



## Evidence that the Subtypes of Antisocial Behavior questionnaire (STAB) predicts momentary reports of acting-out behaviors

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### ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition that substantively important distinctions exist across physically aggressive, rule-breaking, and socially aggressive forms of antisocial behavior. Even so, one limitation to accumulating additional scientific insights into the correlates and origins of these three varieties of antisocial behavior has been the lack of an efficient self-report assessment in the public domain. The Subtypes of the Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire (STAB) was developed to address this need. Although there is already a good deal of psychometric support for the STAB, prior research has yet to examine its “ecological” validity. In other words, it remains unclear whether the STAB scales would predict the frequency of acting-out behaviors in daily life. The current study sought to examine this question via an electronic diary study, in which participants reported on their momentary behaviors on multiple occasions in their natural environments. Analyses revealed that each STAB scale uniquely predicted only the momentary acting-out behaviors characteristic of that scale. Such findings provide further support for the STAB as a promising self-report measure of physically aggressive, rule-breaking, and socially aggressive forms of antisocial behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

There is converging evidence that physical aggression (e.g., assaulting others, bullying), rule-breaking (e.g., lying, stealing, vandalism), and social aggression (i.e., gossiping, ostracism, “stealing” friends) constitute meaningfully distinct, albeit overlapping, components of the broader construct of antisocial behavior. As reviewed in Burt and Donnellan (2009), these sub-types demonstrate distinctive developmental trajectories, have different demographic correlates and personological underpinnings, and evidence important etiological distinctions. For example, deficits in affective regulation are particularly characteristic of physical aggression, whereas impulsivity is more strongly associated with rule-breaking (Burt & Donnellan, 2008). Physical aggression is also more heritable than is rule-breaking (i.e., 65% versus 48%), whereas rule-breaking is influenced more by the shared environment (i.e., 5% versus 18%) (Burt, 2009).

Nonetheless, more work is needed to firmly ground these constructs within the antisocial behavior literature. For example, longitudinal work examining differential outcomes for physical aggression, rule-breaking, and social aggression (e.g., conventional

adult life versus prison) would more firmly cement these three sub-types of antisocial behavior within the literature. Such work has been difficult to conduct however, as researchers have historically needed to collect multiple or very long measures to assess all three forms of antisocial behavior. The 32-item Subtypes of the Antisocial Behavior questionnaire (STAB; Burt & Donnellan, 2009) was developed to address this need.

The factor structure of the STAB was initially established in a sample of college students, and was then confirmed in a second sample of college students, a sample of community adults, and two samples of adjudicated adults. We also found consistent support for the criterion-related validity of the STAB scales when comparing them to related measures, as well as to frequently used conceptualizations of personality. Finally, the STAB demonstrated expected mean differences across the various sample types and across clinical treatment groups. In short, we have already marshaled a considerable amount of initial psychometric support for the STAB (Burt & Donnellan, 2009).

Even so, establishing the validity of a measure is an ongoing process involving the accumulation of different kinds of evidence (Simms, 2008). One potential avenue for such research is to evaluate how well the subscales of the STAB predict momentary reports of behavior in the context of an experience sampling (or ESM) study (Conner, Barrett, Tugade, & Tennen, 2007; Reis & Gable, 2000). In this approach, research participants carry an electronic device for a discrete period of time during which it periodically

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“beeps” and prompts them to report on their thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors in that moment. However, this approach is rarely used to validate measures of antisocial behavior despite the clear advantages of ESM studies for providing reports that are acquired “*in vivo* (in life) and *in situ* (in place)” (Conner et al., 2007, p. 82). Proponents of these approaches (e.g., Conner et al., 2007; Trull & Ebner-Priemer, 2009) argue that such studies can provide important insights into constructs like antisocial actions which are likely to be contingent on the behaviors of others and to be expressed in a social context. Likewise, ESM reports are thought to better approximate actual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors because they do not rely on retrospective recall (Conner et al., 2007). In light of these virtues, we used an ESM study to provide additional data on the validity of the STAB. In particular, we tested whether the STAB subscales predicted momentary reports of physical aggression, social aggression, and rule-breaking, respectively.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 103 undergraduate students (50.5% women; average age = 19.5 years; SD = 1.46) enrolled in psychology courses at a large public university in the Midwest who participated in exchange for course credit or extra credit. The ethnic breakdown was Caucasian (81%), African-American (5%), Asian or Pacific Rim (6%), and other (9%) ethnicities. Research protocol was approved by the Michigan State University IRB. All participants provided informed consent.

### 2.2. Procedure

STAB questionnaire data were collected over the Internet using a web-based interface (along with other questionnaires not germane to the current study), after which participants scheduled an electronic diary orientation session in our laboratory. Of the 103 initial on-line participants, 97 (or 94%) attended their orientation session. During their orientation session, participants reported on their typical sleep–wake schedule (the diary was programmed to beep only during their typical waking hours) and were given the opportunity to practice responding to a diary prompt. To ensure that participants understood the procedures, all participants completed their first diary interview before leaving the lab. After 6 days, participants returned the electronic diary to the lab. Diary responses were then uploaded to a computer for storage and analysis.

We used the Palm Z22 Handheld for our signal-contingent recording. Prompts were generated six times a day at random times, cueing them to complete a real-time interview regarding their behaviors at that moment (as described below). When participants failed to respond to a prompt, they were “beeped” every 30 s for 10 min until they responded. Participants were not able to silence or turn off the handheld computer. The median number of diary entries completed was 27 (Mean (SD) = 23.05 (9.96), Minimum = 0, Maximum = 35; three participants had technical difficulties with their handheld computer and their data were lost).

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. STAB

The STAB contains 32 items assessing physical aggression (AGG), rule-breaking (RB), and social aggression (SA). Items and internal consistency reliabilities are presented in Table 1. The STAB was completed in general (i.e., without regard to a specific time frame) so as to assess typical patterns of behavior.

**Table 1**  
The Sub-Types of Antisocial Behavior (STAB) items.

<i>Physical aggression</i> ( $\alpha = .86$ )
Felt like hitting people
Got angry quickly
Hit back when hit by others
Threatened others
Had trouble controlling temper
Hit others when provoked
Got into fights more than the average person
Swore or yelled at others
Got into physical fights
Felt better after hitting
<i>Social aggression</i> ( $\alpha = .82$ )
Blamed others
Tried to hurt someone's feelings
Made fun of someone behind his/her back
Excluded someone from group activities when angry with him/her
Intentionally damaged someone's reputation
Tried to turn others against someone when angry with him/her
Gave someone the silent treatment when angry with him/her
Called someone names behind his/her back
Revealed someone's secrets when angry with him/her
Was rude towards others
Made negative comments about other's appearance
<i>Rule-breaking</i> ( $\alpha = .84$ )
Broke into a store, mall or warehouse
Broke the windows of an empty building
Shoplifted things
Littered public areas by smashing bottles, tipping trash cans, etc.
Stole a bicycle
Stole property from school or work
Left home for an extended period of time without telling family/friends
Sold drugs, including marijuana
Was suspended, expelled, or fired from school or work
Had trouble keeping a job
Failed to pay debts

#### 2.3.2. Specific acting-out behaviors

Following each prompt, participants were asked a series of yes/no questions pertaining to specific acting-out behaviors or feelings. Items were administered in a random ordering at each assessment. Physically aggressive urges were assessed via the item “Do you feel like hitting someone right now?”. Instances of rule-breaking were assessed via two items ( $\alpha = .54$ ): “Are you breaking the rules/doing something illegal right now?” and “Do you think your parents and other adults would approve of what you're doing right now?” (the latter item was reverse-scored). The instantiation of social aggression was assessed via two items ( $\alpha = .65$ ): “Are you ignoring someone or giving them the silent treatment right now?” and “Are you gossiping and/or complaining about someone right now?”. For rule-breaking and socially aggressive behaviors, the two items were averaged. We then divided the number of acting-out behaviors/feelings endorsed by the number of diary interviews completed, to yield the proportion of times each subset of behaviors was endorsed by each participant.

### 2.4. Analyses

Because of positive skew, all variables were log-transformed prior to analysis. We first evaluated whether the three STAB scales were correlated with momentary reports of specific physically aggressive, rule-breaking, and socially aggressive acting-out behaviors/feelings. To determine the specificity of these associations, we then conducted a series of ordinary least square regressions, in which the three STAB scales were simultaneously entered as predictors of each subset of behaviors. The latter are particularly important for the present study as they index the unique associations between the behaviors and each STAB scale, controlling for the effects of the other STAB scales (because the STAB scales are themselves moderately correlated, as detailed below,

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