

Gender Differences in Physical and Social Aggression in Young Adults



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Introduction

Historically there has been a bias focusing on males in aggression research; researchers assumed that only males aggressed enough to be worth studying (Bjorkqvist, 1994). However, more recent research has shown that females are just as likely to show aggression, albeit in a different way, with the use of indirect and relational aggression (Ireland & Archer, 1996; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Previous studies have defined these terms as two different items, although with only slight differences; therefore, following the example of more contemporary research, this investigation has collapsed the two into one overarching term of social aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). For the purpose of this study, social aggression includes actions that harm a person without physical contact, both overt (teasing, the silent treatment, etc) and covert (damaging of reputation or status in peer groups) actions (Lack & Shepherd, 2009).

Most research done in the past on social aggression has focused primarily on children and adolescents, and precious little has focused on the social and overall aggressiveness of young adults and comparing levels of aggression between the sexes. In one recent study, young adult males and females were actually found to have similar self-reports of both physical and social aggression, completely opposite of what would be expected based on past data (Lack & Shepherd, 2009). The purpose of this study is to add to that limited base of knowledge as well as adding a measure of adherence to traditional masculine/feminine gender roles to assess the adherence to gender roles and the comparison between that adherence and levels of aggression in young adults.



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Method

Participants

Participants included 310 (224 female, 86 male) University of Central Oklahoma undergraduates enrolled in an introduction to psychology course which required research participation for course credit. Of this original sample, 32 participants fell outside of the age parameters of this study (18-23) and dropped from the data analysis. From the remaining 278 participants (202 female, 76 male), the majority were 18-19 (77.4%) followed by those 20-21 (17.6%) and 22-23 (5%) years of age. The majority of the sample self identified as Caucasian (65.5%) with the remainder identifying as African-American (9.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (9.4%), Hispanic/Latino (7.6%), American Indian (4.3%), and Other (3.6%). The majority of the participants were Freshman (73%), followed by Sophomore (20.1%), Junior (5.4%) and Senior (1.4%).

Measures

Participants completed an online questionnaire that contained multiple components. The first component was demographic, requesting information such as age, ethnicity, and collegiate rank. The second component to the current study consisted of a questionnaire designed by Loudin, Loukas, and Robinson (2003), which measured self-reported levels of both physical and social aggression. Finally, participants completed the Hypergender Ideology Scale (HIS), which measures "extreme gender role adherence in both men and women" (Hamburger, Hogben, McGowan, & Dawson, 1998, p. 287).

Procedure

Before data collection began, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study. Participants were volunteers from undergraduate psychology courses at the University of Central Oklahoma. All students who completed the survey received one experimental credit, as required by the course. All surveys were completed online, using the University of Central Oklahoma's SONA Systems website, and participants were given an hour to complete the experiment.

Results

Hypergender Ideology Scale

The total sample means for the HIS was ($M = 144.59$, $SD = 29.87$). The HIS for male's was ($M = 162.32$, $SD = 32.78$) and female's ($M = 137.93$, $SD = 25.79$). These means were higher than those in the original sample, but still showed the same general trend as the original study, where the total sample means for HIS was ($M = 129.05$, $SD = 39.28$) male mean was ($M = 148.83$, $SD = 40.26$) and the female mean was ($M = 112.23$, $SD = 29.46$) (Hamburger, Hogben, McGowan, & Dawson, 1996).

Results Cont.

Aggression Questionnaire

The total sample mean for physical aggression was ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 2.33$). Physical aggression for males was ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 2.38$), for females ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 2.29$). The total sample mean for social aggression was ($M = 6.73$, $SD = 3.68$). Social aggression for males ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 3.61$), and females ($M = 6.89$, $SD = 3.71$). See table 1 for easier comparison.

Correlational Analyses

There was a significant correlation between sex and HIS score ($r = -.365$, $p < .001$). There was also a significant positive correlation between the total HIS score and physical aggression ($r = .230$, $p < .001$). There was a significant positive correlation between the total HIS score and social aggression ($r = .173$, $p = .004$). Finally, results showed a significant positive correlation between level of social and physical aggression ($r = .373$, $p < .001$).

Sex and Gender Differences in Aggression

In order to examine the potential sex differences in types of aggression, a one way ANOVA was run. Results indicated that there was a significant sex difference on physical aggression, with males reporting engaging in it more often ($F(1, 276) = 3.87$, $p = .05$). There was not, however, a significant difference found between males and females on self-reported levels of social aggression ($F(1, 276) = 1.35$, $p = .25$).



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Discussion

Results indicate that average physical aggression was higher for males than for females, who on average had higher levels of social aggression. Furthermore, results were consistent with the main hypothesis in that there was no statistical difference between male and female total levels of aggression. In regards to the HIS there was a significant correlation between the scale and reported gender, which was expected, as were the similarities in mean levels between Hamburger et al. (1998), and the current studies results.

A correlational analysis showed that the HIS was a better predictor of the levels of both social and physical aggression than was just gender alone. As the HIS score increased, which indicated higher adherence to male gender roles, the levels of both physical and social aggression also increased. With this knowledge, a post hoc stepwise multiple regression was performed, indicating that the HIS was in fact a better predictor. However, the r^2 was .03, indicating that while the HIS is the best measurement that was used in the current study, it was still not the best predictor for aggression. Future research should be performed to discover a better predictor than just gender or the HIS. A further, point of comparison between the current study and the previous study conducted by Lack and Shepherd, was that the participants in the current reported higher averages of both social and physical aggression ($M = 6.73$, $M = 4.87$) than the previous study ($M = 6.18$, $M = 4.03$) (2009).

The current study used an easily available and limited sample pool of undergraduate psychology majors. Future research should be performed using a more generalizable sample of young and older adult populations. Because of the low correlation between the newly used HIS and levels of aggression, the authors suggest both a widening of the subject pool and use of different measures, such as peer review, to find a more definitive forecast measure for predicting levels of aggression. A suggestion for future research should include widening the sample pool and including peer groups to evaluate their associates.

Table 1

Statistics for self-reported aggression

	N	Mean	SD
Females	202		
- Social Aggression		6.89	3.71
- Physical Aggression		4.70	2.29
Males	76		
- Social Aggression		6.32	3.61
- Physical Aggression		5.32	2.38