



Psychopathy dimensions, Big Five traits, and dispositional aggression in adolescence: Issues of gender consistency



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ABSTRACT

In order to evaluate the nomological network of associations between psychopathy and its sub-dimensions, and Big Five domains and dispositional aggression in adolescence, and its consistency across gender-based sub-groups, 1253 Italian high school students ($F = 429$, $M = 824$) were administered the Italian translations of the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI), Big Five Inventory (BFI) and the Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire. Males scored on average significantly higher than females on all measures of psychopathy and aggression, whereas females scored significantly higher than males on the BFI O, C, A and N scales. Bivariate correlations between psychopathy scores, and aggression and BFI domains measures were highly similar in females and males. The majority of regression coefficients based on hierarchical regression models were consistently replicated across gender-based groups; effect size estimates for regression models were large, supporting the hypothesis that psychopathy can be described in terms of general personality traits in adolescence and that the relationships between psychopathy, its sub-dimensions and Big Five personality dimensions, and aggression generally are very similar across gender.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy refers to a pathologic syndrome which is characterized by prominent behavioral deviancy in the presence of distinctive emotional and interpersonal features (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). Several researchers (e.g. Roose et al., 2012) have argued that psychopathy may be better conceived in terms of personality dimensions. Over the last 15 years, a number of studies have explored the idea that psychopathy can be described as a configuration of extreme levels of general personality traits (e.g. Gaughan, Miller, & Lynam, 2012). Here, the examination of the relations between the Five Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992), and psychopathy has been an important and useful line of research. Using the FFM, psychopathy may be meaningfully described in terms of a configuration of basic personality dimensions (Roose et al., 2012). Negative associations between psychopathic traits and Agreeableness and Conscientiousness have consistently been reported (see Lynam & Derefinko, 2006 for a meta-analysis).

Psychopathy seem most strongly negatively associated with Agreeableness (weighted mean $r = -.52$) and Conscientiousness (weighted mean $r = -.38$). Interestingly, Miller and colleagues (Miller & Lynam 2003; Miller, Lynam, Widiger, & Leukefeld, 2001) showed that subjects who had FFM profiles similar to an expert-generated FFM profile of the prototypical psychopath, have negative life outcomes, including high levels of alcohol and drug abuse (Miller et al., 2001) and criminal activity (Miller & Lynam 2003; Miller et al. 2001).

Aggression represents a personality feature that has been consistently reported to be associated with psychopathy; indeed, a number of studies have reported significant associations between psychopathy and aggression, antagonistic behavior, and severity of criminal acts (see, Patrick et al., 2009). Although psychopathy is frequently conceived as a unitary construct, factor analytic and correlational-validation research indicates that it nonetheless taps distinguishable component factors, and interestingly, different psychopathy factors often yield somewhat different relationships with aggression measures (for a review, see, Patrick et al., 2009).

The link between psychopathy personality traits and proactive aggression has been observed also in samples of children and adolescents; for instance, Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, and Dane (2003)

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found that psychopathic-like children with callous-unemotional traits have higher proactive aggression scores.

Although there has been an increased interest in investigating the personality traits related to psychopathy in non-criminal populations of children and adolescents (e.g. van Baardewijk et al., 2010), to date, only a few studies have examined the relations between general models of personality and psychopathy in adolescence (e.g. Roose et al., 2012). Interestingly, in a meta-analysis, including five studies, Lynam (2010) reported relationships similar to those observed among adults: youth psychopathy was strongly negatively related to Agreeableness (A) and Conscientiousness (C); weakly negatively related to Extraversion (E) and Openness (O), and weakly positively related to Neuroticism (N). However, to our knowledge, no previous study has examined the relationship between youth psychopathy, Big Five traits, and aggression across gender.

Among the self-report questionnaires which are currently available for assessing psychopathic traits in adolescence, the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002), has been considered particularly favorable by several reviewers (e.g., Vaughn & Howard, 2005). The YPI is a 50-item research instrument which comprises 10 subscales that combine into a three-factor structure (e.g., Andershed et al., 2002) and the three factors are labeled Grandiose–Manipulative, Callous–Unemotional, and Impulsive–Irresponsible.

Consistent with Lynam, Hoyle, and Newman (2006) indications, we did not residualize the YPI scale scores. Indeed, we were not interested in assessing “pure” Grandiose–Manipulative, Callous–Unemotional, or Impulsive–Irresponsible dimensions; rather, we were interested in capturing Grandiose–Manipulative, Callous–Unemotional, and Impulsive–Irresponsible traits as features of the psychopathy domain, thus, in their specificity, as well as in their partial, reciprocal overlap.

To our knowledge, only Miller, Watts, and Jones (2011) have investigated whether psychopathy manifests divergent relations with components of its nomological network depending on gender. Interestingly, they reported that psychopathy largely manifested a pattern of relations with potential etiological factors (e.g., abuse), basic personality traits, and other important variables (e.g., gambling, substance abuse), which did not vary across gender.

Based on this, we aimed at testing if a network of relationships between psychopathy and its sub-dimensions, and Big Five traits and aggression measures could be identified and reproduced across male and female groups of Italian high school students. Specifically, based on available evidence (Lynam, 2010), we expected, in our adolescent sample, that psychopathy scores would be positively associated with measures of both proactive and reactive aggression, as well as with N trait scores, and negatively associated with measures of A and C, and possibly with O and E. In particular, we expected that the YPI Grandiose–Manipulative dimension would be significantly associated with proactive aggression, as well as with low A and high O. We expected that the YPI Impulsive–Irresponsible dimension would be associated with low C, high E, as well as with a propensity towards both proactive and reactive aggression. Consistent with the study of Frick & White, 2008 we expected that the YPI Callous–Unemotional dimension would be related with low N, low A, and with proactive aggression.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The study involved 1299 subjects who originally agreed to take part in the study; however, 46 participants (3.5%) had incomplete YPI, RPQ and/or BFI questionnaires and were therefore excluded. In

the final sample, participants were 1253 Italian adolescents in their “teen” years who were attending a large public high school; 429 participants (34.2%) were females, with a mean age of 15.82 years, $SD = 1.41$ years (range: 14–19), and 824 (65.8%) were males, with a mean age of 15.88 years, $SD = 1.47$ years (range: 13–19). All participants gave their written consent to participate in the study after it had been explained to them; when participants were of minor age (i.e., under age 18), parents also had to sign a written informed consent form to allow participation. None of the participants were paid either directly or indirectly in order to participate in the study. IRB approval was obtained for all aspects of this study, which was conducted adhering to the American Psychology Association ethical norms.

All participants were administered the Italian translations of the instruments in random order and anonymously during school class time by psychology students when teachers were not present. The questionnaires were translated by a clinical psychologists fluent in English and controlled via back translated versions by an English mother-tongue professional translator.

2.2. Measures

Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed et al., 2002). The YPI is a 50-item adolescent self-report questionnaire designed to measure the core traits of the psychopathic personality (Andershed et al., 2002). The YPI yields ten first-order scales, and three second-order scales, namely, Grandiose–Manipulative (G–M; 20 items) scale; Callous–Unemotional scale (C–U; 15 items); Impulsive–Irresponsible scale (I–I; 15 items). The YPI total score is thought to assess a general psychopathy factor in adolescence. Each item in the YPI is scored on a four-point Likert scale. The YPI show excellent psychometric properties in non institutionalized adolescents (e.g., Skeem & Cauffman, 2003). In this study, Cronbach α coefficients were .93, .84, .84, and .94, for the YPI G–M, C–U, I–I scale scores, and for the YPI total score, respectively.

Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999). The BFI consists of 44 short-phrase items, rated on a 5-point scale. The BFI items are assigned to five scales measuring Extraversion (E; 8 items), Agreeableness (A; 9 items), Conscientiousness (C; 9 items), Neuroticism (N; 8 items), and Openness to experience (O; 10 items). Recently, Fossati, Borroni, Marchione, and Maffei (2011) indicated that the Italian translation of the BFI showed adequate psychometric properties in non-clinical adult and adolescent samples, respectively. In this study, Cronbach α values were .68, .75, .77, .78, and .82 for BFI A, N, O, C, and E scales, respectively.

Reactive–Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPQ; Raine et al., 2006). The RPQ is a 23-item self-report questionnaire designed to yield both reactive (11 items) and proactive (12 items) aggression scores in adolescents, as well as a total score indicating the overall level of aggression. Each RPQ item is rated on a 3-point scale. The RPQ have shown adequate psychometric properties in both U.S. (Raine et al., 2006) and Italian (Fossati et al., 2009) adolescent samples. In this study, Cronbach α values were .85, and .93 for the RPQ Reactive Aggression (RA) scale, and Proactive Aggression (PA) scale, respectively.

2.3. Data analyses

Cronbach α coefficient based on item polychoric correlations was used to evaluate the scale internal consistency reliability in the whole sample, as well in gender-based sub-groups. The associations between continuous measures were tested using the Pearson r coefficient with Bonferroni-corrected nominal p -level. The homogeneity of r coefficients across gender was assessed using the appropriate z test (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

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