Relational and Cyber-aggression among Adolescents: Personality and Emotion Regulation as Moderators

Ioanna Voulgaridou & Constantinos M. Kokkinos

Although initial hypothesizing posited that relational aggression (RA) is highly consistent with cyberbullying (CB), other evidence suggests that the anonymity of an online environment provides CB with some unique characteristics. Sound evidence supports linkages of RA with antisocial personality, such as callousness-unemotionality, sensitivity to signals of reward and impulsivity (Behavioral Activation System; BAS). Similarly, cyberbullies tend to lack self-control and exhibit more callousness-unemotionality. The limited capacity to regulate emotions seems to influence the enacting of reactive, while proactive relational aggressors may monitor their emotional states. Cyberbullies were found to be less able in regulating their emotions. This study investigated the association between individual risk factors (callous-unemotional traits, BAS, emotion regulation) and two aggressive forms (i.e., RA and CB) in a community sample of 347 (193 girls) Greek junior high school students. It examined the effects of these variables on RA and CB as well as their moderating role in bidirectional models between these aggressive forms. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire. Confirmatory Factor Analyses replicated the structures of the scales used.

Results showed that CB was predicted by high callous and uncaring traits, and low cognitive reappraisal (emotion regulation), while proactive and reactive RA by high uncaring and callous traits, and BAS. Moderation analyses revealed that the relation between proactive RA and CB was moderated by high callous, low uncaring traits, cognitive reappraisal and BAS. High callous and uncaring traits, low cognitive reappraisal and BAS moderated the link between reactive RA and CB. The previous models were replicated for girls while for boys only the moderating effect of BAS was confirmed. Regarding the opposite association between CB and proactive RA, high callous and uncaring traits, cognitive reappraisal and low BAS moderated this link. Notably, for boys, high BAS, while for girls, low cognitive reappraisal, were found as moderators. Lastly, the association between CB and reactive RA was moderated by low callous, high uncaring traits, high cognitive reappraisal and low BAS. These effects were replicated only for girls. The results revealed a quite similar profile between relational and cyber-aggressors suggesting that CB intervention programs should be developed in conjunction to those targeting RA. The findings also stress that the interventions should be differentiated according to gender. Finally, the present study contributes to the formation of a clearer picture of the perpetrators’ profile and reveals individual risk factors that should be targeted for intervention.