

The Relationship between Alexithymia, Callous Affect and Aggressive Behaviors in Emerging Adulthood: Are Aggressive Acts Related to Not Feeling or Not Knowing How You Feel?

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Introduction

In developmental psychology, Erik Erikson proposed the theory that there are eight different developmental stages throughout the lifetime (Erikson, 1964). As this theory has progressed over the years and society has shaped people in different ways, current psychologists in the field have proposed that there should be an additional stage added in between adolescence and young adulthood, called emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adulthood is a term now used to define a time of development for college-aged (i.e. aged 18-29 years) individuals experiencing a period of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling 'in-between', and a time of possibilities/optimism (Arnett, 2014).

During emerging adulthood, it is common for young adults to experience elevated levels of psychopathy in order to develop a sense of identity (Smits, et al. 2011). Research has shown that there may be a relationship to the period of exploration and self-focus that comes with emerging adulthood (Ostrov & Houston, 2008). Individuals with traits of alexithymia in this age range are also likely to show aggressive behavior as a reaction to the psychological distress that their limited ability or inability to emotionally regulate and identify emotions has incurred (McErlean & Lim, 2020; Everen et al., 2015). Psychopathic traits such as callous affect, impulsivity, and narcissism have been known to be a risk factor for aggressive behaviors (Marsee, et al. 2005). In prior research, callous affect has shown to be a driving factor in predicting aggression (Terranova & Sutz, 2022).

Callous affect and Alexithymia are similar in the fact that they both hinder empathy (Young & Kyranides, 2021). Alexithymia, or difficulty accessing one's emotions and understanding how one feels, appears to be another trait that has some value in predicting aggression (Farah, et al. 2018). This study is intended to examine the relationship between alexithymia, callous affect, aggression, and emerging adulthood.

It is expected that subjects who are experiencing lower levels of emerging adulthood would be associated with higher levels of alexithymia, and would also be associated with a higher level of all forms of aggression measured in the current study (i.e., Proactive, Reactive, Direct, and Indirect). It is also expected higher levels of callous affect and Borderline Personality traits would be associated with higher levels of aggression. It is also expected that those who score higher levels of alexithymia would be associated with higher levels of callous affect and borderline traits. It is also expected that subjects who score higher in aggression, callous affect, borderline traits, and alexithymia would be associated with lower levels of emotional regulation.

Results

Table 1. Correlations Between Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Alexithymia	-							
2. Borderline	.53***	-						
3. Callous Affect	.30*	.26*	-					
4. Emerging Adulthood	.32*	.50***	-.14	-				
5. Emotional Regulation	-.12	-.32*	-.16	.09	-			
6. Direct Aggression	-.24	.47***	.58***	.12	-.38**	-		
7. Indirect Aggression	.52***	.71***	.41***	.46***	-.28*	.61***	-	
8. Proactive Aggression	-.31*	.33**	.52***	.06	-.32*	.60***	.46***	-
9. Reactive Aggression	.33**	.53***	.49***	.30*	-.35**	.80***	.73***	.67***

Note. *** = $p < .001$. ** = $p < .01$. * = $p < .05$.

Alexithymia, callous affect, borderline traits, and low emotional regulation all tended to be correlated with higher levels of aggression (Table 1). Alexithymia, callous affect, and reactive aggression correlated with emerging adulthood. However, it had stronger correlations with indirect aggression and borderline traits.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Study Variables

	Direct Aggression		Indirect Aggression		Proactive Aggression		Reactive Aggression	
	R ²	b	R ²	b	R ²	b	R ²	b
Step 1	.50***		.63***		.36***		.49***	
Alexithymia		-.12		.12		.09		-.03
Borderline		.25*		.40**		.05		.21
Callous Affect		.53***		.30**		.46***		.44***
Emotional Regulation		-.24*		-.12		-.23+		-.24*
Emerging Adulthood		.13		.27*		.09		.28*

Note. + = $p < .10$. * = $p < .05$. ** = $p < .01$. *** = $p < .001$.

Upon running regression analyses, it became clear that callous affect is the main variable driving the relationship between aggression and the personality traits measured in this study (Table 2). Poor emotional regulation related to direct aggression. Borderline traits and emerging adulthood interacted with indirect aggression and it can be inferred that had the power been stronger for this study, borderline traits would have had a significant impact on aggression as well. When compared to callous affect the other variables were not as significant when evaluating aggressive behaviors.

Discussion

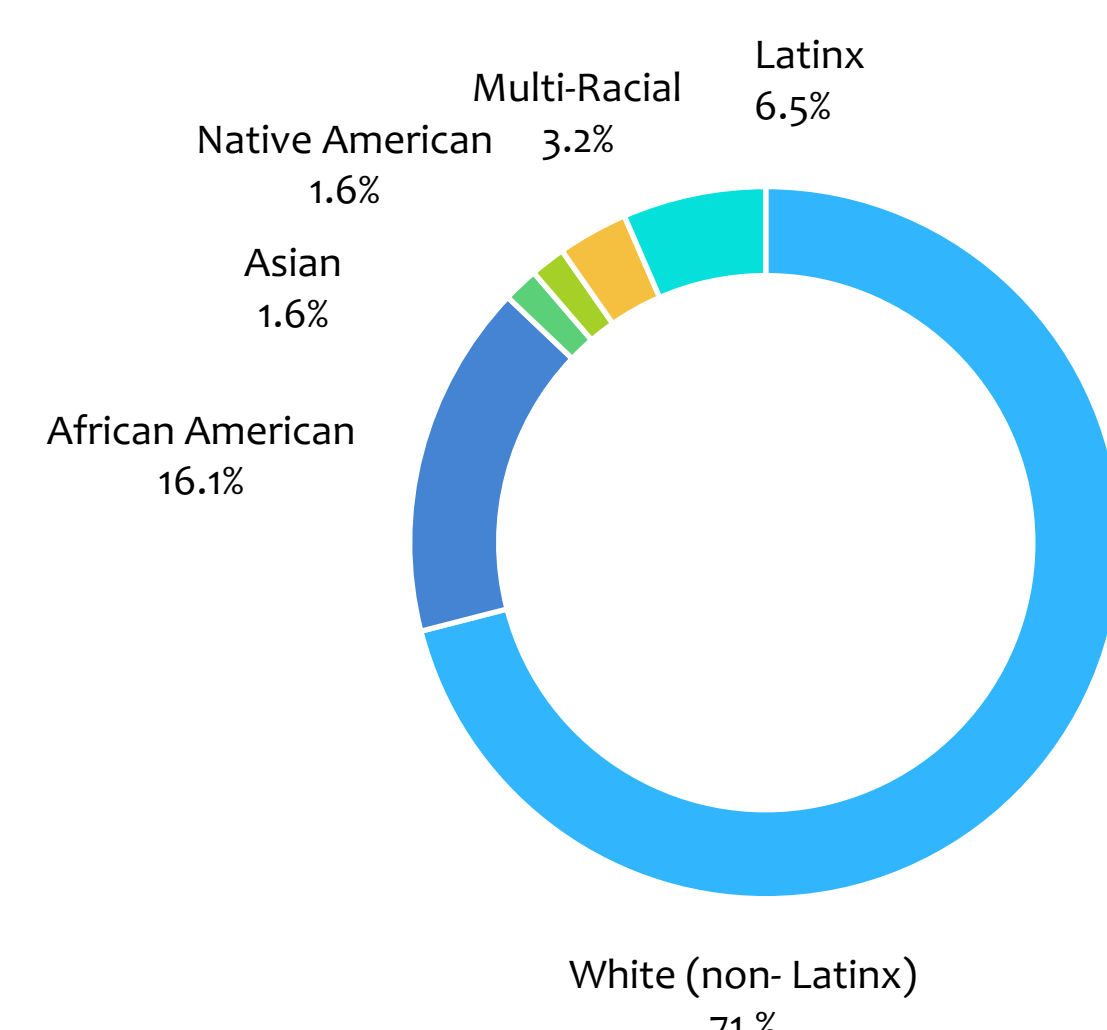
As hypothesized, alexithymia, callous affect, borderline traits, and low emotional regulation correlated with higher rates of reactive, proactive, Direct and indirect forms of aggression. These findings are consistent with the literature, which indicates that these variables are relatively stable predictors of aggression. Alexithymia, Callous Affect, and Reactive aggression correlated slightly with Emerging Adulthood. However, it had stronger correlations with indirect aggression and borderline traits which indicates that there may be some interaction between these variables. While Alexithymia correlated with reactive and proactive aggression, it correlated more significantly with indirect aggression. This is indicative that those who experience alexithymia are less likely to be overtly aggressive as they are to be passive aggressive. Upon running the regression analyses, there are some exceptions but callous affect is the main predictive variable when evaluating aggression. Emerging adulthood and borderline traits interacted with indirect and reactive aggression significantly. Had there been more participants the relationship would have been correlated higher with indirect aggression. These findings are consistent with Paul Frick's theory of callous affect being the main predictor of aggressive behaviors.

Method

Participants

College student participants (N = 62; M age = 19.24; 69% Female; 71% White) completed self-report survey instruments for this study measuring callous affect, alexithymia, emerging adulthood, borderline traits, emotional regulation, and aggressive behaviors. They received 0.5 SONA systems credit as incentive for completing this survey.

Figure 1. Ethnicity



Measures

Callous Affect: Measured with the 16-item Callous affect scale of the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale III using a five option response scale ranging from 1 = *Disagree* to 5 = *Agree Strongly* (Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007).

Alexithymia: Measured with The Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire (Preece, et al., 2018) using a five option response scale ranging from 1 = *Disagree* to 5 = *Agree Strongly*.

Emerging Adulthood: To measure how accurate experiences of emerging adulthood are in describing study participants, participants were asked to complete a 31-item Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood. Participants responded to a likert style scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 4 = *Strongly Agree* (Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007).

Aggression: To measure aggression, participants completed two measures to measure the various aspects of aggression. Participants completed the 29-item Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire for Direct and Indirect aggression (Bryant & Smith, 2001) using a five option response scale ranging from 1 = *Disagree* to 5 = *Agree Strongly*. They also completed the 23-item Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (Raine, et al., 2006) using a five option scale ranging from 1 = *Disagree* to 5 = *Agree Strongly*. The instructions for this scale were modified slightly in order to keep a consistent scale across the measures.