Differences in implicit conceptualization and attribution of the preschooler aggressiveness in relation to gender, education and subjectiveness of the parent

Kristina Brajović Car*, Marina Hadži Pešić, Oana Panescu
Department for Psychology, Singidunum University, Belgrade
Department for Psychology, University of Nis

Abstract

Regardless of the parent education level or his/her gender, implicit assumptions about aggressiveness strongly affect the perception of child’s behavior. The results also suggest that the child gender has an influence on desired outcomes of upbringing. Pearson's chi-squared test was used to analyze the correlation between gender and education. No significant correlation was found. Depending on the child’s gender, significant deviations were detected on one of the indicators: the desired effects of parenting. The research results imply significant differences in the perception and experience of aggressive behavior depending on whether the observed child is one’s own child or not, confirming the initial hypothesis. Parents have a significantly higher level of tolerance for the aggressiveness of their own child than for other people's children.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license. Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Romanian Society of Applied Experimental Psychology.

Keywords: child aggression, parenting, implicit assumptions

* Corresponding author. Tel.:+381638489944; fax: +381112626474
E-mail address: kristina.brajovic.car@fmk.edu.rs
1. Introduction

Aggression is a behavioral reflection of psychological undercontrol, and it is one of the major reasons for treatment referral in childhood. Moreover, as Tremblay et al. (1994) emphasized it is “interpersonally destructive and longitudinally stable” (p.737). In his comprehensive definition of aggressiveness, Fromm (1973) says that:

Aggressiveness as a tendency or motive, can be attributed to every action, physical or verbal, undertaken with intent to harm or damage a being, oneself or non-living object, regardless of the fact if the intention was finalized, or was manifested or remained only at the level of desire to harm someone (p.17).

There is a growing evidence that the quality of children’s relationship with parents and the experience of particular forms of parenting practices contribute significantly to the development of undercontrolled, aggressive behavioral profiles. Both mother’s and fathers’ parenting and the gender of the child in studies of potential links between parenting behaviors and preschool children’s relational and physical aggression were highlighted as important (Casasa, 2006). As we have learned from the similar studies, disorganized attachment behaviors in children, in turn, predict aggression in school-age children with other family factors controlled (Lyons –Ruth, 1996)

The ability to understand relation between parents’ ideas and their childrearing behaviors reflects a very important theoretical goal. Previous researches aimed at that goal, enable a broad understanding of why people hold beliefs, what functions they serve and their effects on parents, children and families (Miguel, Valentim & Carugati, 2009). Kuhn (1989) analyses the research on children and adults as intuitive scientists and comes to the conclusion that “building or revision of mental models are not the same within laymen and scientists” (pp. 674-689). This is to say that in the everyday layman’s reasoning there is a lack of differentiation between theory and evidence, without reaching the level of meta-cognition or thinking about theories, not just with theories.

Much of recent interest in parents’ ideas has stemmed from the conviction that there must be some relation between ideas and behaviors (Miller, 1988). With this research we are aiming to learn about conceptualization of aggressiveness by parents of preschoolers as a precursor of their responding behavioral strategies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Goals of the study

The main goal of the research was to explore the implicit assumptions and upbringing strategies among parents of the preschoolers when it comes to child aggression. Theoretical goals were:

- To determine the difference in implicit assumptions and upbringing strategies among parents in cases of different manifestation of preschoolers’ aggression, depending on their education and gender. Does the difference exist and where it could be found?
- To determine the difference in implicit assumptions and preferred upbringing strategies as a response to different manifestation of aggression depending on the type of instruction given to the parents in test situation (subjectiveness variable).

2.2. Hypotheses

- The upbringing strategies that are practiced by parents of a different educational background, as well as their implicit assumptions and conceptualization of the child’s aggressiveness, are significantly different.
- The upbringing strategies that are practiced by parents of a different gender, as well as their implicit assumptions and conceptualization of the child aggressiveness, are significantly different.
- The parents answer will be significantly different depending on the subjectiveness factor.
2.3. Method

According to the general method, the research was non-experimental survey conducted with an aim to test the stated hypotheses and to explore the implicit assumptions about child’s aggressiveness and its dependence on the education, gender and subjectiveness of the parent, which were used as research variables. The research has combined quantitative and qualitative approach to data analysis. In this case, no standard method was used for analyzing the entirety of the interview material. The meta-analysis of 47 studies have shown that parent-child associations were strongest when the measure of caregiving relied on observation or interviews as opposed to questionnaires (Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994). The collected data was analyzed by meaning categorization. Interviewees’ answers were coded into categories and the frequency of occurrence for each category among answers was counted and presented in a table. The hypotheses have been tested using the $\chi^2$ test.

2.4. Participants

In line with the goals and selected research methodology, the quote sample for participant selection we found to be an adequate choice. The interviewees were parents of children of both genders, aged between 4 and 7, randomly selected, in accordance with the previously established "quotas". The survey encompassed 100 interviewees.

2.5. Procedure and tools

Due to a specific, partly exploratory nature of the research goals, the tool used for data collection was a combined/mixed form of questionnaire. Each parent was asked to define aggressive behavior, and to explain their parenting style and upbringing strategy. After that, four hypothetical situations (stories), describing four types of aggressive behavior: verbal-offensive, verbal-defensive, physical-offensive and physical-defensive, were presented to the interviewees. Presentation of four stories was followed by multiple answers questions with one open ended alternative. Each presented story was followed by five questions. The alternatives offered in the questionnaire were established based on the pilot research, where the same model of sampling was followed, similarly to the main research. The interviewees were expected to express their opinion about the cause of given behavior, their feelings about the presented type of behavior and the ways they would react in the given hypothetical situations. The question about parent’s definition of aggressiveness was asked in an open ended format. Parents were presented with two hypothetical situations, in order to include the subjectiveness variable in test situation. One group was given the instructions that suggested that the main actor in hypothetical stories is their own child, and the other group was told that it is someone else's child. Accordingly, they were asked to answer the questions that followed the one or the other version of the story.

To summarize, throughout this research, we have been learning about parents’ implicit concepts of aggression based on the following indicators: parent definition of aggressiveness, parent's role and influence on such behavior, affective reactions to aggressive behavior; interpretation of causes for aggressive behavior; goal that a parent wants to achieve; parenting strategies and acts; expected effects (perception of relation between strategy and goal).

3. Results

Pearson's chi-squared test was used to analyze the correlation between gender and education, with the distribution of the responses for each indicator of the dependent variable (parenting style, feelings and reactions to the aggressive behavior of children, desired effects and understanding of the cause). No significant correlation was found.

On the other hand, the analysis of controlled variables revealed that depending on the child’s gender, significant deviations from the expected distribution were detected on one of the indicators: the desired effects of parent response to child aggression.
Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Desired Effects of Response to Child aggression in Relation to Child Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tolerance and empathy</th>
<th>Punishment and control</th>
<th>Warning</th>
<th>Create alternatives</th>
<th>Shame</th>
<th>Social norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 11.20 (5, N=100, p<0.05)

As can be seen by the frequencies cross tabulated in Table 1, there is a significant relationship between child gender and desired effect of parent response.

Also, the research results imply significant differences on the same indicator: desired effects of responses to a child aggression depending on whether the observed child is one's own child or modal child, confirming the initial hypothesis (Vide Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Affective Response to Child aggression in Relation to Subjectivity of the Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indifference</th>
<th>Sorrow</th>
<th>Sad and Disappointed</th>
<th>Ager</th>
<th>Approval and Understanding</th>
<th>Worried and scared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own Child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal Child</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 17.45 (5, N=100, p< 0.01)

There is a difference in conceptualization at all of the four indicators of parents’ aggressiveness conceptualization (feelings, reactions, desired effects and interpretation of aggressiveness causes), confirming one of the initial hypotheses of the research. We will present only the most significant findings among previously mentioned indicators (Vide Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Preferred Reaction in Relation to Subjectivity of the Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No reaction</th>
<th>Providing a good model</th>
<th>More attention</th>
<th>Restriction, verbal warning,</th>
<th>Physical punishment</th>
<th>Discussion, explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own Child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal Child</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

χ² = 22.52 (5, N = 100, p< 0.01)

4. Conclusions

The obtained research results negates two out of three starting hypothesis, indicating that the upbringing strategies that are practiced by parents of a different educational background and gender, as well as their implicit assumptions and conceptualization of the child aggressiveness, are significantly different. On the other hand, parents’ implicit assumptions on aggressiveness are of the significant influence when perception of children's aggressiveness is concerned. Parents react differently when aggressive behavior of their own or “someone else's child” is concerned. Parents remain passive when aggression of modal child is concern and feels indifferent. The aggression of their own child is more likely to cause empathy and understanding, even tolerance. Parents are more likely to suggest punishment or restriction of unruly behavior of “someone else's child” than of their own. If the hypothetical situation deals with one's own child, the causes for aggressiveness are most frequently seen in the child's character and his/her emotional profile. This is in line with the findings of Rubin & Mills (1990) study, which has indicated that mothers who would feel guilty and embarrassed by display of maladaptive behavior will attribute this behavior to dispositional factors. If someone else's child is concerned, causes for aggressive behavior, in perception of interviewees, are seen as a result of upbringing and parental failures. The observer who does not share the concern of actor for his/her own self, can, with no hesitation, attribute undesired behavior to personal
characteristics. When one's own child is concerned, the causes are attributed to the outside factors or personality factors, in one word, factors that are outside of their control, which, being such, relieve them of all responsibility.

The results also suggest that the child’s gender has an influence on desired outcomes of upbringing but not on an actual parental behavior. The observed inconsistency in the answers of parents is in accord with the results of meta-analysis of 172 studies on systemic differences in rearing of boys and girls. Little differential socialization for social behavior or abilities can be found across various studies (Lytton & Romney, 1991). Factors other than parental influence should be addressed in order to understand sex and gender differences.

References


