

Aggression and Adaptive Functioning: The Bright Side to Bad Behavior

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The following four papers were presented in a symposium at the meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development (Minneapolis, 2001) entitled *Aggression and Adaptive Functioning: The Bright Side to Bad Behavior*. The title of the symposium hinted at what we believe to be a frequently underreported aspect of human behavior: That aggression in certain contexts may be associated with positive outcomes and desirable traits. Furthermore, at least some (and possibly many) aggressive individuals appear to be socially attractive to peers rather than repellant. Indeed, we have observed that some very aggressive children are central figures in their social groups and tend to enjoy all the benefits of social inclusion. Thus, in its own way, each of the four papers challenges currently accepted assumptions about aggressive behavior and trait aggression.

We do not intend to suggest that the findings from these studies mean that "aggressive behavior is desirable." On the contrary, we agree that there is strong evidence that at least some aggressive individuals can harm society more than a little. Rather, our studies suggest that effective people can engage in behavior defined as socially undesirable (as can the less effective). It appears that aggressive behavior is working well (i.e., is adaptive) for some individuals in that personal goals are attained at relatively little personal or interpersonal cost. This suggests

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nuance and complexity when assigning meaning to aggressive behavior and trait aggression, and furthermore implies that relations between adjustment and aggression may not be optimally described by standard linear models.

In their article contained in this special issue, Vaughn, Vollenweider, Bost, Azria-Evans, and Snider consider aggressive behavior in preschoolers from two perspectives: (a) direct observations of initiated behavior that includes or results in negative affect from one or both members of the interacting dyad, and (b) indirect assessments of interaction quality and personality based on Q-sort descriptions made by experienced observers. Vaughn, et al. demonstrated that ratings and direct observations relevant to aggression tend to cohere across age, gender, and setting. Additionally, observed negative initiations and two of three Q-sort scales were positively associated with measures of social competence. A Q-sort scale referring to social dominance was most highly correlated with social competence and, when social dominance was controlled, correlations between social competence and the remaining aggression variables were reduced and no longer significant. These findings suggest that the interpretation of aggressive behavior and trait aggression as adaptive in the sense of promoting access to physical and psychological resources is useful and valid for preschool age children.

Hawley invokes the term *Machiavellianism* in her work describing a type of individual (here, preadolescents and adolescents) who possesses both positive and negative characteristics resulting in an apparently effective competitor that wins both status and positive peer regard. Launching from theoretical works in evolutionary biology and by drawing on the notion of strategic differentiation, Hawley proposes that aggressive behavior when balanced by prosocial behavior may epitomize a kind of social competence in that such individuals demonstrate superior ability at personal goal attainment while, at the same time, using high levels of aggression in ways that evidently do not jeopardize (and may even enhance) their standing in the peer group. Hawley underscores the necessity to identify different types of aggressive individuals; her work suggests that the effectiveness of skills-based intervention programs may in part depend on whether the participants are already highly socially skilled and well adept at perspective taking (Machiavellians) or not (coercive controllers). In addition, her work highlights an additional "at-risk" group worthy of interventionist attention (i.e., noncontrollers).

Prinstein and Cillessen found partial inspiration in the ethological literature, which they point out has long found links between aggres-

sion and social status. In contrast to these traditional approaches, Prinstein and Cillessen offer far more precise definitions of aggression and popularity and thereby explore in more detail the relationships among various forms and functions of aggression in adolescents with regard to social standing in peer group. By including a form of aggression especially well suited to manipulate the status hierarchy (a peer-nominated, reputation-based measure of perceived popularity), for example, they were able to show more specifically that instrumental aggression of all types is positively associated with peer perceptions of social status. In contrast, no consistent relationships emerged between the functions of aggression with traditional sociometric measures of social preference. Additionally, the authors are among the first to explore adolescent aggression with nonlinear modeling. In so doing, they illustrate the heterogeneity of aggressive individuals; such adolescents can be low status retaliators or high status rank defenders. The authors discuss their findings within a social learning perspective and suggest that status is a self-perpetuating social reward for some types of aggressive behavior.

Last, Little, Brauner, Jones, Nock, and Hawley further demonstrate the utility of intertwining methodological issues with theory development. Their study follows up on Little, Jones, Henrich, and Hawley (2003), who developed a measurement and analysis system that differentiates the functions of aggression (reactive, instrumental) in ways that free them from confounding form variance (relational, overt). Little et al. used the resulting “pure” reactive and instrumental constructs, which, contrary to previous reports, are orthogonal when free from form variance, to identify five subtypes of aggressive adolescences. The authors continue to support the idea that some youth are competent aggressors by revealing a clearly adaptive instrumental profile. This group of youth appears to employ aggression in a measured and planful way such that they do not suffer negative consequences for their actions. Instead, they share many of the same characteristics of typical adolescents. On the other hand, Little et al. also identified a clearly maladaptive *reactive* profile, and, perhaps most surprising, a quite maladaptive profile of adolescents who are highly aggressive but do not appear to employ their aggression for either instrumental or reactive reasons.

Taken together, the four papers demonstrate that it is not aggression per se that is adaptive or maladaptive but rather it is the specific functions of aggression that are associated with some proximal gains (e.g., status, goal attainment, dominance) or losses. They add to a growing body of literature that challenges prevailing sentiment that aggression is monolithically toxic not only to the victim but also to the

aggressor (Archer, 1999; Luthar & McMahon, 1996; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999; Tremblay, 2000). In addition, the four papers cover a reasonable portion of the life span (early childhood through adolescence), employ a variety of methodologies (observation, self- and teacher report, peer nominations), and address both person-centered (Hawley and Little) and variable-centered approaches (Vaughn et al., Prinstein & Cillessen). Finally, each makes theoretical contributions with implications for intervention approaches.

By recognizing that some aggressive behavior serves an adaptive function, researchers can continue to more finely focus their efforts to identify the precise configurations of form and function that are associated with negative consequences and develop more targeted remediation efforts. At the same time, identifying the precise configurations of form and function that are associated with positive outcomes can help to derive the complicated calculus that balances individual and social needs and gives rise to socially competent aggressive individuals.

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