

5-2021

Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator of the Relationship Between Psychopathic Personality Traits and Relational Aggression

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Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator of the Relationship Between Psychopathic
Personality Traits and Relational Aggression

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

Psychopathy is a robust predictor of aggressive behavior and psychopathic personality traits have been shown to predict relational aggression in non-clinical samples of college students. Given the manner in which emotional intelligence appears to be useful in navigating complex social interactions, some have suggested that it may be involved in certain forms of deceitful or manipulative behavior, including those that may be part of relational aggression. The current project evaluated the role of psychopathic personality traits and emotional intelligence in the prediction of relational aggression among college students. In addition to examining the direct relationship of these variables to relational aggression, we sought to determine if emotional intelligence would moderate the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression (i.e., would the strength of the relationship between psychopathic traits differ depending on participants' levels of emotional intelligence?). Archival data ($N = 274$) were analyzed using a hierarchical multiple regression. Psychopathic personality traits were positively correlated with relational aggression, emotional intelligence was inversely related to relational aggression, and emotional intelligence moderated the relationship of psychopathic traits to relational aggression. Contrary to what was expected, emotional intelligence weakened this relationship (i.e., the positive relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression was somewhat weaker for students with higher levels of emotional intelligence).

Keywords: relational aggression; psychopathic personality traits; emotional intelligence; emerging adulthood

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Honors College, my advisor Eric Dahlen, and doctoral student Savannah Merold for this opportunity and constant support and assistance throughout the duration of this project.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EI	Emotional Intelligence
RA	Relational Aggression
SRASBM	Self-Report of Aggression and Social Behavior Measure
SRP-III	Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III
TEIQue-SF	Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Aggression is a common behavior that is widely recognized for its destructive impact. When most people think of aggressive behavior, they focus on direct manifestations of overt aggression in its physical or verbal forms (e.g., violence, verbal assault). Not surprisingly, most psychological research on aggressive behavior has examined overt aggression; however, relational aggression has received increased attention in the literature due to mounting evidence of its harmful effects. *Relational aggression* (RA) refers to a set of behaviors intended to harm others through damage to their social standing and/or relationships, such as calumny, malicious gossip, and social ostracism (Crick, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001; Werner & Crick, 1999). It was first recognized among children and early adolescents, but a number of studies subsequently found that both relational aggression and relational victimization are associated with a number of adverse correlates among older adolescents and emerging adults too (Czar et al., 2011; Dahlen et al., 2013; Prinstein et al., 2001).

Within the field of psychology, much of the empirical research seeking to understand why some people are more relationally aggressive than others have emphasized the role of personality traits known to predict overt aggression and even violence (e.g., psychopathic and narcissistic personality traits). Psychopathy is one of the most consistent predictors of overt physical aggression (Porter et al., 2018), but it was not initially clear whether people higher in psychopathic traits would also be more relationally aggressive. A number of studies have now demonstrated a positive relationship between psychopathic personality

traits and RA (Ackerman et al., 2019; Blais et al., 2014; Schmeelk et al., 2008). Moreover, some of these studies found evidence of this relationship in non-clinical samples using measures of psychopathic traits appropriate for use with non-offenders (e.g., Marsee et al., 2005; Schmeelk et al., 2008). Additionally, similar findings have been reported in studies using college student samples (Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018). Thus, it is clear that individuals higher in psychopathic personality traits are more likely to report engaging in relationally aggressive behavior and that this can be observed in non-offender samples of emerging adults.

The current project examined the possible role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and relational aggression among college students. Specifically, we sought to determine whether the expected relationship between psychopathic personality traits and relational aggression was moderated by emotional intelligence. That is, would the strength of this relationship differ for students at different levels (i.e., low, average, high) of emotional intelligence? We chose to focus on emotional intelligence, in part, because the literature on psychopathy and emotional intelligence has yielded mixed results. Some studies have found psychopathic personality traits were inversely related to social or emotional intelligence (Ermer et al., 2012; Megías, 2018); others have found positive relationships between some components of psychopathy and emotional intelligence (Copestake et al., 2013; Vidal et al., 2009). Despite the conflicting findings about the relationship of psychopathic traits to emotional intelligence, we expected that the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression would be stronger at higher levels of emotional intelligence. If emotional intelligence is used to facilitate complex social

interactions, then it makes sense that it may serve the same function even in the case of interactions involving malicious intent, efforts to manipulate others, and other forms of relational aggression. While psychopathic traits may help explain one's motivation for relationally aggressive behavior, emotional intelligence is expected to facilitate this relationship. Better understanding the possible role of emotional intelligence in relational aggression could inform our understanding of the conditions under which psychopathic traits contribute, ultimately assisting with efforts to prevent relational aggression and treat those at risk for behaving in relationally aggressive ways.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Relational Aggression

Aggression includes a variety of behaviors through which the aggressor intends to harm others. One form of aggression, *relational aggression* (RA), involves aggressive behavior committed with the intent of harming others by damaging their interpersonal relationships, status, and/or feelings of acceptance/inclusion (Crick, 1996; Linder et al., 2002; Werner & Crick, 1999). RA is often manipulative in that the aggressor inflicts harm through the intentional manipulation of social relationships (Grotperter & Crick, 1996; Tackett et al., 2014). Examples include socially excluding or ignoring the victim, defamation, threats to terminate a relationship if one's desires are not met, and encouraging others to mistreat a peer (Czar et al., 2011; Grotperter & Crick, 1996). Unlike other forms of aggression, RA is often covert and is characterized by the type of harm one intends rather than specific methods one may use to cause harm (Crick, 1996). In contrast, overt aggression involves the use of physical harm or the threat of physical harm (e.g., hitting, pushing, threats of attacking; Grotperter & Crick, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001). Though more likely to be covert, RA can also be fairly direct (Coyne et al., 2006). For example, an aggressor could explicitly inform the victim that they are not invited to a social gathering in front of an audience of peers with the goal of social humiliation.

Relational aggression has received far less attention in the literature than overt aggression, and much of the research on RA has focused on children and early adolescents. As a result, there are many aspects of relational aggression that

still need further study (Tackett et al., 2014), especially in late adolescence, emerging adulthood, and adulthood. Research on RA in emerging adults has demonstrated that it is prevalent in both peer and romantic relationships and is associated with a number of adverse correlates (Dahlen et al., 2013). Additional research among emerging adults is likely to be beneficial considering the factors that make RA particularly relevant during this developmental period, such as increased importance of peer relationships, increased time with peers, development of autonomy and independence, engagement in serious romantic relationships, heightened peer pressure, development of cliques, psycho-social maladjustments, etc. (Dahlen et al., 2013; Prinstein et al., 2001; Thomas, 2019).

Relational aggression is known to have a number of adverse correlates (Crick, 1996; Dahlen et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2018), supporting efforts to improve our understanding of how it operates to inform efforts to prevent the behavior and assist those affected by it. Among emerging adults, RA has been shown to be detrimental for both the aggressor and the victim (Czar et al., 2011; Dahlen et al., 2013; Tackett et al., 2014). It has shown to be positively correlated with several externalizing behaviors (e.g., delinquency, substance misuse, reduced prosocial behavior), various psycho-social maladjustments (e.g., loneliness, depression, anxiety), peer rejection, poor quality social relationships, and academic problems (Crick, 1996; Czar et al., 2011; Dahlen et al., 2013; Grotper & Crick, 1995; Prinstein et al., 2001; Tackett et al., 2014; Werner & Crick, 1999). It has also been predictive of enduring aggression and concurrent and future social maladjustment (Crick, 1996). RA has also been linked to maladaptive personality traits. For example, Werner and Crick (1999)

found that relational aggression among emerging adults was positively related to antisocial personality features and negatively related to prosocial behavior. Similarly, relational aggression is positively related to pathological personality traits, including psychopathic personality traits (Dahlen et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2018). In fact, psychopathic traits, which will be discussed in the following section, has been a consistent predictor of RA in college student samples (Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018; Schmeelk et al., 2008).

Psychopathic Personality Traits

Psychopathy is a broad personality construct characterized by affective, antisocial, cognitive, and interpersonal features. It is defined by a lack of regret and concern for others, emotional callousness, manipulation, aggression, impulsivity, among other traits (Blais et al., 2014; Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1996). Although psychopathy overlaps with antisocial personality disorder, it differs in its affective-interpersonal features as well as some cognitive-processing tasks (e.g., emotion-processing) versus the behavioral deviance symptoms emphasized in antisocial personality disorder (Hare, 1996; Strickland, 2013). Psychopathy is often viewed as existing on a continuum in which individuals may display psychopathic traits or tendencies but not meet the full criteria required to be labeled as psychopaths. While psychopathy is a clinical construct (i.e., persons identified as psychopaths are found in clinical and forensic settings), milder gradations of psychopathic traits evident in non-clinical samples are still meaningful.

Psychopathic personality traits have been found to be a consistent predictor of RA (Ackerman et al., 2019; Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018; Schmeelk et al.,

2008). Many of the characteristics associated with psychopathy (e.g., manipulation, charisma, a lack of empathy for others, social deviance, emotional callousness) are positively correlated with relational aggression (Knight et al., 2018). For example, Ackerman and colleagues (2019) found that RA was inversely related to affective empathy and positively related to callous-unemotional traits, a component of psychopathy. After finding that RA was positively correlated with Cluster B Personality Disorders and psychopathic personality traits, Schmeelk and colleagues (2008) suggested that this relationship was likely due to the “manipulative and interpersonally damaging behaviors” typically associated with these disorders and personality traits (p. 279). Other psychopathic traits could also be used to aid in social manipulation or RA, such as superficial charm/glibness proposed by Cleckley (1982). Research indicates that the relationship between psychopathic traits and RA is evident among emerging adults too. Czar and colleagues (2011) found that primary and secondary psychopathic personality traits predicted both peer and romantic relational aggression in a college student sample.

The defining characteristics of psychopathy (e.g., manipulation, a lack of empathy for others, impulsivity; Cleckley, 1982; Strickland et al., 2008) have been shown to predict both overt and relational aggression (Schmeelk et al, 2008). Given the highly social and manipulative nature of RA, it is worth considering the possibility that emotional intelligence may moderate the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression, helping to specify the conditions under which psychopathic traits are more likely to result in RA.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to a form of social intelligence involving the ability to interpret and understand one's own and other's emotions, discern between them, and respond accordingly (Mayer, 2004). EI is recognized as a component of social effectiveness and is often viewed as being important for successfully navigating the challenges of everyday life (Goleman, 1998). In some ways, emotional intelligence holds a unique position in that it intersects with both social effectiveness and personality. While personality traits are typically viewed as stable dispositions, social skills are more malleable (Douglas et al., 2004; Goleman, 1998). Thus, Goleman (1998) asserted that EI focuses on dispositional qualities (e.g., initiative and empathy) and trainable qualities (e.g., adaptability and persuasiveness), meaning that individuals may be better able to develop and improve aspects of EI as compared with many personality traits. Further, Douglas and colleagues (2004) suggested that social skills can be understood as the "tactics" used to transform an individual's internal strategy (i.e., personality) into an observable behavior. They also suggested that personality may be dependent on social skill/effectiveness in order to recognize its potential. This raises the question of whether emotional intelligence might be relevant to more fully understanding the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and relational aggression.

EI is associated with some of the defining features of psychopathic personality traits (e.g., social efficacy and manipulation) as well as correlates of relational aggression (Copestake et al., 2003; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Ling et al., 2018; Owens et al.,

2018). Though typically viewed as a positive skill, emotional intelligence may also be used for self-serving purposes and antisocial behavior (e.g., emotional manipulation), especially by those higher in psychopathic personality traits (Andreou, 2006; Austin et al., 2007; Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Kaukiainen et al., 2002; Sutton et al., 1999). In fact, Austin and colleagues (2007) proposed that there may be a dark side to EI in that individuals high in emotional intelligence may be better able to manipulate others. These implications are consistent with the possibility that effective relational aggression may require an understanding of social interactions, emotional reactions of self and others, and social skills, all of which are components of EI (Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Sutton & Swettenham, 1999).

It is a common assertion that psychopathy is inversely related to EI in the sense that it often involves emotional deficits (Ermer et al., 2012). On the other hand, some research suggests that individuals with psychopathic traits may use emotional intelligence for manipulative and deceptive purposes (Andreou, 2006; Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Sutton & Sweetman, 1999). Perhaps psychopathic traits alone may not be sufficient for perpetrating relationally aggressive behavior and emotional intelligence may be needed to allow this behavior to be more easily and effectively executed. In this project, we sought to determine whether trait emotional intelligence might moderate the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression (i.e., does emotional intelligence strengthen this relationship, facilitating relationally aggressive behavior among those with psychopathic traits?). Ahlbom (1999) and Kaukiainen and colleagues (1996) found positive relationships between social intelligence (a variable distinct from but closely related to EI) and indirect

aggression. Similarly, Andreou (2006) found cognitive components of social intelligence to be predictive of RA. Related research suggests that RA may require more social intelligence than other forms of aggression (Andreou, 2006; Björkqvist et al., 2000; Kaukianen et al., 1996). The common explanation is that the development of social skills and social/emotional intelligence may facilitate the perpetration of “safer” forms of aggression, such as indirect and/or relational aggression (Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Kaukianen et al., 1996). Thus, trait emotional intelligence may be a direct predictor of RA as well as a potential moderator of the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression.

The Current Study

There is limited research on the potential role of trait emotional intelligence in relational aggression (Douglas et al., 2004) and it is unclear whether EI may be helpful in understanding the relationship of psychopathic traits to RA; however, there is some evidence that EI may help to explain the relationship of psychopathic traits to autonomic functioning (Ling et al., 2018) and non-conscious mimicry (Owens et al., 2018). Some findings suggest that high levels of EI could strengthen the relationship between psychopathic traits and RA (Grieve & Panebianco, 2013; Owens et al., 2018), while others suggest that high levels of EI may actually weaken this relationship (Mayer, 2004; Merold, 2018). The current project was designed to clarify the role of EI in the expected relationship between psychopathic personality traits and RA in a college student sample. To do so, we examined trait emotional intelligence as a moderator of the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression. Based on the previous literature showing that psychopathic traits were a positive predictor of RA (Ackerman et

al., 2019; Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018), we expected that psychopathic personality traits would be positively related to relational aggression (i.e., students higher in psychopathic traits would report more relational aggression). We also expected that trait emotional intelligence would be related to RA, though the direction of this relationship was not sufficiently clear to support a directional prediction. Although previous studies of EI (and the closely related construct of social intelligence) have produced mixed results, we tentatively expected that emotional intelligence would moderate the relationship between psychopathic traits and RA such that the strength of the relationship would be greater for students with higher levels of EI.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Participants

We used an archival data set containing the responses of 274 undergraduate volunteers recruited from the University of Southern Mississippi for this project. These data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as part of a larger study investigating psychopathic personality traits, social intelligence, and relational aggression (see Merold, 2018). Although the measure of emotional intelligence used in this project was administered during this prior study, those data were not analyzed as part of that study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 ($M = 19.85$, $SD = 2.06$).

There were 89 men (32.5%) and 185 women (67.5%). The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian/White (61.3%), followed by African American/Black (33.2%), Hispanic/Latino (2.2%), Asian (2.2%), and other (1.1%). Most identified as freshman (43.1%), followed by sophomores (20.8%), juniors (20.8%), and seniors (15.3%).

Instruments

The instruments listed in this section were administered to participants online through Qualtrics and were presented in random order to minimize potential order effects.

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire assessing their age, sex, gender identity, race/ethnicity, year in college, living situation, and other areas of interest. The information collected on this questionnaire was used to make sure participants were qualified to complete the study (i.e., they were between the ages of 18 and 29) and to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-III (SRP-III)

The SRP-III is a 64-item self-report measure of psychopathic personality traits developed by Paulhus and colleagues (2009) for use with non-clinical/offender populations. It was designed to reflect the content and structure of the PCL-R, the most common method for assessing psychopathy in offender populations. Thus, the SRP-III yields four 16-item subscales that map on to the four PCL-R factors: Interpersonal Manipulation, Callous Affect, Erratic Lifestyle, and Anti-Social Behavior. All items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The subscales show adequate reliability (.75 to .82), as does the total score (.81 to .91; Merold, 2018; Williams et al., 2003). Since we were interested in a total index of psychopathic traits in this project, we only used the total SRP-III score. Positive relationships between SRP-III scores and measures of antisocial traits, as well as inverse relationships with measures of empathy, provide support for the construct validity of the SRP-III (Neuman & Pardini, 2014).

Self-Report of Aggression and Social Behavior Measure (SRASBM)

Peer relational aggression was assessed using the 7-item General/Peer Relational Aggression scale from the SRASBM, a 56-item self-report measure of multiple forms of aggression, interpersonal jealousy, and prosocial behavior (Linder et al., 2002). Items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all true”) to 7 (“very true”). The General/Peer Relational Aggression scale has been widely used as one of the few brief measures of relational aggression suitable for use with emerging adults and

adults. It has shown sufficient reliability in college student samples with reported alpha coefficients ranging from .72 to .87, and support for the validity of the General/Peer Relational Aggression scale has been provided in the form of relationships with other measures of aggression and related constructs (Czar et al., 2011; Linder et al., 2002).

Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form (TEIQue-SF)

Petrides (2009) developed the TEIQue-SF, a 30-item self-report measure of trait emotional trait intelligence (e.g., “I’m usually able to influence the way other people feel”), based on the longer TEIQue. The TEIQue-SF includes two items from each of the 15 facets identified in the full TEIQue. Respondents rate each item using a 7-point scale with response options ranging from 1 (“completely disagree”) to 7 (“completely agree”). A total trait EI score is derived by calculating the mean of the item scores. In addition, four subscales can be derived from 26 of the items: Well-Being (6 items), Self-Control (6 items), Emotionality (8 items), and Sociability (6 items). The remaining 4 items belong to two other facets (adaptability and self-motivation); however, the TEIQue-SF was not designed to provide scores on all 15 trait EI facets measured by the TEIQue. The TEIQue-SF demonstrates adequate reliability ($\alpha = .88$; O’Connor et al., 2016). This measure consistently demonstrated evidence of incremental validity and has good construct validity (Seigling et al., 2015).

Procedure

Participants for the original study for which this data set originated were recruited through the online participant pool used by the School of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi, Sona Systems, Ltd. Potential participants enrolled in undergraduate

psychology courses with a research participation requirement or that offer extra credit to students in exchange for participating in research studies access Sona to learn about available studies. After reading a brief description of the study, its requirements, and a warning that quality assurance checks would be used and that participants who failed them would not receive credit for completing the study, students who were interested in participating signed up for the study and were provided with a URL directing them to an online consent form hosted through Qualtrics. The consent form provided a more detailed description of the study and reminded participants about the use of quality assurance checks. Those who provided informed consent to participate were then directed to the demographic questionnaire, followed by the other measures presented in a randomized order. Based on the recommendations of Meade and Craig (2012), two types of quality assurance checks were used: (1) two directed response items (e.g., “Answer this question with ‘strongly agree’”) and (2) survey completion time. Participants who completed the study without failing the quality assurance checks received 0.5 research credits. This procedure was approved by the University of Southern Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A).

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Data Cleaning

Using the Qualtrics data from a larger project, SPSS syntax was used to form the study variables. The data were inspected for missing data and coding errors. Of the initial 338 cases examined, 274 were included in the final sample and used for the analyses reported here. The response of 1 participant was removed for excessive missing data, 44 responses were removed due to respondents failing one or both of the directed response items included to detect careless or random responding, and 19 responses were removed from participants over the age of 29 to restrict the sample to emerging adults.

Preliminary Analyses

Alpha coefficients, descriptive statistics, and independent samples *t*-tests to determine whether scores on any variable differed by respondent gender can be found in Table 1. Internal consistencies, reported in the form of alpha coefficients, for the measures of each variable were all greater than .85, indicating impressive reliability of the measures. Women and men did not differ in their scores on the TEIQue-SF or the Peer/General Relational Aggression scale of the SRASBM; however, there was a significant gender difference on the SRP-III. Specifically, men obtained higher SRP-III total scores than women.

Primary Analyses

Given the nature of psychopathic traits and relational aggression and the non-clinical sample used in this project, scores on measures of these variables were not expected to be normally distributed. An examination of the data revealed that both were positively skewed. Thus, we used bootstrapping in calculating the bivariate correlations

among variables and in the subsequent moderation analysis. Bootstrapping is often preferred in correcting non-normally

Table 1. *Alpha Coefficients, Means, Standard Deviations, and Gender Differences*

Variable	α	Men		Women		$t(272)$	BCa 95% CI	d
		$M(SD)$	$M(SD)$	$M(SD)$	$M(SD)$			
TEIQue-SF	.89	4.77 (.83)	4.74 (.74)	.345	[-.16, .23]	-		
SRP-III	.91	2.41 (.45)	2.08 (.41)	5.95	 [.22, .43] 	.77		
Peer/General RA	.86	14.64 (8.18)	13.07 (6.11)	1.77	[-.17, 3.31]	-		

Note. TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form; SRP-III = Self-Report of Psychopathy Scale-III; Peer/General RA = Peer/General Relational Aggression. BCa 95% confidence intervals (CIs) estimated with 10,000 bootstrap resamples of the data. Significant values (i.e., CIs that do not contain 0) are in bold.

distributed data over transforming scores in moderation analyses because data transformations (e.g., log, square root) can sometimes inflate Type-II error (Field, 2013; Russell & Dean, 2000). Specifically, we used bootstrapping to create 95% bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) confidence intervals with 10,000 resamples of the data.

In examining the correlations among variables (see Table 2), SRP-III scores were positively related to scores on the Peer/General Relational Aggression scale, as expected (i.e., students higher in psychopathic traits reported more relational aggression). In addition, scores on the TEI-Que-SF were inversely related to scores on the Peer/General Relational Aggression scale. That is, students higher on trait emotional intelligence reported *less* relationally aggressive behavior. The relationship between the TEIQue-SF and SRP-III was also negative, indicating that higher trait emotional intelligence was associated with fewer psychopathic traits. We computed a hierarchical multiple

regression using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) to test the hypothesis that trait emotional intelligence would moderate the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and RA. Model one (i.e., simple moderation) was selected. Relational aggression (Peer/General Relational Aggression scale total score) was the

Table 2. *Bivariate Correlations*

Variable	1	2	3
1. TEIQue-SF	-		
2. SRP-III	-.32 [-.42, -.21]	-	
3. Peer/General RA	-.41 [-.49, -.32]	.56 [.47, .64]	-

Note. TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form; SRP-III = Self-Report of Psychopathy Scale-III; Peer/General RA = Peer/General Relational Aggression. Correlations are followed by BCa 95% confidence intervals estimated with 10,000 bootstrap resamples of the data. All correlations are significant (i.e., confidence intervals do not contain 0).

dependent variable, psychopathic personality traits (SRP-III total score) was the independent variable, and trait emotional intelligence (TEIQue-SF total score) was the moderator. The overall regression model was significant ($F(3, 265) = 61.49, p < .0001$), with an R^2 of .41. There was a significant interaction between the SRP-III and TEIQue-SF in the prediction of relational aggression ($DR^2 = .04, F(1, 265) = 17.29, p < .0001$), indicating that trait emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and RA, as predicted. As can be seen in Table 3, psychopathic personality traits were related to relational aggression across levels of the TEIQue-SF; however, this relationship was strongest at lower TEIQue-SF scores. Thus, the positive relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression was somewhat weaker for students with higher levels of trait emotional intelligence.

Table 3. *Conditional Effects of Psychopathic Personality Traits on Relational Aggression at Different Levels of Emotional Intelligence*

TEIQue-SF	Effect	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	BCa 95% CI
1 <i>SD</i> below the mean	10.25	1.03	9.92	.00	[8.21, 12.28]
At the mean	7.09	.76	9.31	.00	[5.59, 8.59]
1 <i>SD</i> above the mean	3.94	1.12	3.53	.00	[1.74, 6.13]

Note. TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form. BCa 95% confidence intervals (CIs) estimated with 10,000 bootstrap resamples of the data. All conditional effects are significant (i.e., confidence intervals do not contain 0).

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This project examined the relationship of psychopathic personality traits and emotional intelligence to peer relational aggression in a sample of college students in the emerging adult (i.e., 18-29) age range. It was expected that psychopathic traits would be positively related to relational aggression and that trait emotional intelligence would moderate the relationship of psychopathic traits to relational aggression. Though unsure about the direction of the relationship, we also expected that trait emotional intelligence would be related to relational aggression. The main findings were:

(1) psychopathic personality traits were positively related to relational aggression, (2) trait emotional intelligence was inversely related to relational aggression, and (3) the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression was moderated by emotional intelligence but not in the manner expected. Specifically, the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression, while present at low, average, and high levels of trait emotional intelligence, was somewhat weaker for students with higher levels of emotional intelligence.

The finding that psychopathic personality traits were positively correlated with RA was consistent with prior research examining the role of psychopathic traits in relational aggression (Ackerman et al., 2019; Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018; Schmeelk et al., 2008). Thus, this finding supports the relevance of psychopathic traits to relational aggression among college students. Students higher in psychopathic traits reported more relational aggression, suggesting that these traits may serve as a risk factor for relational aggression on campus. It was noteworthy that these personality traits, even at non-clinical levels, were positively associated with

relational aggression in a sample that was likely high functioning. It should also be noted that while there were gender differences in psychopathic personality traits (i.e., male students reported more of these traits than female students) consistent with previous studies (Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018; Merold, 2018), women and men did not differ in trait emotional intelligence or relational aggression.

The finding that trait emotional intelligence was inversely related to relational aggression was not entirely unexpected. We had expected a relationship between these variables; however, the previous literature was not sufficiently clear to predict the directionality of this relationship, especially among emerging adults. In general, most prior studies have found inverse relationships between emotional and/or social intelligence and aggression (i.e., both overt and relational aggression) among adolescents; however, some also found positive relationships between various components of emotional intelligence and aggression (Johnston, 2003; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2019). For example, Johnston (2003) found that the interpersonal skills component of emotional intelligence was positively related to overall aggression. Other studies, such as that of Tintweiss (2011), found no relationship between emotional intelligence and relational aggression among adolescents. However, this study did find a moderately strong negative relationship between emotional intelligence and relational aggression in female perpetrators, suggesting that higher levels of emotional intelligence in relationally aggressive individuals may be used to interact and manipulate relationships negatively. Findings such as these provide a reason to suspect that though relational aggression may not be contingent on emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence may play a role in relationally aggressive behavior. This possibility was

not evident in this project, however, as students higher in emotional intelligence reported less relational aggression than their peers. Thus, our findings were more consistent with the possibility that emotional intelligence may offer some protection against relational aggression, likely because students higher in emotional intelligence may perceive themselves as having better options than relational aggression.

The relationship between relational aggression and psychopathic personality traits was moderated by emotional intelligence; however, the increase in emotional intelligence weakened the relationship to some degree. We expected that higher levels of emotional intelligence might strengthen the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression, equipping individuals with psychopathic personality traits with the skills necessary to demonstrate relationally aggressive behavior. Instead, the strength of the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression was somewhat weaker for students with higher emotional intelligence. Perhaps emotional intelligence offers some protection against relational aggression in that it was inversely related to relational aggression and that higher levels of emotional intelligence were associated with a somewhat weaker relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression. These findings were noteworthy given that previous studies have obtained inconsistent results regarding emotional intelligence and psychopathic personality traits (Gómez-Leal et al., 2018; Ling et al., 2018; Megías et al., 2018). When reviewing the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychopathy in several studies, Gómez-Leal and colleagues (2018) mostly found a negative relationship between the two variables in studies that used a performance-based model but inconsistent results in studies that utilized self-report measures.

In considering some possible explanations as to why emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and relational aggression as it did, it is important to note that psychopathic traits were positively related to relational aggression at all levels of emotional intelligence. In other words, this relationship was evident even for students high in emotional intelligence; the strength of the relationship was just somewhat weaker. Perhaps emotional intelligence could be viewed as a protective factor that enables students to navigate complex social situations and avoid social conflict (Gómez-Leal et al., 2018). If students higher in emotional intelligence perceived themselves as having better options than relational aggression, perhaps this could help to explain why the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression was somewhat weaker for students high in emotional intelligence. Some would still be relationally aggressive regardless of their emotional intelligence, but others might pursue other options. Of course, individuals high in psychopathic traits may have other clever means of engaging in relationally aggressive behavior without being detected. Individuals high in psychopathic features can often be highly functional and undetectable as “psychopaths” in society, and some research suggests psychopathic traits are associated with social efficacy in which individuals high in psychopathic traits may engage in complex social interactions, even antisocially, without being recognized (Hare, 1996; Cleckley, 1996). Likewise, research also suggests higher levels of emotional intelligence may lessen social conflict (Mayer, 2004; Goleman, 1988). Thus, individuals high in psychopathic personality traits may use other tactics to perpetrate aggressive behaviors,

while emotional intelligence may be used to mitigate social conflict and maintain their unidentified social goal.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this project that should be considered when interpreting the findings reported here. First, this study relied exclusively on self-report measures. While it makes sense that behaviors which can be as subtle and covert as relational aggression are well-suited for self-report measures, these measures are susceptible to social desirability and other forms of response bias. The addition of methods such as peer nomination or informant ratings would have provided an alternative that may have offered some protection against response bias. Second, the sample used for this project included college students in the emerging adult age range (i.e., 18-29) from only one university. Findings may have differed if older students had been included or if students from other universities had been sampled. Thus, the degree to which the findings may generalize to the larger population of college students is yet to be determined. Third, the sample was predominately female and reflected relatively little ethnic/racial diversity, as most participants were either Black or White and identified as non-Hispanic. Finally, the correlational design does not permit any determination of causality, the directionality of the relationships among variables, or rule-out the possibility of additional variables. For example, the finding that students higher in psychopathic traits reported more relational aggression was consistent with the possibility that psychopathic traits lead students to be more aggressive; however, such a possibility cannot be confirmed by this research design. It is possible that there is no causal connection between these variables and/or that this relationship is explained by a variable

that was not directly assessed (e.g., insecure attachment, impulsivity, experiences with relational victimization).

Implications for Future Research

It is becoming increasingly clear that psychopathic personality traits are associated with an increased risk for a variety of aggressive behaviors, including relational aggression. While far less is known about relational aggression among emerging adults than children and early adolescents, a few studies have reported positive relationships between psychopathic traits and relational aggression in non-clinical samples of college students (e.g., Czar et al., 2011; Knight et al., 2018). Because most of these studies have relied on self-report measures and been limited to cross-sectional designs, additional research with other methods is needed to understand the nature of this relationship more fully and to identify potential protective factors, such as emotional intelligence, that may be beneficial in designing prevention or treatment strategies. Examples include the use of informant data to supplement self-report data and short-term longitudinal studies designed to identify students at risk for relational aggression and follow them over time to identify the best predictors.

Additional research is also needed to further explore the role of emotional intelligence in relational aggression and determine how it may provide insight into the relationship of psychopathy and other dark personality traits to relational aggression. In some cases, emotional intelligence might be a risk factor for relational aggression in the sense that a certain level of emotional intelligence may be needed to carry out relational aggression effectively. In other cases, emotional intelligence may be a protective factor in which one pursues healthier ways of accomplishing social goals than relational

aggression. Perhaps emerging adults higher in social intelligence perceive themselves as having access to a wider range of prosocial options for resolving interpersonal conflict (e.g., directly expressing one's concerns to others, obtaining support from one's peers). Studies with larger and more diverse samples, especially those that offer a much wider range of social intelligence, may be useful here. Finally, there are a number of other potential moderators or mediators that could be examined to better understand the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and relational aggression. A few interesting examples include moral disengagement, attachment style, hyper-competitiveness, distress tolerance, and emotion regulation.

Conclusion

In summation, this project expanded upon the literature addressing relational aggression among emerging adults by examining emotional intelligence as a moderator of the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and relational aggression in a college student sample. As expected, psychopathic traits were positively related to relational aggression; students that scored higher in these traits reported more relationally aggressive behavior in their peer relationships. Trait emotional intelligence was also related to relational aggression; however, this relationship was negative (i.e., students higher in emotional intelligence were less likely to report relationally aggressive behavior), suggesting that emotional intelligence may be a protective factor against relational aggression among college students. Trait emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between psychopathic traits and relational aggression such that this relationship, while present at all levels of emotional intelligence, was somewhat weaker for students at higher levels of emotional intelligence. While additional research is

needed to understand how emotional intelligence may interact with maladaptive personality traits and relational aggression, our findings were consistent with the possibility that it may provide some protection against relational aggression in college students.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of
Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- Face-to-Face data collection may not commence without prior approval from the Vice President for Research's Office.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-437

PROJECT TITLE: Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator of the Relationship Between Psychopathic Personality Traits and Relational Aggression

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: School of Psychology, Psychology

RESEARCHER(S): Aria TayLee Smith, Savannah Merold, Eric Dahlen

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt

CATEGORY: Exempt

Category 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met:

- (i) The identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are publicly available;
- (ii) Information, which may include information about biospecimens, is recorded by the

investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects;

(iii) The research involves only information collection and analysis involving the investigator's use of identifiable health information when that use is regulated under 45 CFR parts 160 and 164, subparts A and E, for the purposes of "health care operations" or "research" as those terms are defined at 45 CFR 164.501 or for "public health activities and purposes" as described under 45 CFR 164.512(b); or

(iv) The research is conducted by, or on behalf of, a Federal department or agency using government-generated or government-collected information obtained for nonresearch activities, if the research generates identifiable private information that is or will be maintained on information technology that is subject to and in compliance with section 208(b) of the E-Government Act of 2002, 44 U.S.C. 3501 note, if all of the identifiable private information collected, used, or generated as part of the activity will be maintained in systems of records subject to the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. 552a, and, if applicable, the information used in the research was collected subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, 44 U.S.C. 3501 et seq.

APPROVED STARTING: 2020-10-21

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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