



## Experiencing anger in a social interaction: The role of personality

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Subjective anger experience  
Personality traits  
Neuroticism  
Staged social interaction  
Status differences

### ABSTRACT

Although prior research has shown a relationship between the Big Five personality factors and trait anger, evidence that links these personality traits to the experience of state anger is rare. The current study investigated the effect of the Big Five personality traits on the state anger experience after a provocation in a staged social interaction and how status differences moderate these personality effects in an academic sample. In the *equal status condition* ( $N = 131$ , 56% female, aged 18 to 37) participants were provoked by a confederate; in the *low status condition* ( $N = 125$ , 55% female, aged 18 to 51) anger was instead provoked by the experimenter. In both conditions, individuals higher in neuroticism experienced more state anger after being provoked. In contrast to our hypotheses, no status effects or interaction effects between personality traits and status condition influenced the anger experience. Our findings illustrate the importance of neuroticism in understanding how people react to provocations in social situations, while status had no impact on the anger experience.

### 1. Introduction

Anger is a common emotion in daily life that is typically evoked by aversive stimuli or harm in reaction to blameworthy behavior of others (Averill, 1982; Weber, 2004). The etiology of anger has been a topic of enduring interest for behavioral scientists (Pease & Lewis, 2015). Previous research has focused on situational (Kuppens & Tuerlinckx, 2007), cognitive (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Denson, 2013), and dispositional (Deffenbacher, 1992; Miller, Zeichner, & Wilson, 2012) factors that contribute to one's experience of anger. In the present study we focus on the influence of dispositional and situational factors on subjective anger experience in a social interaction. We investigated the effect of basic dimensions of personality (*dispositional factors*) on the experimentally induced anger experience in a social interaction; we then tested the effect of status differences between interaction partners (*situational factors*), and the interaction effects of these dispositional and situational factors on state anger experience.

#### 1.1. Personality and anger experience

Trait anger has been strongly associated with basic dimensions of personality (Pease & Lewis, 2015; Sanz, Garcia-Vera, & Magán, 2010) such as the Big Five personality factors (Costa & McCrae, 1985; McCrae & John, 1992). Specifically, research has provided evidence that neuroticism and trait anger are strongly correlated (Martin et al., 1999; Ode, Robinson, & Wilkowski, 2008; Pease & Lewis, 2015). Several

studies have demonstrated an inverse relationship between agreeableness and trait anger (Egan & Campbell, 2009; Graziano & Tobin, 2002; Martin et al., 1999; Meier & Robinson, 2004; Miller et al., 2012), and have established that conscientiousness and trait anger are negatively related (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007; Lee & Dow, 2011; Martin et al., 1999). Finally, significant correlations between extraversion, openness, and trait anger have rarely been found (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentin, 2006; David, Green, Martin, & Suls, 1997; Martin et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2012).

A growing body of research has demonstrated that personality dispositions are related to state affect (e.g. Leger, Charles, Turiano, & Almeida, 2016; Zajenkowski, Gorynska, & Winiewski, 2012). Neuroticism is linked to higher levels of reactivity (Bolger & Schilling, 1991) and its facet “angry hostility” has been defined as frequent and strong experiences of anger (Costa Jr. & McCrae, 1992). Neuroticism has been strongly associated with state negative affect in a given situation, like feelings of anger, fear, sadness, guilt, and embarrassment (Costa Jr. & McCrae, 1992; David et al., 1997). Agreeableness may reflect internalized tendencies in the regulation of frustration and anger. In line with this notion, highly agreeable individuals are better at controlling their anger (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996). Moreover, agreeableness was associated with how people perceive and response to conflict situations (Graziano et al., 1996; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Jones, Miller, & Lynam, 2011). A few studies found an association between both neuroticism and agreeableness with negative affect in a naturalistic daily life setting (Giacobbi, Hausenblas, & Frye, 2005;

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Suls, Green, & Hillis, 1998). Jensen-Campbell, Knack, Waldrip, and Campbell (2007) focused on the influence of the Big Five traits on state anger when facing frustration in an experimental design. In this study, participants wrote an essay and received either negative or positive feedback from a fictitious fellow participant (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2007). The results showed that conscientiousness was negatively related to self-reported state anger, while neuroticism showed no significant relation to self-reported state anger. Agreeableness was positively related to self-reported anger when conscientiousness was low (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2007). By contrast, a study on daily anger using diary methodology found no significant associations between personality traits and subjective anger intensity (Kashdan, Goodman, Mallard, & DeWall, 2016).

In sum, there is robust evidence that neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are associated with trait anger. The relationship between personality traits and the experience of state anger in a given social situation, however, has been examined to a much lesser extent and findings are inconsistent.

### 1.2. Personality, social status, and state anger

Prior research has suggested that the affective experience, and especially the subjective experience of anger, varies considerably across individuals according to their social status (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998; Kemper, 1991), with children and adults of low socio-economic status reporting higher negative mood than persons with higher socio-economic status (Hecht, Inderbitzen, & Bukowski, 1998; Link, Lennon, & Dohrenwend, 1993). It is only recently that the effect of social status on dynamic social interactions in the context of anger has begun to be explored (Tiedens, 2001). These initial studies have suggested that individuals in low-status positions experience and display anger less frequently than higher status individuals within Western culture (Anderson, Langner, & Keltner, 2001; Tiedens, 2001, however, see also Park et al., 2013 for a different result). Langner and Keltner (2008) have reported that people in low status position less frequently experience anger than those in high status position. In line with the theoretical perspective that status stems from an individual's personality, some researcher link striving for status to personality characteristics (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Mazur, 1985). Anderson, John, et al. (2001) found extraversion to be positively related to social status attainment in a face-to-face group. Another study linked workplace victim status to extraversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness, with victims tending to be less independent and extroverted, less emotionally stable, and more conscientious than non-victims (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000). According to these results, some personality traits relate to actual status in a social situation. In addition, extraversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness might influence the interaction partner's perceptions of status differences in social situations. As extraverts are more socially skilled, and have the ability to deal effectively with social situations (Costa Jr. & McCrae, 1992), they might be less influenced by status differences than introverts in an anger-eliciting social interaction. Conscientious individuals generally follow the rules and confirm to their prescribed roles, while neurotic individuals are more vulnerable to factors such as stress, anxiety, and self-consciousness (Costa Jr. & McCrae, 1992). Agreeableness is a personality characteristic that plays a crucial role in interpersonal relationships (Costa Jr. & McCrae, 1992). It could therefore be argued that in anger-eliciting social interactions more agreeable individuals are less affected by status differences than less agreeable individuals because they are generally perceived as more prosocial. Based on these theoretical considerations, highly conscientious, extraverted, neurotic, and less agreeable individuals may perceive status differences to a greater extent than individuals who are less conscientious, introverted, agreeable, or emotionally stable.

Taken together, recent research and the theoretical frameworks underlying this area of study suggest that status may influence how individuals experience an anger-eliciting situation in that individuals in low-status positions experience anger less frequently. Furthermore, personality traits might moderate the effect of status on the experience of anger in that more conscientious, more extraverted, more neurotic, and less agreeable individuals may perceive status differences to a greater extent and may experience more anger as a result.

## 2. The current study

Much of the research in this area has investigated the relationship between personality dimensions and anger experience at the trait level. However, evidence of how personality influences state anger when facing an actual provocation in an experimental design is scarce. The first major aim of the present investigation was to examine the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and an experimentally induced anger experience in an actual situation. The second aim was to investigate the effect of status difference on the experience of state anger in a given social situation. The third aim was to examine how the anticipated effect of status difference on anger experience was moderated by personality traits. To achieve these aims, we conducted a quasi-experimental study to investigate the effect of personality on subjective anger experience after a provocation in a staged social interaction with two conditions that only differ in the status of the anger target. In the *equal status condition*, the target of anger was ostensibly another participant (in fact, a confederate), who was therefore of equal status to the participant. In the *low status condition*, the experimenter was instead the target if anger, creating a status gap between participants (who had lower status) and the experimenter (who had a higher status). We hypothesized that neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are related to subjective anger experience, and that individuals who scored higher on neuroticism, lower on agreeableness, and lower on conscientiousness would therefore experience more anger after a provocation. We also anticipated that status differences would affect anger experience, with individuals in the equal status condition anticipated to experience higher state anger than participants in the low status condition. Additionally, we examined the interaction effects between the status differences and the personality dimensions on state anger. We expected that highly conscientious, agreeable, neurotic, and introverted individuals would be more affected by status differences than individuals who were less conscientious, agreeable, emotionally stable, and extraverted.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited for both experiments through a flyer campaign and from different courses on the University of XXX. Undergraduates from all majors except psychology were eligible to participate, and were offered the chance to win one of four 50 EUR (approx. US\$ 68) vouchers for an online bookstore as compensation. The equal status condition had an initial sample size of 131 students (56% female) and the low status condition had an initial sample size of 125 students (55% female). However, we had to exclude data from 18 participants from the analyses: Twelve (eight women, four men) participants were aware of the real aim of the experiment, and six (five women, one man) participants had to be excluded due to a failure in the testing procedure. This left a total of 238 participants (119 from each condition) aged 18 to 51 years (127 women, age  $M = 23.49$  years,  $SD = 4.17$ ) for the final statistical analyses. The study protocol followed the principles laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the local ethics committee (decision BB 25/10). In both

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