Impact of Violence on Youths’ Aggressive Beliefs and Behaviors: The Role of Contextual Factors

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Introduction

Exposure to Violence

- Youths’ beliefs about the justifiability or acceptability of aggression have been identified as a mechanism by which exposure to violence leads to aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (Garrn et al., 2012; Kimmel & Grych, 2004).
- Exploring how children’s attitudes about aggression develop therefore is an important step in understanding the effects of violence.
- Children exposed to one type of violence often witness and experience other forms as well (Finkelhor et al., 2003; Hamby & Grych, 2012).
- It is not clear if specific forms of violence are particularly likely to impact youths’ attitudes or if the effects of different forms of violence are cumulative.

Resilience

- Protective factors that promote resilience and buffer risk in children exposed to violence are crucial in understanding how youth positively cope in the face of adversity (Mehrin, 2011).
- Family factors, including emotional cohesion, structure, and effective parenting practices, have been found to buffer the effects of violence exposure on youths’ aggressive behaviors (Gerrn-Smith et al., 2004).
- However, the role that context plays in the effects of violence and protective factors is not well understood, including the role of ethnicity.
- Understanding how protective processes differ for various ethnic groups is an important step to including the role of context in resilience research (Luther & Golstein, 2004).

The Present Study

- The present study examined the following research questions:
  1. What are the unique and cumulative effects of youths’ experiences with multiple forms of aggression (interparental, parent-child, and community) on their beliefs about aggression?
  2. Does the quality of children’s attachment with their mothers act as a protective factor, buffering the effects of these experiences on their aggressive beliefs?
  3. Do the nature of these associations vary across participants from different ethnic backgrounds?

Method

Sample
- 148 participants ages 9-14
- Recruited from Milwaukee-area elementary and middle schools
- 38% were male, 62% were female
- 50% Latino, 22% African American, 18% Caucasian, and 10% Other

Procedure
- Letters sent home to parents of children with information regarding study
- Trained graduate and undergraduate research assistants administered measures of attachment, behaviors, exposure to violence, and conducted semi-structured interviews involving 3 vignettes to assess perceived acceptability of aggression

Measures
- Attachment
  - Security Scale (Kerns, Klepp, & Cole, 1996)
  - 15 Items
  - Some kids find it easy to trust their mom BUT other kids are not sure if they can trust their mom (Really True of Them or Sort of True of Them)
- Children’s perceptions of interparental Conflict (CPIC; Grych, Seid, Fincham, 1992)
- 18-item Conflict Properties subscale
  - I never see my parents arguing or disagreeing (True, Sort of True or False)
- Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTPS; Straus et al., 1998)
- 15 Items
  - How often in the past year child experienced acts of verbal and physical aggression (0: This has never happened! More than 20 times)
- Community Violence:
  - Chicago Development Study Stress Measure (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1991)
- 9 Items
  - How many times in the past year was child exposed to violence in community
  - A close friend or acquaintance was a victim of violence
- Perceptions of Violence:
  - 3 written vignettes involved 2 siblings or 2 peers
  - How ok was it that Matt punched Jack? (=Not ok at all – 7= completely ok)

Results

- Experiences and violent behavior were analyzed for youths in the three ethnic groups using ANOVA and moderated regression
- The results of the interactions were interpreted as the influence of family characteristics on youth’s perception of violence
- Moderator analysis was conducted for different levels of family characteristics

Discussion

Conclusions

- Perceived acceptability of aggression was significantly related to aggressive behaviors, further supporting attitudes as an important factor in understanding how these behaviors develop.
- Interparental, parent-child, and community aggression had combined effects on attitudes about aggression, with parent-child and community aggression each having significant unique contributions.
- Maternal attachment buffered the relationship between exposure to community violence and aggressive attitudes.
- For youths with more secure attachment, exposure to greater community violence was not related to more aggressive attitudes, whereas this relationship was significant for less securely attached children.
- Analyses focusing on ethnicity were exploratory due to small sample sizes. Some differences were found:
  - Maternal attachment buffered exposure to community violence in Latino youth. A similar but nonsignificant effect was seen in Caucasian and African American children. With more power, this interaction may have been consistent across all ethnicities.
  - Mother-child security was related to less aggressive attitudes most consistently in Latino youth; Latino families highly value family relationships, and so parent relationships may play a more salient role in shaping children’s attitudes.
  - The relation between witnessing violence and the beliefs that youths develop about aggression depends on many contextual factors, including the setting in which the violence occurs, parent-child relationships, and ethnicity.

Implications

- Strengthening the mother-child relationship may be an important way to prevent youth from developing aggressive attitudes and subsequent aggressive behaviors, even when they live in aggressive environments. This is especially true for Latino children, in which family relationships may be more powerful.
- Resilience research should consider various contextual factors, such as ethnicity, environmental setting, and family characteristics when examining factors that protect at-risk youth.

Selected References


Guerra, N. G., Rowell Huesmann, L. L., & Spindler, A. (2003). Community violence exposure, peer aggression, and children’s attitudes as an important factor in understanding how these behaviors develop.
