

# Peer conflict stressor, coping strategies and aggressiveness: Relations between variables in children and adolescents

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## Introduction (1)

- One possible way of peer interaction in schools is **conflict**; which is a specific stressor, very common in children and adolescents (Causey & Dubow, 1992).
- Some authors (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Compas, Malcarne & Fondaro, 1988) consider that the study of specific stressors is essential, since environment factors, personal variables (specially the threat and control evaluations of a specific stressor) and the demands of the stressing situation can influence the use of different coping strategies for distinct stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

## Introduction (2)

- On the other hand, **agressiveness** is one of the most significant problems identified in schools, worldwide (Marsh, Parada, Yeung & Healey, 2001).
- Several longitudinal studies demonstrated that **aggressiveness** (in childhood and adolescence) is the best behavioural predictor of further psychological adjustment difficulties (eg.: Coie & Dodge, 1998; Crick, 1996; Olweus, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987).
- Some studies revealed that children and adolescents who present different degrees of aggressiveness also use distinct strategies to cope with interpersonal stressors, such as peer conflict (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Smith & Shu, 2000).

## Goals

- To study the differential characteristics of the subjects, regarding three variables: peer conflict stressor, coping strategies and aggressiveness.
- To analyze the role of coping strategies in the relation between peer conflict stressor and aggressiveness.

## Methodology (1)

- This study examined the relation between peer conflict and coping strategies, in **443 children and adolescents** (5th to 9th graders), from 22 classes, in 5 Portuguese public schools, spread out all over the country.
- It also compared **two groups**: children and adolescents, **with** (n=87) and **without** (n=97) **aggressive** behaviors, with respect to the previous variables.
- Data was collected using self-report questionnaires regarding **peer conflict stressor** (QAESSCEP, designed by the authors) and **coping strategies** (SCSI, Ryan-Wenger, 1990), and also through the nomination of the more and less aggressive pupils, by their peers (from the same class) and teachers (one by class), and respective hetero-report questionnaire of **aggressiveness** (QCA, designed by the authors).

## Methodology (2)

- **Peer conflict stressor** was analysed regarding its **frequency** and **intensity**.
- After factorial analyses four dimensions of **coping** were found: "**cognitive behavioral distractive**" strategies, "**acting out**" strategies, "**active**" strategies and "**social isolation**" strategies. Furthermore, coping strategies were measured regarding its **frequency** and **efficacy**.
- **Aggressiveness** was measured by **peers** and **teacher**, in each class, regarding their perception of **frequency** of aggressiveness of the **three more** and the **three less aggressive students**.

## Results (1)

- The study revealed **moderate levels** of peer conflict **stress** (frequency M=1.83, SD=.15; intensity M=2.49, SD=.11; composite result M=2.15, SD=1.24). Only 3.4% of the subjects revealed being stressed many times or almost always, although 22.6% revealed feeling a good deal or enormous stress with it.
- The study also revealed **moderate levels** of **aggressiveness** (total M=1.98, SD=1.42), in a 5 points Likert scale.
- **"Active" strategies** of coping were the **most used** (M=1.75, SD=2.51) and also considered as the **most efficient** (M=2.20, SD=2.27), by the students.
- **"Acting out" strategies** were the **less used** (M=.60, SD=2.45) and considered as the **less efficient** (M=.70, SD=2.62), by the students.

## Results (2)

**Table I.** Intercorrelations between study variables

	Stress	Coping Distractive	Coping Acting Out	Coping Active	Coping Social Isolation	Agressiveness Peers	Agressiveness Teachers
Stress	—	.27**	.16*	.16*	.33**	n.s.	.20*
Coping Distractive	—	—	n.s.	.38**	.21**	.19*	.22*
Coping Acting Out	—	—	—	n.s.	n.s.	.43**	.48**
Coping Activae	—	—	—	—	.29**	n.s.	n.s.
Coping Social Isolation	—	—	—	—	—	-.19*	n.s.
Peers Agressiveness	—	—	—	—	—	—	.87**
Teachers Agressiveness	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

\* p<.05    \*\* p<.01

## Results (3)

- **Positive correlations** were found between peer conflict **stressor** and **all dimensions of coping** strategies, especially distractive and social isolation strategies (non direct conflict resolution strategies).
- **Active, distractive** and **social isolation** strategies have **positive correlations** between them and **non significant correlations** with **acting out** strategies.
- Peer conflict **stressor correlates positively** with **teacher** reports of **aggressiveness**.
- **Acting out** and **distractive** strategies **positively correlate** with **teacher** and **peers** reports of **aggressiveness**.
- **Social isolation** strategies **negatively correlate** with **peers** reports of **aggressiveness**.
- **Teachers** and **peers** reports of **aggressiveness** are **highly correlated**.

## Results (4)

**Table II.** Gender differences regarding the study variables

	Mean (sd)		T	gl	p
	Boys	Girls			
Stress intensity	2.35 (.83)	2.61 (.77)	-3.463	440	<.001
Acting out strategies					
Frequency	.66 (.52)	.56 (.48)	2.020	428	<.044
Efficacy	.76 (.57)	.63 (.46)	2.506	424	<.013
Distractive strategies					
Frequency	1.35 (.62)	1.40 (.57)	ns	ns	ns
Efficacy	1.62 (.67)	1.76 (.61)	-2.266	425	<.024
Active strategies					
Frequency	1.55 (.61)	1.92 (.60)	-6.333	428	<.000
Efficacy	2.03 (.60)	2.35 (.50)	-6.124	425	<.000
Social isolation strategies					
Frequency	.73 (.50)	1.13 (.58)	-7.625	428	<.000
Efficacy	1.07 (.69)	1.60 (.67)	-7.974	425	<.000
Aggressiveness nomination					
Peers	2.37 (.71)	1.41 (.61)	8.339	129	<.000
Teachers	2.25 (.90)	1.40 (.72)	5.892	125	<.000

## Results (5)

- Differences by **gender** were found regarding the **three studied variables**.
- Girls revealed **more intense** levels of peer conflict **stressor**, used **more frequently "social isolation"** and **"active" strategies** of coping and considered them, as well as **"cognitive behavioral distractive" strategies**, **more efficient** than boys.
- **Boys** adopted **more frequently** and considered **"acting out"** strategies **more efficient**, and were nominated as **more aggressive** by their **peers** and **teachers** than girls.

## Results (6)

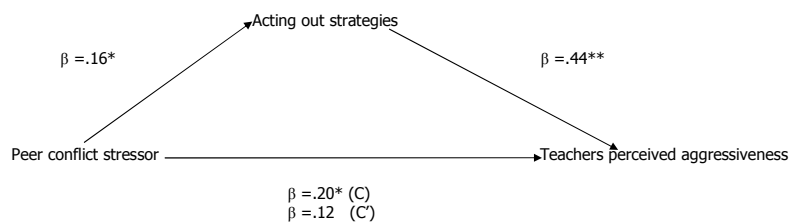
- The other socio demographic variables (age and SES) revealed less consistent relations with the study variables.
- Subjects between **9 and 12 years** old (frequency -  $M=.51$ ;  $SD=.46$ ; efficacy -  $M=.59$ ;  $SD=.47$ ) used **less frequently** ( $F(2,427)=7,805$ ;  $p<.000$ ) **"acting out"** strategies and considered them **less efficient** ( $F(2,423)=9,604$ ;  $p<.000$ ), than subjects between **13 and 14** (frequency -  $M=.67$ ;  $SD=.52$ ; efficacy -  $M=.73$ ;  $SD=.52$ ) and subjects between **15 and 17** years old (frequency -  $M=.75$ ;  $SD=.50$ ; efficacy -  $M=.91$ ;  $SD=.59$ ).
- Students from **middle-low SES** ( $M=1.89$ ;  $SD=.55$ ) presented **higher** levels of **peer conflict stressor frequency** ( $F(4,421)=3,031$ ;  $p<0,018$ ), than students from **middle-high SES** ( $M=1.54$ ;  $SD=.48$ ).

## Results (7)

- This study also allowed us to clarify the dysfunctional role of “acting out” strategies. As shown in figure I, acting out strategies totally mediated the relation between peer conflict stressor and teachers perceived aggressiveness.

## Results (8)

**Figure I.** Mediation effect of acting out strategies in the relation between peer conflict stressor and teachers perceived aggressiveness



\*\*  $p < .01$       \*  $p < .05$   
C = direct relation; C' = mediated relation

## Discussion (1)

- The results have shown that **peer conflict do not occur frequently**, but when it happens **provokes moderate stress**. This result is supported by Lazarus (1999), who said that minor life events generate moderate stress on subjects.
- Fortunately, **subjects use and also consider more efficient active coping strategies**, usually considered more functional.
- There were **positive correlations between all coping dimensions and stress**. Lazarus (1999) has explained that when we deal with a stressor we have to think, feel and act regarding several options, which can cause more stress, although we can also manage it efficiently.
- There was a **high correlation between aggressiveness perceived by peers and teachers**, which support the thesis that the combination of these two methodologies of evaluation is a better way to obtain clearer results (Dodge & Coie, 1987).

## Discussion (2)

- **Gender** differences regarding the intensity of the peer coping stressor, as well as frequency and perceived efficacy of the coping strategies, are supported by other studies (Lima et al., 2002; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Boys seem to use more externalised behaviors because they are socially more acceptable for them than for girls. On the other hand girls seem to use more direct and active strategies, as well as to isolate more in these situations; they use more internal resources than boys do (Lima, et al., 2002).
- The results regarding **age** can be explained by the fact that, in our sample, there were a significant level of pupils that have failed at least one year. Pereira (2002) also found that this fact is positively correlated with aggressiveness and the use of acting out coping strategies.

## Discussion (3)

- The results regarding **aggressiveness** are supported by other studies (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Pereira, 2002). These authors also found that **boys are more oftenly nominated as aggressive than girls**. Additionally our results support Bijttebier e Vertommen (1998) study regarding the positive associations found between the more externalised coping strategies and aggressiveness.
- On the other hand, the results didn't **support** other studies where **aggressiveness was higher in pre-adolescents** (e.g.: Bierman, et al., 1993; Hudley, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993).
- The **mediation effect** found allowed us to underline the **dysfunctional role of acting out strategies** in strengthening the prediction of aggressiveness when in the presence of a peer conflict stressor.

## Conclusions

- The present study supports the **need for the implementation of prevention and intervention programs in schools**. In the evaluation of such programs it is important to analyse not only the decrease of aggressive behaviors, but also the prevention of new aggressive behaviors that didn't exist before (Pereira, 2002).
- In **future studies** it is important to analyse, not only the frequency of **aggressive behaviors**, but also their **intensity**, since one aggression can occur only sporadically, but be extremely intense and have a huge impact on the victim.

Thank you for your attention!

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