Reduced Ratings of Physical and Relational Aggression for Youths With a Strong Cultural Identity: Evidence From the Naskapi People


A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Minority youth in general, and Aboriginal youth in particular, are at increased statistical risk for being perpetrators or victims of aggression.

Methods: We examined the potential protective aspect of cultural identity in relation to peer ratings of physical and relational aggression and factors typically associated with each among almost the entire cohort of Naskapi youths from Kawawachikamach, Québec.

Results: Hierarchical multiple regressions revealed that a strong identity with their own Native culture predicted less perceived physical and social aggression by their peers.

Conclusion: These findings are discussed in the context of the role of a positive affiliation with ancestral culture for the diminishment of adolescent aggression and for general adaptive development and well-being.

The behaviors and deleterious effects associated with adolescent aggression and victimization often persist and are even exacerbated well into adulthood [1]. These long-term outcomes reflect enduring challenges to communities in which adolescent aggression is common and leaves the perpetrators and victims, and their communities at large, at considerable risk. Accordingly, the elevated rates of both victims and perpetrators of aggressive acts among minority groups in North America [2] may contribute to the enduring social concerns that are faced by some of these communities. In the United States, the increased risk associated with aggression is especially evident among American Indian students who are at particular statistical risk for victimization with rates two times higher than for black students, 2.5 times higher than for white students, and 4.5 times higher than for Asian/Pacific Islander students [3]. Although victimization rates are not entirely commensurate with the rates of aggressive behaviors for members of a specific community, these findings highlight the need to consider factors that are both associated with and protective against aggression among Aboriginal youths in the United States and elsewhere [4].

Aggression has traditionally been studied as an individual factor by measuring constructs such as temperament, attachment style, and gender. As Aboriginal youth are at significantly greater risk for aggression, this project was construed as an initial attempt to examine the role of cultural identity as protective against the occurrence of aggressive behaviors. In particular, we focused on the connectedness to one’s particular Aboriginal culture in relation to physical and relational aggression. Both physical and relational aggressions involve behaviors that harm another, but the harm is accomplished by different means [5]. Physical or overt aggression is a primarily physical method of inflicting harm on another, such as with shoving, kicking, or spitting, but can also include the threat of physical violence. In contrast, relational aggression or covert aggression, is accomplished by threatening another’s friendships or social status in a group by means such as spreading rumors, instructing others to...
exclude a peer from an activity, or “giving the silent treatment” to a peer.

In a review of studies of the relations between acculturation and interpersonal and self-directed violence among adolescents from minority groups in the United States, Smokowski et al [6] identified a link between assimilation and youth violence, as violence was most prevalent among youths who were disconnected from their culture. This finding is consistent with evidence that acculturation is a risk factor for aggression [2] and that strong ethnic identity is a protective factor [7]. Among the various groups, Smokowski et al [6] found that American Indian and Alaskan Native adolescents were at higher statistical risk for various types of aggression when compared with other minority groups. We extended this work by studying cultural identity in relation to both physical and relational aggression among almost an entire cohort of adolescents from a single North American Aboriginal community, the Naskapi from Kawawachikamach, Quebec.

The Naskapi community lived a nomadic lifestyle in a Northern Québec region for centuries and resisted settlement until the past half century [8]. However, after a series of treaties and forced settlements, most of the members moved to the Kawawachikamach reserve that is administered by the band’s council. The reserve is relatively isolated, and members continue, to varying degrees, to participate in their traditional Aboriginal activities such as hunting and fishing. The closest town, Schefferville, is approximately 20 minutes away by car, but more populated centers are accessible only by air or rail. Virtually all the children are educated in the school on the reserve in the Naskapi language until the third grade, and then primarily in English for the higher grades. Although the history of this community reflects considerable adaptation (Orchard, 1998, unpublished thesis), the educators of the community initiated the idea of this project to identify contributors to the educational, social, behavioral, and emotional well-being of their high school students. To ensure the integrity of this project, educators and a leading member of the band council approved the measures as relevant to and appropriate for the community’s youths.

Our delineation between physical and relational aggression is based on Card et al’s [9] distinction between direct types of aggression (e.g., hitting), which are more common among males and are associated with low prosocial behavior, externalizing behaviors (e.g., acting out in class), and difficulties negotiating peer relationships, and indirect types of aggression (e.g., gossiping), which are more prevalent among females, and are associated with internalizing behaviors, such as depression and anxiety, and surprisingly, with good prosocial skills. We included information from multiple perspectives as the measures of aggression and prosocial skills were completed by peers, the measures of peer social skills and externalizing behaviors were completed by teachers, and the measures of internalizing behaviors and cultural identity were completed by the students themselves. Our primary hypothesis was that a strong cultural identity would predict less perceived physical and relational aggression.

Method

Participants

The data of 65 students of the approximately 80 students enrolled in grades between 6 and 11 in the Jimmy Sandy Memo-
include *Often I feel sick to my stomach and I worry a lot of the time.* This instrument includes a built-in lie scale to control for socially desirable responses. Acceptable reliability and validity were reported for this measure [11].

**Peer ratings: physical aggression, relational aggression, and prosocial behavior.** Peer ratings of physical and relational aggression and prosocial behavior were used on the basis of a method substantiated by Crick [12]. Individual levels of acceptance among the peer group were assessed generally via the nomination method of sociometric assessment [13–15], of which the physical aggression, relational aggression, and prosocial behavior scales are reported in the present study. The **physical aggression scale** is composed of the items “classmates who hit, kick, or punch others at school,” “kids who push and shove others around,” and “kids who tell others that they will beat them up unless kids do what they say.” The **relational aggression scale** consists of the items “kids who try to make another kid not like a certain person by spreading rumors about them or talking behind their backs,” “kids, who when they are mad at a person, get even by keeping that person from being in their group of friends,” “people who, when they are mad at a person, ignore the person or stop talking to them,” “kids who let their friends know that they will stop liking them unless the friends do what they want them to do,” and “people who try to exclude or keep certain people from being in their group when doing things together.” The **pronsocial behavior scale** consists of the items “people who say or do nice things for other classmates,” “kids who help others join a group or make friends,” and “people who try to cheer up other classmates who are upset or sad about something.”

The individuals were listed alphabetically on the nomination forms and were grouped according to grade. Because of the small number of adolescents in the upper secondary grades, the nomination forms were grouped individually for grades 6, 7, and 8, but together for grades 9, 10, and 11. On the nomination forms for their grade level, the participants were asked to identify peers for each of the items. The total number of nominations for the items were summed separately and then standardized (using z-scores) within each grade (with grades 9, 10, and 11 grouped as one grade level) to obtain each participant’s level of perceived physical aggression, relational aggression, and prosocial behavior.

**Teacher ratings: externalizing behavior and peer social skills.** Teacher ratings of externalizing behavior and peer social skills were obtained with the Teacher-Child Rating Scale [16] that was completed for each child by the two teachers who spent the most instructional hours with the child’s grade level. The Teacher-Child Rating Scale is a 38-item scale that is used to assess three indices of behaviors for the domains of (a) Problems (Acting Out, Shy-Anxious, and Learning) and (b) Adjustment (Frustration Tolerance, Assertive Social Skills, Task Orientation, and Peer Social Skills). Acceptable psychometric properties were reported for this measure [14]. For the purposes of this study, the Acting Out subscale was used to measure externalizing behaviors and the Peer Social Skills subscale was used to assess skills in peer relationships.

**Procedure.**

A team of research assistants visited the school every day for 1 week. The participants completed the questionnaires in a classroom with their peers over a period of 2–4 days, with one to three sessions a day depending on the class schedule. The questionnaires were read aloud by research assistants to avoid confounds associated with reading level. In accordance with a community-based research approach, local educators provided input throughout to ensure that the project met the specific research needs of the community and to delineate developmentally and culturally appropriate measures. Each construct that was measured was discussed in turn and the ethical considerations and possible ramifications were explored in-depth with school administrators. A school psychologist was available to debrief students and to take proper action if a student presented with a risk of suicide on the Children’s Depression Inventory.

**Results.**

**Correlations.**

The correlations among cultural identity (M = 40.09, SD = 5.28), physical aggression (M = 7.37, SD = 9.53), and relational aggression (M = 13.68, SD = 11.24), and the factors associated with them, including gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age, prosocial skills, peer social skills, externalizing (acting out in class), and internalizing behaviors (depression and anxiety) are presented in Table 1.

Two-tailed Pearson Product Moment Correlations were performed. Cultural identity was negatively related to both physical and relational aggression, as higher levels of cultural identity were associated with lower levels of both types of perceived aggression. Cultural identity was also positively associated with age.

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**Table 1**

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<td>.39**</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>–.39**</td>
<td>–.10</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>–.41**</td>
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*p < .05; **p < .01.
Each predictor adds is denoted by a criterion. The incremental change in the predicted variance that each predictor adds is denoted by \( \Delta R^2 \). Acting out in class (externalizing behavior) was positively associated with both physical and relational aggression but negatively associated with peer social skills. Prosocial skills were negatively associated with physical aggression and with acting out but were positively related to gender with female adolescents being rated by their teachers as having better prosocial skills than male adolescents.

A positive relation between prosocial skills and peer social skills was also significant and points to agreement between teacher and peer ratings of these constructs. Depressive symptomatology was more commonly reported by the female adolescents and was negatively related to peer social skills. Anxiety was also negatively related to peer social skills but positively related to depression.

**Hierarchical multiple regressions**

In accordance with previous research on protective factors (e.g., in [17,18]), hierarchical multiple regressions were used to examine the effect of cultural identity on two types of perceived aggression in a specific sample of at-risk youths. Two sets of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to test the affilations between aggression type, factors typically associated with it, and cultural identity. Hierarchical multiple regressions account for the intercorrelations among the predictors and indexes each predictor’s unique contribution to explaining the variability within the criterion [17].

An ordered series of predictors was regressed on to each of physical and relational aggression. In accordance with Tabachnick and Fidell’s [20] suggestion for an appropriate participant-to-variable ratio, approximately eight participants per independent variable were included. Cohen and Cohen [19] suggested entering predictors with “fixed” levels (such as gender) before predictors that are subject to environmental influences (such as socio-economic status). Predictors were entered in six steps that differed depending on the type of aggression being examined. For physical aggression, gender and age were entered first (steps 1 and 2) followed by acting out (step 3), peer social skills (step 4), prosocial skills (step 5), and cultural identity (step 6). For relational aggression, gender and age were entered first (steps 1 and 2) followed by depression (step 3), anxiety (step 4), prosocial skills (step 5), and cultural identity (step 6). Steps 1 through 6 were used to test the main effects of each predictor on the criterion. The incremental change in the predicted variance that each predictor adds is denoted by \( \Delta R^2 \). The criterion for significance is \( p < .05 \).

**Physical aggression**. The results of the regressions on physical aggression are presented in Table 2. The entire regression model was significant and explained 45% of the variability within physical aggression. Gender was a significant predictor, explaining 20% of the variability with male adolescents reported as more physically aggressive than female adolescents. Acting out in class explained an additional 14% of the reported physical aggression with more externalizing behaviors being associated with higher levels of physical aggression. Finally, a strong cultural identity was also a significant contributor and accounted for 7% of the variability in physical aggression. Thus, in accordance with previous research on direct aggression, gender (males) and externalizing behaviors predict higher levels of physical aggression. Further, a strong Naskapi identity predicted lower levels of reported physical aggression among Aboriginal youths.

**Relational aggression**. The results of the regressions on relational aggression are presented in Table 3. The entire regression model (at step 6) was significant and explained 29% of the variability within relational aggression. However, the only unique contribution to the explanation was from cultural identity and it explained 17% of the reported cases of relational aggression, as again a stronger affiliation with Naskapi culture was associated with fewer reports of relational aggression. Thus, the model predicting relational aggression supported by Card et al [9] was not replicated in the present study, thereby highlighting the uniqueness of this group of youths.

**Discussion**

The increased statistical risk for acts of aggression among many groups of minority youths in North America suggest that tension between one’s ancestral culture and the majority culture may be related to the development of aggressive behavior [6]. This may be particularly exacerbated among Aboriginal students who both display and are victims of aggressive behaviors at rates considerably higher than those of other minority groups in the United States [3]. To begin the process of understanding the development of aggression among Aboriginal North American communities, we examined factors associated with physical and relational aggression in relation to adolescents’ self-reported cultural identity among almost the entire population of adolescents from a small Aboriginal community in Northern Québec.

Our primary finding was that the Naskapi adolescents who scored higher on their preference for their native culture were perceived as less physically and relationally aggressive, thereby highlighting that a strong cultural identity may be protective against both physical and relational aggression. Two hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test the main effects of six independent variables, including cultural identity and five others associated with each of relational and physical aggression. Gender and age were entered in the first two steps for both regressions.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and predictor</th>
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<th>F</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
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<td>.20</td>
<td>.20***</td>
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<td>7.35**</td>
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<td>3. Acting out</td>
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<td>9.67***</td>
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<td>.14***</td>
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<td>4. Social skills</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>7.29***</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>5. Prosocial skills</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>5.93***</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>6. Cultural identity</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>6.32***</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.07*</td>
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* \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \).

### Table 3

<table>
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<th>Step and predictor</th>
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<th>( R^2 )</th>
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<td>.29</td>
<td>.17**</td>
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* \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \).
sions, whereas steps 3–5 differed by type of aggression. For physical aggression, prosocial skills, externalizing behaviors, and peer social skills were entered next; and for relational aggression, prosocial skills, depression, and anxiety were entered next for relational aggression. Cultural identity was entered at step 6 for both. For both models, cultural identity was a significant contributor to the model. In addition, for the physical aggression model, both gender and externalizing behaviors were also strong predictors as more males received higher ratings on the peer nomination measure of physical aggression and higher teacher ratings of externalizing behavior predicted higher physical aggression ratings from peers.

The association between cultural identity and decreased levels of both perceived physical and relational aggression is consistent with Chandler and Lalonde’s [21] notion of cultural continuity, a collective identification with cultural traditions and practices, as a protective factor among Aboriginal youths. In support of their position, Chandler and Lalonde highlighted evidence that the suicide rates among Aboriginal youths in British Columbia were dramatically lower in communities which participated in certain practices that reflect a collective effort to promote and preserve cultural continuity. Although it was impossible to establish the causal relation, efforts at the community level to preserve cultural identity appeared to translate to adaptive development at the individual level. Thus, Chandler and Lalonde’s emphasis on the interface between personal and cultural change for understanding the decreased risk for suicide is also essential to other aspects of adolescent well-being, including diminished rates of aggression.

The findings from this study support Chandler and Lalonde’s notion with evidence of an adaptive link between cultural continuity and diminished reports of physical and relational aggression in a single Aboriginal community. Although they may not be relevant to all other, or even some other Aboriginal communities, these findings broaden the conceptualization of the protective nature of affiliation to one’s own ancestral culture. This issue may be seen as particularly essential for Aboriginal adolescents in North America who see the integrity of their culture, and therefore their understanding of self and identity, under constant assault by pervasive caricatures and negative stereotyping in the majority culture [22]. Thus, the protective aspects of the Naskapi adolescents’ association with their own Native culture with regard to aggressive behaviors is a clear reminder to the essential role of positive cultural identity in the development of adolescent well-being.

Acknowledgments

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References