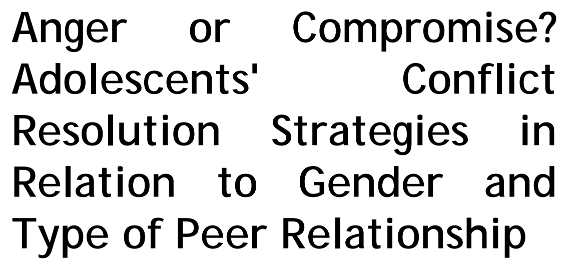

Anger or Compromise? Adolescents' Conflict Resolution Strategies in Relation to Gender and Type of Peer Relationship

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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender differences in conflict resolution across three types of adolescent peer relationship. We predicted that adolescents would vary in their use of overt anger and compromise in accord with gender stereotypes, depending on the type of peer relationship under consideration. It was predicted that, in conflicts with opposite-gender friends, adolescents would modify the strategies typically used with same-gender friends to more closely match those of the opposite gender. Furthermore, it was predicted that, in romantic relationships, compared with cross-gender friendships, adolescents would use more compromise and less overt anger. Broad support for these propositions was found, the main exception being girls' greater use of overt anger than expected, in all three types of peer relationships. Possible reasons posited were changing male and female roles in society and the use of overt anger questionnaire items that reflect social aggression. It was concluded that efforts to promote constructive conflict resolution by adolescents should consider reasons why young people choose different conflict resolution strategies in different types of peer relationships.

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Conflict has been defined as a state in which there exist incompatible goals or behaviours between individuals (Shantz, 1987). Dealing with conflict is obviously an inevitable part of life, and by the time they reach adolescence, young people have a great deal of experience with it, especially with their parents and same-gender friends. Once they reach adolescence, their social world expands to include more opposite gender friendships and romantic relationships (Sippola, 1999), so there is the potential for facing conflict in a broadening range of peer relationships. Nevertheless, as noted by Johnson (2003), most research on adolescent conflict has focused on same-gender relationships or has not differentiated between same-gender and cross-gender relationships.

Conflict *resolution* has been defined as "the style of behaviour used to resolve conflict between individuals interacting in a variety of settings" (Wilson and Gross, 1994). The implication here seems to be that an individual will behave with some consistency in resolving conflicts in different types of relationships. Research addressing this issue has been based on the assumption that conflict resolution styles reflect relatively stable personal preferences; indeed, Sternberg and Dobson (1987) demonstrated "dramatic consistency" in preferred styles of conflict resolution across college students' relationships (p. 801). By contrast, the present study examines the proposition that the strategies that adolescents use for resolving conflicts will depend upon the particular peer relationship context.

Researchers have often suggested that preferred conflict resolution styles are related to gender, and yet clear gender differences do not always emerge (Feldman and Gowen, 1998). One would predict the occurrence of gender differences on the basis of gender schema theory, whereby individuals process information in a manner that is consistent with socially constructed gender stereotypes (Bem, 1981; 1984). Of the various styles identified in the literature, two that are especially relevant in considering gender differences are compromise and overt anger; these styles are also the most reliably measured, based on evidence presented by Charlton (2001), Feldman and Gowen (1998) and Owens, Daly and Slee (2005).

Compromise, used increasingly across the adolescent years (Owens, Daly and Slee, 2004), involves calm discussion and a resolution that moderately meets the needs of both parties – behaviours consistent with female gender stereotypes. Compromise is regarded as a constructive and adaptive way of resolving conflicts, and therefore as a strategy to be promoted amongst young people (Scott, 2002).

Overt anger, by contrast, is regarded as a destructive response, with the ability to diffuse anger being seen as an important skill in the promotion of constructive conflict resolution (Scott, 2002). Overt anger includes aggressive behaviour and argument, and verbal attacks on the other party. Such behaviours are consonant with male stereotypes and have been consistently shown by aggression research to be displayed more by boys than girls (e.g., Owens, 1996).

Expected gender differences have emerged in some studies; for example, girls in several countries have been shown to use constructive conflict resolution methods more than boys (Osterman et al., 1997). Other studies have produced mixed results (e.g., Bird and Harris, 1990; Feldman and Gowen, 1998; Owens, Daly and Slee, 2005) or reported no gender differences in conflict resolution (Haar and Krahe, 1999; Kurdek, 1987).

One possible reason for these mixed results is that the way in which adolescents resolve conflicts with peers is influenced by the particular type of peer relationship. This contrasts with the notion that people's conflict resolution behaviour will be consistent across contexts. As Eleanor Maccoby has said, "social behavior … is never a function of the individual alone" (Maccoby, 1990). It has long been observed that people behave differently depending upon the social context in which they find themselves. Indeed, as long ago as 1891 (p. 294) William James wrote:

> "… a man has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents, and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his 'tough' young friends."

This approach suggests that the term conflict resolution *strategy* might be more appropriate than conflict resolution *style*, as it avoids the implication that individuals will behave consistently regardless of the social context.

William James's observation is directly supported, in the case of conflict resolution, by the finding that adolescents vary their conflict resolution strategies between friendships, relationships with parents and relationships with teachers (Jensen-Campbell, Graziano and Hair, 1996). Adams and Laursen (2001) also found differences in the dynamics of conflict between parents and friends, interpreting this is terms of interpersonal conflict "scripts" that vary with the type of relationship.

Feldman and Gowen's (1998) failure to find clear gender differences in conflict resolution is perhaps attributable to the

fact that they were specifically examining romantic relationships (which are mainly, though not all, cross-gender); this contrasts with most research, which has examined same-gender adolescent conflicts. Johnson (2003) showed that adolescent males and females have different perceptions and goals in conflict resolution within same-gender compared with cross-gender friendships, and speculated that these differences might influence conflict resolution behaviours. Furthermore, there is evidence that young people modify their behaviours towards the norms of the opposite gender when interacting with them: Russell and Owens (1999) found that boys' aggression to other boys was relatively physical and verbal rather than social, but towards girls, they increased in their use of social aggression. This fits with Eagly and Crowley's (1986) theory of chivalry norms, whereby boys are socialised to behave in a more "gentlemanly" manner towards girls. Russell and Owens found that girls also changed their behaviour when aggressive towards boys, becoming more physical and verbal, in contrast to the social aggression that they typically display towards other girls. There is evidence, then, that when adolescents interact with other-gender peers in conflictual situations, they adjust their behaviours in the direction of the norms of the other gender. To draw upon Adams and Laursen's (2001) conceptualisation, it may be that increasing interaction with the opposite gender in adolescence provides an opportunity to learn new interpersonal scripts, or, at least, provides more opportunities to try out lesser-used scripts.

In the present study, therefore, we predicted an interaction between gender and type of relationship, for both overt anger and compromise. In line with gender role stereotypes, we expected that, within same-gender friendships, girls would show more compromise than boys, and boys would show more overt anger than girls. However, in cross-gender friendships, we expected these differences to reduce, with girls showing less compromise and more overt anger than with their female friends, and boys showing greater compromise and less overt anger than with their male friends.

It also seemed important not to conflate two different types of cross-gender relationships – friendships and romantic relationships, since adolescents report that these relationships have different qualities (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg and Pepler, 1999) and there are relatively low correlations between adolescents' representations of relationships with friends and romantic partners (Furman, Simon, Shaffer and Bouchey, 2002). Girls might display less overt anger towards boyfriends than

Measure

We used Feldman and Gowen's (1998) Adolescent Conflict Resolution Questionnaire. Responses were on a scale from zero ("never do this") to 4 ("almost always do this"). The 8-item overt anger scale included items such as "hurt other person's feelings." Reliability was > .9 for all 3 types of peer relationships. The 6-item compromise scale included items such as "try to reason." Reliability ranged from .75–.82 for the various relationships. All these Cronbach's alphas were higher than those reported by Feldman and Gowen. While Feldman and Gowen did not report any evidence for the validity of the scale, frequent peer victimization would be expected to correlate with poor conflict resolution skills (Perry, Perry and Kennedy, 1992); Owens, Daly and Slee (2005) recently reported that the degree to which adolescents are victimized by peers correlates with both the compromise scale (negatively) and the overt anger scale (positively).

Procedure

Ethical permissions and parental and adolescent consent were obtained and data were collected in class. Respondents completed the questionnaire three times, being asked to think about how they would behave in the case of a conflict with a romantic partner, a same-sex friend and an opposite-sex friend. These were presented in random order. Conflict was defined as "a disagreement about something which is important to you." Participants were asked to think about a relationship that they currently had or had had within the last twelve months. We also provided space for respondents to add any further comments on the questionnaire process or content. We also took steps to ensure that those without a certain relationship, such as a romantic partner, or those who were same-sex attracted, would not feel marginalised by the process: the opportunity to provide free responses enabled students who omitted part of the questionnaire to keep writing, and the section on romantic relationships was prefaced by a question asking the sex of the person the respondent had in mind. Questionnaires were placed in a slot in a sealed box to ensure confidentiality. Data collection took approximately 10 minutes of participants' time. Data were analysed using the SPSS 10.0 for Windows package.

concluded that traditionally feminine types of interaction, such as compromise, are beneficial in heterosexual relationships provided

TABLE 1

Means and standard deviations for males (N=53), females (N=64) and the complete sample (N=117) on Compromise and Overt Anger. Figures in brackets are the means for the subsample (N=64) with romantic relationships.

	Compromise		Overt Anger	
Type of relationship	M	SD	M	SD
Same-gender friendship				
Male	2.38 (2.42)	0.93	1.51 (1.46)	1.02
Female	2.82 (2.88)	0.59	1.55 (1.59)	0.87
Total	2.62	0.79	1.53	0.94
Cross-gender friendship				
Male	2.76 (2.9)	0.80	0.99 (0.96)	0.96
Female	2.59 (2.75)	0.77	1.58 (1.64)	0.87
Total	2.66	0.79	1.31	0.95
Romantic relationship (N=64)				
Male (N=25)	3.04	0.83	0.78	0.89
Female (N=39)	2.97	0.71	1.35	0.76
Total	3.00	0.75	1.13	0.85

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for males, females and the complete sample on compromise and overt anger are shown in Table 1. Means for the subset of those involved in romantic relationships are also shown, and it is apparent that their scores on same-gender and cross-gender friendships are typical of the group as a whole.

As some of the variables were skewed, we chose to use a conservative alpha level of .01 (Keppel, 1991). For same-gender versus cross-gender friendships, the whole data set ($N = 117$) was available for a 2×2 split-plot ANOVA (gender × friendship type). A smaller sample ($N = 64$) was available for analysis to compare the two types of cross-gender relationship, as only about half the adolescents were involved in such relationships. This was also a 2×2 split-plot ANOVA. The descriptions of effect size are based on Cohen (1988).

Overt Anger

Considering first the entire sample to compare same-gender and cross-gender friendships on overt anger (Figure 1), as predicted, there was no main effect for gender of respondent, $F(1,115) = 3.86$, $p = .05$, the trend being towards more overt anger in females. As predicted, there was a significant interaction, $F(1,115) = 22.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$ (large effect size), but the nature of this interaction was not entirely as predicted: the expected drop in overt anger for boys from same- to cross-gender friendships occurred; however, for girls, rather than the expected increase from same- to cross-gender friendships, a high level was apparent in both. Furthermore, there was a significant effect of

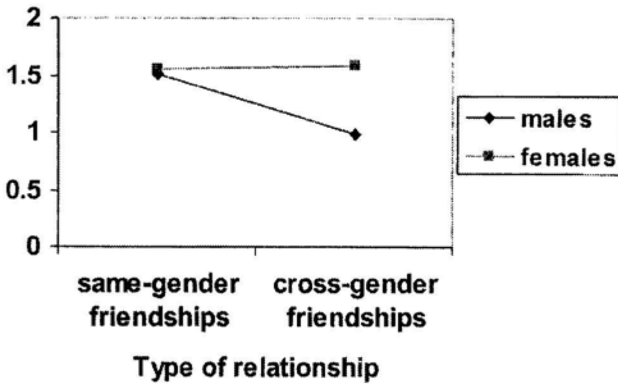

Figure 1. Overt anger (same-gender vs. cross-gender friendships, N = 117).

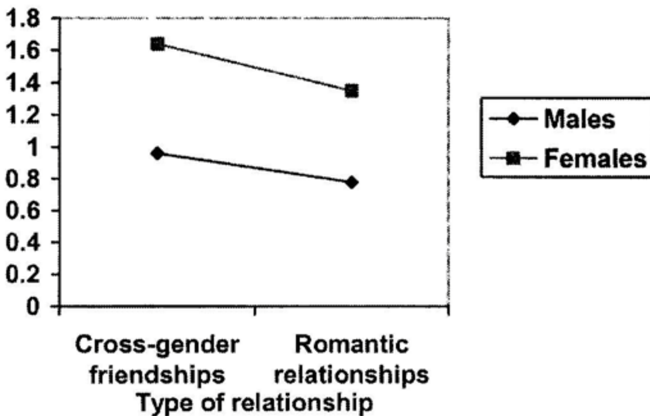

Figure 2. Overt anger (cross-gender friendships vs. romantic relationships, N = 64)

type of relationship, with lower reporting of overt anger for cross gender than same-gender friendships, $F(1,115) = 17.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$ (moderate to large effect size).

Considering the sub-sample of young people who reported having a romantic relationship, as predicted, overt anger was significantly lower in these relationships than cross-gender friendships for both boys and girls, $F(1,62) = 7.63$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .112$ (moderate effect size) (Figure 2). There was also a significant effect for gender, with females reporting higher levels of overt anger in both types of cross-gender relationship, $F(1,62) = 8.82$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$ (moderate to large effect size). These results, therefore, are reflecting our expectation that romantic relationships would be a context in which use of overt anger is

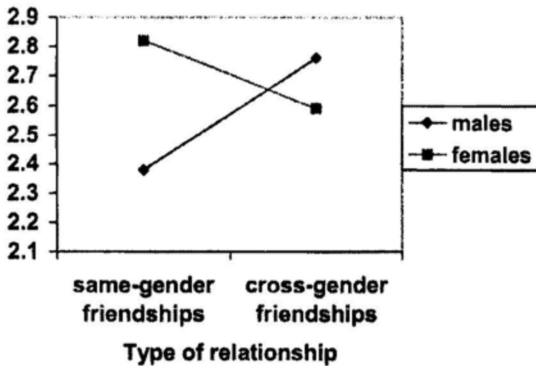

Figure 3. Compromise (same-gender vs. cross-gender friendships, N=117).

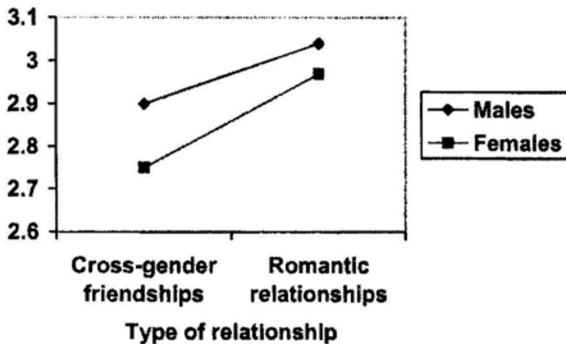

Figure 4. Compromise (cross-gender friendships vs. romantic relationships, N = 64)

moderated, but we had not anticipated finding that the overall levels in girls would be higher than for boys, in both types of cross-gender relationships.

Compromise

For the whole sample, examining same-gender and cross-gender friendships (Figure 3), we found no main effect of gender, $F(1,115) = .92$, $p > .01$, nor of type of friendship, $F(1,115) = .71$, $p > .01$. However, as predicted, there was a significant interaction, $F(1,115) = 23.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$ (large effect size), with boys' use of compromise increasing from same-gender to cross-gender friendships, and girls' use of compromise decreasing.

Considering compromise in the sub-sample who had romantic relationships, in order to compare these with cross-gender friendships (Figure 4), the analysis revealed no significant effects for gender, $F(1,62) = .39$, $p > .01$, nor for type of relationship, $F(1,62) = 4.26$, $p > .01$. It should be noted, however, that for type of relationship the effect size was moderate ($\eta^2 = .06$), indicating that there may have been a real difference in line with our prediction, with greater compromise in romantic relationships, but that this sub-sample was too small for this to reach significance.

DISCUSSION

As far as we are aware, this is the first study to look at gender differences in conflict resolution across three types of adolescent peer relationship. Our predictions were based on the proposition that, rather than maintaining a stable personal preference for particular conflict resolution strategies, adolescents would vary in their use of overt anger and compromise in accord with gender stereotypes, depending on the type of peer relationship under consideration. Our predictions were broadly supported, the main exception being girls' greater use of overt anger than expected in all types of peer relationships.

We had anticipated finding that boys would use overt anger more frequently than would girls with their same-gender friends, since this is the type of conflict resolution style most closely associated with verbal aggression, which boys use with same-gender peers more than do girls (Owens, 1996). However, boys and girls were found to use it equally often with their same gender friends, which is similar to a recent finding by Owens,

Daly and Slee (2005), using the same instrument, with regard to same gender peers (not necessarily friends). An examination of the items in the overt anger scale shows that in fact they cover quite a range of aggressive behaviours of both a verbal and more indirect, or social, kind (try to spite partner, hurt partner's feelings, get sarcastic, get angry and walk away). The scale may therefore be tapping into some behaviours that are common amongst groups of adolescent girls (e.g., Owens, 1996; Owens, Shute and Slee, 2000) and therefore it is perhaps not so surprising, in hindsight, that both males and females use overt anger at similar levels with their same gender friends.

When it comes to cross-gender friendships, the girls use overt anger just as much as with their female friends, while the boys use it less than with their male friends. This fits with the chivalry hypothesis, which concerns a social norm that boys should be "nice" to girls (Eagly and Crowley, 1986), while the girls remain unrestrained in expressing their overt anger towards boys. Our current research (Owens, Shute and Slee, 2005) indicates that girls experience a great deal of sexual harassment from boys in coeducational high schools, even from the boys who are their friends, and they often deal with this by verbal retaliation, so we could speculate that this is a factor here.

As anticipated, both boys and girls expressed less overt anger in romantic relationships than cross-sex friendships, which suggests that the young people may be working especially hard to maintain these relationships without upsetting the other person. Nevertheless, girls are maintaining their expressions of overt anger at a higher level than boys even in romantic relationships. This is consistent with Feldman and Gowen's (1998) finding with US adolescents that, in romantic relationships, girls express more overt anger than boys. Feldman and Gowen observed that this is contrary to accepted gender roles, but could not offer an explanation for it. One suggestion we have is, again, that numbers of the overt anger items may be concerned with the social aggression that is typical of girls. However, this would not explain another finding of Feldman and Gowen, that girls, in romantic relationships, displayed more violence of a physical nature than did boys, a finding supported by a number of other studies (e.g., Gray and Foshee, 1997) (we did not measure such violence in our study). One could speculate that societal changes in women's roles are resulting in girls feeling freer these days to express anger towards their partners, while their partners remain constrained by chivalry. As one participant in another of our current studies commented, "There's this big social rule that

boys don't hit girls." Nevertheless, studies specifically of dating violence do suggest that mutual violence among mid-adolescent couples is commonplace, at least in Canadian and US samples (Wolfe et al., 2003), although girls may often be acting in self-defence (Foshee et al., 1996). Given also Owens, Daly and Slee's (2005) recent Australian finding that girls use overt anger as a conflict resolution strategy among peers as often as boys do, the current findings are adding to evidence that some aspects of adolescent girls' conflict-related behaviour today are at odds with traditional gender stereotypes.

In examining compromise we found, as expected, that the girls were more likely than the boys to use compromise with their same-gender friends. This is in line with previous findings that girls use constructive conflict resolution more than boys (Osterman et al., 1997). In addition, our expectation that boys and girls would shift towards the norm of their opposite-gender friends was fulfilled, with boys increasing, and girls decreasing, their use of compromise. This convergence in use of compromise with cross-gender friends makes sense, as compromise necessarily involves both parties, unlike overt anger, which is just an expression of feeling by one party regardless of the perspective of the other.

The tendency for boys to compromise more with girls may be due to several factors. With their male peers, boys tend to have status issues, and they might see compromise as lowering their status; with girls, they may not see the same need for this. Girls, who often use compromise with their same-gender peers, might also be modelling this behaviour to their opposite-gender friends and encouraging the boys to use this strategy in their relationships with them.

We saw a trend for both boys and girls to use more compromise in their romantic relationships than cross-gender friendships, though given the size of this subsample it did not reach our conservative significance criterion. However, as the effect size was moderate, this is a finding that may be worth following up with a larger sample. If confirmed, it may again be because these relationships are especially important to the adolescents and they want to work hard at maintaining them. As one girl said, "I am better at working out disputes with my boyfriend, rather than my ordinary friends. Because we want to be happy, we try not to fight in the first place." (We can add a general observation here that students who provided additional comments often mentioned that they did not have many conflicts with their peers; the girls, in particular, often indicated their wish to avoid conflict.)

The main limitation of the study was that the sample was filtered through both parental and teacher permissions and may therefore have been biased towards students whose parents and teachers were most supportive of research participation; this may have resulted in a bias towards the more middle-class students, despite our specific efforts to involve students from a range of SES backgrounds. While Owens, Daly and Slee (2005) succeeded in obtaining a higher response rate in the same city for their study on adolescent conflict resolution, that was at a single middle-class school. The present study nevertheless provides some strongly suggestive findings that provide a springboard for future research with more representative samples. Studies such as the present one that rely on self-reports also need to be considered with caution because of the possibility of socially desirable responding (over-reporting of compromise and under-reporting of overt anger), which might be expected to influence girls' responding in particular. However, the pattern of results and size of effects suggest that this was not a significant issue.

The literature suggests that an aggressive style of conflict resolution – overt anger – is maladaptive, being associated with adverse mental health in adolescents, such as depression and peer relationship difficulties; compromise, on the other hand, is adaptive, being associated negatively with mental health problems, and positively with well-being and self-esteem (Feldman and Gowen, 1998). This suggests, as indicated earlier, that we should be encouraging adolescents to use compromise in resolving their peer conflicts. However, our study suggests that a simplistic approach may not be entirely appropriate. Young people are choosing different ways of resolving their conflicts in different types of peer relationships, and gender appears to be a crucial factor in determining these choices. We need to discover more about adolescents' reasons for their choices, such as having differing goals in regard to intimacy and control (Johnson, 2003) in different types of peer relationships.

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