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## Overt and relational forms of reactive aggression in adolescents: Relations with temperamental reactivity and self-regulation <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined whether overt and relational forms of reactive aggression were differentially related to adolescents' temperament. Measures of adolescents' temperament and aggression were completed by 670 adolescents (369 females), ages 10–17, and their mothers. Effortful control and fearfulness were inversely associated only with reactive–overt aggression, whereas frustration proneness was more strongly linked with reactive–relational aggression. Furthermore, amongst younger adolescents, effortful control had a larger association with reactive–overt aggression when fearfulness was low, whereas frustration proneness had a stronger relation to reactive–relational aggression when effortful control was high. The differential relations between the two forms of reactive aggression (i.e., overt and relational) and effortful control or fearfulness are discussed with respect to variations in the riskiness and the social competence required to implement these aggressive actions.

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### 1. Introduction

Aggressive behavior in childhood predicts a host of negative developmental outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, including substance dependence, high school drop-out, mental health problems, financial problems, unemployment, interpartner violence, criminal offending, and imprisonment (Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002). In addition, conduct problems are the primary reason that children and adolescents are referred to mental health clinics (Kazdin, 1995). Consequently, it is crucial to study the development of aggressive behavior with a view to developing effective prevention and treatment programs.

Several models of aggressive behavior specify that temperament or personality-based predispositions affecting emotional reactivity and self-regulation abilities are important risk factors (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 2012; Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Temperament is defined as biologically-based individual differences in emotional, attentional and motor reactivity, and in

self-regulation processes, such as effortful control and reactive control (Rothbart, 2011; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Proneness to frustration is a facet of emotional reactivity that has been shown to increase risk of aggression (Rothbart, 2011), though two aspects of self-regulation—effortful control or reactive control—may diminish this association. Effortful control involves conscious, voluntary, effortful, and cognitive strategies (e.g., stopping and thinking about consequences prior to acting) that facilitate the inhibition of a dominant impulse to permit the performance of a subdominant response, as well as planning and error detection (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Reactive control, on the other hand, entails automatic, unconscious, and emotion-related self-regulation processes that reflect the balance in the reactivity of approach and avoidance motivation systems (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Rothbart, 2011). For example, an easily frustrated adolescent who is relatively fearless may be predisposed to engage in an approach-related aggressive response to provocation rather than avoiding confrontation (Rothbart, Ellis, & Posner, 2011). Temperament contributes indirectly to the development of conduct problems by influencing the mental processes or internal states (e.g., cognitions, emotions, arousal levels, action tendencies) that arise in social situations, such as a perceived provocation by parents or peers (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 2012; Dodge & Pettit, 2003).

Temperament has been shown to differentiate reactive and proactive functions of aggression. In contrast to proactively aggressive

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attacks, which are goal-directed, instrumental and deliberate, reactively aggressive acts are described as provoked, retaliatory, defensive, anger-driven, emotionally dysregulated, and impulsive (Card & Little, 2006; Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006). Consistent with the Frustration–Aggression and Cognitive Neoassociation model of aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1993; Berkowitz, 2012), reactive aggression has been associated with predispositions that contribute to difficulties with the regulation of negative affect (Hubbard et al., 2010), which include anxiety, angry reactivity, emotional dysregulation and inattention (see Vitaro et al., 2006). Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis indicates that reactive aggression, rather than proactive aggression, is independently associated with measures of emotional dysregulation and ADHD symptoms (Card & Little, 2006). However, much of the previous research that has examined distinctions between reactive and proactive aggression has employed measures that emphasize physical aggression (Vitaro et al., 2006). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the link between temperament and both overt and relational forms of reactive aggression.

Currently, there is very little research differentiating reactive–overt from reactive–relational aggression. In contrast to the physical or verbal attacks that characterize overt aggression, relational aggression involves harming the victim by damaging relationships or social status, and by virtue of being more indirect and covert, it allows the aggressor to avoid detection as the perpetrator (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). A reactive–relationally aggressive response involves retaliation through acts such as social exclusion or rumor spreading. Amongst adolescent participants, reactive–relational aggression is associated with perceived popularity and social preference, whereas reactive–overt aggression is negatively related to these same outcomes (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Furthermore, reactive–overt aggression also has a stronger association than reactive–relational aggression with adolescents' violent delinquency and arrest history (Marsee et al., 2011). Finally, in a sample of adolescent girls in a detention centre, reactive–overt but not reactive–relational aggression was uniquely associated with emotional dysregulation (Marsee & Frick, 2007). Additional research is required to illuminate the temperament dimensions that distinguish the heterogeneous forms of reactive aggression.

We expected that two facets of self-regulation – effortful control and reactive control – would constitute protective factors for reactive–overt aggression as opposed to reactive–relational aggression. Although the ability to inhibit impulses and regulate emotions is negatively related to the frequency of overt and relational aggression (Card et al., 2008), the use of relational aggression also appears to be facilitated by social competence (Björkqvist, 1994). For example, it is done more often by youth with high levels of social intelligence or social status (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Furthermore, a meta-analysis indicates that measures of poor self-regulation are more strongly associated with overt aggression (Card et al., 2008). Thus, there are empirical and theoretical reasons to suggest that complex relationally aggressive responses to provocation, such as social exclusion, may be facilitated by good effortful control. Therefore, because effortful control may both inhibit and facilitate reactive–relational aggression, we hypothesized that effortful control would be more strongly related to reactive–overt than to reactive–relational aggression, and that it would significantly moderate the association between frustration proneness and only the overt form of reactive aggression.

We further predicted that fearful youth would display lower frequencies of reactive–overt aggression. We reasoned that fear would affect participation in reactive–overt aggression rather than reactive–relational aggression because the former is more

dangerous and risky, given that the perpetrator is more likely to sustain a physical injury, to be identified as the aggressor and, consequently, to face retaliation (Björkqvist, 1994). Indeed, some writers taking an evolutionary perspective have stated that females prefer to use relational rather than overt aggression primarily because it is a safer option (Vaillancourt, 2005; Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, 2012). Consistent with this expectation, Terranova, Morris, and Boxer (2008) found that temperamental fearfulness was inversely associated with future overt but not relational bullying.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants included 670 adolescents (369 females) and their mothers from southern Ontario, Canada. The adolescents ranged in age from 10 to 17 ( $M = 13.92$ ;  $SD = 2.10$ ), and the mean maternal age was 43.19 ( $SD = 5.37$ ). Seventy-three percent of the mothers were married, whereas 14% were lone parents. Regarding ethnicity, 72% identified themselves as Canadian, 16% cited a European ethnicity, 4% comprised small groups of diverse ethnicities, and 8% did not specify an ethnicity. Median household income was \$70,000. The highest education level for 41% of the mothers was high-school, whereas 59% completed a post-secondary degree.

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Temperament

Temperament was measured using three subscales of the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire-Revised (Capaldi & Rothbart, 1992). For each temperament dimension, we calculated a composite mean of adolescent-report and mother-report means, the correlations between which ranged from .24 to .56. All items involved a five-point scale ranging from Almost Always Untrue to Almost Always True. The Effortful Control scale consisted of 14 adolescent-report and 18 mother-report items that tapped Inhibitory Control (e.g., It is easy for me to keep a secret), Activation Control (e.g., If I have a hard assignment to do, I get started right away), and Attention (e.g., I pay close attention when someone tells me how to do something), which had a high level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Seven adolescent-report and six mother-report items indexed the Frustration Proneness scale (e.g., It really annoys me to wait in long lines), which had a coefficient alpha of .75. Fearfulness (e.g., I worry about getting into trouble) was assessed with six self-report and six mother-report items; internal consistency was adequate ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Aggression measure

Aggression was measured using 25 items with a four-point scale ranging from Not at all True to Completely True (Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). For each subtype of aggression, we calculated a composite mean of youth-report and mother-report means, the correlations between which ranged from .21 to .39. There were four adolescent-report and four mother-report items ( $\alpha = .81$ ) indexing reactive–overt aggression (e.g., If others have angered me, I often hit, kick or punch them), and four adolescent-report and four mother-report items ( $\alpha = .64$ ) tapping reactive–relational aggression (e.g., If others upset or hurt me, I often tell my friends to stop liking them). In addition, proactive–overt aggression was tapped by four self-report and four mother-report items ( $\alpha = .76$ ; e.g., I often threaten others to get what I want) whereas proactive–relational aggression was measured with four self-report and four mother-report items ( $\alpha = .76$ ; e.g., I often tell my friends to stop liking someone to get what I want). Finally,

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