Components of Callous-Unemotional Traits as Predictors of Personality Disorders

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Abstract

This study examined three domains of callous-unemotional (CU) traits (e.g., callousness, unemotionality, and uncaring) and their ability to uniquely predict maladaptive personality traits such as narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial. Callousness (above and beyond uncaring and unemotional scales) was found to uniquely predict all three types of personality disorder traits (narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial). In addition, unemotionality predicted borderline personality disorder traits controlling for the other two CU domains. These results suggest that interventions focused on specifically reducing callousness in particular in patients who show narcissistic, borderline or antisocial personality disorder traits could help lessen the degree of severity in their symptoms.

Introduction

Callous-unemotional (CU) traits consist of characteristics like deficient affect, lack of empathy or remorse, and a persistent disregard for others. CU traits have been shown to designate a more severe group of youth with behavior problems and are unique predictors of a host of behaviors. CU traits are useful when predicting recidivism among antisocial youth (Frick & Dickens, 2006), both physical reactive and relational proactive aggression as well as bullying and defending behaviors (Thornton et. al., 2013), substance-related delinquency (Taylor & Lang, 2006) and aggression and violent sexual offending (Caputo, Frick, & Brodsky, 1999; Frick & White, 2008). Thus, examining CU traits is of critical importance. Kimonis et al. (2008) found that within CU traits "there are three independent subfactors (i.e., Callousness, Uncaring, and Unemotional), each of which account for unique variance in their respective set of items, over and above the variance accounted for by the general factor." A large body of research supports this three-factor model of CU traits.

Studies suggest that in particular, the callousness dimension is strongly associated with measures of aggression (Kimonis et al., 2008), interpersonal manipulation, callous affect, erratic lifestyle, and an increased likelihood of committing a violent and non-violent act against a partner (Byrd et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a significant negative relationship between being unemotional and having both empathy and positive affect in detained boys (Kimonis et al., 2008). Additionally, there is a negative correlation between full-time employment and the unemotional subscale, as well as a negative association between being unemotional and relationship functioning (Byrd et al., 2013). Lastly, the uncaring dimension is found to be more strongly related to measures of offending (Kimonis et al., 2008), such as the number of criminal charges and violent arrests (Byrd et al., 2013). The current study tried to identify unique differential associations among CU trait dimensions and personality disorder symptoms in order to narrow down the target trait for intervention for people showing symptoms of these disorders.

Method

For this study, we conducted a secondary analysis of data collected from 198 male adolescent youth (aged 12 to 19 years; M = 15.37; SD = 1.21). The youth who participated were in detention centers in the southeastern United States. Self-report data was collected for measures of personality disorder symptoms and callous unemotional (CU) traits. We conducted regression analyses to examine the unique variance associated with three CU trait factors (callous, unemotional, and uncaring) as predicting personality disorder symptoms (narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial).

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Age	---								
2. Sex	.006	---							
3. Ethnicity	-.010	.021	---						
4. NPD	-.061	.160	-.042	---					
5. BPD	-.036	.221**	.050	.538**	---				
6. APD	.024	.172*	-.105	.428**	.403**	---			
7. Callousness	-.155*	.143*	-.018	.220**	.300**	.286**	---		
8. Uncaring	-.086	.039	-.010	-.005	.033	-.110	-.015	---	
9. Unemotional	-.081	.312**	-.037	.151	.266**	.074	.380**	.268**	---

Note. NPD = Narcissistic Personality Disorder, BPD = Borderline Personality Disorder, APD = Antisocial Personality Disorder; Sex was coded 0 = male, 1= female; Ethnicity was coded 0 = other ethnicity, 1= Caucasian *p<.05, **p<0.01

Results

We explored three CU trait domains (callousness, unemotionality, and uncaring) as potential unique predictors of personality disorders (narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial). To determine whether a CU domain was uniquely associated with the three personality disorders we performed a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Callousness was a significant predictor of narcissistic personality disorder (ß = 0.184, p<.05), borderline personality disorder (ß = 0.265, p<.01), and antisocial personality disorder (ß = 0.283, p<.01) after controlling for unemotional and uncaring variables. Unemotionality was a unique predictor for borderline personality disorder (ß = .217, p<.05) after controlling for callousness and uncaring. Uncaring did not uniquely predict any of the personality disorder traits. Overall, these results suggest that it is the callousness dimension of CU traits that best predicts maladaptive personality characteristics.

Conclusion

The current results do not support differential associations between the three factors of CU traits and personality disorder traits in this detained sample. The callousness subscale uniquely predicted narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial traits controlling for the other two CU domains, and the unemotionality domain uniquely predicted borderline symptoms. Our hypotheses were thus only partially supported, and are in line with other research showing that callousness is particularly predictive of maladjustment (e.g., Kimonis et al., 2008). Future research might consider how useful the three-factor model of CU traits is in designating severity, especially within detained samples of youth. Focusing primarily on callousness when intervening with individuals with personality disorders may provide a parsimonious treatment target to lessen the impact of co-occurring maladaptive personality traits.

References

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