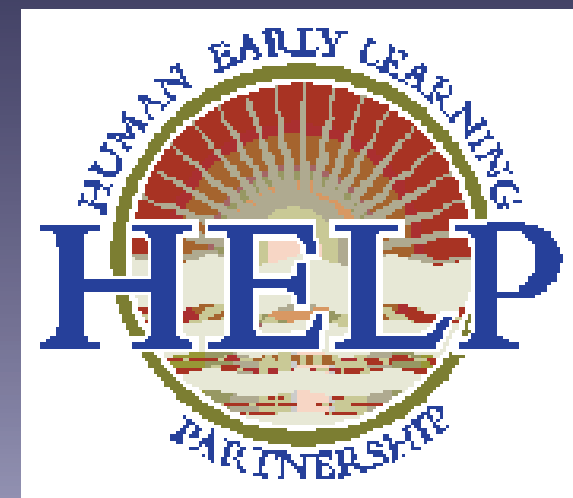




Too Much, Too Little?

The Roles of Affect Regulation and Deficient Affect in Youth Violence

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Introduction

Children with high levels of dysregulated affect and negative reactivity experience a range of emotional and behavioral problems, including low levels of prosocial behavior, aggression and delinquency (Bower, 1992; Gross & Munoz, 1995; Larsen, 2000). Alongside this body of research, studies also have demonstrated a link between low levels of emotional reactivity and aggression (Frick, et al., 2003). Furthermore, features of low emotional reactivity may signal the development of psychopathy – a construct which embodies characteristics of deficient emotionality (Cleckley, 1976) and shows robust associations with aggressive and violent behaviors (Forth et al., 2003; Hare, 2003).

These diverging lines of research call attention to the complex role of emotion in aggressive behavior, and appear to support opposing hypotheses (i.e., dysregulated versus deficient affect as risk factors for aggressive behavior; see Frick et al., 1999). One possibility is that affect regulation and deficient affect represent two separate, and perhaps even mutually exclusive, risk factors for aggression and violence. Although this idea has yet to receive empirical support, it is consistent with the increasing recognition that aggressive youth represent a heterogeneous population, and that there exist subgroups of aggressive youth who differ in terms of the manifestation and etiology of their behaviors (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998).

A primary goal of this study was to clarify the contributions of affect regulation and deficient affect in placing youth at risk to engage in acts of aggression, violence and delinquency. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to investigate the joint effects of affect regulation and deficiency in predicting both concurrent and future acts of aggression and antisocial behavior. It was hypothesized that both constructs (i.e., affect regulation and deficit) would show significant associations with each of the dependent variables while being marginally related to each other.

Method

Participants at Time 1 were 179 adolescents (97 males, 82 females) between the ages of 12 and 18 ($M = 15.3$, $SD = 1.5$) drawn from custody centers (53%), a provincial mental health assessment center (45%), and probation offices (2%) in British Columbia. The sample included 66% Caucasian, 23% Aboriginal, and 11% youth of other ethnicity. Participants at Time 2 were 82 adolescents (36 males, 46 females; 62% of youth from Time 1 who were eligible for the follow-up interview) with a mean age of 17.6 ($SD = 1.6$). Average length of follow-up was 26.1 months ($SD = 3.5$).

Materials: Time 1

The **Psychopathy Checklist, Youth Version (PCL:YV; Forth et al., 2003)** is a 20-item symptom construct rating scale designed to measure the interpersonal, affective, and behavioral features of psychopathy in youth. PCL:YV scores were completed by three trained raters based on a semi-structured interview and review of extensive file information. Interrater reliability was satisfactory for PCL:YV total score ($ICC2 = .96$; $n = 28$) and factor scores: Factor 1 = .93, Factor 2 = .90, and Factor 3 = .84. The current study focused on Factor 2 of the PCL:YV (Deficient Affective Experience; DAE) as a measure of deficient affect.

The **Affect Regulation Checklist (ARC; Moretti, 2003)** is a 12-item scale designed to measure three components of affect regulation: Dyscontrol (e.g., “I have a hard time controlling my feelings”), Suppression (e.g., “I try hard not to think about my feelings”), and Reflection (e.g., “Thinking about why I have different feelings helps me to learn about myself”). The present study focused on the first subscale (Dyscontrol), as it most clearly represents a maladaptive regulation strategy, and is also most consistent with the conceptualization of affect dysregulation in other studies (e.g., Gross & John, 1998; Shields & Cicchetti, 1998).

Materials: Time 1 & Time 2

The **Form-Function Aggression Measure (FFAM; Little et al., 2003)** is a self-report measure that enables independent examination of the forms of aggression (overt and relational) and its functions (instrumental and reactive). The current study focused on reactive and instrumental classes of overt aggression (e.g., “When I am hurt by someone, I often fight back”; “I often threaten others to get what I want”).

The **Self-Report of Offending (SRO)** was adapted for use in this study based on the more widely studied Self-Report of Delinquency (Huizinga & Elliot, 1986; Piquero et al., 2002). The current measure included 15 items assessing involvement in violent (e.g., assault and weapons charges) and non-violent (e.g., narcotics and property crimes) offenses over the past 24 months.

Reliabilities and Intercorrelations among Variables: Time 1

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	α
1. Dyscontrol	--						.81
2. Deficient Affect	.05	--					.65
3. Reactive Aggression	.35**	.42**	--				.85
4. Instrumental Aggression	.31**	.38**	.59**	--			.91
5. Violent Offenses	.08	.37**	.48**	.48**	--		.78
6. Non-violent Offenses	.07	.29*	.48**	.45**	.63**	--	.83

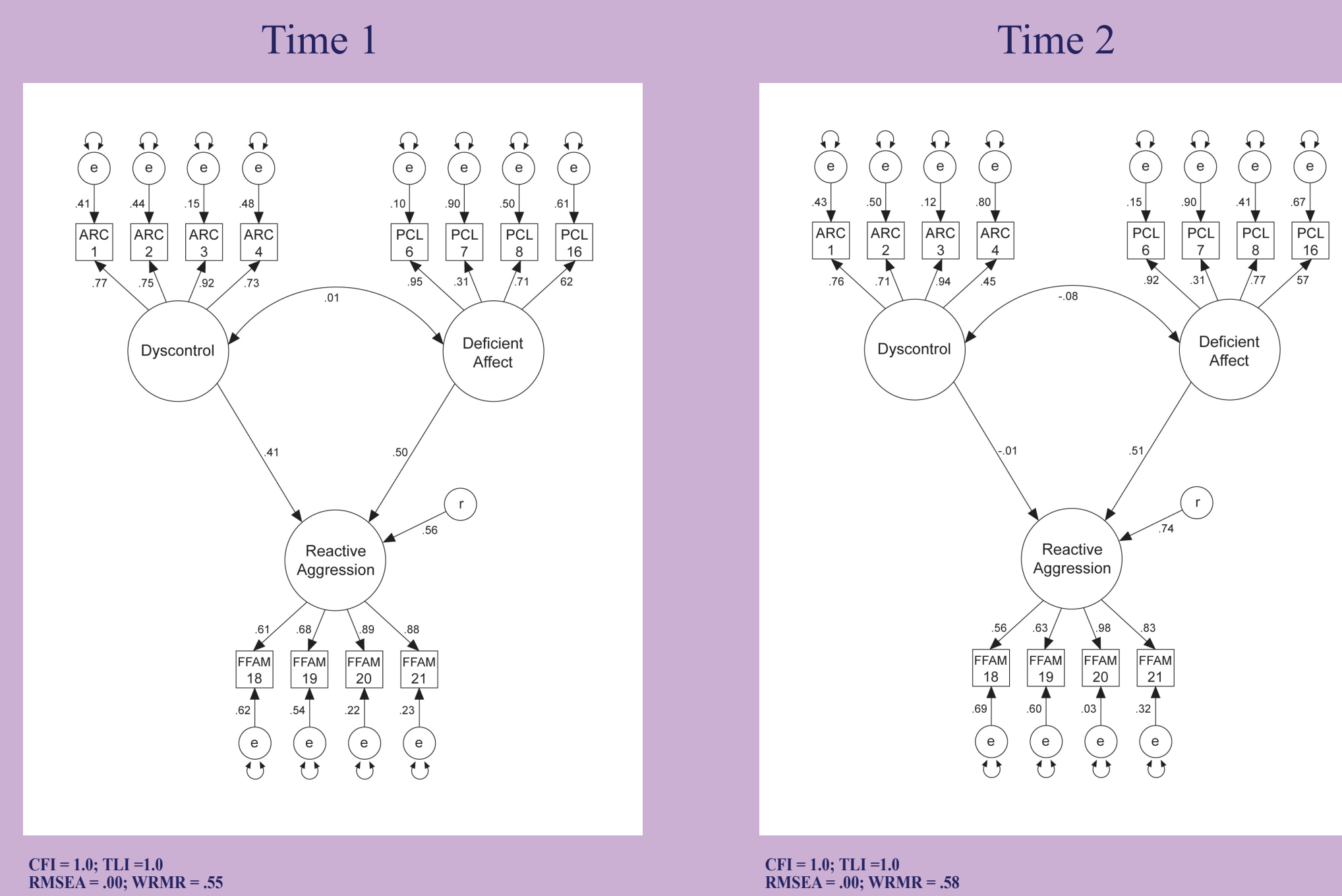
* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$.

Reliabilities and Intercorrelations among Variables: Time 2

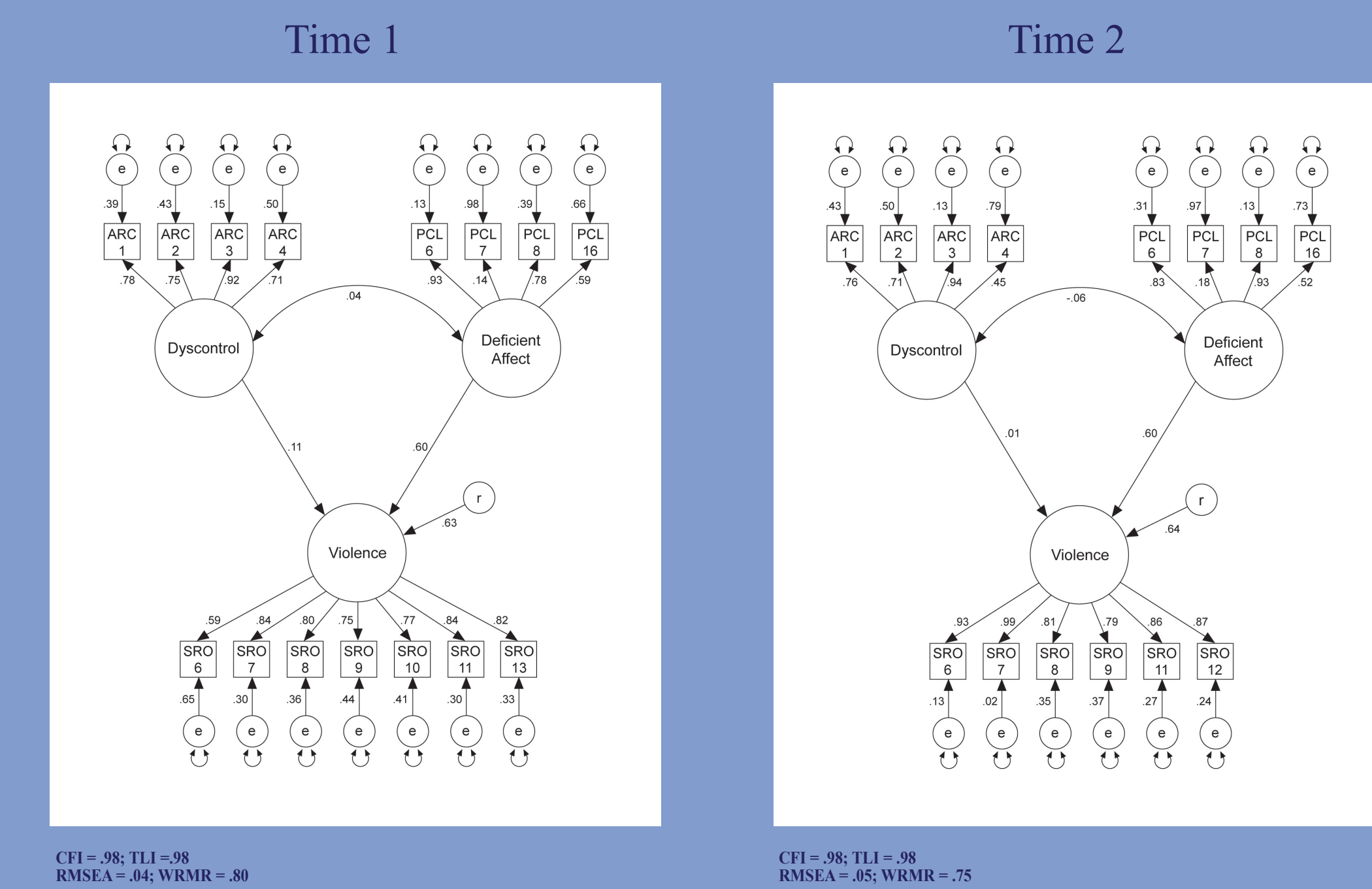
Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	α
1. Dyscontrol (T1)	--						.81
2. Deficient Affect (T1)	n/a	--					.65
3. Reactive Aggression	-.02	.38**	--				.83
4. Instrumental Aggression	.12	.36**	.54**	--			.87
5. Violent Offenses	-.02	.32*	.62**	.37**	--		.85
6. Non-violent Offenses	-.12	.30*	.50**	.32*	.66**	--	.74

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$.

Joint effects of affect dyscontrol and deficient affect on aggression



Joint effects of affect dyscontrol and deficient affect on violence



Results and Discussion

Affect regulation and deficient affect have both received consistent support in their respective associations with aggression, violence, and non-violent delinquency; however, few researchers have attempted to reconcile the notion that both elevated and depressed levels of emotional reactivity appear to be integrally involved in the aggressive and antisocial behaviors of at-risk youth.

Results from the current study indicate that affect dysregulation – specifically affect dyscontrol – and deficient affect are both significant predictors of reactive and instrumental aggression. In contrast, when outcomes included violent and non-violent offending, only deficient affect emerged as a significant predictor of these variables. Similarly, only deficient affect predicted future indices of aggression and antisocial behavior. In accordance with expectations, affect dyscontrol was consistently unrelated to deficient affect across each of the models tested.

In accordance with the extant literature on psychopathy, findings from this study suggest that the affective features of this construct offer incremental value in the prediction of violent and non-violent criminality (Forth et al., 2003; Kosson et al., 2002). While youth experiencing problems with affect regulation demonstrated higher levels of reactive and instrumental aggression, youth demonstrating features of deficient affect engaged in aggression in addition to violent and delinquent activities at the more severe end of the spectrum (i.e., illegal behaviors), and also appeared more likely to persist in their involvement in these types of activities.

Consistent with the developmental theory that multiple pathways can facilitate the development of similar behavioral problems among children (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995), these results suggest that the constructs of affect dysregulation and deficient affect share little common variance in their relation to outcomes, and likely represent two separate routes to aggression, violence, and delinquency. Findings from the present study may also reflect the existence of distinct subgroups in the population of at-risk youth (e.g., dysregulated versus deficient) who engage in qualitatively different forms of aggressive and antisocial behaviors.

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