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Perceived Aggression of Gender

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of aggression for males and females related to physical and relational aggression. Physical aggression is more common in males and relational aggression is more common in females. These differences have promoted stereotypes of appropriate actions for men and women. Identifying the inequalities that individuals have when judging between the sexes is important in trying to create equality and fairness within society. One hundred ninety-three individuals were given one of four scenarios. The scenarios involved either physical or relational aggression between two men or two women. Results generally indicated that women were rated more harshly than men regardless of aggression type and that relational aggression was rated more harshly than physical aggression. We conclude that the societal expectation that women are more passive and the emphasis on reputation within society were influencing factors in these results.*

Aggression is everywhere, in the news, in movies, in magazines, and in books. But our current focus on aggression is not original. Physical and verbal aggressions have always been a part of society and therefore there are many social norms that have developed. Society has deeply ingrained ideas of what is acceptable when it comes to aggression, especially involving gender. These ideas are introduced at a young age, as gender roles are normally set early in life (Condry & Ross, 1985). And from this young age there is a clear difference in types of aggression between sexes.

Stereotypically, men display aggression through violent fighting while women display aggression through gossip social rejection. These two forms of aggression are categorized into physical and relational aggression. Physical aggression "physically hurts or threatens another person" (Lips, 2008). Alternatively, relational aggression "hurts or threatens another person by damaging his or her relationships" (Lips, 2008). Although both genders engage in both forms of aggression, research has

supported the stereotype of men as physically aggressive and women as relationally aggressive. Studies show that men participate in more physical aggression than women (Zeichner, Parrott, & Frey, 2003). Studies also suggest that women are just as relationally aggressive as men are physically aggressive (Zeichner, Parrott, & Frey, 2003).

If men are physically aggressive and women are relationally aggressive, what has contributed to this dichotomy? Research shows that children are influenced in their aggression choices by the teachings of society. Boys are expected to be physically aggressive (Zeichner, Parrott, & Frey, 2003). This self fulfilling prophecy is compounded as studies show that boys are even encouraged in their rough and tumble play (Condry, 1985). Girls, on the other hand, are discouraged from this type of play (Condry, 1985). Physical aggression is simply not seen as socially acceptable for girls and from a young age, girls learn to gain the power that comes with physical aggression in another way. A recent study revealed that girls who spread rumors about other girls have more social power (Liu & Kaplan, 2004), and that spreading rumors increases their status in groups (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Female bullies who use this type of aggression are surprisingly popular among their peers (Liu, 2004). Just as men use their strength to intimidate and control others, girls use their words. And just as girls are discouraged from being physically aggressive, boys are discouraged from being relationally aggressive. Boys are far less likely to relationally aggress against another boy because it is not in line with social norms (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Society has defined the acceptable forms of aggressive for males and females. This definition has influenced behavior but also people's perception of aggression.

A study performed by Condry and Ross (1985) sought to understand the influence of gender on the amount of perceived aggression. They showed a video of two ambiguous children playing in the snow and asked observers to rate the level of perceived aggression when

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one child pushed the other. When a boy aggressed toward another boy, it was rated as significantly less aggressive compared to when a boy aggressed against a girl or if a girl aggressed against another girl. Condry and Ross determined that these results occurred because people expected boys to be more aggressive and therefore judged them less harshly. In a similar study it was found that physical aggression involving two males is consistently viewed as more justified or appropriate when compared to females (Covne, 2008). The same actions are judged differently depending on gender likely because of gender stereotypes and societal stigmas.

Research involving the effect of gender on the perception of aggression is important in recognizing these unfair bias and stereotypes. This study will gather data on societal perceptions of the different types of aggression as related to gender. Prior studies on perception of aggression have focused on mainly physical aggression. This study will seek to provide the needed data on relational aggression while also gathering more data on physical aggression and then comparing the two. Prior research has shown that there are differences in how people judge aggressive acts based on gender and prior research also shows that physical aggression is more common and more expected among men while relational aggression is more common and more expected among women.

This information has contributed to our hypothesis, as we expect that acts of aggression that violate social norms will be rated more harshly than aggressive acts that comply with social norms. Therefore, we hypothesize that people will perceive physical aggression between women and relational aggression between men as more aggressive, more surprising, and more inappropriate. Furthermore, physical aggression between men and relational aggression between women will be viewed as less aggressive, less surprising, and less inappropriate in accordance with existing social norms.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-three participants from BYU read one of four scenarios involving aggression and responded to seven questions. Of all respondents, 106 were female, 81 were male and 3 chose not to identify their gender.

One hundred seventy-five participants were single and 15 were married. Participants included 97 freshmen, 40 sophomores, 34 juniors, 20 seniors, and 2 of unknown grade level.

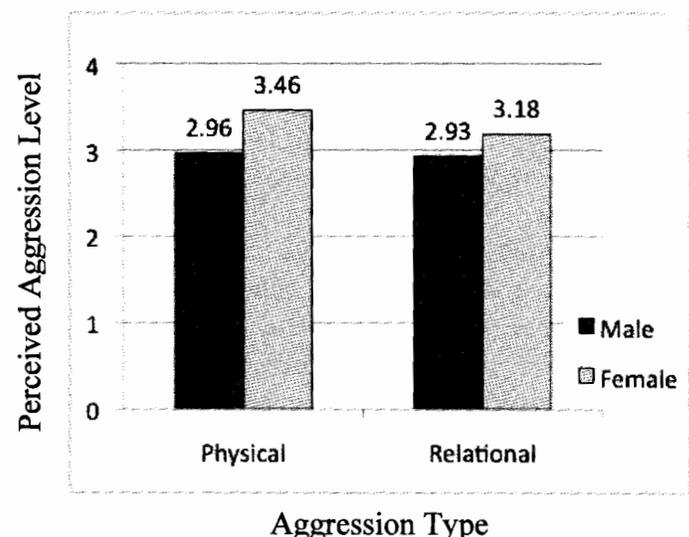
Design Type and Rationale

There were two independent variables manipulated in this research study: 1) the gender of the characters in the scenario and 2) the type of aggression expressed (physical or relational). The dependent variables were the respective scores given in response to questions relative to each scenario. Questions included how surprised an individual was, how inappropriate they thought the action was, and how aggressive they felt the scenario was. In addition, filler questions were used to decrease face validity. Four alternate forms of the aggression scenario were given randomly to participants, with each participant only evaluating one scenario. The four scenarios differed in the gender of the interactors and the type of aggression. This experimental design was selected to ensure that participants would not be able to review all of the scenarios before responding to the questions. Scenarios were written to avoid bias by using gender neutral terms.

Description of the Measure

The responses were measured using a 4-point Likert scale; 1 was consistently the null hypothesis while 4 correlated with rejection of the null. Some of the questions were reverse scored and four of them were filler questions designed to decrease face validity. No pre-existing scales were used.

Figure 1
How aggressive was this reaction?



All four aggression scenarios were identical, except for the independent variables of gender of the aggressor and aggression type. Therefore, two forms portrayed physical aggression, with one being female-on-female and the other male-on-male. The other two forms portrayed relational aggression, with one female-on-female and the other male-on-male as well (see Appendix B). Physical aggression scenarios portrayed either a male or a female becoming upset about an advance of a same gendered peer on the significant other of the character. They aggressively responded by shoving the other character to the ground. In the relational aggression scenario, the same incident occurred and the character responded by spreading a rumor that the other person had a serious drug problem.

Test Administration

The test was administered online. Participants were Brigham Young University psychology undergraduate students. Participants first responded to demographic questions about age, gender, class standing, and marital status. Next, participants read their randomly assigned aggression scenario and responded to the questions.

Statistical Procedure

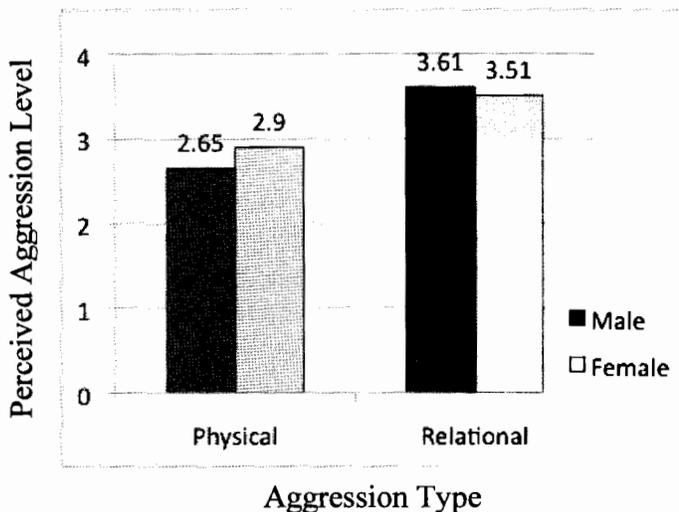
Means were taken for each question and within and between each condition. Using the gender of the participants and the type of aggression read by the participant as independent variables, factorial analysis of variance was used to find significance within the data. Each question asked in response to the scenarios was

treated as a separate dependent variable in the running of statistics.

Results

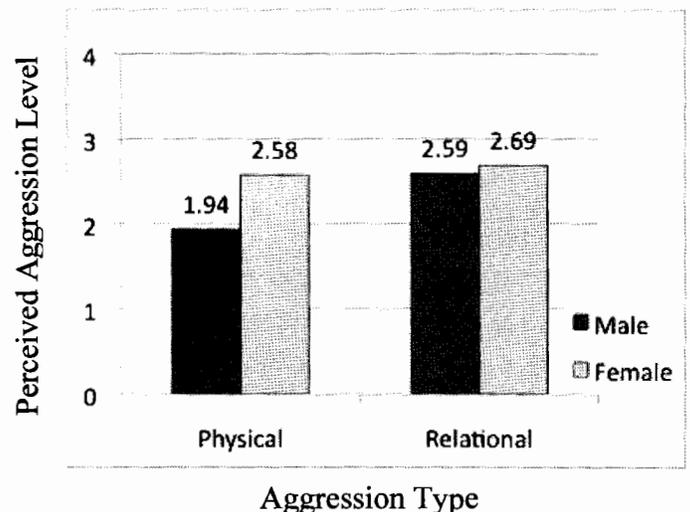
Each set of data was analyzed according to the independent variables of gender of the aggressing characters and the type of aggression; significant results were found with all three questions as dependent variables. Means were taken for clarification and comparisons and factorial analysis of variance was used to establish significance. The question "How aggressive was this reaction?" showed a significant difference ($F[1,183]=11.64, p=.001$) in the ratings of male and female characters. The female ($M=3.33$) characters were rated as significantly more aggressive than male ($M=2.93$) characters (see Figure 1). When asked "How appropriate was the response?", participants showed a significant difference when rating types of aggression ($F[1,184]=71.90, p<.001$), rating relational aggression ($M=3.56$) as far less appropriate than physical aggression ($M=2.78$; see Figure 3). The question "How surprised was the response" revealed a significant difference in the ratings of character gender and aggression type. Participants rated female aggression ($M=2.63$) as more surprising than male aggression ($M=2.25$; $F[1,184]=12.56, p=.001$; Figure 4). Additionally, relational aggression ($M=2.63$) was rated as significantly

Figure 2
*How inappropriate was this reaction?**



*This item was reverse scored.

Figure 3
How surprised were you by this reaction?



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more surprising than physical aggression ($M=2.27$; $F[1,184]=12.41$, $p=.001$; see Figure 4). There was also an interaction between character gender and aggression type ($F[1,184]=6.24$, $p=.013$; see Figure 4), participants being similarly surprised by relationally aggressive actions of male and female characters, while women taking part in physical aggression were substantially more surprising to participants than men doing the same.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of aggression for males and females as it relates to physical and relational aggression. Our hypothesis that relational aggression would be viewed as more surprising, more aggressive, and more inappropriate when performed by a male as compared to a female and that physical aggression would be viewed as more surprising, more aggressive, and more inappropriate when performed by a female as opposed to a male, was not supported. Our expectation that relational aggression would be viewed as more aggressive for males and that physical would be viewed as more aggressive for females was contrary to our findings.

When asked "How aggressive was the reaction," individuals rated women as significantly more aggressive regardless of the type of aggression. We expected women to be rated as more aggressive for physical aggression but not relational aggression, as relational aggression is in line with social expectations. However, upon further thought, this idea that women would be viewed as more aggressive than men regardless of aggression type is in line with other social stigmas. There is a societal expectation that women be kinder, more docile, more passive, and more loving than men. Women are supposed to be gentle in all situations, and although relational aggression may be common for females, that does not mean that it is more acceptable for women to be mean. In looking at the media, physical aggression is often seen as heroic and positive. On the other hand, relational aggression is almost exclusively portrayed as negative. A backstabbing gossip is never a heroin, but a gun toting martial arts master is often a hero. Therefore, women are judged harshly not only for violating social norms and being physically aggressive, they are also judged harshly for acting as expected and being relationally aggressive. Women can't be physically aggressive because that is not ladylike and polite but they

also shouldn't be relationally aggressive because that is not ladylike and polite, although it is expected. Men on the other hand can be physically aggressive because it is manly and tough but can't be relationally aggressive because it is not nice.

Abstaining from both physical and relational aggression would of course be optimal for both sexes and should be viewed as equally aggressive regardless of gender. But, because of our society's double standard for men and women, women are held to a much higher moral standard than men when it comes to expressing their feelings through aggressive acts and therefore the same aggressive acts are viewed as much more aggressive for women than for men regardless of their compliance with social norms.

The question, "How appropriate was the reaction" revealed more surprising results, as relational aggression was viewed as more inappropriate regardless of gender. Compliance or violations of societal expectations were irrelevant, as rumors were considered much more offensive than pushing. As mentioned above, the glorification of physical aggression in the media could be a contributing factor. Gossip and rumors are almost never portrayed as positive actions; yet punching and hitting are portrayed in both a positive and negative way. Participants may have viewed a push in defense of one's significant other to be a positive act of physical aggression. And perhaps rumors are seen as so inappropriate because of their long lasting consequences. One can quickly recover from a fall to the floor but the damage of a ruined reputation can last for years. Our society is very focused on image and damage to that image is seen as extremely offensive and as this research suggests even more offensive than physical violence.

Scores for "How surprising was the reaction" were contrary to our hypothesis yet consistent with our other results in that relational aggression was generally found more surprising. For men there was a significant jump in amount of surprise from physical to relational aggression (see Figure 3). This is likely attributed to the societal norm that men be protective and physically aggressive. Physical aggression between two males is seen as more justifiable (Covne, 2008). Relational aggression, on the other hand, is not expected for males and is therefore seen as more surprising. However, women are more relationally aggressive than men yet participants were still more surprised by female relational aggression than female

physical aggression, although the difference between the two was not nearly as substantial. This may be due to the serious nature of the scenario's rumor, as having a drug problem is a serious personal fallacy. Additionally, the expectation that women be more passive may also have been a contributing factor. It seems as though there is a double standard in that men are expected to be protectors and women are expected to be peacemakers.

The findings of this study do have limitations. The largest limitation was a non-representative sample. The test participants were all BYU students mostly in their late teens and early twenties. Also, because the vast majority of students at BYU are Latter-day Saints, it can be assumed that most participants were LDS. It is therefore unknown if these results can be transferred to the larger population. In addition, there were only four scenarios with only two specific types of aggression: shoving or spreading a rumor about drug use. Future research could be done to show if different scenarios would produce the same results. The form of relational aggression was fairly extreme; having a serious drug problem is a major personal and social problem. The extreme nature of this rumor may have influenced results. However, these limitations only provide a platform for future research.

In future research, more scenarios with varying levels of relational and physical aggression would allow researchers to see if results are similar with scenarios of different intensities. This study could be replicated on other campuses and with other populations to provide a more representative sample.

The findings of this test of perception of aggression were not consistent with our hypotheses, but provided many significant findings that provided further insight into the stereotypes and gender expectations within society. The test explores a relatively new subject area and has high external validity. The findings have helped to demonstrate the stereotypes and double standards present in our society. Knowledge of these false perceptions allows for often harmful gender expectations and socialization to be identified and hopefully minimized.

Scenarios

Scenario 1

Natalie is at a party with her boyfriend Tom. Stacy, who knows Natalie is dating Tom, comes up and puts her arm around Tom and invites him to leave the party with her. Natalie walks over to Stacy and shoves her to the ground.

Scenario 2

Nate is at a party with his girlfriend Olivia. Brian, who knows Nate is dating Olivia, comes up and puts his arm around Olivia and invites her to leave the party with him. Nate walks over to Brian and shoves him to the ground.

Scenario 3

Natalie is at a party with her boyfriend Tom. Stacy, who knows Natalie is dating Tom, comes up and puts her arm around Tom and invites him to leave the party with her. To get back at Stacy, Natalie tells everyone at the party that Stacy has a serious drug problem.

Scenario 4

Nate is at a party with his girlfriend Olivia. Brian, who knows Nate is dating Olivia, comes up and puts his arm around Olivia and invites her to leave the party with him. To get back at Brian, Nate tells everyone at the party that Brian has a serious drug problem.

Questionnaire

1. How appropriate was Natalie's response?
Very Appropriate---Appropriate---Inappropriate---Very Inappropriate
 2. How surprised are you by Natalie's response?
Very Surprised---Surprised---Not Surprised---Very Unsurprised
 3. How aggressive was Natalie's response?
Very Aggressive---Aggressive---Not Aggressive---Very Unaggressive
 4. How likely is it that such a scenario would happen at BYU?
Very Likely---Likely---Unlikely---Very Unlikely
 5. How likely is it that such a scenario would happen in colleges other than BYU?
Very Likely---Likely---Unlikely---Very Unlikely
 6. How likely would you be to intervene in this situation?
Very Likely---Likely---Unlikely---Very Unlikely
 7. Should people intervene in this situation?
Absolutely Yes---Yes---No---Absolutely No
-

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