Abstract

DISRESPECT HOMICIDE: STREET CODE ADHERENCE, CALLOUS-UNEMOTIONAL
TRAITS AND THE CAPACITY OF VIOLENT OFFENDING VERSUS NON-OFFENDING
URBAN YOUTH TO MENTALIZE ABOUT STREET VIOLENCE

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National statistics are not available on the proportion of violent juvenile offenses driven by the experience of being disrespected. However, the NYPD estimates that about 40% of the city’s shootings involve members of violent crews of 12 to 20 year olds with most of this gun violence driven by incidents of disrespect. The present study examines the extent and nature of breakdowns in mentalization among violent offending (VO) versus non-offending (NO) youth in response to the experience of being disrespected and the extent to which these breakdowns are shaped by level of street code adherence and callous-unemotional (CU) traits. Mentalization, defined as the ability to envision mental states (i.e., feelings, beliefs and intentions) in oneself and others, “…arguably underlies the capacities for affect regulation, impulse control, self-monitoring, and the experience of self-agency” (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 25), all of which are implicated in interpersonal violence. From a developmental psychodynamic perspective, the capacity to mentalize is seen as developing within the context of secure early attachment relationships via the process of caregiver affect attunement (Fonagy et al., 2002; Stern, 1985; Winnicott, 1963) with further scaffolding optimally provided by secure social contexts such as school and the wider socio-cultural environment (Twemlow, 2003). The present study was
conducted to better understand the role of inner city street culture, embodied in street code, as scripting code adherents’ behavioral responses to disrespect and as inhibiting victim empathy towards code violators. Secondary analyses examined the relationship of CU traits with street code adherence and with the capacity to mentalize in the context of attachment relationships given the limited investigation of social-cultural and relational factors that may shape the development of CU traits.

A community sample of violent offending (N = 10) and non-offending adolescent controls (N=8) from low-income New York City neighborhoods completed measures assessing their level of street code adherence, capacity to mentalize in the context of attachment relationships and level of psychopathic traits. Mentalizing capacity in the context of street violence was assessed through a semi-structured interview organized around three movie clips of disrespect homicide involving teenaged perpetrators. This interview was coded for level of reflective function by an independent rater as well as analyzed qualitatively.

Results indicated that VOs presented with significantly lower mentalizing capacities in the context of street violence than NOCs. This finding was also borne out by the qualitative analysis with VOs exhibiting a more restricted engagement with protagonists’ affective states than NOCs (e.g., more limited affective repertoire, frequent omission of affective states, use of affective states of muted intensity) paralleled by their great degree of defensive distancing (e.g., breaks in narrative, yawning, laughter) than NOCs. A higher level of street code adherence was found to be moderately related to a lower capacity to mentalize in the context of street violence. A medium effect size was found for the relationship between higher levels of CU traits and lower capacity to mentalize the victim’s (though not the perpetrators) experience. While this latter
finding was not statistically significant it is suggested that with a larger sample size this effect may be statistically significant. Lower mentalizing capacities in the context of attachment relationships were found to be associated with higher levels of street code adherence. From this perspective, individuals whose early attachment related experiences did not support the acquisition of adequate mentalizing capacities may be more drawn to the predictable yet organizing framework for interpersonal interactions provided by street code. Finally, a case study of one of the VO participants is presented to demonstrate how impoverished emotional responses among high CU and high code adhering youth may, in part, represent a “turning off” of emotions secondary to severe and chronic trauma in the form of community violence. Implications for the development of more clinically effective interventions for street code invested violent juvenile offenders are discussed.

Key Words: Mentalization, Disrespect Homicide, Street Culture, Callous-unemotional traits, Juvenile Offenders