

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AS A PREDICTOR OF BULLYING AND
AGGRESSION:
ARE THERE GENDER DIFFERENCES?

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University of Nebraska, 2008

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The purpose of this study was to examine the potential roles of gender and moral disengagement in aggressive behaviors including bullying, overt aggression, and relational aggression. Six hypotheses guided this investigation. First, it was hypothesized that boys would be involved in bullying at higher rates than girls. Second, it was hypothesized that boys would report higher rates of overt aggression than girls, while girls would report higher rates of relational aggression than boys. The third hypothesis was that boys would score higher on moral disengagement than girls. Hypothesis four was that moral disengagement would be predictive of bullying behaviors. Similarly, hypothesis five was that moral disengagement would be predictive of both overt and relational aggression. The final hypothesis guiding this investigation was that moral disengagement would mediate the relationships between gender and bullying, and between gender and overt and relational aggression.

Participants in this study included 930 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students from three Midwestern middle schools who participated in a larger longitudinal study on bullying, aggression and victimization. Findings from one-way analyses of variance

(ANOVAs) supported the hypothesis that boys were involved in bullying at higher rates than girls, although follow-up analysis did not fully support gender differences for bullying. Findings did support the hypothesis that boys would be involved in overt aggression at higher rates than girls, however; no significant gender differences were found for involvement in relational aggression. The hypothesis that boys would score higher for moral disengagement was supported. Findings from bivariate linear regression analyses supported the hypotheses that moral disengagement would be predictive of bullying, and of overt and relational aggression. Finally, structural equation modeling was used to further examine the relationships among the variables. As hypothesized, moral disengagement accounted for a sizable portion of the variance by gender in bullying and overt aggression.

The theoretical and applied implications of these findings are discussed, along with limitations of the current investigation. Finally, possible directions for future research are identified.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One—Introduction	1
Gender Differences in Aggression and Bullying	5
Cognitive and Moral Theories of Bullying and Aggression	6
Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement	9
Purpose of the Study	10
Chapter Two—Overview of Previous Research	12
Overview of Previous Research on Aggression	12
Definition of Aggression	12
Subtypes of Aggression	15
Overt Aggression	15
Indirect Aggression	15
Physical Aggression	16
Verbal Aggression	16
Social Aggression	17
Relational Aggression	17
Instrumental Aggression	18
Prevalence of Aggression	19
Sequelae of Aggression	21
Gender and Aggression	21
Prevalence	21
Developmental Trends in Gender and Aggression	26
Psychosocial Correlates	29
Bullying as a Sub-type of Aggression	30
Definition of Bullying	31
Prevalence of Bullying	33
Sequelae of Bullying	37
“Benefits” of Bullying	40
Gender and Bullying	44
Prevalence	44
Psychosocial Correlates	47

Theoretical Explanations for Gender Differences in Aggression and Bullying.....	49
Attribution Style.....	49
Parenting Styles	49
Gender Socialization.....	51
Biological Explanations	53
Cognitive and Moral Theories of Aggression and Bullying	55
Social Information Processing/Social Deficit Model	55
Moral Reasoning.....	59
Moral Disengagement.....	60
Moral Disengagement and Aggression.....	66
Moral Disengagement and Bullying	68
Gender and Moral Disengagement	70
Theoretical Explanations for Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement.....	73
Proposed Cognitive and Moral Model of Aggression and Bullying.....	75
Purpose of the Study	75
Research Hypotheses	76
Hypothesis 1: Boys will tend to be involved in bullying at higher rates than girls.....	76
Hypothesis 2: Boys will tend to be involved in higher rates of overt forms of aggression than girls and girls will be involved in higher rates of relational aggression than boys.....	76
Hypothesis 3: Boys will tend to score higher on moral disengagement than girls.....	77
Hypothesis 4: Moral disengagement will be predictive of bullying behaviors.....	77
Hypothesis 5: Moral disengagement will be predictive of both overt and relational aggression	78
Hypothesis 6: Moral disengagement will be predictive of both overt and relational aggression	78
Chapter Three—Methods.....	80
Participants.....	80
Measures	81

School Questionnaire	81
The Children's Social Behavior Scale	82
The Moral Disengagement Scale	83
Procedures	85
Analysis	87
Preliminary Analyses	87
Data Analysis Strategy	88
Chapter Four—Results	92
Description of Data	92
Research Hypotheses	93
Hypothesis 1: Boys will be Involved in Bullying at Higher Rates than Girls	93
Hypothesis 2: Boys will be Involved in Higher Rates of Overt Forms of Aggression than Girls, and Girls will be Involved in Higher Rates of Relational Aggression than Boys	94
Hypothesis 3: Boys will Score Higher on Moral Disengagement than Girls	96
Hypothesis 4: Moral Disengagement will be Predictive of Bullying Behaviors	97
Hypothesis 5: Moral Disengagement will be Predictive of Overt and Relational Aggression	98
Hypothesis 6: Moral Disengagement will Mediate the Relationships between Gender and Bullying and between Gender and Overt and Relational Aggression	99
Chapter Five—Discussion	103
Findings	103
Implications	108
Research and theoretical implications	108
Limitations	111
Applied Implications	113
Summary and Suggestions for Future Research	114
References	116
Appendices	172

List of Tables

Table 1	Topographies of Aggression and Bullying	151
Table 2	Participant Demographics Presented by School	152
Table 3	Participant Grade Levels Presented by Gender	153
Table 4	Means and Standard Deviations for Continuous Variables across Ethnicity	154
Table 5	Means and Standard Deviations for Continuous Variables across School	155
Table 6	Factor Analysis of the Bullying Scale of the School Questionnaire	156
Table 7	Factor Analysis of the Children's Social Behavior Scale	157
Table 8	Correlations among the Bullying, Overt, and Relational Aggression Scales	158
Table 9	Factor Analysis of the Moral Disengagement Scale	159
Table 10	Means and Standard Deviations for Continuous Variables across Gender	161
Table 11	Percentage of Boys and Girls Classified as Bullies	162
Table 12	Percentage of Boys and Girls Classified as Overtly or Relationally Aggressive	163
Table 13	Percentage of Boys and Girls Classified as Morally Disengaged.....	164
Table 14	Correlations of Moral Disengagement Scale Scores to Bullying with Bullying, Overt Aggression, and Relational Aggression.....	165
Table 15	Direct and Indirect Effects of Gender and Moral Disengagement on Bullying, Overt Aggression, and Relational Aggression	166

List of Figures

Figure 1	Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in Aggressive Behavior.....	167
Figure 2	Proposed Mediation Model of Bullying and Aggression.....	168
Figure 3	Model of the Direct Effects of Gender on Bullying, Overt Aggression and Relational Aggression.....	169
Figure 4	Model of the Direct Effects of Moral Disengagement on Bullying, Overt Aggression, and Relational Aggression.....	170
Figure 5	Model of the Mediation Relationship between Gender, Moral Disengagement, Bullying, and Overt Aggression.....	171

PREVIEW

List of Appendices

Appendix A	Institutional Review Board Application	172
Appendix B	Parental/Guardian Consent Form.....	177
Appendix C	Parent Letter.....	180
Appendix D	Youth Assent Form.....	182
Appendix E	Measures	185

PREVIEW

Chapter One

Introduction

Aggressive or antisocial behavior is the most common reason for youth referral to counseling or mental health services (Craig, 2000; Kazdin, 2003; Kazdin, Whitley, & Marciano, 2006; Weisz, McCarty, Eastman, Chaiyasit, & Suwanlert, 1997). Estimates indicate aggressive behavior accounts for one third to one half of such referrals (Little, Bruaner, Jones, Nock, & Hawley, 2003). Given these referral rates, coupled with the cost of aggressive behavior in terms of victim distress, disruption to learning environments in school, and the allocation of resources, childhood aggression is one of the most widely studied developmental phenomena in the past several decades (Cairns & Cairns, 1984; 2000; Craig, 2000; Crick, 1997; de Wit & Hartup, 1974; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Lochman, Coie, Underwood, & Terry, 1993; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004; Rys & Bear, 1997; Underwood, 2003; Werner & Crick, 2004).

The literature on youth aggression in the last two decades has focused on the different manifestations of aggressive behavior. Initially, most researchers focused on overt aggression, defined as behavior that causes immediate physical harm, or the threat of such harm (Cairns & Cairns, 2000; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Huesmann et al., 1984; Lochman et al., 1993; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004; Rys & Bear, 1997). Overt aggression includes direct physical aggression, like kicking, hitting and pushing, as well as threats of such action. Verbal aggression, also expressed directly, involves name calling, verbal threats and

insults. More recently, researchers have expanded their view of youth aggression to include relational aggression (Crick, 1995, 1997; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) defined relational aggression as the use of interpersonal relations to harm others through damage to their peer relationships. This can be carried out through hostile rumors, exclusion from social activities or manipulation of the relationship to control the individual (i.e. “I won’t be your friend unless you do what I say”) (Crick et al., 2001).

Similarly, as research in youth aggression has expanded to include both overt and relational forms, bullying has been recognized as a subtype of aggression that plays a significant role in young people’s lives (Craig, 1998; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Olweus, 1993; Orpinas, & Horne, 2006; Pepler & Craig, 1995; Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalino, & Slee, 1999; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Defined as a form of aggression in which a more powerful individual or group repeatedly inflicts negative acts upon individuals who are less powerful (Olweus, 1995), bullying has increasingly been recognized as a critical issue faced by school personnel (Crockett, 2004; Long & Pellegrini, 2003; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004). As with aggression, bullying can be overt (physical or verbal) and/or relational in its expression.

While prevalence rates have tended to vary according to the definition of bullying and methodology used by the researcher (Espelage & Swearer, 2003), even conservative estimates have indicated that bullying is a significant factor in children’s lives. For

example, according to one study, 88% of students reported having observed bullying and 77% reported having been a victim of bullying during their school years (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). In a widely cited study, Nansel and colleagues (2001) found that nearly a third of all students in grades 6 through 10 reported frequent involvement in bullying, with 13% identifying themselves as bullies, 10.6% as victims and 6% as bully-victims, students who were involved as both perpetrator and victim (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simon-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Further, according to the U.S. Secret Service, 71% of the perpetrators of school shootings from 1974 to 2000 reported repeated victimization by bullies. Whether these school shooting perpetrators were victims of bullying only or were bully-victims is unclear (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002).

Developmental trends have been examined in the exhibition of aggressive behaviors across childhood and into early adulthood. In general, research has indicated that physical aggression tends to peak in early childhood, then to gradually decline with age, with a brief upswing during adolescence (Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). Although less widely researched, evidence has indicated that verbal aggression, unlike physical aggression, tends to increase with age (Archer & Côté, 2005) through childhood and adolescence before declining in adulthood. Finally, research has indicated that indirect and relational aggression also tend to increase with age during this period, particularly among girls (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002; Vaillancourt, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger & Crick, 2005).

Aggression and bullying have been associated with negative outcomes for both the perpetrator and the victim. Among adolescents, aggression has been correlated with low peer acceptance, loneliness, and academic problems (Crick, 1997; Ladd & Burgess, 2001). Involvement in bullying has also been linked to negative psychosocial outcomes. Among victims, experiences with bullying have been correlated with diminished self-esteem, depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms and school refusal (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Swearer, Song, Cary Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). Involvement as a bully has been linked to other types of antisocial behavior in the short term (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004; Olweus, 1993) and has been predictive of arrests (Olweus, 1995) and long term involvement in violent and abusive behaviors (Rigby, Smith, & Pepler, 2004; Smith et al., 1999).

While the extant research has informed us about aggression, and about bullying, it may have fallen short of describing and explaining children's experiences of these phenomena as they occur on the playground. Schafer, Werner, and Crick (2002) noted that studies of childhood aggression have typically split into two differing paths, those which addressed bullying and those which addressed general victimization. They suggested that our understanding of peer aggression has suffered as a result of the chasm between the "bully/victim" and the "general victimization" research traditions. Given that definitions of bullying incorporate an imbalance of power or status, the bully/victim research may exclude aggression which occurs in relationships characterized by mutual antipathy among peers of equal status (Murray-Close & Crick, 2006a), or that which occurs within friendship groups. Research has found that friendship groups and dyads are

a setting in which peer-based aggression occurs (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995; Grottpeter & Crick 1996; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Parker & Asher, 1993; Parker & Seal, 1996; Werner & Geiger, 1999). Further, this between-friends aggression has negative psycho-social sequelae above and beyond those associated with bullying (Crick & Nelson, 1999; Schafer, et al., 2002), and its omission from the literature poses a significant oversight.

Independently, the general victimization and bullying research traditions have offered unique and valuable contributions to our understanding of childhood aggression. As these fields continue to mature, Schafer et al. (2002) advocated for their integration in order to develop a more cohesive understanding of the range of aggressive behaviors experienced by children. Although the research may make it appear so, it is unlikely that children experience either bullying in the absence of other aggression, or aggression in the absence of bullying. A more comprehensive understanding of the nature of, and factors contributing to, all forms of aggression (bullying included) will presumably lead to more effective and comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies.

Gender Differences in Aggression and Bullying

Historically, researchers have considered boys to be more aggressive than girls (Bjorkqvist, 1994; Espelage, Mebane, & Swearer, 2004; Maccoby, 1990; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004). As Eleanor Maccoby (2004) succinctly noted, “it has been quite clearly established that males are the more confrontational sex” (p. 9). As a result, much of the early bullying research focused on boys. Although the empirical evidence is by no means unequivocal, in general boys have appeared to be involved in aggressive behaviors more

frequently than girls (Pepler, Craig, Yuile, & Connolly, 2004) and particularly more involved in both physical and verbal forms of aggression (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Denning, 2004). When relational forms of aggression, defined as behaviors intended to damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by his or her peers (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), are considered, the gender differences become less clear. Some studies have found that relational aggression is largely the domain of females (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 1997). Others have suggested that boys and girls are equally likely to engage in relational aggression (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Espelage et al., 2004; Rys & Bear, 1997), while still others have found boys to be both physically and relationally aggressive at higher rates than girls (Henington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1997).

Cognitive and Moral Theories of Bullying and Aggression

In order for prevention and intervention programs to be effective, a better understanding of the developmental processes that contribute to bullying and other aggressive behaviors is needed (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Extrapolating from the aggression literature, both bullying and aggression have often been attributed to deficits or biases in social information processing in which patterns of processing social cues lead to patterns of harmful behavior (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996, 1999). Here, the traditional view of the unpopular, socially isolated, childhood aggressor is promulgated. Indeed, research has established that, in general, children who are rejected by their peers are more aggressive than their non-rejected counterparts (Asher & Dodge, 1986). Bullies have similarly been found to be rejected by peers (Boulton & Smith, 1994). However, as

Garandeau and Cillessen (2006) noted, these findings are not universal. Some researchers have found that aggressive children were part of, and even central to, friendship networks, and were even as likely as other children to be identified as a “best” friend (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Garipey, 1998; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Recent research by Rodkin and colleagues (2000) has also refuted the traditional notion of the aggressor as the unpopular social misfit. These authors found that both aggressive and nonaggressive boys were considered popular by their peers (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Aker, 2000). Further, both Sandstrom (1999) and Pellegrini and colleagues (1999) noted that aggressive behavior was actually correlated with a rise in social stature (Pellegrini, Bartino, & Brooks, 1999). These apparent social benefits of aggressive behavior may apply to the group as well as to the individual. Garbarino and deLara (2002) posited that bullies from dominant social groups (i.e. athletes) engage in a “pro-social” sort of bullying, often with the overt approval of adults, which may serve to establish and maintain a school’s social hierarchies.

While the social information processing model of bullying and aggression seemed to lend itself well to the development of prevention and intervention efforts which could target specific stages of the process (i.e. interpretation of social cues), these interventions did not address the needs of these popular, seemingly socially astute, aggressors. This led Orpinas and Horne (2006) to note that truly effective intervention efforts must rely on an understanding of the multiple social, personal and ecological influences on bullying and aggressive behavior. Indeed, a growing number of researchers have argued that the social

information processing model does not fully explain the phenomenon of bullying and aggression among children (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Gini, 2006; Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999a). They have noted that bullying, in particular, generally occurs in a social context, often group (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Rocke Henderson, Hymel, Bonanno, & Davidson, 2002; Rocke Henderson & Hymel, 2002; Swearer & Doll, 2001) and thus requires a rather sophisticated level of social cognition to determine the situations in which aggressive behavior will be peer-supported. Murray-Close and Crick (2006b) noted that while the social information processing approach has offered “a number of important insights about children’s engagement in aggression, aggression scholars have recently proposed that researchers should explore whether children’s values and moral understanding are associated with aggressive conduct” (p.345). They noted that few studies to date have addressed children’s moral reasoning about aggression. However; the relatively few studies that have been conducted have found preliminary support for a relationship between moral reasoning about aggression and involvement in aggressive behavior (Murray-Close & Crick, 2006b).

One avenue for further exploring the role of moral reasoning in children’s bullying and aggression can be found in Bandura’s (1991) conceptualization of moral disengagement (Gini, 2006). Bandura and colleagues (1996) posited that individuals form internal standards for conduct through socialization, and these standards generally guide behavior. At times, however, individuals can selectively disengage the self-sanctions which deter negative conduct, through a variety of cognitive processes termed “moral disengagement.” While moral disengagement has been linked to aggressive and anti-

social behavior in children and adults (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004), a PsychINFO search covering the years 1990 to 2007 using the keywords “moral disengagement” and “bullying” revealed that just three studies to date have examined the role of moral disengagement in conjunction with bullying behaviors among youth (Gini, 2006; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonnano, 2005; Menesini, Sanchez, Fonzi, Ortega, Constabile, & Lo Feundo, 2003).

Gender Differences in Moral Disengagement

Few studies to date have examined the role of gender in moral disengagement. While Bandura and colleagues (1996) found boys to endorse higher levels of moral disengagement than females, a subsequent smaller study with African American youth failed to replicate this finding (Pelton, et al., 2004). However, hypothesized gender differences were supported in a sample of 1499 American adults, as males were more prone to moral disengagement than females (McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). A far larger body of work has examined possible gender differences in a related construct, moral reasoning. It has been suggested that males and females take different approaches to moral reasoning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982), with women taking a more care and relationship-based orientation and men being oriented more toward justice and individual rights. (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Skoe, Cumberland, Eisenberg, Hansen, & Perry, 2002). In an adult sample, Skoe and colleagues found support for Gilligan’s assertions, although historically, findings for gender differences in moral reasoning across age groups have been mixed (Hanson & Mullis, 1984; Hudgins & Prentice, 1973; Ryan, David, & Reynolds, 2004). Gender

differences in moral reasoning and the moral self may provide a theoretical framework for the examination of gender differences in moral disengagement.

Purpose of the Study

The current study investigated the specific and interactive influences of gender and moral disengagement on aggressive and bullying behaviors among middle school students. This study built upon previous literature by investigating the relations among moral disengagement, gender, and bullying, and by concomitantly investigating the relations among moral disengagement, gender, and overt (verbal and physical), and relational aggression. Espelage and Swearer (2003) wrote that while research has taught us much about the individual characteristics involved in bullying, consideration of how these variables may interact in determining bullying behavior and its sequelae is often missing from many investigations. As Schafer and colleagues (2002) noted, the study of bullying exclusive of other forms of aggression has provided an incomplete picture of the phenomenon of peer-group aggression as it is experienced by children. This study attempted to answer these questions. Further, it added to the body of knowledge about moral disengagement as a potential pathway to involvement in bullying and other aggressive behaviors. If, females have a more relationship-oriented approach to moral reasoning than males, as Gilligan (1982) suggested, the mechanisms of moral disengagement involving dehumanizing the victim and disregarding the harmfulness of aggressive actions may be less likely among girls than boys.

Specifically, this study tested the hypothesis that moral disengagement would mediate relationships between gender and bullying, and between gender and overt and

relational aggression. It was hypothesized that boys would score higher on a measure of moral disengagement than girls, and would also report higher rates of bullying and overt aggression than girls. Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that girls would report higher rates of relational aggression than boys. Participants included 930 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students from three Midwestern middle schools who participated in a larger longitudinal study on bullying, aggression, and victimization. Data for this study were collected in October and November 2005. The information gained from this study will help researchers and educators better understand the cognitive and moral factors that contribute to adolescents' participation in bullying and other aggressive behaviors, and may lead to the development of more effective prevention and intervention programs to decrease these behaviors.

Chapter Two

Overview of Previous Research

Overview of Previous Research on Aggression

Definition of Aggression

Aggression is typically treated as a within-the-child, pathologic phenomenon. It has been defined in the literature as an individual's propensity to harm or injure others (Cairns & Cairns, 2000). Defined this way, aggression is viewed as a personality trait, established early and persisting over time (Cairns & Cairns, 2000; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Huesmann, et al., 1984; Lochman, et al., 1993; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004; Rys & Bear, 1997). This "within-the-child" conceptualization of aggression has been further pathologized through its incorporation into research on antisocial behavior (often the terms are used interchangeably, see Craig, 2000) and conduct disorder (Tremblay & Côté, 2005). In turn, the notion of aggression as a personal disposition has influenced much of the research into criminal and antisocial behavior and childhood delinquency.

In spite of its hegemony, recently researchers (Cairns & Cairns 2000; Underwood, 2004) have cited several weaknesses in the personality trait concept of aggression. First, some have noted the lack of empirical support for the supposition that aggression remains constant over time (Cairns & Cairns, 2000; Moffitt & Caspi, 2005). Next, pointing to the diverse array of developmental processes that lead to aggression in adolescence, researchers have noted that aggression is the outcome of a complex interplay among social, cultural, and biological factors (Cairns & Cairns, 2000; Cicchetti & Rogosh, 1996; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). Finally, researchers have suggested the view of aggression as

a personality/psychological construct has become self perpetuating, as researchers sought to isolate the “trait” from contextual factors like gender, age and social influences (Underwood, 2004).

As an alternative to this trait view of aggression, Cairns and Cairns (2000), and others (Crick, 1997; Tremblay & Côté, 2005) suggested that researchers examine concrete manifestations and outcomes of aggressive behavior in context. This contextual, rather than trait, definition of aggression would avoid the blanket assumption that all aggressive behavior is negative or maladaptive. In keeping with Lorenz’s (2002) position that aggression is “an instinct like any other and in natural conditions it helps...to ensure the survival of the individual and the species” (p. x), some have called for research that examines aggressive behavior as a normal aspect of psychosocial development. Among these, Hay (2005) suggested that most children develop an “aggressive competence” by which they learn to effectively use physical and verbal aggression in conflict situations. Following the development of this competence, Hay suggested, aggressive behavior is influenced by the interaction between the child’s temperament and the social environment. Within contextual definitions, temperament, conceptualized by Carey (1998) as “behavioral style, the characteristic way that the individual experiences and responds to the internal and external environment (p. 523),” is not considered the primary determinant of aggression, as it tended to be in the trait model of aggression. Rather, the interplay among temperament and social influences in the development of aggression has received considerable attention in the literature, with results generally indicating that these factors individually and interactively explain variance in aggressive