



Negative emotionality and aggression in violent offenders: The moderating role of emotion dysregulation



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study sought to examine the independent and interactive contribution of negative emotionality and emotion dysregulation in predicting levels of physical aggression among violent offenders.

Methods: A sample of 221 male violent offenders incarcerated in Italian prisons completed self-report measures of trait emotionality, emotion dysregulation, and trait aggression. Hierarchical multiple regression and simple slopes analyses with bootstrapping were used to test the study hypotheses.

Results: Negative emotionality was positively linked to physical aggression, whereas positive emotionality had a negative relation with physical aggression. Emotion dysregulation explained incremental variance in physical aggression, with a unique contribution of negative urgency. Negative urgency moderated the relation between negative emotionality and physical aggression, such that the positive association between negative emotionality and physical aggression was significant only at medium and high levels – but not at low levels – of negative urgency.

Conclusions: These findings provide empirical evidence for, and possible ground for integration of, traditional and modern theories of aggression and criminal behavior, corroborating the hypotheses of DeLisi and Vaughn's (2014) temperament-based theory of antisocial behavior. Further, these findings suggest that treatments for violent offenders should target emotion regulation skills to reduce aggressive tendencies in the presence of negative emotionality.

1. Introduction

Emotions are an important driver of human behavior, and the way we regulate them contributes to subjective and interpersonal well-being (Balzarotti, Biassoni, Villani, Prunas, & Velotti, 2016; Barrett, Lewis, & Haviland-Jones, 2016; Baumeister, 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising that emotion has been one of the individual differences constructs most often studied to understand human destructiveness, including aggression and violent behavior (DeLisi, 2011; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2016; Mesquita, 2016). Negative emotions are a central tenet in the influential framework of the general strain theory (Agnew, 1992, 2001; Ganem, 2010). General strain theory posits that strains and stressors increase the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions, which in turn can trigger criminal behavior (Agnew, 2001, 2013), including violent acts (Ousey, Wilcox, & Schreck, 2015). Accordingly, research has consistently reported links between high levels of negative emotionality – and low levels of positive emotionality – and offending in general (Day, 2009; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2015; Garofalo, Velotti, Crocarno, & Carrà, 2017; Hollist, Hughes, & Schaible, 2009;

Mazerolle, Burton, Cullen, Evans, & Payne, 2000; Moon, Morash, McCluskey, & Hwang, 2009; Nestor, 2002), as well as between negative emotionality and aggressive behavior in particular (Connolly & Beaver, 2015; Donahue, Goranson, McClure, & Van Male, 2014; Ganem, 2010; Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011; J. D. Miller & Lynam, 2006; J. D. Miller, Zeichner, & Wilson, 2012).

Traditionally, studies that have investigated the link between negative emotions and aggression have almost exclusively focused on anger (Agnew, 2001; Berkowitz, 2012; Novaco, 2011). However, the link may well extend to other negative emotions, although it has been argued that it is less intuitive to understand why other negative emotions could be associated with aggressive behavior (Howells, Day, & Wright, 2004). A fitting example is the emotion of shame, which is typically related to internalizing symptoms and behavioral tendencies such as avoidance or withdrawal (Howells et al., 2004). However, research shows that shame feelings can also elicit externalizing reaction and aggressive acting out (Elison, Garofalo, & Velotti, 2014; Ribeiro da Silva, Rijo, & Salekin, 2015; Tangney, Stuewig, & Hafez, 2011; Tangney, Stuewig, & Martinez, 2014; Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014). Based on

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these considerations, several scholars have argued that one way to make sense of the relation between negative emotions (including but not limited to anger) and offending is to explore possible mechanisms of their relation (Day, 2009; Wolff & Baglivo, 2016). Indeed, it was proposed that – while negative emotions are certainly an important dynamic risk factors for offending – other criminogenic factors related to negative emotionality should be considered to refine theories of offending and treatment of offenders, including self- and emotion regulation (Day, 2009; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014; Velotti et al., 2014).

A possible example of the role of emotion regulation in the link between negative emotions and aggression can be drawn from Baumeister's theory of self-regulation (Baumeister, 1990; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). This theory suggests that some individuals can experience diminished cognitive control under states of negative emotional arousal. In these circumstances, these individuals tend to disengage from self-awareness (including emotional awareness), and focus on immediate or short-term considerations that can either be hedonic (i.e., feel better, or numbing the negative emotional experience) or instrumental (i.e., getting revenge) (Baumeister et al., 1994; see also Tamir, 2016). Accordingly, it could be not only the experience of negative emotions (e.g., anger, shame), but also the way people regulate them that might increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior (Day, 2009). Based on similar considerations, some authors have found that factors other than negative emotions can explain individual differences in the tendency to act aggressively, including low self-control (Joon Jang & Song, 2015).

The emphasis on studying self-control and self-regulation (used interchangeably here) to understand aggression and criminal behavior is not new (Day, 2009; DeLisi & Vaughn, 2016; Denissen, Thomaes, & Bushman, 2017; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Vazsonyi, Mikuška, & Kelley, 2017), though the literatures on self-control and negative emotions have largely grown separately. Deficits in self-control are robustly linked to aggression (Caspi, Moffitt, Newman, & Silva, 1996; de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Denissen et al., 2017; Denson, DeWall, & Finkel, 2012; DeWall, Finkel, & Denson, 2011; Farrington, 2005; Moffitt et al., 2011), and play a pivotal in both traditional (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and modern comprehensive theories of aggression and violent behavior, such as the general aggression model (DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011). Although the construct of self-control or self-regulation subsumes individual differences in the ability to regulate emotions, only in recent years has the study of emotion regulation seen an increase of scholar publications in the field of forensic psychology and aggression research (García-Sancho, Salguero, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2014; Garofalo, Holden, Zeigler-Hill, & Velotti, 2016; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, we define emotion regulation as encompassing: the awareness, clarity, and acceptance of emotional experience; the ability to tolerate distress and engage in goal-directed behavior when upset; the ability to refrain from impulsive behavior when experiencing upsetting emotions; and the ability to rely on effective emotion regulation strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). In the last few years, impairments in these domains have been consistently linked with aggressive tendencies across a variety of populations, including undergraduates, community-dwelling individuals, psychiatric patients, juvenile and adult offenders (Donahue et al., 2014; Garofalo et al., 2016; D. J. Miller, Vachon, & Aalsma, 2012; Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2014, 2015; Velotti et al., 2016). Specifically, findings seem consistent in linking all of the emotion dysregulation domains mentioned above with physical aggression at a bivariate level. However, when examining the unique contribution of emotion dysregulation dimensions in predicting levels of physical aggression, negative urgency (i.e., difficulties in controlling impulsive behavior when upset) typically emerged as independent significant predictor, with somewhat less consistent evidence for the role of emotional nonacceptance and lack of emotional awareness (Garofalo et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2014, 2015; Velotti,

Casselmann, Garofalo, & McKenzie, in press; Velotti et al., 2016). The centrality of negative urgency in explaining the individual tendency to behave aggressively is consistent with the self-regulation theory proposed by Baumeister and mentioned above, according to which behavioral control can be diminished under states of negative emotional arousal (Baumeister et al., 1994). Notably, scales assessing negative urgency are also included in some measures of impulsivity, and also in that context negative urgency shows consistent associations with indices of aggression (J.D. Miller et al., 2012).

It is worth noting that a focus on emotion dysregulation is not mutually exclusive with the propositions of the general strain theory (Joon Jang & Rhodes, 2012). Indeed, strains, stress, and adversities may constitute distal and proximal risk factors contributing not only to negative emotions, but also to difficulties in regulating emotions, which in turn can partly explain (or increase) the relation between strain and aggressive behavior (Day, 2009; Gratz, Paulson, Jakupcak, & Tull, 2009; Herts, McLaughlin, & Hatzenbuehler, 2012). Of note, general strain theory also postulates that a possible function of aggression and crime is to alleviate negative emotions (Agnew, 2001; see also Berkowitz, 1993). That is, already general strain theory posited that aggression may constitute a maladaptive way of coping with – or regulating – the chronic or intense experience of negative emotions (Agnew, 2013; Joon Jang, 2007; Joon Jang & Song, 2015).

An integration of negative emotionality and emotion regulation has recently been proffered by DeLisi and Vaughn's (2014) temperament-based theory of antisocial behavior. Based on a comprehensive review of extant theories and research from a variety of fields (e.g., developmental psychology, psychiatry, criminology, neuroscience, and genetics), this model posits that negative emotionality and effortful control represent the main temperamental precursor for the development of antisocial behavior and predict subsequent involvement with the criminal justice system (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014). Of note, DeLisi and Vaughn (2014) made explicit reference to emotion regulation as one component of the broader effortful control construct that – fueled by negative emotionality – may give rise to aggressive manifestations. Furthermore, this temperament-based theory postulates that a focus on negative emotionality and effortful control as independent constructs may not be sufficient to understand the complexity of antisocial behavior. Rather, it was argued that these two constructs “work in tandem to increase antisocial behavior” (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014, p. 14) and that their interaction increases the likelihood of antisocial outcomes. This theory was grounded on evidence of a joint and interactive effect of negative emotionality and effortful control in predicting externalizing behavior both concurrently and prospectively in children and adolescents (Eisenberg et al., 1993; Eisenberg et al., 1996; Laible, Carlo, Panfile, Eye, & Parker, 2010). However, only few studies have tested this theory in offender populations, and have mostly been focused on juvenile offenders. These studies provided rather consistent evidence that both negative emotionality and low effortful control predicted a greater likelihood of antisocial behavior, and that levels of antisocial behavior were greater among youth with present both high levels of negative emotionality and low levels of effortful control (Baglivo, Wolff, DeLisi, Vaughn, & Piquero, 2016; Wolff, Baglivo, Piquero, Vaughn, & DeLisi, 2016).

Notably, studies that have examined the joint role of negative emotions and emotion dysregulation in explaining aggression are surprisingly rare. In a sample of undergraduate students, emotion dysregulation mediated the association between negative emotionality and physical aggression. Notably, negative urgency emerged as a unique mediator in the relation that negative emotionality had with physical aggression in male participants (Donahue et al., 2014). In another study, both negative emotionality and negative urgency explained a significant portion of the variance in violent behavior in a sample of juvenile offenders. Further, emotion dysregulation moderated the association between negative emotionality and violent behavior, such that the positive relation between negative emotionality and violent

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