

Introduction

It is increasingly acknowledged in the literature that aggression is a multidimensional construct. Investigators have recently begun to distinguish the “forms” or expressions of aggression, with the function that the aggressive behavior is serving. Little and colleagues (2003) were among the first to empirically disaggregate aggressive behavior into four separate quadrants reflecting both the “whats” and “whys” of aggression: overt, relational, reactive, and instrumental. When aggression was measured this way, Little and colleagues (2003) were unable to replicate the finding, frequently reported in the literature, that girls engage in higher levels of relational aggression as compared to males. Rather, Little and colleagues (2003) found males to engage in higher levels of aggression across subtypes.

Recent studies have linked measures of psychopathy with aggression in adolescent males (Kosson et al., 2002; Grettton et al., 2004). The present study seeks to expand our understanding of psychopathy and aggression in youth, particularly in female youth, by examining how gender may moderate the patterns of association of psychopathic characteristics with adolescents’ engagement in different forms of aggression. We examined the four subtypes of aggression posited by Little and colleagues (i.e., overt, relational, instrumental, reactive) and their respective associations with the affective, interpersonal, and behavioral facets of psychopathy (Cooke & Michie’s 3-factor model).

The use of overt aggression by girls is atypical; therefore, we predicted the increased presence of psychopathic personality characteristics may be a prerequisite for females to engage in these gender atypical behaviors (Silverthorn & Frick, 1999). We examined whether the affective and interpersonal features captured by psychopathy may play a greater role in accounting for girls engagement in aggression as compared to males for whom the interpersonal, affective, and behavioral dimensions of psychopathy may be equally important.

Method

Participants. Participants included 142 adolescents (76 male; 66 female) between the ages of 12 and 18 ($M = 15.6$; $SD = 1.6$) gathered from custody centres (61%), provincial assessment centers (37%), and probation offices (2%).

Materials

The Hare Psychopathy Checklist, Youth Version (PCL:YV; Forth, Kosson, & Hare, 2003). The PCL:YV is a 20-item symptom construct rating scale designed to measure the same interpersonal, affective, and behavioral dispositions as does its parent measure, the PCL-R, in youth. Psychometric properties of the PCL:YV are similar to the PCL-R, and include good to excellent levels of interrater reliability, internal consistency, and convergent validity (Forth & Burke, 1998; Forth et al., 2003; Kosson et al., 2002). The mean PCL:YV score in the sample was 22.17 ($SD = 7.31$), and interrater reliability ($n = 28$) was excellent (ICC_2 for PCL:YV total score = .96; Factor 1 = .93; Factor 2 = .90; Factor 3 = .84).

Little’s Aggression Items (LAI-25; Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). The LAI contains six subscales designed to differentiate manifest forms of aggression (overt and relational) among specific quadrants of aggression (pure overt, overt reactive, overt instrumental, pure relational, relational reactive, relational instrumental). Based on the proposed model in Little et al. (2003), 25 items were extracted from the original measure to form two overarching composite scores (“overt” and “relational”), encompassing both “pure” forms of overt and relational aggression, as well as overt and relational aggression that is driven by reactive and instrumental motives. All items are scored on a 4-point scale ranging from “not true at all” to “completely true”. The alpha coefficient for the entire scale was .95 (.93 and .90 for overt and relational aggression, respectively). Little and colleagues (2003) reported acceptable levels of internal validity, as well as satisfactory external and criterion validity for the scale, which was shown to generalize across age-cohort (ages 11 to 16), gender, and ethnicity.

Procedure. Each participant filled out a series of self-report questionnaires containing the items from the LAI. A clinical interview was conducted with each youth in order to gather the information necessary to score the PCL:YV. Three trained graduate students completed the PCL:YV codings based on interview and extensive file information. Regression analyses were run to assess main and interaction effects of gender and psychopathy on aggressive behaviors.

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Hierarchical Regression with PCL:YV Total Score Predicting Subtypes of Aggression

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²
Step 1				
Gender				
Overt	.85	1.43	.05	.18
Relational	3.19	1.30	.22*	.11
Reactive	1.74	.92	.16	.17
Instrumental	1.86	1.00	.17	.13
PCL:YV Total Score				
Overt	.50	.10	.44**	.18
Relational	.32	.09	.32**	.11
Reactive	.32	.06	.44**	.17
Instrumental	.28	.07	.37**	.13
Step 2				
Gender X PCL:YV				$\pm R^2$
Overt	.27	.20	.35	.19
Relational	.21	.18	.31	.12
Reactive	.19	.13	.38	.19
Instrumental	.18	.14	.35	.14

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

Hierarchical Regression with PCL:YV Factor Scores Predicting Subtypes of Aggression

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²
Overt				
ADI	-.72	.44	-.16	
DAE	1.38	.45	.33**	.19
IIB	.90	.40	.22*	
Relational				
ADI	.03	.41	.01	
DAE	.67	.42	.18	.05
IIB	.23	.38	.07	
Reactive				
ADI	-.44	.29	-.15	
DAE	.72	.30	.27*	.15
IIB	.57	.27	.22*	
Instrumental				
ADI	-.09	.31	-.03	
DAE	.83	.32	.29**	.10
IIB	.16	.29	.06	

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

Results & Discussion

The current study was designed to investigate whether gender moderates the concurrent relationships between psychopathic characteristics and subtypes of aggression in high-risk adolescents. Contrary to expectations, gender did not emerge as a moderator on the relationships between psychopathy and aggression. Rather, the PCL:YV total and factor scores appeared to predict diverse types of aggression comparably for both boys and girls.

Results from the current study suggest that deficits in affect and empathy are key factors involved in youth aggression. Factor 2 scores on the PCL:YV were associated with diverse types of aggression, and uniquely contributed to the prediction of overt, relational, and instrumental aggression. Outside the psychopathy literature, empathy is regarded as a protective factor, in both males and females, that mitigates one’s inclination towards violent and aggressive behavior (Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988); in contrast, deficits in the capacity to identify with and respond to others’ emotional states have been linked to a range of antisocial behaviors including aggression, violence, and conduct disorder in youth samples (Broidy et al., 2003; Cohen & Strayer, 1996).

The behavioral features of psychopathy (Factor 3) were associated with all subtypes of aggression, and uniquely contributed to the prediction of overt and reactive forms of aggression. Despite the importance of Factor 3 in the prediction of aggression, it is important to note that some degree of content overlap between Factor 3 items (e.g., stimulation seeking, impulsivity, irresponsibility) and the outcome variables used in this and other studies (e.g., reactive aggression) exists. Although the 3-factor model of psychopathy substantially reduces the problem of predictor-criterion contamination, the remaining overlap may continue to inflate the association witnessed between Factor 3 scores and aggression.

To date, this is one of the first studies to examine the 3-factor model of psychopathy in a sample of high-risk adolescent males and females. While the study provides preliminary evidence for the concurrent validity of the PCL:YV in young females – as the total score was associated in expected ways with subtypes of aggression – our finding that not all PCL:YV factors predicted aggression raises questions about whether psychopathy should be viewed as an established multi-faceted construct during adolescence. Future studies will need to employ factor analytic techniques and item response theory to gauge the functional invariance of the PCL:YV across gender and to demonstrate that items on the PCL:YV are optimally tapping the underlying construct in both male and female adolescents.