Associations between aggression type, gender, and intentionality on children's trait attributions toward transgressors

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Introduction

- Social decisions about transgressors vary by gender: children associate physical aggression with boys and relational aggression with girls (Giles & Heyman, 2005). This association is relatively accurate, as girls are generally more relationally aggressive than boys (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).
- Regardless of gender, the intentions of transgressors are not always explicit (e.g., Dodge & Frame, 1982). Still, past research demonstrates that children make negative trait attributions toward transgressors, regardless of whether their intentions are ambiguous or unambiguous (Boseovski, Lapan, & Bosacki, 2013).
- This effect varies by transgressor gender, as boy transgressors with ambiguous intentions are judged more negatively than girl transgressors with ambiguous intentions (Heyman, 2001).
- We examined whether children's trait attributions (i.e., nice, mean, not nice or mean) toward transgressors varied by aggression type, transgressor gender, and the clarity of a transgressor's intentions. Given that all three factors are present simultaneously in real world social contexts, it is important to disentangle which factors are most relevant to children when they make social judgments about others.

Method

- Five- to 10-year-olds (N = 139) were presented with two relational aggression stories (one with boys, one with girls) and two physical aggression stories (one with boys, one with girls).
- In the unambiguous condition, all stories explicitly depicted the transgressor's intentions (i.e., "did it on purpose"). In the ambiguous condition, the transgressor's intentions were not given (i.e., nothing was provided).
- After each story, children answered the following question: "Is [transgressor boy or girl] nice, mean, or not nice or mean?" The answer choices were randomized, with the exception that "not nice or mean" was always provided as the last option. Scoring was as follows: 0 = nice, 1 = not nice or mean, 2 = mean.

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Results

A 2 (ambiguity condition: ambiguous vs. unambiguous) x 2 (aggression type: relational vs. physical) x 2 (transgressor gender: boy vs. girl) x 2 (age group: 5- to 7-year-olds vs. 8- to 10-year-olds) mixed ANOVA was used to determine whether children's trait attributions varied by the clarity of a transgressor's intentions, aggression type, and transgressor gender.

There was a significant aggression type x ambiguity interaction, $F(1, 136) = 34.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$. Participants in the ambiguous condition rated the physical transgressors ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 1.69$) as less mean than the relational transgressors ($M = 2.93$ $SD = 1.38$), $t(70) = 6.36$, $p < .001$. By contrast, participants in the unambiguous condition rated the physical transgressors ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .91$) and the relational transgressors ($M = 3.40$, $SD = .13$) as similarly mean, $t(69) = -.903$, $p = .369$. See Figure 1 below.

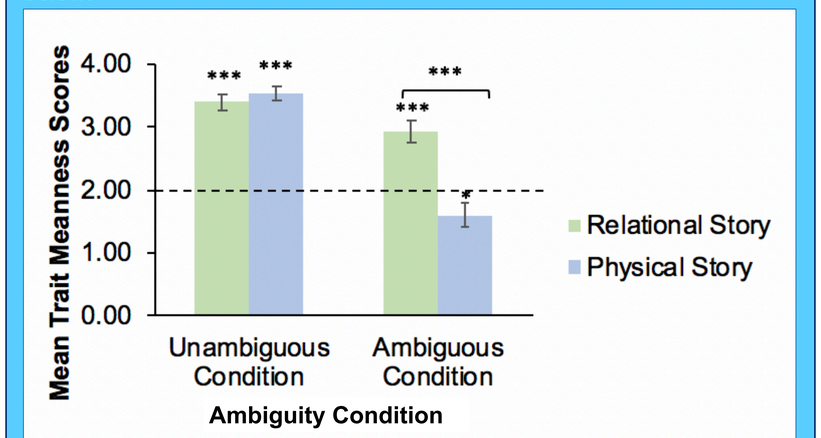

Figure 1. Mean trait meanness scores by ambiguity condition and aggression type. Scores ranged from 0 (all nice) – 4 (all mean). Error bars represent standard errors. *** = $p < .001$ and * = $p < .05$.

There was also a significant aggression type x age group interaction, $F(1, 136) = 6.60$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Younger children reported that the relational transgressor ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.47$) was as mean as the physical transgressor ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(69) = 1.518$, $p = .134$. Older children reported that the relational transgressor ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .84$) was meaner than the physical transgressor ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(70) = 4.656$, $p < .001$. See Figure 2 below.

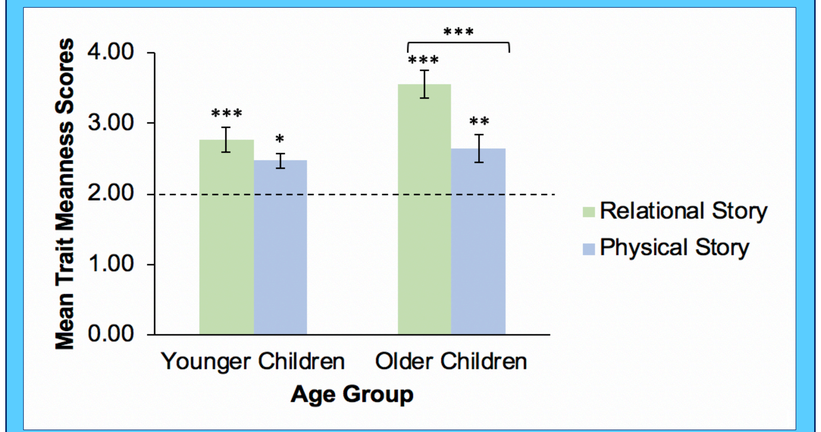

Figure 2. Mean trait meanness scores by age group and aggression type. Scores ranged from 0 (all nice) – 4 (all mean). Error bars represent standard errors. *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, and * = $p < .05$.

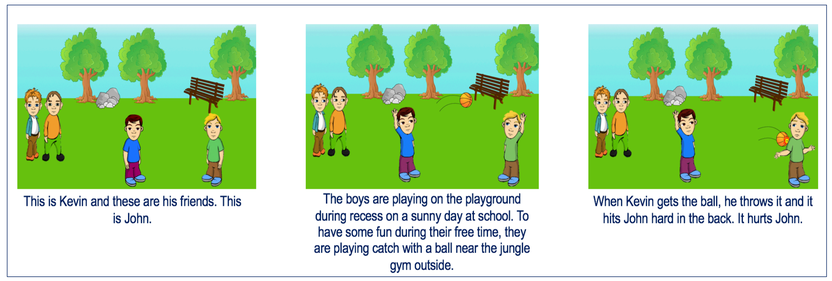

Figure 3. Sample physical story from the ambiguous condition.

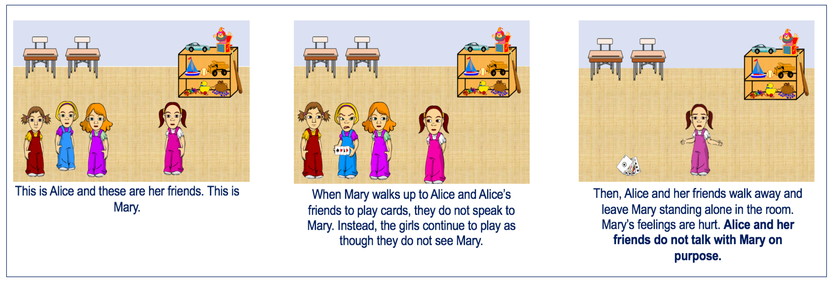

Figure 4. Sample relational story from the unambiguous condition.

Discussion

Children likely interpreted ambiguous acts as accidental (Yuill & Perner, 1988), which elicited less trait consistent attributions, as compared to unambiguous acts. This was especially true for physical transgressors, perhaps because relational transgressors often act covertly (Crick, 1997). Alternatively, accidental physical aggression might arise more frequently in children's social settings, at least compared to accidental relational aggression. Although preschoolers can recognize relational aggression (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997), children might be hesitant to interpret it as accidental. Compared to ambiguous relational aggression, ambiguous physical aggression might allow children to maintain positive evaluations of others (e.g., the positivity bias; Boseovski, 2010).

Only older children rated the relational transgressor as meaner than the physical transgressor. It is likely that children experience more relational aggression with age, which could elicit a more nuanced assessment of relationally aggressive behaviors. Although physical aggression elicits physical harm and is therefore especially salient to young children (e.g., Ball, Smetana, Sturge-Apple, 2017), their limited understanding of relational aggression perhaps led to a lack of differentiation between physical and relational transgressors.

There were no effects of transgressor gender on children's trait attributions, despite past literature that suggests boy transgressors receive harsher judgments than girl transgressors (Giles & Heyman, 2004). The present findings suggest that gender stereotypic associations for different acts of aggression do not warrant different trait attributions about the transgressors.

Overall, aggression type and clarity of intention overpower transgressor gender in aggression contexts, implying that *who* committed an aggressive act is not as relevant as *what* the act was and *why* it was committed.

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