Journal of Experimental Child Psychology 116 (2013) 674–692

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp

Children's social cognition about proactive aggression

Drew Nesdale [a,*], Melanie Killen [b], Amanda Duffy [a]

[a] School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Southport, QLD 4222, Australia
[b] Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 August 2012
Revised 10 June 2013
Available online 2 September 2013

Keywords:
Proactive aggression
Social cognition
Social groups
Moral judgment
Peer relationships
Group identity

ABSTRACT

In this study, 6- and 9-year-old children ($N = 258$) observed two instances of proactive aggression (one relational and the other direct aggression) that were committed by members of a group toward out-group members. Participants were either members of the group or independent observers. Analyses of participants' social cognition about the aggressor and the aggression (cause of aggression, moral judgment of aggression, attitudes toward the aggressor, and exclusion of the aggressor) indicated that, overall, group members were more positive toward aggressors than were independent observers. Although intergroup competition was perceived to be the cause of the aggression, participants disapproved of both types of aggression (especially direct aggression), disapproval increased with age, and girls disapproved of relational aggression more than did boys. Group members' social cognition about the aggressor and the aggression comprised a coherent cognitive process for both types of aggression, but the observers' process was simpler and differed by aggression type.

Introduction

The current research was concerned with the development of children's proactive aggression, that is, aggression that is driven by the personal gains (e.g., popularity, power) that are anticipated to follow the aggressive act (Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay, & Lavoie, 2001). Proactive aggression may be enacted in order to steal, tease, scare, or coerce (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997),

* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 07 555 28291.
E-mail address: d.nesdale@griffith.edu.au (D. Nesdale).

0022-0965/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2013.07.003

but this form of aggression is typically not accompanied by anger or loss of control—unlike, for example, reactive aggression (Brendgen et al., 2001).

The goal of this study was to examine four aspects of children's social cognition about proactive aggression. First, whereas much of the research on children's aggression has focused on the motivations and responses of the aggressors (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Vitaro & Brendgen, 2012), the current research was concerned with the responses of observers of proactive aggression. Second, whereas much of the research has focused on individual protagonists aggressing against particular targets (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2010), the current research was concerned with proactive aggression in a *group context*. That is, the observers responded to aggression that was enacted by members of a social group toward children who were out-group members when the observer was or was not a member of the aggressor's group. Third, whereas an increasing amount of research has addressed the role played by aggressors' social cognitive processes, including their impressions and memories of others, cause and intent attributions, goal and outcome expectations, and response evaluations and selection (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Crick & Dodge, 1996), the current research sought to examine additional social cognitive processes such as moral judgments and intra- and intergroup attitudes and beliefs of observers of proactive aggression. Fourth, the study assessed whether participants' social cognitive processes relating to the observed aggression were differentiated by the gender and/or age of participants.

Examining observers' reactions to proactive aggression

Research on children's aggression and bullying during middle childhood and early adolescence has revealed that up to 80% or more of these episodes typically involve a number of peers, many of whom are present as interested observers (Frey et al., 2005; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Furthermore, as children increase in age, proactive aggression gradually supplants reactive aggression (Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2002; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006), proactive (but not reactive) aggression is more accepted by peers, and those who engage in proactive rather than reactive aggression have more friends (Poulin & Boivin, 2000).

These findings underpin the importance of gaining an increased understanding of the nature of the social cognitive responses instigated in children who observe episodes of proactive aggression. On the one hand, such understanding might serve to sharpen our appreciation of why children engage in proactive aggression; on the other hand, it might provide a stronger basis for encouraging observers to intervene and support the victims of proactive aggression and bullying (Ahmed, 2008; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012).

To shed as much light as possible on observers' reactions to proactive aggression, two different types of proactive aggression were included in the current study. The observers were shown an episode of relational aggression (i.e., excluding a peer by asking others to refrain from talking to him or her) as well as an episode of direct aggression (i.e., pushing a peer and calling him or her clumsy) (Vitaro et al., 2006). Based on previous findings, we expected that observers would view both aggressive episodes negatively rather than positively but that direct aggression would be judged more harshly than relational aggression because the former is considered to be more harmful (Galen & Underwood, 1997).

Social groups and proactive aggression

The current research focused on episodes of proactive aggression enacted in a group context. This focus reflected the increasing recognition by researchers that inclusion and belonging to groups are critically important to people, including children (Killen & Rutland, 2011; Nesdale, 2007), and that the latter display an increasing involvement in social groups as they move through middle childhood and adolescence (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). According to social identity development theory (Nesdale, 2007), children's membership in such a group is governed by their identification with the group; the more they identify (i.e., adopt the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the group as their own), the more they are motivated to maintain and defend the status of the group and to act in accordance with the group's social norms or expectations.