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Michael J, Beatty

Kristin M, Valencic

Jill E. Rudd

*Cleveland State University, J.RUDD@csuohio.edu*

Jean A. Dobos

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**A "Dark Side" of Communication Avoidance: Indirect  
Interpersonal Aggressiveness**

Michael J. Beatty  
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Kristin Marie Valencic  
West Virginia University

Jill E. Rudd  
Cleveland State University

Jean A. Dobos

Although our understanding of strategic efforts to inflict psychological harm on another via direct verbal assault has been greatly enhanced by the sizable literature regarding trait verbal aggressiveness (For comprehensive reviews see, Infante, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1996;

Wigley, 1998), by comparison indirect forms of interpersonal aggressiveness remain understudied. However, ordinary experience as well as the classic discussions of aggression (Bandura, 1973) remind us that verbal and nonverbal messages can be used to inflict harm without face-to-face interaction. Indirect interpersonal aggressiveness includes tactics such as spreading rumors, betraying confidences, withholding important information, failing to relay messages, undermining another by "working" informal networks, and destroying another's personal property.

In contrast to direct verbal aggressiveness, indirect tactics permit the aggressor to damage another, while at the same time, *avoid face-to-face interaction*. While episodes of verbal assault are often short-lived and unless physical violence occurs the consequences are limited to embarrassment, anger, fear, or some other transient reaction, some types of indirect aggressiveness cause long-term, substantive damage such as soiled reputation and lost professional opportunities. In addition, whether and how we respond to direct aggressiveness is often a matter of choice whereas, we are defenseless against undiscovered indirect assaults.

A specific theoretical justification for exploring indirect forms of interpersonal aggressiveness is rooted in the classic work of aggression scholars. Bandura (1973), for instance, noted that "People ordinarily refrain from direct personal assaults because such obvious actions carry high risk of retaliation. Rather, they favor disguised modes of aggression that, being difficult to interpret or to consider blameworthy, afford protection against counterattack" (p. 9). Furthermore, Bandura acknowledged that indirect aggressors sometimes distance themselves from blame. As Bandura put it "people often hurt others indirectly by setting in motion a series of detrimental events or by fostering certain environmental conditions that eventually produce injurious consequences for others" (p. 9). Although attracting little attention in the communication literature, exploration into interpersonal aggressiveness would clearly broaden our understanding of the ways in which (some) people use messages as weapons.

Conceptually, our exploration of indirect interpersonal aggressiveness was informed by Infante and Wigley's (1986) development of the trait verbal aggressiveness construct and measure and recent theoretical work (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997, 1998; Valencic, Beatty, Rudd, Dobos, & Heisel, 1998) which advances a neurobiological model for interpersonal aggressiveness. As should be obvious from this point of departure, we advance a trait conceptualization of indirect interpersonal aggressiveness. Specifically, we (1) generated a set of self-report items which were stylistically similar to Infante and Wigley's (1986) VAS items, except our item pool focussed on indirect forms of aggressiveness, (2) factor analyzed the indirect items and VAS items as a single set to determine whether indirect interpersonal aggressiveness constitutes a separate factor of interpersonal aggressiveness or merely alternative items tapping trait verbal aggressiveness, (3) examined correlations between measures of interpersonal aggressiveness and a criterion variable (i.e., psychoticism) to provide a preliminary validity estimate, and (4) conducted a second-order factor analysis of aggressiveness factors with Eysenck's (1986) superfactors of personality.

## METHOD

### *General Procedure*

One hundred and seventy-seven undergraduates (females = 98; males = 79) enrolled in introductory communication courses at a mid-eastern university participated in the present study. A set of materials consisting of the VAS, our indirect interpersonal aggressiveness

items, and Eysenck's (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) personality measure which contained the items for psychoticism was administered. Participants responded to the questionnaires and were briefed about the purpose of the study upon completion.

Trait (direct) verbal aggressiveness items. Infante and Wigley's (1986) 20-item VAS was administered as the measure of participants' predispositions to employ direct forms of verbal aggressiveness. Although all 20 items were administered, only the 10 negatively worded (agreement = aggressiveness) items were included in the factor analysis. Our rationale for excluding the benevolently worded items was based on Beatty, Rudd, and Valencic's (1999) analysis of the VAS: The factor defined by the benevolent items displays statistical characteristics that are more indicative of a meaningful factor/construct (such as nurturance or confirmation) than an artifactual consequence of wording bias (Infante & Wigley, 1986). If the second factor represents principally positive wording bias, then (1) the difference between the means for a measure consisting of positively-worded items and one comprised of negatively-worded items should be substantial, (2) the correlation between those measures should be substantial, (3) the reliability coefficient should be considerably smaller for the 10 item negatively-worded measure than for the entire 20-item VAS, and (4) the factors should be redundant in the prediction of a criterion variable. However, the evidence reported by Beatty et al. was contrary to all four points: (1) Although statistically significant due to the large  $N$ , Beatty and his associates computation of Cohen's (1988)  $d$  indicated a very small difference between the mean of the 10 aggressive items and that for the benevolent item set in Infante and Wigley's study ( $M_{diff} = 0.90$ ,  $d = .13$ ; Cohen proposes .3 as a small effect for difference tests), (2) In addition to clean loadings for items on their respective factors, Beatty et al. reported a correlation between the set of aggressively worded items and benevolently worded items which was much smaller ( $r = .28$ ) than would be expected if the second factor were artifact, (3) The reliability of a measure consisting of only the 10 aggressively-worded items was less than .02 points smaller than the reliability coefficient for the 20-item scale (.83 versus .84). Since alpha reliability coefficients reflect inter-item correlations and test length, the trivial reduction in alpha resulting from the removal of half of the items indicates that the jettisoned items were working against the measurement of verbal aggressiveness, and (4) When entered separately as predictors in a regression equation, each factor accounted for unique variance in the prediction of psychoticism (For a more complete presentation and discussion of these four issues as well as a conceptual distinction between the two VAS factors see, Beatty, Rudd, & Valencic, 1999). Thus, for the purpose of the present study, only the 10 aggressive items were entered into the analysis ( $M = 23.14$ ,  $sd = 6.84$ )

Indirect interpersonal aggressiveness items. Ten items were written according to the conceptualization of indirect interpersonal aggressiveness as a predisposition to harm other people without engaging in face-to-face interaction. Item content included spreading rumors, withholding information, facilitating others' failure through networks, and destruction of property.

Presented in Table 1, the items were patterned in style, language, syntax, and response format after the negatively-worded VAS items written by Infante and Wigley. The mean for these 10 items was 19.70 ( $sd = 6.41$ ).

Personality measures. Eysenck, Eysenck, and Barrett's (1985) 12-item measure of psychoticism ( $M = 25.33$ ,  $sd = 6.43$ ) was embedded within a general questionnaire consisting of Eysenck's 10-item measures of extraversion ( $M = 37.93$ ,  $sd = 6.09$ ) and neuroticism

( $M = 26.84$ ,  $sd = 7.39$ ). Psychoticism has been identified by personality theorists as an important variable in the validation of aggressive predispositions in general (Eysenck, 1986) and verbal aggressiveness in particular (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997, 1998; Infante, 1987; Valencic et al., 1998). Administration of extraversion and neuroticism measures facilitated our examination of the validity of our measure by permitting us to test whether the measure of indirect interpersonal aggressiveness would load, as theoretically expected (Eysenck, 1986), with the VAS on a psychoticism factor in a second-order factor analysis of the two aggressiveness measures and psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in three ways. First, the 10 VAS items and the 10 Indirect Interpersonal Aggressiveness (IIA) were factor analyzed. Second, if separate factor(s) were indicated, the resulting factor(s) would be examined regarding its relationship to psychoticism. Third, also in the event that multidimensional structure was observed, second-order factor analysis of extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and the obtained aggressiveness factors was performed to determine whether the measures fit the theoretical expectations for aggressiveness traits within general personality theory.

## RESULTS

Overall, the results of principal components factor analysis indicated multidimensional structure with each set of items defining separate factors. Specifically, initial examination of the unrotated factor matrix indicated that two of the 20 items posted their absolute highest loading on a factor other than the first factor, which McCroskey and Young (1979) consider borderline for unidimensional interpretation. Inspection of the scree plot, however, indicated the presence of two factors. Moreover, the two factor interpretation was bolstered by the calculation of confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method with squared multiple correlations employed as commonality estimates, which revealed that a single factor model was insufficient to account for the data ( $\chi^2 = 452.17$ ,  $df = 170$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Tucker-Lewis coefficient = .70).

As indicated in Table 1, the results of varimax rotation produced two interpretable factors, accounting for 42.16% of the variance.

**TABLE 1**  
Factor Loadings for Indirect Interpersonal Aggressiveness (IIA) and Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS) Items

Items	Factors	
	IIA	VAS
1. If someone intentionally treats me unfairly, I would spread rumors about him or her.	66	04
2. I would provide inaccurate information to a person who has been hostile or unfair to me.	63	28
3. I might "forget" to relay information to a person who has been hostile or unfair to me.	62	12
4. I would work "behind the scenes" to keep an enemy from getting what he or she wants.	61	14
5. If someone is a real jerk, I would harm his or her chances for success if given the chance.	71	22
6. I would facilitate the failure of people who have mistreated me.	67	29

**TABLE 1 (contd.)**  
 Factor Loadings for Indirect Interpersonal Aggressiveness (IIA) and Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS) Items

Items	Factors	
	IIA	VAS
7. Given the chance, I would keep a person who has mistreated me from getting a job or promotion that he or she really wants.	59	15
8. I would not warn a person who has mistreated me about a problem situation even though my information would allow him or her to avoid trouble.	48	21
9. I have destroyed one or more of another's belongings because he or she mistreated me.	66	10
10. I would try to keep important information from people who have been hostile toward me.	33	11
11. When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness.	21	73
12. When people refuse to do a task I know is important without good reason, I tell them they are unreasonable.	-25	54
13. If individuals I am trying to influence really deserve it, I attack their character.	24	62
14. When people behave in ways that are in very poor taste, I insult them in order to shock them into proper behavior.	23	73
15. When people simply will not budge on a matter of importance I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them.	12	73
16. When individuals insult me, I get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off.	30	59
17. I like poking fun at people who do things which are very stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence.	20	54
18. When people do things which are mean or cruel, I attack their character in order to help correct their behavior.	21	65
19. When nothing seems to work in trying to influence others, I yell and scream in order to get some movement from them.	37	49
20. When I am unable to refute others' positions, I try to make them feel defensive in order to weaken their positions.	34	43
Eigenvalue	4.32	4.12
Cumulative Variance Explained	21.58	42.16

*Note:* Decimals have been omitted from factor loadings.

Factor 1 labeled "Indirect Interpersonal Aggressiveness" accounted for 21.58% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 4.32) and consisted of the items generated to measure the construct (alpha reliability coefficient = .82). As indicated in that table, seven of the items met the stringent 60/40 loading criteria (one item missed the criterion for primary loadings by .01) and the difference between the primary and secondary loadings for the remaining three items exceeded .20. Factor 2 consisted of the 10 VAS items, explaining an additional 20.58% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 4.12). Five of those items met the 60/40 criteria and only two failed to post loading differences of at least .20. The alpha reliability coefficient for the 10 VAS items was .83.

Consistent with theoretical expectations, calculation of a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient indicated that the IIA factor was significantly related to psychoticism (attenuated  $r = .44, p < .01$ ; disattenuated,  $r = .54$ ). Furthermore, the unique contribution of IIA was underscored by the results of multiple regression using the VAS measure ( $b = .29$ ,

$t = 3.85, p < .01$ ) and IIA measure ( $b = .28, t = 3.79, p < .01$ ) to predict psychoticism ( $R = .51, F = 30.56, df = 2/174, p < .01$ ). The addition of IIA improved the variance explained by an additional 7.1 percent. An equation based on a disattenuated correlation matrix yielded slightly stronger results ( $R = .60, F = 49.92, df = 2/174, p < .01$ ) with both predictors contributing significantly to the equation regardless of order of entry.

Finally, results of second-order factor analysis confirmed the theoretical match between IIA and its conceptualization. As indicated in Table 2, both Infante and Wigley's VAS measure and our IIA measure loaded on the factor with psychoticism: Extraversion and neuroticism formed separate factors.

**TABLE 2**  
Second-Order Factor Structure of Personality and Communication Aggressiveness Measures.

	Factors		
	I	II	III
Indirect interpersonal aggressiveness	82	01	09
Verbal aggressiveness	82	20	14
Psychoticism	76	-35	-14
Extraversion	01	95	-13
Neuroticism	07	-12	96

*Note:* Decimals have been omitted from loadings.

The results of the second-order factor analysis are consistent with Beatty and McCroskey's (1998) model of interpersonal communication traits, which was heavily influenced by Eysenck's (1986) three dimensional model of the superfactors of personality.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study provide preliminary evidence in support of a dimension of trait verbal aggressiveness concerned with indirect interpersonal tactics for inflicting harm on a target. Results of exploratory factor analysis, second order factor analysis, and regression analysis employing the direct verbal aggressiveness factor and the indirect interpersonal aggressiveness factors to predict psychoticism, all were consistent with conceptually-based expectations for the measure. The items comprising the indirect aggressiveness factor were consistent with the general description of the construct. As is the case with most measures, further development and refinement of the measure should be undertaken. However, the findings reported in the present study suggest that the proposed instrument is internally consistent. Moreover, the measure functioned in a manner consistent with expectations for a measure assessing individual differences in the tendency to employ indirect tactics to inflict harm on others.

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