



# Direct and indirect relations between the Big 5 personality traits and aggressive and violent behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Relations between the Big 5 personality traits and aggressive behavior have been studied frequently. However, no work has tested whether that relation is direct or indirect through aggressive attitudes and aggressive emotions. Data from two large samples that used different Big 5 measures examined these effects. Overall, results showed that the paths from Big 5 traits to aggressive behavior depends on both the specific type of aggressive behavior and the Big 5 traits measured. For example, Openness and Agreeableness were both directly and indirectly related to physical aggression, but were only indirectly related (through aggressive attitudes) to violent behavior. Similarly, Neuroticism was both directly and indirectly (through aggressive emotions) related to physical aggression, but not to violent behavior. Theoretical implications and future work are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Aggression and personality theorists posit that personality variables are important predictors of aggressive behavior (see Anderson & Huesmann, 2003). Indeed, several personality traits are related to aggressive behavior, including, narcissism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), impulsivity (Campbell & Muncer, 2009), among others. The predominant overall model of personality has identified the “Big 5” personality factors, traits that repeatedly appear across culture and gender. The predominant social-cognitive models of aggression (e.g., General Aggression Model; GAM) include personality variables, and to some extent explicate psychological processes that link traits to aggression. For example, the GAM postulates that traits can influence aggression through their impact on aggressive emotions or on aggressive cognitions. The present research tested the direct and indirect effects of the Big 5 personality traits (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) on aggressive behavior. We used multi-group path modeling from two samples that used different Big 5 measures to test the direct effects of personality on two types of aggression (physical, violent) as well as indirect effects (mediated effects) through aggressive emotions and aggressive attitudes.

### 1.1. Big 5 and aggression

The strongest Big 5 predictor of aggressive behavior is Agreeableness, which is characterized as good-natured, trustful, and

cooperative (John & Srivastava, 1999). It is negatively related to self-report and peer-report aggressive behavior (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Richardson, 2004) and violence (Heaven, 1996). Conscientiousness is characterized by being responsible, orderly, and dependable (John & Srivastava, 1999), and tends to be negatively related to aggression (Sharpe & Desai, 2001). Neuroticism, characterized by being easily upset and emotionally unstable (John & Srivastava, 1999), is positively related to aggressive behavior (Sharpe & Desai, 2001). Openness, characterized by being intellectual, polished, and independent-minded (John & Srivastava, 1999), tends to be unrelated to aggressive behavior (e.g., Gleason et al., 2004). Finally, Extraversion is characterized as being talkative, assertive, and energetic (John & Srivastava, 1999) and its relations with aggression are mixed. Sharpe and Desai (2001) found that the correlation between self-reported physical aggression and Extraversion was negative, whereas Gallo and Smith (1998) found a positive relation between Extraversion and physical aggression.

### 1.2. Incorporating the Big 5 into larger aggression theories

It is unknown whether or not the relations between the Big 5 and aggression are direct, or indirect through some learned aggressive outcomes, such as aggressive emotions and aggressive attitudes. GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) posits that repeated interaction with aggression-related stimuli (both real and fictitious) and situations, and subsequent positively reinforced aggressive behavior, is likely to increase one's aggressive personality through several learned outcomes (e.g., aggressive beliefs, attitudes, and related emotions). Furthermore, in all major social-cognitive models of aggression, momentary accessibility of

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aggressive emotion and cognitions are key proximal causes of aggressive behavior. Thus, depending on the specific Big 5 trait, GAM would suggest that the Big 5 are related to aggressive behavior because they may either enhance or inhibit the development and chronic accessibility of aggressive emotions and aggressive attitudes. For example, if Agreeableness is negatively associated with aggressive emotions or aggressive attitudes, then it should also be negatively related to aggression. There is strong support for how repeated exposure to aggression-related stimuli and situations is related to aggressive emotions and aggressive attitudes; and how those aggressive outcomes are related to the likelihood of aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). However, there is a paucity of research on how Big 5 traits are related to these aggressive outcomes.

Research has shown that Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are both negatively related to vengefulness (an aggressive emotion), whereas Neuroticism is positively related to vengefulness (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Sharpe and Desai (2001) found that Neuroticism is positively related to anger and hostility (aggressive emotions), whereas Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness are negatively related to these emotions. Anderson et al. (2004) found that Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were negatively related to attitudes towards violence (an aggressive attitude). Thus, this literature suggests that the Big 5 personality traits may be related to aggressive behavior directly and/or indirectly through aggressive emotions and aggressive attitudes.

### 1.3. Overview of the current research

Despite the wealth of literature examining the relations between Big 5 traits and aggressive behavior, it is unknown whether these effects are direct, indirect through aggressive attitudes and aggressive emotions, or some combination of direct and indirect effects. Furthermore, it is unclear whether various routes to aggressive behavior are similar or different across all five personality traits. For instance, some personality traits may be only directly related to aggressive behavior, others may be indirectly related to aggressive behavior, some may be both directly and indirectly related to aggressive behavior, while some may not be related to aggressive behavior. Finally, it is unclear whether these effects differ as a function of different types of aggressive behavior. For instance, the effects of Agreeableness may be stronger for physical aggression than violence, in part because violence in general is harder to predict.

### 1.4. Primary study

Conger, Patterson, and Ge (1995) argued that if one can replicate an effect using different samples and different measures to assess the same theoretical construct(s), then the theoretical underpinnings for such relations are robust to measurement. We tested the relations between Big 5 traits, aggressive emotions, aggressive attitudes, and aggressive/violent behavior with two independent samples using a different measure of the Big 5 for each sample. We chose to focus on aggressive and violent behavior for this study. On the aggression continuum (see Anderson & Huesmann, 2003), physical aggression (e.g., hitting) lies before violent behavior (e.g., hitting with a weapon). Because the potential consequences may be more severe for violent offenders compared to aggressive offenders, the specific relations between the Big 5 and these behaviors may differ.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Description of the two samples<sup>1</sup>

Both samples consisted of undergraduate students from the same large Midwestern University. Partial course credit for their psychology course requirements was given to all participants. Sample 1 consisted of 347 (56% male) participants. Sample 2 consisted of 873 (40% male) participants.

### 2.2. Materials

The two samples completed the following three scales:

#### 2.2.1. Violent behavior

The modified National Youth Survey (NYS; Anderson & Dill, 2000) was used to assess violent behavior. This is a 10-item questionnaire that asks participants to indicate how often they did a variety of aggressive acts from 1 (*0 times*) to 11 (*more than 27*) times in the past year. A sample item is, "Hit or threatened to hit other students." Prior to summing up the items, all of the NYS items were converted to Z-scores (Anderson & Dill, 2000). These standardized items are summed.

#### 2.2.2. Attitudes towards violence

To assess aggressive attitudes, the Revised Attitude towards Violence Scale (RATVS; Anderson, Benjamin, Wood, & Bonacci, 2006) was used. This 39-item questionnaire has participants rate their level of agreement with the items on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. Items are summed.

#### 2.2.3. Aggressive personality

The Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to assess trait aggression. This 29-item questionnaire has participants indicate how much they believe items are characteristic of them on a 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 7 (*extremely characteristic of me*) rating scale. Certain items are reverse scored then summed. This questionnaire has four subscales. The first is the physical aggression subscale, which consists of nine items. A sample item is, "If somebody hits me, I hit back." This subscale is conceptualized as self-report estimates of aggressive behavior. The second is the trait anger subscale, consisting of seven items. A sample item is, "I am sometimes eaten up by jealousy." The third subscale is the trait hostility subscale, which consists of eight items. A sample item is, "When people are especially nice, I wonder what they want." The trait anger and hostility indices were summed for an index of aggressive emotions. The final subscale is the verbal aggression subscale, which was not used in this study.

#### 2.2.4. The Big 5 personality traits

Participants in Sample 1 completed the Five Factor Inventory (FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992). This scale consists of 60-items that asks participants to rate their level of agreement for each item on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. Each of the five personality traits was assessed using 12-items. A sample item from the Extraversion factor is, "I like to have a lot of people around me." A sample item from the Agreeableness factor is, "I try to be courteous to everyone I meet." A sample item from the Openness factor is, "I don't like to waste my time daydreaming (reverse coded)." A sample item from the conscientiousness factor is, "I keep my belongings clean and neat." Finally, a sample item from the Neuroticism factor is, "I often feel inferior to others." Certain items

<sup>1</sup> No additional demographic information was provided for Sample 2. Additional ethnic information was gathered for Sample 1, which showed that 83% reported that they were Caucasian.

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