



## Mean on the screen: Psychopathy, relationship aggression, and aggression in the media

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to examine the association between psychopathic features and various forms of relationship aggression in a non-clinical population. Additionally, exposure to media aggression was examined as a potential mediator of the relationship between psychopathy and aggression. Participants consisted of a total of 337 individuals who either reported on their current or most recent relationship. Results revealed that secondary psychopathy traits were related to both types of aggression measured in the current study (physical aggression and romantic relational aggression). Additionally, primary psychopathy traits were related to romantic relational aggression. Though exposure to media aggression (both physical and relational forms) was related to perpetration of relationship aggression, such exposure did not mediate the relationship between psychopathy and aggression.

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### 1. Introduction

Psychopathy has long been a focus of the public, media, and research community. Defined by features such as lacking conscience and feelings for others, psychopaths use charm, manipulation, and sometimes violence to get what they want (Hare, 1996). The literature suggests that psychopathy is multi-dimensional, with individual components (e.g. factor-1 and factor-2, Hare, 1991, or the four facets, Hare, 2003) demonstrating continuous rather than categorical qualities. It is therefore possible for a 'psychopath' to demonstrate few of the core psychological traits expected. This knowledge has led scholars such as Skeem, Poythress, Edens, Lilienfeld, and Cale (2003) to suggest that distinctions should be made on the basis of 'primary' and 'secondary' psychopathy, the former demonstrating the core affective traits whereas the latter being more behaviorally derived.

Karpman (1941) first proposed the primary–secondary psychopath distinction. Although both types manifested a disregard for the rights and feeling of others, as well as antisocial behavior, Karpman believed that primary psychopathy was the result of a congenital affective deficit whereas secondary psychopathy was the result of an adaptation to adverse early experiences. Primary psychopaths were believed to be motivated by reward (instrumen-

tal behavior), whereas secondary psychopaths were motivated by emotion (reactive behavior). Subsequent research has provided support for this distinction, finding that the traits of primary psychopathy may be the result of low levels of anxiety, whereas the features of secondary psychopathy may be the result of high levels of negative affect and impulsivity. There is broad research support for the existence of primary and secondary psychopathy traits (Falkenbach, Poythress, & Creevy, 2008; Ray, Poythress, Weir, & Rickelm, 2009; Wareham, Dembo, Poythress, Childs, & Schmeidler, 2009) (for a review see Poythress & Skeem, 2007).

#### 1.1. Aggression

A disproportionately large amount of violence and crime is thought to be perpetrated by individuals with psychopathic features (Hare, 1996). However, not all such individuals use violence to get what they desire. Indeed, many "successful" psychopaths function reasonably well in society, with many holding positions of power within academia, business, and other industries (e.g., Board & Fritzon, 2005; Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999). Although egocentric, callous, and manipulative (traits of primary psychopathy), these individuals usually lack the more overtly antisocial attributes found in secondary psychopathy, attributes that typically result in contact with the criminal justice system. According to the Warrior Hawk hypothesis (see Book & Quinsey, 2004), such individuals avoid violent behavior, particularly if they feel their

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behavior would be discovered. Instead, discretion and more manipulative types of behavior are likely to better suit their needs.

Most research on the aggression and psychopathy relationship has focused on physical violence (e.g., Martinez et al., 2007). However, there is a growing body of research suggesting that individuals with psychopathic traits are also more likely to use relational aggression (e.g., Coyne & Thomas, 2008; Schmeelk, Sylvers, & Lilienfeld, 2008; Warren & Clabour, 2009). Such aggression aims to harm relationships or the social structure as a whole (e.g., social exclusion, relationship manipulation, spreading rumors) and is linked to a variety of psychosocial problems for victims (e.g., Craig, 1998).

Coyne and Thomas (2008) found that individuals with primary psychopathic traits were particularly likely to use relational aggression to manipulate those around them. However, they speculate that individuals with psychopathic traits may use aggression differently, depending on the target of the aggression. Some evolutionary theorists (Dawkins, 1976), indicate that aggression in close relationships may be particularly problematic, as the individual is not likely to remain anonymous, and the partner may eventually leave the relationship. However, various forms of partner aggression can be crafted to carefully manipulate and control one's partner into a mindset of denial and need for the aggressor. For example, romantic relational aggression (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002) specifically focuses on manipulating the relationship to control one's partner (e.g., threatening to leave the relationship should the individual not comply with the aggressor's wishes).

Such aggression in romantic relationships may be particularly common by individuals with psychopathic traits. Indeed, the relationship between psychopathy and abuse has been noted in several studies (e.g., Huss & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006; Swogger, Walsh, & Kosson, 2007). However, the vast majority of this research focuses on physical forms of abuse in a clinical population and typically examines psychopathy as a unified construct as opposed to examining subtypes. Accordingly, one of the primary aims of this study is to examine the relationship between primary and secondary psychopathy traits and romantic relationship abuse, with a particular focus on romantic relational aggression in a non-clinical population.

### 1.2. Media

One factor often examined when explaining aggressive behavior is the media. Some studies have found that viewing violence in the media can increase aggressive thoughts and behavior, both in the short and long term (Anderson et al., 2003). Other research has also revealed that viewing relational forms of aggression in the media can also affect both physically and relationally aggressive behavior (e.g., Coyne et al., 2008). Accordingly, examining even subtle forms of aggression in the media is important when determining the effect of media exposure on subsequent behavior.

However, research examining the link between media violence and subsequent aggression has come under recent criticism. Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005) argue that though there is clear evidence for a short term effect of viewing media violence, the long-term effects on aggressive behavior and crime are weak or inconsistent. Additionally, after correcting for publication bias, a recent meta-analysis (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009) found only a very small overall effect size ( $r = .08$ ) when examining this relationship. Indeed, according to the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), the viewer seeks out violent media to fulfill certain needs, such as having an aggressive personality. According to this theory, personality may drive any relationship between media and violence.

Additionally, the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) notes that personality may influence the media

violence effect in two other important ways. First, long-term exposure to media violence can shape an individual's personality, particularly those facets of personality related to aggressive behavior (Huesmann, 1986). Second, certain personality characteristics seem to mediate the effect of viewing media violence on subsequent aggressive behavior in the short term. For example, when Zilmann and Weaver (1997) exposed adults to gratuitous media violence, only males high in psychoticism showed increased acceptance of aggressive conflict resolution. On the other hand, Ferguson, Cruz, Martinez, Rueda, Ferguson, and Negy (2008) found that although personality was related to engagement in crime, exposure to media violence was not.

To our knowledge, it is unknown whether psychopathic traits and media violence are related. Indeed, it is possible that individuals with such traits may be particularly vulnerable to media effects. First, these individuals may be more prone to enactment of aggression, with a highly elaborate system of aggression-related scripts in memory. Secondly, individuals with primary psychopathic features are unlikely to empathize with victims of on-screen violence, one of the characteristics that often buffers the effect of media violence on aggression (see Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994). Accordingly, exposure to media aggression may particularly enhance the likelihood for engagement in aggressive behavior for those with psychopathic traits.

### 1.3. Aims and hypotheses

There are two main purposes to this study. Firstly, we aim to assess the relationship between psychopathy traits and relationship aggression in a non-clinical population. It is expected that all forms of aggression will be associated with both types of psychopathy traits. However, since primary psychopathy is characterized by an aptitude for manipulating people and relationships for their own advantage (Hare, 1996), it is expected that the use of romantic relational aggression would be particularly associated with primary psychopathy traits.

The other primary aim of the study is to test whether viewing media aggression mediates the relationship between psychopathy and aggression. Based on the uses and gratifications approach, we predicted that psychopathy would be related to both types of media aggression, and this would partially mediate the relationship between psychopathy and relationship aggression.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The study consisted of 337 participants (55% female) recruited from undergraduate courses at a university. Participant age ranged from 18–27 ( $M = 20.93$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ) and the majority described themselves as Caucasian (88%). Furthermore, all participants reported being heterosexual. Relationship status was fairly mixed, with 23% of participants being married, 44% reporting they were dating someone at the present time, and 34% reporting they were currently single (though they had previously been in a relationship). Length of relationships ranged from one month to just over eight years ( $M = 1$  year, 6 months;  $SD = 1$  year, 1 month). The main requirement for participation was that participants had to have been involved in a serious relationship at some point in their adult life (since graduation from high school). Qualified participants were given the questionnaire packet and were asked to complete it by the next class period. A debriefing form was given upon completion of the questionnaires. Participants received course credit for their participation. Completion rates across classrooms ranged from 65 to 90% (overall completion rate of 85%).

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