



Revealing the nuanced associations between facets of trait impulsivity and reactive and proactive aggression



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ABSTRACT

Although impulsivity has been repeatedly associated with aggression, specific associations between facets of impulsivity and reactive (RA) and proactive (PA) have yet to be fully elucidated. This may be due, in part, to overlapping variance among facets of impulsivity and between RA/PA. The current study systematically examined associations among these variables using both bivariate correlations as well as path analysis. In addition to raw aggression scores, we isolated the variance unique to both RA/PA by regressing RA onto PA (and vice versa), and saving these residual aggression scores. Participants included 384 racially-diverse undergraduates. Results indicated facets of impulsivity uniquely characterize RA/PA, particularly using residual aggression scores. RA was uniquely characterized by higher levels of Negative Urgency followed by low Perseverance, as well as high Premeditation and low Positive Urgency. In contrast, PA was uniquely characterized by higher levels of Positive Urgency, and to a lesser degree, high Premeditation. Results indicate facets of impulsivity represent potentially different underlying pathways to specific subtypes of aggression. As such, impulsivity, particularly in the context of affect, may be especially important to consider in relation to specific subtypes of aggression.

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1. Introduction

Aggression represents a broad and heterogeneous construct encompassing a variety of behaviors. Although such complex behaviors are likely explained by multiple etiological processes (e.g., Broidy et al., 2003; Loeber & Hay, 1997; Moffitt, 1993), individual differences in personality (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Perugini, 1994; Geen & Donnerstein, 1998), and impulsivity in particular (e.g., Latzman & Vaidya, 2013; Miller & Lynam, 2001), have been repeatedly found to play an important role in the development and persistence of aggressive and antisocial behaviors. Yet, aggression is a broad, complex construct. To better delineate the heterogeneity within aggression, researchers frequently differentiate between various subtypes or forms of aggressive behaviors. One common distinction, which may be especially pertinent when considering differences in trait impulsivity, is that between reactive (RA) and proactive aggression (PA). Whereas RA is an impulsive, angry response to a provocation, PA is a planned act of aggression committed as a means to achieve a secondary goal. Although their distinction rests heavily on

impulsivity (Berkowitz, 1993; Dodge, 1991), the way in which various facets of trait impulsivity relate to RA/PA is not yet understood. As such, it is important to empirically evaluate both the shared and unique associations between facets of trait impulsivity and subtypes of aggression. Such investigations may help to elucidate pathways between individual differences in personality and aggression, and potentially identify avenues through which to intervene (e.g., Derefinko, DeWall, Metzke, Walsh, & Lynam, 2011).

1.1. Impulsivity and aggression

Increasingly, researchers are directing effort toward understanding impulsivity's contribution to aggression (e.g., Miller & Lynam, 2001). Indeed, impulsivity and related constructs (e.g., self-control) have repeatedly been associated with aggression (e.g., Latzman & Vaidya, 2013; Miller & Lynam, 2001). Although historically a poorly agreed upon construct, there is an emerging consensus that impulsivity is a multidimensional construct that can be meaningfully divided into distinct dimensions (Roberts, Bogg, Walton, Chernyshenko, & Stark, 2004; Vaidya, Latzman, Markon, & Watson, 2010; Whiteside & Lynam, 2009). To clarify its multidimensional nature, Whiteside and Lynam (2001) analyzed the factor structure of several existing widely-used self-report impulsivity measures, resulting in the development of a

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multifaceted conceptualization of trait impulsivity, with the UPPS Impulsive Behavior Scale created to operationalize these facets. In this model, trait impulsivity is comprised of: Sensation Seeking, a tendency to engage in rash action as a means of seeking excitement or arousal; Urgency, a tendency toward rash action during periods of intense affect; (lack of) Premeditation, characterized by a poor ability to think through to the consequences of one's actions; and (lack of) Perseverance, characterized by difficulty in following through with tasks from beginning to end. Subsequent research by [Cyders and Smith \(2007, 2008\)](#) demonstrated the importance of separating Urgency into Positive and Negative Urgency, which were both included in the revised UPPS-P measure ([Cyders & Smith, 2007](#)). Negative and Positive Urgency represent tendencies toward impulsive action during periods of intense negative and positive affect, respectively.

Although relatively few studies have investigated these facets in relation to aggression, Negative and Positive Urgency, Sensation Seeking, and (lack of) Premeditation have all been broadly implicated ([Carlson, Pritchard, & Dominelli, 2013](#); [Lynam & Miller, 2004](#); [Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003](#); [Seibert, Miller, Pryor, Reidy, & Zeichner, 2010](#)). However, these studies employ various operationalizations of aggression, and their results vary. For example, [Lynam and Miller \(2004\)](#) found only (lack of) Premeditation to be associated with higher levels of both choosing and enacting an aggressive response after viewing short provocative vignettes. In contrast, using a response choice aggression paradigm, [Seibert et al. \(2010\)](#) found, only Positive Urgency to be significantly positively correlated with aggression, and no significant associations were found in multivariate regression analyses. The authors speculated that the lack of associations might be related to the nature of the laboratory aggression paradigm, which may have indexed cold, calculated aggression (similar to PA), rather than tapping impulsive, affectively-based aggression (similar to RA). All told, these studies suggest facets of impulsivity differentially relate to aggression, and highlight the importance of considering various aspects of aggression.

1.2. Trait impulsivity and subtypes of aggression

Although the lower order structure of aggression is not fully agreed upon, researchers commonly distinguish between two subtypes or forms of aggression, primarily differentiated by the level of impulsivity and affect involved in the act: reactive and proactive ([Berkowitz, 1993](#); [Dodge, 1991](#)). RA refers to impulsive aggressive acts that are retaliatory in nature, carried out in the context of negative affective states such as anger or frustration, whereas PA represents planned, affect-neutral acts that are committed as a means to achieve a secondary goal ([Bandura, 1978](#); [Berkowitz, 1993](#)). Although some have questioned the utility of the distinction between RA/PA given the relatively high correlation between them (e.g., [Bushman & Anderson, 2001](#)), the distinction has been broadly supported in the extant literature, as each exhibit differential associations with various external correlates. For example, RA/PA are differentially associated with social cognitive biases (e.g., [Crick & Dodge, 1996](#)), emotion regulation ([Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997](#)), and personality traits, including impulsivity (e.g., [Latzman, Vaidya, Clark, & Watson, 2011](#); [Miller & Lynam, 2006](#)). All told, this literature indicates RA/PA may arise from potentially different etiological processes, one of which appears to be impulsivity. Yet, less is known concerning the specificity of associations with facets of trait impulsivity.

Indeed, recent research does suggest that facets of trait impulsivity may be differentially associated with subtypes of aggression. Although not specific to RA/PA, [Derefinko et al. \(2011\)](#) found both (lack of) Premeditation and Sensation Seeking predicted general violence, while Urgency predicted intimate partner violence. As

such, the authors concluded that lower levels of premeditation and higher levels of risk taking characterize general violence. Intimate partner violence, however, arises not simply from lower levels of self-control, but from lower levels of self-control in situations which provoke heightened affectivity. These results highlight the need to consider the associations between facets of impulsivity and subtypes of aggression, particularly RA/PA, given the importance of both impulsivity and affectivity in their theoretical distinction.

Recent research does indeed suggest that facets of impulsivity may exhibit specificity in associations with RA/PA. Although all five UPPS-P facets were not included in their study, [Latzman and Vaidya \(2013\)](#) found (lack of) Perseverance and (lack of) Premeditation to be positively correlated with both RA/PA, yet both were more strongly correlated with PA. This suggests that both lack of follow through, and lack of forethought may be especially pertinent to PA. These results are unexpected and warrant further study, given that the construct of PA would suggest that *higher* levels of forethought and follow through would be necessary for planned, goal-oriented aggression. In the first study to date to simultaneously consider RA/PA in relation to all five facets of trait impulsivity, [Miller, Zeichner, and Wilson \(2012\)](#) found a different pattern of associations when examining all five facets of the UPPS-P in relation to reactive, proactive, and relational aggression. Consistent with [Latzman and Vaidya \(2013\)](#), (lack of) Premeditation and (lack of) Perseverance were significantly positively correlated with PA. PA was also positively correlated with both Negative and Positive Urgency, whereas RA was only correlated with Negative Urgency. Semipartial correlations revealed positive associations between RA and both Negative Urgency and Sensation Seeking, and between PA and (lack of) Premeditation. In regression analyses, RA was uniquely positively associated with Negative Urgency and Sensation Seeking, whereas PA was not associated with any of facets. These important differences in associations at the bivariate versus multivariate level highlight the need to consider overlapping variance in order to understand the unique associations among these variables. Because RA/PA are often highly correlated (e.g., $r = .55$ in [Miller et al., 2012](#)), isolating the variance unique to each subtype would allow for a more fine-grained analysis of the associations among these variables, which may potentially reveal distinct pathways to aggressive behaviors.

1.3. Current study

The current study aimed to elucidate the common and distinct associations between facets of impulsivity and RA/PA through the use of path analysis. Given that Urgency, Sensation Seeking, and (lack of) Premeditation are pertinent to aggression broadly (e.g., [Carlson et al., 2013](#); [Lynam & Miller, 2004](#); [Whiteside & Lynam, 2009](#)), and given the high correlation between RA/PA (e.g., [Miller et al., 2012](#); [Poulin & Boivin, 2000](#)), it was hypothesized that Negative Urgency, Positive Urgency, Sensation Seeking, and (lack of) Premeditation would be correlated with both RA/PA at the bivariate level. Residual scores of RA/PA were also included in analyses in order to index "pure" RA/PA, independent of each other. Because residual scores remove shared variance between RA/PA, we expected to observe greater differentiation in associations with these scores.

Because RA is theoretically a spontaneous aggressive response, and given previous research indicating that low Premeditation is associated with aggressive responding under provocation ([Latzman & Vaidya, 2013](#); [Lynam & Miller, 2004](#)), we expected low Premeditation to be uniquely associated with RA. Moreover, because RA theoretically arises during periods of negative affect, and given [Derefinko et al. \(2011\)](#) findings, we expected Negative

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