



Distinct characteristics of psychopathy relate to different subtypes of aggression

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 January 2009

Received in revised form 28 June 2009

Accepted 30 June 2009

Available online 3 August 2009

Keywords:

Psychopathy

Reactive aggression

Proactive aggression

ABSTRACT

This article both selectively reviews the evidence supporting the view that reactive and proactive aggression actually reflect related but separate constructs, and also investigates the selective relationship between these forms of aggression and psychopathic personality in 121 male prison inmates. Results show that total psychopathy scores were related to residualized scores of proactive (but not reactive) aggression. However, different sub-characteristics of psychopathy were differentially related to reactive as well as proactive aggression. Results support the view that reactive and proactive aggression have differential correlates, and suggest that while psychopathic personality is predominantly characterized by proactive aggression, some psychopathy components are more related to reactive aggression.

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1. Introduction

During the last few years, different models of aggression have been proposed, but a frequently-used distinction is between reactive and proactive aggression (Vitaro, Barker, Boivin, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2006). However, there has been debate regarding the meaningfulness of differentiating aggression into these two subtypes. Both concepts (i.e., reactive and proactive aggression) tend to be quite highly correlated, suggesting that they tap into the same underlying construct (e.g., Poulin & Boivin, 2000). For instance, Bushman and Anderson (2001) have argued that the dichotomy has outlasted its value as an illustration of fundamentally different kinds of human aggression and it is therefore time to “pull the plug” on this distinction. In contrast, authors have argued that reactive and proactive aggression have also different correlates. Certain emotions, like anger and frustration have been related to reactive aggression, while a lack of emotions seems to be more related to predatory aggression (e.g., Berkowitz, 1993).

In line with this, increased evidence suggesting that people who engage in reactive, affective-driven aggression differ in several aspects from people who show more goal-directed, proactive aggression (Raine et al., 1998; Walters, 2008). Moreover, reactive aggression (also termed affective aggression) refers to spontaneous, emotion-driven forms of aggression and often occurs as a response to perceived threats. This impulsive response to interpersonal provocation is argued to be associated with high

affective-physiological arousal and minimal cognitive processing (Chase, O’Leary, & Heyman, 2001). In contrast, proactive aggression requires forethought and planning, and autonomic arousal is thought to be minimal, with goal-directed behaviour (Blair, 2003).

Importantly at an empirical level, several studies have demonstrated that proactive and reactive aggression have different correlates. To give an overview of these relationships in a systematic manner, these differential characteristics are outlined in Table 1. Summarizing these findings, reactive aggression is more characterized by information-processing/neurocognitive impairments, abusive home backgrounds, an angry/impulsive/anxious personality, and high psychological stress reactivity. In contrast, proactive aggression tends to be characterized by poor parental control, lack of affect, psychopathic personality, and low physiological arousal.

Despite the ambiguity of whether reactive and proactive aggression form distinct constructs, both reactive and proactive aggression are associated with delinquent personality features. Although research demonstrated that psychopaths behave aggressively and violently (e.g., Andrade, 2008), it remains unclear whether psychopathy relates differentially to these two forms of aggression. Socially, predatory offenders are more sadistic and dominant in interpersonal relations (Brendgen et al., 2006). It is therefore often assumed that proactive offenders are more likely to be psychopaths (Porter, Birt, Yuille, & Hervé, 2001). Indeed, psychopathic offenders more often show a history of predatory aggression than non-psychopathic offenders (e.g., Woodworth & Porter, 2002). In studies by Edens (e.g., Edens, Poythress, Lilienfeld, Patrick, & Test, 2008), it was demonstrated that specifically PPI-II (impulsive antisociality) relates to aggressive misconduct. However, most of the above studies did not take standardized reactive and proactive dimensions into account. Research by Woodworth

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and Porter (2002) and Porter, Woodworth, Earle, Drugge, and Boer (2003) demonstrated that psychopathy is mainly related to instrumental, cold-blooded homicide, supporting the notion that psychopaths are predominantly proactively violent. However, all of these studies used this type of crime to measure proactive aggression. Given the fact that a critical differentiation between reactive and proactive aggression concerns *motive of aggression* (Raine et al., 2006), offenders charged with a “proactive” offence at the time of imprisonment could be more reactively than proactively aggressive in their criminal career (Chase et al., 2001; Cornell et al., 1996). Moreover, mixed motives may lead to both reactive and proactive aggression in psychopathic offenders (Raine et al., 1998). Therefore, using current criminal offence as a method to classify proactive aggression, while valuable in its own right, may not be the most appropriate method of assessing reactive and proactive aggression.

To our knowledge, no study to date has measured the relationship between psychopathy and aggression using self-report measurements. One exception is a study by Raine and colleagues (2006) demonstrating that psychopathic personality was related to residualized scores of proactive aggression. A limitation of this study is that it was conducted within a community sample. An interesting question concerns whether this relationship remains within the context of a prison. In an imprisoned sample, one could hypothesize that psychopathy is related to both types of aggres-

sion. Since there has been no prior research on different variations of psychopathy with different types of aggression, the current study investigated whether reactive and proactive aggression correlate differentially to different characteristics of psychopathy within prison inmates in order to assess the validity of the reactive–proactive aggression distinction.

In order to assess the utility of self-reports measurements the current study also investigates demographical variables such as age and recidivism. A diagnosis of psychopathy has often been a good predictor of recidivism (e.g., Hemphill, Hare, & Wong, 1998). Some evidence suggests that both psychopathy factors (i.e., fearlessness and antisocial) correlate significantly with future violence (e.g., Grann & Wedin, 2002). Therefore, in the current study a positive relationship with aggression and psychopathy is expected (recidivists are often more psychopathic and aggressive; e.g., Gretton, McBride, Hare, O’Shaughnessy, & Kumka, 2001). Since research has demonstrated that both aggression and certain psychopathic characteristics (i.e., psychopathy factor 2) go down with age (Porter, Birt, & Boer, 2001), it is predicted that aggression as well as psychopathy will be negatively related to age.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In total, 121 male prison inmates participated in this study. They were enrolled from several prisons in the Netherlands, de Geerhorst in Sittard, Overmaze in Maastricht, and Penitentiary institute Breda and Zoetermeer. The following exclusion criteria were used: psychotic disorders; the use of any kind of medication; a history of traumatic brain injury; and current drug and/or alcohol dependence. Given the association between drug and/or alcohol use and psychopathy, most participants had a diagnosis of substance abuse. However, there was no existing drug or alcohol use while participating in this study. All were Caucasian, native Dutch speakers, and had Dutch nationality. Their mean age was 35.12 (SD = 10.28). Regarding type of crime committed, 21 (17%) were convicted for murder or manslaughter, while 20 (16.5%) had committed a sexual offence, of which eight (6.6%) were convicted for sexual abuse of children and 12 (9.9%) of rape. Twenty-six (21.5%) were convicted for bodily harm, three (2.5%) for arson, 24 (19.8%) for theft, 16 (13%) for drug smuggling, and 11 (9.1%) for other crimes (i.e., fraud). Regarding recidivism status, some rates were unknown ($n = 33$) leaving 88 offenders who could be analyzed for recidivism. Recidivism was scored when an offender had one or more prior convictions on top of the crime they were incarcerated for.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Psychopathic personality inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996)

The Dutch version of the PPI (Jelicic, Merckelbach, Timmermans, & Candel, 2004) was administered to all participants, measuring different dimensions of psychopathy. This 187-item self-report instrument employs a 4-point scale (1 = false, 2 = somewhat false, 3 = somewhat true, 4 = true), divided over eight subscales and three validity scales. A total score can be obtained by summing across items. More recent factor analysis on these eight subscales revealed evidence for two largely orthogonal factors (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, & Krueger, 2003; Patrick, Edens, Poythress, Lilienfeld, & Benning, 2006). Factor 1 is referred to as the fearless dominance and Factor 2 is termed impulsive antisociality. Several studies have examined the psychometric properties of the PPI. For the PPI total score, internal consistency ranges from .90 to .93. For the PPI

Table 1
Distinctive correlates of reactive and proactive aggression.

Reactive aggression	Proactive aggression
Impairments in executive functioning ^a	
Verbal impairments ^b	
Inadequate encoding and problem-solving processing ^c	
Physical abuse ^c	
Negative emotionality ^d	Low physiological arousal ^e
Controlling and punitive parents ^d	Less parental monitoring and fewer household rules ^f
	Lack of moral emotions ^g
Diminished P3 ERP amplitudes ^h	
History of abuse ⁱ	Relationship with psychopathic traits ^j
Neuroticism ^k	Family violence ^l
Increased peer delinquency ^l	Externalizing behaviour ^k
Hostile attributional bias ⁿ	Delinquency ^m
Anger, impulsive ^k	Positive outcome expectations ⁿ
Dating violence ^p	Instrumental ^o
Predicts substance abuse ^q	Delinquency related physical violence ^p
Higher cortisol levels ^r	Family history of substance abuse ^j
Poorer psychosocial adjustment ^{ct}	Lower cortisol levels ^s
Hyperactivity ^u	Lower autonomic reactivity ^q

^a Stanford, Greve, and Gerstle (1997).

^b Greve et al. (2002).

^c Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, and Pettit (1997).

^d Vitaro et al. (2006).

^e Stanford, Houston, Villemarette-Pittman, and Greve (2003).

^f Poulin and Boivin (2000).

^g Cima et al. (2007).

^h Barratt, Stanford, Felthous, and Kent (1997), Mathias and Stanford (1999).

ⁱ Cornell et al. (1996), Porter et al. (2003), Woodworth and Porter (2002).

^j Connor, Steingard, Cunningham, Anderson, and Melonni (2004).

^k Miller and Lynam, 2006.

^l Fite and Colder (2007).

^m Vitaro, Gendreau, Tremblay, and Oligny (1998).

ⁿ Walters (2007).

^o Brendgen et al. (2006).

^p Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay, and Lavoie (2001).

^q Hubbard et al. (2002).

^r Van Bokhoven et al. (2005).

^s Cima, Smeets, and Jelicic (2008).

^t Card and Little (2006).

^u McAuliffe, Hubbard, Rubin, Morrow, and Dearing (2006).

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