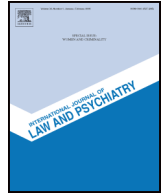




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Implicit cognitive aggression among young male prisoners: Association with dispositional and current aggression

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ABSTRACT

The current study explores associations between implicit and explicit aggression in young adult male prisoners, seeking to apply the Reflection-Impulsive Model and indicate parity with elements of the General Aggression Model and social cognition. Implicit cognitive aggressive processing is not an area that has been examined among prisoners. Two hundred and sixty two prisoners completed an implicit cognitive aggression measure (Puzzle Test) and explicit aggression measures, covering current behaviour (DIPC-R) and aggression disposition (AQ). It was predicted that dispositional aggression would be predicted by implicit cognitive aggression, and that implicit cognitive aggression would predict current engagement in aggressive behaviour. It was also predicted that more *impulsive* implicit cognitive processing would associate with aggressive behaviour whereas *cognitively effortful* implicit cognitive processing would not. Implicit aggressive cognitive processing was associated with increased dispositional aggression but not current reports of aggressive behaviour. Impulsive implicit cognitive processing of an aggressive nature predicted increased dispositional aggression whereas more cognitively effortful implicit cognitive aggression did not. The article concludes by outlining the importance of accounting for implicit cognitive processing among prisoners and the need to separate such processing into facets (i.e. impulsive vs. cognitively effortful). Implications for future research and practice in this novel area of study are indicated.

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Implicit or 'automatic' processing has been described as a spontaneous process not requiring deliberation, operating in the absence of conscious monitoring and intention (Moors & DeHouwer, 2006). The exact definition has proven challenging to capture (De Houwer, Teige-Mocigemba, Spruyt, & Moors, 2009), although the most basic will refer to it as a form of cognitive processing that can occur outside of conscious awareness. Definitions of implicit cognitive processing do share commonalities though, brought together by Stacy and Wiers (2010) who describe it as a subset of associations in memory spontaneously activated under various conditions. These associations can operate without conscious supervision and are thought influenced by experiences. They can impact on emotions and behaviour (Koole, 2009), with the latter including a range of challenging behaviours such as aggression in general, student and workplace samples (e.g. Bluemke, Friedrich, & Zumbach, 2009; Frost, Ko, & James, 2007; James et al., 2005; Todorov & Bargh, 2002), and extending to emotional aggression between partners (Ireland & Birch, 2013).

The impact of implicit cognitive processing on aggression has been of particular interest, with a considerable proportion of aggression thought to occur in the absence of cognitive resources (Bluemke et al., 2009) and not always in line with conscious thought (Banse & Greenwald, 2007; Perugini & Banse, 2007). The *General Aggression Model* (GAM) attempts to capture this by distinguishing between impulsive behaviour and thoughtful action (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), describing aggression as influenced by the former and demonstrated in the absence of considered deliberation. The GAM was built on pre-existing research from social cognition focusing on the role of automatic processing in aggression (Todorov & Bargh, 2002). The *Integrated Model of Information Processing* (Huesmann, 1998) is arguably one of the best social cognition models capturing automatic processing, with this model forming an underpinning theoretical element of the GAM. The Integrated Model makes specific reference to automatic cognition as a factor crucial in priming aggressive scripts. The model argues how such cognition leads to an individual accessing an aggressive script (and then enacting it) more rapidly, and then using their resulting aggressive behaviour as a means of justifying the value of the aggressive script. This leads to further reinforcement of the associated aggressive cognitions, including automatic cognitions.

However, the primary model that has captured a role for implicit cognition appears to be the *Reflection-Impulsive Model* (RIM: Strack &

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Deutsch, 2004). This model has not been applied to aggression and yet clearly has valuable components with clear utility to furthering our understanding of aggressive processing at a cognitive level. It describes two systems relevant to implicit cognitive processing, an *associative system* and a *reflective system*, both of which are thought to co-exist. The reflective system is consistent more with explicit methods of assessing aggression involving conscious deliberation and appraisal (Hofmann & Friese, 2008). Such methods include self-report aggression measures which ask directly about aggression frequency and tendency (e.g. 'how often have you shown aggression in the past month?').

The reflective system has featured most heavily in aggression research (e.g. Joormann & Gotlib, 2010) as opposed to the associative [implicit cognitive] system. The explicit, reflective, system has also featured heavily in aggression therapy where attempts are made to alter beliefs and appraisals by identifying and exploring them directly (Ireland, 2011). However, the success of such attempts is questionable regarding their enduring impact on those cognitions which may *not* be immediately accessible to individuals. It could be argued that prompting change by using the more automatic [implicit cognition] systems may have more success since it would be addressing the more implicit levels of cognition and thus unconscious cognition which has, to date, been neglected in aggression therapy and assessment (Ireland, 2011).

Some researchers have also referred to implicit cognitive processing as a disposition and thus a more stable, trait-related construct. This disposition is thought to play a key role in aggression tendency, particularly with impulsive aggression (Bluemke et al., 2009), a notion supported by both the GAM and the Integrated Model. Using a student sample Bluemke et al. (2009) found it correlated with stable trait aggression measures. Bluemke et al. (2009) noted a positive correlation between implicit cognitive aggression and overall trait, physical and angry aggression but not in relation to verbal aggression and hostility.

Aggression research to date has, however, failed to address prisoners and has focused on implicit cognitive processing as a homogenous concept. There is considerable heterogeneity in implicit cognitive processing. For example, some can be more impulsive in nature and some more cognitively effortful (De Houwer et al., 2009). There is developing consensus that implicit cognitive processing should be considered a multi-factorial concept (Stacy & Wiers, 2010) which is aptly reflected in the methods used to examine it.

Methods to assess for implicit cognition include the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) incorporating response latency; primed Stroop tests (Stewart, Hall, Wilkie, & Birch, 2002) and word association and word production tests (Cramer, 1968; Ireland & Birch, 2013). Word tests have utilised both free-word associations and controlled associations. The former is thought a more impulsive element of implicit cognitive processing and the latter more cognitively effortful (Stacy & Wiers, 2010). 'Cognitive effortful' refers here to cognitive processing that still occurs at a largely unconscious level but is less automatic than impulsive cognitive processing. Thus, although it remains a largely unconscious process, therefore distinguishing it from explicit processing, it represents the less automatic element of implicit cognitive processing.

Impulsive implicit processing is of particular interest in forensic populations where impulsive responding is considered a factor underpinning a range of challenging and dissocial behaviours, including aggression. Indeed, aggressive responding is thought a product in part of an absence of cognitive resources and/or of a situation where behavioural control is lacking (i.e. impulsivity) (Bluemke et al., 2009). While aggression research has considered behavioural control in detail by examining areas such as impulsivity using explicit methods of measurement (e.g. Ireland & Archer, 2004), what has not been considered is the distinction between *impulsive* implicit cognitive aggressive processing and the more *cognitively effortful* implicit aggressive processing. It could be logically expected, for example, that it would be the more

impulsive implicit cognitive processing likely associated with aggression than that requiring more cognitive effort. *Impulsive* implicit cognitive processing in this instance would be considered more an extension of explicit impulsive processes (e.g. behaviour) already known to relate to increased aggression (Ireland & Archer, 2004).

In addition, it could theoretically be expected that increased implicit cognitive aggressive processing would be found more with individuals demonstrating an *explicit* dispositional tendency for aggression (Bluemke et al., 2009) since implicit elements are based on pre-existing content which can be activated implicitly. Those with a tendency towards repeated aggression, as determined by dispositional [trait] aggression, would be expected to have more aggressive memories. On the basis that implicit cognitive processing is based on associative memory (Stacy & Wiers, 2010) and activates the associative system described by the Reflection-Impulsive Model (RIM: Strack & Deutsch, 2004), it would be expected that those with a disposition towards aggression have a wealth of aggression memories that become associated when implicit cognitive processing is activated.

As noted, examining the association between implicit cognitive processing and aggression among prisoners represents a neglected field of study. The current study aims to examine such processing with a young adult male prisoner sample, exploring its association with explicit aggressive disposition and current aggressive behaviours, making use of the following models; Reflective-Impulsive Model, Integrated Model of Information Processing and the General Aggression Model. The following core predictions were made: (1) Dispositional aggression would be predicted by implicit cognitive aggression; (2) Implicit cognitive non-aggression will predict decreased dispositional aggression; (3) Implicit cognitive aggression will predict current engagement in aggressive behaviour, and (4) More impulsive implicit cognitive aggression will predict increased aggressive behaviour, with the more cognitively effortful implicit aggression not serving as a predictor.

1. Methods

1.1. Participants

Three hundred and forty seven young male prisoners were invited to take part from a single establishment. Three hundred and thirty two measures were returned, of which 262 were completed. This represented a 75.5% completion rate. The sample was a general prisoner sample; thus prisoners were not selected from this sample due to increased levels of aggressive tendency.

The mean age of participants was 19.4 years (SD 0.8: age range 18 to 21). Eighty seven percent classed their ethnicity as white, three percent as Asian, four percent black, three percent mixed race, with one percent not indicating ethnicity. Of those sentenced, the majority (38%) were serving for an acquisitive offence (e.g. theft, burglary) and 33% for a violent offence (e.g. wounding or assault). Eight percent were serving for drug offences, 19% for other offences (e.g. arson, motoring offences), with the remaining two percent not stating what they were detained for. The mean sentence length was 5.4 years (SD 2.8) and mean total length of time spent in prison 3.6 years (SD 1.6). Sixteen percent were not sentenced as they remained on remand awaiting sentencing/outcome.

1.2. Measures

All participants completed the following measures.

1.2.1. Puzzle Test (Ireland & Birch, 2013)

The Puzzle Test is a variant of a word association test which incorporates cognitively effortful (less automatic) and uncontrolled (impulsive) implicit cognitive processes using two core methods: *word identification* and *word replacement*. Such word association tests are considered capable of identifying implicit conceptual memory (e.g. Zeelenberg, Shiffrin,

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