, and the inhibition of the VA behaviour, called Behaviour Inhibition. Scope is twofold: a method to measure inhibition of VA behaviour is presented and validated, and simultaneously, the empirical differentiation of both types of inhibition is tested.

Measuring inhibition is not straightforward because inhibition is not directly observable. Trying to measure inhibition with a direct, situation-based approach, one can end up with questions like ‘How much do you feel inhibited to curse in this situation?’ or ‘In case you feel a tendency to curse in this situation, to which degree do you inhibit this tendency?’ Such direct items may be too complex, certainly if one wants to distinguish between the just mentioned types of inhibition. Alternatively, Smits, De Boeck, and Vansteelandt (2004) successfully developed an indirect strategy to measure inhibition based on a simple view on verbal aggression. An extensive description of the theoretical framework can be found in Smits et al. (2004); here a short description will be presented. It is assumed that anger feelings feed the tendency to react in a VA way, the VA action-tendency, (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Frijda, 1986; Kinney, Smith, & Donzella, 2001), and the VA action-tendency can be seen as the basis of VA behaviour (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989). Whether inhibition is present or not, can be derived from anger feelings without a VA action-tendency or from a VA action-tendency without a VA behaviour (see Fig. 1 for a graphical representation).

In a first study, we tested whether it is possible to distinguish both types of inhibition. As a result, a situation-based measure of anger and indirect measures of both inhibition types are obtained. In the second study, first, we tested whether the results can be replicated, and second, the inhibition measures will be related to external variables of three types: the big five personality dimensions, behaviour regulation variables, and specific trait variables concerning anger and aggression. The relations with external variables are important from a theoretical and a validity point of view.

## **2. Study 1: Measuring inhibition**

### *2.1. Method*

#### *2.1.1. Participants*

The participants were 361 first-year psychology students (60 males, 299 females, 2 gender unknown; average age = 18.6, SD = 1.81). Participation was a partial fulfilment of a requirement to participate in research.

#### *2.1.2. Materials*

To measure both types of inhibition, a direct imagery task was used: the participants received 15 vignettes with situation descriptions, that were taken from two existing situation–response

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