

Implicit attitudes towards violence in a sample of adolescent offenders with conduct disorder

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Abstract

Few studies have addressed attitudes towards violence in offender populations by using implicit measures. The aim of this study is to test whether implicit attitudes towards two types of violence (physical and relational) differ between two groups of adolescent offenders: one group with conduct disorder (CD; $n=36$) and the other group without this condition (No-CD; $n=26$). We found that adolescent offenders with CD evidenced less negative implicit attitudes towards physical violence than the No-CD group. No differences between groups were observed in the case of relational violence. Our results suggest that CD modulates implicit attitudes towards violence in adolescent offenders, and that the influence of CD is stronger in the case of physical rather than relational acts of violence.

Keywords: Implicit attitudes, violence, conduct disorder, offenders

Attitudes towards violence have an important role in the translation of hostile feelings into aggressive behaviors (Velicer, Huckel, & Hansen, 1989). In this vein, substantial evidence obtained from self-report questionnaires suggest that positive attitudes towards violence are associated with frequency of violent behavior (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999). For instance, attitudes towards violence have been shown to predict both sexual and nonsexual violent behavior towards women (Polaschek, Ward, & Hudson, 1997; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). Other studies showed that attitudes supporting the use of violence are longitudinally influential on children's and adolescents' aggressive behavior (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Slaby & Guerra, 1988).

Until now, violent attitudes in offender populations have mostly been assessed with explicit measures. Researchers typically measure violent cognition by having offenders complete self-report questionnaires (such as the Velicer Attitudes Towards Violence Scale; Velicer et al., 1989) about criminal attitudes and beliefs. Although there is empirical evidence that self-report data can have predictive validity (Mills, Loza, & Kroner, 2003), some authors suggests that respondents' ability for introspection (Nunes, Firestone, & Baldwin, 2007) and social desirability compromise the use of self-report instruments (Zwets et al., 2015), especially in the case of some mental disorders (Roefs et al., 2011).

As a result, there has been a growing interest in extending measurement procedures of psychological attributes beyond what self-assessment questionnaires can reveal. Indeed, implicit measures of attitudes (understood as outcomes of measurement procedures caused automatically by psychological attributes; De Houwer, Teige-Mocigemba, Spruyt, & Moors, 2009) have emerged dramatically in the last decade, and have been applied to...

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