



# Sub-types of angry aggression in antisocial youth: Relationships with self-reported delinquency and teachers' perceptions of social competence and emotional/behavioural problems

Gunnar Bjørnebekk<sup>a,c</sup>, Rick Howard<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Norwegian Centre for Child Behavioural Development, Oslo, Norway

<sup>b</sup> Division of Psychiatry & Institute of Mental Health, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

<sup>c</sup> Postboks 7053 Majorstuen, 0306 Oslo, Norway, Essendropst. 3, 0368 Oslo, Norway

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined associations between four motivationally distinct types of angry aggression (AA: explosive/reactive, thrill-seeking, coercive and vengeful/ruminative), antisocial behaviour, and teachers' perceptions of social competence, emotional and behavioural problems. Participants comprised 101 Norwegian adolescents ranging in age between 12 and 18 years who suffered from serious conduct problems. Results of regression analysis showed that vengeful/ruminative AA uniquely predicted participants' cognitive problems and their failure to cooperate as rated by their teachers. Thrill-seeking AA uniquely predicted all forms of self-reported delinquency. Explosive/reactive AA uniquely predicted self-reported expulsion from school and teacher ratings of poor self-control and externalizing behaviour problems. Teacher-rated affective disturbance in youths was negatively associated with thrill-seeking and positively associated with explosive/reactive and vengeful/ruminative forms of AA. Results provide further validation of the Angry Aggression Scales and confirm that the quest for excitement is an important motivation for antisocial behaviour in youth.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Instrumental vs. affective aggression

Bjørnebekk and Howard (2012) have described the construction and preliminary validation of a brief self-report questionnaire, the Angry Aggression Scales (AAS), designed to operationalise four types of Angry Aggression (AA) posited by a quadripartite violence typology (QVT: Howard, 2009, 2011). This was developed to redress deficiencies in the traditional dichotomy between instrumental/proactive aggression and hostile/affective aggression, said to differ in relation to the goal of the behaviour, the emotion experienced, and the extent of planning (e.g., Buss, 1961; Geen, 1990; McEllistrem, 2004).

### 1.2. Deficiencies of the instrumental vs. affective dichotomy

Bushman and Anderson (2001) argued that the goals, emotions, and level of forethought in aggression cannot accurately be dichot-

\* Corresponding author. Address: Institute of Mental Health, Sir Colin Campbell Building, 2nd Floor, Triumph Road, Nottingham NG7 2TU, UK. Tel.: +44 1777 880503/0115 8231269; fax: +44 115 8231263.

E-mail addresses: [gunnar.bjornebekk@atferdssenteret.no](mailto:gunnar.bjornebekk@atferdssenteret.no) (G. Bjørnebekk), [Richard.howard@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.howard@nottingham.ac.uk) (R. Howard).

<sup>1</sup> AAS: Angry Aggression Scales; AA: Angry aggression.

omized. Instrumental offending can be impulsive and emotional as, for example, in an opportunistic robbery with associated feelings of excitement and exhilaration; and hostile aggression can be planned and unemotional as, for example, in a calculated act of revenge. Anderson and Bushman (2002) suggested that aggression could be more clearly defined in relation to the ultimate goals of the behaviour. McMurran, Jinks, Howells, and Howard (2009) identified three types of alcohol-related aggression or violent behaviour: that carried out in the pursuit of material goals, of social dominance goals, and of defence goals.

However, even this more differentiated, tripartite typology arguably fails to do justice to the motivationally heterogeneous nature of acts of violence, which can sometimes be carried out in a state of gleeful exhilaration and appear motivated by a quest for excitement (Howard, 2011). Excitement has been highlighted as an important motive for the commission of antisocial acts in young men (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2004). Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (2007) reported that excitement motivation was positively associated with impulsivity and anger, and negatively associated with feelings of remorse and guilt. Moreover, the experience of anger is arguably far more differentiated than is implied in the instrumental vs. affective dichotomy, i.e. present or absent. While traditionally seen as involving the experience of negative affect, anger is increasingly recognised as capable of being experienced as a positive affect. Even suffering inflicted on another

person can be experienced as excitement and exhilaration by the agent, who experiences anger as a positive affect rather than as a negative one (Howard, 2011). Suspension of feelings of empathy for the victim is said to be a precondition of experiencing this positive affective state.

### 1.3. The quadripartite violence typology (QVT)

These considerations gave rise to development of QVT, which extends and revises the above-mentioned dichotomy between instrumental and affective aggression. In QVT impulsive acts are distinguished from controlled acts, and appetitively motivated behaviours from aversively motivated behaviours. An impulsive act is one that: first, is based on a minimal or automatic (even unconscious) cognitive appraisal of some provoking stimulus, such as a threat or a challenge; second, is characterised by the experience of, and failure to control, strong emotional impulses (Shapiro, 1965); the affect generated is *automatic*: it occurs rapidly, may not be conscious, and directly initiates behaviour (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007); third, as a consequence of the lack of cognitive control, the act is rash, ill-considered, and performed without regard to long-term consequences. The distinction between appetitively and aversively motivated behaviour is fundamental to the complexity of human behaviour (Carver, 2006). Appetitively driven acts, accompanied by positive affects and emotions, are motivated by some *desire* for something, while aversively driven acts, accompanied by negative emotions, are motivated by some *fear* or *loathing* of something.

According to QVT, violence may be either impulsive or controlled, and within each of these categories, either appetitively or aversively motivated. This yields four violence types, each associated with the achievement of a particular goal, with a particular affective state (positive or negative) and a particular constellation of emotions: fear and distress (in the case of aversively motivated violence carried out impulsively); spite and vengefulness (in the case of aversively motivated violence carried out in a controlled way); exhilaration and excitement (in the case of appetitively motivated violence carried out impulsively); and pleasant anticipation (in the case of appetitively motivated violence carried out in a controlled way). In addition to these emotions, each type of violence is said to be associated with a distinct type of angry aggression: explosive/reactive, vengeful/ruminative, thrill-seeking, and coercive, respectively. The traditional distinction between instrumental and affective violence is contained within QVT: instrumental violence corresponds in QVT to that which is both controlled and appetitive; affective violence to that which is both aversively motivated and impulsive.

### 1.4. Angry Aggression Scales (AAS)

Results of a factor analysis of AAS items in separate samples of antisocial and prosocial Norwegian youths revealed four AAS factors that precisely matched the QVT types, and a higher-order angry aggression factor (Bjørnebekk & Howard, 2012). AAS had good internal consistency, with Cronbach alphas ranging from .84 to .93. Preliminary support for both convergent and discriminant validity of AASs was provided by measures of behavioural activation and behavioural inhibition, and by teacher ratings of “instrumental” and “emotional” aggression.

### 1.5. The present study

Using data from the Norwegian antisocial sample studied by Bjørnebekk and Howard (2012), we here report further support for both the convergent and discriminant validity of AAS factors using scores from: the teacher reports of the Social Skills Rating

Systems (SSRS, Gresham & Elliott, 1990), the teacher report form (TRF) of the Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach, 1991), and scores on a measure of self-reported delinquency (Huizinga & Elliott, 1986). We predicted that aspects of self-reported delinquency would show differential associations with particular AAS factors. Since previous research has indicated appetitively motivated (proactive) aggression to be associated with severe forms of delinquent behaviour in adolescents (Fite, Raine, Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, & Pardini, 2010; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2002; Vitaro, Gendreau, Tremblay, & Oligny, 1998; Ollendick, Jarrett, Wolff, & Scarpa, 2009), we predicted that physical violence, destruction of others' property, rule-breaking behaviour in school settings, and property offences would be associated with appetitive AA. Since previous research has indicated a particular association between violent offending in youth offenders and the impulsive (thrill-seeking) form of appetitive violence (Howard, Howells, Jinks, and McMurran (2009), we predicted that delinquency, particularly serious delinquent behaviour such as violence and carrying weapons, would associate strongly with thrill-seeking AA. We further predicted that teacher-rated cognitive dysfunction (thought and attention problems) and poor cooperation skills would associate with ruminative anger, while a measure of self-control would be negatively related to all types of aggression, but particularly to explosive/reactive AA. Finally, aversively motivated (reactive) aggression has been uniquely linked to negative emotionality, specifically to anxiety (Fite et al., 2010), and reactively aggressive children have been found to report more depressive feelings than other children (Vitaro et al., 2002). A measure of behavioural inhibition correlated positively with vengeful/ruminative and explosive/reactive AA, but not with coercive or thrill-seeking AA (Bjørnebekk & Howard, 2012). We therefore predicted that the degree of aversively motivated AA, both vengeful/ruminative and explosive/reactive, would be positively associated with anxiety/depression scores.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Male and female Norwegian youths, mean age 15 years (range 12–18 years), were recruited into the main study during the period autumn 2008 to spring 2011. Participants were of mixed ethnicity (56 Caucasian and 45 Asian) and comprised 101 Norwegian adolescents, 64 boys and 37 girls, whose ages ranged from 12 to 18 years. They suffered from serious conduct problems requiring placement by child welfare authorities either in special classes for social-emotional problems ( $N = 73$ ) or in a residential medium-secure unit ( $N = 28$ ). Both placements represented options of last resort; that is, less restrictive environments were insufficient to meet the juveniles' needs which required their moving up the continuum of care into more secure settings. The conduct problems were any behaviour listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fourth Edition (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as criteria for Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (CD), or disruptive behaviours such as aggression or delinquency.

Permission to conduct this investigation was provided by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, the school principals/the director of the medium security institution and the youths' primary teachers. Participants older than 16 years signed their own statements of informed consent for participation in the study. In the case of participants 16 years and younger, parents gave informed consent on the child's behalf. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary, and no remuneration or other incentive was offered.

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