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Does the strength of the victim-offender overlap depend on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Strong evidence of the correlation between victimization and offending has led researchers to investigate both the causal relationship between victimization and offending and possible contingencies in this relationship. But, research has yet to investigate whether the victim's relation to the perpetrator impacts the strength of the victim-offender overlap. Drawing on betrayal trauma theory, we examine whether the victim-offender overlap depends on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.
Methods: Using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, a three-level logistic item response model nested 7936 violent crime item responses at level 1 within 992 subjects (at level 2) representing 174 neighborhoods across metropolitan Chicago (at level 3).
Results: Victimization by a relatively unfamiliar (acquaintance) or unknown (stranger) perpetrator did not increase the likelihood of subsequent violent behavior, while victimization by a family member, peer, or gang member was significantly associated with future violence. Among known perpetrators, victimization by a family member was least likely to generate an offending response.
Conclusions: Victimization and offending are inextricably linked, but the ways in which these constructs are related are nuanced. In particular, the strength of the victim-offender overlap depends on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator.

1. Introduction

There is strong evidence of the correlation between victimization and offending. In a recent review of 37 studies spanning over five decades, 31 studies found "considerable" empirical support for the relationship between victimization and offending (Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012). For example, Reingle, Staras, Jennings, Branchini, and Maldonado-Molina (2012) found that 11.9% of a nationally representative sample of young adults in the United States reported both victimization and perpetration of intimate partner violence. In addition, Maldonado-Molina, Jennings, Tobler, Piquero, and Canino (2010) found that between 15% and 27% of children and adolescents from the Bronx Puerto Rican youth data were both victims and offenders, while the remaining youth were victims only (32–44% of the sample), offenders only (4–9%), or neither victims nor offenders (31–36%). Similarly, in a nationally representative sample of individuals from Bogota (Columbia), Klevens, Duque, and Ramirez (2002) found that roughly one-third of persons (32.2%) were both victims and offenders, while 38.6% were victims only, 2.9% were offenders only, and 26.3% were non-victims and non-offenders. In short, the "victim-offender overlap" has been "remarkably consistent across a diversity of analytical and statistical techniques and across historical, contemporary, cross-cultural, and international assessments" (Jennings et al., 2012, p. 16).

Yet, there are questions regarding the causal relationship between victimization and offending: the observed victim-offender overlap may be attenuated (either partially or fully) as a result of confounding mechanisms; offending may increase one's risk of victimization; or victimization may increase subsequent offending behavior. This has moved researchers away from debating whether victims and offenders share similar characteristics and toward unpacking: (1) the types of relationships between victimization and offending, and (2) the theoretical mechanisms used to explicate these relationships. Understanding the etiology of the victim-offender overlap is critical, given intimations that it may not be possible to fully understand victimization and offending apart from one another (Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991, p. 267).

Another important research agenda identified by recent scholars is to understand whether, and to what extent, the victim-offender overlap is moderated by relevant theoretical constructs. While the literature base on this topic is by no means extensive, existing research suggests that the victim-offender overlap is contingent on a number of individual factors, relational attributes of the victim and the offender, and the

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social context in which victimization and offending take place. An underexplored contingency in the victim-offender overlap is the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. That is, research has yet to fully investigate whether the victim's relation to the perpetrator (e.g., a family member, friend, or stranger) impacts the likelihood of engaging in subsequent offending behavior. It is important to note that a number of studies have examined the impact of family-perpetrated victimization on youth offending outcomes (Herrenkohl et al., 2004; Ireland & Smith, 2009); however, they do not compare these effects to victimization by non-family members.

Our research contributes to the literature by examining whether the strength of the victim-offender overlap depends on the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. Drawing upon a trauma informed theoretical model, we argue that the nature of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator impacts the victim's future offending risk. Specifically, we posit that the magnitude of the effect of victimization on subsequent violent offending is positively associated with the closeness of the relationship between victim and perpetrator. We test the hypotheses using data from a sample of Chicago youth, of whom roughly one-quarter reported some form of victimization and engaged in at least one violent crime. Before enumerating and testing the hypotheses, we begin with a brief discussion of the theoretical literature on the victim-offender overlap.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Theory on the victim-offender overlap

There is debate over the causal mechanisms responsible for the observed victim-offender overlap. For example, it is possible that the observed bivariate association between victimization and offending is attenuated (either partially or fully) as a result of confounding mechanisms. There are also questions as to whether offending increases the risk of victimization or victimization increases subsequent offending behavior.

Routine activity theory provides one explanation for why the observed correlation between victimization and offending may be spurious. Specifically, victimization and offending may share a common etiology. According to this perspective, lifestyle choices and daily patterns of activities impact both offending and victimization risks. In particular, individuals who adopt riskier lifestyle choices (e.g., skipping school, unstructured socializing, socializing at night) are probabilistically more likely to offend and to be victimized via increased exposure to delinquent peers, inadequate adult supervision, and cross-cohort socialization (see Osgood, Wilson, O'Mally, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). Additionally, social bonding theory suggests that individuals who lack strong relational attachments to parents and to prosocial peers are more likely to perpetrate violence and to be victimized (see Schreck & Fisher, 2004). And, self-control theory has been formulated both as a theory of criminal and analogous behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and as a theory of vulnerability (Schreck, 1999), under which the short-sighted need for immediate gratification increases the risk for both delinquency and victimization (see also Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014).

There is also convincing rationale for why offending behavior may increase one's risk for future victimization. For example, the "principle of homogamy" suggests that persons are more likely to be victimized when their lifestyle choices put them in greater contact with delinquent or criminal others. Accordingly, offenders disproportionately associate with other offenders, who increase their risk of victimization. In addition, offending through involvement with a gang leaves individuals vulnerable to retaliation (Melde, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2009).

Finally, theories have been used to explicate the mechanisms through which victimization increases subsequent offending behavior. For example, strain theory posits that victimization may produce strong feelings of frustration and anger that are coped with using violent means (Agnew, 2002). At other times, retaliation is the result of experiencing disrespect or an affront on one's manhood (Anderson, 1999). Specifically, the "street code" dictates that being disrespected must be met with violence; conversely, *not* retaliating may be seen as a sign of weakness, leading to repeat victimization (Jacobs & Wright, 2006). In this case, violence may be viewed as a form of "self-help" (Apel & Burrow, 2011). When unable to retaliate, youth (e.g., infants and children) can learn that violence is an appropriate response to disrespect, perpetuating a "cycle of violence" (Widom, 1989). The cycle of violence literature provides one example of how the type of perpetrator may contribute to a victim's later offending; however, this is limited to within-family violence (Herrenkohl et al., 2004; Ireland & Smith, 2009). Most recently, Averdijk, Van Gelder, Eisner, and Ribeaud (2016) linked violent victimization to violent offending via decision-making heuristics. Specifically, they found support for the hypothesis that violent victimization impacts how individuals appraise criminogenic situations by accentuating the benefits of violence perpetration and discounting the costs.

2.2. Moderators of the victim-offender overlap

A relatively recent addition to the literature, which has stimulated theory and empiricism, is research on moderators of the relationship between victimization and offending. For example, the strength of the victim-offender overlap may vary by crime type, and those who are both victims and offenders seem, holistically, to exhibit the most risk factors and fewest protective factors for violence (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2000). Research has also found that the size of the effect of victimization on subsequent violent behavior may vary as a function of certain genetic characteristics. For example, the high-expressing serotonin receptor of the MAOA gene allele reduces the chances of subsequent offending for individuals exposed to violence (Caspi et al., 2002).

Characteristics of the interpersonal relationship between victim and offender also seem to impact the victim-offender overlap. For example, Felson, Savolainen, Hughes, and Ellonen (2015) studied intimate partner aggression and found significant differences in the overlap related to the sex dynamic of the relationship. While many men who attack their female partners have similar risk factors as general offenders, they are more likely to have been abused by their partner and to have experienced sexual abuse as a child (Felson & Lane, 2010). Relatedly, Wright and Fagan (2012) found that the gender of the perpetrator in intimate partner violence had a significant impact on the development of mental health outcomes among adolescents. Female-only perpetrated intimate partner violence resulted in an increase in mental health problems for female victims but not for male victims.

Recent research has also examined contextual variability in the victim-offender overlap (see Wright & Fagan, 2013). In some cases, variability in the overlap is surmised to be due to contextual factors that promote retaliation, such as a "street code" (Berg & Loeber, 2011; Berg, Stewart, Schreck, & Simons, 2012). Larger socio-cultural factors, such as the importance of "individuality," have also been found to moderate the relationship between victimization and offending (Posick & Gould, 2015). In cultural contexts where individuality is highly valued, the overlap is strengthened, perhaps due to the idea that one must retaliate and take care of one's own problems rather than relying on others – including agents of formal social control such as the police. In other cases, it may be individual traits, such as negative emotionality, that play a key role in explaining the causal mechanisms through which the social context moderates the victim-offender overlap. When depressive emotionality is the primary response to victimization, retaliatory responses are dampened, as opposed to being amplified which occurs when anger and frustration are the primary reactions to victimization (Agnew, 2002; Posick & Zimmerman, 2015).

In short, while there is strong evidence of the correlation between victimization and offending, the relationship seems to be contingent on individual factors, relational attributes between victim and offender, and characteristics of the social context. The theories and studies