

UD's 2015 Spotlight on Technology, Art, Research & Scholarship (STARS)
Proposed Presentation Abstract
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Callous-Unemotional Youths at Risk for Offending: The Science of Socialization

Youths with callous-unemotional (CU) personality traits (as indicated by a lack of remorse and empathy) are at elevated risk for developing persistent, aggressive, and severe forms of delinquency. One popular explanation for this finding is that youths with CU traits are unresponsive to socialization processes, such as parenting, that typically work to prevent these outcomes (e.g., Blair, 2007). In support of this account, studies have found that parenting characteristics that are associated with reduced risk for delinquency in youths without CU traits are not associated with delinquency in youths with CU traits (e.g., Oxford et al., 2003). Providing further support are studies showing that youths with CU traits may be unresponsive to treatments for aggressive and delinquent behaviors that focus on enhancing parents' use of nonphysical disciplinary responses to those behaviors (Washbusch et al., 2007).

It is possible, however, that instead of simply reducing responsiveness to all aspects of parents' socialization efforts, CU traits confer differential susceptibility to particular parenting practices. The theory of differential susceptibility (Belsky, 2009) posits that youths with adverse temperament and personality characteristics will show reduced responsiveness to some aspects of parenting and *enhanced* responsiveness to other aspects of parenting. In other words, it is the goodness-of-fit between a parent's socialization efforts and their child's personality that matters most. Evidence from laboratory studies showing that CU traits are associated with reduced sensitivity to punishment and enhanced sensitivity to reward suggests that youths with CU traits might show reduced responsiveness to punitive socialization efforts and enhanced responsiveness to incentive and warmth-focused socialization efforts (e.g., Dadds & Salmon, 2003).

The research I propose to present investigates whether youths with CU traits, relative to youths without, exhibit differential susceptibility to contingent aspects of parenting (i.e., parental punishments and rewards) and noncontingent aspects of parenting (i.e., overall parental positivity and negativity). A sample of parent-youth dyads (N=384) completed study procedures when youths were 16 years-of-age. Dyads completed a discussion of pre-selected and dyad-specific conflict topics. Youth and parent behaviors during the discussion were coded as positive, neutral, or negative, from which rates of parents' positive and negative responses to youths' positive, neutral, and negative behaviors were computed. Youths reported on CU traits using the Antisocial Process Screening Device (Frick & Hare, 2001).

Results showed that regardless of CU trait levels, youths reciprocated their parents' positive and negative behaviors. In addition, whereas youths without CU traits suppressed behaviors that were reliably associated with negative responses by parents, youths with CU traits did not. The findings suggest that CU traits may reduce responsiveness to parental socialization practices by reducing youths' capacity to learn from punishment, but that youths with CU traits are responsive to positive parental behaviors. These findings suggest that the socialization of at-risk youths with CU traits may be enhanced by using rewards and fostering a warm and responsive parent-child relationship rather than relying on punishments and hostility to manage behavior.