
Paper session WA-1
Wednesday, July 26, 2006

A Meta-Analysis of the Distinction Between Reactive and Proactive Aggression in Children and Adolescents

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Many recent studies of children's aggressive behaviour make use of the well known distinction between reactive and proactive aggression. Reactive aggression is defined as a reaction to a presumed threat which is associated with anger, and proactive aggression as planned, instrumental and cold-blooded behaviour. Although research has demonstrated the difference in precursors, correlates, and prognoses between reactive and proactive aggression there has been the recurring problem of large correlations between both forms of aggression. Furthermore, correlations vary considerably across studies. The present meta-analytic review aimed to clarify these inconsistent findings. Fifty-one studies with 17,965 participants were included in the analysis. A significant correlation between reactive and proactive aggression was found ($r=.64$). Aggression measure was the strongest predictor of the correlation between reactive and proactive aggression. Questionnaires were associated with larger correlations than observational studies and tilt/noise tasks. Within the large group of questionnaire studies, studies disentangling the form and function of aggression found much lower correlations than studies that did not disentangle form and function. In these questionnaire studies higher reliability was associated with larger correlations. Effect size did not depend on study characteristics such as sample type, age, and informant type. It is concluded that reactive and proactive aggression are most clearly distinguished with behavioral observations and questionnaires that unravel form and functions of aggression.

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