



Examining the Relationship between Rejection Sensitivity and Psychopathy in At-Risk Male and Female Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Background: Rejection Sensitivity (RS) is the tendency to anxiously expect and intensely overreact to rejection (1). RS results in a bias to perceive ambiguous situations as rejections, and has been linked to both hostile and aggressive responses towards strangers and intimate partners (2,3). Similar cognitive biases are observed in those displaying psychopathic traits who tend to perceive ambiguous situations as hostile (4) and, in response, react aggressively (5). While cognitive biases and the tendency to react aggressively have been associated with both psychopathy and RS, no study to date has explicitly examined the relationship between psychopathy and RS. The current study investigated this relationship. **Method:** 69 males and 55 females (ages 12-18) completed the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire-Revised, the PCL:YV, and the Integrated Measurement Framework of Aggression. **Results:** Both RS and psychopathy were predictive of overt and relational aggression in females; whereas only psychopathy was predictive in both types of aggression in males. The relationship between RS and psychopathy was not significant indicating that RS and psychopathy reflect independent risk factors for aggression. **Conclusions:** Findings illustrate that different factors are involved in the expression of aggression in males and females. RS served a unique role in aggressive acts committed by females, while psychopathy was related to aggressive acts in both males and females. Such findings highlight the importance of further research investigating gender differences in risk factors for aggression.

INTRODUCTION

Rejection Sensitivity (RS) is defined as the chronic disposition to anxiously expect, perceive, and intensely overreact to rejection (1). RS individuals are hypervigilant to cues of rejection and display a bias to perceive ambiguous situations as rejections (1,2). High levels of RS have also been linked to hostile and aggressive responses towards both strangers and intimate partners (2,3). Similar cognitive biases are observed in individuals who display psychopathy traits. Such individuals tend to perceive ambiguous situations as hostile (4) and this cognitive bias contributes to aggressive and hostile acts (5).

Although RS and psychopathy share many characteristics, no study has examined the relationship between RS and psychopathy. The current study investigates this association in a sample of youth at high risk for aggression. The relationships between RS and psychopathy to overt and relational aggression were also examined. Furthermore, gender differences were investigated as gender differences are known to exist in the behavioural expression of both psychopathy (6) and RS (1).

We anticipated that both RS and psychopathic traits would be related to aggression. Furthermore, we predicted that RS and psychopathic traits would be positively correlated, with higher levels of RS predicting psychopathic traits. We also hypothesized that RS would act to moderate the relationship between psychopathy and aggression, with aggression being most elevated in individuals who have high levels of RS and psychopathy.

METHOD: Measures

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire-Revised (RSQ-R). The RSQ-R is a 12-item revised version of the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (7). This measure consists of 6 hypothetical situations in which rejection by a close friend and a romantic partner are possible. For each situation, participants are asked to indicate both their degree of anger and anxiousness about a possible negative outcome on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely).

Integrated Measurement Framework of Aggression (IMFA). The IMFA (8) is a self-report instrument that enables the examination of two forms of aggressive behaviour (overt and relational) and two functions of aggression (instrumental versus reactive). The 25 items comprising this test are scored on a four point scale ranging from "not true at all" to "completely true". Alpha coefficients for each scale have been found to range from .62 to .84 (9).

The Psychopathy Checklist – Youth Version (PCL:YV). The PCL:YV (10) is a multi-item symptom construct rating scale that measures interpersonal and affective characteristics as well as overt behaviours. Trained observers rate the severity of each symptom based on a semi-structured interview, a review of case history information, and information from collateral informants. Each of the 20 items is scored on a 3-point scale (0 = item doesn't apply, 1 = item applies somewhat, 2 = item definitely applies). Reliability studies demonstrated acceptable levels of internal consistency and inter-rater agreement ($r = 0.81$ to $r = 0.93$; 11).

METHOD: Participants and Procedure

Participants were 69 male and 55 female adolescents from the ages of 12 to 18 ($M = 15.32$, $SD = 1.46$). Participants were recruited from a maximum and minimum security custody center, and a provincial center which provides assessment for youth with severe conduct problems (Maples Adolescent Centre). Exclusion criteria for this sample were comprised of (a) IQ below 70, or (b) any significant Axis I psychotic symptoms.

Youth agreeing to participate in the study completed individual assessments comprised of semi-structured clinical interviews, computerized diagnostic assessments, and a battery of self-report measures. Data from official files, including social history, psychological, institutional, and educational reports were coded.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Males (69)		Females (55)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
RS Anger	10.90	3.23	13.02	3.66
RS Anxious	9.96	3.56	11.59	3.18
PCL:YV Total	21.57	6.72	19.65	6.89
Overt Aggression	24.07	7.47	24.24	9.14
Relational Aggression	19.29	5.60	22.54	8.69

Table 2. Zero-order Correlations

	RS Anger	RS Anxious	PCL:YV Total	Overt Agg	Relational Agg
RS Anger		.70**	.08	.04	.13
RS Anxious	.51**		.06	.05	.09
PCL:YV Total	.15	-.05		.39**	.26*
Overt Agg	.45**	.08	.50**		.62**
Relational Agg	.32**	.12	.41**	.69**	

Note: Correlations for males appear above the diagonal; correlations for females appear below the diagonal; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

RESULTS

Multiple regression analyses were performed to test the relationships between RS and psychopathy with aggressive outcomes (see Tables 3 and 4). For males, psychopathy was found to significantly predict both overt and relational aggression but RS did not. In females however, both RS Anger and psychopathy were predictive of overt and relational aggression. RS Anxious was not significantly predictive of either overt or relational aggression for both males and females. The relationship between RS and psychopathy was not found to be significant. Furthermore, RS was not found to moderate the relationship between scores on the PCL-YV and overt and relational aggression.

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Table 3. PCL:YV and RS Anger Predicting Overt Aggression

Model		β	T	p
1	Males			
	RS Anger	0.01	0.06	0.95
2	PCL:YV Total	0.39	3.47	0.00**
	RS Anger	0.01	0.08	0.94
2	PCL:YV Total	0.36	2.79	0.01*
	RSxPCL:YV	-0.08	-0.65	0.52
1	Females			
	RS Anger	0.47	4.53	0.00**
2	PCL:YV Total	0.43	4.18	0.00**
	RS Anger	0.46	4.55	0.00**
2	PCL:YV Total	0.38	3.51	0.00**
	RSxPCL:YV	0.15	1.40	0.17

Model 1: Males: $R^2 = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$; Females: $R^2 = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$

Model 2: Males: $R^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$; Females: $R^2 = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$

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

Table 4. PCL:YV and RS Anger Predicting Relational Aggression

Model		β	t	p
1	Males			
	RS Anger	0.04	0.32	0.75
2	PCL:YV Total	0.25	2.06	0.04*
	RS Anger	0.04	0.29	0.77
2	PCL:YV Total	0.30	2.21	0.03*
	RSxPCL:YV	0.11	0.82	0.42
1	Females			
	RS Anger	0.31	2.60	0.01*
2	PCL:YV Total	0.35	2.93	0.01*
	RS Anger	0.32	2.58	0.01*
2	PCL:YV Total	0.37	2.86	0.01*
	RSxPCL:YV	-0.04	-0.35	0.73

Model 1: Males: $R^2 = 0.04$, $p = 0.11$; Females: $R^2 = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$

Model 2: Males: $R^2 = 0.03$, $p = 0.17$; Females: $R^2 = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$

* $p < .05$

DISCUSSION

Contrary to our predictions, the relationship between RS and psychopathy was not significant. Despite the noted similarities between RS and psychopathy, our results indicate that psychopathy and RS reflect independent risk factors for aggression.

Findings differed significantly for males and females in the current sample. The anger component of RS appeared to serve a unique role in the aggression exhibited by females but not males. Psychopathic traits however, were found to be related to aggressive acts in both males and females. A key implication of these findings is that different factors are involved in the expression of aggression in male and female adolescents. These results are in agreement with findings from previous studies showing that gender differences are observed in the behavioural expression of both psychopathy (6) and RS (1). These findings highlight the need for further research into gender differences in risk factors for aggression. The results of this study must be considered in the context of the sample used which included adolescents with significant behavioural problems and traumatic histories.



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