Direct and Indirect Aggression in Adults: The Psychological Correlates of Parenting Styles

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Abstract

The present study investigated whether common or overlapping associative factors between parenting styles and aggression types lead to correlations between the two. Two-hundred and fifteen (age range = 15-34, *M* = 20.05) undergraduate female students of California State University, East Bay completed 10 assessments of which only 2 were used in the current study. To measure parenting styles subscale items from The Parenting Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991) was used and to measure aggression types subscale items from the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Osterman, 1992) were used. Results from Pearson’s *r* correlation analyses revealed statistical insignificances except for a positive correlation between authoritarian parenting and indirect aggression (*r*(211) = .16, *p* = .01). These results were contrary to the hypothesis of the study and suggested the need for a deeper investigation into the relationship between aggression strategies and parenting styles.

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In the past few decades, research on aggression has been influenced by a major development. Previously, aggression had been studied in terms of overt physical aggression. This lead to numerous studies finding that boys were more aggressive than girls (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). As research progressed, the definition of aggression became more nuanced and intricate. Researchers made distinctions between different types of aggression. In contrast to direct aggression came the neologisms of indirect aggression, relational aggression, and social aggression. This development in aggression research has had large heuristic value. It has led to research studies taking into account the nuances of the different kinds of aggression in their research. Previous research conducted with the definition of aggression in the physical overt form became reexamined with the nuanced definition of aggression in its overt and covert forms. This research on the newly construed terms of indirect, relational, and social aggression lead to the revamping finding that girls use more indirect, relational, and social aggression than boys (Archer & Coyne, 2005). New and original research has experimented with the newly construed aggression forms. Associations between parenting style and aggression types other than direct aggression became studied (Nelson & Crick, 2002). Different types of personality traits have been associated with indirect, relational, and social aggression (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007; Kaukiainen, Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, Osterman, Salmivalli, Rothberg, & Ahlbom, 1999).

It is in this light that the present study was conducted. As the developments of indirect, social and relational aggression came into play in research on aggression, research became conducted on associations between parenting style and the different types of aggression (Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, Ijzendoorn, & Crick, 2011; Nelson & Crick, 2002). The present study adds to this increasing amount of research literature that has incorporated indirect, relational, and social aggression into the examining of the effects of parenting style. Specifically, the present study is a novelty in the research literature as it examines the association between different parenting styles and direct and indirect aggression in adults.

Baumrind (1968, 1971) formulated three different types of parenting styles – authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. The three different parenting styles are classified by the dyadic distinction consisting of one parenting dimension of acceptance and responsiveness and another parenting dimension of demand and control. Authoritative parenting is characterized by the parenting dimension of acceptance and responsiveness with the parenting dimension of demand and control. Parents encourage and allow their children to be independent and autonomous while setting limits and controls. Interactions between parents and children are two-sided and reciprocal. If the child does not do as he or she was expected to do by their parent, then the parent appropriately reasons, cautions, or reprimands corresponding to the degree of transgression. The parent gives reasons to his or her children for doing so. Authoritarian parenting in characterized by the parenting dimension of rejection and unresponsiveness with the parenting dimension of demand and control. Authoritarian parents set a strict standard of conduct onto their children to which they are expected to obey. When their child transgresses the rules of their parents they are reprimanded in a usually forceful way. There is very little verbal exchange between the parents and the child. The child is not given reasons for being punished by their parents. Permissive parenting is characterized by the parenting dimension of acceptance and responsiveness with the parenting dimension of no demand and no control. Permissive parents are lax and generally do not engage themselves with the development of their children. They avoid the exercise of control on their children and allow them to be autonomous in their actions. The child thereby becomes free of restraint and self-regulates himself (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Santrock, 2012).

The outcomes of parenting styles have been researched extensively. Children of authoritative parents are high in self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem. They exhibit less aggressive behaviors in general and have better peer relations than children of other parenting styles. They are high in social competence and are low in aggression toward peers. Authoritative parenting also fosters an achievement motivation, prosocial behavior, and social confidence. Children of authoritarian parents have weak communication skills, are moody, hostile to peers and others, have low self-esteem, fail to initiate activity, and use physical aggression. Children of permissive parents have high rates of physical aggression, rarely have respect for others, have difficulty controlling their behavior (i.e., self-control), and might have unsatisfactory peer relations (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Kawabata et al., 2011; Santrock, 2012; Steinberg, 2001).

Aggression is generally defined as a behavior committed with the intent to inflict harm on to someone (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Within the umbrella term of aggression is direct aggression and indirect aggression. Direct aggression is typically defined as an overt act committed by an either actor to inflict harm to a victim verbally or physical that is upfront in a face-to-face manner. All actions that directly inflict harm onto a victim are direct aggressions. These include hitting, pushing, and verbal threats. Indirect aggression is defined as intended psychological or physical harm by social manipulation that is committed often circuitously. The perpetuator manipulates the social structure through a third person to target his victim. Because the perpetuator is not personally involved, he or she might be left unnoticed as responsible for the act of aggression. Thereby, the perpetuator may be able to avoid rebounding retaliation or social disapproval of others. This consequence can act as a motive towards committing indirect aggression. Some forms of indirect aggression, however, do involve awareness of the perpetuators identity. An example of an indirect aggression is when a person becomes friends with another person in the social structure in order to make someone else jealous or to exact revenge on someone else (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist, Osterman, Lagerspetz, Landau, Caprara, & Fraczek, 2001; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Lagerspetz et al., 1988).

Researchers have given many reasons for the exhibition of the aggression strategies of direct physical aggression, direct verbal aggression, indirect aggression. Maturation of verbal and social skills has been noted as a developmental factor in the trends of aggression style. From early on in people’s lives to adolescence and later adulthood, verbal and social skills are being developed. While people are in their very young ages, they do not have the requisite verbal or social skills in order to commit indirect aggression effectively. As a result, they resort to using direct physical aggression. When they do develop verbal and social skills, the use of direct verbal aggression and indirect aggression becomes available and used. This is shown in the overall decrease in direct physical aggression and the overall increase of direct verbal and indirect aggression in both sexes. Social norms are a factor as direct physical aggression is socially undesirable and socially unacceptable. As people grow into adolescence and adulthood, pressure from society to not commit physical aggression lead to direct verbal aggression and indirect aggression being used as an alternative to direct physical aggression. This would be especially the case for adolescent and adult females as the physical aggression of females is shunned by society. The psychological trait of social intelligence has been given as a factor in aggression style choice. Social intelligence necessarily aids the use of indirect aggression. High social intelligence would mean successful indirect aggressions where the perpetuator is not discovered to be responsible for the aggressive act. Social intelligence has been found to have no correlation to direct physical aggression or direct verbal aggression among 10, 12, and 14 year old children. Social intelligence was also found to be positively correlated with indirect aggression among 10, 12, and 14 year old children. A person’s social structure of peer groups can also affect the choice of aggression styles. The social structure of peer groups are different between the sexes. Girls tend to form tight, small, and intimate peer groups. Boys tend to form larger and loose peer groups. This factors into aggression styles as tighter peer groups situate peers in a position to be able to use indirect aggression effectively. When friendships are close and well-defined in a peer group, the use of indirect aggression could be effective and powerful. In sum, tighter social structure of peer groups creates an environment conducive for indirect aggression and thereby increases the likelihood of its occurrence (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Lagerspetz et al., 1988).

It was hypothesized that because the parenting outcome characteristics found to be linked in the different parenting styles were also found to be linked or related to linked factors of aggression styles, associations between parenting style and aggression style would correspond accordingly to the common associations. This syllogistic logic would render the following hypotheses. Authoritative parenting fosters certain positive psychological and social outcomes. In turn, these positive and social outcomes foster the disuse of direct aggression and the use of indirect aggression. Authoritarian and permissive parenting fosters certain negative psychological and social outcomes. In turn, these negative psychological and social outcomes foster the disuse of indirect aggression and the use of direct aggression. The factors in aggression styles (i.e., social intelligence, structure of peer groups, and internalization of social norms) are synonymous, overlapping, and not mutually exclusive with the factors that are linked with the different parenting style outcomes (e.g., peer relations, social competence, self-control, and exhibition of prosocial behaviors). Therefore, it was hypothesized that authoritative parenting would yield a negative relationship to direct aggression, but would yield a positive relationship with indirect aggression. Authoritarian and permissive parenting was hypothesized to foster positive correlations with both direct aggression while being negatively correlated with indirect aggression.

Authoritative parenting would lead to indirectly aggressive, but not directly aggressive, children for the following reasons. The factors of better relations with peers and high level of social competence related to authoritative parenting are not independent from the factors of high verbal and social skills, tighter social structure of peer groups and high social intelligence related to the disuse of direct aggression and the use of indirect aggression. Hence, authoritative parenting ought to be associated with the disuse of direct aggression and the use of indirect aggression. Additionally, the factors of social competence and prosocial behaviors found in authoritative parented children are an indication that the children have internalized social norms. Internalized social norms is a developmental factor that is related to the disuse of direct aggression and the use of direct aggression. Again, this provides a further link between authoritative parenting and the disuse of direct aggression and the use of indirect aggression.

Authoritarian and permissive parenting would lead to directly and not indirectly aggressive children for these following reasons. The factors related to permissive parenting of difficulty in self-control and unsatisfactory peer relations and the factors related to authoritarian parenting of weak communication skills, hostility to peers and others, and low self-esteem are not independent from the factors of low verbal and social skills, loose social structure of peer groups and low social intelligence related to the use of direct aggression and the disuse of indirect aggression. Therefore, authoritarian and permissive parenting ought to be associated with the use of direct aggression and the disuse of indirect aggression. Again, social norms factors the relationship between parenting style and aggression type. The anti-social factors found in authoritarian parented children (e.g., hostility towards peers and others) and permissive parented children (e.g., low self-control and lack of respect for others) suggest that the children might not have internalized social norms. Because the lack internalized social norms is related to the use of direct aggression and the disuse of direct aggression, this further suggests a link between authoritarian and permissive parenting and the use of direct aggression and the disuse of indirect aggression. Additionally, authoritarian parenting and permissive parenting has been found to be directly linked to the use of physical aggression in children.

**Method**

**Participants**

Two-hundred and fifteen (age range = 15-34, *M* = 20.05) undergraduate female students of California State University, East Bay participated in the current study. The students were enrolled in an introductory psychology course who participated in order to fulfill the psychology course requirements of research credits. They registered in the experiment by signing their names onto a posted sign-up sheet. Among the participants were 34 Blacks or African Americans (16%), 31 Whites (14.6%), 58 Hispanics or Latinos (27.4%), 35 Asians (16.5%), 5 Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders (2.4%), 8 people of other ethnic origins (3.8%), and 41 people of more than one race (19.3%). There were 25 participants whose age was not identified and there were three participants whose ethnicity was not identified.

**Design**

The quantitative experiment was a non-experimental correlation study. Two sets of variables were analyzed by correlation with one another. One set of variables constituted parenting styles. This set consisted of the variables authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting, and permissive parenting. Authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting, and permissive parenting were measured based on subscale items from The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991). The other set of variables constituted aggression types. This set consisted of the variables direct aggression (both verbal and physical direct aggression) and indirect aggression. Direct aggression and indirect aggression were measured using the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Each variable of one set was analyzed in correlation with each variable in the other set.

**Materials**

The experimental materials consisted of 15 page paper packets containing 10 assessments, demographic questions, a debriefing statement, and a right-hand and left hand digits scan fill-in sheet. Only two of the 10 assessments were used in the present study. Again, the assessment used to measure direct aggression and indirect aggression was the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). The subscales consisted of 7 items for direct physical aggression, 5 items for direct verbal aggression, and 12 items for indirect aggression totaling to 24 items. For the purposes of the present study, direct physical aggression and direct verbal aggression scores were summed into a collective direct aggression form. This created an equal amount of items in both aggressions, direct and indirect. Indirect aggression was scored by the sum of the items in the indirect aggression scale. The items were evaluated by a five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). As scores ascended, more quantity of the particular aggression was frequented by the participants, whereas when scores descended, less quantity of the particular aggression was frequented by the participants. Again, the assessment used to measure parenting styles was The Parental Authority Questionaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991). The questionnaire consisted of three subscales: permissive style, authoritarian style, and authoritative style. Each of these subscales had 10 items. These 10 items were evaluated by a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The subscales were scored individually by the sum of all of the items in the particular subscale. A higher score on a particular subscale meant that more of that particular quality of parenting style was present in the parenting style of the participant’s parents. Lower scores on a particular subscales meant that less of that particular quality of parenting style was present in the parenting style of the participant’s parents.

**Procedure**

The research proposal was submitted to California State University, East Bay’s institutional review board and the institutional review board approved of the experiment. The experiment began with the researchers instructing the participants to enter into the experimenting room and to sit on a designated seat that had the experimental materials on the table. Participants were first told to read the consent forms. After they decided to participate in the experiment by signing the consent form, participants began to complete the experimental materials. In the experiment, all of the participants completed the same experimental materials. This is to say, that the experiment contained no random assignment to different conditions. All of the participants went through the same one condition.

When the participants completed the experimental materials, they were asked a few demographic questions. They stated there age, ethnicity, class standing, sexual orientation and current menstrual phase. Then, researchers took lives scans of each participant’s right and left hand to measure the digit ratio length between the second and fourth digit. These procedures, class standing, sexual orientation, current menstrual phase, and digit-ratio live scans were not examined in the present study. After, they were debriefed. At the end of the experiment, participants were told to leave their experimental materials on the table and to take the debriefing sheet. Then, they were dismissed.

**Results**

Pearson’s *r* correlation analyses were calculated to test the relationship between the set of parenting style variables of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles and the set of aggression type variables of direct aggression and indirect aggression. The findings of the six bivariate one-tailed correlations are as follows. Authoritative parenting had a near zero or no correlation with direct aggression, *r*(211) = -.02, but this was not statistically significant (*p* = .37). Authoritative parenting also had a near zero or no correlation with indirect aggression, *r*(211) = -.04, but this was also not statistically significant (*p* = .29). Authoritarian parenting was positively correlated with direct aggression, *r*(211) = .09. This result was not statistically significant, *p* = .11. Authoritarian parenting was positively correlated with indirect aggression, *r*(211) = .16. This result was statistically significant, *p* = .01. Permissive parenting had a near zero correlation with direct aggression *r*(210) = .25, *p* = .25. Permissive parenting was also at a near zero correlation with indirect aggression, *r*(210) = -.03, *p* = .31. Both of the correlative results for permissive parenting were not statistically significant.

Data from two participants was omitted from the data analysis of the correlations between authoritative parenting and authoritarian parenting with direct aggression and indirect aggression (creating a total of 213 participants whose data was analyzed among these correlations). Data from three participants was omitted from the data analysis of the correlations between permissive parenting with direct aggression and indirect aggression (creating a total of 212 participants whose data was analyzed among these correlations). The omissions were made because of blank answers being given on the assessment questions.

**Discussion**

Overall, the hypotheses of the study were not supported by the results of the study. It was predicted that authoritative parenting would yield a negative relationship to direct aggression and a positive relationship with indirect aggression. It was predicted that permissive parenting would yield a positive relationship to direct aggression and a negative relationship with indirect aggression. It was also predicted that authoritarian parenting would yield positive relationship with direct aggression. All of the correlative tests for these specific hypotheses yielded statistically insignificant results. Statistically insignificant results were contrary to the hypotheses that predicted a relationship between these variables of the two different sets of parenting style and aggression types. The lone statistically significant result that came from authoritarian parenting being positively correlated with indirect aggression was contrary to the hypothesis that authoritarian parenting would be negatively correlated with indirect aggression.

The major issue from the results of the study is that five out of the six bivariate correlations were found to be statistically insignificant. One might contend that with more participants statistically significant results would have emerged. This reasoning, however, is not entirely warranted. This is because authoritarian parenting’s positive relationship to indirect aggression was statistically significant at the *p* = .01 level. This is a rather robust finding. With this in mind, a possible corresponding interpretation of the statistically insignificant results would be that authoritative parenting and authoritarian parenting do not appear to be related to either type of aggression, both direct and indirect. Also, that permissive parenting does not appear to be related to direct aggression. This interpretation, however, is conflicting with the findings of previous research (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Especially, research that found direct associations between authoritarian parenting and permissive parenting with direct physical aggression (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Kawabata et al., 2011; Santrock, 2012; Steinberg, 2001). In sum, common associations between parenting style outcomes and factors of aggression types were not shown to produce associations between parenting styles and aggression types.

This leaves the academic community with the need for a deeper investigation. Researchers ought to investigate more and different associations that may lead to new hypotheses. This would bring more strength to the predictions made of the association or non-association between parenting style and aggression type. A weighing of factors may also create new hypotheses and stronger predictions. For example, given the findings of the present study, future research could investigate whether authoritative parenting and permissive parenting are related to the disuse of any type of aggression or peaceful methods of conflict resolution. Previous research has shown that authoritative parenting brings about less aggressive behavior in general and low aggression toward peers in children. Children of authoritative parenting engage in prosocial behaviors (Kawabata et al., 2011; Santrock, 2012; Steinberg, 2001). It appears, from the results of this study, that these factors outweigh the factors of social competence and better peer relations to produce an apparent non-association between authoritative parenting and direct and indirect aggression. Appropriately, future research ought to weigh different factors in their effects on the relationship between parenting style and aggression type to determine which factors are most influential in relationships between the two. From here, corresponding predictions can be made based on the levels of the factors present in the outcomes of a particular parented style of a person.

Another issue of results of the study was the implications of the finding that authoritarian parenting was positively correlated with indirect aggression at statistical significance. One reason why authoritarian parenting may be positively correlated with indirect aggression could be because the aggressiveness that authoritarian parenting brings about in children applies to not just physical aggression, but also indirect aggression even though children of authoritarian parents demonstrate weak social skills. In this view, social skills are not a requisite requirement for the occurrence of indirect aggression, although social skills are a requisite for successful indirect aggression. This throws into question the developmental theory of indirect aggression based upon the progressing of verbal and social skills (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). This issue could benefit from further investigation of factors related to both authoritarian parenting and indirect aggression. A suggestion for future research, with the above concern in mind, would be test for a regression between social skills, authoritarian parenting, and indirect aggression. This would help determine whether the factors of low social skills along with authoritarian parenting is related to indirect aggression. If so, this would bring further doubt to the developmental theory of indirect aggression as a function of progressing verbal and social skills.

The present study has a few limitations. As with all correlational studies, the results of the study could not be used to infer causation. This limited the study’s scope to results of associations. In turn, this affects the interpretation of the findings of this study. It could only be stated that there was a mere relation between the variables studied and nothing more. Known issues of the question of the directionality of the variables and possible third-variables come to limit the robustness of this correlational study as with all correlational studies.

Another limitation of the study was participant fatigue. The work-load of the experimental materials encompassing 10 different assessment may have caused participants to be exhausted, bored, or disinterested to the extent of producing an experimental confound. The assessments located in the later portions of the experimental packet might have been adversely affected by this. Future studies ought to keep the work-load of participants in their experimental materials to a degree that would not, in any case, bring about participant fatigue.

Even though participants of this study consisted of only female adults, this did not limit the generalizability or external validity of the results of the study. When it comes to parenting style, the outcomes of the investigated research of this study applied to both the male and female sexes (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Kawabata et al., 2011; Santrock, 2012; Steinberg, 2001). When it comes to aggression types, the factors of the investigated research of this study that lead to the use or disuse of the different aggression types also applied to both the male and female sexes (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Therefore, differences in the sexes did not matter in the present study.

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