



When you say aggressiveness, what do you mean by that? Similarities and differences between aggressiveness/agreeableness scales from personality inventories

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to examine which components (affective, behavioral, or cognitive) of trait aggressiveness were included in aggressiveness/agreeableness scales from both psychobiological and psycholexical models. In Study 1, aggressiveness components were measured by the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ), and in Study 2 they were measured by expert estimations of the contribution of each component in aggressiveness/agreeableness items. The results showed that the scales from psychobiological models were mutually similar and captured a broader range of aggressiveness indicators, favoring the behavioral component. Scales from psycholexical models also captured, to a lesser extent, behavioral component in relation to the AQ. However, according to expert estimations, they captured aggressiveness components in a more balanced way, but favor the cognitive component compared to psychobiological models. We could conclude that different approaches in defining basic personality traits influenced which components and indicators would be covered by certain self-report measures.

1. Introduction

The differences in conceptual and research paradigm for the creation of psychobiological and psycholexical models of personality contribute to certain differences in the nature of the basic personality traits. A conceptual agreement is mainly present regarding domain which correspond to neuroticism (or neuroticism-anxiety) and extraversion (or sociability, see [Aluja, García, & García, 2002](#)). However, there are disagreements about the characteristics of other traits, especially aggressiveness. The differences may be a result of the adoption of specific strategies in the construction of questionnaires. Questionnaires within the psychobiological approach are usually created on the so-called rational approach, with pre-defined assumptions about the content and structure of the basic personality traits. On the other hand, the questionnaires within the psycholexical approach are usually created using an inductive approach, without hypotheses about the number and content of lexically derived personality traits. Additionally, in the psychobiological models there is a clear assumption that aggressiveness has correlates in biological processes, while the psycholexical models are principally descriptive, and defined at the psychometric level. Accordingly, the question arises which components of aggressiveness are covered by the relevant scales from different questionnaires for

personality inventories – affect, behavior, or cognition (ABC)? The common affective component of aggressiveness is anger, the behavioral component is aggression or violence, and the cognitive component is hostility ([Martin, Watson, & Wan, 2000](#)).

1.1. Aggressiveness in psychobiological models

The common characteristic of psychobiological models of personality is an attempt to integrate knowledge in the field of physiology, neuroimaging, and pharmacological research with animals, with manifest behavior that is at the basis of personality traits. Therefore, personality traits in these models reflect underlying biological factors ([Matthews & Gilliland, 1999](#)). Aggressiveness is a trait whose biological basis is relatively well known and commonly appears as an independent dimension in many psychobiological personality models ([Gray & McNaughton, 2000](#); [Zuckerman, 1991](#)), except for the Eysenck's PEN model, where it is a subtrait of psychoticism ([Eysenck, 1998](#)). In the Alternative Five Factor Model ([Zuckerman, 2002](#)), aggressiveness represents trait aggression–hostility. In the original Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST: [Gray, 1982](#)), fight/flight system was associated with sensitivity to unconditioned aversive stimuli and it was considered as the basis of fearlessness. Therefore, questionnaires of the original

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RST have only included the behavioral inhibition system – BIS/anxiety and the behavioral activation system – BAS/impulsivity, and the results indicated a significant role of these traits, especially of BAS, in different forms of aggression (e.g., Cooper, Gomez, & Buck, 2008; von Collani & Werner, 2005). The relation between aggressiveness and the BAS can be attributed to the lack of behavior control and/or to an approaching behavior present in both traits. In the revised RST (rRST: Gray & McNaughton, 2000), the fight/flight system becomes a fight/flight/freeze system and presents a mechanism that controls responses to a broader range of unpleasant stimuli. Fight responds to an immediate and real danger and it is activated in situations when a real proximal threat is present and cannot be avoided, thus leaving an aggressive reaction as the only possible solution.

1.2. Aggressiveness in psycholexical models

Psycholexical research is primarily focused on detecting the number and structure of phenotypic characteristics, based on the description of personality coded in the language. Therefore, the personality traits based on psycholexical models are usually exclusively descriptive. In psycholexical models, such as the Big Five, aggressiveness does not appear as an independent personality dimension, but rather it is associated with the negative pole of agreeableness (e.g., Goldberg, 1990). Agreeableness refers to a wide range of indicators concerning positive interpersonal relationships, including not only a lack of aggressiveness, but also prosocial behavior, altruism, empathy, helpfulness, etc. Besides, the behavioral component (physical and verbal aggression) and aggressive attitudes were more related to agreeableness, while cognitive and affective components were more related to neuroticism from the Big Five (Barlett & Anderson, 2012; Gallo & Smith, 1998; Tremblay & Ewart, 2005). It could be assumed that agreeableness contains more behavior components because they explicitly involve interpersonal interaction, while neuroticism refers to internal experience that follows this interaction, such as emotions and cognitions. Although not derived from the psycholexical paradigm, the dimensions of the Five Factor Model (FFM) are similar to Big Five dimensions, and showed the same pattern of relationships (Sharpe & Desai, 2001; von Collani & Werner, 2005). Results from a meta-analysis suggest that neuroticism from FFM is also related to aggression, but only under provocation, while agreeableness is related to aggression regardless of presence of provocation (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). This is in line with findings that reactive aggression was related to high neuroticism and low agreeableness, while proactive aggression was related solely to low agreeableness (e.g., Miller & Lynam, 2006). However, there was the least agreement among inventories over the conceptualization of agreeableness from different personality inventories (Pytlík Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002). For example, Agreeableness scale from the Big Five Inventory accentuated the behavioral component, while NEO-PI-R Agreeableness scale showed a higher cognitive and a lower affective component, compared to the inventories from the psycholexical approach.

In the six-factor psycholexical model HEXACO, the markers of emotional and cognitive components are part of agreeableness, along with forgiveness, gentleness, flexibility, and other indicators of interpersonal-related behavior (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014). Therefore, agreeableness from HEXACO was more negatively related to reactive aggression (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012), as to all kinds of aggressive acts, regardless of whether they are calculated or immediate (Lee & Ashton, 2012). Consequently, it could be expected that HEXACO agreeableness contains a broader range of aggressiveness components, in regards to agreeableness from the Big Five model.

It could be noticed that some components of aggressiveness are often related to neuroticism (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2006). However, it is not a priori expected that aggressiveness and neuroticism have a high correlation. Moreover, the results of the examination of aggression in the laboratory settings do not indicate a connection with neuroticism,

but low agreeableness (Seibert, Miller, Pryor, Reidy, & Zeichner, 2010). Therefore, in this study only scales from personality inventories which are commonly linked to aggressiveness are included.

1.3. Purpose of the current study

Aggressiveness has a different status in personality theories and models. While psychobiological models more explicitly recognize aggressiveness as a basic personality trait, the conceptual status of this trait in psycholexical models is more complex. Nevertheless, it is usually linked with the negative pole of agreeableness (Goldberg, 1990). Aggressiveness is an important factor of adaptation (Figueredo & Jacobs, 2011), whose affective, behavioral, and cognitive components are very heterogeneous that it is obviously a challenge to create a scale that will cover all of them. In recent decades there are justifiable attempts to unify the psychological and biological perspectives through an explanation of the neurobiological basis of the traits derived from the lexical approach (DeYoung, 2010). When it comes to the operationalization of the trait at the item level, measures from different approaches often use similar items, despite the fact that they are assumed to reflect phenomena at different levels of analysis, (Poropat & Corr, 2015). However, given the conceptual inconsistencies between personality models, an important research question is whether different models reflect a focus on different components of aggressiveness and how this affects the assessment of aggressiveness. Therefore, measures derived from different models could contain similar and overlapping items. Nevertheless, different models could affect which component of aggressiveness will be favored in those measures. To answer these questions, two studies were conducted, in which similarities and differences were examined between the personality scales that are usually associated with aggressiveness in psychobiological and psychological models.

2. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 is to determine the correlates of aggressiveness/agreeableness scales from personality inventories based on aggressiveness components captured by the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ: Buss & Perry, 1992). AQ was developed on the basis of authors' clinical experience and it is not linked to a particular theoretical approach or model, which makes it suitable for the purpose of this study, ensuring a theoretically unbiased measurement of the components of aggressiveness.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 583 participants from the general population from Serbia (38.77% male), ages ranging from 18 to 68 ($M = 29.79$, $SD = 11.74$). The majority of the participants had higher education: 268 (45.97%) were students and 83 (14.24%) were college graduates from a variety of academic professions. The instruments were administered by trained MA psychology students as part of their pre-exam activities. In order to obtain heterogeneity, requirements regarding sex and age quotas were given. These quotas were: 4 males, of which one had age in a range 18–25, second in a range 26–35, and third had 36 years or more, and the same quotas were applied in the case of 4 female participants. In the case that students could not meet given criteria, they instructed to find participants regarding one of criteria (and not both). Therefore, this is a nonrandom, convenience sample. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

2.1.2. Measures

Aggression–Hostility (A–H) scale from Zuckerman–Kuhlman Personality Questionnaire III-Revised (ZKPQ III-R: Zuckerman, 2002, for Serbian adaptation see Mitrović, Čolović, & Smederevac, 2009)

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