

Boldness, meanness and disinhibition as predictors of indirect/direct type of aggressive behavior in youth

Krzysztof Nowakowski

Institute of Psychology, Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

Summary

Aim. Numerous studies show that a high level of psychopathic traits in youth is related to the propensity to use various types and forms of aggression. The presented study focuses on the relations between psychopathy and aggression, both indirect (relational) and direct in this age group. The triarchic model of psychopathy was used, according to which psychopathy is described as a configuration of boldness, meanness and disinhibition. It was assumed that boldness would be a predictor for indirect aggression and disinhibition – for the direct forms of aggressive behaviors.

Methods. The sample consisted of 200 older adolescents (108 boys and 92 girls), aged 16–19. Two groups were distinguished for comparison: juveniles from youth fostering centers and youth not violating legal norms. For the measurement of the variables the following self-reports were used: Triarchic Psychopathy Measure, Indirect Aggression Scale (Aggressor Version) and Aggression Questionnaire.

Results. From among the dimensions of psychopathy, the strongest predictor for both forms of aggression (indirect and direct) was disinhibition. The study also revealed the differences in the intensity of psychopathic traits and aggressive behaviors with reference to gender and institutionalization. However, the hypothesis on the relationship between boldness and indirect aggression was not confirmed.

Conclusions. The results showed that disinhibition and meanness can be considered as significant personality risk factors for aggressive behaviors and violence not only in adults but also in adolescents. The study supported also the heterogeneity of the triarchic model of psychopathy itself.

Key words: psychopathy, indirect aggression, direct aggression

Introduction

The leading theories of psychopathy, both classic and modern ones, comprise a claim about the connection between psychopathic traits and propensity for aggressive behaviors. The data from studies conducted in the population of correctional facilities

and among forensic patients confirm that psychopathy is related with an increased risk of violent acts and criminal violence [1-3]. Moreover, the studies on aggressiveness of adults who do not violate legal norms also indicate that disposition to aggressive behaviors is associated with psychopathic traits, in particular with symptoms of meanness and disinhibition [4-6]. In the light of those reports, it seems that a crucial role in the psychopathy – aggression relation is played on the one hand by emotional deficiencies (such as lack of sensitivity and empathy, unconcern, callousness, no sense of guilt or remorse and shallowed affect) typical of a psychopathic personality and, on the other hand, by problems with self-regulation of behavior, expressed mostly in high impulsiveness and reduced self-control.

A relationship between psychopathic traits and aggression is also indicated by research conducted among youth¹. Numerous reports suggest that psychopathic symptoms shown in adolescence are associated not only with juvenile sexual and criminal offending [13], but also with a wide spectrum of aggressive behaviors such as bullying [14], cyberbullying [15, 16] or using displaced aggression [17]. It should be noted that most studies on psychopathy and aggression among young people are based on the distinction into reactive/impulsive aggression and proactive/instrumental aggression (e.g., [18-20]), or refer to direct forms of aggression, which (such as robbery) are often classified as indices of criminal violence in itself (see [21]). So far, relatively little attention has been paid in this field of study to another type of aggressive behavior – indirect aggression. Indirect aggression, also known as relational aggression, covers the whole range of diverse covert aggressive behaviors (such as spreading malicious gossip or ridiculing), aiming at creating a negative image of the victims in the eyes of others, lowering their position in the group and social exclusion [22].

The relevance of investigating the relationship joining psychopathy with indirect aggression results to a large degree from interpersonal characteristics of this disorder, which comprise egocentrism, dominance, ruthless exploitation of social environment as well as manipulative and deceptive skills. In this context, making use of covert forms of aggression (like, e.g., attacking the status and the reputation of the victims) may be treated as a sign of specific manifestation of the psychopathic style of functioning in social interactions, revealing as early on as in adolescence. Penney and Moretti [23] reported that symptoms of psychopathy – measured by the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL-YV) – accompany the more frequent engagement in relational

¹ Aggressive behaviors are also one of the key diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder (CD, DSM-5) and conduct-dissocial disorder (CDD, ICD-11). Psychopathy and CD/CDD are not considered equal disease entities. However, many researchers draw similarities in the etiology, symptomatology and biological and psychosocial correlates of these two disorders [7-9]. Convergence of psychopathy and conduct disorder is especially evident in the case of the CD subtype with limited prosocial emotions (LPE). This subtype is characterized by insensitivity, lack of guilt and remorse, lack of empathy and shallow affect, i.e., callous-unemotional traits, which are core features of psychopathy. Reaching a differential diagnosis is difficult – not just due to the co-occurrence of early symptoms of psychopathy with conduct disorders, but also its co-occurrence with externalizing disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder or ADHD [10, 11]. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research on the distinctiveness of psychopathy in relation to other disorders associated with antisocial and aggressive behaviors in youth (see [12]).

aggression, regardless of the adolescents' gender. On the other hand, Marsee and Frick [24] revealed a strong relationship between callous-unemotional (CU) traits and covert aggressive behaviors in under-age detained girls. The results of several other studies [25-27] also indicate that CU traits are positively related to relational aggression, though some findings suggest that narcissism is a stronger predictor of this form of aggression than CU traits [28, 29].

While the hypothesis on the relationship between psychopathy and indirect aggression has already been verified with regard to youth, it seems that up until now the role played in this relationship by particular components making up the construct of psychopathy has been verified only to a relatively limited degree. It was assumed, then, in the present study that the tendency to use indirect aggression in peer relationships by youth with psychopathic traits is related not so much to a high overall level of psychopathy, but to the intensity of boldness – one of the dimensions of the triarchic psychopathy model [30]. We hypothesized that psychopathic traits described through the boldness dimension, such as decisiveness, lack of social anxiety or persuasiveness rather than emotional deficiencies (meanness) and decreased behavioral control (disinhibition) are responsible for hurting others indirectly through exclusion from a group, depreciation in the eyes of the peers, malicious comments, manipulating feelings and inducing a sense of guilt. On the other hand, it was expected that the dimension of disinhibition would prove to be a predictor of a more frequent use of direct aggression, both physical and verbal.

The triarchic model of psychopathy used in this study is based on a dimensional approach to personality disorders, being an alternative to Hare's theory of psychopathy and the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R), prevailing so far. Moreover, the triarchic model remains consistent with reports concerning early precursors of psychopathy and the three-factor structure of psychopathic traits in youth (see [31]). The studies on features of psychopathy from the triarchic perspective have already been conducted among older adolescents [32-35] and the Triarchic Psychopathy Measure (TriPM) itself allows for the use of a different research approach than clinical rating scales or measures based solely on the concept of CU traits.

Material

The sample consisted of 200 youths in their late adolescence (aged 16-19) from two equal groups to be compared. Group 1 comprised juveniles (55 boys, 45 girls, age: $M = 17.20$; $SD = 2.01$) residing in youth fostering centers (*Młodzieżowe Ośrodki Wychowawcze/MOWs*) in conflict with the law and displaying serious maladaptive behavior, such as: violence towards adults and peers, theft, dealing drugs and problematic substance use. Group 2 comprised adolescents who had not violated legal norms, recruited from secondary schools (53 boys, 47 girls, age: $M = 17.65$; $SD = 1.70$).

Method

Before the study, a positive opinion of the competent Ethics Committee of the University had been obtained (no. 03/III/2019). The study was conducted in youth fostering centers and a large educational care facility for youth in southern Poland. Prior to filling in the questionnaires, the participants had been informed about voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and the use of data for scientific purposes only. The participants and their caregivers expressed their informed consent to the research.

For the measurement of the intensity and the structure of psychopathic traits, the Polish adaptation of the Triarchic Psychopathic Measure TriPM-41 [36] was used. The TriPM-41 consists of three scales corresponding to the basic dimensions (domains) of psychopathy in the triarchic model, i.e., boldness, meanness and disinhibition. The tool also allows for measurement of the overall level of psychopathic traits. All 41 items of the questionnaire are rated on scale with the answers 'true', 'somewhat true', 'somewhat false' and 'false', coded from 3 to 0 points. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the particular TriPM-41 scales ranges from 0.84 to 0.90, and for the total score it is 0.84.

Indirect aggression was measured by means of the Indirect Aggression Scale (Aggressor Version) – IAS-A [37]. A Polish version of the scale, made by a bilingual person in compliance with the standards of back-translation, was used. The IAS-A is a 25-item self-report tool designed for the measurement of this form of aggression which occurs in social and interpersonal relations. The IAS-A comprises three scales: Social Exclusion (SE), Malicious Humor (MH) and Guilt Induction (GI), corresponding to different types of covert aggressive behaviors. Total scores from these scales also allow for the determination of the general level of indirect aggression. The participant addresses statements of the questionnaire using a 5-point scale, where 1 stands for 'never' and 5 – 'regularly'. In the original version of the IAS-A, the Cronbach's α coefficients for the particular scales equaled as follows: 0.82 (SE), 0.84 (MH) and 0.81 (GI). In this study, these indices were 0.86, 0.86, and 0.83, for Social Exclusion, Malicious Humor, and Guilt Induction scales, respectively. Internal consistency of the IAS-A in the present sample was Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$.

The level of the last of the measured variables – direct aggression – was determined on the basis of the results obtained through the Aggression Questionnaire [38]. The Polish version was used, as prepared by *Instytut Amity* [39]. The AQ consists of 29 items grouped into four scales: Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger and Hostility, rated according to a 5-point scale where 1 stands for 'not at all like me' and 5 – 'completely like me'. The reliability of the AQ in the Amity version is satisfactory – the Cronbach's α coefficients for the scales are within the range of 0.76 (Physical Aggression) to 0.60 (Anger), and for the total score – 0.87. In this study a measure of direct aggression was used, being the total of the scores from the scales on Physical and Verbal Aggression. Both scales contain items referring to behavioral, overt indices of aggression (such as, e.g., getting into fights, hitting when provoked, arguing and quarreling), while the scales of Anger and Hostility comprise, respectively, the affec-

tive and the cognitive component of aggression. Selected scales of the AQ had been used in previous studies as separate measures of direct aggression [40].

The statistical analysis of the data obtained was performed with the use of the IBM SPSS v.24 software. The following parametric statistics were used: Pearson’s correlation coefficient, Student’s t-test and linear regression analysis.

Results

The correlation analysis conducted in the first stage showed the occurrence of statistically significant correlations between the dimensions of psychopathy and indirect/direct aggression (Table 1).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations (SD), and correlation coefficients for measures of psychopathy and aggression in the study group (N = 200)

Variable	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Psychopathy ^a	59.78	15.00								
2. Boldness	24.82	6.54	0.49***							
3. Meanness	11.71	5.63	0.62***	0.09						
4. Disinhibition	23.29	10.12	0.81***	0.03	0.30***					
5. Indirect aggression ^b	57.39	17.90	0.47***	0.12	0.42***	0.37***				
6. Social exclusion	22.48	7.50	0.48***	0.10	0.42***	0.41***	0.93***			
7. Malicious humor	22.16	7.14	0.45***	0.15*	0.38***	0.35***	0.93***	0.78***		
8. Guilt induction	12.74	4.89	0.32***	0.05	0.36***	0.23***	0.87***	0.73***	0.73***	
9. Direct aggression	40.93	10.39	0.51***	0.20**	0.26***	0.47***	0.52***	0.43***	0.60***	0.37***

Note. ^a TriPM total score; ^b IAS-A total score; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Disinhibition positively correlated with all the indices of indirect aggression ($r = 0.23-0.41$, $p < 0.001$) as well as with direct aggression ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). A similar association was reported with reference to meanness. Meanness moderately correlated with indirect aggression ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), including all the IAS scales ($r = 0.36-0.42$, $p < 0.01$), and direct aggression ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). However, boldness had a weak correlation only with indirect aggression in the scale of Malicious Humor ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) as well as with direct aggression ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$).

In the next stage of the analysis, comparisons were made between selected groups (group 1: juveniles in MOWs, group 2: non-institutionalized youth without criminal records) with regard to the dimensions of psychopathy, indirect aggression and direct aggression. Moreover, the intergroup comparisons were conducted with gender as

a division criterion. Tests of differences between means in the compared groups of youths showed that the juveniles in MOWs are characterized by a higher intensity of psychopathy traits ($t = 3.01, p < 0.1, d = 0.43$), disinhibition ($t = 5.19, p < 0.01, d = 0.73$) and direct aggression ($t = 3.64, p < 0.01, d = 0.52$). On the other hand, youths from the non-institutionalized comparison group achieved higher scores in the scope of indirect aggression in the form of inducing guilt ($t = -3.70, p < 0.01, d = 0.52$). No significant gender differences were noticed with regard to general intensity of psychopathic traits (TriPM total score) and indirect aggression (IAS total score). Gender was a differentiating factor, though, at the level of the TriPM and IAS scales: girls used indirect aggression in the form of inducing a sense of guilt more often ($t = -3.14, p < 0.01, d = 0.44$) while boys showed a higher level of boldness ($t = 2.98, p < 0.01, d = 0.42$).

The final stage of the analysis consisted in testing the linear regression models where the dimensions of psychopathy were the psychological predictors, and indirect aggression and direct aggression were the independent variables. Gender ($\beta = -0.19, p < 0.01$), institution ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.01$), meanness ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$) and disinhibition ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$) showed a significant effect on indirect aggression². The model explained 29% of indirect aggression variance ($F(5.19) = 17.37, p < 0.001$). Boldness ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.01$), meanness ($\beta = 0.14, p = 0.04$) and disinhibition ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$) showed a significant effect on direct aggression. The model explained 27% of direct aggression variance ($F(5.19) = 15.53, p < 0.001$). In conclusion, regression analysis revealed that among the dimensions of psychopathy, disinhibition and – to a lesser extent – meanness were predictors for both types of aggression (indirect and direct). However, boldness turned out to be only a weak predictor for the disposition to undertake overt and direct aggressive behaviors.

Discussion of the results

The assumed hypotheses were confirmed by the obtained data only partially. As predicted, disinhibition was that dimension of psychopathy which was mostly positively related with direct aggression. Nevertheless, the assumption that the domain of psychopathic boldness is responsible for the disposition for behaviors which consist in lowering someone else's position in a group or social exclusion (indirect aggression) was not confirmed. Meanness and disinhibition turned out to be the main predictors of indirect aggression, which may indicate that the propensity for indirect forms of aggression is not conditioned by a configuration of psychopathic traits other than the propensity for aggression as such. Hence, no proof was found for the claim that the so-called adaptive traits of psychopathy (stress immunity, social influence, positive self-presentation), described through

² Coded for gender: 0 – women, 1 – men; coded for institution: 0 – youth fostering centres/MOWs, 1 – reference group/non-institutionalized youth

the dimension of boldness, are related to the use of more 'sophisticated' forms of aggression in interpersonal relations.

The findings suggest that the key role is played in this relationship by lowered behavioral inhibition and impulsiveness (disinhibition) as well as by deficiencies in the scope of pro-social emotions and emotional reactivity (meanness). Disinhibition and meanness were also positively related to both indirect and direct aggression, which confirms additionally that the intensity of these very traits increases the risk of aggression as such, regardless of the form in which the aggressive behavior is manifested. Some previous studies have also reported a similar relationship in adults [4, 6, 41]. The results suggest that high disinhibition and meanness may be significant early personality-based risk factors for violence.

Intergroup comparisons did not reveal significant differences in indirect aggression resulting from gender. Apart from a more frequent engagement of teenage girls in behaviors aiming at inducing a sense of guilt in their victims, other indices of indirect aggression were similar in both groups. The results are consistent with previous findings [42, 43] indicating a similar intensity of indirect forms of aggression (such as gossip or social exclusion) among boys and girls, which can partly result from the beclouding of behavioral patterns assigned to traditional, socially- and culturally-shaped gender roles.

When compared to secondary school youths without criminal records, the juveniles from youth fostering centers were characterized by a higher intensity of psychopathy and disinhibition traits. What is more, in that group a higher level of direct aggression was noted too. The obtained psychological characteristics of these juveniles are consistent with the studies indicating that young people staying in correctional facilities constitute a population which is specific with regard to the intensity of personality risk factors for criminal violence [44]. While the socially maladjusted adolescents revealed a higher proneness to using direct aggressive behaviors, they did not differ from their non-institutionalized peers in the level of indirect aggression. The only significant difference between the two groups concerned the IAS scale measuring inducing a sense of guilt. The adolescents from the reference (non-criminal) group more often used aggression consisting in manipulating the feelings of others. A greater prevalence of covert aggressive behaviors of this type among youth without criminal records may be related to the fact that the efficient hurting of others through inducing a sense of guilt or emotional blackmail requires having certain resources in the form of linguistic or communication skills. Meanwhile, some findings show that among young people with criminal records deficiencies are usually observed in this sphere of functioning [45, 46].

Conclusions

The present research confirms the usefulness of the triarchic model of psychopathy in the risk assessment for occurrence of aggressive behaviors in youth. At the same time,

the study shows a diverse role of boldness, meanness and disinhibition in predicting both indirect and direct aggression. However, the disposition of adolescents to using these two forms of aggression seems to be most strongly related to the combination of high disinhibition and meanness.

The study solely covered the analysis at the level of relations between psychopathy seen from the triarchic perspective and aggression in its accepted division into indirect and direct. However, the potentially broader network of connections between these variables was not considered. In the light of these limitations it would be worth testing in future research to what a degree the above relationship is influenced by other mediating variables (e.g., processing of social information or empathy). Future studies also need to be extended by clinical data enabling to indicate comorbidities and differential diagnosis.

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Address: Krzysztof Nowakowski
Department of Forensic Psychology and Criminology
Institute of Psychology
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow
e-mail: krzysztof.nowakowski@ignatianum.edu.pl