



# Implicit attitudes and self-concepts towards transgression and aggression: Differences between male community and offender adolescents, and associations with psychopathic traits



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## ABSTRACT

Research suggests that implicit attitudes play a key role in the occurrence of antisocial behaviours. This study assessed implicit attitudes and self-concepts related to aggression and transgression in community and offender adolescents, using a new set of Implicit Association Tests (IATs), and examined their association with psychopathic traits. Thirty-six offenders and 66 community adolescents performed 4 IATs assessing 1) implicit attitudes about a) aggression and b) transgression as good, and 2) implicit self-concepts about a) aggression and b) transgression as self-descriptive. They filled in self-report questionnaires: the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory, the Child Behaviour Checklist, and explicit measures of their attitudes and self-concepts towards transgression and aggression. Results showed few differences between community and offender adolescents on implicit attitudes and self-concepts, and unexpected negative associations between some implicit attitudes and psychopathic traits, while the association was positive for the corresponding explicit attitudes. Possible explanations of these findings are discussed.

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Antisocial behaviour is characterized by two main components which are strongly related: aggressive behaviour, defined as injuring others directly or indirectly, and transgressive or rule-breaking behaviour, which refers to acts violating legal or conventional norms (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). Research suggests that antisocial behaviour may be underpinned by the attitudes that the perpetrators hold towards such issues. Though there is scattered evidence that both implicit and explicit attitudes towards aggression or violence predict aggressive behaviour (e.g. racial attitudes, Banse & Fischer, 2002; Sandstrom & Jordan, 2008), no study has to date jointly investigated implicit attitudes (IA) and implicit self-concept (ISC) towards rule-breaking and aggression. The present study aimed to fill this gap.

Attitude is a core social psychology construct referring to a tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a social object. Attitudes are thought to serve the function of facilitating the adaptation to the environment, and have been shown to

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substantially influence behaviour (for a detailed review, see Fazio & Olson, 2003), notably antisocial behaviour. Particularly, positive attitudes towards violence or aggression have been found to predict diverse aggressive behaviours, such as bullying at school (e.g. Eliot & Cornell, 2009; McConville & Cornell, 2003), domestic violence in college students (Fincham, Cui, Braithwaite, & Pasley, 2008), and teachers' use of violence towards their students (Khoury-Kassabri, 2012). While most of the existing evidence on the prediction of aggression currently focuses on explicit attitudes (EA), typically assessed via self-report, some recent studies have provided empirical evidence that IA also strongly affect behaviour. For example, higher negative IA towards black people predicted more negative non-verbal behaviours during an interaction with a black experimenter (McConnell & Leibold, 2001), and positive IA towards cigarette among smoking mothers predicted the likelihood that their children would smoke (Chassin, Presson, Rose, Sherman, & Prost, 2002).

IA has been defined as «introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experiences that mediate (...) feeling, thoughts, or action toward social objects» (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p. 8). They are thus automatic affective reactions activated in the face of a relevant stimulus (Gawronski, 2002), which are manifested in actions or judgements without the subject's awareness. The first and currently most well-established measure of IA is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998). The IAT is a computerized double discrimination task in which the participants are required to categorize a single stimulus as fast as possible to a pair of target categories. The IAT effect relies on the assumption that participants will be faster to classify a stimulus when the two concepts sharing the same response key are associated in their implicit attitudes, than when the two concepts sharing the same response key are not associated in their implicit attitudes.

The question of what is exactly measured by the IAT procedure has elicited a great deal of attention during the past decade, as two meta-analyses have demonstrated a wide variability across concepts in the strength of association between implicit and explicit measures, with  $r$ s ranging from  $-.25$  to  $.75$  (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005; Lane, Banaji, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2007). This wide variability could be explained by the fact that explicit measures are often affected by social desirability while this is not the case for implicit measures. Therefore, high correlations between implicit and explicit measures are expected for neutral topics such as consumer preferences, while null or even negative correlations are expected for socially sensitive topics, such as racial attitudes (Fazio et al., 1995). Confirming this hypothesis, a meta-analysis found compelling evidence that the predictive validity of both type of measures varied across domains and that implicit and explicit predicted different aspects of criterion behaviours (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). While self-report measures exceeded the IAT in predicting controlled behaviours and preferences, the IAT exceeded the self-report measures in predicting spontaneous behaviours and outcomes related to socially sensitive topics. Indeed the IAT has been shown to be resistant to attempts to "fake good" (Banse, Seise, & Zerbes, 2001; Steffens, 2004), in contrast to self-report questionnaires, a characteristic of particular interest for the study of socially sensitive topics. For instance, a study investigating the lack of empathy in adult offenders (Kampfe, Penzhorn, Schikora, Dunzl, & Schneidenbach, 2009) confirmed their reduced positive IA towards empathy, compared to control participants. In contrast, the offenders however reported higher levels of empathy than the control group on explicit measures. These findings suggest that, at least in adult offenders, self-report may provide a distorted image when socially desirable topics are involved (Fazio et al., 1995). While the exact nature of the association between explicit and implicit measures remains an unsolved issue, some authors have suggested that implicit and explicit measures may assess related but distinct attitude constructs (Nosek, 2007) and that implicit and explicit constructs may intervene in a dual-process to influence judgement, perception and actions simultaneously (Nosek, 2007; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Regarding aggression, several studies in the field of automaticity have highlighted key implicit determinants of aggressive behaviour (for a review, see Todorov & Bargh, 2002), and demonstrated that IAT measures could predict violent behaviour. For instance, men involved in domestic violence showed more positive IA towards violence than non-violent men (Eckhardt, Samper, Suhr, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2012). However, to our knowledge, no study has explored IA in relation to rule-breaking.

Additionally, the hardly fakeable and non-transparent IAT procedure (Banse et al., 2001; Fiedler & Bluemke, 2005; Schnabel, Asendorf, & Greenwald, 2007) is of high interest for populations known to be prone to lying and manipulation, such as offenders with psychopathic traits. Indeed, psychopathic traits encompass a manipulative and arrogant interpersonal style, a shallow and remorseless affective style, and an impulsive and irresponsible behavioural style (Hare, 1991). Individuals with psychopathic traits are described as frequent liars and as having the ability to con and manipulate others (Hare, 2001), which can be expected to limit the convenience of explicit measures (Rice, Harris, & Cormier, 1992). To the best of our knowledge, only one study has to date used an IAT assessing the IA towards violence to compare adult psychopathic murderers, non-psychopathic murderers and non-murderers. While the IA towards violence was, as expected, less negative in the psychopathic murderers compared to the two other groups, it was unexpectedly more negative in the non-psychopathic murderers than in the non-murderers (Gray, MacCulloch, Smith, Morris, & Snowden, 2003; Snowden, Gray, Smith, Morris, & MacCulloch, 2004). This study was the first to demonstrate the IAT's ability to discriminate between extremely violent psychopaths and other offenders. However, to date, no evidence is available for adolescent offenders with and without psychopathic traits.

Most of the studies using the IAT procedure examine IA, defined as the *evaluation* (i.e. in terms of good or bad) of a social object and thus measure the association of the social object or social group of interest with a valence attribute (good-bad). Recently, in the field of clinical psychology, the use of the IAT procedure has been extended to implicit self-concept (ISE). ISE can be related to cognitive schemata about the self and is measured as the association of the concept of self (i.e. me–not me) with either a valence attribute (e.g., good–bad, used to measure implicit self-esteem), or another type of attribute. Recently,

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