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EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE ON YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEER AND SIBLING AGGRESSION

By

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ABSTRACT
EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE ON YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF
PEER AND SIBLING AGGRESSION

Jessica L. Houston, B.S.

Marquette University, 2012

The present study examined the relationship between youth exposure to violence in the home and community and their perceptions of the acceptability of aggression in interactions involving peers and siblings. The importance of the context in which the violence occurs was investigated, as well the ability of parent-child attachment to buffer the effects of violence on aggressive attitudes. A diverse sample of 148 children, ages 9 to 14, completed measures of interparental, parent-child, and community aggression, as well as a measure of mother-child attachment. Youths also rated the acceptability of aggressive interactions between two peers and two siblings in written vignettes. Youths' exposure to violence was related to perceptions of aggression as more acceptable, with parent-child aggression having the strongest association and community violence also having a unique contribution. Maternal attachment acted as a buffer between exposure to community violence and perceived acceptability of aggression, such that when exposed to high levels of community violence, youth with more secure maternal attachments perceived aggression as less acceptable than youths with less secure attachment. Finally, when examining peer and sibling interactions separately, parent-child conflict had the strongest relation with perceptions across contexts of peer and sibling aggression and community violence only predicted attitudes about peer aggression.

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EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE ON YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEER AND SIBLING AGGRESSION

Introduction

Exposure to violence is linked to increased aggression in youth, but the mechanisms underlying this association are not well understood (i.e. Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004; Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008). Furthermore, children and adolescents report increasing and alarming rates of exposure to violence, both in their communities and in their homes (Acosta, Albus, Reynolds, Sprigs, & Weist, 2001). Understanding the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive behavior is important because aggression has been described as one of the "most disruptive and pervasive behavioral problems for children" and usually persists across contexts and relationships (Waldman, 1996; Huesmann, Dubow, & Boxer, 2009). Social learning models emphasize the role of cognitive processes in explaining why children who witness violence are more aggressive and experience negative outcomes. Youths' beliefs about the normativeness and justifiability of aggression have been shown to mediate the impact of community and family violence on their behavior, supporting the role of cognitive processes in youths' aggressive behaviors (e.g., Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Marcus, Lindahl, & Malik, 2001).

Since the link between youths' exposure to violence and aggressive behaviors is well supported, its imperative to understand different factors that can interrupt this cycle of violence. Research on characteristics that can reduce the effects of violence on youth, or protective factors, has focused on youths' behaviors and internalizing symptoms (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004; Skopp, McDonald, Jouriles, & Rosenfield, 2007; Hammack,

Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004). Although understanding the effects of violence on youths' behaviors is valuable, attitudes have been shown to mediate the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive behaviors. Thus, the current study focused on a protective factor, maternal attachment, as buffering the effects of violence on youths' attitudes, possibly targeting youth before they become aggressive themselves.

Furthermore, given the role of youths' attitudes in predicting aggressive behaviors, it is important to better understand how these attitudes about aggression are formed and to identify factors that can affect them. One factor that may be important in shaping children and adolescents' attitudes is the context in which violence occurs. Experiencing violence in the home and community may have different effects on youth. For instance, violence in the home may have an impact on youths' interactions and attitudes involving family members, while violence in the community may affect youths' attitudes about and interactions with their peers or other community members. Since children and adolescents experience violence in different contexts, it is important to study youths' attitudes about aggressive interactions in different contexts, such as interactions between peers and siblings.

Understanding these different contexts may provide a more accurate understanding of the causes of violence and its impact on youth. Although many studies have examined peer and sibling conflict individually, very few have focused on peer and sibling relationships and the differences between them (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006; Herzberger & Hall, 1993). Those that have compared peer and sibling relationships have found significant differences between peer and sibling aggressive interactions. For instance, negative affect is highest in adolescent conflict with family members, but less

common in conflict with peers (Laursen, 1993), and youth tend to expect more negative outcomes when engaging in aggressive sibling conflict than peer conflict (Herzberger & Hall, 1993). Distinctions between conflict in peer and sibling relationships may be influenced by the differences in the nature of these two relationships. Sibling relationships tend to be more stable and less easily disrupted, whereas peer relationships are voluntary and more fluid (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Although the nature of peer and sibling relationships and conflict differs, little is known about how exposure to different types of aggression affects these attitudes.

The present study examined the relation between youths' exposure to violence in the home and community and their attitudes about the acceptability of aggression in peer and sibling interactions. Violence in the home was expected to have a stronger effect on youths' perceptions of sibling aggression since these interactions occur in the same context, whereas community violence was predicted to have a stronger impact on perceptions of peer aggression. It also is important to identify factors that decrease the impact of witnessing violence on youths' developing attitudes about aggression. Given the high rates of violence in many homes and communities, understanding how the adverse effects of violence may be minimized has implications for prevention and intervention. The present study focused on youth's attachment to their mother as a protective factor that moderates the relationship between exposure to violence and perceived acceptability of aggression.

Exposure to Violence

Witnessing and being a victim of violence are associated with similar negative outcomes (Carlson & Slovak, 2007; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). Exposure

to violence in the community, both in neighborhoods and at schools, is a common experience, especially in disadvantaged, urban communities (Acosta et al., 2001). Prevalence estimates show that approximately 5 to 16% of youth experience severe aggression or abuse from their parents and over 50% experience more minor forms of aggression, such as corporal punishment (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). Youth exposure to interparental aggression is estimated at about 29% (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikier, Caetano, & Green, 2006), whereas rates of youths' direct experience of community violence is from 30 to 50% and rates of youth witnessing community violence is over 90% (Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & Vestal, 2003; Richters & Martinez, 1993). Longitudinal studies also show that rates of exposure to violence not only remain constant over an individual's lifetime, but also leads to a number of negative outcomes in children and adolescents (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004).

One of the most well-established and consistent findings in the literature is the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive behavior (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009). Exposure to violence in childhood is the single best predictor of aggression and delinquency later in life (Farrington, 1991), and can also lead to internalizing disorders and negative outcomes related to educational achievements, social relations, and health status (Farrington, 1995, Bair-Merritt, Blackstone, & Feudtner, 2006; Delaney-Black et al,. 2002; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Lynch, 2003; Margolin and Gordis, 2000; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003; Wright et al., 2004). The link between exposure to violence and aggressive behaviors has been consistently supported by longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, with youths' exposure to violence being within both community and home contexts (Gorman-Smith et

al., 2004; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2003; Evans et al., 2008).

Examining the role of the various contexts in which youth are exposed to violence could lead to a better understanding of how youth are affected by violence. This is supported by research demonstrating that youth are more likely to be exposed to violence in multiple contexts (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Margolin et al., 2009) and youth exposure to violence in one context increases their likelihood of experiencing violence in other contexts (Finkelhor, Omrad, & Turner, 2007). . Thus, examining youths' exposure to violence in separate contexts may provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of its effects, particularly on their perceptions of aggression in different contexts. The proposed study will examine how exposure to violence in different contexts, the home and the community, influences youths' attitudes about aggression in two types of interactions: between peers and siblings.

Attitudes About Aggression

Social learning explanations view youths' attitudes about aggression as playing an important role in the link between youth exposure to violence and aggressive behaviors. These explanations suggest that children and adolescents exposed to violence start to view violence as normative and acceptable, leading to a decrease in their inhibitions surroundings its use; this in turn increases their violent behavior (Bandura, 1986). Huesmann's (1988) theoretical model of social information processing suggests that youths develop schemas and scripts, or expectations about how people should behave, based on their interactions with their environment. According to Huesmann, viewing aggression as normative or acceptable shapes important cognitions that ultimately

influence youths' aggressive behaviors. Multiple studies have examined youth cognitions as mediators of the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive behaviors. For example, Guerra and colleagues (2003) found that fourth through sixth graders' perceptions of acceptability of aggression mediated the link between their exposure to community violence and their aggressive behaviors (as rated by teachers and peers). Similarly, McMahon and colleagues (2009) found that youths' (ages 10 to 15) beliefs about the normativeness of aggression mediated the link between their exposure to violence and aggression, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. While studies have examined how youths' beliefs about aggression are influenced by their experiences of violence, the majority of this research focuses on general beliefs about aggression or beliefs about aggression in romantic relationships (Guerra et al., 2003; McMahon et al., 2009; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Research is lacking on youths' beliefs about aggression in peer and sibling relationships, which is important to examine as these relationships become more salient and influential as children approach adolescence.

Protective Factors

As it is clear that exposure to violence leads to not only aggressive attitudes, but a number of negative outcomes in youth, it not only becomes increasingly important to understand the mechanisms by which these effects occur, but also to understand the factors that may moderate, or weaken, the impact of exposure to violence (Howard, Budge, & McKay, 2010). This approach is consistent with models of resilience and protective processes (e.g., Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) and developmental assets (e.g. Benson et al., 2006), which propose that the effect of risk factors, including exposure to violence, can be buffered (or moderated) by either external or internal protective factors.

In other words, a protective factor functions by weakening the relationship between a risk factor and the outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In this case, since the focus is on the relationship between exposure to violence and aggressive attitudes, understanding the factors that buffer this relationship could be essential to interrupting the transmission of violence.

Several protective factors have been shown to buffer the relationship between exposure to violence and youths' negative outcomes. For example, in a longitudinal study examining African American and Latino 11 to 15-year-olds, family factors such as high levels of emotional cohesion, structure, and effective parenting practices moderated the relationship between exposure to violence and violent behaviors (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004). In this study, youths from families higher in emotional cohesion, structure, and effective parenting practices were less likely to be perpetrators of violence than youths from families lower in these attributes who were exposed to similar levels of violence. Similarly, Skopp and colleagues (2007) examined the buffering effects of maternal and partner warmth on the relationship between intimate partner aggression and children's externalizing behaviors. This study found that intimate partner aggression was positively related to youth externalizing behaviors when mothers were low in warmth, but not with higher levels of maternal warmth. Protective factors have also been found that buffer the effects of exposure to violence on youth's internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression (Hammack et al., 2004). These factors included maternal closeness, time spent with family, and social support (Hammack et al., 2004).

The protective factor that the present study examined is parent-child attachment. Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment stresses healthy parent-child relationships as a

foundation for the child's long-term development. Children with early secure attachments are able to openly explore their environment, develop skills of engagement, and have more confidence in their abilities (Davies, 2004). Furthermore, secure attachments lead youth to develop positive internal working models for both themselves and others, which aids in their development of goals and expectations for current and future relationships. For middle to elementary school-aged youth, attachment primarily relies on youths' perceptions of their caregivers as responsive and available, as well as their ability to rely on their caregiver in times of distress (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). It is widely supported that secure attachment is linked to many positive outcomes for children and insecure attachment linked to negative outcomes, including externalizing behaviors (see Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010, for a review). Although there are associations between attachment security and both positive and negative outcomes, attachment security has also been supported as a protective factor for youth, moderating the relationship between negative experiences and youths' outcomes.

For instance, parental attachment was found to buffer the relationship between exposure to community violence and internalizing symptoms in a longitudinal study examining 11-14 year-olds over the course of three years (Salzinger, Feldman, Rosario, & Ng-Mak, 2011). In African American youth exposed to community violence, Kliewer and colleagues (2004) found the quality of the caregiver-child relationship to be the strongest protective factor for both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Since youths' attitudes about aggression has been supported as a possible link between exposure to violence and their aggressive behaviors (McMahon et al., 2009; Guerra et al., 2003), examining how protective factors influence youths' attitudes is an important step

in understanding the effects of violence.

Study Goals

The present study assessed youths' observations of verbal and physical aggression in the family, direct experience of parent-child aggression, and experiences of community violence as both witnesses and victims. Differences in youths' exposure to violence and aggressive attitudes were examined first based on participants' gender, age, and ethnicity, because research has shown significant differences based on these factors. For instance, males, older children, and ethnic minorities typically report more experiences of violence (Carlson & Slovak, 2007; Mrug & Windle, 2010). Next, three hypotheses were examined. First, it was expected that youth with more experiences of violence (in the home and community) would view aggressive acts as more acceptable in peer and sibling interactions. Then, the present study examined whether youths' attachment to a caregiver would buffer this relationship between exposure to violence and attitudes about aggression. It was expected that youths' maternal attachment would moderate the link between exposure to violence and aggressive attitudes, such that more securely attached youth would show a weaker association between exposure to violence and perceived acceptability of aggression. Finally, whether these associations were context-specific was also investigated with the study's third hypothesis, in which peer and sibling interactions were examined separately: it was expected that exposure to violence in the home would be a better predictor of youths' attitudes towards sibling aggression, and exposure to violence in the community would better predict perceptions of peer aggression.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a larger study and included 148 youths (38% male, 62% female) aged 9-14 years, with a mean age of 11.15 (*SD* = 1.39). The youth represented diverse ethnic backgrounds, including 50% Latino, 22% African American, 18% Caucasian, and 10% other, most of whom classified themselves as multi- or bi-racial. Eighty-nine percent of the participants had siblings, and those without siblings were included in the analyses in which peer and sibling interactions were analyzed together (hypothesis one and two). For the third hypothesis, examining context specific effects of violence, only youth with siblings were included in the analysis. The sample was composed primarily of Latino and African American youth, because research has found that Latino and African American youth report significantly more exposure to violence than their Caucasian counterparts, regardless of their family's income level (Crouch, Hanson, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 2000). The age range of 9 to 14 was used because by these ages, youth have developed the cognitive ability to report reliably on their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Fraser, 1996). These participants were recruited from Milwaukee area Catholic elementary and middle schools by sending letters home to parents that described the purpose of the study. Parents who expressed interest in participating in the study were contacted to schedule a time for their participation.

Procedure

The majority of interviews were conducted at the schools where the youth were recruited, after classes had been finished for the day. When not feasible, participants were offered the option of completing the study in a university research laboratory. After the purpose of the study was described to mothers and children, mothers' informed consent and youths' assent was obtained for participation in the study. With their mother in a separate room, youth completed a demographic form and a series of questionnaires, consisting of measures of interparental, parent-child, and community aggression, as well as a measure of parent-child attachment. Participants also read and answered questions about three hypothetical vignettes portraying aggressive interactions between two peers and two siblings and rated the acceptability of aggression in the vignette (see Appendix A). The research assistants who administered the measures and interviewed the youth were graduate students in clinical psychology and advanced undergraduate psychology students. Both graduate and undergraduate students received extensive training in interviewing, including how to interview victims of abuse, to prepare for discussing sensitive material with the participants. Mothers received $30 and youths received $10 for their participation.

Measures

Exposure to Violence: The *Children's Perceptions of Interpersonal Conflict Scale* (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) is a 48-item measure that assesses youth self-reports of exposure to interparental conflict. Youth answer "true," "sort of true," or "false" on the questions. Three factor-analytically derived subscales are included in the CPIC: Conflict Properties, Threat, and Self-Blame. Only the Conflict Properties subscale

was used, which focuses on the frequency, intensity, and resolution of interparental conflict and includes questions such as “I never see my parents arguing or disagreeing” and “When my parents have an argument they usually work it out”. Higher scores on this measure indicate that conflict is more frequent, intense, and poorly resolved. This subscale has been shown to display good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent validity (Grych et al., 1992). Internal consistency of the CPIC in the present study was also strong (α= .90).

The *Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTSPC; Straus, et al., 1998) was used to assess youths’ exposure to verbal and physical aggression from their parents. Participants responded to fifteen questions regarding both their mothers and fathers, answering how often they experienced an act of verbal or physical aggression in the past year, such as how often their mom or dad “shouted, yelled, or screamed at” them or how often their mom or dad “spanked you on the bottom with his/her bare hand”. Their options included “once”, “twice”, “3-5 times”, “6-10 times”, “11-20 times”, “more than 20 times”, “not in the past year but it did happen before”, and “this has never happened”. The CTSPC has also demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability in previous studies (α= .88; Straus et al., 1998) and in the sample used in the current study (α= .88). This measure also has displayed both construct and discriminant validity (Straus et al., 1998).

Exposure to community violence was assessed using nine items from the *Chicago Youth Development Study Stress Measure* (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1991). This measure requires participants to respond to “how many times in the previous year have the following things happened?” and items include questions such as “A close friend or acquaintance was a victim of violence” and “I witnessed a violent crime”. Internal

reliability for this measure has been found acceptable (α= .67; Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1991) and was also acceptable in the present sample (α= .68).

Perceptions of Aggression: Acceptability of aggression was assessed with written vignettes portraying aggressive interactions between two peers and two siblings (see Appendix). These vignettes were adapted from narratives developed for a study assessing adults' attitudes towards violence (Lane & Knowles, 2000). Two of the vignettes describe pairs of friends and one vignette describes siblings; in each, a verbal disagreement escalates and ends with an act of aggression. Participants were asked to rate how acceptable or "ok" the act of aggression was in each vignette on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing "not ok at all" and 7 being "completely ok". In support of the validity of these vignettes, youths' perceptions of the vignettes were highly correlated ($p < .01$) with their reports on the Normative Beliefs about Aggression Scale (NOBAGS; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997), which has been supported at a reliable and valid measure of youth's attitudes about aggression. Also, youths' responses on the multiple vignettes for peers and siblings were highly correlated ($p < .01$), suggesting consistency both across the two peer vignettes and across the peer and sibling vignettes. Youths' responses to the peer and sibling vignettes were summed for a measure of overall perception of aggression (Total vignettes). This combined measure was used to address the first and third research questions exploring whether experiences of violence predicted youths' perceptions of aggression and whether attachment security moderated this relationship. The peer and sibling vignettes were used separately to address the second research question: Are the associations between youths' exposure to violence and perceptions of aggression context-specific?

Parent-Child Attachment: To assess youths' self-reported parent-child attachment, the *Security Scale (*Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996) was administered. Targeted at elementary and middle-school aged children, this 15-item measure assesses the beliefs that an attachment figure is responsive and available, tendency to rely on the attachment figure in times of stress, and ability to communicate with the attachment figure (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). Respondents read a statement, such as "Some kids find it easy to trust their mom BUT other kids are not sure if they can trust their mom" and choose which statement is most characteristic of them, answering either "Really true of me" or "Sort of true of me" to one of the statements. The 4-point items were summed to form an attachment security score, with higher scores indicated more secure relationships. The Security Scale has displayed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's α= 0.84), as well as strong convergent and divergent validity (Kerns et al., 1996). Strong internal consistency was found for the *Security Scale* in the current sample as well, with a Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items of 0.82 and 0.84, for questions regarding mothers and fathers respectively.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

First, descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the exposure to violence measures (parent-child, interparental, and community), as well as each of the perceived acceptability of aggression variables (Total vignettes, peers, and siblings; Table 1). Next, the strength of the associations between the exposure to violence variables and perceptions of aggression were assessed using a correlational analysis (Table 2). The two

measures examining youths' experiences of violence in the home, interparental conflict (CPIC) and parent-child conflict (CTSPC) were significantly related, as expected. A significant correlation was also found between parent-child conflict and exposure to community violence, but not between interparental conflict and community violence. Youth perceptions of sibling and peer aggression were significantly correlated suggesting that participants responded consistently regarding how acceptable aggressive acts were in various contexts. Furthermore, both parent-child conflict and community violence were significantly related to youth perceptions of aggression in peer and sibling interactions, while interparental conflict was not significantly associated with these variables.

To examine whether the associations among the indices of youths' exposure to violence and their perceptions of violence differed according to age, gender, or ethnicity, three Box's M tests were conducted. Significant differences were found for age (Box's M= 135.80, $p < .01$), gender (Box's M= 19.32, $p < .05$), and ethnicity (Box's M= 137.03, $p < .01$). Consequently, these three variables were included as covariates in the following analyses.

Hypotheses

To test the first hypothesis, that youth with more experiences of violence in the home and community would view aggressive acts as more acceptable, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. Age, gender, and ethnicity were included as covariates in the first step. Youths' reported levels of exposure to different forms of aggression were included as the predictor variables and their perceptions of aggression (with peer and sibling interactions combined) as the dependent variable. Together, reports of parent-child, interparental, and community violence significantly predicted higher

levels of perceived acceptability of peer and sibling aggression. The total variance of youths' perceptions on the peer and sibling vignettes explained by the model was 12.1%. Youth reports of parent-child conflict had the strongest and only unique contribution in predicting attitudes about aggression. These results are displayed in Table 3.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test the second hypothesis: youths' attachment to a caregiver will moderate the relationship between exposure to violence and attitudes about violence, with more secure attachment to a mother figure resulting in lower perceived acceptability of aggression. Three analyses were conducted to examine the ability of maternal attachment to moderate the effects of each context of violence separately: parent-child, interparental, and community. Youths' age, gender, and ethnicity were entered as covariates in the first step. The second step of the regression analysis included youths' exposure to violence type (parent-child, interparental, or community) and maternal attachment. An interaction term created with exposure to violence and maternal attachment security was entered in the third step of the regression analyses. The results of these three analyses are displayed in Table 4, 5, and 6.

Examination of the main effects of these analyses revealed that males reported significantly more accepting attitudes towards aggression than females, regardless of exposure to violence (interparental, parent-child, or community) and maternal attachment. Also, older participants indicated significantly more accepting attitudes towards aggression than younger participants, regardless of interparental or parent-child aggression and maternal attachment. The effect of age on youths' attitudes approached significance when entered with exposure to community violence and maternal attachment. Furthermore, youth with more secure attachment to their mothers reported

significantly less accepting attitudes towards aggression, regardless of their exposure to interparental violence. The effect of attachment to a mother figure on participants' attitudes approached significance when entered with parent-child aggression.

Examination of the interaction effects revealed no significant moderational effects of attachment security for the relationship between parent-child violence or interparental violence and aggressive attitudes. However, the interaction of maternal attachment and community violence was significant, indicated a moderating relationship for maternal attachment on the association between community violence and youths' beliefs about aggression. Analysis of this interaction showed that for youths with less secure attachment, exposure to greater community violence was related to more accepting attitudes about violence. In contrast, for youths with more secure attachments, exposure to greater community violence was related to less acceptance of peer and sibling violence (see Figure 1).

Only participants with siblings (89%) were included in the analyses for the third hypothesis, that exposure to violence in the home would be a better predictor of youth's attitudes towards sibling aggression, and exposure to violence in the community would better predict perceptions of peer aggression. This was to eliminate differential effects for youths with siblings and those without siblings, since peer and sibling interactions were analyzed separately for this research question. Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether the relationship between exposure to violence and beliefs about aggression were context-specific (Table 7 and 8). Participants' age, gender, and ethnicity were entered in the first step as covariates. Then, the three exposure to violence types (interparental, parent-child, and community) were entered as

predictors of youths' accepting attitudes of aggression in peer interactions and in sibling interactions, separately. Males reported significantly more accepting attitudes of sibling aggression. Exposure to parent-child aggression significantly predicted both attitudes about the acceptability of aggression between siblings and peers, with more exposure to parent-child aggression predicting more acceptable views of aggression. While exposure to community violence was not a strong predictor of perceived acceptability of aggression between siblings, it significantly predicted higher levels of perceived acceptability of aggression between peers.

Discussion

The present study investigated the relations between youths' exposure to aggression in the home and community and their perceptions of the acceptability of aggression in peer and sibling interactions. It also examined if attachment security to mother figures moderated the relation between youth exposure to violence and youths' aggressive attitudes. Finally, it assessed whether aggression in the home predicted perceptions regarding sibling relationships better than peer relationships, and if violence in the community better predicted perceptions of peer relationships than aggression in the family.

Support was provided for the hypothesis that youth exposed to higher levels of violence would view aggression as more acceptable. Exposure to aggression in the home between the parent and child and in the community contributed uniquely to youths' increased perceptions of acceptability of aggression in sibling and peer interactions. This is consistent with previous research that showed an association between adolescents'

exposure to aggression in the home and perceived acceptability of aggression in romantic relationships (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). The present study, however, expands on previous research by exploring the effects of community and family aggression on youths' perceptions of peer and sibling interactions.

The analyses for the second research question indicated that the security of youths' attachment with mothers had both direct and moderating relations with their beliefs about aggression. Youth with more secure attachment to their mothers reported marginally less accepting attitudes towards aggression, when controlling for both interparental and parent-child aggression. Additionally, a significant moderating effect of maternal attachment was found for youths' exposure to community violence. For youths with more secure attachment, exposure to community violence was unrelated to their attitudes about aggression, whereas youths with less secure maternal attachments showed increasingly accepting attitudes towards aggression when exposed to more community violence. Thus, attachment security with their mothers appears to act as a buffer of the impact of exposure to community violence on youths' perceived acceptability of aggression. These results are consistent with previous studies supporting maternal attachment and quality of the mother-child relationship as a protective factor for youth exposed to community violence (Salzinger et al., 2011; Kleiwer et al., 2004). The results of this study highlight the importance of the mother-child relationship on the development of youths' attitudes about violence, as attachment security acts as a protective factor against youths' exposure to community violence.

However, the mother-child attachment did not act as a buffer against experiences of aggression in the home setting. It appears that regardless of the quality of relationship

between a parent and child, the effects of experiencing violence in the home are detrimental, whereas a strong mother-child relationship may shield youth from the effects of violence in settings outside the home. Although attachment theory suggests that youth develop expectations and beliefs based on the quality of their relationship with a caregiver, social learning theory suggests that youths' expectations and beliefs are shaped by their observations of others through mechanisms such as observational learning and modeling (Bandura, 1986). While it is clear that the quality of the parent-child relationship is important in youths' development, the present study supports youths' observations and experiences in the home as possibly more important to their development of attitudes regarding aggression than their relationship with their caregiver. The effects of experiencing or witnessing aggression in the home, whether between two parents or between a parent and a child, are not ameliorated by a secure parent-child relationship.

Supporting the role of context, parent-child conflict significantly predicted attitudes in peer and sibling contexts, whereas experiences of community violence significantly predicted perceptions of acceptability of violence in peer relationships but not sibling interactions. This suggests that parent-child conflict has the most impact on youths' perceptions of aggression regardless of the context in which the aggressive interactions occur, whereas exposure to violence in the community has a more context-specific effect. Taking into consideration that research has shown that youth attitudes mediate the relationship between experiences of violence and aggressive behaviors (Guerra et al., 2003; McMahon et al., 2009), the results of this study suggest that youth exposure to violence in the community may be more influential on their subsequent

aggressive behaviors in a community setting, while parent-child aggression may be influential on their aggressive behaviors across settings.

Whereas context-specific effects were supported regarding exposure to violence in the community, parent-child aggression appears to have the most impact on youths' attitudes regardless of context. Attachment theory could be used to explain why this might be the case. Secure attachments to caregivers help youth develop positive internal working models for both themselves and others, which includes expectations for current and future relationships. If youth are experiencing aggressive parent-child interactions in the home, this would likely interrupt their attachment security, as the person in their life who is supposed to be responsive to their needs in times of distress becomes the source of their distress. With less secure attachment, youth are more likely to develop internal working models that reflect these experiences, shaping their expectations and attitudes for relationships in social interactions, regardless of its context. Thus, if youth are experiencing aggression in the home at the hand of their caregiver, they are more likely to develop expectations of aggression in other situations and interactions. Not only will these experiences shape youths' expectations about aggression, but also their perceptions of these interactions are more acceptable. This could be a way for children and adolescents to protect themselves from the harmful emotional effects of experience parent-child aggression, as they normalize the behavior and begin to view it as more acceptable.

The contextual differences found in this study could also be explained by the type of experiences the measures of exposure to violence assessed. For instance, the measures of interparental conflict and exposure to community violence used questions regarding

youth witnessing violence (either in their community or between their parents) or more indirect experiences of violence. However, the parent-child conflict measure assessed the youths' direct experiences of aggressive interactions with their parents. Children and adolescents may experience a more significant impact on their beliefs about aggression when they experience violence directly as opposed to witnessing violent interactions between others. Viewing aggression as acceptable could be a way for youth to normalize their own experiences, making more direct aggressive interactions seem less severe.

Implications

The outcomes of this study have implications for strengthening prevention and intervention programs for youth exposed to violence. Various models of resilience (i.e. Howard et al., 2010; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) suggest the importance of discovering what factors may buffer or reduce the effects of risk factors on youth. This study supports the role of the mother-child relationship as a protective factor against exposure to violence, and strengthening this relationship would be another effective direction that various prevention and intervention programs could pursue. Targeting youths' relationships with their caregivers could be the needed foundation to prevent the cycle of violence, as youth who experience violence tend to become more aggressive themselves. The present study also has implications for treating children and adolescents displaying aggressive or externalizing behaviors. It is likely that these youth have experienced some form of aggression whether in the community or home setting. Focusing on their attitudes about aggression in treatment could be particularly effective, as they are likely to view aggression as more acceptable or justifiable. It is possible that targeting and changing these cognitions could help decrease their aggressive behaviors. Also, in youth exposed

to community violence, effective treatment could focus on family support and more particularly the mother-child relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of the current study was that cross-sectional methods were used, thus limiting the ability to make causal assumptions. Future research should utilize longitudinal methods to establish a causal relationship between exposure to violence and attitudes about aggression. Also, while the sample in this study represented a diverse group of people, the majority of the sample was composed of children in racial/ethnic minority groups. As this is not a representative sample, the results may be limited to applicability to minority populations. The participants were all recruited from Catholic school, which is another limitation in the generalizeability of the results. Participants in this study would have more exposure to religious ideals, which could be influential on their perceptions of aggression. Thus, examining youth from a multitude of backgrounds could be more informative about how these results generalize to different populations. Furthermore, research should focus on establishing a better understanding of the underlying reasons for the gender, age, and ethnic differences in exposure to violence and perceptions of aggression found in the present study. This could be done utilizing methods with more sensitivity to gender, age, and ethnic differences. Also, including these demographic variables in future models examining protective factors could help explain the role of these factors on youth outcomes.

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Table 1

Youth Reports of Exposure to Violence and Perceived acceptability of aggression Variables: Descriptive Statistics (N = 148)

Variables	M	SD	Range	α
Parent-Child Conflict (CTSPC)	32.39	24.72	1-166	.91
Interparental Conflict (CPIC)	11.90	7.70	0-32	.90
Community Violence	1.92	2.83	0-21	.68
Total Acceptability of Aggression Vignettes	6.43	3.80	4-28	
Acceptability of Peer Aggression	4.85	2.92	3-21	
Acceptability of Sibling Aggression	1.58	1.21	1-7	

Table 2

Youth's Exposure to Violence and Perceptions of Acceptability of Aggression: Correlational Statistics (N = 148)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Parent-Child Conflict	-			
2. Interparental Conflict	.42**	-		
3. Community Violence	.20*	.04	-	
4. Sibling Aggression	.18*	-.03	.17*	-
5. Peer Aggression	.23**	.04	.22**	.63**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Youths' Perceived Acceptability of Aggression (N = 148)

	Total Perceived Acceptability of Aggression		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.38	.24	.14
Gender	-.73	.69	-.09
Ethnicity	-.29	.25	-.10
Parent-Child Conflict	.04	.02	.23*
Interparental Conflict	-.03	.05	-.06
Community Violence	.20	.12	.15
R^2		.12	
F		3.00**	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Maternal Attachment as a Moderator between Interparental Aggression and Perceived Acceptability of Aggression (N = 148)

	Total Perceived Acceptability of Aggression		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.42	.20	.17*
Gender	-1.32	.59	-.19*
Ethnicity	-.22	.22	-.09
Maternal Attachment	-1.45	.62	-.20*
Interparental Aggression	.14	.08	.15
Attachment x Aggression	.14	.08	.15
R^2		.13	
F		3.36**	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Maternal Attachment as a Moderator between Parent-Child Aggression and Perceived Acceptability of Aggression (N = 148)

	Total Perceived Acceptability of Aggression		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.40	.19	.17*
Gender	-1.26	.58	-.18*
Ethnicity	-.21	.20	-.09
Maternal Attachment	-1.22	.63	-.17^{+}
Parent-Child Aggression	-.001	.01	-.01
Attachment x Aggression	-.04	.03	-.13
R^2		.13	
F		3.45**	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ $^{+}p < .065$

Table 6

Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Maternal Attachment as a Moderator between Community Violence and Perceived Acceptability of Aggression (N = 148)

	Total Perceived Acceptability of Aggression		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.34	.18	.14^{+}
Gender	-1.13	.53	-.16*
Ethnicity	-.20	.19	-.08
Maternal Attachment	-.57	.58	-.08
Community Violence	.13	.09	.11
Attachment x Community Violence	-.67	.16	.34**
R^2		.35	
F		7.61**	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ $^{+}$ $p < .065$

Table 7

Linear Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Youths' Perceived Acceptability of Aggression in Siblings (N = 148)

	Perceived Acceptability of Sibling Aggression		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.07	.08	.09
Gender	-.52	.23	-.21*
Ethnicity	-.04	.08	-.05
Parent-Child Conflict	.01	.01	.23*
Interparental Conflict	-.02	.02	-.10
Community Violence	.05	.04	.12
R^2		.14	
F		3.17**	

*$p < .05$ ** $p < ..01$.

Table 8

Linear Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Youths' Perceived Acceptability of Aggression in Peers (N = 148)

	Perceived Acceptability of Peer Aggression		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.17	.19	.08
Gender	-.39	.55	-.06
Ethnicity	-.20	.20	-.09
Parent-Child Conflict	.03	.01	.26*
Interparental Conflict	-.03	.04	-.07
Community Violence	.20	.09	.20*
R^2		.134	
F		2.98*	

*$p < .05$.

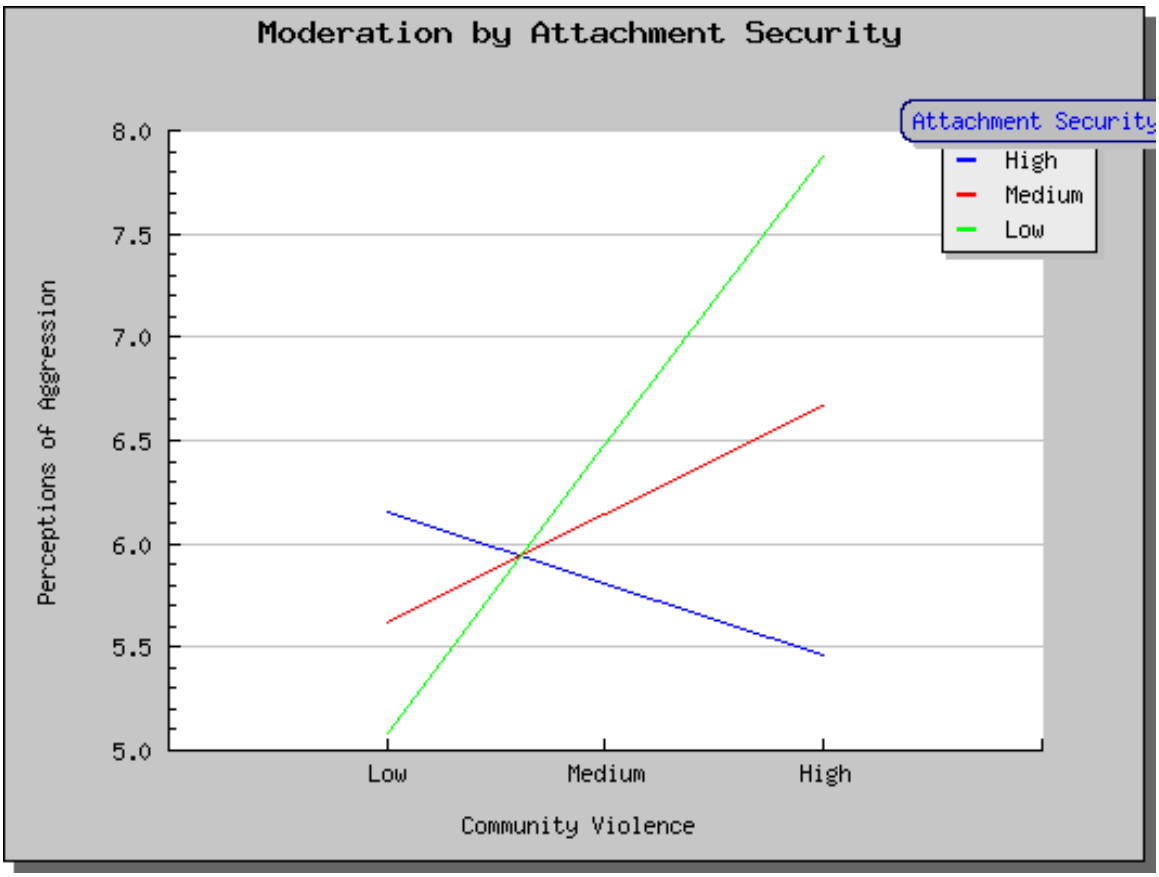

Figure 1: Attachment security as a moderator between exposure to community violence and perceived acceptability of aggression.

Appendix A

Vignette 1: Peers

1. Carl and John are classmates. John brought his new soccer ball to school one day, and was practicing with it at recess. Carl asked John if he could play with him and John said no. Carl said that John was being selfish, and John told him to get his own ball and walked away. When John was practicing, the ball went near Carl and he kicked it over the fence and into the street. John ran over to him and knocked him down to the ground.

Vignette 2: Siblings

2. Jack and Matt are brothers. One day after school, they were both playing in their neighborhood. After a few minutes of playing, Jack started teasing Matt and calling him mean names. Matt punched Jack in the stomach. Jack fell to the ground and started crying.

Vignette 3: Peers

3. Rosy and Becky are classmates. One day they were talking together after lunch, and started arguing and yelling at each other. Becky started to walk away and Rosy cursed at her and yelled something insulting. Becky turned around and hit Rosy. Rosy hit her back. They started fighting and other kids had to pull them apart. Both had cuts and bruises.