



Do moral emotions buffer the anger-aggression link in children and adolescents?



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ABSTRACT

Given the prevalence of anger-related aggression in school and out-of-school contexts, research on counteracting the anger-aggression link in children and adolescents is likely to have implications for educators and practitioners. Here, we tested moral guilt and sympathy as potential moderators of the anger-aggression link in a sample of 4-, 8-, and 12-year-olds ($N = 242$). Caregivers reported their children's aggression and anger levels with a questionnaire. Children reported their moral guilt (in response to vignettes depicting intentional harm) and sympathy levels in an interview. Moral guilt and sympathy interacted with anger in relation to aggression. Controlling for age, sex, socio-economic status, and inhibitory control, high anger was significantly related to high aggression, but not when children and adolescents had high guilt or sympathy. We discuss the potential roles of moral guilt and sympathy in mitigating the anger-aggression link.

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Aggression in childhood and adolescence, such as fighting and teasing, has been linked to academic impairment (Brennan, Shaw, Dishion, & Wilson, 2012), peer rejection (Ladd, Ettekal, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Rudolph, & Andrews, 2014), and poor mental health outcomes (see Eisner & Malti, 2015) for aggressors and victims. At the societal level, a lifetime case of untreated aggression costs taxpayers roughly \$2.6 to \$4.4 million (Cohen & Piquero, 2009).

Given that aggressive behavior is often emotionally charged, developmental scientists have worked to identify its affective antecedents and thereby inform its early intervention (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2010). In particular, the *aggravating* anger-aggression link (i.e., the notion that aggression is driven and exacerbated by unharmed, angry feelings) has been well documented in children and adolescents (Lochman, Barry, Powell, & Young, 2010). On the other hand, evidence suggests that moral feelings of guilt and sympathy highlight the negative consequences of aggression and *protect* against its development (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2014; Malti, submitted for publication). However, the interaction of these competing emotions has not been considered in light of aggressive behavioral outcomes. The extent to which moral emotions counteract the anger-aggression link remains unclear. We addressed this gap by investigating moral guilt and sympathy as potential moderators of 4-, 8-, and 12-year-olds' anger-related aggression. We chose these age groups to account for heightened moral-affective responding and behavioral functioning from childhood

to adolescence (Malti & Ongley, 2014), and to address the dearth of research on moral emotions and aggression in early childhood (see Malti & Krettenauer, 2013).

Anger and aggression

Aggressive behavior intentionally causes physical harm, psychological harm, or distress to others and is often associated with emotional states of anger (Krahé, 2013). Anger is an intense, affective reaction to threat or the perception of threat that involves a fight-or-flight response to an instigating stimulus (Lazarus, 1991). With the exception of moral anger (see Montada & Schneider, 1989), research with various measures of anger and aggression seems to align with the frustration-aggression hypothesis (i.e., that anger and related arousal are expressed through overt aggressive behavior; Berkowitz, 1989). For example, high levels of anger have been associated with heightened forms of generalized aggression in children and adolescents (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Lerner, Hertzog, Hooker, Hassibi, & Thomas, 1988). In a longitudinal study by Eisenberg et al. (1999), children who displayed more frequent angry reactions during free play at study onset (ages 4–6) were rated as more aggressive by caregivers 2 and 4 years later. Anger has also been positively associated with reactive (i.e., provoked, defensive, and retaliatory) forms of aggression (Hubbard, Romano, McAuliffe, & Morrow, 2010). In comparison to their less aggressive counterparts, reactively aggressive children have been shown to display more angry non-verbal cues and higher physiological arousal (e.g., skin conductance reactivity) during competitive, frustration-arousing activities (Hubbard et al., 2002).

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Moral emotions and aggression

Unlike anger, moral emotions are thought to help children anticipate the negative consequences of aggression and adjust their behavior accordingly (Arsenio, 2014; Malti, submitted for publication; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). In the present study, we focused on two distinct moral emotions of particular relevance to children's aggressive conduct: moral guilt and sympathy. Moral guilt is commonly referred to as regret over wrongdoing (Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002; Malti & Latzko, 2012). With the exception of neurotic guilt (i.e., inappropriate self-blame), guilty individuals rightly accept or anticipate responsibility for causing or associating themselves with a transgression of internalized moral norms (Hoffman, 2000). Developmental studies have utilized children's self-attributed, negative emotions following hypothetical moral transgressions to assess their guilt feelings in an experimental setting. Converging results from this paradigm have associated high levels of anticipatory guilt in contexts of moral transgression with low levels of aggressive conduct in early childhood (e.g., Dinolfo & Malti, 2013) and across development (e.g., Malti, 2007). A recent meta-analytic review of 42 studies and over 8,000 participants between the ages of 4 and 20 found a significant, negative association ($d = .39$) between moral guilt and aggressive behavioral outcomes, although it was recognized that relatively little research was conducted with samples from early childhood (Malti & Krettenauer, 2013).

Sympathy, like empathy, stems from the apprehension of another's emotional state. Unlike empathy, it does not require experiencing the same or similar emotion(s) as the other. Sympathetic feelings are predominantly characterized by other-oriented sorrow or concern and are thought to heighten children's attention to the needs of others (Eisenberg, 2000a). A growing number of studies have documented a negative link between sympathy and aggressive behavior in childhood (e.g., Dinolfo & Malti, 2013; Schultz, Izard, & Bear, 2004; Strayer & Roberts, 2004) and adolescence (Blair, 2010; Frick, 2012).

Moral emotions, anger, and aggression

Our major goal was to assess moral emotions (i.e., guilt and sympathy) as potential buffers of the anger-aggression link in children and adolescents. Research on these competing emotions and aggressive behavioral outcomes is scarce. One previous study has investigated guilt and anger-related aggression (Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996). Nine- to 17-year-olds who rated themselves as more guilt prone were less likely to *anticipate* aggressive responses to hypothetical, anger-eliciting scenarios. To date, these results have not been extended to early childhood or corroborated with caregivers' reports of children's *actual* aggression. Moreover, the researchers did not control for children's and adolescents' regulatory capacities, which have been associated with low levels of anger (Frick & Morris, 2004) and aggression (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010). The anger-aggression buffering effects attributed to guilt-proneness may have actually stemmed from heightened regulation.

The combination of anger and empathic deficits has been shown to account for more variance in teacher-reported aggression than either construct alone (Schultz et al., 2004) and empathy (aggregated across child-, teacher-, and caregiver-reports) has been shown to predict less observed anger *and* aggression, respectively, in a group of 5-year-old children (Strayer & Roberts, 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, the potential for sympathy to buffer the anger-aggression link has not been investigated. Highly sympathetic children are more likely to anticipate and express concern for others (Eisenberg et al., 2014). This other-oriented concern is likely to operate in stark contrast to anger, for example, by highlighting the negative consequences of aggressive retaliation (see Eisenberg, 2000a).

In sum, past findings suggest that aggravating feelings of anger may interact with moral guilt and sympathy in multifaceted ways to

determine the frequency and severity of aggression. Children who often feel guilt and sympathy may exhibit less anger-related aggression.

The present study

In the present study, we employed an ethnically diverse sample of 4-, 8-, and 12-year-olds to investigate guilt and sympathy as potential moderators of the anger-aggression link. In line with recent conceptual and empirical works outlining the differential/competing relations of moral emotions and anger to aggression (Arsenio, 2014; Lochman et al., 2010; Malti, submitted for publication), we hypothesized that moral emotions would offset the anger-aggression link (i.e., that high anger would be associated with high aggression, but not for those with high levels of guilt or sympathy). To account for the well-established role of children's regulatory capacities in governing both anger and aggression, we controlled for inhibitory control, a self-regulatory aspect of temperament that involves preventing dominant, maladaptive responses, either under instruction or in novel/ambiguous situations (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). We also accounted for socioeconomic status (SES) and sex in light of previous studies linking (a) SES to aggression (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994), anger (Chen & Matthews, 2001), and moral emotions (Eisenberg et al., 2014), and (b) sex to aggression (Archer, 2004), anger (Potegal & Archer, 2004), and moral emotions (Malti, Gasser, & Buchmann, 2009). Finally, we extended previous research to include early childhood, an understudied age group in this area, and considered potential age differences in our proposed relations because developmental differences in our study variables have been established in previous studies (see Maughan, Rowe, Messer, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2004 for aggression; Murphy, Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, & Guthrie, 1999 for anger; Malti, Eisenberg, Kim, & Buchmann, 2013 for moral emotions).

Method

Participants

A community sample of 80 4-year-olds (M age = 4.48, SD = .37, 39 girls [49%]), 80 8-year-olds (M age = 8.47, SD = .24, 42 girls [53%]), and 82 12-year-olds (M age = 12.53, SD = .36, 40 girls [49%]) participated (N = 242, 121 girls [50%]). All children were fluent in English (speaking and comprehension), as were their caregivers (speaking, comprehension, and writing). Families resided in a major Canadian city and were recruited from local community centers, events, and summer camps. As a proxy of SES, caregivers reported their highest level of education with the following breakdown: 7% high school, 22% vocational, 55% bachelor's, and 14% master's/doctoral level (2% chose not to report). This distribution was representative of the suburban region from which it was drawn (Statistics Canada, 2012). Ethnic composition included 34% Western European, 12% Eastern European, 11% South Asian, 4% Caribbean, 4% East Asian, 3% African, 3% Central and South American, 3% West and Central Asian, 3% South East Asian, and 21% other/multiple origins (2% chose not to report). The researchers' institution granted ethical approval.

Procedure

A pilot study (N = 11) was conducted to ensure age-appropriate assessment techniques and measures. Experimenters were undergraduate psychology students who received extensive training in both assessment techniques and procedures. For the present study, children and their caregivers attended the research laboratory for a single session. Written informed consent was obtained from caregivers and oral assent from children. Child interviews were conducted separately from caregivers in a designated room, lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes, and were filmed for data analytic purposes. Caregivers remained in a waiting area and completed a questionnaire. At study

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