



Do Big Five personality traits associated with self-control influence the regulation of anger and aggression? ☆

Lauri A. Jensen-Campbell *, Jennifer M. Knack,
Amy M. Waldrip, Shaun D. Campbell

Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Arlington, Box 19528, Arlington, TX 76019-0528, USA

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Abstract

This study examined whether Big Five personality traits associated with the ability to exhibit self-control would moderate the anger–aggression link. A total of 126 participants (63 women) completed personality measures. In a separate experimental session, participants wrote an essay and then received either positive or negative feedback from a fictitious participant. Participants were given the opportunity to aggress against the supposed other person. Baseline and post-experimental emotions were assessed. EEG was recorded to measure activity in midfrontal, lateral-frontal, and parietal areas. Results replicated previous findings that anger is associated with left relative to right prefrontal asymmetry and aggression. Conscientiousness was negatively associated with anger and relative left prefrontal asymmetry. Conscientiousness also moderated the link between anger and aggression. Agreeableness was positively associated with anger, but only when levels of conscientiousness were low.

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 817 272 2364.

E-mail address: Lcampbell@uta.edu (L.A. Jensen-Campbell).

1. Introduction

In every society, self-control is important for getting along with others. It has even been suggested that the overarching purpose of self-control in humans is inherently social in nature (Barkley, 2001). A person who cannot control his or her thoughts, feelings, or behaviors is more likely to lash out in anger when frustrated, handle conflicts less constructively, and engage in antisocial behavior (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Even nonaggressive children who have attentional problems often have difficulty giving situationally appropriate responses and have difficulty modulating their behavior to meet the social demands of the situation (Landau & Milich, 1988). Conversely, individuals who are able to control their behaviors should receive numerous benefits from their social relations within the group such as belongingness, peer acceptance, higher quality relationships, and even protection from victimization (Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2004; Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004).

Research has indeed found associations between attentional processes, emotion-related regulation, and social behavior. For example, preschoolers' attentional control was associated with constructive anger reactions (Eisenberg, Fabes, Nyman, Bernzweig, & Pinuelas, 1994). Additionally, Eisenberg et al. (1995) found that high attentional control in elementary school boys predicted socially appropriate behavior. Teacher and parent reports of behavioral regulation were also associated with lower levels of aggressive and disruptive behavior. Similarly, Belsky, Friedman, and Hsieh (2001) found that early attentional control moderates the association between negative emotionality and social competence.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether Big Five personality dimensions associated with self-control, namely agreeableness and conscientiousness, influence emotional and behavioral responses when individuals were confronted with a frustrating interpersonal situation. If frustration is a major instigator of aggression (Berkowitz, 1968), an important mechanism that inhibits aggressive behavior may be the ability to exhibit self-control in frustrating situations. Many studies have found that anger is often directly associated with aggression when other defensive motivations are absent (e.g., Berkowitz, 1993; Richardson et al., 1998). For example, Harmon-Jones and Sigelman (2001) have found that relative left prefrontal cortical activity is associated with state-induced anger, which in turn predicted offensive aggression.

Previous research has focused primarily on “main effect” models of anger and aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson & Carnagey, 2004). Interactive models, on the other hand, allow for the exploration of moderator or “buffer” variables that influence these associations. We were specifically interested in whether conscientiousness and agreeableness moderated the contributions of anger to aggression. Individuals who have the ability to effortfully shift and focus their attention may be less likely to aggress when angered than individuals who have less self-control. In other words, the behavioral and cognitive control capacities associated with conscientiousness and agreeableness may aid in weakening the anger–aggression link. Agreeable and conscientious individuals may be better able to suppress the dominant or prepotent response to be angry and offensively aggressive when involved in a frustrating situation.

1.1. *Self-control and personality*

Rothbart and Bates (1998) and Rothbart and Posner (1985) suggest that self-regulation, also termed effortful control (EC), involves constitutionally based executive control

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