



## Trait anger and aggression: A moderated mediation model of anger rumination and moral disengagement

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### ABSTRACT

Although trait anger has been shown to play an important role in aggression, little is known about mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying this relation. Based on the general aggression model, we investigated the mediating role of anger rumination in the association between trait anger and aggression and the moderating role of moral disengagement. Four hundred and sixty-four Chinese young adults completed the measures of trait anger, anger rumination, moral disengagement, and aggression. The results indicated that trait anger was significantly and positively associated with aggression and anger rumination mediated this relation. Moral disengagement moderated the relation between anger rumination and aggression and the relation between trait anger and aggression. Specifically, the significant relation between anger rumination and aggression only existed among high moral disengagement individuals and the relation between trait anger and aggression became weaker for high moral disengagement individuals.

### 1. Introduction

Aggression is a major public health and societal problem that may result in direct physical injury, psychological and behavioral problems (Wang, Lei, Yang, Gao, & Zhao, 2017). It has been defined as any behavior directed toward another individual that is carried out with the immediate intent to cause harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Given the negative consequences, it is of theoretical and practical importance to explore those factors that may contribute to an increase in aggression. Anger has been well documented as one of the most examined predictive variables of aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Shorey, Cornelius, & Idema, 2011; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2008, 2010). Anger has also been defined as a state and a trait in the literature (Deffenbacher et al., 1996; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010). As a dispositional trait, trait anger involves “stable individual differences in the frequency, duration, and intensity of state anger” (Spielberger, 1999; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2008, 2010). More importantly, some researchers have found that trait anger is a stronger predictor of aggression than is state anger (Deffenbacher et al., 1996). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to replicate the relation between trait anger and aggression and to extend previous literature by investigating the roles of anger rumination and moral disengagement (henceforth

MD) in this relation.

#### 1.1. Trait anger and aggression

Trait anger is a personality construct that refers to stable individual differences in the propensity to experience anger as an emotional state (Owen, 2011; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2008, 2010). Individuals with anger respond aggressively to various stimuli more frequently and are more likely to engage in aggression including physical aggression, verbal aggression, and indirect aggression (Colasante, Zuffianò, & Malti, 2015; Gresham, Melvin, & Gullone, 2016; Li et al., 2016; Wyckoff, 2016). Similarly, according to approach-withdrawal model, trait anger is associated with approach motivation (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2010) and particularly excessive approach motivation may result in aggression, which has been shown in violent prisoners (Keune et al., 2012). Furthermore, there is growing support among researchers for that high trait anger individuals are more likely to perpetrate aggression (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006; Bondu & Richter, 2016; Shorey et al., 2011; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010).

It is important to note, however, that previous studies have focused primarily on the direct relation between trait anger and aggression. The

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mediating mechanism (i.e., how trait anger relates to aggression?) and moderating mechanism (i.e., when the link is most potent?) underlying this relation remain largely unknown. Answers to these questions are essential for a better understanding of the etiology of aggression and the development of targeted intervention programs. Therefore, we utilized a sample of young adults to examine the mediating effect of anger rumination and the moderating effect of MD.

### 1.2. Anger rumination as a mediator

Anger rumination refers to the tendency to focus and dwell on angry moods and experiences, as well as their causes and consequences (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001; White & Turner, 2014). In reality, considerable research has investigated the relation between anger rumination and aggression. Some experimental studies have shown that rumination about experimental provocation can increase the likelihood of individuals exhibiting direct aggression and displaced aggression (Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005; Pedersen et al., 2011; Vasquez et al., 2013). Furthermore, many studies conducted outside the laboratory also indicate that anger rumination is a significant predictor of aggression including physical aggression and verbal aggression (Peled & Moretti, 2007; Peled & Moretti, 2010; Peters et al., 2015; Pugliese, Fritz, & White, 2015; Turner & White, 2015; White & Turner, 2014). Most importantly, anger rumination has been demonstrated to uniquely predict aggression, even after controlling for other variables (Anestis, Anestis, Selby, & Joiner, 2009; Eisenlohr-Moul, Peters, Pond Jr., & DeWall, 2016; Smith, Stephens, Repper, & Kistner, 2016).

The previous literature is clear that trait anger is strongly associated with aggression, but the extent to which intervening variables mediate this relation is relatively less studied. That is, those factors that may mediate this relation remain relatively less clear. Drawing from the general aggression model (GAM) (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011), we proposed that anger rumination might mediate this relation. The GAM provides a parsimonious account of why people act aggressively in terms of three levels: personal and situational factors, internal states, and outcomes of appraisal and decision-making processes. Specifically, personal factors (e.g. personality traits and attitudes) interact with situational factors (e.g. insults) to create an internal state which is a composite of cognitions (hostile thoughts, aggressive scripts), affect, and arousal (physiological and psychological arousal). The internal state in turn influences appraisals and decision-making processes which may or may not result in an aggressive response (García-Sancho, Salguero, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2016). That is, trait anger (as a personal factor) might influence individuals' propensity to aggress via priming aggressive thoughts and scripts and increasing attention to provoking events (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Gresham et al., 2016). Given that angry rumination is a cognitive process that begins following an event that induces anger (Denson, 2013), it is possible that anger rumination is one promising mediator between trait anger and aggression.

Some theorists have claimed that high trait anger individuals have a tendency to ruminate on anger experiences, which may contribute to an increase in their aggression (Owen, 2011; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2008, 2010). This is supported by a series of empirical studies. First, trait anger is significantly associated with anger rumination (Borders & Lu, 2017; Denson, Pedersen, Ronquillo, & Nandy, 2009; Peters, Geiger, Smart, & Baer, 2014). Specifically, when anger is activated in an individual, she/he is less likely to be able to control anger rumination (Suhr & Nesbit, 2013). Second, there is accumulating evidence in support of the incremental validity of anger rumination in predicting aggression (Anestis et al., 2009; Eisenlohr-Moul et al., 2016; Peled & Moretti, 2007; Peled & Moretti, 2010; Peters et al., 2015; Pugliese et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016; Turner & White, 2015; White & Turner, 2014). Furthermore, one study has found that anger rumination mediates the relation between trait driving anger and aggressive driving behaviors

(Suhr & Nesbit, 2013). Therefore, we proposed that anger rumination would mediate the relation between trait anger and aggression.

### 1.3. Moral disengagement as a moderator

Although trait anger may be significantly associated with aggression via anger rumination, not all individuals who are predisposed to anger homogeneously experience higher levels of anger rumination and show more aggression. Thus, it is important to explore those factors that may amplify or diminish (i.e., moderate) the strength of the associations among trait anger, anger rumination, and aggression. MD is one of the most examined predictive variables of aggression (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2015). It refers to a psychological scheme by which moral self-sanctions can be selectively disconnected from detrimental aggression by converting harmful acts to acceptable ones and making allowances for the enactment of antisocial and immoral conduct (Caprara et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017), and several studies have recently explored whether MD functions as a moderator (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Wang et al., 2017). Indeed, some theorists have claimed that “it is time to move from ‘main effect’ studies, aimed at establishing a relation between MD and aggressive behavior, to ‘interaction effect’ studies, testing specific hypotheses and more complex patterns of relations (Gini et al., 2014; Gini et al., 2015).” According to MD theory, most people have developed personal moral standards, as a self-regulation process, which can guide good behavior and deter bad behavior (Bandura et al., 1996). Thus, individuals usually behave in ways that are consistent with their internal moral standards. However, this self-regulation process can be deactivated selectively through MD. Through MD, individuals can be freed from the self-sanction that would ensue when behavior violates internal standards. That is, aggressive behavior can be cognitively reconstructed via MD so as to make it appear less harmful or not harmful at all to others (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2015; Wang, Lei, Liu, & Hu, 2016). Thus, high levels of MD might strengthen the association between trait anger and aggression as well as anger rumination and aggression. Specifically, high MD individuals may use one or more of many potential explanations to rationalize and justify their aggressive behaviors. This may increase the risk of aggression by individuals who have a highly trait anger and anger rumination. In contrast, those with low levels of MD should decrease the likelihood of legitimizing aggression. Thus, low levels of MD might weaken the association between trait anger and aggression as well as anger rumination and aggression.

Empirical studies support these hypotheses showing that MD exhibits a moderating function between some psychological variables (e.g., aggression efficacy, empathy, grandiose-manipulative traits, impulsive-irresponsible traits, moral identity, negative affect, and trait self-control) and aggression (Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Gini et al., 2015; Li, Nie, Boardley, Situ, & Dou, 2014; Samnani, Salamon, & Singh, 2014; Wang et al., 2017). For instance, MD moderates the association between grandiose-manipulative traits and instrumental aggression and the association between impulsive-irresponsible traits and reactive aggression (Gini et al., 2015). To our knowledge, however, no previous studies have examined whether MD is a risk factor that strengthens the adverse effects of trait anger and anger rumination on aggression. In addition, MD may not moderate the association between anger and anger rumination because that MD only can legitimize aggression but not anger rumination.

### 1.4. The present study

Taken together, the aims of the current study were twofold. First, the current study tested whether anger rumination would mediate the relation between trait anger and aggression. Second, we tested whether MD would moderate the association between trait anger and aggression as well as anger rumination and aggression. These two research

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