Parenting and Subtypes of Aggression

Shashi Bhardwaj[1]* Dr. Santosh[2]

[1] Research Scholar

[2] Associate Professor, Faculty of Psychology, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan

Abstract – Less research has been conducted on the etiological factors of the different types of aggression; there are few findings regarding the particular parenting strategies associated with proactive and reactive aggression mainly. Dodge (1991) has hypothesized that reactive aggression has its roots in early childhood, and that rejection and that rejection and maltreatment by parents will be associated with such behaviour. Dodge also hypothesized greater attachment disruption in reactive rather than proactively aggressive children, but research so far only demonstrates a link between insecure attachment and both types of aggressive behaviour (Marcus & Kramer, 2001).

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INTRODUCTION

Some research has linked child impulsivity with harsh parenting and poor parental management of negative emotions(Mel nick & Hinshaw,2000),and so it makes sense that these factors would be a starting point for considering possible etiological factors of impulsive, or reactive, aggression.. In examining the parental correlates of impulsivity and aggression, Straus and Meridian (1998) found that, in Caucasian families, increased use of corporal punishment by mothers was associated with increased rates of antisocial activities and impulsive behaviour in their children. These relationships held even when other variables often associated with child behaviour were controlled for, such as age, sex, SES, level of nurturance and use of non-corporal punishment interventions used by the mother. In addition to corporal punishment, the authors examined the extent to which the punishment was administered impulsively by the parent. When corporal punishment was administered by the parent in an impulsive way, the relationship between parent and child behaviour was even stronger.

Children who are reactively aggressive, on the other hand, have an earlier onset of behaviour and characteristics that implicate the interaction of temperamental reactivity with parental maltreatment in the development of their aggressive behaviour. Heightened physiological reaction to frustration and problems regulating emotions, combined with high rates of behavioural impulsivity, make it difficult for these children to think through the consequences of their aggressive behaviour. These characteristics also make parenting such a child a unique challenge, and a negative parent-child interaction can exacerbate the problem. In families where the interaction is extremely negative, or if the parents have many of the same characteristics as the parent of proactively aggressive children or reinforce aggression, a reactive child may also learn the use of proactive aggression, and thus, would be characterized as pervasively aggressive. A great number of parent- child interactions for this group will be marked by negativity, lack of warmth and physical violence. Over time, it may be difficult to distinguish these parents from the parents of other aggressive groups because they may also be engaging in parenting behaviours that are a reaction to (but in turn, reinforce) the behaviours of their child they are trying to reduce. Parents of reactively aggressive children who are extreme in physical violence, model antisocial behaviour to their children, or use impulsive discipline will most likely to have their reactively aggressive child become pervasively aggressive during late childhood or early adolescence.

It appears that siblings play an important role in shaping and maintaining children's aggressive behaviour, and arguably parents' reactions to sibling aggression are also an important factor. Most studies have examined characteristics of parents of generally aggressive children, and have not focused exclusively on those parents whose children are aggressive with their siblings. Parents of aggressive children tend to be inconsistent in their discipline practices. They have been found to be permissive and lax in supervising their children, but also to be intrusive and controlling. Thus, such parents will sometimes react with harsh punishment in response to their children's aggression, but at other times will ignore it. Differential treatment of children and parental conflict in general, as well as concerning discipline practices, are characteristics of parents of aggressive children.

There is also a positive association between the aggressiveness of parents and their children (Farrington, 1991; Rubin et al., 1992). Additionally, Patterson (1982, 1984) describes the coercive

interaction patterns that are typical of parents of aggressive children and that frequently lead to further escalation in their children's aggressive behaviour. In comparison to parents of non-aggressive children, they start more conflicts, allow conflicts to escalate, and respond to noxious behaviour with their own aversive reactions (e.g., nattering, empty threats, mother's interventions following their 18-month- old children's aggression as prohibiting the aggression, suggesting reconciliation, referring to social rules or feelings and as distracting the children).

Additionally, families were observed in their homes at two different time periods, allowing for investigation of how these factors change over time, and whether they influence children' later aggression. Thus, this study provides a much needed examination of the factors that predict future levels of sibling aggression. It is important to study sibling aggression in the toddler and preschool years because it has been argued that parental factors influence children's aggression only until 6- year of age, at which time behavioural scripts are said to be solidly in place (Enron et al., 1991). Additionally, longitudinal data allow for comparison of first- and second- born siblings when they are the same age to investigate the impact of relative position in the family on sibling aggression.

Following from past observational studies, it is expected that older children will be more aggressive than their younger siblings, and that over time both children become less aggressive. Parents state that they would rarely ignore aggression (Mills & Rubin, 1990). Thus it is expected that parents will intervene following a high proportion of their children's aggressive acts, and that they will ensure that when conflicts and the children receive a clear indication that physical aggression is unacceptable. It is difficult to predict the most common parental responses to sibling aggression because they have varied in past studies, ranging from explanations and references to the feelings of the victim to use of power assertion (Mills & Rubin, 1990; Zhan-Waxier & Chapman, 1982). Some of this variety may depend on the method of data collection. However, it is expected that parent's verbal responses will be more sophisticated when they are addressing their first-born children, and particularly older 6-year-olds, due to their presumably more advanced cognitive abilities. Similarly it is hypothesized that because 6-year-old children's verbal abilities are more advanced, their responses to sibling aggression will involve more rule statements and discussion of feelings whereas simple commands and crying are expected to be the predominate response of younger children. In terms of predicting future aggression, it is expected that parents who use explanations and discuss the feelings of victim, and families where resolution indicate the unacceptability of aggression will have less aggressive children at time 2, whereas parents' physical intervention will be predictive of higher levels of later sibling aggression.

PERSONALITY

Subcultures of violence and portrayals of aggression in the media are social conditions that can create differential level of deposition to aggress in the person. An- another source of individual variation in tendencies to aggress is personality. Everyday experience suggests that individual difference in personality play an important role in aggression. The "aggressive personality "that is usually thought to be fairly typical among violent criminals is a well-known category. People who advocate harsh and punitive treatment of such criminals are often motivated by the conviction that little can be done about such "personalities" and that nothing is to be gained by attempts at rehabilitation or changing the persons' environments. We do have grounds for assuming the reality of aggressive personalities, but it is probably correct to think of these personalities as moderators of situational influences rather than as causes of aggression in and of themselves.

The five factor model (Costa & Mc Crae, 1992), a prominent theory of personality dimensions, is useful for understanding the link between personality and aggressive behaviour (Jensen- Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Miller et al; 2003). The major personality dimensions in the five-factor model are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience; each dimension is represented by six facets. Research on aggressive behaviuor has examined the influences of a variety of specific personality variables (e.g., trait aggressiveness, trait anger, Type A personality) without reference to these major dimensions. More recently, however, a few researchers (Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & Richardson, 2004; Graziano, Jensen- Campbell, Hair, 1996; Suls, Martin, & David, 1998) have sought to understand the relation between aggression and dimensions of personality using the five- factor model. The Neuroticism and Agreeableness dimensions appear to be particularly associated with aggression (Costa, McCrae, & Dembroski, 1989; Gleason et al..,2004; Graziano et al., 1996; Miller et al.,2003; Suls et al., 1998).

The agreeableness dimension describes people who are directed toward interpersonal relationships and the needs of others. The facets of agreeableness include trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness. The opposite pole of Agreeableness is Antagonism. According to Costa et al (1989), antagonistic people tend to be hostile and irritable-"they need to oppose, to attack, or to punish others". Moreover, those high in Antagonism tend to mistrust and have a low regard for others, and, in turn, they act in ways designed to exclude or snub those who are perceived as disliked or inferior. Finally, antagonistic people may lack emotional expression and be unattached interpersonally-"they are cool or cold, contemptuous, callous, unfeeling".

Shashi Bhardwaj[1]***** **Dr. Santosh**[2]

The Neuroticism dimension is characterized by those who have a tendency to experience negative affectivity and psychological distress. The facets of Neuroticism include anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, and impulsiveness. Neurotic individuals are ineffective in their attempts to cope with stress and are prone to engage in irrational thought. By contrast, those who are low in Neuroticism are more emotionally stable and calm and adapt well to stressful situations.

Theorizing and research suggest that these two personality dimensions may predict different propensities for hostility and aggression. Costa et al. (1998) distinguished between neurotic hostility (i.e., "hot-blooded" hostility) and antagonist hostility (i.e. "cold-blooded" hostility) and stated that "whereas neurotic hostility is exemplified by frequent and strong experiences of anger…, antagonistic hostility is exemplified by cynicism, callousness, and lack of cooperation". Accordingly, Costa et al. linked these two personality dimensions to particular patterns of aggressive behaviour. Somewhat consistent with these distinctions, Hennig, Reuter, Netter, Burk, and Landt (2005) labeled the two factor of aggression identified in their analysis as Neurotic Hostility and Aggressive Hostility.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that aggression.- related construct may be divided into two main factors. The angry factor of aggression appears to be positively related to Neuroticism; this type of aggression may be similar to reactive aggression. As such, Neuroticism may be particularly likely to be positively related to aggressive behaviour only under provocation. Because it has been linked to cold-blooded aggression, which is not necessarily precipitated by provocation, Antagonism (i.e., low Agreeableness) may be positively associated with aggressive behaviour under neutral conditions as well as provocation conditions.

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Corresponding Author

Shashi Bhardwaj*

Research Scholar

Shashi Bhardwaj[1]* **Dr. Santosh**[2]