



Communion-orientation as an antidote for aggressive behaviour among high provocation sensitive individuals



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ABSTRACT

The current study explored whether high provocation sensitive individuals would declare less anger and therefore fewer physical aggressive acts if they are high in communal values. Three samples, students, prisoners and psychotherapy patients, were compared for differences in occurrence of aggressive reactions and preassembly communion-orientation. Data was tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Among students, communion-orientation itself and in interaction with sensitivity to provocation had a diminishing effect on anger. Among prisoners and patients, there was no support for the notion that communion-orientation had an effect on anger. Among patients, the relationship between sensitivity to provocations and physical aggression was fully mediated by anger, but among prisoners a provoking situation was enough to lead to physical aggression.

Although based on data from self-reports, possibly biased by impression management, results suggest that communion-orientation should be considered in research on aggression.

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1. Introduction

Previous research has shown (Diehl, Owen, & Youngblade, 2004) that communal-orientation helps to establish healthy and satisfying relationships that are very important to mental health, proper personality development, steady identity development and psychological stability. Communal-orientation is related to an increased ability to build intimate relationships. Communion attributes have positive correlations with extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness which can mean that such individuals are more sympathetic toward others, and more self-controlled in their behaviour (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Diehl et al., 2004).

On the other hand, problems in relating to others, that is interpersonal dysfunctions, seem to be associated with hostility, which is opposite to friendly, nurturance factors associated with communion orientation (Dolan & Blackburn, 2006; Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1982). Hostility is one of the central factors for many personality disorders (Wiggins & Pincus, 1992) and aggressive behaviour in groups (Dolan & Blackburn, 2006). Doyle and Dolan (2006) stressed that factors like anger and hostility that influence violent behaviour have not received much attention, although for instance psychiatric inpatients, with lower anger, seem to be less violent. In

their study, conducted with a forensic mental health population, they found that anger regulation problems and interpersonal style were closely associated with increased risk of violent behaviour occurrence.

People high on trait anger feel it more often and both more intensely and longer (Deffenbacher et al., 1996). When they feel threatened or provoked, they respond more aggressively (Wilkowski, Robinson, Gordon, & Troop-Gordon, 2007). Trait anger was positively correlated with neuroticism and low agreeableness (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1996; Martin, Watson, & Wan, 2000) and was shown to be associated with greater aggressive behaviour under provocation conditions (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). It was suggested that those high in trait anger perceive actions of other people in a more provoking way and therefore act to correct the provoking action, which can be done in an assertive or aggressive way (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Wilkowski et al., 2007).

In this context it seems very important how an individual perceives the actions from outside: as either provoking or not. When a person is prone to hostile attribution, the possibility of aggressive acts increases (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997). People high on trait anger make hostile attributions more often, and therefore, being more prone to provocations, may act physically aggressive (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Tiedens, 2001; Wilkowski et al., 2007). McNiel, Eisner, and Binder (2003) described aggressive attributional style as characterised by external hostile

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attributions, which increase the risk of violent behaviour for example among psychiatric patients. In a meta-analysis, trait anger and provocation interacted with each other where trait anger seemed to predict aggressive behaviour primarily in response to provocation (Bettencourt et al., 2006).

People with hostile interpersonal style, high in trait anger, and low on agreeableness are more prone to hostile attributions than possibly more agreeable communion-oriented individuals. The latter would perceive a provoking situation another way for example due to differences in patterns of psychologically dealing with difficult emotions (Diehl et al., 2004). Communion attributes were negatively correlated with projection, i.e. seeing undesirable qualities in others. Diehl et al. (2004) stipulated that such people do not overemphasise the negative aspects of a given situation perhaps by considering the social contextual clues that will impact their angry feelings. Thus, one may hypothesises that they are less likely to see somebody as provoking.

In general, provocation increased the likelihood of aggression (Bettencourt et al., 2006). It depends however, on the individual's sensitivity to provocations (SP), which relates to feeling aggressive in reaction to goading and provocation from others (Lawrence, 2006; Zajenkovska, Jankowski, Lawrence, & Zajenkowski, 2013). Such individuals had higher scores on overt physical aggression (PA) (as measured by the AQ; Lawrence, 2006). Moreover, SP was negatively associated with agreeableness among students and prisoners (Zajenkovska et al., 2013). On the other hand, higher agreeableness among communion-oriented individuals possibly relates to their concern for interpersonal harmony (Diehl et al., 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), being compliant with others, and being able to include contextual cues in their judgement of difficult conditions.

1.1. Current study

Perceived provocations produced negative affect that could be related to both fight or flight tendencies whereby the fight gives rise to feelings of anger (Berkowitz, 1990). Perceived provocations increased anger, which affected the probability of aggressive acts (Bettencourt et al., 2006). Communal-orientated individuals paid more attention to relations between people and harmony, which supposedly decrease levels of anger (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The current study focused on answering whether high provocation sensitive individuals would declare less anger and therefore fewer physical aggressive acts if they are high in communal values.

For this study, three different samples from diverse societal groups differing with regard to aggression occurrence and preassembly communion-orientation were chosen: students, prisoners and patients. There are no direct studies comparing these three groups based on communal-orientation and aggression, however because students function within social norms, the aggression manifestation is expected to be lower than prisoners. Moreover, although communion-orientation has not been investigated widely in the context of prisoners, hostile interpersonal style, the opposite of being friendly and nurturing, seems to predict institutional aggression in high security psychiatric hospitals (Logan & Blackburn, 2003, in: Doyle & Dolan, 2006) as well as in prison samples (Dolan & Blackburn, 2006). Patients who are in the psychotherapy process and are non-psychotic, often present personality disorders that make it impossible for them to have successful relationships with others (Gabbard, 2009) and hostile interpersonal style can be seen as a factor reinforcing many personality disorders (Wiggins & Pincus, 1992). Prisoners and patients are believed to have problems with anger regulation (Gabbard, 2009). Such problems seem to be related to attributional style, with hostile attributions increasing the likelihood of violence (McNiel et al., 2003).

2. Method

2.1. Materials

2.1.1. The Situational Triggers of Aggressive Responses (STAR) scale

The Situational Triggers of Aggressive Responses (STAR) scale (Lawrence, 2006) was used to measure aggression-related sensitivities. The questionnaire consists of 22 items (10 reflect Sensitivity to Frustrations, and 12 SP). Participants are presented with 22 situations and are asked to rate how aggressive each makes them typically feel on a 5-point scale. The instrument has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$ for SP and $\alpha = .80$ for Frustrations) and its validity has been examined previously (Lawrence, 2006). The questionnaire was translated for the current study into Polish, then two experts translated it into English, then it was back-translated by a bilingual person, and approved by the author of the original scale.

2.1.2. The Aggression Questionnaire

The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992) comprises 29 items relating to behaviours and feelings concerning different aggressive responses. There are 4 subscales, two of which relate to overt expressions of aggression: Physical Aggression (PA, 9) and Verbal Aggression (VA, 5) while the other two subscales relate to aggressive emotions: Anger (A, 7) and cognitions: Hostility (H, 8). The AQ uses a 5-point Likert-type scale to score the items where "1" = very untrue, "5" = very true. The instrument has high internal consistency (α 's = .85, .72, .83, and .77, for the PA, VA, A, and H dimensions, respectively; Buss & Perry, 1992).

2.1.3. Agency-Communion Scale

Agency-Communion Scale (Wojciszke & Szlendak, 2010) was used to measure agency defined as focus on the self and one's own goals in addition to communion defined as focus on other people and interpersonal relations. The questionnaire consists of 30 adjectives and participants are asked to rate how they agree with each of them on a 7-point scale. The instrument has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$ for Communion and $\alpha = .90$ for Agency) and its validity has been examined previously (Wojciszke & Szlendak, 2010).

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. Students

In the student sample, there were 318 participants (151 females). All were undergraduate students from three universities in Warsaw (humanistic departments). The mean age of females was 21.84 ($SD = 4.07$) ranging from 18 to 40 years. The mean age of males was 21.63 ($SD = 2.62$) ranging from 18 to 35 years. No sex differences were found regarding age. In order to make use of specific statistical techniques (modification indices in path analysis), all participants with missing data were excluded from the analysis (sample size after missing data exclusion $N = 290$, 145 females).

2.2.2. Prisoners

225 questionnaires were distributed among inmates from three adult prisons in Warsaw (2 mainly male prisons, 1 mainly female prison). 158 questionnaires were returned (return rate 70%). Among those who returned questionnaires, 90 were females. The mean age of females was 39.54 ($SD = 11.58$) ranging from 20 to 63 years. The mean age of males was 35.75 ($SD = 9.90$) ranging from 20 to 78 years. The mean age of women was higher than the mean age of men, $t(155.54) = 2.22$, $p < 0.05$. 48% of the prisoners were arrested for physical assault, the remaining group committed larceny or participated in rows where juveniles were

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