

Introduction

Psychopathy in youth has recently gained empirical support as a reliable and clinically useful construct for assessing a range of personality features and behaviours in adolescents. Similar to what has been found in the adult literature, psychopathic personality traits and behaviours in adolescents are relevant primarily because of their association with various maladaptive outcomes as well as risk for future violence (Forth & Mailloux, 2000). Given that gender-specific effects have been demonstrated for risk factors and manifestations of antisocial behaviours more generally, it is likely that gender influences psychopathy as well. The present study seeks to expand our understanding of psychopathy in youth, and specifically in female youth, by examining how gender may moderate the patterns of association that psychopathic traits have with a youth's level of aggressive or criminal behaviour.

Societal norms and expectations typically inhibit overt antisocial behaviours in females; therefore, the increased presence of psychopathic personality traits may be a prerequisite for females to subsequently break gender-specific norms and engage in aggressive or violent activities (Silverthorn & Frick, 1999). A central hypothesis of the present investigation, is whether the construct of female psychopathy may be more accurately captured by emphasizing the affective and interpersonal features of the syndrome, rather than placing equal weight on the interpersonal, affective, and behavioural dimensions.

Method

Participants. Participants included 27 females between the ages of 12 and 17 ($M = 15.03$) who were referred to either the Maples Adolescent Treatment Centre or Youth Forensic Psychiatric Services in Burnaby, British Columbia. As such, the sample consisted mainly of adolescents who were actively involved in the criminal justice system and/or who had serious mental health problems.

Materials.

The Hare Psychopathy Checklist, Youth Version (PCL-YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003). The PCL-YV is a recently developed measure of psychopathic traits in youth, and was modeled according to the adult version (PCL-R; Hare, 1991) while taking into account the limited life experience of adolescents. The measure has been shown to possess good internal consistency and item homogeneity in samples of adolescents (Forth et al., 1990). Scores yielded from the measure have been shown to correlate with conduct disorder symptoms, substance abuse, and number of postrelease violent offences (Forth & Burke, 1998). The mean PCL-YV score in the sample was 20.13 ($SD = 7.12$).

Little's Aggression Items (LAI-25; Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). Twenty-five items were taken and slightly modified from Little et al.'s (2003) original system developed to measure four separate quadrants of aggressive behavior: reactive versus instrumental and overt versus relational aggression. Little and colleagues (2003) demonstrated good levels of internal, external, and criterion validity for the scale.

Conflict Tactics Scale, Revised (CTS-R; Murray, 1979). The CTS-R is a self-report measure designed to assess the use of reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence within the family unit and intimate relationships. The measure has been recently revised (CTS2, Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996), and was further modified for the purposes of the present study to allow for the reporting of both verbal and physical forms of aggression. Scores were summed across the different acts of aggression to yield peer, family, and total aggression scores.

Self-Report of Offending, Revised (SRO-R). A modified version of Elliot and Ageton's (1980) Self-Report of Delinquency scale was used. The current measure includes 16 items assessing the occurrence and frequency of non-violent (e.g., narcotics and property offences) and violent (e.g., assault and weapons charges) offending.

Procedure. Each participant filled out a series of self-report questionnaires containing the modified items from the LAI, CTS, and SRO measures. A clinical interview was then conducted with each youth in order to gather the information necessary to score the PCL-YV. Four trained graduate students completed the PCL-YV codings based on interview and file information. Pearson correlations between PCL-YV factor scores and the measures of aggression and offending were computed. The pattern of correlations obtained was compared with correlations from the literature for adolescent males.

Pearson correlations among measures of aggressive & criminal behaviour and the PCL-YV

	Overt Aggression	Relational Aggression	Peer Aggression	Family Aggression	# Violent Offenses	# Non-violent Offenses
FEMALES ($n = 27$)						
F1 (ADI)	-.07	.05	-.02	-.10	.08	.00
F2 (DAE)	.54**	.44*	.39*	-.20	.32	.34
F3 (IIB)	.55**	.26	.36	-.15	.39*	.48*
Total	.59**	.37	.36	-.18	.50**	.58**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note: ADI = Arrogant and Deceitful Interpersonal; DAE = Deficient Affective Experience; IIB = Impulsive and Irresponsible Behaviour

Results

These preliminary results suggest that the different factors of the PCL-YV are differentially related to varying forms of aggression among girls. These results also attest to the validity of the 3-factor model of psychopathy; specifically, the results support the practice of dividing the interpersonal and affective components of psychopathy into two separate factors. In this sample of girls, Factors 2 and 3 evidenced moderate to large correlations with both aggressive and criminal behaviours, while Factor 1 did not correlate with any of the criterion measures.

These findings may be contrasted to what is typically reported in the literature for samples of adolescent males. Brandt, Kennedy, Patrick, & Curtin (1997) reported similar correlations among Factors 1 and 2 (representing the interpersonal/affective and behavioural facets of the 2-factor model of psychopathy) with several measures of aggressive behaviour. Similarly, Forth (1995) reported that the interpersonal/affective and behavioural factors of the PCL-YV were equally correlated with aggressive symptoms of Conduct Disorder in boys. Preliminary results with a small sample of boys ($n = 13$) in this study revealed that, unlike previous studies, the interpersonal features of psychopathy (F1) were negatively correlated with all measures of aggressive and criminal behaviour. Additionally, and in contrast to the results for girls reported above, Factor 2 did not evidence any association with overt or relational forms of aggression for boys. Behavioural features of psychopathy (F3) continued to correlate with violent and non-violent offending in boys.

Discussion

Females, both adult and adolescent, are entering the criminal justice system in increasingly large numbers. Over the past decade, for example, violent crime among girls has increased at twice the rate as that observed for boys (Statistics Canada, 2000). Statistics such as these underscore the importance of understanding the contributors to female aggression and criminality, as well as how they may differ from those typically observed in males. This study examined the construct validity of the PCL-YV in terms of how each of its factors correlated with measures of aggressive and criminal behaviour in a sample of adolescent girls. Overall, these preliminary results highlight the differential relationships that the PCL factors have with a variety of aggressive and criminal behaviours. Specifically, these findings suggest that both affective and behavioral features are relevant to assess in aggressive girls, and that the interpersonal styles of these girls may not be as salient as hypothesized. It is also highly plausible that the classic interpersonal features of psychopathy (e.g., grandiosity, glibness, and manipulative style) have not yet crystallized in samples of youth.

Recently, Jackson and colleagues (2002) demonstrated that deficits in affect are a highly discriminating feature of female psychopathy. Similarly, Loucks and Zamble (1999) found that the affective deficits and behavioral indices of psychopathy were equally predictive of criminal behaviour in a sample of incarcerated women. An analogous picture has been painted in youth, where highly antisocial girls tend to display both the affective anomalies and poor behavioral controls associated with psychopathy (Silverthorn, Frick, & Reynolds, 2001). Despite the concordance with previous research, these preliminary findings do not support the current hypothesis that interpersonal and affective deficits are more salient in samples of antisocial girls than are the behavioural indices. However, due to the preliminary nature of these results and small sample size, it is probable that the patterns of association will change as the sample size increases. With a larger sample it will also be possible to report and statistically test the differences between correlations evidenced by boys versus girls.