A Return Potential Measure of Setting Norms for Aggression

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This study tested a classroom-level measure of norms based on J. Jackson’s (1966) Return Potential Model. “Return potential” refers to the probability of approval of aggression in a given setting or group, and the return potential model allows quantification of different aspects of a setting’s norms. Return potential measures were computed for unprovoked and provoked aggression. A pilot sample of 236 students in 11 classrooms and a main sample of 3,304 students in 158 classrooms completed this measure and a self-report measure of aggression. Results from hierarchical linear models showed that all measures of classroom return potential for aggression were significantly clustered by classrooms. Four return potential measures had main effects on aggression, and four measures showed variation in effects by grade or urban residence. Differences in clustering and effects by grade suggested age differences in the importance of different normative characteristics.

KEY WORDS: aggression; norms; measurement; ecological variables.

INTRODUCTION

Social context plays an important role in the development of aggression and violence (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; DeRosier, Cillessen, Coie, & Dodge, 1994; Pierce & Cohen, 1995; Price & Dodge, 1989). Little research has addressed the role of children’s schools and classrooms in the social learning of aggression. Schools have generally been regarded as relatively neutral environments with respect to the development of aggression, and are the venue of choice for many prevention programs (e.g., Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1997a, 1997b; Farrell, Meyer, & White, 2001; Metropolitan Area Child Study Research Group, 2002; Meyer & Farrell, 1998). However, social comparison processes in schools and classrooms may be quite important in children’s early social development (Levine, 1983), including the social learning of aggression (Henry et al., 2000).

Norms regarding aggression in school and classroom settings may be one important process in the social learning of aggression (Henry et al., 2000). Most studies involving norms have defined norms either in terms of personal normative beliefs (e.g., Huesmann & Guerra, 1997), or as individual beliefs about what generalized peers think is acceptable (e.g., Ozer, Weinstein, Maslach, & Siegel, 1997). Few have considered the role of norms as characteristics of settings in the development of aggression.

Henry et al. (2000) investigated normative processes in urban public school classrooms, distinguishing them from personal normative beliefs. They found that classroom injunctive norms (those that prescribed appropriate behavior), but not descriptive norms (aggregates of individual levels of aggression), predicted individual children’s aggression, controlling for preexisting levels, gender, and ethnicity. Moreover, these investigators found that in classrooms that made norms for aggression salient through rejection and unpopularity of aggressive students and teacher contingent reprimand of aggressive behavior, individual children’s aggression decreased from preexisting levels.

Studying school norms for drug use, Allison et al. (1999) found strong effects for the average behavior of
schoolmates other than the respondent on both minor (tobacco, alcohol, marijuana) and serious (cocaine, opiates, hallucinogens) drug use.

In these studies, setting norms were assessed by taking the mean of individual beliefs or behaviors (Allison et al., 1999; Henry et al., 2000). However, this approach carries a fundamental limitation of estimating features of settings (such as normative processes) from the average of individual measures (Shinn, 1990). There is no organizing of the group data to represent the processes by which a social setting regulates behavior, and the aspects of norms as characteristics of settings are not explored.

It has been suggested that changing norms that foster aggression among children is necessary for preventing violence (Dykeman, Daehlin, Doyle, & Flamer, 1996; O’Donnell, Hawkins, & Abbott, 1995). Disentangling setting characteristics from the average of individual characteristics is an important task in this endeavor, and for understanding ecological influences on individual behavior generally.

SELF-REGULATION IN SETTINGS

Settings develop self-regulating mechanisms (Barker, 1968; Mayo, 1933) that may function to inhibit aggressive or disruptive behavior in schools or classrooms. Teachers who institute contingencies aimed at regulating class disruptions find that students begin to discourage disruptive behaviors of their fellow students (Davey, Alexander, Edmonson, Stenhoff, & West, 2001). Self-regulatory mechanisms may not be well represented by averaging individual-level characteristics, because setting-level processes may be qualitatively different than individual-level processes or characteristics (Shinn, 1990; Tillich, 1954). Among these homeostatic forces are (1) deviation-countering circuits that homogenize the behavior of persons in the setting and (2) veto circuits that exclude persons whose behavior does not respond to deviation-countering circuits. Behavior management in a classroom might be viewed, in Barker’s (1968) terms, as deviation-countering and vetoing activity by staff and students. Teachers counter aggressive behavior through words, gestures, looks, organization of classroom space and time, and, if necessary, time-out and exclusion from the setting. Peers also have a role in countering aggressive behavior through the extent to which children who behave aggressively are popular or rejected or rewarded (cf., Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996). Deviation-countering circuits in school classrooms involve the students’ acceptance or rejection of aggressive behavior by other students as well as teachers’ and administrators’ efforts at behavior management.

Although a setting’s norms may be defined as typical behavior, and represented by the average of individual behaviors, norms may also be defined, after Barker (1968), as deviation-countering circuits. Such a definition of norms is consistent with the distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms offered by Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno (1991). It is also consistent with organizational definitions of norms (Katz & Kahn, 1978; March, 1954; Sherif, 1954).

Katz and Kahn (1978, p. 386) offered three necessary criteria for inferring the existence of a system norm:

1) there must be beliefs about appropriate and required behavior for group members as group members.
2) There must be objective or statistical commonality of such beliefs.
3) There must be an awareness by individuals that there is group support for a given belief.

Using this definition, a classroom-level measure of norms for aggression should assess the extent to which classmates are aware of commonly held beliefs regarding appropriate levels of aggressive behavior in the classroom setting. The statistical commonality of such beliefs should be demonstrable. The Henry et al. (2000) study found statistical commonality of individual beliefs and behavior, but did not determine the extent to which individual children were aware of group support for such common beliefs.

Operationalizing Setting Norms Using the Return Potential Model

Jackson’s (1966) Return Potential Model of Norms conceptualizes setting norms in a way that is consistent with Barker’s (1968) behavior setting theory and allows all three of Katz and Kahn’s (1978)