



Can one's temper be cooled? A role for Agreeableness in moderating Neuroticism's influence on anger and aggression [☆]

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Abstract

The study followed from the idea that Neuroticism captures hot or facilitative vulnerabilities related to anger and aggression, whereas Agreeableness captures cool or inhibitory processes in relation to these same outcomes. As such, it was predicted that Neuroticism and Agreeableness should interact to predict anger and aggression according to hot/cool models of self-regulation. This hypothesis was systematically examined among three independent samples of participants (total $N = 176$). As predicted, Neuroticism and Agreeableness interacted to predict anger and aggression among all samples, and did so in a manner consistent with the hypothesis that Neuroticism–anger relations would be lower at high levels of Agreeableness. The results therefore highlight the distinct roles of Neuroticism and Agreeableness in predicting anger and aggression, while placing these traits in a common interactive self-regulatory framework.

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1. Introduction

The personality traits of Neuroticism and Agreeableness are often, if not typically, uncorrelated (John & Srivastava, 1999), yet both predict outcomes related to anger and aggression (Martin, Watson, & Wan, 2000). Such data are intriguing because they suggest

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that there are two quite different trait-related influences on anger and aggression, one that facilitates such outcomes (i.e., Neuroticism) and one that inhibits such outcomes (i.e., Agreeableness). Beyond this correlational level of analysis, it may also be that Neuroticism and Agreeableness *interact* to predict anger and aggression, and do so in a manner that is consistent with self-regulation theories involving hot and cool personality-related influences. More specifically, we predicted that Neuroticism–anger relations would be quite a bit stronger among individuals low in Agreeableness. Although this prediction is novel to the literature, it is nevertheless consistent with prior theory and data. In support of this point, we first review relevant data involving Neuroticism and Agreeableness before presenting an interactive model of these personality-related influences.

1.1. Neuroticism, anger, and aggression

Individuals higher in Neuroticism report higher levels of anger just as they report higher levels of other negative emotions like anxiety, sadness, and guilt (Watson & Clark, 1984). The strength of these relationships is such that some prominent models of trait Neuroticism suggest that it can be labeled in terms of “negative affectivity” – i.e., the broad tendency to experience aversive emotional states (Clark & Watson, 1999; Watson, 2000). Although anger is merely one of a number of aversive states linked to high Neuroticism, the connection between Neuroticism and anger is clearly robust.

Other data add to our understanding of how and why Neuroticism is linked to anger and aggression. Neurotic individuals not only report higher levels of irritation, annoyance, and contempt (Watson, 2000), but they also endorse coping strategies that demonstrably exacerbate interpersonal conflicts (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). Moreover, the link between Neuroticism and interpersonal conflicts is not particular to self-reported outcomes variables, as it has also been shown that spouses of neurotic partners view their marriages as more conflicted than do spouses of stable partners (Buss, 1991). Indeed, Neuroticism has a unique ability to predict divorce in longitudinal designs (Kelly & Conley, 1987). These sources of data therefore link Neuroticism to interpersonal conflict as well as to subjective states of anger.

What accounts for the relationship between Neuroticism on the one hand and anger and aggression on the other? A good deal of relevant research has highlighted the negative reactivity processes associated with higher levels of Neuroticism. Individuals high in Neuroticism have been shown to be more reactive to both laboratory inductions of negative emotions (e.g., Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998) and to stressors in daily life (e.g., Bolger & Schilling, 1991). Findings such as these suggest that individuals high in Neuroticism may be more prone to anger and aggression primarily because they are more reactive to negative events (e.g., Bolger & Schilling, 1991). This sort of reactivity perspective is consistent with prominent models of reactive aggression, such as that of Anderson and Bushman (2002), which contends that negative affect, regardless of its source, exacerbates aggression in response to provocation. Neuroticism, as a dispositional variable, therefore seems quite consistent with “hot” or facilitative influences on anger and aggression.

1.2. Agreeableness, anger, and aggression

In relation to their zero-order correlates with negative affective states, Neuroticism and Agreeableness are quite different. Whereas Neuroticism predicts a wide variety of negative

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