



# Gender moderates the association between psychopathic traits and aggressive behavior in adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze the relationships between psychopathic traits and aggressive behavior in adolescents. We assessed four subtypes of aggression (proactive-overt, reactive-overt, proactive-relational and reactive-relational). Gender was included as a moderator of those relationships. The sample comprised 765 adolescents (464 girls) who completed measures of psychopathic traits (callous–unemotional, grandiose–manipulative and impulsivity) and aggression at Time 1 and one year later. Participants were between 14 and 18 years old. Results showed that callous–unemotional (CU) traits predicted proactive-overt and proactive-relational aggression. Grandiose–Manipulative (GM) predicted proactive-overt and reactive-overt aggression, and Impulsivity–Irresponsibility (II) predicted reactive-overt aggression. The path from CU traits to proactive-overt aggression was higher in girls, and the path from GM to proactive-overt aggression was higher in boys. Results indicate that research on psychopathic traits needs to include both girls and boys to identify gender-specific manifestations of these traits.

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## 1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a multidimensional construct that has been traditionally used to explain severe antisocial behavior in adults (Guay, Ruscio, Knight, & Hare, 2007). Recently, the utility of its application in children and adolescents has been recognized (Salekin & Frick, 2005; Salekin & Lynam, 2010). Although there is still discussion about the best way to conceptualize the core dimensions of psychopathy (Hare, 2003), several recent factor analyses (Cooke & Michie, 2001; Frick, Bodin, & Barry, 2000; van Baardewijk et al., 2010) have found that an adequate solution consists of three interrelated dimensions. The first dimension focuses on an affective style characterized by callousness, lack of empathy and remorse, and superficial emotionality, which is usually referred to as Callous–Unemotional (CU) traits. The second dimension refers to an interpersonal style characterized by arrogance, lying, manipulation, and superficial charm (Grandiose–Manipulative dimension; GM). The third dimension—the behavioral dimension—includes behavioral characteristics of Impulsivity and Irresponsibility (II dimension). These characteristics of the psychopaths make them feel indifference in general for the rights of others and for societal rules, facilitating their involvement in aggressive acts. In fact, previous studies have found a relationship between psychopathic traits and aggression (e.g., Barry et al., 2007; Penney & Moretti, 2007). However, in recent

years, the necessity of distinguishing types of aggressive behavior such as proactive vs reactive and overt vs relational has been highlighted. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the relationships between psychopathic traits and these types of aggressive behaviors.

### 1.1. Proactive and reactive aggressive behavior

The main difference between proactive and reactive aggression is the intrinsic motivation of the aggressor (i.e., the function of the aggression). The aggressor responds to a perceived threat or provocation in reactive aggression. In proactive aggression, the aggressor carries out a deliberate behavior that is controlled by external reinforcers (Dodge & Coie, 1987).

In general, previous studies indicate that psychopathy is more associated with proactive rather than with reactive aggression in both adults (Cima & Raine, 2009) and adolescents (Fite, Raine, Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, & Pardini, 2009). Furthermore, some studies have assessed the relationships between specific psychopathic traits and proactive and reactive aggression. Most of the studies have found that CU traits relate more to proactive aggression (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009; Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003; Kimonis et al., 2014; Marsee & Frick, 2007). However, Barry et al. (2007) found that CU traits were not related to any type of aggressive behavior cross-sectionally and Kimonis et al. (2008) found that CU traits were related to both proactive and reactive aggression.

Regarding the GM dimension, results are mixed. People with grandiose personality are characterized by being overbearing, egocentric and

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more likely to use violence to obtain a personal benefit. However, the GM dimension has been found to both types of aggressive behavior in some cross-sectional studies with children (Barry et al., 2007) and adolescents (Fossati, Borroni, Eisenberg, & Maffei, 2010).

Finally, regarding the behavioral dimension, it is worth mentioning that reactive aggression is characterized by impulsive behavior and therefore it seems reasonable that there is a significant relationship between this dimension of psychopathy and reactive aggression. Consistent with this, even if at a correlational level, impulsivity correlates with both proactive and reactive aggression (Perenc & Radochonski, 2013), once the other type of aggression is controlled for, impulsivity relates only to reactive aggressive behavior (Barry et al., 2007).

### 1.2. Overt and relational aggressive behavior

It is also important to differentiate types of aggression according to their form: overt and relational aggression. Overt aggressive behavior includes physical and verbal aggression, and relational aggressive behavior includes more covert and subtle forms of aggression that aim to harm the other person's social relations (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). With some notable exceptions (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2008; Marsee & Frick, 2007), previous studies have not differentiated whether these different forms of aggression were carried out reactively or proactively; therefore, very few studies have tested whether the four combinations of aggressive behavior (proactive overt, proactive relational, reactive overt and reactive relational) relate differentially to psychopathic traits.

Marsee and Frick (2007) found that CU traits were cross-sectionally related to both proactive overt and proactive relational aggression in detained adolescent girls. Furthermore, the association was stronger for the relational type of proactive aggression. In another study with detained adolescents, Kimonis et al. (2008) found that CU traits correlated with all of the aggressive behavior types (i.e., proactive overt, proactive relational, reactive overt, and reactive relational). Finally, in a sample of young women White, Gordon, and Guerra (2015) found that CU traits were related both to proactive and reactive relational aggression, although the association was stronger for proactive relational than for reactive relational aggression.

### 1.3. Gender differences

Studies indicate that adolescent boys score higher in the GM dimension (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012), CU traits (Fanti et al., 2009; Kimonis et al., 2014), and II dimension (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012). The results on gender differences in aggressive behavior are not so clear. On the one hand, in regard to the function distinction, some studies have found that adolescent boys are more aggressive both proactively and reactively (Calvete & Orue, 2011) than adolescent girls, but others have found that boys score higher on proactive but not reactive aggression (Fanti et al., 2009). However, usually only the overt forms of aggression have been evaluated. Although boys engage in more overt acts of aggression than girls (Archer, 2004), relational aggression is more evenly enacted by both girls and boys (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). In a recent study where form and function were taken into account, Crapanzano, Frick, Childs, & Terranova (2011) found that boys scored higher on both functions of physical aggression (i.e., physical-proactive and physical-reactive) and that girls scored higher on both functions of relational aggression (i.e., proactive-relational and reactive-relational). However, there are very few studies on gender differences in the associations between psychopathic traits and aggressive behavior. Some of these studies have found that the strength of the relationship between psychopathic traits and some types of aggressive behavior is similar for boys and girls (Penney & Moretti, 2007), but others have found that gender moderates this relationship. For example, Marsee, Silverthorn, and Frick (2005) used a cross-sectional study to separate relational and overt forms of aggression and found that the association between the GM dimension and relational aggression was significant

only in girls but that the association between total psychopathy and overt aggression was stronger in boys. These results highlight the importance of assessing aggressive subtypes depending on both their form and function to study the correlates associated with each of these and to test whether they vary for boys and girls.

### 1.4. The present study

With some exceptions (Frick et al., 2003), previous studies of psychopathic traits in adolescents have been cross-sectional, which has prevented obtaining evidence about their predictive utility. In addition, most of the previous studies have included only a psychopathy dimension and have not differentiated aggressive behavior by taking into account both its form and function. Therefore, the first objective of this study was to assess the longitudinal relationships between the three dimensions of psychopathy and the four types of aggressive behavior described (reactive-overt, reactive-relational, proactive-overt, and proactive-relational). Moreover, given the gender differences described in psychopathic traits and aggressive behavior, a second objective was to assess gender differences in those relationships. We did not propose any specific hypothesis on gender differences in the longitudinal paths between psychopathic traits and aggressive behavior subtypes because the scarce previous results have been mixed.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The initial sample comprised 985 high school students from 13 randomly selected schools in Bizkaia (Spain). Of those adolescents, 765 (464 girls and 301 boys) completed the measures at both Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2) one year later. There were no differences in any of the variables of the study at T1 between the adolescents who completed the two waves and those who failed to complete the study. The participants were between 14 and 18 years old ( $M_{age} = 15.43$  years,  $SD = 1.09$ ). Most of the participants were Spanish (90.1%) or South American (7.9%). The remaining 2% were from various countries. The socio-economic levels were represented with the following distribution according to the criteria recommended by the Spanish Society of Epidemiology (2000): 12.1% low, 17.7% low-medium, 32.7% medium, 29.9% high-medium, and 7.6% high.

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Psychopathic traits

The Youth Psychopathic Inventory-Short Form (YPI-S; Van Baardewijk et al., 2010) was used to measure psychopathic traits. The YPI-S includes 18 items from the original 50-item YPI (Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002). The YPI is based on Cooke and Michie's (2001) model of psychopathy, and it assesses the three core psychopathic traits. The Spanish YPI has shown good psychometric properties (Orue & Andershed, 2015). It assesses three psychopathic dimensions: The Grandiose-Manipulative dimension, the Callous-Unemotional traits, and the Impulsive-Irresponsible dimension. Each dimension contains six items, which are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Does not apply at all*) to 4 (*Applies very well*). Cronbach's alphas in this study were .83 for Grandiose-Manipulative, .72 for Callous-Unemotional and .72 for Impulsive-Irresponsible.

#### 2.2.2. Aggressive behavior

Aggressive behavior was assessed with the 36 item self-report questionnaire developed by Little, Henrich, Jones, and Hawley (2003). This questionnaire differentiates the forms and functions of the aggressions. In this study, we employed the subscales that refer to proactive overt, proactive relational, reactive overt and reactive relational aggression, with six items each. The items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale

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