



## Developmental patterns of psychopathic personality traits and the influence of social factors among a sample of serious juvenile offenders

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### ABSTRACT

Little is known about the development of psychopathic traits and the factors impacting its trajectory. Using a Latent Growth Curve Modeling (LGM) approach with Multiple-Group Multiple-Cohort (MGMC) method to account for the cohort sequential design of the data, trajectories of the Grandiose-Manipulative (GM), the Callous-Unemotional (CU), and the Impulsive-Irresponsible (II) dimensions as measured by the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed et al., 2002) were examined from ages 14.5–25 among a sample of serious juvenile offenders ( $n = 1354$ ). It was also examined if several social risk factors (i.e., demographic characteristics, delinquent peer association, neighborhood disorder, parenting, parental criminality, and violence exposure) accounted for baseline levels (intercept) and change (slope) of each of the dimensions of psychopathic traits. While all three dimensions of the YPI declined from adolescence to young adulthood, the GM and II dimensions leveled-off sooner than the CU dimension. Delinquent peer association and parental warmth were most consistently associated with initial levels of all three dimensions; however, witnessing violence was associated with change in the GM dimension only. Delinquent peer association and parental warmth were associated with change in the CU dimension. None of the factors predicted change in the II dimension.

Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by interpersonal (e.g., shallow, superficial, and manipulative), affective (e.g., lack of remorse, callous, and unemotional), impulsive behavioral (e.g., impulsive, irresponsible, and thrill-seeking), and antisocial (e.g., criminal history, conduct disorder, and rule breaking) features (Cooke & Michie, 2001; Hare & Neumann, 2005). Non-normative levels of these traits designate a particularly severe subgroup of antisocial adults who engage in serious and violent forms of offending (Hare, 1999). Given these poor outcomes, especially in relation to public safety, it is important to understand the development of these traits and the factors that can influence the onset and stability of these traits across development. Several studies have looked at trajectories of psychopathic traits over time (e.g., Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2007; Pardini & Loeber, 2008; Salihovic, Özdemir, & Kerr, 2014); however, few studies have examined trajectories of psychopathic traits measured at multiple time points from adolescence into adulthood. Importantly, several of these studies have utilized data from research studies that have employed an accelerated cohort design. An accelerated cohort (or cohort-sequential; Nesselroade & Baltes, 1979) design, as opposed to a “true” longitudinal research design, follows individuals from multiple birth cohorts over time. This approach is useful because it allows for estimating longitudinal trajectories of outcomes over longer developmental periods without following the same individuals over the course

of the entire period. That is, using the appropriate analytical model, such as the multiple group, multiple cohort (MGMC) model, a single growth curve can be estimated for the entire sample by combining information from all cohorts (e.g., Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2006). In this way, observations of individuals can occur over a much shorter period of time while still allowing for estimates of trajectories over longer developmental periods (Duncan, Duncan, Strycker, Li, & Alpert, 1999).

There is also a debate regarding the etiological factors associated with the development (onset and stability) of psychopathic traits. On one hand, there tends to be a long-held belief that psychopathic traits are primarily the result of genetic factors. This perspective is grounded in research supporting the primary role of genetic and neuro-cognitive factors in the etiology of psychopathic traits (Blair, 2013; Blair, Leibenluft, & Pine, 2014; Frick, Ray, Thornton, & Kahn, 2014a) as well as accounting for stability in these traits (Blonigen, Hicks, Krueger, Patrick, & Iacono, 2006; Forsman, Lichtenstein, Andershed, & Larsson, 2008). On the other hand, there is also growing evidence that psychopathic traits are malleable and that social or environmental factors can influence both the onset and developmental trajectories (i.e., change) of these traits across various developmental periods (Frick, Ray, Thornton, & Kahn, 2014b; Waller, Gardner, & Hyde, 2013). Thus, while genetic factors clearly play a role in the development of

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psychopathic traits, research has also highlighted the importance of social factors to affect change in psychopathic traits (e.g., [Blonigen et al., 2006](#)). Thus, it is important for research to continue to identify social factors that influence the development of psychopathic traits across the life-course.

An additional consideration when examining the development of psychopathic personality traits is that it is a multidimensional construct. However, only a few studies have separately examined developmental patterns of the distinct components or dimensions of psychopathic traits and few studies have identified the unique impact that relevant social factors might have on the development of these different dimensions. The current study attempted to fill these important gaps in the literature by identifying developmental trajectories of the three dimensions of the YPI (i.e., Grandiose-Manipulative [GM], Callous-Unemotional [CU], and Impulsive-Irresponsible [II]) among a sample of serious juvenile offenders from ages 14.5–25. Additionally, several relevant social factors (i.e., demographic characteristics, delinquent peer association, neighborhood disorder, parenting, parental criminality, and violence exposure) that have previously been found to be related to psychopathic personality traits ([Frick et al., 2014a,b](#)) were examined to determine their impact on the development of each of the dimensions of the YPI.

## 1. Developmental trajectories of psychopathic personality traits

There is evidence suggesting that psychopathic personality traits are fairly stable across development (for reviews see [Andershed, 2010](#); [Salekin, Rosenbaum, Lee, & Lester, 2009](#)). For instance, [Lynam et al. \(2007\)](#) found that psychopathic traits assessed at age 13 using the Childhood Psychopathy Scale ([Lynam, 1997](#)) were predictive of scores on the Psychopathy Checklist: Screening Version (PCL:SV; [Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995](#)) at age 24 ( $r = 0.31$ ). Additionally, psychopathic personality traits have been found to be relatively stable across childhood and adolescence, especially compared to other forms of emotional and behavioral adjustment (for a review, see [Frick et al., 2014b](#)). For example, across diverse samples (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and methods (e.g., parent-report, self-report) of assessing the CU component of psychopathy, research has found considerable stability from late childhood through adolescence ( $r$ 's range from .43–.71, [Forsman et al., 2008](#); [Munoz & Frick, 2007](#); [Obradović, Pardini, Long, & Loeber, 2007](#); also see [Frick & Ray, 2015](#) for a review). These stability estimates reported in adolescence are comparable to those of other personality traits ([Frick & Ray, 2015](#); [Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000](#)).

While the evidence using longitudinal correlations is fairly supportive of the notion of stability, there is still both conceptual and empirical reasons to expect some change. To start, there is considerable change during both adolescence and into young adulthood in terms of cognitive, biological, and neurological development that could impact the development of psychopathic traits ([Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000](#)). Additionally, while the longitudinal correlations are evidence for a fair amount of stability, they still suggest some degree of change. For instance, based on the studies reviewed above, at best ( $r = 0.71$ ), there is still 49.6% unexplained variance in psychopathic traits over time – suggesting that they might change for a good portion of individuals. Longitudinal correlations, while useful for understanding the relative stability across individuals (i.e., rank-ordered stability), do not capture within-individual change in these traits. Recent research has utilized Latent Growth Curve Modeling (LGCM) for examining both between- and within-individual change in developmental trajectories of psychopathic traits.

Using LGCM, [Pardini and Loeber \(2008\)](#) examined trajectories of interpersonal-callousness among a community sample of youth from ages 14–18 years. Although there was a significant negative slope ( $-0.111$ ), they interpreted the results of the LGCM as being suggestive of considerable stability in these traits over time. It is important to note that they found evidence for heterogeneity (between-individual

change) in the growth trajectories based on the significant variance associated with the slope parameter. Similar findings were reported using LGCM to examine developmental trajectories of CU traits in a sample of youth ages 9 to 15 receiving cognitive behavioral therapy for conduct disorder ([Muratori et al., 2016](#)). [Salihovic et al. \(2014\)](#) used LGCM to identify trajectories of all three dimensions of the YPI among a community sample of youths ages 10–18. The results of the LGCM suggested that on average youth decreased in a linear fashion on all three dimensions over time. They too found evidence for a good deal of heterogeneity among the sample in the degree that these traits change and this was the case for all three dimensions of the YPI.

To summarize, while there is a substantial level of stability in psychopathic traits across childhood and adolescence and potentially from early adolescence into adulthood (e.g., [Lynam et al., 1997](#)), research has yet to examine trajectories of the different aspects of psychopathic personality traits from adolescence into adulthood. That is, much of the research on the trajectories of psychopathic traits have focused on childhood or early adolescence, a period where such traits may be more malleable than in later adolescence and young adulthood. Further, despite the fact that the majority of these studies using LGCM have relied on accelerated cohort designs, none of these studies have employed an analytic technique to model such data so that developmental patterns of psychopathic traits are modeled by age. Specifically, the studies examining trajectories of psychopathic traits have relied on data that follow individuals from multiple birth cohorts ([Duncan, Duncan, & Hops, 1996](#)). Analytic procedures exist to appropriately model the development of outcomes (e.g., behavior, personality, etc.) by age (rather than measurement time-point) across time including the MGMC approach ([Muthen & Muthen, 2005](#); see below for a more detailed description of accelerated cohort designs and the MGMC method).

## 2. Social factors influencing developmental trajectories of psychopathic traits

Despite the strong evidence for genetic contributions to the stability of psychopathic traits, there is also growing evidence that environmental factors can explain change in psychopathic traits ([Blonigen et al., 2006](#); [Waller et al., 2013](#)). Thus, it is important for research to identify social factors that would help explain this change. This would be especially important for determining what social factors may be related to decreasing trajectories and which could, in turn, be the focus of interventions designed to enhance or support these factors. Additionally, it would also be useful to determine if the factors associated with change in these traits are specific to each of the psychopathic trait dimensions. Such research could help to inform and tailor intervention efforts and allow for better assessment of their effectiveness. For example, if family factors (e.g., parenting) were found to be effective in reducing only the affective aspects of psychopathic traits, the impact of family interventions on reducing psychopathic traits might go unnoticed in research solely looking at the overarching psychopathy construct. Accordingly, evaluations of such interventions that measure the broader construct of psychopathy and fail to account for the multifaceted nature of psychopathy may underestimate their effectiveness.

There is a considerable amount of research highlighting the importance of parenting on the development of psychopathic traits (e.g., [Waller et al., 2013](#)). More specifically, there is evidence that more authoritative (e.g., warmth and supervision) parenting can have a positive influence on psychopathic traits, particularly the CU component, even during adolescence ([Salihovic, Kerr, Ozdemir, & Pakalniskiene, 2012](#); [Waller et al., 2013](#)). For example, research has found that poor parenting (e.g., lack of supervision, weak attachment) is associated with more stable and increasing patterns of CU traits over time ([Fontaine, Rijdsdijk, McCrory, & Viding, 2010](#); [Pardini & Loeber, 2008](#)). [Salihovic et al. \(2014\)](#) identified unique developmental patterns of psychopathic traits more generally (i.e., YPI scores) and examined their relation to parenting (e.g., warmth and attachment). They found that those with

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