



Perceived positive outcomes as a mediator between adolescent callous-unemotional traits and antisocial behavior



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated perceived positive outcomes as a mediator of the relation between callous-unemotional (CU) traits and antisocial behavior (i.e., delinquency, aggression) and the potential moderational influence of anxiety in that model. Participants were 149 adolescents, ages 16–19 years (124 males, 25 females) in a residential setting. Perceived positive outcomes for antisocial behavior mediated the relation between CU traits (callousness and uncaring) and such behaviors. Additionally, anxiety had a moderating effect on the relation between callousness and perception of positive outcomes, and the indirect effect of callousness on antisocial behavior was conditional based on varying levels of anxiety. These results suggest a potential mechanism through which CU traits are associated with adolescent behavioral problems.

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1. Introduction

Callous-unemotional (CU) traits (e.g., lack of emotion, guilt, or remorse; callous disregard for others) comprise the affective component of psychopathy and are uniquely associated with stable, aggressive, and severe problem behavior (see Frick and White (2008) for review), as well as with poor adherence to psychological or behavioral treatment (Roose, Bijttebier, Decoene, Claes, & Frick, 2010). CU traits have been conceptualized as consisting of three domains, labeled “callousness” (e.g., lack of empathy or remorse), “uncaring” (e.g., lack of concern about one’s performance or others’ feelings), and “unemotional” (e.g., absence of emotional expression) using the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU; Essau, Sasagawa, & Frick, 2006). Research has demonstrated moderate associations for callousness and uncaring with externalizing problems and nonsignificant or even negative relations for unemotionality and such problems (Berg et al., 2013; Essau et al., 2006).

Further understanding of the factors that might contribute to the relation between CU traits and behavioral problems in youth is needed. One such factor may be how a young person interprets, and responds to, the behavioral contingencies in his or her environment. That is, the individual’s belief that antisocial behavior is rewarded – or that the positive consequences outweigh the negative consequences – may partially explain the persistent connection

between CU traits and such behaviors. Such perceptions could provide a potential target for intervention for youth with CU traits insofar as altering the perceived positive outcomes of antisocial behavior might reduce the likelihood of its occurrence. The present study is a preliminary investigation of the role of such perceptions in the connection between CU traits and adolescent problem behaviors.

CU traits have been linked to response modulation deficits whereby an individual has difficulty adapting his/her behavior to altered contextual factors or contingencies (see O’Brien and Frick (1996), Roose, Bijttebier, Van der Oord, Claes, and Lilienfeld (2013)). Thus, when a behavior has been previously rewarded, an individual with high levels of CU traits may have particular difficulty modifying that behavior even if it is met with increasing rates of punishment (Newman, Patterson, & Kosson, 1987; O’Brien & Frick, 1996). Moreover, CU traits have been associated with a tendency to perceive social rewards from aggression (Pardini & Byrd, 2012). Adolescents with high levels of CU traits also tend to be unconcerned about possible social conflicts that may come at the expense of reaching their social goals (Pardini, 2011). Therefore, CU traits are governed by processes that attend to potential positive outcomes for engaging in negative behaviors, whereas potential negative outcomes (both to the victim and to the perpetrator) are largely ignored (Pardini & Byrd, 2012).

For the present study, we theorized that the reward-oriented approach reflected in experimental paradigms of reward dominance would be evident in self-reported perceptions regarding antisocial behavior, meaning that adolescents with high levels of CU traits would report engaging in behaviors that have potentially

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negative results (i.e., delinquency and aggression) at least in part because of the perceived opportunity for a positive result. This perceived likelihood of positive outcomes may override any concerns or awareness of the potential negative outcomes of those behaviors, particularly if the individual has previously experienced such positive outcomes.

1.1. Anxiety and the relation between CU traits and antisocial behavior

Previous research suggests that anxiety plays a mitigating role in the connection between CU traits and reward dominance such that individuals with CU traits and co-occurring anxiety are less likely to persist with a response that is increasingly punished than are those with CU traits alone (O'Brien and Frick (1996)). Therefore, individuals with high levels of CU traits who also have relatively high levels of anxiety may be more inhibited against engaging in antisocial behavior than individuals with high levels of CU traits and lower levels of anxiety. As such, perceived positive outcomes for antisocial behavior may play less of a role in mediating the relation between CU traits and antisocial behavior if an individual is also relatively anxious. That is, among individuals with high levels of both CU traits and anxiety, the perceived benefits of antisocial behavior may be tempered, thus inhibiting engagement in such behavior.

1.2. Present study and hypotheses

The primary aim of the present study was to determine the potential mediating role of perceived positive outcomes for engaging in antisocial behavior in the relation between CU traits and those behaviors. In particular, the study sought to extend the literature by examining whether self-reports of perceived outcomes for antisocial behavior were relevant in a manner similar to what has been demonstrated from laboratory tasks. Furthermore, anxiety was examined as a potential moderator in the proposed model. It was hypothesized that the callousness and uncaring aspects of CU traits in particular would be positively related to antisocial behavior (i.e., delinquency and aggression; Hypothesis 1). It was also hypothesized that adolescents' perceived positive outcomes for antisocial behavior would mediate the above relations (Hypothesis 2). It also was predicted that anxiety would moderate the same mediations such that the presence of higher levels of CU traits along with lower levels of anxiety would be associated with higher perceived positive outcomes for antisocial behavior (Hypothesis 3). Finally, conditional indirect effects models were examined to determine if perceived positive outcomes mediated the relation between CU traits and antisocial behavior only for low levels of anxiety (i.e., moderated mediation). Alternative conceptual models were considered, including the moderating effect of anxiety on the relation between perceived positive outcomes and antisocial behavior, between CU traits and antisocial behavior, and among all three stages of the mediation model simultaneously.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 149 non-adjudicated adolescents (124 male, 25 female) ages 16–19 years old ($M = 17.01$, $SD = .86$). The sample was 56% Caucasian, 34% African American, and 10% other. The participants were enrolled in a voluntary 22-week military style residential program designed for adolescents who have dropped out of school for a variety of reasons including academic, behavioral, and economic. Participants were not clinic- or court-referred to the program.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2003)

The ICU is a self-report measure of CU traits in adolescents consisting of 24 items, each rated using a four-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all true* to *definitely true*. As noted above, Essau and colleagues (2006) provided support for a three-factor solution (i.e., Callousness, Uncaring, and Unemotional). Further support for this factor structure was demonstrated by Roose and colleagues (2010). In the present study, two items that loaded on the Callousness scale demonstrated low item-total correlations and were removed to improve internal consistency of the Callousness scale. Resulting alphas for the Callousness and Uncaring scales were acceptable at .72 and .78, respectively. The Unemotional scale demonstrated lower internal consistency with an alpha of .53.

2.2.2. Self-report of delinquency (SRD; Elliott & Ageton, 1980)

The SRD is a 34-item self-report measure that assesses the occurrence of a variety of delinquent behaviors such as property, drug, status, and violent offenses. Total score values can range from 0 (reporting no offenses) to 34 (reporting at least one instance of all listed offenses). In the present sample, the internal consistency of the SRD was .89.

2.2.3. Peer conflict scale (PCS; Marsee, Kimonis, & Frick, 2004)

The PCS is a self-report measure of aggression in adolescents. The PCS consists of 40 items (e.g., "I enjoy making fun of others," "I threaten others to get what I want," "I carefully plan out how to hurt others") rated on a four-point scale ranging from *not at all true* to *definitely true*. The total PCS score was calculated with higher scores representing higher levels of overall aggression. In this sample, the internal consistency of the PCS was excellent with an alpha of .96.

2.2.4. Behavior assessment system for children, 2nd edition (BASC-2; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004)

The BASC-2 was used to measure self-reported anxiety with a 13-item scale. The self-report form utilizes a four-point Likert-style response format with response choices being *Never*, *Sometimes*, *Often*, and *Almost Always* for some items and a *True/False* format for the others. To ensure compatibility between response formats, z-scores were calculated for all items and summed to form the score for the Anxiety scale. The internal consistency for this scale was good, $\alpha = .85$.

2.2.5. Perceptions of individual outcomes (PIO)

The PIO was developed for the present study to assess perceived positive and negative outcomes of engaging in antisocial behavior. The target behaviors for this measure were derived from parent-reported BASC-2 Conduct Problems and Aggression scale items as well as PCS and SRD items to ensure coverage of a broad range of antisocial behaviors typically assessed in research and clinical settings. Graduate students and faculty in clinical child psychology reviewed items from these scales to select those that adequately sampled delinquency and aggression to maximize face validity while remaining non-specific to any particular type of problem behavior. Ten behaviors were chosen: using foul language, stealing, drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs, going places without permission, breaking rules, lying, teasing, hitting someone, and carrying a hidden weapon. Respondents indicated their agreement with a statement (e.g., "Good things have happened when I have stolen something.") that the results of a behavior have been positive and then with a statement that the results of the same behavior were negative (e.g., "Bad things have happened when I have stolen something.") on a four-point scale ranging from *completely not true* to *completely true*. Ratings were summed to create separate scale

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