

Do Self-Esteem and Parental Authority Influence Self-Reported Aggressive Behaviors?

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Abstract

Aggression is a primary concern throughout the United States and over the last 40 years many researchers have tried to understand how aggression manifests (Tremblay, 2002). The present study examined the relations between self-esteem, perceived parental authority, and aggression. Two-hundred sixty participants were asked about their aggressive behaviors, self-esteem, and perceptions of parental authority. Results indicated that perceived authoritarian parenting was negatively correlated with hostility and physical aggression. Self-esteem was positively correlated with perceived authoritative parenting. Individuals' who reported lower levels of self-esteem also reported higher levels of anger and hostility. The present study can contribute to understanding how an individuals' perception of their parents can negatively influence their thoughts and behaviors.

Introduction

Over the last few years, aggression and violence levels have drastically increased among adolescents and young adults (Paternite, Simons, & Shore, 2001). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2006) reported 36% of students in grades 9-12 had been in at least one physical fight during the year 2005, which had increased from 33% in 2003. Moreover, from 1985 to 1991, homicide rates increased 154% among 15-19 year-olds (Dahlberg, 1998). It was reported that in 1999, over 1,700 adolescents under the age of 18 were arrested for homicide in the United States (Fox & Zawitz, 2001). Not surprisingly, an increasing number of children are being referred to mental health services for treatment of their aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Frick & Silverthorn, 2001). It is difficult to isolate an explanation for this increase; however researchers have been able to identify a variety of factors that correlate with aggressive behaviors.

Understanding how aggressive behaviors manifest is complex because of the many factors involved. For example, Hawkins et al. (1998) found a strong correlation between juvenile aggression and child maltreatment, poor family management, family conflict, separation from home, and residential mobility. According to Siegler, Deloache, and Eisenberg (2006), biological factors and parenting styles also influence the development of aggressive behaviors. In addition, the level of an individuals' self-esteem has been extensively debated as another factor contributing to aggressive behaviors (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Cale & Lilienfield, 2006; Coopersmith, 1967; Donnellan et al., 2005; Parker & Benson, 2004; Sprott & Doob, 2000). All of these factors may conceivably be narrowed down to the upbringing of a child and the child's parental authority. The purpose of the present study was to examine the relation between perceived parenting styles and aggression, the relation between self-esteem and perceived parenting styles, and the relation between self-esteem and aggression.

Parental Authority and Aggression

Parenting styles are the behaviors and attitudes that set the emotional climate of parent-child interactions (Sielger et al., 2006). Parenting styles and behaviors are defined in two separate dimensions. The first dimension is the degree to which parents provide warmth, support, and acceptance towards their child; the second is the degree to which parents exhibit high levels of control and demands of the child (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). For the purpose of the present study, the focus will be on Baumrind's (1971) research that defined authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive as three separate parenting styles.

Parents who exhibit an authoritative parenting style tend to be demanding, warm, and responsive toward their child (Baumrind, 1971). Typically, authoritative parents supervise their child's behaviors, set very lucid standards, and exhibit consistency and confidence when punishing the child (Baumrind). Parents who utilize an

authoritative style allow their child considerable autonomy within set limits and are able to reason with the child in a calm demeanor. Baumrind's (1991) research indicates that children who experience authoritative parenting grow to be socially responsible, assertive, competent, and display self-control, resulting in less problematic behaviors. More specifically, research has demonstrated a strong correlation between authoritative parenting and low levels of antisocial behavior in the child (Sielger et al., 2006).

Authoritarian parents have the tendency to be bitter and unresponsive towards their child (Baumrind, 1971). Parents utilizing an authoritarian approach, exhibit high demands, high control, and expect the child to comply without asking questions. It is common for authoritarian parents to use threats and punishment to implement their parental power (Baumrind). Research has indicated that children who grow up with authoritarian parents typically develop low social competence, become very dismal and isolated, and experience low levels of self-confidence (Sielger et al., 2006).

Permissive parents are exceptionally lenient and are responsive to their child's needs and desires (Baumrind, 1971). Parents who utilize permissive parenting tend to behave in a non-punitive and compliant manner towards their child's impulses, behaviors, and requests (Baumrind). Typically, permissive parents do not demonstrate control over their child's behaviors. Sielger et al. (2006) claim that permissive parents allow the child to behave inappropriately without monitoring their child's behaviors. Research has indicated that permissive parenting correlate to children's impulsive behaviors and low levels of self-control (Baumrind, 1991).

The three parenting styles defined by Baumrind (1971; 1991) have been influential in understanding how parenting affects the developmental path of a child. Research has indicated that a lack of parental support, parental supervision, and parental involvement strongly correlate to behavioral problems and delinquency (Barber, 1992; Frick, 1993; Parker & Benson, 2004). Moreover, past research has found a negative correlation between parental involvement and behavioral problems such as aggression and violence (Corvo & Kimberly, 2000). Greenberg et al. (1993) argue that research focused on aggression and parenting practices such as discipline, socialization, and communication between the child and the parent have been clearly linked to child behavior problems and low levels of self-esteem.

Self-Esteem and Parental Authority

Self-esteem encompasses the approval or disapproval of oneself, and the degree to which one believes he or she is competent, successful, significant, and worthy (Rosenberg, 1965). Furthermore, Rosenberg claims that an individual with high self-esteem demonstrates self-respect and feelings of worth, whereas an individual with low self-esteem exhibits self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, and self-contempt.

Previous research investigating the impact of parenting styles on the development of a child's self-esteem has found a positive correlation between a child's self-esteem and authoritative parenting styles (Coopersmith, 1967; Gecas, 1971; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984; Parker & Benson, 2004; Rosenberg, 1965). Researchers have suggested that supportive parental behavior influences a child's belief that they are competent and worthwhile individual (Gecas; Openshaw et al.). Previous research has also indicated that children who are given freedom and autonomy are more likely to explore their surrounding world, facilitating their development of competence, thus positively influencing the child's self-esteem (Gecas). Moreover, research has demonstrated that authoritarian parenting is linked to children with lower levels of reported self-esteem (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Coopersmith; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). Recently research has argued that the level of self-esteem may influence aggressive behaviors (Bradshaw & Hazan, 2006.).

Self-Esteem and Aggression

Researchers have disputed the relation between self-esteem and aggression (Donnellan et al., 2005). On one side of the argument, the 'threatened egotism model' predicts that individuals with unrealistically high levels of self-esteem have a tendency to be aggressive or violent (Baumeister et al., 2000). On the other hand, research indicates that an individual who experiences real-world externalizing problems report lower levels of self-esteem (Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Sprott & Doob, 2000). For example, Rosenberg (1965) proposed that an individual with lower self-esteem establishes a weaker attachment towards society and as a result, the individual does not conform to social norms, thereby increasing delinquency and aggressive behaviors. Moreover, research has indicated that a feeling of low self-esteem and inferiority intrinsically motivates aggressive behaviors (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2006; Donnellan et al.). In addition, it has been suggested that hostility or anger towards others stems from displaced feelings of inferiority (Donnellan et al.). With the number of inconsistencies among the literature researchers cannot confidently claim that either high or low self-esteem predicts aggressive behaviors.

The Present Study

The present study investigated the relation between an individuals' perceived parental authority, self-esteem, and aggressive behaviors that included anger, hostility, verbal, and physical aggression. It was hypothesized that individuals who perceived their parental authority to be permissive or authoritarian would be more aggressive than individuals that perceived their parental authority to be authoritative. Due to the many inconsistencies among the literature, it was also hypothesized that an individual who perceived their parents to be authoritative, would exhibit higher levels of self-esteem where an individual who perceived their parents to be authoritarian or permissive would display lower levels of self-esteem. Finally, based on previous findings it was hypothesized that there would be an inverse relationship between low self-esteem and aggression.

Method

Participants

A total of 260 participants completed the study (77.2% females and 22.8% males). Of participants who reported ethnicity/race, a majority of them were Caucasian/White (85.4%), with smaller numbers of Hispanic (4.0%), Asian (3.0%), and 'Other' (4.5%). The mean age of participants was 30.18 years ($SD = 11.29$). Participants were recruited from various undergraduate courses and an email list utilized through Survey-Monkey. The Institutional Review Board approved all procedures before data collection began.

Measures

Self esteem. Self esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Survey (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale consisted of 10 items based on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). The survey addresses the participants' general feelings toward themselves, without referring to any specific quality or attribute. A self-esteem score was computed for each participant by summing responses for each question. Higher scores on this scale demonstrated higher levels of a participants' self-esteem. This measure had adequate internal reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .87$).

Parenting styles. Perceived parenting styles were assessed with a modified version of John Buri's (1991) Parental Authority Questionnaire. The original questionnaire was developed to measure Baumrind's (1971) permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parental authority prototypes. For the purpose of the present study, questions were condensed and written in the form of my mother/my father. Questions were base on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Each participant was asked to respond to the questions regarding their own mother and father. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items that included 10 permissive ($\alpha = .82$), 10 authoritarian ($\alpha = .87$), and 10 authoritative ($\alpha = .92$) responses. The highest score for each of the three parenting styles indicated how each participant felt they were raised as a child.

Aggression. Aggressive behaviors were measured with the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992). This scale is a five-point Likert scale that contained 29 questions, which asked each participant to rate themselves on a degree that ranged from 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic of me*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic of me*). Each participant received an overall aggression score by summing their responses ($\alpha = .92$). Next, the questionnaire was broken down to four factors: hostility, anger, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. Each participant received a factor score by summing up the responses for each factor, with higher scores indicating more aggressive behavior.

Procedures

Participants completed the survey either online through Survey-Monkey ($n = 220$) or during their class ($n = 40$). The survey was collated presenting the self-esteem scale first, parenting questionnaire second, and the aggression questionnaire last. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and completely anonymous. Participants were instructed that if they became uncomfortable at any time during throughout the survey, they were free to withhold their answers or withdraw without penalty. Participants were informed that results were used for research purposes only. The survey consisted of 72 questions and took about 15-20 minutes to complete.

Results

To examine whether perceived parenting styles significantly correlate to aggression and self-esteem, Pearson's r correlation was computed between perceived parenting styles and aggression; between perceived parenting styles and self-esteem; and between aggression and self-esteem. As will be discussed below, results indicated significant correlations between perceived authoritarian parenting and aggression and between authoritative parenting and self-esteem. Furthermore, results indicated a negative correlation between self-esteem and aggression.

Perceived Parenting Styles and Aggression

Participants who perceived their parental authority to be authoritarian displayed more overall aggressive behaviors (see Table 1). However, due to a small effect size ($r^2 = .03$) and to further understand aggression the sub-factors of aggression (anger, hostility, verbal aggression, and physical aggression) were also examined. Participants who perceived their parental authority as authoritarian reported characteristic behaviors of only hostility and physical aggression (see Table 2). In general, these results suggest that children who are raised by authoritarian parenting may in fact, have an increase in hostile behaviors and physical aggression.

There were no significant correlations found between participants who perceived their parental authority to be permissive or any of the four sub-factors of aggression. However, an unexpected positive correlation was found between participants who perceived their parental authority to be authoritative and verbal aggression. In addition, an unexpected negative correlation was found between authoritative parenting and hostility. These findings suggest that a child who is raised with authoritative parenting will exhibit an increase in verbal aggression but a decrease in hostile behaviors.

Perceive Parenting Styles and Self-Esteem

There was a significant positive correlation found between perceived authoritative parenting styles and reported high self-esteem (see Table 3). These results suggest that children who are raised by authoritative parents tend to develop higher self-esteem. However, there were no significant correlations between reported self-esteem and perceived permissive or authoritarian parenting styles.

Aggression and Self-Esteem

Results indicated a significant negative correlation between overall aggression and self-esteem (see Table 4), indicating that as an individuals' self-esteem decreases their aggressive behaviors increase. However, due to the small effect size ($r^2 = .11$) and to gain a more complete understanding of aggression, the sub-factors of aggression were examined. A significant negative correlation was found between self-esteem and both anger and hostility, but not verbal or physical aggression (see Table 4). Overall, the results suggest that as an individuals' self-esteem decreases, characteristic behaviors of anger and hostility increase.

Discussion

The present research examined the relation between self-esteem, perceived parental authority, and self-reported aggressive behaviors. We hypothesized that an individual who perceived their parental authority to be permissive or authoritarian would exhibit more aggressive behaviors than individuals' that perceived their parental authority to be authoritative. Results partially supported the hypothesis. A participant who perceived their parental authority to be authoritarian demonstrated more overall aggressive behaviors. Specifically, only those with an authoritarian parenting style exhibited positive correlations between parenting style and hostility and physical aggression. These findings support other research with similar results indicated that a lack of parental involvement and support positively correlate to aggressive behaviors (Barber, 1992; Corvo & Kimberly, 2000; Frick, 1993; Parker & Benson, 2004). Furthermore, our results are consistent with research that demonstrates parents who utilized physical punishment and strict disciplinary behaviors (authoritarian styles) tend to have a more aggressive child (Loeber & Dishion, 1984).

Similar to previous research (Coopersmith, 1967; Gecas, 1971; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984; Parker & Benson, 2004; Rosenberg, 1965), the second hypothesis that an individual who perceived their parental authority to be authoritative would exhibit higher levels of self-esteem was supported by a significant positive correlation.

Finally, our hypothesis that there would be an inverse relationship between low self-esteem and aggression was supported by significant negative correlation. Specifically, an individual with lower self-esteem tend to exhibit hostile behaviors and anger. Many researchers debate whether low-self esteem or high self-esteem is strongly correlated to aggression (Baumeister et al., 2000; Cale & Lilenfeld, 2006; Donnellan et al., 2005; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Sprott & Doob, 2000). Our findings support the argument that individuals' with lower levels of self-esteem tend to exhibit more aggressive behaviors (Cale & Lilenfeld; Donnellan et al.; Fergusson & Horwood; Rosenberg et al.; Sprott & Doob). However, as mentioned earlier, we examined the sub-factors of aggression and found that individuals' with lower self-esteem tend to exhibit more anger and hostility, not physical or verbal aggression.

Limitations

Although the present study made contributions to understanding the relations between aggressive behaviors, perceived parenting styles, and self-esteem, a few limitations must be considered. First, participants were asked to recall and reflect their perceptions of parental authority. This may have been difficult since the average age for the participants was 30.18 years. Over time, perceptions change and may have been distorted. Future research should focus on adolescents to gain the best understanding of how perceptions play into thoughts and behaviors. Similarly, because the present study was based on self-report surveys, participants might have underestimated how aggressive they really are. Future research would greatly benefit by collecting the perceptions from the participants parents, siblings, as well as any close relatives to compare possible discrepancies within the self-reported data and to control for any possible confounding variables. Another limitation to consider is the number of female participants compared to the number of male participants. Future research may benefit from having an equal number of males and females. This factor would also allow future research to examine any possible gender differences. Lastly, self-report surveys always indicate the possibility of social desirable characteristics. It may be very difficult for a participant to report honestly about their levels of self-esteem, even when complete anonymity is guaranteed.

Conclusion

The present study results suggest that perceptions of parental authority play an important role in aggressive behaviors and self-esteem. In this study, perceived authoritarian parenting significantly correlated with hostility and physical aggression. Furthermore, the present study found that individuals' who perceived their parental authority as authoritative also reported higher levels of self-esteem. This study also confirmed that individuals' who reported lower levels of self-esteem also reported more characteristic behaviors of anger and hostility. Collectively, the results can be used to further understand aggression and how important individuals' perceptions play into their thoughts and behaviors.

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Tables

Table 1. Pearson's Correlation between Parenting Styles and Aggression

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Overall Aggression	—	0.14	.17*	-0.05
2. Permissive	—	—	-.52**	.26**
3. Authoritarian	—	—	—	-.39**
4. Authoritative	—	—	—	—

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation between Parenting Styles and Aggression

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Authoritarian	—	-.39**	-.52**	.14*	0.04	0.11	.20**
2. Authoritative	—	—	.26**	-0.08	.15*	0.01	-.15*
3. Permissive	—	—	—	0.13	0.14	0.13	0.06
4. Physical	—	—	—	—	.49**	.70**	.45**
5. Verbal	—	—	—	—	—	.54**	.35**
6. Anger	—	—	—	—	—	—	.56**
7. Hostility	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Pearson Correlations between Perceived Parental Authority and Self-Esteem

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem	—	0.04	-0.02	.20**
2. Permissive	—	—	-.52***	.26***
3. Authoritarian	—	—	—	-.39***
4. Authoritative	—	—	—	—

Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4. Pearson Correlations between Self-Esteem and Aggression

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-esteem	—	-0.11	-0.03	-.31***	-.57***	-.33***
2. Physical Aggression	—	—	.49***	.70***	.45***	—
3. Verbal Aggression	—	—	—	.54***	.35***	—
4. Anger	—	—	—	—	.56***	—
5. Hostility	—	—	—	—	—	—
6. Overall Aggression	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note: *** $p < .001$