

Relational Aggression and Prosocial Behaviors in Latino Children's Sibling Relationships

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Abstract

We examined Latino children's aggressive and prosocial behaviors during sibling interactions in semistructured play situations, compared to interactions observed among Anglo siblings. Ethnicity and gender both made a difference in levels of aggression and prosocial behavior by sibling dyads, though some of the differences were not in the predicted directions. Aggression and prosocial behavior were related to each other in distinctly different ways for Latino and Anglo sibling pairs.

Introduction

Research conducted on Latino children's family relationships is limited, despite the fact that the Latino population is the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Existing research has suggested some cultural themes that differentiate Latino families from Anglo families, including the importance of family, religion, and gender roles, especially within the family. Previous studies have found that Latino parents emphasize prescribed family and community roles for their children, while downplaying individual goals and self-determination. Surprisingly, no previous research has investigated how these factors might be reflected in Latino children's sibling interactions.

We examined:

- Latino children's aggressive and prosocial behaviors during sibling interactions in semistructured play situations, compared to interactions observed among Anglo siblings, and connections among aggressive and prosocial behavior rates for each group of sibling dyads.

Based on experience with Latino children and the limited existing research, we hypothesized that:

- Latino sibling pairs would show higher rates of prosocial behavior and lower rates of aggression than comparable groups of Anglo sibling pairs;
- the gender composition of sibling pairs would make a difference in the children's behavior, although perhaps in different ways for Latino and Anglo children; and
- patterns of connection among aggressive and prosocial behaviors would differ for the two groups of children, due to cultural differences in the meaning of those behaviors in the context of sibling relationships.

Method

Participants

A total of 25 Latino middle- and lower-class families from the Rochester, NY, and New York City areas participated in the study. The researchers recruited participants through social networks such as Latino community groups and church groups located in these areas. The sibling pairs were about even in terms of gender pairing (same sex = 12, mixed sex = 13), although the sample varied with regard to age (younger siblings $M = 70.96$ months, range 33-108 months; older siblings $M = 103.28$ months, range 72-194 months), ethnicity (Dominican and Puerto Rican), and acculturation status (from recent immigrants to third generation in the United States). All families received a gift card as a token of gratitude for their participation. The study also included a comparison group of 45 Anglo sibling pairs, of roughly similar age and gender composition, for whom data had previously been collected, using the same materials and procedure.

Procedure

We videotaped the sibling pairs playing in a familiar setting, usually at home, in a location with sufficient play space. Each pair participated in a 30-minute session that included a 10-minute construction task, a 10-minute board game session, and a 10-minute free play session with a wooden train set provided by the researchers. For the purposes of the current study, we analyzed only the free play sessions. After the video footage was transcribed, the behavior of each sibling pair was coded for **physical**, **verbal**, and **relational aggression** (behaviors intended to hurt or bother the partner) and **prosocial behaviors** (behaviors intended to benefit the partner). **Social engagement** was coded at 10-second intervals. For the purposes of the present analysis, social engagement was collapsed into three categories: engaged (partners mutually participating in the activity or engaged with each other), semi-engaged (one partner watching or trying to engage the other), and unengaged (partners not socially engaged with each other).

Analysis

To examine the extent to which the sibling pairs' aggressive and prosocial behaviors varied in the free play task, we conducted 2 (ethnicity: Latino, Anglo) X 4 (gender composition: brother/brother, sister/sister, older brother/younger sister, older sister/younger brother) repeated measures MANOVAs, with rates of aggression and prosocial behavior as the dependent variables. To examine connections between aggression and prosocial behavior, bivariate correlations among rates of prosocial behavior and the three types of aggression were conducted separately for the Latino and Anglo children.

Figure 1. Latino and Anglo Sibling Relational Aggression

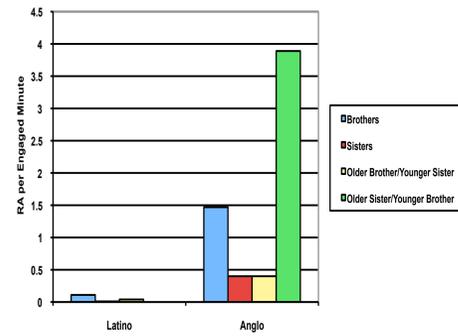


Figure 2. Latino and Anglo Sibling Verbal Aggression

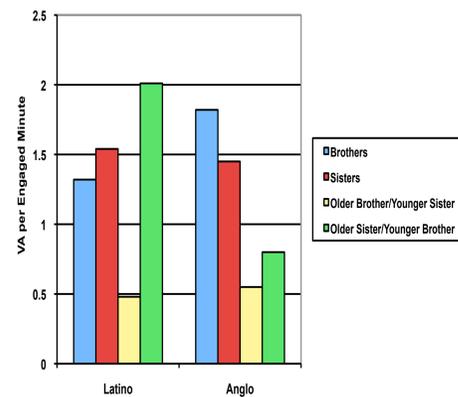


Figure 3. Latino and Anglo Sibling Physical Aggression

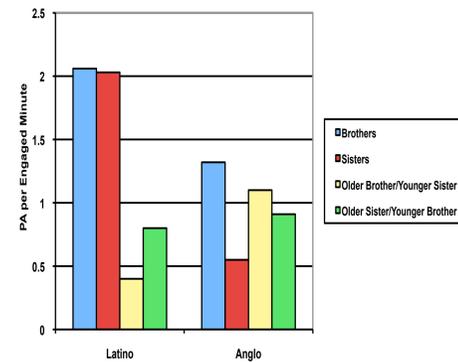


Figure 4. Latino and Anglo Sibling Prosocial Behavior

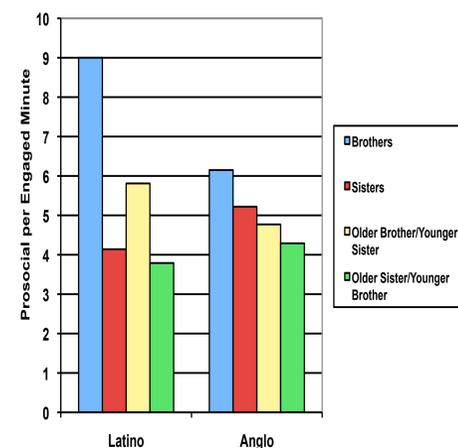


Table 1. Correlations among aggression and prosocial behavior for Latino and Anglo sibling dyads

	Relational Aggression	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression	Prosocial Behavior
Relational Aggression		.46*	.24	.08
Verbal Aggression	.28		.48*	.05
Physical Aggression	.55**	.58**		.03
Prosocial Behavior	-.26	-.35*	-.28	

Anglo

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

Results

Rates of Aggression and Prosocial Behavior

Contrary to expectations, we did not find ethnic differences in overall rates of aggression or prosocial behavior. However, we found a number of ethnic differences for specific types of aggression and particular gender compositions:

- Most notably, Latino sibling dyads used practically no relational aggression; in contrast, Anglo sibling dyads used it extensively. The contrast was especially extreme for older sister/younger brother dyads. Anglo dyads in this category used relational aggression (primarily intentional ignoring) more than any other form of aggression, whereas the corresponding Latino dyads did not use it at all.

- Although there was no overall ethnic difference in use of verbal aggression, Latino older sister/younger brother dyads used much more verbal aggression than Anglo older sister/younger brother pairs.

- Same-sex Latino sibling pairs used more physical aggression than same-sex Anglo pairs, but the reverse was true for older brother/younger sister dyads.

- There was an overall marginal gender composition effect for prosocial behavior ($p = .064$), with pairs of brothers showing more prosocial behavior than other sibling dyads. In addition, Latino brother pairs showed higher rates of prosocial behavior than Anglo brother pairs.

As shown in Table 1, the connections between aggression and prosocial behavior were notably different for Latino and Anglo sibling pairs:

- For Latino dyads, verbal aggression was positively correlated with relational and physical aggression, but aggression and prosocial behavior were essentially unrelated.
- In contrast, for Anglo dyads, physical aggression was positively correlated with verbal and relational aggression, and prosocial behavior was negatively correlated with all three types of aggression.

Discussion

Ethnicity and gender seem to play more complex roles in siblings' aggression and prosocial behavior than we had anticipated. Cultural factors can be used to explain some of the differences that we found. For example, Latino emphasis on the importance of family relationships may explain the extreme contrast between Latino and Anglo sibling pairs' use of relational aggression; ignoring or embarrassing a sibling, especially in front of a non-family member, may simply not be acceptable in Latino families. The relatively high use of verbal aggression in Latino older sister/younger brother pairs may reflect culture-specific standards for appropriate behavior between big sisters and little brothers; physical and relational aggression may be less approved options for those sibling pairs.

The differing patterns of correlations among aggression and prosocial behavior also suggest cultural differences. Aggression and prosocial behavior seem to be more or less independent for Latino sibling pairs, whereas they appear to operate in opposition to each other for Anglo pairs. In addition, verbal aggression seems to play a more central role for Latino siblings, while physical aggression is more central for Anglo siblings.

Two limitations of our study are sample size and heterogeneity in age and nationality in our Latino sample. In addition, some important gender and ethnic differences may not be apparent in the dyad-level data used in the present analyses. As we continue to add to our sample, we anticipate being able to control more adequately for age and nationality. We also intend to re-analyze our data at the individual level, which will allow us to distinguish individual aggressive behavior within dyads by, for example, older sisters and younger brothers.

