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ABSTRACT

Several hypotheses have been generated about the functions of mock aggression, including its association with dominance. This paper describes a study that expanded this line of research by interviewing college students about a broad array of mock aggressive behaviors and their contexts, targets, benefits, and functions. The hypotheses were that: (1) mock aggression is a common, valued, form of social interaction; (2) there is a range of mock aggression across a variety of contexts and targets; (3) there are few consistent gender differences in mock aggression; (4) there would be positive reports regarding experiences with mock aggression; and (5) there would be reports of immediate- and long-term benefits of mock aggression. College students (N=109; 79 females, 30 males) were interviewed about the types, rates, targets, contexts, benefits, and functions of mock aggression. The results support the hypothesis that mock aggression is common and a positive part of the daily lives of late adolescents/young adults. There were no gender differences in the use of mock aggression, although it was related to decreased aggression in males but not females. Mock aggression has similar functions for them as for children. However, the young adults reported outcomes (e.g., sex, stress relief) not seen among children. The paper concludes that mock aggression is an important social behavior and that it varies across developmental contexts across the lifespan. (Contains 24 references and 1 table.) (JDM)

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Tickling, Punching, and Poking:
Mock Aggressive Behavior in College Students

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Paper based on a poster presented at APA, August 2000, Washington, DC

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Abstract

We examined mock aggression among college students (N = 109 - 79 females; 30 males), using an interview that elicited information about the types, rates, targets, contexts, benefits, and functions of mock aggression. Our hypothesis that mock aggression would be a common and positive part of the daily lives of our late adolescent/young adult sample was supported. College students often use mock aggression in interacting with friends and loved ones across contexts. There were no gender differences in use of mock aggression, although its was related to decreased aggression among males, but not females. According to our participants, mock aggression has similar functions for them (e.g., motor skills, affiliation), as for children. However, they reported outcomes (e.g., sex, stress relief) not seen among children. We suggest that mock aggression is an important social behavior into adulthood and that it varies across developmental contexts across the lifespan.

Tickling, Punching, and Poking:
Mock Aggressive Behavior in College Students

Mock aggression appears aggressive, but lacks intent to harm. Mock aggression occurs in nearly all species. Common mock aggressive behaviors include wrestling, play-fighting, chasing, and tickling. Cues such as play face, role-reversal, restraint, self-handicapping, vocalizations, expressions, posture, targets, and intensity aid in distinguishing between mock and serious aggression (Aldis, 1975; Fry, 1990; Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Smith & Boulton, 1990). Mock aggression, in the form of rough-and-tumble play, has been examined in children and young adolescents, but not adults.. We investigated mock aggression among college students

Mock aggression follows an inverted, U-shaped curve across development among most species (e.g., Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Pellis & Pellis, 1997. However, the dearth of research on adults may underestimate the use of mock aggression in contexts such as parenting or mating. Likewise, while much of the literature indicates that males display more mock aggression (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), gender differences in mock aggression vary across development and species and are more robust under some contexts than others; no consistent gender differences emerge (Boulton, 1996; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Thor & Holloway, 1984).

Several hypotheses have been generated about the functions of mock aggression, including that it is associated with dominance. However, among children mock aggression only plays a role in the development of dominance hierarchies among adolescent boys and is more important to affiliation (Boulton, 1990; 1996; Fry, 1990; Pellegrini, 1995; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Among adolescents and adults mock aggression might be related to the sexual development, but this has not been explored in humans (Pellis & McKenna, 1992). Mock aggression develops motor skills and may develop fighting skills (Aldis, 1975). Finally, use of mock aggression is related to social problem-solving among males and may teach children how to encode and decode social signals (e.g., Bjorklund & Brown, 1998; Pellegrini, 1992; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).

Statement of Problem

Mock aggression has been studied primarily among children in the context of rough-and-tumble play on the playground. We expanded this line of research by interviewing college students about a broad array of mock aggressive behaviors and their contexts, targets, benefits, and functions. We expected to find: (a) mock aggression is a common, valued, form of social

interaction, (b) a range of mock aggression across a variety of contexts (e.g., home, work, sports) and targets (e.g., lover, friends, family), (c) few consistent gender differences in mock aggression, (d) positive reports regarding experiences with mock aggression, and (e) reports of immediate and long-term benefits of mock aggression.

Method

Participants included 109 (79 female; 30 male) college students (mean age = 21.37). The upper-middle class sample was representative of the campus population: White (90.8%); Black (4.6%); Native American (2.8%); Hispanic (0.9%); and Asian-American (0.9%). Most were heterosexual (98%) and in a romantic relationship (78%).

Participants completed a consent, a demographic form, a measure of aggressive and assertive behavior, and a 45-min mock aggression interview. Female RAs interviewed participants individually. Participants were asked to recall each type of mock aggression they had used over the past mo. Next they were given a list of mock aggressive behaviors to cue recall and asked to describe other mock aggression they had used over the past mo. They reported the frequency, targets, contexts, and outcomes of each behavior. Other items assessed behavioral traits, skills, benefits, and negative effects related to mock aggression. Participants were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

As expected, mock aggression was prevalent. Participants had engaged in many ($\underline{X}$ = 7.6 types; range = 1-22; $\underline{SD}$ = 3.9) mock aggressive behaviors and had done so often ($\underline{X}$ = 80.6 events; range 1-621; $\underline{SD}$ = 96.6; see Table 1 for specific statistics). Tickling, pretend fighting, bear hugs, wrestling, and arm punches were most common.

Participants viewed mock aggression as an important part of relationships with teammates (87%), romantic partners (77%), friends (73%), family (59%), and co-workers (36%). Friends, romantic partners, and family members were common targets of mock aggression (see Figure 1). Less familiar targets are less likely to have mock aggression directed toward them. Targets and contexts vary together and with regard to the daily activities of the sample. Mock aggression most often occurred socially, at home, and in romantic contexts (see Figure 2), the contexts in which one is most likely to interact with common targets. Other contexts for mock aggression (e.g., sports and work) are related to the rate of mock aggression aimed at teammates and co-workers.

Participants viewed mock aggression positively. Bouts of mock aggression were likely to be initiated either partner and most experienced positive affect (91%) and stayed together after the bout (96%; mock aggression was also used in parting). Some (2%) participants volunteered that sex resulted from a bout of mock aggression. We did not directly assess sex as an outcome, so the actual proportion of bouts ending in sex may be higher. Consistent with the literature (Boulton, 1991a; Fry, 1990), positive facial expressions (see Figure 3) and vocalizations (see Figure 4) were more common than negative ones. Smiling and play face were the most commonly reported facial expressions. Only a few participants reported negative facial expressions during mock aggressive exchanges. Laughing and teasing were cited as the most common vocalizations.

Participants credited mock aggression as fostering the development of social skills (49%), social cues (12%), stress relief (10%), communication skills (7%), and flirting skills (1%). Some cited development of motor skills (9%) or fighting skills (12%) as a benefit of mock aggression. Participants reported several social benefits of mock aggression, including affiliation (22%), icebreaker (10%), social skills (3%), dominance (2%), and sex (1%). Mood control was seen as a primary benefit, both in terms of enhancing positive moods (e.g., fun - 26%; positive emotion - 8%) and relieving negative moods (e.g., stress - 21%; anger and aggression - 7%).

Most participants report that mock aggression does not usually lead to injury (69%) or serious aggression (84%) and many (37%) report that mock aggression has no negative effects. Negative emotion (26%), injury (24%), increased aggression (8%), being perceived as aggressive (3%), and dislike of touch (1%) were listed as negative outcomes. Similarly, participants reported primarily positive outcomes for the target of their mock aggression (see Figure 5).

Some of our findings run counter to conventional wisdom on mock aggression. Most participants reported that their rate of mock aggression had increased (46.8%) or remained stable (12.8%) over the years, rather than decreasing in late childhood (40.4%), as reported in the literature (e.g., Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Also in contrast with the literature (e.g., Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), we found no gender differences in rates or types of mock aggression. But, aggression and assertiveness was correlated with mock aggression for males, but not females. with the number of types of mock aggression displayed. Males who display more mock aggression may be more assertive ($r = .37$; $p < .05$) and less aggressive ($r = -.50$, $p < .01$) than males who engage in less mock aggression.

Discussion

In sum, our hypotheses were supported. Mock aggression is a common, positive, and important aspect of the daily lives of our participants in their interactions with friends and loved ones. Our participants report that mock aggression has similar functions for adults as children (e.g., development of social, motor, and cognitive skills; affiliation), as well as outcomes and benefits (e.g., sex, stress relief) that have not been previously reported or examined. Our participants viewed mock aggression as more importantly related to the development of social skills and social cognition than the development of motor skills. In addition, our participants viewed mock aggression as a positive way to relieve negative affect, such as stress, anger, and feelings of aggression. This was supported by findings that males with higher levels of mock aggression had lower levels of overt aggression. Stress relief as a benefit of mock aggression has not been examined extensively and is a promising direction for research.

We suggest that rather than a U-shaped developmental pattern that becomes static after adolescence, mock aggression fluctuates across developmental contexts throughout the lifespan. Contexts such as a new romance, playing sports, or parenthood are likely to be related to higher levels of mock aggression (e.g., Aldis, 1975; Ballard, 1998; 1999; McDonald & Park, 1986).

Participants identified several factors related to changes in levels of mock aggression over time. Participants who reported increased mock aggression saw these increases as related to improved social skills, decreased shyness, an increased number of friends, interest in flirting, or being involved in a romantic relationship. Those who reported decreases in mock aggression over time viewed these decreases as related to emotional maturation, learning new ways to interact, physical maturation (increases in size/strength in males; increases in breast size in females), and separation from mock aggressive partners (often family members, especially brothers).

The primary weakness of this study rests in the self-report measure used. Participants may have over- or under-estimated their level of mock aggression. Thus, observational studies of mock aggression should be extended beyond adolescence and into adulthood in sports and social settings, including work. However, some important uses of mock aggression, such as that used by couples in the home to increase intimacy or initiate sex, may be tapped via the use of self-report measures. These methods should be utilized to continue to obtain information about the developmental and contextual factors related to the use of mock aggression among adults.

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Table 1
Mock Aggressive Behaviors, Number and Percent of Subjects Displaying Mock Aggressive Behaviors, and Number of Events for Each Mock Aggressive Behavior

Behavior	Number of Subjects	Percent of Subjects	Number of Events
Tickle	79	73%	910
Pretend Fight	77	71	1004
Bear Hug	58	53	698
Wrestle	52	48	442
Arm Punch	48	44	580
High 5/10	45	41	1074
Giving the Finger	41	38	543
Finger Jabs/Poking	41	38	519
Butt Slap	33	30	726
Chase	30	28	150
Back Slap	29	27	211
Pillow Fight	29	27	83
Body Flex	23	21	119
Pretend Slap	20	18	146
Body Slam	20	18	70
Pretend to Throw Object	17	16	145
Point Finger Like Gun	16	15	265
Throw Object	15	14	112
Splashing	13	12	36
Growling	12	11	197
Biting	12	11	158
Pinning	12	11	66
Overly Firm Handshake	11	10	45
Knuckle-to-Knuckle Hit	10	9	90
Scratching	8	7	73
Spanking	8	7	38
Noogie/Muss Hair	7	6	84
Tackle/Sweep	7	6	59
Bump Chests	7	6	18
Head Lock	5	5	35
Fist into Palm	5	5	30
Pump Fist	4	4	27
Head Butt	4	4	7
Tripping	2	2	5
Pile-Up	2	2	2
Pretend to Tear Clothing	1	1	12
Shaking	1	1	5
Dunking	0	0	0

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