



## A social identity approach to explaining children's aggressive intentions



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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the effects of group norms, intra-group position, and age on the direct and indirect aggressive intentions of 247 children (aged 5.50 to 11.83 years). Participants were assigned to a team, with team norms (aggression vs. helping) and the child's position within the team (prototypical vs. peripheral-prototypical vs. peripheral) manipulated. Results showed that children in the aggressive norm condition reported greater aggressive intentions than those in the helping norm condition, although, when age was considered, this effect remained evident for younger, but not older, children. Similarly, intra-group position influenced the aggressive intentions of younger children only. For these children, when group norms supported aggression, prototypical members and peripheral members who anticipated a future prototypical position reported greater aggressive intentions than peripheral members who were given no information about their future position. The implications of these findings for understanding childhood aggression, and for intervention, are discussed.

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The question as to why children engage in aggression has received widespread attention over the years. Studies that have focused on this issue have frequently explored the individual characteristics of aggressive children (e.g., Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2002), as well as their family characteristics (e.g., Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Eron, Huesmann, & Zelli, 1991; Haapasalo & Tremblay, 1994; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984). However, it's increasingly becoming recognized that the peer group also has an important role to play (DeRosier, Cillessen, Coie, & Dodge, 1994; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & VanAcker, 2006).

#### Childhood aggression and the group context

As children progress through middle childhood, they spend an increasing amount of time with their peers (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Typically, children form friendships with peers who are similar to them in terms of demographic characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Hartup, 1992; Kupersmidt, DeRosier, & Patterson, 1995). Similarities in behaviors such as aggression also occur from an early age. Farver (1996), for example, studied the friendship groups of 4-year-olds and found that, for 9 of the 12 groups examined, significant within-group similarity in aggression occurred (i.e., intraclass correlations ranged from .73 to .98 for these nine groups). Such behavioral similarity has also been observed within

friendships during middle childhood (Boivin & Vitaro, 1995; Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Kupersmidt et al., 1995; Poulin & Boivin, 2000).

Attempts to explain why aggressive children are friends with similarly aggressive others must consider both selection and socialization processes. Initially, children tend to select friends who are similar to themselves in terms of their aggressive behavior (Poulin & Boivin, 2000; Werner & Crick, 2004). However, evidence also indicates that friends have a continuing influence on aggression. Boivin and Vitaro (1995), for instance, found that elementary school-aged boys who were initially less aggressive than the others in their peer network became significantly more aggressive over a 1-year period. In another longitudinal study, Werner and Crick (2004) examined whether the initial level of aggressive behavior displayed by friends in Grades 2 to 4 could predict the child's own level of aggression 1 year later. For both boys and girls, friends' initial physical aggression predicted the child's later physical aggression, supporting the existence of a socialization effect. A similar association was also found for girls when relational aggression was considered.

Given these findings, a focus on the processes that underlie the group's influence would seem essential, in order to more fully understand why children engage in aggression. Accordingly, the current study aimed to elaborate on the group mechanisms that might contribute to children's aggressive intentions and employed a social identity approach to do so. In particular, the current study drew on social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and it's more recent elaboration, self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), as well as the application of SIT to children via social identity development theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2004, 2007).

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### A social identity approach to childhood aggression

Briefly, SIT proposes that individuals are prone to self-categorizing themselves into particular groups (e.g., activity, sex, ethnicity, social), with their group affiliations forming part of their self-concept, or social identity. SIT makes the further assumption that individuals are motivated to achieve and maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975) and, in order to accomplish this goal, it is necessary to make comparisons between the in-group and relevant out-groups. In particular, a positive social identity can be achieved by evaluating the in-group as positively distinct from relevant out-groups.

Although SIT's propositions can, in principle, be applied to children, the theory does not address the issue of how intra- and inter-group attitudes and behaviors develop. SIDT was proposed to fill this gap, highlighting four phases in the developmental process. Specifically, children are thought to move through the stages of *undifferentiated* (typically up to 2–3 years), *social group awareness* (beyond 2–3 years), and *in-group preference* (after the acquisition of group awareness). In-group preference might then turn to *out-group hostility* (typically after 6–7 years) under certain circumstances. These include, but are not limited to, if out-group hostility is normative within the in-group and if the child believes that their status within the in-group, or the in-group's status overall, can be improved by a display of out-group hostility (Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, Kiesner, & Griffiths, 2008).

A growing body of evidence is now available to support the relevance of the social identity perspective to children. Research has shown that, even by 5 years of age, self-categorization as a group member occurs (see Bennett, 2004). Studies have also revealed this perspective to be useful in explaining numerous group phenomena amongst children, including in-group favoritism (Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Nesdale & Flessner, 2001; Yee & Brown, 1992), stereotyping (Bigler, Spears-Brown, & Markell, 2001), and prejudice (Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, & Griffiths, 2005; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005).

Recent years have also seen the emergence of preliminary investigations that utilize a social identity approach to enhance the understanding of children's aggressive behavior. It is on this work that the current study builds, focusing on two variables central to the social identity perspective: group norms and intra-group position. Specifically, the impact of these variables on children's aggressive intentions is examined for two age groups that span middle childhood (i.e., those in early middle childhood and those in late middle childhood) and for two types of aggression (i.e., direct and indirect).

#### Group norms

According to the social identity approach, once individuals categorize themselves as belonging to a particular group, the group will begin to exert its influence on them via group norms (i.e., rules or standards that prescribe appropriate attitudes and behaviors to be displayed by group members; Turner, 1982). As noted previously, SIDT also specifically proposes that preference for the in-group is more likely to shift to hostility towards an out-group if group norms support such out-group negativity. In applying this perspective to childhood aggression, it follows that children should have more positive attitudes towards aggression, and engage in more aggressive behavior, if the norms of the group that they belong to endorse such actions.

Several findings in line with this proposition have now been reported. Ojala and Nesdale (2004), for example, examined the role of group norms in determining attitudes towards bullying by presenting children, aged 10 to 13 years, with a story in which an in-group member bullied an out-group member. Within the story, group norms were manipulated to support either bullying or fairness. Results revealed that the in-group member (i.e., the bully) was more likely to be retained by the in-group when his behavior was consistent

with the in-group's norms (i.e., when the norm was bullying rather than fairness).

Other studies have also explored the association between group norms and aggressive or bullying intentions and behavior. For example, both Nesdale et al. (2008) and Duffy and Nesdale (2010) found that elementary school children, in Grades 2 to 5 and Grades 4 to 7, respectively, reported greater aggressive and bullying intentions when the norms of the group to which they were assigned supported rather than sanctioned such behavior. Moreover, a recent study that examined group norms within the naturally formed friendship groups of 8- to 14-year-olds, showed that children who belonged to groups with a norm supportive of bullying (as determined by peer-reports of group norms) engaged in greater bullying behavior than those who belonged to groups without such a norm (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009).

The current study utilized a design similar to that employed by Nesdale et al. (2008) and Duffy and Nesdale (2010), with children assigned to either an aggressive norm condition or a helping norm condition. In line with the findings of these studies, it was anticipated that those belonging to a group supportive of aggression would report greater aggressive intentions than those belonging to a group supportive of helping behavior.

#### Intra-group position

When considering the extent to which group members' behavior is consistent with the norms of their group, the social identity construct of intra-group position (or prototypicality) also becomes relevant. According to Turner et al. (1987), the more similar an individual is to other in-group members, and the less similar he or she is to out-group members, the more prototypical that individual is. Consequently, when compared to peripheral group members, prototypical members are typically evaluated more positively by other group members (Hogg & Hardie, 1991; Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003) and, when the in-group is threatened, are more likely to respond with group-level strategies such as increased in-group bias (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997).

Given that the prototypical position is considered to be the most representative of the in-group, it also follows that prototypical group members should engage in more normative behavior than peripheral group members. Applied to the issue of childhood aggression, it could thus be argued that, amongst groups with a norm supportive of aggression, children who are prototypical rather than peripheral members would have the most positive attitudes towards aggression and would display the most aggressive behavior.

Two recent studies have provided support for this prediction. Focusing on naturally formed friendship groups amongst children aged 8 to 14 years, Duffy and Nesdale (2009) found that prototypical members of pro-bullying groups engaged in greater bullying behavior than those on the periphery of such groups. Further, using a design in which both group norms (helping versus aggression) and intra-group position (prototypical versus peripheral) were experimentally manipulated, Duffy and Nesdale (2010) obtained a similar result with a similarly aged sample. That is, amongst children assigned to the aggression norm condition, it was the prototypical rather than peripheral members who reported the greater aggressive intentions.

However, although the foregoing studies have provided consistent support for the social identity approach, further research regarding the relationships between intra-group position and childhood aggression is still required. In particular, studies to date have only considered the child's position within the group at a single point in time, without considering the possibility that a group member's position can change over time. As early as 1978, Tajfel argued that out-group derogation could be used as a strategy to improve intra-group position. Similarly, SIDT notes that children might be more likely to direct negative actions towards an out-group if they believe that such behavior could help them to gain a more central position in the future.

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