

Exploring Factors Associated with the Development of Aggressive Behavior in Vietnamese Secondary School Students: The Role of Normative Beliefs Approving Aggression and Harsh Punishment in Parenting Practices and Policy Implications for School Authorities

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ABSTRACT

Peer violence is a critical concern in Vietnamese schools due to its negative effects on student academic outcomes. The current study aims at examining the roles of normative beliefs approving aggression and harsh punishment as a type of negative parenting practice. There are 155 (56.8% girls; Mage = 13.0, SD = 1.25) Vietnamese secondary students taking part in the study. Results indicated that both normative beliefs approving aggression and paternal harsh punishment significantly and uniquely predict the development of aggressive behavior. Policy implications were discussed in this study.

Keywords: Normative Beliefs, Aggressive Behavior, Paternal/Maternal Harsh Punishment, Hierarchical Multiple Regression analyses, Vietnamese Adolescents.

Peer violence is a critical concern in Vietnamese schools due to its negative effects on student academic outcomes (Halliday et al., 2021). It is possible that the negative outcomes challenge efforts of school authorities to build up a positive school climate in Vietnam. Exploring factors that influence the development of violent behavior is thus essential in helping school authorities for example school directors, better understand the mechanisms underlying the development of the behavior, which in turn supports them for finding appropriate interventions for treating such behavior. The present study thus focused on investigating the role of individual and environment factors in explaining the development of aggressive behavior, which is a more general form of violent behavior in Vietnamese adolescents.

According to the ecological systems for human development framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), individual, family are critical factors that influence the development of aggressive

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behavior. Regarding individual factors, normative beliefs approving aggression play a unique role (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Studies investigated the role of normative beliefs approving aggression in predicting the development of aggressive behavior following the assumptions of social information processing models (Huesmann, 1988; 1998). According to these models, normative beliefs are cognitive aspects of an individual reflecting the levels of accepting the use of aggressive behavior for addressing social conflict (Huesmann, 1988; 1998). Western research showed that individuals who have higher levels of normative beliefs supporting aggression are more likely to use aggressive behavior in addressing social conflicts (Krahé & Busching, 2014). A prior research conducted in Vietnamese schools also revealed that normative beliefs approving aggression are meaningful factors explaining the development of aggressive behavior in students (Vu et al., 2020).

Concerning family factors, prior Western studies consistently showed that negative parenting practices play an important role in the development of psychopathology, including aggressive behavior in adolescents (Pinquart, 2017). Harsh punishment, which is characterized by the use of psychologically aggressive and physical violent practice can be considered a typical negative parenting practices (Pinquart, 2017; Straus et al., 1998). Parents who use this practice were indicated to enhance the likelihood that their children exhibit aggressive behavior (Gershoff, 2002).

Previous research also reported that mother's and father's parenting practices play a unique role in predicting the development of their child(ren)'s externalizing behavior (Gryczkowski et al., 2010). In a study, Koukouli and Kalaitzaki (2021) revealed that paternal punitive discipline was more related to antisocial personality symptoms compared to maternal punitive discipline. Interestingly, in a meta-analysis, Kawabata et al. (2011) found that fathers' and mothers' harsh parenting have equal role in predicting the increase of relational aggression. However, research focussing on considering the influence of harsh punishment on the development of aggressive behavior of both Vietnamese fathers and mothers is still limited. Therefore, further research considering the influence of both fathers' and mothers' harsh parenting in Vietnamese settings is still needed so far. Findings from such studies enable researchers and school authorities to get more insights the unique role of fathers and mothers on their child(ren) psychological development.

The present study

So far, the role of individual factor, for example normative beliefs approving aggression, has been found to be a significant factor of the development of aggressive behavior in Vietnamese students. There has still been lack of international research investigating the influence of (negative) parenting practices on the development of aggressive behavior in Vietnam schools. This is a critical concern as prior research has shown that harsh punishment is a parenting practice that is prevalent in Vietnam (Rydström, 2006). It can be that harsh punishment plays a unique role over and above child(ren)'s normative beliefs approving aggression in predicting the development of aggressive behavior. Also, the role might be different across mother and father. However, these hypothesizes have not been tested in Vietnamese context so far.

Therefore, in the present study we wanted to test whether (1) normative beliefs approving aggression uniquely and significantly predict the development of aggressive behavior; (2) maternal harsh punishment uniquely and significantly predicts the development of

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aggressive behavior; (3) paternal harsh punishment uniquely and significantly predicts the development of aggressive behavior in Vietnamese secondary schools.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 155 (56.8% girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 13.0$, $SD = 1.25$) students from a Vietnamese study participated in the study. Most of the students lives with their biological parents (69%), some others lived with their biological mothers (3.9%), or their biological mothers and the mothers' partners (0.6%), biological fathers and the fathers' partners (2.1%). The rest did not report (25.2%).

The participants were collected via school contexts. First, we asked for permission from the school director for surveying in the school. Data were collected after obtaining consent from the teachers and parents of the participants. A link with the study's questionnaire was sent to the teachers and parents who agreed for their children participate in the survey. Children who agreed to participate answered the online questionnaire. The participants understood the procedure and goal of the study and only answered the questionnaire if they agreed to participate in the survey in advance.

Measures

The Vietnamese version of the Aggression Scale (VAS) was used to measure aggressive behavior. The Aggression Scale was originally developed by Orpinas and Frankowski (2001) and then validated in Vietnamese by Vu et al. (2019). The VAS was used to examine overt aggressive behavior in Vietnamese adolescents. There are 11 likert-type items in the VAS, in which all these items have 7 answer options to be arranged from 0 (*0 times*) to 6 (*6 times or more*). One example of these items is *I slapped or kicked someone*. The VAS had sufficient internal consistency ($\alpha = .80$).

The Vietnamese version of the Aggression Legitimate (AL) was used to measure normative beliefs approving aggression. The Aggression Legitimate is a subscale of the Vietnamese version of the Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Aggression scale, which was originally developed by Vernberg et al. (1999) and was validated in Vietnamese by Vu et al. (2022). There are 8 likert-type items in the AL, in which all these items have 4 answer options to be arranged from 1 (*I don't agree at all*) to 4 (*I completely agree*). One example of these items is *It's okay for students to fight each other*. The single factor of the AL was supported by the study's data (CFI = .99, RMSEA = .6, and SRMR = .10 (Brown, 2014; Byrne, 2013)). The AL had sufficient internal consistency ($\alpha = .71$).

The Harsh Punishment scale (HP) of the Vietnamese version of the Parenting Behavior Scale-Short Form. The Parenting Behavior Scale-Short Form was originally developed by Van Leeuwen and Vermulst (2004) and was validated in Vietnamese by Van Heel et al. (2019). The HP comprises five likert-type items and all these items have five answer options ranging from 1 (*(almost) never*) to 5 (*(almost) always*). One example of these items is *I spank my children when he/she is disobedient or naughty*. Each of these items of the scale was adapted to form a maternal scale version, for example a five-item version of the maternal scale and a five-item version of the paternal scale. The single factor for each version was supported by the current study data, for example CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07, and SRMR = .06 for the maternal scale version; and CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04, and SRMR = .04

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(Brown, 2014; Byrne, 2013). Both scales had sufficient internal consistency $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = .69$ for the maternal scale and the paternal scale versions, respectively.

Analytic Strategies

To examine the unique roles of normative beliefs approving aggression, and harsh punishment by fathers and mothers in predicting the development of aggressive behavior, we used hierarchical multiple regression analyses. Two models (Model 1 and Model 2) would be considered in the analyses. As Gender and Age might effect aggressive behavior, in the first model (Model 1) we put Age, Gender as the predictors of aggressive behavior. Regarding Age, we distinguished two groups, both of which are the group of early adolescents (< 14 years old) and the middle adolescents (≥ 14 years old). In the second model (Model 2), in addition to Age and Gender, we put normative beliefs approving aggression, maternal harsh punishment, and paternal harsh punishment as the predictors and aggressive behavior as the dependent variable. All the analyses in the present study were conducted in R.

RESULTS

Descriptive analyses

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables and Pearson Correlation Coefficients in the Current Study

	N	M (SD)	Median (Min, Max)	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. AB	155	0.57 (0.70)	0.27 (0, 3.36)	1.81 (0.19)	3.37 (0.39)	-	.37***	.30***	.26***
2. AL	155	1.29 (0.36)	1.25 (1, 3.75)	2.88 (0.19)	14.89 (0.39)	-	-	.11	.14
3. P_HP	155	1.31 (0.48)	1.20 (1, 3.40)	2.25 (0.19)	5.27 (0.39)	-	-	-	.61***
4. M_HP	155	1.45 (0.67)	1.20 (1, 4.40)	2.03 (0.19)	4.30 (0.39)	-	-	-	-

Note. AB: Aggressive behavior; AL: Aggression Legitimate; P_HP: Paternal Harsh Punishment; M_HP: Maternal Harsh Punishment
[†] $p = .09$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 1 shows the results of relevant statistical analyses and correlation coefficients between the study variables. All these variables are non-normal distributions (see the values of the skewness and kurtosis in Table 1). Among these variables, the links between paternal- and maternal harsh punishments and Aggression Legitimate are less strong than between these parenting practices and Aggressive Behavior.

There was no significant difference across gender concerning the Aggressive Behavior ($t(113.63) = 1.11, p = .27$). Also for the Aggressive Behavior scale, concerning age group, however, the group of middle adolescents scored significant higher mean scores than the one of early adolescents ($M = 0.42$ and $M = 0.93$, respectively; $t(56.157) = - 3.426, p < .05$).

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses

Bảng 2.

Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analyses for variables predicting aggressive behavior

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	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1		.11	
Gender ^a	-.07		
Age group ^b	.32***		
Model 2		.29	.18***
Gender ^a	-.01		
Age group ^b	.30***		
Aggression Legitimate	.28***		
Paternal Harsh Punishment	.19*		
Maternal Harsh Punishment	.13		

Note. ^aBoys are the reference group; ^bthe early adolescents are the reference group.
* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Results from the hierarchical multiple regression analysis show that if only age and gender included in the regression model (Model 1), they explained 11% of the variation in aggressive behavior ($F(2, 152) = 9.47, p < .001$). However, after including the three main study variables, which are the aggression legitimate, paternal harsh punishment and maternal harsh punishment, these included variables explained an additional 18% of the variation in Aggressive Behavior ($F(5, 149) = 12.37, p < .001$) (Model 2). In Model 2, after controlling for Gender and Age effects, Aggressive Legitimate significantly and uniquely predicted aggressive behavior. Similar effect on aggressive behavior was found for the Paternal Harsh Punishment but not for Maternal Harsh Punishment. Namely, Paternal Harsh Punishment significantly and uniquely predicted aggressive behavior whereas Paternal Harsh Punishment not. In sum, age, gender, aggression legitimate, paternal- and maternal harsh punishment explained 29% of the variation in Aggression Behavior.

DISCUSSION

The main aim of the present study was to explore whether individual and family factors play a role in predicting the development of aggressive behavior. Normative beliefs approving aggression was considered an individual factor and harsh punishment, which is an example of parenting practices was considered a family factor. Results indicated that each factor played a role in predicting the development of aggressive behavior. More specifically, normative beliefs approving aggression as measured by the Aggression Legitimate were the significant factor that explained for the development of aggressive behavior in Vietnamese adolescents. This finding is in line with previous studies revealing that normative beliefs approving aggression are the factor that explains the development of aggressive behavior in Vietnamese adolescents (Vu et al., 2020). This finding suggests for school directors and policymakers to call for initiatives to develop intervention programs, in which they focus on changing normative beliefs approving aggression in Vietnamese adolescents. Prior research indicated that intervention programs based on a model of social-cognitive development help decrease normative beliefs approving aggression (Guerra & Slaby, 1990). Unfortunately, such an intervention is still limited in Vietnam. One possible reason is that there is inadequate awareness of the role of such interventions in changing individual normative beliefs, for example reducing normative beliefs approving aggression in Vietnamese society. This limitation can hinder the implementation of interventions aiming at reducing such normative beliefs in Vietnamese schools. Therefore, providing support for doing pioneering

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research evaluating the effectiveness of interventions based on social-cognitive development models is needed in the country.

Concerning harsh punishment as a type of negative parenting practices, we found that paternal harsh punishment was more linked to aggressive behavior compared to maternal harsh punishment. Prior research suggested that there was a prevalent use of harsh punishment by Vietnamese fathers compared to Vietnamese mothers (Rydström, 2006). Additionally, Vietnamese fathers were found to be less warm, and more authoritarian than Vietnamese mothers (La et al., 2020). Vietnamese fathers have indicated to do less child-rearing than Vietnamese mothers (Locke et al., 2012). These could be the reasons explaining why fathers are more linked with the development of psychopathology, including aggressive behavior in their child(ren), compared to mothers, which is the case in the present study. A prior study also suggested that compared to maternal parenting practices, paternal parenting practices are a factor that puts their child(ren) at a higher risk of developing psychopathology (Vu et al., 2022). The finding suggests a need to adjust paternal parenting practices in Vietnamese society. Prior research suggested that there is a prevalent use of physical punishment by Vietnamese fathers, suggesting the prevalence of attitudes favoring the parenting practice by fathers in Vietnamese society. At the policy level, it is necessary to support future research focussing on reducing attitudes supporting harsh punishment in parenting practices, especially in Vietnamese fathers.

Limitation and future research directions

First, the current study was only based on data collected from a single informant. This might put the data at risk of social desirability bias. As aggressive behavior is generally not accepted, the participants might underreport their actual aggressive behavior (Peets & Kikas, 2006). We controlled the potential bias by mentioning to the students before participating in the study that there is no wrong or right in their answers to the questions in the survey and that we would keep their answers anonymous. The participants were also told that they could leave the survey whenever they felt uncomfortable. Future research combining different informants, for example, self-reports, peer nominations and teacher reports are useful to get more details about the influence of social desirability bias in aggressive behavior data (Henry & Study research group, 2006).

The current study revealed the roles of normative beliefs approving aggression and harsh punishment in predicting the development of aggressive behavior in students in a Vietnamese secondary school. Prior research suggested that harsh punishment could be the predictor of normative beliefs approving aggression, which in turn links to the development of aggressive behavior (Eron et al., 1991; Huesmann, 1998). This suggests the use of a mediation analysis to test the mediating role of normative beliefs approving aggression in the link between harsh punishment and aggressive behavior. However, that mediation model requires the use of longitudinal data, for example a three-wave. Further research using longitudinal data is needed to get more insight into the longitudinal links.

CONCLUSION

The current study suggested that both normative beliefs approving aggression and harsh parenting practices play a role in predicting the development of aggressive behavior in Vietnamese adolescents. The findings suggested school authorities facilitate the implementation of interventions aiming at reducing normative beliefs approving aggression

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in Vietnamese students. Also, the findings suggested school authority support for the development of interventions aiming at increasing awareness of Vietnamese parents about the negative impacts of harsh punishment in parenting practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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