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Early warm-rewarding parenting moderates the genetic contributions to callous–unemotional traits in childhood

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Background: Previous gene–environment interaction studies of CU traits have relied on the candidate gene approach, which does not account for the entire genetic load of complex phenotypes. Moreover, these studies have not examined the role of positive environmental factors such as warm/rewarding parenting. The aim of the present study was to determine whether early warm/rewarding parenting moderates the genetic contributions (i.e., heritability) to callous–unemotional (CU) traits at school age. **Methods:** Data were collected in a population sample of 662 twin pairs (Quebec Newborn Twin Study – QNTS). Mothers reported on their warm/rewarding parenting. Teachers assessed children's CU traits. These reports were subjected to twin modeling. **Results:** Callous–unemotional traits were highly heritable, with the remaining variance accounted for by nonshared environmental factors. Warm/rewarding parenting significantly moderated the role of genes in CU traits; heritability was lower when children received high warm/rewarding parenting than when they were exposed to low warm/rewarding parenting. **Conclusions:** High warm/rewarding parenting may partly impede the genetic expression of CU traits. Developmental models of CU traits need to account for such gene–environment processes. **Keywords:** Callous–unemotional traits; warm/rewarding parenting; gene–environment interaction; twin studies.

Introduction

Children with callous–unemotional (CU) traits are characterized by a lack of guilt, a disregard for others' feelings (or lack of empathy) and a shallow display of emotions. These features are a distinguishing characteristic of psychopathy in adulthood (Cleckley, 1976; Frick, 2009), and index early risk of developing psychopathy and severe/stable antisocial behavior across the life span (Frick, Ray, Thornton, & Kahn, 2014). Accordingly, there is a need to understand the child and family factors involved in the development of CU traits.

Developmental theories of CU traits posit that they result from a failure to develop the moral emotions of guilt and empathy (i.e., conscience; Frick et al., 2014). These theories are grounded on the documented associations of CU traits with low empathy (Dadds, Cauchi, Wimalaweera, Hawes, & Brennan, 2012; Dadds et al., 2009), low guilt/remorse (Lotze, Ravindran, & Myers, 2010; Pardini & Byrd, 2012), and low prosocial behavior (Roose, Bijttebier, Decoene, Claes, & Frick, 2010; Sakai, Dalwani, Gelhorn, Mikulich-Gilbertson, & Crowley, 2012). Such failure in conscience development among children displaying CU traits could result from early atypical affective processing (Frick et al., 2014). Indeed, these children tend to show poor behavioral modulation following punishment (Frick & Viding, 2009), as well as reduced behavioral and neural responses to other people's distress (Blair, Leibenluft, & Pine, 2014; Jones, Laurens, Herba, Barker, & Viding, 2009; Marsh & Blair, 2008; Sebastian et al., 2014; Viding et al., 2012). Thus, learning about societal norms and what is morally wrong may be disrupted because children with high CU traits do not learn from punishments and do not find other people's distress aversive (Blair et al., 2014).

Past research indicates that an initial understanding of right and wrong emerges early in life (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002), and that a substantial degree of variation in CU traits is accounted for by genetic factors (i.e., heritability; see Viding & McCrory, 2012). Indeed, moderate to strong heritability was found for this construct (43%–70%), regardless of clinical severity (Viding & McCrory, 2012). This could also be the case for the affective processing variables underlying CU traits. At the same time, not all children who process affect atypically show later deficits in empathy and guilt (e.g., Cornell & Frick, 2007) and CU traits are not uniformly stable across

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children, partly due to environmental influences (Fontaine, Rijsdijk, McCrory, & Viding, 2010; Pardini & Loeber, 2008). Thus, despite the importance of genetic factors in accounting for individual differences in CU traits, environments are likely to play a substantial role regarding how these traits emerge. While independent contributions of genetic vulnerability and environment have been extensively documented (Viding & McCrory, 2012), environments may combine with genetic vulnerability in shaping CU traits through gene–environment interactions (GxE; Frick et al., 2014; Viding & McCrory, 2015) and this has not been investigated systematically to date.

Previous twin studies of CU traits decomposed the variance attributable to latent genetic and environmental factors but did not consider measured environmental risk factors and, therefore, did not test whether GxE account for the manifestation of these traits. Some studies have documented GxE through a limited number of candidate genes (Sadeh et al., 2010; Willoughby, Mills-Koonce, Propper, & Waschbusch, 2013), which does not capture the full genetic load for complex phenotypes. Furthermore, they only examined the role of adverse environment. Yet, positive aspects of the early environment – particularly warm/rewarding parenting – have been more consistently associated with CU traits than adverse environments (Pasalich, Dadds, Hawes, & Brennan, 2012; Pasalich, Witkiewitz, McMahon, & Pinderhughes, 2016). Recently, warm and rewarding forms of parenting have been shown to mitigate the contributions of genetic factors – as indexed by proxies such parent history of antisocial behavior and fearless temperament – to CU traits (Hyde et al., 2016; Waller et al., 2016). In other words, parental warmth and rewards may help shape aspects of norm compliance and conscience development that protect from a genetic vulnerability for developing CU traits.

In summary, past research indicates that warm/rewarding parenting can buffer the development of CU traits. However, no study has examined the degree to which the relative importance of genetic and environmental factors in accounting for CU traits varies as a function of warm/rewarding parenting. The goal of this study was to determine whether early warm/rewarding parenting (63 months) moderates the relative importance of genetic and environmental contributions to childhood CU traits (7, 9, 10, and 12 years). Our statistical approach probed this GxE process while controlling for any gene–environment correlation (rGE). rGE would be indicated if exposition to warm/rewarding parenting is correlated with CU traits through a passive (i.e., shared parent–child genetic vulnerabilities explain the correlation between warm/rewarding parenting and CU traits) or evocative process (i.e., children elicit parental reactions based on genetic characteristics; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). To provide a robust assessment of children's CU traits, the present study relied on repeated assessments across childhood. Warm/rewarding parenting was assessed before school entry to evaluate its predictive and interactive role with respect to later CU traits. Furthermore, because children's initial disruptive tendencies tend to consolidate with age, and progressively evoke parental reactions (i.e. evocative rGE; Scarr & McCartney, 1983), the late preschool period was more likely to index the full challenging context of parenting children with CU traits.

Methods

Participants

Participants were from the Quebec Newborn Twin Study (QNTS; Boivin et al., 2013). Over 660 families from the Greater Montreal area were initially enrolled (1995–1998) and followed annually from birth on a host of individual, social, family, and school characteristics. Parents' consent was obtained before each data collection. Teachers' consent was also obtained for those who acted as respondents on the CU assessments. Zygosity was initially assessed via questionnaire (Goldsmith, 1991), and ascertained with a 96% correspondence through genotyping (Forget-Dubois et al., 2003). The ethics boards of St.-Justine Hospital and Laval University, as well as the boards of the participating schools approved all procedures. As the number of twins varied across measures, we employed a Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) approach in order to include a maximum of participants with missing data (more details on the sample are provided in Appendix S1).

Measures

Warm/rewarding parenting was self-reported when the twins were on average 63 months old. The items were selected based on content and overlapped with how past studies assessed constructs such as positive parenting, parental warmth, and parental rewards in relation to CU traits (Waller, Gardner, & Hyde, 2013). These items assessed mothers' perceptions of their own tendencies to encourage, reward, and spend time with their child: 'I have talked and/or played games with my child', 'I told my child I was proud of him/her', 'I have spent time with my child playing sports and/or doing activities', 'I have praised my child for a good deed' (0–5 Likert scale). In the present study, all internal consistencies were verified by selecting one twin per pair. The internal consistency of the warm/rewarding parenting scale was acceptable ($\alpha = .70$). We verified the factor structure of this scale through a principal components factor analysis, also by selecting one twin per pair. All four items clearly loaded on a single factor, with loadings ranging from .69 to .76. Mean scores were thus computed, with high scores indicating high warm/rewarding parenting. As twin concordance was very high (.83), we computed an interfamily score by averaging the warm/rewarding parenting means for both twins. Thus, warm/rewarding parenting was used as a family-wide environmental moderator in GxE testing.

Teachers rated CU levels at 7, 9, 10, and 12 years via a 5-item questionnaire assessing their perceptions of target children (0–2 Likert scale). Items were selected according to their content validity in previously validated CU measures. Three items were taken from the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (Frick, 2003): 'he/she did not seem guilty after misbehaving', 'his/her emotions appeared superficial', 'he/she has been insensitive of other people's feelings'. Two others were from the Antisocial Process Screening Device (APSD; Frick &

Hare, 2001): 'he/she did not keep promises', 'he/she used or conned others'. Additional work has supported a one-factor structure at each wave that was time-invariant (this material is featured in Henry et al., 2018). Mean scores were computed at each wave (a high mean score indicates high CU traits). Internal consistencies were acceptable (α = .73–.76). The resulting CU scales were convergent with known correlates of CU traits, such as physical aggression (see Appendix S1). An aggregate CU score was created by averaging the mean scores as they were all correlated ($r_{7–9}$ = .40, p < .001; $r_{7–10}$ = .36, p < .001; $r_{7–12}$ = .26, p < .001; $r_{9–10}$ = .49, p < .001; $r_{9–12}$ = .35, p < .001; $r_{10–12}$ = .41, p < .001).

Two covariates – hostile-reactive parenting and mothers' depressive symptoms – were included in the genetic analysis and are detailed in Appendix S1.

Statistical analysis

The CU scale was positively skewed. Thus, we applied a logarithmic transformation. We report the findings using the transformed scale, except in Table 1. Scores were Z-standardized for genetic analysis.

The GxE testing requires determining whether the outcome has significant genetic contributions. Thus, we first conducted a full univariate ACE twin model on the CU traits scores. The twin design's basic principle is to determine whether, on a given phenotype, similarity between monozygotic (MZ) twins, sharing 100% of their genes, exceeds similarity between dizygotic (DZ) twins, who share on average 50% of their genes. This allows individual differences on a given phenotype to be disentangled into additive genetic (A), shared environmental (C; environments that increase sibling similarity), and nonshared environmental (E; environments that increase sibling differences) sources of variance. Additive genetic influences reflect the extent to which MZ twin pairs are more similar than DZ twin pairs.

Second, we tested the presence of gene–environment interaction through a GxE model for continuously distributed variables (Price & Jaffee, 2008). In this model, the latent sources of variance A, C, and E load on CU traits with unstandardized beta coefficients *a*, *c*, and *e*, respectively. A variable assessing a family-level measured environment (i.e., warm/rewarding parenting) is posited to contribute to CU traits (*b*) and may also be correlated with *a* due to a potential rGE (r). This parameter refers to the correlation between the moderator and the genetic load for CU traits; it does not specify the type of rGE at play. An interaction term is also incorporated into *a*, therefore testing moderation of the family environment on the genetic contributions (*ma*). In other words, *a* is a beta coefficient reflecting the main genetic contribution, and *ma* indicates to what extent the genetic contribution varies linearly as a function of the family environment.

To test whether the parameters were statistically significant, we compared models where parameters were freely estimated versus fixed to zero. We first considered a full model where all parameters were freely estimated. Second, we tested a nested model where *r* was fixed to zero. Then, we tested a model where *ma* (in addition to r) was fixed to zero. The *ma* interaction term was considered statistically significant only if the *r* parameter was not. Finally, a significant *ma* interaction was decomposed to assess heritability of CU traits across different absolute values of warm/rewarding parenting.

Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations were obtained using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 20.0, IBM Corp, 2011). Mplus (Version 8; Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) was used to perform the genetic models. As the default estimator when using Mplus, FIML permitted the use of all available data. The likelihood ratio chi-square tests, Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC), and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) were used as fit indices.

Results

Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1. Boys (M = .32, SD = .34) displayed significantly higher CU traits than girls (M = .20, SD = .27); $t_{1,031.29}$ = 6.16, p < .001, but did not differ from girls in warm/rewarding parenting; t_{880} = −.45, p = .651. All significant correlations between the target variables were modest. CU traits were negatively correlated with warm/rewarding parenting (r = −.14, p < .001) and positively correlated with hostile-reactive parenting (r = .18, p < .001), but uncorrelated with mothers' depressive symptoms (r = .002, p > .05). Warm/rewarding parenting was negatively correlated with hostile-reactive parenting (r = −.13, p < .001) and with mothers' depressive symptoms (r = −.11, p < .05). Hostile-reactive parenting and mothers' depressive symptoms were uncorrelated (r = .02, p > .05).

The intraclass correlations in CU traits for MZ (*ICC* = .65; p < .000) versus DZ twins (*ICC* = .33; p < .001) suggested a significant heritability of CU traits (see Table 2). Accordingly, a full ACE model revealed that genetic factors (A) accounted for 65% of the variance in CU traits, the remaining variance being associated with nonshared environmental factors (E).

Table 3 reports the full and nested multivariate genetic models. Fixing *r* to zero in the second model did not deteriorate the fit compared to the full model. The third model, where both *r* and *ma* were fixed to zero, had a significantly worse fit than the second model. Thus, the second model, where *ma* (but not r) was freely estimated, provided the best fit to the data, thus indicating significant GxE (*ma* = −.14; p < .05). In this model, *a* (.68, p < .001), *e* (.60, p < .001) and *b* (−.10, p < .05) were also significant.

Figure 1 provides a graphical illustration of the significant interaction by depicting the values of

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for warm/rewarding parenting (WRP), hostile-reactive parenting (HRP), mothers' depressive symptoms (DEP), and callous–unemotional (CU) traits

Variables	*M* (*SD*)	Skewness (±2**SE*)	Kurtosis (±2**SE*)	*n*
WRP	3.75 (.61)	−0.10 (−0.27–0.06)	−0.21 (−0.54–0.12)	890
HRP	2.22 (.49)	0.24 (0.07–0.40)	−0.16 (−0.49–0.17)	890
DEP	1.39 (.41)	1.82 (1.66–1.98)	4.12 (3.80–4.44)	924
CU	0.26 (.31)	1.79 (1.64–1.94)	3.56 (3.26–3.85)	1,073

Table 2 Monozygotic (MZ) and dizygotic (DZ) intraclass correlations and estimates of heritability (A), shared environment (C), and nonshared environment (E) for callous–unemotional (CU) traits with 95% confidence intervals, from the full univariate model

	MZ		DZ				
	ICC	*n*	ICC	*n*	A	C	E
CU	.65	218	.33	318	**.65 (.58–.72)**	.00 (–.00–.00)	**.35 (.28–.42)**

ICC, Intraclass correlation; *n,* Number of participants for each variable. Statistically significant ACE parameters are highlighted in bold.

Table 3 Full and nested multivariate genetic models parametrizing gene–environment correlation and interaction processes linking callous–unemotional traits (outcome) and warm/rewarding parenting (moderator) (N = 890)

Model	*a*	*c*	*e*	*b*	*ma*	*r*	Δ−2LL	AIC	BIC
Full	.681**	.000	.602**	−.166	−.134*	−.09	–	7,125.42	7,215.48
***r* = 0**	**.678****	**.001**	**.602****	**−.104***	**−.136***	**–**	**.02**	**7,123.46**	**7,209.43**
r = 0, *ma* = 0	.685**	.000	.602**	−.102*	–	–	7.67*	7,129.13	7,211.00

a = Additive genetic path parameter; *c* = Shared environment path parameter; *e* = Nonshared environment path parameter; *b* = Main effect of warm/rewarding parenting; *ma* = Linear moderation of genetic path by warm/rewarding parenting (GxE); *r* = Warm/rewarding parenting/CU traits correlation due to rGE; Δ−2LL = Difference in −2LL (twice the negative loglikelihood) between the previous model and the model that is tested; AIC, Akaike's Information Criterion; BIC, Bayesian Information Criterion. The best-fitting model is highlighted in bold.
*p < .05; **p < .01.

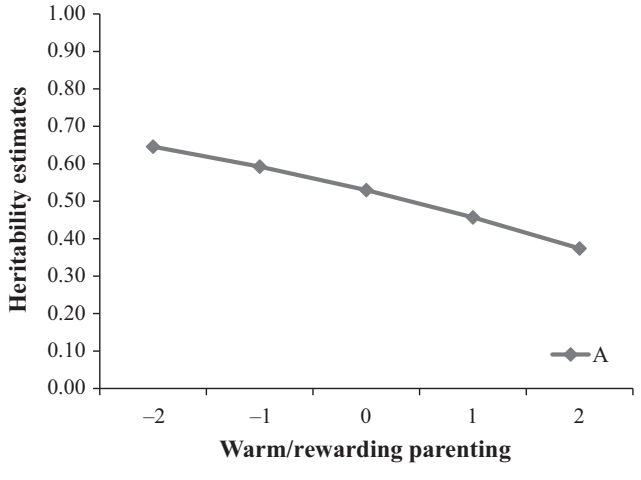

Figure 1 Moderation effect of warm/rewarding parenting on the heritability of callous–unemotional traits

additive genetic variance across different levels of warm/rewarding parenting. The role of genetic factors in CU traits decreased as child exposure to warm/rewarding parenting increased (values of warm/rewarding parenting = standardized additive genetic variance: −2 = .65; −1 = .59; 0 = .53; 1 = .46; 2 = .37). In other words, when children were exposed to higher levels of warm/rewarding parenting, their genetic contributions to CU traits were lower than when children were exposed to lower levels of warm/rewarding parenting.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to determine whether the relative importance of genetic and environmental factors on CU traits across childhood varies as a function of warm/rewarding parenting at 63 months. Our univariate twin modeling showed that genetic factors accounted for a substantial degree of individual differences in CU traits, but the multivariate genetic modeling indicated that the degree of genetic influence on variation in CU traits was weaker in environments characterized by early warm/rewarding parenting.

The high heritability of CU traits is consistent with past twin studies (43%–70%; Viding & McCrory, 2012). The present study also found a modest negative association between warm/rewarding parenting and CU traits. This finding is in line with previous studies where modest/moderate, yet persistent, correlations between early parenting and CU traits were found regardless of assessment method [i.e., observed (Hyde et al., 2016; Waller et al., 2012, 2014) vs. self-reported (Barker, Oliver, Viding, Salekin, & Maughan, 2011; Hawes, Dadds, Frost, & Hasking, 2011)], rater [i.e., mother (Barker et al., 2011; Hawes et al., 2011; Waller et al., 2012, 2014) vs. teacher (the present study)] and age at outcome [i.e., preschool (Hyde et al., 2016; Waller et al., 2012, 2014), adolescence (Hawes et al., 2011)].

Most importantly, the present study allowed the investigation of gene–environment interplay with respect to the relative importance of genetic and environmental factors in accounting for individual differences in CU traits in parenting environments varying in warmth/rewards. The genetic contributions to individual differences in CU traits were lower in environments characterized by higher warm/rewarding parenting, compared with environments characterized by lower warm/rewarding parenting. In addition, the modest phenotypic association between warm/rewarding parenting and CU traits

was not accounted for by genes (no rGE). This GxE effect was also robust to the inclusion of several covariates (i.e., hostile-reactive parenting, mothers' depressive symptoms). All of this points to warm/rewarding parenting as a protective environment that can counter genetic vulnerability to CU traits. This idea is supported by an adoption study that demonstrated that higher levels of adoptive mother's positive reinforcement at 18 months predicted lower levels of CU traits at 27 months in children of biological mothers with history of antisocial behavior, thus indicating that the adoptive mother's positive reinforcement partly buffered the contribution of genetic risk for CU traits (Hyde et al., 2016; Waller et al., 2016).

The present GxE findings indicate that positive aspects of parent–child relationship can moderate the expression of genetic risk to CU traits and add to the evidence base regarding the importance of environments in contributing to CU trajectories (Fontaine et al., 2010; Pardini & Loeber, 2008). It has been proposed that warm/rewarding parenting *in response to prosocial behavior,* particularly early in life when such parenting behaviors can be implemented consistently, shapes the aspects of norm compliance and moral behavior in children at risk of developing antisocial/CU behavior (Frick et al., 2014). Warm/rewarding forms of parenting are particularly predictive of reduction in conduct problems in children with high CU traits (Pasalich et al., 2012, 2016), while harsh/hostile practices are more closely related to increased conduct problems in children without elevated levels of CU traits (Hipwell et al., 2007; Oxford, Cavell, & Hughes, 2003; Wootton, Frick, Shelton, & Silverthorn, 1997). Buffering the genetic risk for CU traits could be one reason why high warm/rewarding parenting is associated with lower CU traits over time (i.e., suppression; Shanahan & Hofer, 2005). Caregiving environments encouraging prosocial behavior through consistent rewards could be protective for all children, but especially for those at risk for CU traits. Another possibility is that warm/rewarding parenting rather promotes genetic expression for empathy and prosocial behavior, thus protecting against the development of CU traits (i.e., facilitation; Shanahan & Hofer, 2005). We need carefully conducted, longitudinal neurocognitive data to examine these two possibilities more closely. In any case, the low magnitude of this moderation suggests that the protective effect may be limited.

Our study employed a broad and powerful indicator of genetic vulnerability (i.e., heritability). This GxE test was also original in its use of warm/rewarding parenting as a moderator; this was warranted by the current stage of knowledge in the field. This study also relied on repeated measures of CU traits provided by different raters at each wave, thereby optimizing reliability and validity. Yet, several limitations are of note. First, all results were obtained from a non-normal and transformed CU variable. Despite log-transformation, normality criteria were not reached. It is, however, common in population-based samples to have non-normal CU variables. Second, a limited number of items were included in our scales; this may have increased measurement error. In the case of CU traits, this problem was partly taken care of by averaging repeated measures, and despite the limited number of items on the warm/rewarding parenting scale, several statistics indicated limited measurement error on this variable (e.g., acceptable internal consistency, modest 'E' in twin modeling).

The present GxE pattern points to the malleability not only of the CU construct but also of its underlying genetic predisposition. Theoretical conceptualizations need to explicitly consider complex GxE processes as part of the development of CU traits. In this regard, warm and rewarding forms of parenting may contribute to CU traits in part because children at risk for these traits have a reward-oriented response style and may particularly benefit from consistent rewarding of norm compliant behavior. If that is the case, children with a reward-oriented response style should benefit more than other children from high levels of warm/rewarding parenting, and the absence of warm/rewarding parenting should impact them more. This possibility should be tested formally as this may not only inform developmental models but could also help determine which groups of children benefit more from parenting training interventions in terms of increase in norm compliance and/or conscience development.

Finally, the present GxE analyses for CU traits should be extended to a larger spectrum of psychopathic traits, mainly because parental warmth may not only be consistently related to other features such as narcissism (Brummelman et al., 2015) but also considering the unique importance of each dimension – narcissism and impulsivity, in addition to CU traits – in understanding the development of psychopathy (Feilhauer & Cima, 2013).

Conclusion

In brief, this was the first published study to document variations in the heritability of CU traits according to an environmental condition. Developmental models of CU traits will need to account for such GxE transactions in the future but first, our understanding of these processes should be informed by a detailed examination of the genetic roots of CU traits, as well as more systematic replication.

Supporting information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix S1. Additional sample information, validation of the CU traits measure and details on study covariates.

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Key points

- To our knowledge, our study is the first to probe a gene–environment interaction in relation to CU traits using a global indicator of genetic risk (i.e., heritability).
- Our study shows that high warm/rewarding parenting may be a protective factor against the genetic expression of CU traits.
- More data are needed to understand the nature of warm/rewarding parenting's contribution to CU traits. This could inform developmental models and intervention efforts.

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