



Social information processing problems related to reactive and proactive aggression of adolescents in residential treatment



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ABSTRACT

Adolescents in residential treatment predominantly show externalizing problems. To provide more tailored treatments, gaining knowledge on underlying processes is important. Aggression is often subdivided in defensive/reactive, and instrumental/proactive aggression. The social information processing (SIP) model assumes that reactive aggression involves early SIP, whereas proactive aggression involves late SIP. This study investigated SIP steps in relation to reactive and proactive aggression of adolescents in residential treatment.

In total 81 adolescents were included in the main analyses. A social information processing task using video vignettes measured sequential SIP steps. Both zero-order and partial correlations with reactive and proactive aggression were investigated.

Early SIP related to both subtypes of aggression, recognizing problems was negatively related to proactive aggression. The late SIP steps generating antisocial goals and responses were related to both aggression subtypes. Feeling competent and positive evaluation related to reactive aggression, while overseeing consequences related to proactive aggression. Partial correlations were non-significant. Post-hoc analysis for males and females separately showed differences in relationships between aggression measures and SIP.

The current study indicates that both subtypes of aggression are related to early and late SIP steps. However, discrepancies are present which could potentially provide specific targets for treatment.

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1. Introduction

Antisocial behaviours in adolescents have a major impact on society and brings considerable costs (Scott, Knapp, Henderson, & Maughan, 2001; Cohen & Piquero, 2009). Adolescents showing severe antisocial behaviours may end up in the juvenile justice system, although such an imposed intervention does not always lead to reduction of problematic behaviours; many show recidivism after two years (Wartna, Kalidien, Tollenaar, & Essers, 2006; Wartna et al., 2012). Since 2008, a new compulsory residential treatment programme was implemented in the Netherlands, specifically aimed at adolescents with severe problem behaviours. Research has shown that adolescents in this residential treatment programme predominantly showed externalizing problem behaviours (98%) (Van Dam, Nijhof, Scholte, & Veerman, 2010). Evaluation of treatment progress of adolescents in the residential programme has shown significant decreases in externalizing problem behaviours as reported by adolescents and parents. However, group care worker

ratings showed a worsening of externalizing behaviours during admittance (Nijhof, Veerman, Engels, & Scholte, 2011). As such, rigorous interventions specifically aimed to reduce severe externalizing behaviours (and recidivism) in adolescents do not necessarily have the desired effect. This could be due to the generic nature of these interventions, which are possibly not sufficiently tailored to differences within externalizing behaviours of the adolescents. In order to provide more tailored interventions, it is important to gain more knowledge on the underlying processes of different types of externalizing behaviours. It has been suggested that the origin of aggressive and rule-breaking behaviours lies within one or more problems in social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994). As such, the current study will investigate different types of aggression and the underlying social information processing problems in a group of adolescents with severe externalizing behavioural problems in a residential treatment programme.

1.1. The social information processing model

The social information processing (SIP) model assumes that in a social situation, behaviour is achieved by six sequential steps, i.e.

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(1) encoding of external and internal cues, (2) interpretation of cues, including attributions, (3) goal clarification or selection, (4) response generation, and (5) response decision, including response evaluation, outcome expectancies, self-efficacy, response selection and the last step involving (6) behavioural enactment (Crick & Dodge; 1994). Problems in each one of these steps may lead to problematic behavioural responses, e.g. aggression. Ultimately, researching the underlying SIP problems of aggression may inform a more tailored treatment for aggressive youth. The first two SIP steps (encoding and interpretation of cues) are thought to guide interpretation and understanding of the current social situation. It has been shown that aggressive children are less likely to use relevant social cues compared to non-aggressive children (Dodge & Tomlin, 1987). Hostile attribution bias or style (HAS) is the tendency to attribute hostile intent to others, which involves encoding and interpretation. A meta-analysis has confirmed that HAS is linked to aggression in several populations and across different ages (Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002). Furthermore, research supports the hypothesis that hostile attribution contributes to aggressive behaviour over time, predicting future aggressive behaviour (Dodge, 2006). As such, the *early* steps of social information processing involving encoding and interpretation seem to play a significant role in aggressive behaviour through hostile attribution biases. The role of *late* steps in social information processing in aggressive behaviour has not been researched as extensively. The steps of (3) goal clarification or selection, (4) response generation have received little or no attention. It has been shown that pre-adolescent aggressive boys generate more aggressive responses and evaluate aggressive responses less negatively (Orobio de Castro, Merk, Koops, Veerman, & Bosch, 2005). Response decision (5) has been shown to have a mediating role in the relation between hostile attribution and antisocial behaviour, especially in adolescents with well-developed cognitive processing capacities (Fontaine, 2010; Fontaine et al., 2010). It has been shown that youth who have problems in both early and late SIP steps, show higher externalizing problems than youth characterized by either early or late SIP problems (Lansford et al., 2006). The present study focuses on both early and late SIP steps, and investigates social information processing problems and its relation with different types of aggression.

1.2. Reactive and proactive aggression

Aggressive behaviour can be divided into subtypes based on motive or function. In this respect, defensive aggression is labelled as reactive aggression, whereas an instrumental or offensive act is labelled as proactive aggression (Vitiello & Stoff, 1997). According to this division, reactive aggression emerges from the (subjective) experience that a given situation is hostile, and is a reaction to an aversive event or anticipated threat as part of a defence mechanism. Proactive aggression however, is driven by the anticipation of reward and is offensive or premeditated in nature (Merk, Orobio de Castro, Koops, & Matthys, 2005). These subtypes of aggression are thought to theoretically differ in function and underlying mechanisms, in which reactive aggression involves hostile attributions and is frustration based, while proactive stems from positive outcome learning (Merk et al., 2005). Indeed, within the SIP model it is assumed that reactive and proactive aggression involve different social information processing problems (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Reactive aggression is thought to involve particularly difficulties in encoding and interpreting cues (hostile attribution), while proactive aggression is thought to involve positive expectancies of aggression and personal gain (late SIP steps). It has been shown that reactive aggressive children showed hostile attribution more frequently, while proactive aggressive children evaluated aggressive acts more positively, and were less likely to have relationship-endorsing goals (Crick & Dodge, 1996).

To our knowledge there is little to no research on social information processing problems of adolescents in the compulsory treatment programme, even though they typically show severe externalizing

behaviours (Van Dam et al., 2010). Recently, Van Rest et al. (2014) evaluated a newly developed SIP instrument measuring each sequential SIP step, in a sample with both adolescents in the juvenile justice system and adolescents in the compulsory treatment programme. Results showed that several SIP steps were correlated with self-reported general aggression and rule breaking behaviour, with no differences between IQ groups (mild to borderline versus average IQ). Correlations were found for both aggression and rule-breaking behaviour with hostile intent attribution. In addition, the aggression subscale was correlated with SIP scores for feeling competent and overseeing consequences of antisocial behaviour, and rule breaking behaviours was correlated with positive evaluation and the selection of antisocial responses. However, no distinction between reactive and proactive aggression or early versus late SIP steps was researched. Furthermore, differences in males versus females have been shown in relation to aggression and its correlates (e.g. Berkout, Young, & Gross, 2011). As such, different social information processing problems for males versus females might relate to their antisocial behaviour.

As such, the aim of the present study was to investigate problems in the sequential steps of social information processing in relation to reactive and proactive aggression of adolescents in a residential treatment programme. First, to replicate earlier findings, the relationship between social information processing and general aggression and rule breaking behaviour was investigated. It was hypothesised that similar correlation would be found (Van Rest et al., 2014). Furthermore, we investigated whether social information processing problems reflected in SIP step scores were related to reactive and proactive aggression respectively. It was hypothesised that reactive aggression would be related to *early* SIP steps (i.e. encoding of external and internal cues, and interpretation of cues). Whereas proactive aggression, would be hypothesised to relate to *late* SIP steps (i.e. goal clarification, response generation, and response decision). In addition, post-hoc analyses investigated the relationship between aggression measures and SIP separately for males and females.

2. Methods

2.1. Social information processing task

The different steps of social information processing were measured with the social information processing task, especially developed and validated for adolescents in residential facilities and in addition suitable for borderline intellectual functioning (Van Rest et al., 2014). The SIP task was developed in cooperation with adolescents with low IQ (between 55 and 85) in order to adjust language and social situations to their language and cognitive abilities. The interview consisted of six different video vignettes in which a social problem situation is displayed involving peers, showing one of the adolescents being underprivileged. Before each video vignette, the participants were asked to identify themselves with the underprivileged peer. After each video vignette, each participant was asked to answer 24 structured questions involving the different SIP steps. The whole interview took approximately 45 min, and was performed and scored by a trained student who followed a detailed protocol concerning potential difficulties with the SIP task, for example when the assistant believed participants did not understand the items. A second trained student scored each interview, and if consensus could not be reached a trained researcher made the final decision of the assigned scores.

The following SIP scores resulted from the structured interview. *Encoding* was assessed with the question 'What happened in this video vignette?' followed by a second question 'What else can you tell me?'. Each video vignette involved ten relevant cues, for which the participant earned a point, this led to one variable of mean score encoding for all six video vignettes (score 0–10). Secondly, it was assessed whether the main problem in the situation was recognized, *problem recognition*, with the question 'In the video vignette a problem is displayed, can you shortly tell me what it is?'. If the problem was fully recognized,

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