



## Indirect aggression and parental attachment in early adolescence: Examining the role of perspective taking and empathetic concern<sup>☆</sup>



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 7 April 2015

Received in revised form 3 July 2015

Accepted 6 July 2015

#### Keywords:

Early adolescence

Empathy

Attachment

Indirect aggression

Moderation

### ABSTRACT

This study examined the unique and interactive roles of parental attachment and empathy in indirect aggression during early adolescence. A sample of 6301 early adolescents (49.2% boys and 50.8% girls) in urban China, aged from 11 to 14 years, completed self-administrated measures of parent-adolescent attachment, empathy, and indirect aggression. Results indicated that perspective taking was negatively associated with indirect aggression, and empathetic concern was not related to indirect aggression. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that perspective taking moderated the association between empathetic concern and boys' indirect aggression. The findings highlighted that empathetic concern might not be a sufficient protective factor of indirect aggression for boys with low levels of perspective taking during early adolescence.

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### 1. Introduction

Aggressive behaviors of child and adolescent have been widely researched. More recently the indirect forms of aggressive behavior have received considerable attentions, because the harm inflicted on its victim is hard to indentify and prevent. It has also been referred to as relational (Crick, 1995) and social aggression (Underwood, Galenand, & Paquette, 2001) in aggression literature. Compared to physical aggression and verbal aggression, indirect aggression is defined as intentionally harming others in covert ways without direct confrontation (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992), which provides more anonymity and less possibility of retaliation to the perpetrator. Alternately, indirect aggression always occurs through social manipulation, such as using others, spreading rumors, social exclusion, ignoring, and rejection (Feshbach & Sones, 1971; Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006). For these reasons, the impact of indirect aggression is difficult to detect and often underestimated. Nevertheless, many researchers found that victims of indirect aggression showed higher level of depression, anxiety, loneliness, peer rejection, and even higher risk of suicide in extreme cases (Baumeister, 1990; Craig, 1998). Experimental

studies found that the consequences of indirect aggression were associated with increased aggression and lower self-esteem (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Victims also suffered long-term emotional damage and social maladjustments (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Werner & Crick, 2004).

Early adolescence, ages 11 to 14 years, was the context for current study. According to the aggression development theory outlined by Björkqvist et al. (1992), young children often first resort to physical aggressive acts, and then verbal aggression with the formation of verbal skill, while individuals do not exert indirect aggression until they acquire more advanced verbal skills and social intelligence. Longitudinal studies have shown that indirect aggression is manifested with age during early childhood and peak in early adolescence before declining in later adolescence, which demonstrated a curvilinear relationship with pubertal maturity (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989; Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). Early adolescence is also deemed to be a crucial period when individuals begin to get more autonomy from parents and parental attachment has been shown to decrease (Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991). Several studies suggest that parental attachment and empathy are related to indirect aggression (Gomez & McLaren, 2007; Kaukiainen et al., 1999). While most researchers typically focused on the bivariate relationships of empathy or attachment and indirect aggression, only a few studies have explored the role of empathy in relationship between attachment and indirect aggression. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the unique and interactive effects of empathy and parental attachment on indirect aggression in Chinese early adolescents.

<sup>☆</sup> Competing interests: the authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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### 1.1. Attachment and indirect aggression

Evidence has shown that secure attachment relationship with parents is associated with less aggression (Michiels, Grietens, Onghena, & Kuppens, 2008; Nelson & Crick, 2002; Simons, Paternite, & Shore, 2001). According to Bowlby (1973), quality of intimate relationships is originated from pattern of interactions between infants and their early caregivers, primarily the parents. This pattern, also known as “internal working model”, is a stable set of expectations and beliefs of oneself and others. Children who received responsive, sensitive parenting are supposed to construct a positive working model that perceives oneself as lovable, and others as trustworthy. Such a secure attachment bond with parents provides a safe base to develop new intimate relationship with more positive expectations (Ainsworth, 1969), and facilitates distress management and emotional regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Indeed, studies have found that securely attached youths with parents report less indirect aggressive behavior (Gomez & McLaren, 2007), while insecurely attached children with negative working model exhibit more indirect aggression (Michiels et al., 2008; Rubin & Mills, 1991; Talebi & Verma, 2007).

### 1.2. Indirect aggression and empathy

As an alternative aggressive strategy unique to human beings, indirect aggression necessitates the ability to build and maintain social connections in order to execute social manipulation, such as sharing ones' feeling, inferring ones' emotional status, and understanding the consequence of one's actions on others (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999b). These abilities are often referred to as empathy. Empathy is generally viewed as a multidimensional construct including both affective and cognitive components (Davis, 1980). Affective empathy (e.g., empathetic concern, EC) is characterized by the tendency to experience and share the emotions of others, which is often related with feelings of sympathy, concern or sorrow for others, whereas cognitive empathy (e.g., perspective taking, PT) is defined as the ability to identify and understand another's social or emotional situation (Davis, 1980; Eisenberg & S. J., 1987; Hogan, 1969).

Emerging evidences have shown that PT and EC carry different implications for indirect aggression (Caravita et al., 2009; Yeo, Ang, Loh, Fu, & Karre, 2011). Several studies found that EC was not associated with indirect aggression among early adolescents (Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994; Batanova & Loukas, 2014). However, prior findings concerning the association between PT and indirect aggression were mixed. For example, some researchers found that PT was negatively associated with indirect aggression (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 2000; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Richardson et al., 1994). Moreover, Crick (1995) found that youths who are indirectly aggressive do hold bias or deficiency in social information processing. Thus, it seems that children with low level of PT cannot make realistic judgments about the intentions of other people, thus leading to the adoption of indirect aggressive behaviors. Conversely, some other studies proposed that PT was positively associated with indirect aggression (Andreou, 2004; Kaukiainen et al., 1999). In line with this, some research argued that individuals high in PT may have a superior theory of mind (the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others), which served as a vital premise of social manipulation (Andreou, 2004; Konrath, Corneille, Bushman, & Luminet, 2014; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999a; Sutton et al., 1999b).

### 1.3. Present study

This study was aimed to examine the unique and interactive contributions of two distinctive components of empathy, mother attachment, father attachment to early adolescents' indirect aggression in urban China. As discussed earlier, parental attachment was expected to be negatively associated with indirect aggression. Moreover, we expected

that PT would relate to indirect aggression while EC would not relate to indirect aggression. In addition, Van der Graaff, Branje, De Wied, and Meeus (2012) found that empathy mediated in the relationship between perceived parental support and aggressive behavior in a sample of 323 Dutch adolescents. Furthermore, empathy has also been examined as a moderator in the relations between parenting behavior and child conduct problems in 56 mother–child dyads (Miller, Johnston, & Pasalich, 2014). Thus, we hypothesized that empathy (PT and EC) would moderate the relationship between parental attachment and indirect aggression during early adolescence. Based on earlier studies concerning the interactive effect of two components of empathy on aggression (Batanova & Loukas, 2014; Caravita et al., 2009), we further hypothesized that PT and EC would be interacted in predicting indirect aggression among Chinese early adolescents, even though the hypothesis has not been empirically supported in Western societies. Based on research indicating that girls worry more about relationships and exhibit more indirectly aggressive acts than boys (Loudin et al., 2003), we expected that female and male might have different mechanisms in understanding the links between empathy, parental attachment, and indirect aggression.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The data came from a national survey of junior and senior high school students conducted in five provinces (including Hubei, Yunnan, Anhui, Heilongjiang and Guangdong) of China, which has been designed to explore the impacting factors of aggression. We conducted a two-stage stratified randomized cluster sampling survey taking a class as the basic sampling unit. Firstly, 15 cities were selected from 5 provinces according to the economic status. Secondly, for all the public middle schools in the 15 cities, 82 middle schools were selected using the systematical sampling method. Within each selected class, all students were included in the survey except those with severe mental illness. Finally, 15,738 participants were recruited and returned their questionnaires. We included a total of 6301 early adolescents aged from 11 to 14 years ( $M = 13.13$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) for current analysis. Of them 3102 (49.20%) were boys and 3199 (50.80%) were girls.

Participants were asked to fill in a self-reported questionnaire in a 45-minutes class at school with the guidance of trained investigators. Before the survey, informed consents were gotten from all target schools and parents or the next of kin, caretakers, or guardians were obtained and documented.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Indirect aggression

Indirect aggression was assessed by 6 items in Chinese version of Buss–Warren Aggression Questionnaire (BWAQ) (Maxwell, 2008). Items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale format ranging from 1 (Extremely uncharacteristic of me) to 5 (Extremely characteristic of me). High scores reflect more indirect aggressive behavior. The internal consistency reliability of the indirect aggression subscale for the current sample was 0.71 and 0.73 for girls and boys, respectively.

#### 2.2.2. Attachment

Parent section of the Inventory of Parent and Peer attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used to assess adolescents' parental attachment. The IPPA was a self-reported questionnaire rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale format (1 = almost never or never true; 5 = almost always or always true). The scale contains 25 items of three subscales of communication, trust, and alienation. Items were summed up with items of alienation scale reverse-scored. Father and mother attachment was evaluated respectively with parallel wordings of items. The Chinese version of IPPA has demonstrated good reliability in Chinese

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