



Interaction between implicit aggression and dispositional self-control in explaining counterproductive work behaviors



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ABSTRACT

Implicit component of aggression as a personality trait seems to be important for understanding aggressive behavior in different life domains, including counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). However, the expression of aggressive urges might depend on the level of self-control an individual possesses. In this paper we report the results of 2 studies that tested the interaction between implicit aggression, as measured with the Conditional Reasoning Test for Aggression (CRT-A), and dispositional self-control (DSC) in explaining counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). In Study 1, 333 employees completed a study package consisting of the CRT-A, a DSC scale, and a CWB scale. In Study 2, an additional sample of employees ($n = 341$) completed a research battery consisting of the CRT-A, another DSC scale, and another CWB instrument. Additionally, in Study 2 we collected ratings about the participants' DSC and CWBs from their coworkers. The moderation analyses confirmed that high DSC buffers the effect of implicit aggression on self-reported CWBs in both studies, irrespective of whether self-control was self- or other-reported. However, the moderation effect was nonsignificant when other-reports of CWBs were used as the criteria.

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1. Introduction

Recent developments in implicit personality could shed a new light on the relationship between personality and work behavior (Uhlmann et al., 2012; Vasilopoulos, Siers, & Shaw, 2013). New implicit personality tests should capture subconscious, automatic aspects of personality that are usually not covered by personality questionnaires (i.e., explicit personality measures). At the same time, the measures are supposed to overcome the objections that were often related with the psychological instruments intended for the measurement of implicit psychological processes (e.g., low reliability and questionable incremental validity, Lilienfeld, Wood, & Garb, 2000). Moreover, implicit personality measures should be practically convenient in terms of the time and resources needed for its application in order to be useful for practical purposes (e.g., personnel selection).

While a few studies described new implicit personality measures that are both psychometrically valid and practically convenient, and showed that implicit and explicit personality measures only partially overlap (cf. Uhlmann et al., 2012), the interaction between explicit and implicit personality in explaining work behavior is mostly unexplored. In this paper we will report the results of 2 studies that tested the relationship between implicit aggression, as measured with the Conditional Reasoning Test for Aggression (CRT-A, James & LeBreton, 2012), and dispositional self-control (DSC, de Ridder, Lensvelt-

Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok & Baumeister, 2012) in explaining counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), a set of behaviors intended to harm the employing organization or coworkers. Before we report the results of our research, we will briefly describe the CRT-A as a measure of implicit aggressiveness and explain why the interaction between implicit aggression and DSC in explaining CWBs should be tested.

1.1. Conditional Reasoning Test for Aggression (CRT-A)

Research on aggression as a personality trait indicates that it consists of both explicit, conscious and implicit, unconscious components (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Todorov & Bargh, 2002). The explicit component refers to an individual's understanding of his/her aggressive inclinations and is measured with self-report questionnaires (e.g., the Aggression Questionnaire, Buss & Perry, 1992). The implicit component consists of the associations between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors related to aggression that span from simple associations between concepts to complex knowledge structures (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The implicit component is not completely accessible to introspection and should therefore be measured with specially designed assessment procedures.

The CRT-A represents one such procedure. It is based on the idea that aggressive individuals use specific motive-based biases in their reasoning that help them to see their aggressive behavior as completely reasonable responses to situations they encounter in life. For example, aggressive individuals are inclined to *hostile attribution bias* and *retribution bias*. They have a tendency to see hostile intent in other people's

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behavior even if they do not have any real reason for that (*hostile attribution bias*). In addition, they prefer aggression over reconciliation when they are concerned about restoring endangered pride and dignity in social interactions (*retribution bias*). The motive-based biases operate out of conscious awareness, and influence everyday reasoning through cognitive processes such as selective attention, confirmatory biases, and causal inferences, making it conditional on one's personality. According to James and LeBreton (2012), the more often individuals use these biases in their reasoning, the better they are prepared to aggress (i.e., their implicit aggression is higher). So, in order to measure implicit aggression, the CRT-A consists of specially designed inductive reasoning problems that capture the presence of the aggressive biases in an individual's reasoning.

The CRT-A has demonstrated favorable psychometric characteristics, both within the classical test theory (James & LeBreton, 2012), and the item-response theory (DeSimone & James, 2015) framework. Moreover, the CRT-A scores have shown moderate-to-high validities in predicting aggressive behavior, both in laboratory and field studies (Berry, Sackett & Tobares, 2010; James & LeBreton, 2012). Additionally, the CRT-A has been demonstrated to be important predictor of CWBs, mostly independent from personality questionnaires (Galić, 2016). Finally, the test seems to be resistant to deliberate response distortion, which is consistent with the idea that it measures aspects of unconscious, implicit personality (LeBreton, Barksdale, Robin & James, 2007).

1.2. Implicit aggression and self-control in explaining CWBs

Although the relationship between implicit aggression and various undesirable behaviors seems well established (e.g., Berry et al., 2010; James & LeBreton, 2012), there is a lack of studies testing its boundary conditions. Some contemporary theories of human aggression (e.g., I³ theory, Denson, DeWall & Finkel, 2012; DeWall, Finkel & Denson, 2011) hold that aggressive behavior depends both on the urge to aggress and also on dispositional and situational factors that influence the likelihood that an individual will override that urge. The I³ theory holds that the likelihood of aggression is highest when the individual differences in the urge to aggress (i.e., impellers) are strong, social circumstances that normatively trigger aggression (i.e., instigators) are present, and dispositional/situational forces that inhibit aggressive behavior are low (i.e., inhibitors).

Among the factors that could inhibit the effects of aggression on undesirable behavior I³ theory gives an important role to dispositional self-control (DSC). DSC can be defined as an individual difference in the capacity to override immediate response tendencies in order to align behavior with long-term goals (Tangney, Baumeister & Boone, 2004). DSC is usually measured with self-report questionnaires that ask about self-control in a broad range of behavioral domains and seems to be relatively stable across time and situations (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). It was shown to be beneficial in many aspects of life. It is positively related with desirable outcomes such as school and work performance, eating behavior and weight control, interpersonal behavior, well-being, and adjustment (de Ridder et al., 2012). Marcus and Schuler (2004) showed that DSC is exceptionally important determinant of CWBs. In their study it outperformed all other explanations of CWBs, including demographic variables, other personality characteristics (e.g., integrity, stimulus seeking), and important situational variables, such as injustice perceptions and perceived organizational monitoring.

Until now, support for the proposition that self-control buffers the effect of aggression-related traits on aggressive behaviors is limited to the explicit measures. Several studies that clearly revealed a beneficial effect of self-control come both within and outside organizational realm. For example, Bordia, Restubog, and Tang (2008) confirmed that DSC buffers the effect of the individual differences in revenge cognitions on workplace deviance. Extending that finding, Restubog, Zagecnyk, Bordia, Bordia, and Chapman (2012) recently showed that revenge

cognitions result in workplace deviance in aggressive work cultures only for employees that are low in DSC. Even stronger support for the role of self-control in suppressing aggressive inclinations comes from relationship research. For example, Ayduk et al. (2000) showed that DSC moderates the effect of the rejection sensitivity trait on life outcomes such as adjustment, drug consumption, or interpersonal aggression. Individuals who were high in rejection sensitivity (i.e., those that fear rejection and react hostilely to it) but are also high in self-control were no worse than their rejection-indifferent counterparts. In other words, the negative effect of rejection sensitivity disappeared when self-control was high. Similar results were recently reported for intimate partner violence. Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, and Foshee (2009) reported that DSC helped individuals to override their violent impulses that are experienced during conflicts with intimate partners. Moreover, both experimental depletion of self-control and its bolstering through a training influenced intimate partner violence.

1.3. Our study

Earlier studies have unequivocally shown that both implicit aggression and DSC are important predictors of CWBs. However the interaction between the 2 predictors seems to be important and yet remained underexplored. In this paper we will report the results of 2 studies that tested the relationship between implicit aggression, as measured with the CRT-A (James & LeBreton, 2012), and DSC in explaining CWBs. In Study 1, a heterogeneous sample of employees from various organizations completed a study package consisting of the CRT-A, a DSC scale (Tangney et al., 2004), and a CWB scale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). In Study 2, we sought to replicate Study 1's findings on another sample, using a slightly different methodology. An additional sample of employees completed a research battery consisting of the CRT-A, another DSC scale (Ein-Gar & Sagiv, 2014), and another CWB instrument (Spector et al., 2006). Additionally, in Study 2 we collected ratings about the participants' DSC and CWBs from their coworkers.

Based on earlier research, we expected that the CRT-A would correlate positively with CWBs, irrespective of whether CWBs were self- or other-reported (*Hypothesis 1*). We also expected negative relationship between DSC and CWBs both for self- and other-reported DSC/CWBs (*Hypothesis 2*). Finally, our main hypothesis concerned the interaction between the CRT-A and DSC: we expected the positive relationship between the CRT-A and CWBs to disappear for individuals high in DSC (*Hypothesis 3*).

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Instruments

2.1.1.1. CRT-A. The CRT-A consists of 25 inductive reasoning problems with 4 offered response alternatives. Three of the problems are "ordinary" inductive reasoning problems with only one correct solution. They are included only to strengthen CRT-A's face validity as a reasoning test and are not scored. The other 22 are conditional reasoning problems that have 4 response alternatives, where 2 of the alternatives are logically incorrect while the other 2 are logically correct and equally plausible (see Table 1 for a sample task). One of the logical alternatives reflects the reasoning biases typical for aggressive individuals and the other one prosocial reasoning that characterizes the reasoning of nonaggressive people. In the sample item given in Table 1, the alternatives (a) and (c) represent logically incorrect responses. The other 2 alternatives are equally plausible, with (d) being the "aggressive" alternative, reflecting the use of the *retribution bias* in reasoning and (b) reflecting prosocial reasoning usually endorsed by most participants.

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