



Personality and individual differences in responses to aggression triggering events among prisoners and non-prisoners

Anna Zajenkowska^{a,*}, Konrad S. Jankowski^b, Claire Lawrence^c, Marcin Zajenkowski^b

^a The Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education, Warsaw, Poland

^b Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, Poland

^c Faculty of Science, University of Nottingham, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationships between individual differences in situational triggers of aggressive behaviors (STAR) and the FFM personality traits. The investigation, conducted among Polish male and female offenders and students, revealed different relationships across samples. Among students, higher sensitivity to frustration and provocation was related to higher Neuroticism and lower Agreeableness and sensitivity to provoking situations to lower Openness to Experience. Among prisoners, however, lower Agreeableness was negatively linked to being more sensitive to provocation. Furthermore, the study found sex differences in STAR scales in the student sample but not the prisoners' sample.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Person and situation influences of aggression

Many theoretical models, including the General Model of Aggression, stress the importance of both individual and situational factors in aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Anderson, Benjamin, Wood, and Bonacci (2006) have highlighted four main ways in which situational and individual factors can influence aggression and those factors may interact. First, both factors may interact (e.g. trait aggressive individuals may become more aggressive under provocation). Second, repeated experience of a situation can lead to changes in personality (e.g. watching repeated violence can lead to stable increases in aggressive personality). Third, personality can influence the situations one is exposed to (e.g. aggressive individuals frequent more violent places). Finally, personality can alter the situation to make it more aggressive (e.g. aggressive individuals act negatively towards others – which make others more hostile to them). However, Lawrence (2006) has pointed out that little attention has been paid to individual differences in responses to situational triggering factors. Lawrence (2006) argued that people may vary in their sensitivity to certain

situational aggressive triggers – in particular provocations and frustrations. In order to measure individual differences in responding to various situations, Lawrence (2006) developed the Situational Triggers of Aggressive Response (STAR) scale, consisting of two factors – sensitivity to frustrations (SF) and sensitivity to provocations (SP). SF reflects proneness to feel particularly aggressive in response to having one's goals blocked and to uncontrollable negative events. SP measures predisposition to feel aggressive in reaction to goading and provocation from others. While SP and SF are typically related (Lawrence, 2006), they offer differential prediction of relevant different cognitions and behaviors. For example, SP, but not SF scores predict individuals' susceptibility to perceive the provoking behavior of others as more aggressive (Lawrence & Hodgkins, 2009), and aggressive behavior towards a provoking individual (Lawrence & Hutchinson, 2013). Indeed, when SF is controlled for in these analyses, the effect of SP remains (Lawrence & Hutchinson, 2013).

1.2. Aggression and the Five Factor Model of personality

Models explaining aggression emphasize the role of broad-based personality in aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 1993). The most commonly used model of personality: the Five Factor Model of personality (FFM: Costa & McCrae, 1992), has been shown to explain 30–60% of the variance in anger and hostility (Ruiz, Smith, & Rhodewalt, 2001; Sharpe &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +48 723109266.

E-mail addresses: anna.wasiela@gmail.com, azajenkowska@aps.edu.pl (A. Zajenkowska).

Desai, 2001), with anger and hostility being particularly related to greater Neuroticism (N) and lower Agreeableness (A). Consequently, N has been argued to be most associated with anger experience, while low A has been associated with behavioral components of aggression (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006; Martin, Watson, & Wan, 2000). Those high in N are particularly sensitive to stimuli evoking negative affect and to develop psychological distress, as they perceive events as more stressful, and are more emotionally reactive to stressors (Schneider, 2004). In a meta-analytic review, Bettencourt et al. (2006) concluded that high N and low A are related to aggression, but conditionally dependent on whether the situation is neutral or provoking. Finally, along with A and N, Conscientiousness (C) has been linked to aggression and antisocial behaviors (Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011). Specifically, those low in C typically exhibit higher levels of antisocial behaviors, including aggression.

Investigations examining aggression and personality usually differentiate between offender and non-offender samples. Aggression and antisocial behaviors have been reported more frequently in offender, as compared to normal population (Ohlsson & Ireland, 2011). Regarding FFM dimensions, a number of differences between prisoners and non-prisoners have been found. For example, incarcerated psychopaths score lower on C, A and Openness to Experience (O) compared with non-psychopaths and non-prisoners (Ghadery, Borjali, Bahrami, & Sohrabi, 2011). Further, a large body of research has found higher levels of N amongst offender groups as compared to non-offenders (e.g. Laak et al., 2003). Consequently, different patterns of personality-aggression relationships are possible in prisoners and non-prisoners. What is not clear in the literature to date, is whether offenders are higher in SP and SF, when compared to non-offenders, and secondly whether SP and SF are associated with the FFM domains differentially in these groups.

1.3. Current study

The study aims to test relationships between FFM and SF and SP in non-prisoners and prisoners. Moreover controlled analyses for participant sex, as sex effects have been found in both aggression measures (Archer & Haigh, 1997; Lawrence, 2006), with males being typically shown to be higher in behavioral aggressive measures and five-factor personality dimensions (Costa & McCrae, 1992), with females being typically higher in A and N (Chapman, Duberstein, Sorenson, & Lynas, 2007).

Particularly, we expect the following relationships:

- (1) We expect low agreeableness related to greater sensitivity to provocation, since people with high Agreeableness value getting along with others; are friendly, cooperative and willing to compromise (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and sensitivity to provocations results from interactions with others.
- (2) Those high in N are sensitive to stimuli that cause in them negative affect and are more prone to feel psychological distress (Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2009), thus we expect neuroticism to be linked to SP and SF – as both types of situations evoke negative emotions (Lawrence, 2006).
- (3) As this trait has been found negatively related to aggression and antisocial behaviors, we expect individuals high in C to be lower in both SP and SF.
- (4) A recent meta-analysis (Jones et al., 2011) has shown that on the lower-order analysis, the facet of Extraversion (E) – warmth was among the strongest correlates of antisocial and aggressive behaviors. As warmth reflects the manner in social contacts, we expect high E related to low SP.

As we noticed above, the prisoners may be expected to differ substantially from a general population in some personality

dimensions and aggression (Ohlsson & Ireland, 2011), and consequently the studied relationships could be attenuated.

2. Method

2.1. Materials and procedure

2.1.1. The NEO-FFI

(Costa & McCrae, 1992) in Polish adaptation (Zawadzki et al., 1998) was used to measure five personality traits. The questionnaire consists of 60 items assessing Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Thus, each dimension contained twelve items. The internal consistency for each scale in the Polish adaptation was as follows: $\alpha = .80$ (N), $\alpha = .77$ (E), $\alpha = .68$ (O), $\alpha = .68$ (A), and $\alpha = .82$ (C) (Zawadzki, Strelau, Szczepaniak, & Śliwińska, 1998). Cronbach's alphas in the present research (see Table 1) were close to those cited above, although those for E and O scales were slightly lower in the offending group.

2.1.2. The STAR scale

(Lawrence, 2006) was used to measure aggression-related sensitivities. The questionnaire consists of 22 items (10 reflect Sensitivity to Frustrations, and 12 Sensitivity to Provocations). Participants are presented with 22 situations, and are asked to rate how aggressive each makes them feel typically on a 5-point scale. The instrument has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$ for Provocations and $\alpha = .80$ for Frustrations) and its validity has been examined previously (Lawrence, 2006). The questionnaire was translated for the current study into Polish, then by two experts into English and then back-translated by a bilingual person, and approved by the author of the original scale. The internal consistency of the STAR dimensions in the present research was high in both students and prisoners (Table 1).

Groups of students were tested in classrooms or in dormitories. In the inmates questionnaires were administered during time when prisoners are in their cells on their own. All participants were informed of the nature, purpose and anonymity of the study. The study meets the ethical standards of the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw. The data collection from inmates was approved by the local head of prisons in Warsaw.

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. Students

In the student sample there were 300 participants (189 female, 111 male). All were undergraduate students from three Warsaw universities. The mean age was 21.86 ($SD = 2.12$) ranging from 19 to 34 and males (21.58 ± 1.06) were older than females (22.36 ± 2.15) ($t_{(298)} = 3.093, p < .01$). There were no missing data.

Table 1

Internal consistency, means and standard deviations of NEO-FFI and STAR scales among students and prisoners.

Scale	Cronbach's alpha		Means (SD)	
	Students	Prisoners	Students	Prisoners
N	.86	.83	23.02 (8.95)	20.75 (8.69)
E	.78	.57	28.36 (6.95)	28.15 (5.31)
O	.62	.56	28.25 (6.31)	26.68 (5.47)
A	.67	.63	27.87 (7.01)	28.06 (5.70)
C	.85	.77	28.42 (8.15)	36.06 (5.81)
Provocations	.78	.87	40.85 (7.94)	39.21 (10.66)
Frustrations	.77	.88	29.29 (7.35)	26.27 (9.22)

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