

The Interaction Between Gender and Environmental Risk in the Presentations of Psychopathy

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ABSTRACT

Psychopathy has historically been studied using predominantly male, forensic, and incarcerated populations, limiting understanding of how psychopathy develops and is expressed within the general population, particularly among females. This literature review examined how sex and gender-related factors may interact with environmental influences to shape the development and expression of psychopathy-related traits from childhood through young adulthood. Peer-reviewed empirical studies and review articles investigating community and other non-forensic samples were synthesized, with particular attention to childhood adversity, parenting practices, family functioning, peer environments, and differences in psychopathy-related outcomes across males and females. Importantly, the studies reviewed did not all measure the same construct: some examined psychopathy directly, whereas others assessed narrower but related constructs, including callous-unemotional (CU) traits, impulsive antisociality, conduct problems, or delinquent behavior. Across the reviewed literature, environmental experiences were associated with the development of psychopathy-related traits; however, direct evidence that the same environmental exposure has different effects depending on sex or gender remains limited. While boys more commonly exhibited overt aggression and traditional externalizing behaviors, girls in some studies demonstrated relational aggression, internalizing symptoms, and interpersonal dysfunction alongside psychopathy-related traits. The review also highlights important limitations in the current literature, including the historical reliance on male-based conceptualizations of psychopathy, substantial differences in measurement and operational definitions, and the limited number of longitudinal community studies directly examining sex or gender as a moderator of environmental risk. Together, these findings suggest that psychopathy-related development is associated with complex interactions among environmental experiences, developmental processes, and individual differences, emphasizing the importance of more precise, sex- and gender-sensitive research and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Psychopathy is a personality construct characterized by interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits including callousness, shallow affect, manipulativeness, impulsivity, and chronic antisocial behavior (Hare & Neumann, 2009). A large body of research suggests that psychopathy does not emerge from a

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single cause. Instead, psychopathic traits are associated with environmental experiences that may interact with underlying dispositional vulnerabilities. These environmental experiences may be related to psychopathic traits through their effects on emotional regulation, attachment, moral socialization, and behavioral control (Granic & Patterson, 2006). However, the relationship between environment and psychopathy is often discussed without enough attention to whether observed differences reflect biological sex, gender-related socialization, or both. Research using community samples has found meaningful sex differences in both the levels and behavioral expression of psychopathy-related traits, suggesting that male and female presentations should not necessarily be understood in identical ways (Colins et al., 2017). Because several studies discussed in this review compare participants categorized as male and female, the term “sex differences” is used when describing those findings unless a study specifically addresses gender-related socialization or norms. As a result, examining psychopathy across sex and gender-related contexts is important for understanding how these traits develop and are expressed in non-forensic populations. This is particularly consequential when environmental factors may interact with sex or gender-related experiences to produce different behavioral outcomes.

The constructs examined in this review are related but not interchangeable. Psychopathy is a multidimensional personality construct characterized by a constellation of interpersonal traits, including grandiosity and manipulativeness; affective deficits, including shallow affect, callousness, and lack of guilt or remorse; and behavioral tendencies such as impulsivity and persistent antisocial behavior (Hare & Neumann, 2009). Callous-unemotional (CU) traits represent a narrower affective-interpersonal dimension characterized primarily by a lack of empathy and guilt, shallow or deficient emotional responsiveness, and reduced concern for others (Frick & White, 2008). Although CU traits overlap substantially with the affective features of psychopathy, they do not encompass its full interpersonal and behavioral dimensions. Impulsive Antisociality, as conceptualized within the triarchic and related personality literature, refers to a dispositional tendency toward behavioral disinhibition, impulsivity, aggression, and persistent antisocial behavior and is conceptually distinct from interpersonal-affective traits such as Fearless Dominance (Benning et al., 2005; Hicks et al., 2012). Conduct problems refer to a pattern of behaviors involving aggression, rule-breaking, defiance, and other violations of social norms or the rights of others, whereas delinquency more specifically refers to behaviors that violate legal or juvenile-status laws (Frick & Viding, 2009). Accordingly, findings concerning CU traits, Impulsive Antisociality, conduct problems, or delinquency are interpreted throughout this review as evidence concerning specific dimensions or correlates associated with psychopathy-related development, rather than as direct evidence of psychopathy in its entirety.

Differences in behavioral expression have been reported across males and females. Male presentations more often involve overt aggression and externalizing behavior, whereas female presentations have, in some studies, been associated with greater relational aggression, interpersonal difficulties, and internalizing symptoms (Verona & Vitale, 2006). These findings do not establish that females with psychopathy are inherently more covert or that psychopathy is necessarily “masked” by socially adaptive behavior. Rather, socialization and gender norms have been proposed as possible explanations for differences in behavioral expression. These differences raise the possibility that environmental risk factors

may also be associated with psychopathy-related traits differently across males and females. However, evidence directly testing this sex- or gender-by-environment interaction remains limited. A history of maltreatment, neglect, exposure to violence, or family dysfunction has been associated with psychopathy-related traits in both males and females, but relatively few studies have examined whether the strength or nature of these associations differs by sex or gender. Differences in socialization, coping, aggression, and emotional expression may provide possible explanations for why similar environmental experiences could be associated with different manifestations of psychopathy, but these pathways remain insufficiently understood.

This literature review therefore examines how environmental factors are associated with the development and presentation of psychopathy-related traits and evaluates the limited evidence that these associations differ by sex or gender-related socialization from childhood through young adulthood. Specifically, it focuses on environmental influences such as childhood maltreatment, neglect, parenting practices, exposure to violence, peer environments, and family dysfunction, and considers both direct evidence of moderation and indirect evidence of differences in trait expression across males and females. By synthesizing research, this review aims to clarify how psychopathy-related traits may manifest differently across sex and gender-related contexts and to address a large gap in a literature that has historically centered male samples and male expressions of psychopathy.

LITERATURE REVIEW/RESULTS

Psychopathy and Environment

Current literature suggests that psychopathy-related traits are associated with the interaction of individual predispositions and adverse environmental experiences rather than being attributable to a single cause alone. Although genetic factors contribute to vulnerability, environmental experiences during childhood and adolescence may influence how these predispositions are expressed over time. Rather than viewing psychopathy through a simple nature-versus-nurture framework, developmental systems models propose that biological vulnerabilities and environmental experiences continuously influence one another throughout development, although these models do not establish a single causal pathway from adversity to psychopathy (Maung, 2021).

Callous-unemotional (CU) traits refer to a pattern of reduced empathy, shallow affect, limited guilt or remorse, and diminished concern for others that has been consistently associated with aggressive and antisocial behavior (Centifanti et al., 2017). CU traits represent one component related to psychopathy rather than a complete measure of psychopathy itself. Longitudinal research has identified caregiving characteristics that predict or are associated with later changes in CU traits. For example, Waller et al. (2017) reported longitudinal evidence linking lower parental warmth, reduced positive reinforcement, and harsher parenting with increases in children's CU traits over time, after accounting for earlier conduct problems. These findings concern CU traits rather than psychopathy as a whole. Likewise, Miller et al. (2014) reported an association between harsh parenting during infancy and subsequent CU traits,

suggesting that the timing of caregiving experiences may be relevant to later socioemotional development. These longitudinal findings should not, however, be interpreted as demonstrating that harsh parenting alone causes CU traits, because other child, family, and genetic factors may also contribute.

Environmental influences continue beyond early childhood. In a community sample of adolescent twins, Hicks et al. (2012) found that “Impulsive Antisociality” —a dimension characterized by impulsivity, aggression, and antisocial tendencies— was consistently associated with lower academic achievement and school engagement, poorer relationships with both mothers and fathers, greater affiliation with antisocial peers, and higher rates of school-, legal-, and family-related stressful life events. Notably, these associations were substantially stronger than those observed for “Fearless Dominance” —a dimension involving social boldness, emotional resilience, and low fear—, indicating that environmental adversity was more strongly associated with this behavioral-externalizing dimension than with Fearless Dominance in this sample. Because Impulsive Antisociality and Fearless Dominance are dimensions related to, but not identical with, psychopathy as a whole, these findings should be interpreted at the level of the specific traits measured. Similarly, Salihovic et al. (2012) found that adolescents reporting higher psychopathic traits were more likely to experience family dysfunction, weaker parental relationships, and broader social adversity, while also demonstrating poorer social adjustment. Together, these findings suggest that adverse childhood and adolescent environments are associated with psychopathy-related and antisocial traits and may contribute to developmental pathways through which underlying vulnerabilities are expressed, rather than independently causing psychopathy.

Gender Interactions with Environmental Risk Factors

Although adverse childhood environments have been consistently associated with psychopathy-related traits, relatively few community-based studies have examined whether these developmental pathways differ by sex or gender-related factors. As a result, it remains unclear whether boys and girls respond similarly to environmental risk factors or whether these experiences contribute to different patterns of psychopathic traits. One of the few studies to directly address this question was conducted by Watts et al. (2017), who found that childhood maltreatment was more strongly associated with the meanness and disinhibition dimensions of psychopathy in males than females, while the relationship between childhood neglect and boldness was weak in males and nearly absent in females. Because Watts et al. directly tested whether the associations between environmental adversity and specific psychopathy dimensions differed across males and females, it provides more direct evidence of moderation than studies that examine environmental risk or sex differences separately. These findings suggest that adverse childhood experiences may relate differently to specific psychopathic traits across sex categories, although evidence remains limited.

Longitudinal studies have also demonstrated that early family environments are associated with changes in CU traits. Waller et al. (2017) found that lower parental warmth and harsher parenting were associated with increases in CU traits across childhood, while Miller et al. (2014) reported that harsh parenting during infancy was associated with later CU traits, highlighting the potential importance of early caregiving experiences. However, neither study examined whether these associations differed between

boys and girls. These studies therefore provide evidence concerning environmental associations with CU traits but do not provide direct evidence that sex moderates those associations. Given the documented sex differences in psychopathy-related traits during adolescence (Davis et al., 2022), the lack of research examining sex or gender as a moderator represents an important gap in the literature.

Taken together, the current evidence should be separated into three levels. First, several studies demonstrate associations between environmental adversity and psychopathy-related constructs. Second, other studies demonstrate differences in trait levels or behavioral expression between males and females. Third, only a limited number of studies, including Watts et al. (2017), directly test whether the relationship between a particular environmental exposure and a psychopathy-related outcome differs by sex. The first two types of findings do not by themselves establish gender-by-environment interaction.

Additional longitudinal studies using community samples are therefore needed to determine whether environmental risk factors contribute similarly to psychopathy-related traits in males and females or whether distinct developmental pathways exist.

Gender Differences in the Expression of Psychopathy-Related Traits

Although boys generally report higher levels of psychopathy-related traits than girls, reported sex differences vary according to the trait dimension and assessment measure used. Davis et al. (2022) found that boys consistently scored higher on primary psychopathy, a dimension characterized by interpersonal and affective traits such as manipulativeness, shallow affect, reduced empathy, and lack of guilt or remorse. Similarly, Colins et al. (2017) reported that males scored significantly higher on grandiose-manipulative traits, including deceitfulness, superficial charm, and exploitation of others, as well as callous-unemotional (CU) traits, which reflect a lack of empathy, guilt, and emotional responsiveness. These interpersonal and affective characteristics may co-occur with more overt externalizing behaviors, including physical aggression and conduct problems. However, findings from these studies should not be generalized to imply that all boys with psychopathy-related traits resemble traditional forensic descriptions of psychopathy.

In contrast, psychopathy-related traits in girls may be associated with different patterns of behavioral and emotional difficulties. Colins et al. (2017) found that males and females in a community sample were similarly likely, according to the study's specific operational definition and assessment procedure, to meet criteria for a psychopathic personality profile (12.9% and 12.4%, respectively). These percentages should not be interpreted as general population prevalence estimates or as rates of a formal categorical psychopathy diagnosis. However, females reported significantly lower levels of physical aggression but higher levels of relational aggression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms than males. Likewise, Centifanti et al. (2015) found that adolescent girls with the highest CU traits were most likely to engage in both reactive and proactive relational aggression, associate with delinquent peers, report greater parental overcontrol, and engage in higher levels of delinquent behavior. Because this study measured CU traits rather than psychopathy as a complete construct, its findings provide evidence concerning a related affective-interpersonal component rather than female psychopathy broadly. Together, these findings

suggest that similar or related psychopathy-associated traits may be accompanied by different behavioral patterns across males and females, although differences in measurement and sample composition may also contribute to apparent sex differences.

Although sex differences in psychopathy-related traits are evident during adolescence, these differences appear to change across development. Davis et al. (2022) found that boys consistently reported higher levels of primary psychopathy throughout Grades 10–12, whereas sex differences in secondary psychopathy were small, suggesting that some observed differences remained relatively stable during the period examined. However, researchers have argued that developmental changes in gender-related socialization may increasingly shape how psychopathic traits are expressed with age. This explanation concerns gender norms and social expectations rather than biological sex alone. As boys and girls mature, gender norms may encourage or discourage particular forms of dominance, aggression, and emotional expression, which could influence whether similar underlying traits are expressed through overt, relational, or interpersonal behaviors (Colins et al., 2017; Centifanti et al., 2015). These proposed socialization mechanisms remain explanatory hypotheses and should be distinguished from the empirical findings demonstrating sex differences themselves.

Because most diagnostic criteria and assessment instruments were originally developed using predominantly male forensic samples, some researchers have raised concerns that assessment practices emphasizing physical aggression and overt antisocial behavior may be less sensitive to certain presentations in females (de Vogel et al., 2014). To address limitations in violence-risk assessment, de Vogel et al. (2014) developed the Female Additional Manual (FAM), a supplement to the HCR-20 violence risk assessment that incorporates female-relevant risk factors, including relational aggression, trauma histories, victimization, caregiving responsibilities, and interpersonal functioning. The FAM is not a gender-specific psychopathy assessment instrument and should not be interpreted as a diagnostic measure of psychopathy. Rather, its relevance to this discussion is that it illustrates broader concerns about whether assessment frameworks developed primarily in male populations adequately capture gender-relevant patterns of risk and functioning. Together, these findings suggest that age, sex-related differences, gender-related socialization, and assessment practices may influence how psychopathy-related traits are expressed and recognized.

METHODS

This review was conducted as a narrative literature review rather than as a systematic or scoping review. Its purpose was to synthesize and critically evaluate available evidence concerning environmental influences, sex differences, gender-related socialization, and psychopathy-related constructs in community and other non-forensic developmental samples. Accordingly, the search was not designed as a formal systematic review with exhaustive study identification, duplicate screening, or PRISMA-style reporting.

A literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and PubMed to identify peer-reviewed articles examining gender differences in the development and expression of psychopathy-related traits. Search terms included combinations of psychopathy, callous-unemotional traits, gender differences, sex differences, environment, childhood adversity, maltreatment, parenting, family environment, peer relationships, socialization, community samples, and non-forensic populations. Reference lists of relevant review articles were also examined to identify additional studies.

The literature search and the included studies in this review were conducted over the period of 2005 to 2025. Because the review was conducted narratively and records were not prospectively tracked in a systematic screening database, an exact number of records identified and excluded cannot be reported retrospectively. Studies were selected through iterative screening for their relevance to the review's central questions, with particular attention to studies providing direct evidence of environmental associations, sex differences, or sex-by-environment interactions. Where multiple potentially relevant studies addressed similar questions, priority was generally given to community-based, developmental, longitudinal, and primary empirical research. Review articles were used primarily to provide conceptual context and identify relevant primary studies rather than as substitutes for primary evidence when such evidence was available.

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) they were empirical studies, longitudinal studies, systematic reviews, or narrative reviews examining the relationship between environmental factors, sex or gender-related variables, and psychopathy-related constructs; (2) they focused on community, developmental, or other non-forensic populations rather than incarcerated or criminal samples; (3) they investigated environmental influences including childhood maltreatment, neglect, parenting practices, family functioning, exposure to violence, peer relationships, or gender-related socialization experiences; (4) participants ranged from childhood through young adulthood; and (5) the study was published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Studies relying exclusively on forensic or incarcerated samples without developmental implications for community populations were excluded. Particular emphasis was placed on longitudinal studies because they provide stronger evidence regarding temporal ordering and developmental prediction than cross-sectional studies, although longitudinal associations do not independently establish causation. Ultimately, using the above criteria, 15 studies were identified and included in this review.

MEASUREMENT CONSIDERATIONS

An important limitation across the reviewed literature is that studies operationalized psychopathy-related constructs differently. Some studies assessed broad psychopathic personality profiles or dimensions such as primary and secondary psychopathy, whereas others focused specifically on CU traits, Impulsive Antisociality, or behavioral outcomes such as aggression and delinquency. Studies also differed in participant age, informant, and use of self-report or other assessment methods. These methodological differences may contribute to apparent sex differences and limit direct comparisons across studies.

Accordingly, the findings summarized in this review should be interpreted according to the specific construct measured rather than treated as interchangeable evidence of psychopathy.

The following table displays the differences in sample, measured constructs, environmental factors, and relevant sex/gender findings in major studies reviewed in this paper:

Study	Sample/Developmental Stage	Construct Measured	Environmental Factor	Relevant Sex/Gender Finding
Waller et al. (2017)	Childhood	CU traits	Parental warmth, positive reinforcement, harsh parenting	Environmental associations reported; sex moderation not tested
Miller et al. (2014)	Children ages 7-11	CU traits	Harsh parenting	Associations with later CU traits; sex moderation not tested
Hicks et al. (2012)	Community adolescent twins (ages 11 and 17 upon intake)	Impulsive Antisociality and Fearless Dominance	School engagement, family relationships, antisocial peers, stressful events	Environmental associations differed across trait dimensions; this finding does not itself establish sex moderation
Watts et al. (2017)	Community sample of undergraduates	Psychopathy dimensions: meanness, disinhibition, boldness	Maltreatment and neglect	Direct evidence that some adversity-trait associations differed between males and females
Colins et al. (2017)	Community sample	Psychopathic personality profile and psychopathy related traits	Not primarily an environmental moderation study	Reported sex differences in trait expression and behavioral/emotional correlates

Centifanti et al. (2015)	Community sample of 206 mothers and children (108 girls).	CU traits	Parental overcontrol and peer environment	Examined relational aggression and associated behavioural patterns within females; not a direct male-female comparison of psychopathy
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DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed suggests that psychopathy-related traits are associated with dynamic relationships among biological predispositions, environmental experiences, and developmental processes rather than being explained by either biological or environmental influences independently. Across childhood and adolescence, adverse family environments, harsh parenting, reduced parental warmth, childhood maltreatment, dysfunctional family relationships, and broader social adversity were consistently associated with greater psychopathy-related traits or related constructs such as CU traits and Impulsive Antisociality. However, relatively little research has examined whether these developmental pathways differ between boys and girls, particularly within community populations. The strongest conclusion supported by the current literature is therefore not that sex or gender consistently moderates environmental risk, but that environmental associations and sex differences have both been documented while direct tests of their interaction remain comparatively rare.

An important theme emerging from this review is the historical development of psychopathy as a construct. Much of the foundational research informing modern theories, diagnostic criteria, and assessment instruments was conducted using predominantly male forensic populations. Consequently, characteristics more commonly observed in males, such as physical aggression, overt antisocial behavior, and criminal offending, have become central features of traditional psychopathy conceptualizations. Some studies have reported that females with psychopathy-related traits show greater relational aggression, interpersonal difficulties, anxiety, or other internalizing symptoms. However, these patterns should not be treated as universal characteristics of female psychopathy, and differences in assessment instruments, informants, and operational definitions may contribute to observed findings. This historical bias may contribute to the underrepresentation of women in psychopathy research and complicates efforts to accurately identify psychopathy-related traits across different populations.

The reviewed literature also suggests that developmental gender-related socialization may help explain differences in presentation. From early childhood, boys and girls may be exposed to different social expectations regarding emotional expression and aggression. These socialization patterns are proposed explanations rather than direct evidence that gender norms cause particular psychopathy-related behaviors. Physical aggression and emotional detachment may be more socially tolerated among boys, whereas girls may experience greater pressure to maintain interpersonal relationships and avoid overt aggression. These differences in socialization may not alter the underlying psychopathy-related traits themselves but instead may influence how those traits are expressed behaviorally. Consequently, it has been proposed that girls with elevated psychopathy-related traits may be more likely to exhibit relational aggression, interpersonal manipulation, and emotional difficulties rather than the overt violence more commonly associated with traditional male-centered descriptions of psychopathy.

Several limitations within the existing literature should also be considered. First, studies employed a wide variety of psychopathy measures, including broad psychopathy instruments, CU-trait measures, and measures of related behavioral constructs, making direct comparisons across findings more difficult. Differences in informants, including self-report and other reporting methods, participant ages, and operational definitions may also contribute substantially to apparent sex differences. Second, many investigations relied heavily on self-report questionnaires, which are susceptible to reporting bias and may not accurately capture socially undesirable behaviors. Third, despite growing interest in developmental psychopathy, much of the literature remains cross-sectional, limiting conclusions regarding temporal direction, developmental pathways, and causation. Finally, because psychopathy is moderately heritable, separating environmental influences from underlying genetic vulnerability remains challenging despite increasingly sophisticated developmental models. Bidirectional parent-child processes, peer selection, socioeconomic factors, and other unmeasured influences may also contribute to observed associations.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that follow boys and girls from childhood into adulthood while examining multiple environmental contexts, including parenting, family functioning, peer relationships, school environments, and broader cultural expectations surrounding gender roles and emotional expression. These studies should directly test interaction effects rather than inferring sex-by-environment moderation from separate environmental and sex differences. Greater inclusion of female participants and community samples will also improve understanding of psychopathy beyond traditionally studied forensic populations. Future work would also benefit from clearly distinguishing biological sex from gender identity and gender-related socialization, while specifying which construct is being measured and analyzed. Continued development and validation of gender-responsive assessment approaches may further improve the identification of diverse presentations of psychopathy-related traits, although instruments designed for violence-risk assessment should not be treated as psychopathy measures without separate validation. Collectively, these directions will contribute to a more comprehensive developmental understanding of psychopathy and may ultimately support earlier identification and more effective intervention strategies.

CONCLUSION

Psychopathy and related traits develop through complex interactions between biological predispositions and environmental experiences rather than through either influence alone. Across childhood and adolescence, environmental factors including childhood adversity, parenting practices, family relationships, peer influences, and broader social environments are associated with variation in psychopathy-related traits. However, this review does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that sex or gender consistently changes the effect of environmental risk. Instead, the literature supports a more cautious conclusion: environmental associations and differences in behavioral expression across males and females are both evident, while direct evidence of sex-by-environment moderation remains limited.

Although boys generally exhibit more overt aggression and externalizing behaviors, some studies have found that females with elevated psychopathy-related or CU traits demonstrate greater relational aggression, interpersonal dysfunction, and co-occurring internalizing symptoms. These findings may reflect a combination of sex-related differences, gender-related socialization, developmental context, and measurement practices, although the relative contribution of these factors remains uncertain. Because many existing assessment frameworks were developed using predominantly male forensic samples, researchers should continue to evaluate whether traditional measures adequately capture the full range of psychopathy-related presentations across different populations.

Overall, the literature highlights the importance of examining psychopathy from a developmental and sex- and gender-sensitive perspective. A more precise understanding of how psychopathy-related traits emerge and are expressed requires attention to differences in measurement, developmental context, and the limited evidence currently available regarding sex-by-environment interactions. Addressing these gaps may help build a more comprehensive understanding of psychopathy-related development across diverse populations.

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