



The externalizing spectrum in youth: Incorporating personality pathology



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ABSTRACT

Although personality disorder characteristics are often grouped with externalizing problems in adults, little is known about the extent to which they define the externalizing spectrum in youth. We examined the extent to which personality pathology traits in youth reflected common and specific variance in externalizing problems and explored differentiation of these connections by age. Parents reported on physical aggression, rule-breaking, relational aggression, and personality pathology traits for 1080 youth (48.8% male) ages 6–18 years. Disagreeableness and emotional instability traits were correlated with a general externalizing factor as well as with specific behavioral subfactors. The magnitude of these correlations varied across age, with the highest magnitude evidenced during the developmental periods of greatest prevalence for the specific externalizing behavior subtype. Taken together, these findings suggest that personality pathology is tightly connected with externalizing problems in youth, especially during developmental periods when externalizing problems are common.

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Externalizing behaviors, which include problems such as inattention/hyperactivity, delinquency, and substance use, often emerge in childhood or adolescence (Burt, 2012; Krueger & South, 2009). Despite robust evidence that externalizing problems capture a primary domain of youth psychopathology (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978; Lahey et al., 2004), a clear and comprehensive understanding of the externalizing construct in early life has only recently been emerging (e.g., Baker & Heller, 1996; Bezdjian et al., 2011; Witkiewitz et al., 2012). Specifically, the youth externalizing spectrum has typically been defined by physical aggression (Agg) and rule-breaking (RB) behaviors, as defined in the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Recent attention has sought to expand this content to relational or indirect aggression (RAgg; Tackett, Daoud, De Bolle, & Burt, 2013) and the current study aims to further this dimension into the domain of personality pathology.

A spectrum conceptualization cuts across related behavioral manifestations (e.g., both psychopathology and personality constructs) that are thought to be quantitatively related, rather than qualitatively distinct (e.g., Widiger & Smith, 2008). Initial support for a spectrum model typically manifests from psychometric studies demonstrating substantial covariation among certain types of behavior, such as the high covariation found for Agg and RB (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Psychometric

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covariation is an important initial test of hypothesized spectrum associations, and has also been used to support inclusion of normal-range personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness in a youth externalizing spectrum (De Bolle, Beyers, De Clercq, & De Fruyt, 2012; Tackett, 2006). More stringent tests of spectrum associations aim to investigate common causal factors underlying personality and psychopathology constructs falling on the same spectrum (e.g., Baker & Heller, 1996; Tackett, Lahey, et al. 2013; Waldman, Rhee, Levy, & Hay, 2001). The present investigation focuses on the first step for inclusion in an overarching externalizing spectrum, and investigates evidence for substantial covariation between hypothesized youth PD traits and youth externalizing problems. This investigation further explores the extent to which such PD traits offer additional explanatory value in interpreting components of the youth externalizing spectrum.

The role of personality pathology in externalizing problems

Personality pathology (or personality disorder; PD) is a domain of psychopathology that has frequently been studied in relation to externalizing problems in adults, yet remains understudied in youth (Tackett, Balsis, Oltmanns, & Krueger, 2009). Cluster B personality disorders, particularly borderline, antisocial, and narcissistic PDs, have been linked to externalizing problems in youth (Burnette, South, & Reppucci, 2007; Crawford, Cohen, & Brooks, 2001; Crick, Woods, Murray-Close, & Han, 2007; Underwood, Beron, & Rosen, 2011). Such work, however, has been significantly impeded by a lack of attention to early personality pathology in previous research (Paris, 2008). Recent advances in both empirical and theoretical perspectives on youth personality pathology offer a timely opportunity for empirical investigations examining links between youth personality pathology and the externalizing domain.

Advances in youth PD research have converged on an understanding that PD traits emerge in early life, are reliably measured in youth, and show levels of stability comparable to adults (e.g., Cohen, Crawford, Johnson, & Kasen, 2005; De Clercq, De Fruyt, Van Leeuwen, & Mervielde, 2006; Johnson et al., 2000). In addition, theoretically rich models of the development of personality pathology in childhood and adolescence have emerged for antisocial, borderline, and narcissistic constructs (e.g., Barry, Frick, & Killian, 2003; Barry et al., 2007; Beauchaine, Klein, Crowell, Derbidge, & Gatzke-Kopp, 2009; Crowell, Beauchaine, & Linehan, 2009; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008), all of which are encompassed in the current investigation. Thus, it is important to move toward a comprehensive understanding of how these constructs should be conceptualized within the existing youth externalizing framework. Along with these theoretical advances, new measurement tools allow for unprecedented empirical investigations of hypotheses about youth PD that have previously gone unstudied. In the present study, we focus on the Dimensional Personality Symptom Itempool (DIPSI; De Clercq et al., 2006) which is one of the most promising of these PD measures because it was created using a developmentally-based bottom-up approach that allowed constructs to emerge that might be important for child and adolescent, but not adult, populations.

The DIPSI is an empirically derived measure that assesses 27 lower-order facets and four higher-order personality pathology traits in children and adolescents. The higher-order traits—disagreeableness, emotional instability, introversion, and compulsivity—are analogous, but not identical, to similar higher-order PD trait structures in adult measures (e.g., Clark, 1993; Livesley & Jackson, 2009). Disagreeableness (characterized by antagonism and difficulty getting along with others) is the trait with the strongest conceptual links to externalizing behaviors and Cluster B PD domains, and thus represents the best candidate for integration into the youth externalizing spectrum. However, emotional instability (characterized by high levels of negative affect and poor emotion regulation skills), which has typically been linked to internalizing psychopathology and trait neuroticism, is also linked to the borderline PD construct in adults (Eaton et al., 2011). This suggests that it may show secondary links to youth externalizing and the broader Cluster B PDs, as well. In other words, we would expect disagreeableness to show strong robust connections across many types of externalizing psychopathology, whereas emotional instability may show more modest, but still significant connections that are less robust across different externalizing problems. Thus, the current investigation focused only on the disagreeableness and emotional instability DIPSI domains. Specifically, we examined both domains and the facets indexing each of these higher-order traits in order to gain a more nuanced picture of the role that personality pathology plays in the externalizing spectrum.

Aspects of the youth externalizing spectrum

The externalizing spectrum in youth is typically defined by behavioral subtypes of Agg and RB behaviors, as defined in the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Although Agg and RB are typically highly correlated, they show important differences as well (Burt, 2012; Tackett, Daoud, et al., 2013). Their developmental course is one such difference, with Agg showing highest prevalence earlier in childhood whereas RB tends to be highest in adolescence (Burt, 2012; Stanger, Achenbach, & Verhulst, 1997; Tremblay et al., 2004). They have also been differentiated in terms of severity, with researchers suggesting that Agg represents more severe externalizing problems, whereas RB behaviors appear to be more normative, particularly in adolescence (Burt, 2012; Burt & Klump, 2012; Tackett, Balsis, et al., 2009; Tackett, Krueger, Iacono, & McGue, 2005; Tackett, Daoud, et al., 2013). This pattern of both convergence and divergence across subtypes of youth antisocial behavior (ASB) can be extended to an externalizing spectrum that incorporates RAgg (Tackett, Daoud, et al., 2013).

RAgg—which is similar to social or indirect aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005)—refers to aggressive behaviors intended to damage another's social status or interpersonal relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Although early evidence indicated that RAgg was integrally linked to other forms of externalizing problems in youth (Baker & Heller, 1996; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Tackett, Waldman, & Lahey, 2009), including links to borderline PD in particular

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