



Conflict Tactics and Conflict Management Styles in Mexican Adolescent High-School Students

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ABSTRACT

In order to contribute to the discussion on interpersonal aggression and conflict management in adolescence in the school context, this paper analyses the relationships between four conflict tactics (reasoning, psychological aggression, slight physical aggression, and severe physical aggression) and three conflict management message styles (self-oriented, other-oriented, and issue-oriented), in a sample (N = 171) of Mexican high-school students, aged 15 to 19 years old. The participants answered an adaptation of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and the Conflict Management Message Style Instrument (CMMS). In the results, the self-oriented style correlated positively with physical and psychological aggression, the issue-oriented style correlated positively with reasoning and slight physical aggression. In turn, other-oriented style correlated positively with all conflict tactics. These findings will be discussed considering previous studies on these issues.

KEYWORDS : Interpersonal conflict, Interpersonal aggression, Conflict management, Conflict resolution.

Actually, there are few studies on the relationships between interpersonal aggression and conflict management among adolescents in the school context. On the one hand, the academic literature on school violence has been centered on bullying and other related phenomena, but no on the conflict management styles used by adolescents in the school. On the other hand, the studies of conflict management in adolescence have been centered on conflict styles of adolescents with parents, siblings, romantic partners and friends. In this context, the conflict management among classmates has received little attention from scholars.

Because of this, and in order to contribute to the discussion on this issue, the present study was proposed to analyze the relationships between the conflict tactics used by adolescents to manage conflicts with their classmates and the conflict management styles of these adolescents, in a sample of Mexican high school students.

Conflict management message styles

The conflict management style is "the way a person most commonly deals with conflict" (Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, 1994, p. 31). Ross and DeWine (1988) propose to evaluate the conflict management styles through verbal messages used by individuals into conflict situations. In this way, these authors identified three conflict management message styles: a) the self-oriented style reflects an emphasis on the speaker's personal interest; b) the issue-oriented style maintains that the problem can be solved without jeopardizing the relationship and emphasizes that both parties must deal with the problem; c) the other-oriented style emphasizes overlooking the problem and keeping the other party happy.

Some recent studies in Mexico have evaluated the Ross-DeWine model in adolescents (Luna, 2014; Luna & Laca, 2014; Luna, Laca & Cedillo, 2012). These studies have contributed to conceptualize conflict management of Mexican adolescents into Ross-DeWine theoretical framework. Luna and Laca (2014) for example, conducted a factor analysis of *Ross-DeWine Conflict Management Message Style Instrument* in a study with a sample of 1074 adolescents and emerging adults (age range of 11-25 years). Their results showed a three-factor solution appropriate to the theoretical model with acceptable indicators of validity and reliability.

Conflict tactics

According to Straus (1979), conflict tactics can be defined as "the method used to advance one's own interest" (p. 76). In order to identify the use of argumentation and aggression as tactics employed in the management of conflicts, Straus (1979) developed the *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS). The CTS is a list of behaviors used by the individual in a conflict situation, for example, to discuss calmly, insult, push, hit, and so on.

In order to evaluate conflict tactics employed by adolescents in dating relationships in Spain, Muñoz-Rivas, Andreu, Graña, O'Leary and González (2007) made the translation of CTS into Spanish on a sample of 5,355 youths from the Community of Madrid, ages between 16 and 26 years. Their factor analysis of CTS resulted in a four-factor solution which was consistent with the theory and previous research: reasoning, psychological aggression, slight physical aggression, and severe physical aggression. According to Muñoz-Rivas *et al.* (2007), argumentation "represents the least aggressive form of conflict resolution" (p. 696). It includes behaviors such as discussing calmly, searching for information, or calling someone else to try to fix things. Psychological aggression is "aimed at conflict resolution through insults, arguments and verbal threats" (p. 696). It includes behaviors such as to insult, refuse to talk, or threaten. Slight physical aggression "reflects a series of aggressive tactics manifested through physical or bodily contact with the victim, but do not involve damage or serious physical injury" (p. 696). It includes behaviors such as hitting or kicking, pushing or biting. Finally, severe physical aggression "reveals the use of physical tactics with serious consequences for the integrity of the person assaulted" (p. 696). Mora, Natera, Tiburcio and Juárez (2008) consider this component as high risk violence noting that "includes a series of actions that endanger the health and life of the victim" (p. 115). Includes behaviors as throwing an object, give a beating, or threatening with a weapon.

The CTS was originally made by Straus (1979) as a tool to evaluate the use of aggression and argumentation in the field of family relationships, a field in which CTS has become an worldwide essential reference (Straus, 2007). Despite this, as explained Boone and Flint (1988), "the resolution strategies contained in the CTS are widely employed outside of the family unit and as such, it may be a useful research tool for assessing aggression in a variety of relationships" (p. 296). Because of this, Luna and De Gante (2015) realized an adaptation of CTS to school context of Mexican adolescents. Their confirmatory factor analysis of CTS resulted in a four-factor solution according Spanish version of Muñoz-Rivas *et al.* (2007).

Conflict tactics and conflict management message styles

The mean antecedent of the present research is the cited study of Luna and De Gante (2015) which analyses the relationship between the conflict tactics and the conflict management message styles employed among Mexican adolescents middle school students, aged 11 to 15 years. In their results, the self-centered style correlated positively with aggression in all its forms, while issue-oriented and other-oriented styles correlated positively with argumentation. The authors concluded that their study provides evidence for the relationship between competitive conflict management style and interpersonal aggression, and between cooperative styles and rational argumentation.

Because of the antecedent study has been conducted on a sample of middle school students, the present study was proposed to analyze

the correlations between these variables in a sample of high school adolescents in order to contribute to enlarge the discussion on the relationship between interpersonal aggression and conflict management in adolescence in school context.

METHOD

Participants

The sample ($N = 171$) was composed of high school students from the city of Guadalajara, México, with age-range 15 to 19 ($M = 16.70$, $DS = 0.94$). 80 (46.8%) of the participants were males and 91 (53.2%) females.

Instruments

Conflict Management Message Style instrument. This questionnaire consists of 18 items distributed in three subscales according to the model of Ross and DeWine (1988): a) self-oriented, b) issue-oriented, and c) other-oriented. The instrument was originally created for Ross and DeWine (1988). Mejía and Laca (2006) and Laca, Mejía and Mayoral (2011) made the translation into Spanish on samples of Mexican and Spanish university students. Later, Luna and Laca (2014) realized a validation study of a sample ($N = 1074$) of Mexican students, age-range 11 to 25. The coefficient of reliability Cronbach's alpha reported for Luna and Laca (2014a) were of .68, .72 and .83 for the self-oriented, other-oriented, and issue-oriented styles, respectively.

Conflict Tactics Scale (adapted version). The original instrument by Straus *et al.* (1979) is composed of 18 items. Muñoz-Rivas *et al.* (2007) made the translation of the CTS into Spanish which resulted in a four-factor solution: reasoning, psychological aggression, slight physical aggression, and severe physical aggression. Later, Luna and De Gante (2015) realized an adaptation of this Spanish version of CTS to school context. The authors asked to participants about their conflict tactics used with their classmates. Luna and De Gante conducted a study of a sample ($N = 346$) of Mexican middle school students, aged 11 to 15 years. Their confirmatory factor analysis of CTS resulted in a four-factor solution according Spanish version of Muñoz-Rivas *et al.* (2007). Thus, four factors were identified by Luna and De Gante (2015) as conflict tactics employed by adolescents in conflicts with their classmates: reasoning (alpha .81), psychological aggression (alpha .74), slight physical aggression (alpha .65), and severe physical aggression (alpha .68).

Procedure

Collaboration of school authorities was obtained. Students were invited to participate in the classroom in a completely voluntary and anonymous way. They were guaranteed confidential handling of information and its exclusive use for scientific purposes. Participants answered a battery consisting of various psychometric scales in one session lasting approximately an hour; as a part of a larger study on *Correlates and predictors of conflict management styles in teenagers*. In this paper the correspondent results to the relationships between conflict tactics and conflict management are reported.

RESULTS

According the aim of this study, a Pearson's correlational analysis was realized. As it can be seen in Table 1, the following correlations were statistically significant. First, the self-oriented style correlated positively with physical and psychological aggression. Second, the issue-oriented style correlated positively with reasoning and slight physical aggression. In turn, other-oriented style correlated positively with all conflict tactics.

	Reasoning	Psychological aggression	Slight physical aggression	Severe physical aggression
Self-oriented	.048	.384**	.266**	.220**
Other-oriented	.215**	.226**	.182*	.192*
Issue-oriented	.391**	.130	.158*	.146

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, realized on a sample of high school adolescents of 15-19 years old, are partly consistent with the results of Luna and De Gante (2015) conducted with a sample of middle-school adolescents of 11-15 years old. On the one hand, in both studies the self-centered style correlated positively with aggression in all its forms, while that issue-oriented and other-oriented styles correlated positively with argumentation. On the other hand, in this study (but no in the study of Luna and De Gante) the other-oriented style correlated positively with physical and psychological aggression, and the issue-oriented style correlated positively with slight physical aggression.

Therefore, in general, we can say that the findings of this and the previous study provide evidence for the relationship between competitive conflict management style (self-oriented) and interpersonal aggression, and between cooperative styles (other and issue oriented) and rational argumentation.

Further, in addition to the above, the present study provides evidence of that interpersonal aggression appears to be associated with all styles of conflict management in Mexican adolescents of high school: first, with the self-centered, secondly with other-centered, and in third place (although to a lesser degree) with issue-oriented style. This result could indicate that, among high school students, the conflict management styles may be under both an aggressive manner or in a no-aggressive way.

A second way of explanation could be that a higher frequency of conflicts among adolescents in high school could be associated with a greater use of all styles of conflict management and also with an increased incidence of aggression. Thus, the fact that in this study the aggression was correlated to a lesser extent with the issue-oriented style could be an indication of that this style of conflict management could have a moderating role on the effect of frequency of conflicts on aggression. Therefore, and in order to empirically test this interpretative hypothesis, it is suggested that further studies evaluating simultaneously the effects of both the magnitude of conflicts and conflict management styles on interpersonal aggression in conflicts among adolescents at school.

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