



# Personality and relational aggression: Moral disengagement and friendship quality as mediators



Constantinos M. Kokkinos <sup>\*</sup>, Ioanna Voulgaridou, Angelos Markos

Department of Primary Education, School of Education Sciences, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece

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## ABSTRACT

The present study tested mediation models of relational aggression integrating personality (callous-unemotional traits, behavioral activation system), self-regulatory cognitive processes (moral disengagement), and interpersonal factors (friendship quality) in a non-clinical sample of 276 Greek preadolescents. Relational aggression was positively associated with callous-unemotional traits, behavioral activation system, moral disengagement and negative friendship quality (i.e. conflict and betrayal). Moral disengagement mediated the effects of callous-unemotional traits and behavioral activation system on relational aggression. Furthermore, friendship conflict mediated the link between callous-unemotional traits and relational aggression, while positive friendship the association between behavioral activation and relational aggression. The findings confirm previous research and are discussed in terms of their implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Relational aggression (RA) refers to harming others through the manipulation of peer relationships through rumor spreading and social group exclusion (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Various theoretical models proposed to explain aggressive behavior have been integrated into the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) providing an account of why people act aggressively in terms of three levels: personal and situational factors, internal states, and decision making processes. According to this model, personal factors (e.g., personality) interact with situational factors (e.g., conflicts) to create an internal state (i.e. a composite of cognitions) affecting decision making processes, which may or may not result in aggressive responses. Using the GAM as a theoretical framework, this study examines mediation models of personal, interpersonal and social-cognitive constructs to inform our understanding about RA in preadolescence.

### 1.1. Personality and relational aggression

Many studies have identified personality correlates of RA, such as callous-unemotional (CU) traits and impulsivity (Marsee & Frick, 2007; Marsee, Silverthorn, & Frick, 2005). Marsee and Frick (2007) proposed that CU traits, defined as lack of empathy and remorse, may be related to the development of RA in adolescents. Similarly, Frick and

White (2008) reported associations between CU and RA. Thus, a positive association between CU traits and RA is expected.

Adolescents' personality traits reflecting impulsivity and sensation seeking are robustly associated with externalizing behaviors including RA (Dane & Marini, 2014). Such early findings emphasize the need for further research integrating broad dispositional trait frameworks. Gray's (1987) Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST) assumes that behavior is navigated by two brain systems (Muris, Meesters, De Kanter, & Timmerman, 2005): the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), regulating the experience of anxiety in response to threatening signals, and the behavioral activation system (BAS) which is sensitive to cues of reward, and is related to impulsivity and sensation seeking. Limited research on the links between BIS/BAS and RA showed positive correlations only with BAS (Kokkinos & Voulgaridou, 2015). In the same line, there are empirical and theoretical reasons to suggest that the inhibition of a dominant impulse, related to BIS, is associated specifically with reactive and overt forms of aggression (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Dane & Marini, 2014). An easily frustrated adolescent with high emotion dysregulation (i.e. low BIS) may be predisposed to engage in an approach-related aggressive response to provocation, such as overt aggression, rather than avoid confrontation and use more covert aggressive tactics (Marsee & Frick, 2007). Even reactive relationally aggressive responses involving retaliation through social exclusion or rumor spreading seem to be less strongly related to the ability to control and inhibit behavior (Dane & Marini, 2014), while more strongly to personality traits such as sensation seeking (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Therefore, this study explored the association between RA and BAS in the absence of BIS.

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace, N. Hili, GR 68100 Alexandroupolis, Greece.

E-mail address: [kkokkino@eled.duth.gr](mailto:kkokkino@eled.duth.gr) (C.M. Kokkinos).

### 1.2. Moral disengagement as mediator

According to GAM, internal states such as aggressive cognitions, influence decision making processes by increasing the likelihood of aggressive responses (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Recent evidence provided a more detailed explanation of aggression by examining interactive models between socio-cognitive and personality factors, such as impulsivity and psychopathic traits (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015). A useful contribution to the analysis of the socio-cognitive correlates of aggressive behavior, scarcely investigated in RA (Kokkinos, Voulgaridou, Mandrali, & Parousidou, 2016), is made by the Social Cognitive Theory of the Moral Self (Bandura, 1991). The theory suggests that aggression is associated with biases in morality such as moral disengagement (MD), referring to cognitive mechanisms that allow the moralization of actions that would otherwise be considered immoral (Gini et al., 2015). Little is known about the relationship between MD, CU traits and BAS. It is suggested that children with CU may have difficulties in recognizing the moral consequences of their actions (Glenn, Raine, Schug, Young, & Hauser, 2009). According to Gini et al. (2015), CU adolescents cannot estimate the impact of their immoral actions on others and show reduced salience of others' distress. Such difficulties in perceiving the effects of antisocial behavior may be conducive to aggression (Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010). However, much of the extant research examining the links between MD and CU has employed measures of overt aggression or explored MD as moderator (Gini et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the mediating role of MD in the link between CU and RA. Recent work documented that MD is associated with higher impulsivity (Wachs, 2012) which has been related to BAS (Muris et al., 2005). When children behave impulsively, are more likely to show MD and engage in aggression (Wachs, 2012). While these findings are illuminating, no published studies, to our knowledge, have yet considered how MD affects the association between personality and RA among preadolescents. Given that MD is an explanatory factor in models of aggression, and that CU and BAS have been associated with MD and RA, MD may mediate the links between CU, high BAS and RA.

### 1.3. Friendship quality as mediator

To further understand the mechanisms of RA, researchers have focused their attention on interpersonal relations, the core issue of RA (Banny, Heilbron, Ames, & Prinstein, 2011). Interestingly, perceived friendship quality (i.e., a child's impression of the degree to which a given relationship meets specified needs, ranging from opportunities for companionship to allowing for intimate disclosure; Parker & Asher, 1993), has been implicated in the development of RA (Kawabata, Crick, & Hamaguchi, 2010). Heilbron and Prinstein's (2008) review stresses the importance of studying negative and positive friendship quality separately to understand their unique associations with RA. For instance, while RA has been concurrently and longitudinally associated with friendship conflict, the links with friendship qualities such as support and intimacy may be either positive or negative (Banny et al., 2011). Relationally aggressive adolescents may refer more positive features of their friendships as they hold biased beliefs that their friends care about them (Meter, Casper, & Card, 2015).

Prior research confirms that individuals with antisocial personality characteristics are more likely to have problematic friendships (Fanti, 2013; Muñoz, Kerr, & Besic, 2008). Fanti (2013) found that high levels of CU were associated with low social support, while Muñoz et al. (2008) claimed that individuals with psychopathic traits show more interpersonal problems, as they tend to be dishonest in their relationships. Given that CU traits are likely to predict problematic interpersonal relations and that friendship qualities may predict RA (Banny et al., 2011), negative friendship quality is proposed as a possible pathway through which CU traits are associated with RA.

Coplan, Wilson, Frohlick, and Zelenski (2006) found that children's self-reported high BAS was associated with antisocial activities and

difficulties in friendships. Individuals scoring high in BAS may engage in antisocial behavior as a result of their vulnerability to interpersonal frustration (Knyazev, 2004). Adolescents, who are more oriented toward the rewards attained from engaging in risky behavior, are anticipated to show negative peer relationships which may in turn result in aggression (Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, Miernicki, & Galván, 2015). Likewise, Banny et al. (2011) reported that for risk taking adolescents, delinquent behavior may be due to their impetus to overcome the negative feelings resulting from poor peer relationships. Based on this body of evidence, the study examined whether friendship quality mediates the relationship between BAS and RA.

### 1.4. The role of gender

Previous research regarding mean-level gender differences in RA has been equivocal (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Some evidence suggests that girls use more RA compared to overt aggression which more typically reflects boys' aggressive engagement (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), while other reports minimal gender differences or even higher scores for boys (Card et al., 2008). Regarding the association between CU and RA it has been argued that this link prevails for adolescent females (Marsee et al., 2005). Hence, it is expected that high CU would more strongly predict RA in girls compared to boys. Impulsivity, indicative of BAS, tends to be viewed as appropriate gender-role behavior for boys urging them to be exposed to more risky situations such as overt aggression (Knyazev, 2004), given that the perpetrator is more likely to be identified as the aggressor and consequently to face retaliation. In the case of preadolescents, we reasoned that BAS would affect females' participation in RA. Indeed, some researchers, taking an evolutionary perspective, suggested that females prefer relational rather than overt aggression primarily because it is a safer option (Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, 2012).

While several studies revealed no gender differences in the association between MD and aggression (Gini et al., 2015), others found that boys were more likely to morally disengage from RA (Kokkinos et al., 2016). As far as the link between friendship quality and RA is concerned, Kawabata et al. (2010) suggested that girls place more emphasis on close relationships, exhibit a relatively higher level of exclusivity toward friends and view RA as a means of maintaining them. Therefore, because relationally aggressive girls were found to report more positive friendship qualities (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996), it is expected that the link between positive friendship quality and RA would be stronger among girls.

Seara-Cardoso, Dolberg, Neumann, Roiser, and Viding (2014) posited that psychopathic traits and impulsivity were positively associated with moral processing biases in both males and females, hindering the formulation of specific hypotheses for the present study. The link between MD and friendship might be also related to gender. Specifically, given prior evidence that boys are more susceptible to peer influences, particularly in the case of delinquent behavior, and also tend to endorse more self-justification of immoral behavior than girls (Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008), it is expected that the link between friendship quality and MD would prevail for males. Based on these findings, gender effects would be tested in every link between personal and interpersonal factors and RA.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

A convenient sample of 276 fifth and sixth graders (145 boys and 128 girls – three had missing data) from Northern Greece, aged between 10 to 13 years ( $M = 11.31$ ;  $SD = .66$ ) participated. Most of them (70.3%) came from middle socioeconomic circumstances (fathers were primarily civil servants).

Participants were recruited via oral communication with the school principals, along with parental written informed consent. Of the 300

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