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# Natural conflict resolution in humans

## Preface

During the past decades aggressive behaviour has been a part of many theories of human behaviour and is addressed by many different disciplines such as social and developmental psychology, and ethology (Tremblay, 2002). Within these disciplines, major research efforts have been made to further our understanding about the causes of aggressive behaviour and its malleability in humans. In contrast to this abundance of studies that focused on the initiation of aggressive conflicts, little attention has been paid to mechanisms of conflict resolution. This scarcity of research is particularly surprising given the almost logical necessity of the occurrence of conflicts as part of the social negotiation of interests among group living individuals.

Most knowledge on conflict resolution comes from animal studies. An observation by de Waal & van Roosmalen (1979) in captive chimpanzees, showing that former opponents reunited using friendly gestures shortly after the end of a conflict, stimulated ethological research on conflict resolution. In this line of research, reconciliation has been defined as post-conflict friendly reunions between former opponents that restore disturbed social relations and alleviate stress after a conflict (Aureli & de Waal, 2000). This was quantified using a controlled observation method in which friendly behaviour between former opponents directly after a conflict is compared with friendly behaviour during a matched control period (Veenema et al., 1994). Since then, reconciliation has been demonstrated in many other species as varied as dogs (Cools et al., 2008), primates (e.g., Aureli et al., 2002) and dolphins (Samuels & Flaherty, 2000).

About 10 years ago researchers in Europe and the USA adapted the controlled observation method for use during naturalistic observations of peer aggression in children (Verbeek et al., 2000). This broke new ground in three important ways. First, it enabled researchers to obtain a reliable measure of what happens after peer aggression, not only of what leads up to it or what happens during it. Second, it enabled researchers to measure the aftermath

of peer aggression within the context of ongoing peer relations. And third, it provided researchers with a standard tool for comparative research on reconciliation among children of different cultures.

However, although the above described method helped demonstrate reconciliatory behaviour in children, systematic research on conflict resolution in humans is scarce and many questions remain unanswered. With the present Special Issue of *Behaviour* on 'Natural conflict resolution in humans' we aim to progress in empirical and theoretical issues, particularly to demonstrate new perspectives in exploring the mechanisms for controlling aggression in humans. First, this special issue brings together various studies conducted on conflict resolution in humans to emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. This issue includes studies that examined conflict resolution using various observational methods (Roseth et al., this issue; Westlund et al., this issue; van Hoogdalem et al., this issue; Horowitz et al., this issue; Kempes et al., this issue), network analyses (Fujisawa et al., this issue), interviewing techniques (Branje, this issue) and physiological methods (Butovskaya, this issue). Secondly, studies in the present special issue highlight two kinds of relationships: 'vertical' attachments to adults, and 'horizontal' relationships with peers. Most early work on conflict resolution in children focused on dyadic peer relations. The present special issue includes studies on the influence of teachers interventions on preschooler's conflict resolution (Roseth et al., this issue), mother-daughter interactions during adolescence (Branje, this issue) and child interventions in peer conflict (van Hoogdalem et al., this issue). Finally, the articles in this special issue demonstrate that conflict resolution can be studied from preschoolers to adolescents and can help us increase our understanding of the role that peer aggression and its aftermath plays in children's socialization and social development.

### **Outline of the special issue**

This special issue contains one review article and nine contributions presenting empirical data. The opening contribution is a review by Verbeek, which uses the framework of Niko Tinbergen's famous four questions to discuss comparative evidence for natural peacemaking in children and nonhuman primates as a bases for future research on peace ethology in humans.

An important issue for future research Verbeek highlights in his review, is the need for studies that examine the development of conflict resolution. The first empirical study by Westlund, Horowitz, Jansson and Ljungberg is

a cross-sectional study that focuses on the development of conflict management and reconciliation in 3–6-year-old preschool children. They showed that boys, but not girls, improved their reconciliatory skills with age and were more likely to reconcile with older boys than with same aged peers.

Butovskaya used physiological measures to explore the stress reduction hypothesis, which states that reconciliation reduces post-conflict stress levels. The article provides evidence for post-conflict reduction of the stress hormone cortisol after reconciliation in 7–15-year-old boys.

Fujisawa, Kutsukake & Hasegawa investigated conflict resolution among preschool children using an innovative approach which included the application of concepts regarding the structure of social networks. They examined social network structures to identify whether children, who show more aggression, or children, who show more affiliative behaviour, stabilize social integration in a group. The data suggest that aggressive children not only play a dispersive but also a cohesive role in their social networks, which suggest that they may promote general harmony in their classrooms.

The next two papers provide more inside in the role of an educator/parent in conflict resolution and management in children and adolescents. A first article by Roseth, Pellegrini, Dupuis, Bohn, Hickey, Hilck and Peshkam studied teacher intervention in preschoolers' peer conflicts. Results support the view that teacher intervention disrupts the on-going resolution cycle. A second article by Branje examined the content and structure of mother-daughter conflict interactions during early adolescence. The study illuminates how specific conflict management behaviours and variability therein are associated to parent-adolescent perceived relationship quality.

In addition to educators, children can also intervene in peer conflicts. Van Hoogdalem, Singer, Bekkema and Sterck examined peer intervention in 2–3-year-old children and showed that intervention of children in a conflict depends on their distance to the opponents, whether a teacher is nearby and whether the intervening child is playing with one of the opponents. In addition, age and ethnicity influence the probability that children will intervene in a conflict.

Since conflict resolution is such an important mechanism in a child's socialisation process, deviances in these mechanisms may attribute to behavioural disturbances or lead to social isolation. The last two papers concern studies that focus on children showing behavioural disorders. Horowitz, Westlund & Ljungberg examined conflict resolution and subsequent social interaction in 4–6-year-old language impaired children and children with

typical language development. Boys with language impairment displayed less assertive conflict management. Finally, Kempes, Orobio de Castro and Sterck investigated reconciliation in 6–7-year-old children with and without aggressive behaviour problems. The data showed that children with aggressive behaviour problems refrained from reconciliation because they rejected post-conflict affiliation. This may be an important reason why their aggressive behaviour escalates and is perceived as disruptive.

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