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RUNNING HEAD: PERCEIVED CONTAINMENT AND AGGRESSION TOWARDS PEERS

Perceived Containment as a Predictor of Children's Aggression Towards Peers

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Abstract

The current study investigates the extent to which children's levels of perceived containment predicts their aggression towards peers in a community program in a sample of 132 school-age children (Mean age = 8.83 years; 55% male). Perceived Containment was assessed by the administration of the Perceived Containment Questionnaire (PCQ) (Schneider et al., 2003). Relational Aggression was measured by using the Children's Social Behavior Scale-Teacher Report (Crick et al., 1996). Children's ratings on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire were found to be unrelated to staff reports of relational aggression. However, a direct relationship was discovered between children's ratings on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire and staff reports of physical aggression. These findings suggest that perceived containment may be a predictor of children's physical aggression towards peers and this relationship is deserving of further investigation.

Keywords: perceived containment; relational and physical aggression

Perceived Containment as a Predictor of Children's Aggression Towards Peers

The relationship between ineffective parenting and children's externalizing problems has been thoroughly researched and is generally viewed as evidence that poor parenting results in the child developing conduct problems (Patterson, 1997). However, recent research suggests that children with conduct problems affect their own socialization and internalize the conflict they experience within their parent-child relationships (Cavell, 2000). As a result, they form mental representations of their disciplinary experiences, which in turn affect the generational transmission of aggression (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995). Perceived containment is an integral part of the power dynamic between parents and children. Schneider, Cavell and Hughes (2003) established that children with low levels of perceived containment tend to have higher levels of externalizing behaviors, (i.e. subtypes of aggression) that children with low levels of perceived containment are likely to display. Thus, understanding the relationship between children's levels of perceived containment and their relational and physical aggression towards peers could help to identify behavior to target in an effort to reduce particular subtypes of aggressive behavior in children. Accordingly, this study investigates the degree to which perceived containment predicts children's aggression towards peers. Specifically, we hypothesize an inverse relationship between perceived containment and both relational and physical aggression, particularly that children with low scores on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire will have correspondingly high rates of relational and physical subtypes of aggression towards their peers.

Perceived Containment

An aspect of the power dynamic between parents and children is perceived containment, which is defined by Schneider et al., (2003) as "a child's belief that adults have the capacity to

impose firm limits and to prevail if there is a conflict in goals." Children who have low levels of perceived containment have been found to engage in more externalizing behaviors than their peers, and evidence suggests that perceived containment could be used as a predictor of conduct problems, particularly aggression (Schneider et al., 2003).

Cavell (2000) first discussed the idea of containment when defining parental containment as "any behavior that fosters in children a sense of restraint while not threatening their relationship security." Schneider et al. (2003) expanded on this concept and defined perceived containment as a child's beliefs and internalizations about the containment they experience from their parents. The aforementioned study not only confirmed that the Perceived Containment Questionnaire is a valid method for measuring perceived containment but also establishes the relationship between perceived containment scores and children's externalizing behaviors. Researchers found that children who have "relatively low PCQ scores tended to have higher levels of externalizing behaviors, regardless of the effectiveness of parental discipline" (Schneider et al., 2003). This evidence suggests that children who believe their parents will not discipline them are more likely to engage in externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and peer conflict.

It has been concluded that adolescents are more likely to engage in the delinquent behaviors that they expect will not lead to discipline (Luthar & Goldstein, 2008). This evidence suggests that adolescents are more likely to be aggressive towards peers if they believe their parents will not take disciplinary action in response to such aggressive behavior. By definition, a child with low levels of perceived containment understands parental limits to be flexible and believes they will prevail over the parent if the parent does choose to take disciplinary action. Thus, a youth with low levels of perceived containment may be more likely to be aggressive

toward their peers because they not only think there is little chance of being disciplined, but also that they will prevail over the parent in the unlikely case of punishment.

Physical and Relational Aggression

Past research has established two forms of aggression that children and adolescents engage in, physical and relational aggression (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Physical aggression represents behavior that harms others through physical damage (e.g., pushing or threatening to beat up a peer). In contrast, relational aggression harms through damage to social relationships (e.g., using social exclusion or rumor spreading as a form of retaliation). Because of this conceptualization, the academic community's understanding of aggression among children has been broadened to include sex differences in types of aggression in early childhood (Casas et al., 2006). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) hypothesized that children aggress in ways that are most likely to thwart or damage the social goals of the target; and thus, girls are more likely to use relational forms of aggression because these methods are effective in hindering the intimacy goals that are more typical in girls. Studies have supported this hypothesis. That is girls tend to be more relationally aggressive than boys, and boys are likely to be more physically aggressive than girls (Crick, Brigbee, & Howes, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Additionally, age differences have also been discovered in that relational aggression is more common among older children; whereas physical aggression is more common among younger children (Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen-Yeh, & Casas, 2004; Crick et al., 2006). Additionally, past research has found that children are likely to exhibit the same type of aggression as those of their siblings and parents, suggesting that family relationships and aggression styles can impact the ways that children aggress towards their peers (Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher, 2006; Casas et al.).

Intergenerational Transmission of Aggression

Socialization theories of externalizing behavior problems suggest the intrinsic meaning that a child applies to a particular parental behavior is likely based on both the child's past disciplinary experiences and on the child's active construction of the current status of the parent-child relationship (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Further research concludes that the frequent occurrence of coercive cycles between a parent and child can undermine the child's acquisition of prosocial behavior and positive social interactional skills (Patterson, 1982). A crucial point of these theories is that children's mental representations of their discipline experiences are an important part of the transmission of aggression, and it is the child's mental representations that mediate and account for socialization effects, therefore directing future social behaviors (Dodge et al., 1990; Dodge et al., 1995).

Research has also been conducted examining the intergenerational transmission of perceived power and how children's perception of their own power influences their interaction with friends. Bugental and Martorell (1999) found that children who have low levels of perceived parental containment, and also perceive their friends as powerless, are likely to be verbally aggressive towards their peers. It was also concluded that a "verbally competitive style in children who view themselves as powerless in their relationship with their parents likely bolsters their sense of power and control and predicts conflict in peer relationships" (Bugental & Martorell). The results from this study suggest that children transfer their perceptions of power from their relationships with their parents to their relationships with peers and are likely to enact their sense of power over their peers in an aggressive way.

Social Information Processing

Much research has been performed concerning the relationship between social information-processing and social adjustment in childhood. Crick and Dodge (1994) conducted a review that provided further empirical evidence supporting this relationship and suggests that certain aspects of social-information processing are likely causal of social behaviors that occur as a part of peer interaction. The definition of social adjustment includes both the degree to which children get along with their peers and the extent to which they inhibit aversive social behavior. In Crick and Dodge's (1994) analysis, the degree to which children are aggressive towards peers is used as an index of social maladjustment.

Specific social-information processing mechanisms, such as the use of schemas and hostile attributional biases, were found to be characteristic of socially maladjusted children, particularly those children who were aggressive toward their peers (Crick & Dodge, 1994). The tendency of aggressive children to use these mechanisms is integral to the understanding of social interaction because these social-information mechanisms are used as a guide for interpreting and understanding the social situation in which the child may be involved. Therefore, if a child already has an aggressive schema stored in their memory, obtained from previous experiences with their parent, the child is likely to use this schema much in the way of a hostile attributional bias, resulting in aggressive behavior towards their peers (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge et al., 1990; Dodge et al., 1995).

Socialization of Children

The socialization of children by their parents maintains its origins in social learning theories, which establish that children model and internalize the behavior they observe in adults (Bandura, 1977). In recent research, there has been increasing emphasis on the role of emotions

and mutual cognitions in establishing the meaning of parent-child exchange, implying that the parent-child relationship must have a unique role in childhood socialization (Maccoby, 1992). Such mutual cognitions include the conceptualization of a mutually responsive relationship between the parent and the child in which both persons feel "invested in and responsible for each other's welfare; one feels concern for and acts responsively to the other's needs, and, at the same time, one comes to expect the other to be responsive to one's needs and to be concerned about one's welfare" (Kochanska, 1997). Research has shown that children who had high mutually responsive relationships with their mothers had a higher internalization of their mother's rules and were more reluctant to break these rules, suggesting that they had high levels of perceived containment (Kochanska, 1997).

Furthermore, research indicates that values are more likely to be transmitted from parent to child when the parent genuinely cares about the value being transferred across generations (Grusec, Rudy, & Martini, 1997). As related to children's relational aggression towards peers and perceived containment, this evidence suggests that if a parent genuinely cares about a value, such as not promoting aggressive behavior, the child is more likely to internalize this value. Additionally, given that children are more likely to engage in activities that they believe to be the least disciplined for, if parents truly denounce aggressive behavior and make rules according to this value, the child will be less likely to violate these rules for fear of being disciplined.

Current Study

In sum, the current study investigates the extent to which children's levels of perceived containment predicts their aggression towards peers. Specifically, we hypothesize an inverse relationship between perceived containment and relational and physical aggression, in that children with low scores on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire (PCQ) will have

correspondingly high reports of relational and physical aggression towards their peers. Furthermore, we expect to produce findings consistent with previous research that claims that an associative relationship exists between physical and relational aggression, essentially establishing that one form of aggression is almost always observed in relation to the other. In addition, we also expect that, as consistent with previous research, that there is a distinct association regarding the gender and age of a child and which form of aggression they will likely display. Particularly, we expect to find greater reports of relational aggression among female participants and older participants than among younger participants and male participants, respectively. Likewise, we expect higher levels of physical aggression from younger children and males than older children and females.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited from a mid-sized, southeastern community-based facility that provides low-cost after-school and summer care for between 200 and 300 school-aged children daily. A table with a sign that said "Earn $5.00" was setup in the main hallway where parents come in to pick up their children for 1 week (5 days). Only families who approached the table were informed of the study. One hundred thirty-two children were enrolled in the study by caregivers.

Children ranged from 5 to 15 years of age (M = 8.83, SD = 2.43). Just over half of the children were male (55.3%). The racial composition of the sample was 72.5% African American, 14% Caucasian, 1.5% Hispanic/Latino, and 12% identified with another racial/ethnic group. The majority of study participants (93%) received a fee reduction for their children to

attend the program. By data collection, the majority of the sample (60%) had been attending the program at least 6 to 12 months, with only 20% having attended the program less than 1 month.

Procedures

Child data collection occurred over the course of a week (5 days). Children completed questionnaires in small groups that ranged from 3 to 15 children at a time, depending on age and the number of study staff members available during the data collection session. For younger children (less than 3rd grade), there was never less than 1 study staff member per 2 children. For older children (3rd grade and up), there was never less than 1 study staff member per 5 children. All questionnaires were read aloud by a study staff member and children then reported their own answers using paper-pencil measures. Study staff monitored the room in order to ensure that children were staying on pace and following along. Children were instructed to raise their hand if they had a question and a staff member would then address the individual child. There were a few occasions (< 10) in which a child could not keep up with the group. These children were pulled aside and the items were read to them individually. The interviews were typically completed in approximately 25 minutes, and children received $5.00. Note that facility staff were not privy to the children's answers and waited just outside the testing room while children completed the measures in order to ensure confidentiality and increase accuracy in reporting.

Director reports of child demographic information and behavior as well as staff reports of child behavior were collected using Medialab interview software. The director and staff member were each provided a laptop for 2 weeks to respond to questions for children whose parents had signed consent forms. Interviews were completed in less than 5 minutes per child and the director and staff member were compensated $2.00 per child.

Measures

Perceived Containment. Child reports of the Schneider et al., (2003) Perceived Containment Questionnaire were collected. This measure is an instrument specific to containment beliefs of aggressive children. Such children are expected to more frequently challenge adults' authority and do so in situations where the base rate for children prevailing is rather low. Considering this, there are two types of questions on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire. The first type involves general statements about the adults' capacity to exert their authority (e.g., "My mother/father can make me obey her/him even if I don't want to"), which children rate on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = "not at all like me"; 4 = "very much like me").This subscale includes either mother or father relationships and contains five such items. The second type of item on the Perceived Containment Questionnaire describes situations in which it would be unlikely that a child's wishes would prevail (e.g., "You really don't want to go to school today. Your mother/father says that you have to go anyway. Can your mother/father make you go to school?"). Children answer these items with a dichotomous yes/no response, which were coded as either 1 or 4, respectively, to parallel the scoring of the Likert scale items. There are four such items, bringing the total number of PCQ items to 9. This measure has been found to be reliable and valid in that PCQ scores reflect children's internal schemas about their own power relative to adults' capacity to be insistent in the face of opposition (Schneider et al., 2003). Higher PCQ scores are indicative of greater perceived containment. Internal consistency of the scales was inadequate ($\alpha = .44$). Responses were averaged across item type, standardized, and used for analyses.

Relational and Physical Aggression. Staff reports of child relational and physical aggression were assessed using Crick et al.'s (1996) Children's Social Behavior Scale-Teacher

Report, which is designed to describe children's behavior towards their peers. The items on this scale were adapted from measures used previously to assess relational and overt aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The CSBS-T consisted of 13 items, 5 of which assessed relational aggression (e.g., "This child spreads rumors or gossips about peers"), four that assessed physical aggression (e.g., "This child hits or kicks peers"), and four that assessed prosocial behavior (e.g., "This child says supportive things to peers"). The response scale for each item on the CSBS-T was a 5-point likert scale (1 = "this is never true of this child" to 5 = "this is almost always true of this child"). Staff members were asked to complete the CSBS-T for each of the child participants. Mean scores were computed and used for analysis. The internal consistencies for relational and physical aggression were good ($\alpha = .96$ and $\alpha = .91$ respectively).

Data Analyses

Regression models were estimated using Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) 9.1. To examine unique associations, the outcome variables (i.e. physical aggression and relational aggression), were simultaneously regressed on the perceived containment, age, gender, and the opposite form of aggression.

RESULTS

Regression Analyses

The outcome variables (i.e., physical aggression and relational aggression) were simultaneously regressed on perceived containment, age, gender, and the opposite form of aggression (see Table 1).

Relational Aggression. As expected, age and gender were positively associated with relational aggression, suggesting that relational aggression is more common among girls (B = .67, $p = .0005$) and older children (B = .39, $p = .002$) than boys and younger children,

respectively. Additionally, an expected positive association was discovered between physical aggression and relational aggression (B = .90, $p < .0001$). This evidence supports and is consistent with previous research establishing these relationships (Crick & Brigbee, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2004; Crick et al., 2006). Contrary to expectation, however, perceived containment was unrelated to relational aggression.

Physical Aggression. Surprisingly, perceived containment was positively associated with high levels of physical aggression, suggesting that high scores of perceived containment are associated with high levels of physical aggression (B = .21, $p = .03$). Additionally, age (B = -.04, $p = .03$) and gender (B = -.04, $p < .001$) were negatively associated with physical aggression, providing further evidence that younger children and boys are more likely to be physically aggressive than older children and girls, respectively. Furthermore, relational aggression positively associated with physical aggression (B = .51, $p < .001$), suggesting that physical and relational aggression are typically observed together and the observation of one form can be used to predict the likelihood of observing the other. These findings regarding the associations of gender and age with subtypes of aggression are consistent with previous research (Crick & Brigbee, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2004; Crick et al., 2006).

DISCUSSION

The current study examined relations between perceived containment and aggression, specifically investigating the extent to which levels of perceived containment predicted children's physical and relational aggression toward their peers. Perceived containment was unrelated to relational aggression. Furthermore, perceived containment was related to physical aggression, but this association was not in the expected direction. Perceived containment was positively associated with physical aggression. Findings also provided additional support for

previous research regarding age and gender difference in children's exhibition of physical and relational aggression. Findings and their implications are discussed in turn.

Perceived Containment and Relational Aggression

Contrary to expectation, no statistically significant relationship was found between levels of perceived containment and relational aggression. This is inconsistent with previous research which had established that children with low levels of perceived containment tend to have higher levels of externalizing behaviors (e.g., Bugental & Martorell, 1999; Cavell, 2000; Schneider et al., 2003). However, this is the first study to examine the relationship between perceived containment and physical and relational aggression as specific types of externalizing behaviors. The absence of an association between relational aggression and perceived containment may be due to demographics of the sample used in this study. In this study, 93% of participants attended the club on fee-reduction, indicating that an overwhelming majority are of low socioeconomic status and thus part of a disadvantaged community. Level of education is a measure of socioeconomic status (e.g., Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 2002), and considering that relational aggression requires high verbal skills and higher level cognitions that are manipulative in nature (e.g., threats, spreading rumors, etc), relational aggression may not be the primary form of aggression that disadvantaged children exhibit. Further research that would control for education levels in low SES groups while examining the association between perceived containment and relational aggression would contribute to the understanding of this relationship.

Perceived Containment and Physical Aggression

Perceived containment was found to be positively associated with physical aggression, such that high levels of perceived containment are related to high levels of children's physical aggression (see Table 1). This is contrary to previous research, which establishes that children

with low levels of perceived containment are likely to exhibit externalizing problems (e.g., Bugental & Martorell, 1999; Cavell, 2000; Schneider et al., 2003). Prior research concludes that corporal punishment is common in low socioeconomic groups, and thus often provides children in this population with models of physical aggression (Strauss & Stewart, 1999). Furthermore, previous research concludes that children are likely to model parental behaviors and exhibit similar aggression types as their parents (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Bugental & Martorell; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge et al., 1990; Dodge et al., 1995). Taking all of these factors into consideration, children in this sample may be witnessing physical aggression in their parental relationships and thus engaging in physical aggression toward peers. Finally, the positive association between perceived containment and physical aggression may exist because parents are using physically aggressive means to instill levels of perceived containment in their children, thus the children may be modeling this behavior and being physically aggressive towards their peers. Future research examining the role of physically aggressive parenting and its influence on children's peer relationships is needed.

Limitations and Conclusions

Findings need to be interpreted while also considering the current study's limitations. First, that this is one of the first studies to use the Perceived Containment Questionnaire and to specifically use it as a measure of predicting relational and physical aggression. Future studies establishing the validity of this measure and the relationship between perceived containment and subtypes of aggression are needed. Furthermore, that the internal consistency of the Perceived Containment Questionnaire was found to be inadequate in this study ($\alpha = .44$). Future studies should investigate which particular items are causing this phenomenon and also examine the clarity of the questions, specifically regarding if they are developmentally appropriate for

children across various age ranges and education levels. Note, however, that associations were found despite these limitations. Secondly, the sample used in this study was limited to children living in low socioeconomic communities. Characteristics of this specific population, including low education levels and prevalence of physical aggression, may have influenced the reports of subtypes of aggression. Future studies that not only control for these factors in disadvantaged populations but also include the examination of perceived containment and aggression in other socioeconomic groups are needed.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides evidence for a link between perceived containment and physical aggression, suggesting that high levels of perceived containment are associated with high levels of physical aggression. This association could exist because parents are using physical aggression as a route to instill levels of perceived containment in their children, thus providing opportunities for the children to model and internalize these aggressive behaviors and later enact them toward their peers. Future studies that examine exactly how parents are enforcing levels of perceived containment upon their children could in turn lead to a better understanding of the connection between perceived containment and physical aggression. Consequently, pathways of perceived containment could be modified to avoid physically aggressive means and thus discourage children from modeling these behaviors and being physically aggressive towards their peers.

Furthermore, research indicates that values are more likely to be transmitted from parent to child when the parent genuinely cares about the value being transferred across generations (Grusec, et al., 1997). As related to children's relational and physical aggression towards peers and perceived containment, this evidence suggests that if a parent genuinely cares about a value, such as not promoting aggressive behavior, the child is more likely to internalize this value. By

modifying methods of instilling perceived containment to exclude parents being relationally and physically aggressive, the value of avoiding aggressive behavior is more clearly transferred to the child and thus more likely to be internalized, which could reduce the child's likelihood to be aggressive towards their peers.

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Table 1. Unique associations of perceived containment with relational aggression and physical aggression

	Relational Aggression		Physical Aggression	
	R^2 = .49***		R^2 = .52***	
	B(SE)	*t*	B(SE)	*t*
Age	.67(.02)**	3.17	-.04(.02)*	-2.26
Gender	.39(.11)***	3.59	-0.39(.08)***	-4.96
Perceived Containment	-.21(.13)	-1.64	.21(.10)*	2.16
Opposite Form of Aggression	.90(.09)***	9.62	.51(.05)***	9.62

Note. B = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient; SE = Standard Error; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; gender (1=male, 2=female)