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An empirical examination of sex differences in scoring preschool children's aggression

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ABSTRACT

Sex differences in adults' observations and ratings of children's aggression was studied in a sample of preschool children ($N = 89$, mean age = 44.00 months, $SD = 8.48$). When examining the direct observations made by trained observers, male observers, relative to female observers, more frequently recorded aggressive bouts, especially of boys. On rating scales assessing aggression, trained male raters also gave higher aggressive ratings than female raters. Lastly, we compared the ratings of trained female raters and female teachers on the same scale and found no differences. Results are discussed in terms male raters' and observers' prior experiences in activating their experiential schemata where males' greater experience in aggression, relative to that of females, leads them to perceive greater levels of aggression.

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Introduction

Sex differences in aggression during early childhood are considered as serious risk factors for subsequent behavioral problems such as persistent antisocial behavior and dropping out of school (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). From this view, early identification of aggression should be an important part of any attempted remediation. Identification of children's aggression, however, is not a simple matter. For example, there are issues associated with obtaining a valid sample of aggressive behavior as well

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problems with observers' reliability. With regard to valid sampling of behavior, many researchers recommend direct observations of behavior by trained observers because they are said to be the "gold standard" in assessment (e.g., Kagan, 1998).

What is not often alluded to in these recommendations (but see Condry & Ross, 1985; Gurwitz & Dodge, 1975; Lyons & Serbin, 1986; Marsh & Hanlon, 2004; Ostrov, Crick, & Keating, 2005; Susser & Keating, 1990) is the sex² difference between observers of sex role stereotypical behavior such as aggression. The issue of sex differences in observers' scoring of aggression has recently been pointed out in the comparative literature. For example, a study of aggression in nonhuman animals (i.e., salamanders) found that male observers, relative to female observers, systematically recorded higher rates of specific types of aggression (Marsh & Hanlon, 2004). To exacerbate this problem, many observational studies in the developmental psychological literature either do not even specify the sex of the observers (e.g., Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978; Pellegrini et al., 2007) or tend to be all female when the sex of the observers is specified (e.g., Martin & Fabes, 2001; Serbin, Moller, Gulko, Powlista, & Colburne, 1994).

In the first objective of the current study, sex differences between observers recording preschool boys' and girls' aggression were examined. We predicted that both male and female observers would record higher frequencies of aggression for boys than for girls, possibly because of observers' extant sex schemata that boys are more aggressive than girls (Lyons & Serbin, 1986). That is, instruction to observers stressing objectivity may actually prime them to see boys as more aggressive than girls given their extant beliefs. Furthermore, male observers typically have greater experience in aggression than do females, so they should record more aggression in direct observations (Condry & Ross, 1985).

With that said, it has also been widely recognized that aggression in schools occurs very infrequently, thereby making direct observations of aggression too expensive to be practical (e.g., Caspi, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Consequently, rating scales completed by classroom teachers are often used instead of observations, with the rationale being that teachers spend extended time with children and these experiences form a valid base from which to rate children. Similar to the findings in the direct observation literature, however, there is evidence of sex differences between raters of children's aggression. For example, male raters, relative to female raters, give boys higher scores on antisocial and aggressive items (Davidson, MacGregor, MacLean, McDermott, & Farquharson, 1996; Sideridis, Antoniou, & Padeliadu, 2008).

Next, we examined differences between raters of children's aggression on a standardized rating scale. To do this, male and female trained observers, in addition to the children's female teachers, provided ratings of children's aggression on the same instrument, a variant of the Teacher Checklist (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Specifically, in the second objective, the ratings of trained male and female research associates who had spent an entire school year observing the same children were compared. Following the same logic specified in the first objective, we hypothesized a sex of rater difference on the scoring of boys' and girls' aggression. In earlier research using the same rating scale, researchers' ratings of children, relative to those of teachers, were better predictors of risk status because the researchers were more rigorously trained in identifying dimensions of aggressive behavior (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000).

In the final objective, we compared female preschool teachers' and female research associates' ratings of children's aggressive behaviors. The difference between the two sets of raters was primarily in terms of training on the meaning of aggressive behavior. Specifically, as part of the researchers' training as observers, they received extensive and continuous training and monitoring on the criteria for aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, the researchers observed the children across an entire school year, thereby minimizing context differences that can bias ratings (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Lorenz, Melby, Conger, & Xu, 2007). Teachers, although highly competent in their knowledge of child development and early education, were not explicitly and repeatedly trained on the specific

² We use the term *sex*, rather than *gender*, throughout this article for the following reasons. Although the literature (e.g., Maccoby, 1998) recommends that *sex* be used to refer to "biological" differences and *gender* be used to describe differences associated with socialization, we suggest that biology versus socialization is a false dichotomy akin to nature versus nurture. Furthermore, "biological sex" of offspring is affected by "social" processes, following the Trivers–Willard hypothesis (Trivers & Willard, 1973). We used *sex* to simply describe differences between males and females as identified by their parents (if children) or by themselves (if adults).

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