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From victim to victimizer: Hostility, anger, and depression as mediators of the bullying victimization–bullying perpetration association[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The principal aim of this study was to test one cognitive (i.e., hostility) and two emotional (anger and depression) variables as possible mediators of the well-documented association between bullying victimization and bullying perpetration. Using data from the Illinois Study of Bullying and Sexual Violence (ISBSV), a sample of 718 pre-adolescent/early adolescent children (343 boys and 375 girls) provided self-report data in three waves, with six months between waves. Consistent with predictions, hostility and depression correlated equally well with prior bullying victimization but only hostility successfully mediated the relation between prior bullying victimization and subsequent bullying perpetration. Like hostility, anger successfully predicted bullying perpetration but unlike hostility it failed to mediate the victimization–perpetration association. Knowing that hostility provides a link between bullying victimization and bullying perpetration has both theoretical and practical implications. With respect to theory, the current results are largely consistent with the control model of criminal lifestyle development. From the standpoint of practice, intervention programs designed to address the cognitive construct of hostility, which appears to serve as a conduit through which bullying victimization leads to bullying perpetration, may not only help bullied children cope with the trauma of victimization but may also disrupt the victim to victimizer cycle responsible for creating an ever-expanding supply of new bullies.

1. Introduction

Bullying is a serious societal concern with important implications for the future success and failure of youth who commit, witness, and fall victim to this behavior. Although victims, bullies, and bystanders may all be negatively affected by bullying behavior, the impact is perhaps most heavily felt by the victims, many of whom eventually become bullies themselves. The research literature clearly indicates that being the victim of bullying greatly enhances the odds of becoming a perpetrator of bullying (Chan & Wong, 2015; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Lee, 2010; Shetgiri, Lin, & Flores, 2012). Organizing longitudinal bullying data into trajectories, Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, and Maughan (2008) demonstrated that victimization often leads to bullying behavior. There is also evidence that those who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying suffer more serious consequences than those who just perpetrate bullying. The results of one study, in fact, showed that bully-victims reported significantly more

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psychological distress, peer victimization, drug use, and suicide attempts than pure bullies (Viljoen, O'Neill, & Sidhu, 2005). The purpose of the current investigation was to determine whether a cognitive variable like hostility or emotional variables like anger and depression link early bullying victimization to later bullying perpetration.

The reason why hostility, anger, and depression were selected as potential mediators of the bullying victimization–bullying perpetration nexus is that these are three of the most frequently cited consequences of victimization. Research indicates that two of the most common sequelae of sexual assault victimization in males (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2011) and females (Messman-Moore, Long, & Siegfried, 2000), crime victimization in law-abiding citizens (Norris & Kaniasty, 1994), and violence victimization in prison inmates (Zweig, Yahner, Visser, & Lattimore, 2015) are hostility and depression. Hostility, depression, and, to a lesser extent, anger are also among the more commonly observed consequences of bullying and cyberbullying victimization (Low & Espelage, 2013; Rose, Simpson, & Preast, 2016; Schenk, Fremouw, & Keelan, 2013). Besides being predicted by bullying victimization, it has also been demonstrated that hostility, anger and depression are capable of predicting bullying behavior. It is fairly well established that hostility and anger predict bullying perpetration (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009; Rose & Espelage, 2012), and while depression has also been found to predict bullying perpetration, it is more clearly associated with bullying victimization (Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & YLC-CURA, 2006; Wei, Williams, Chen, & Chang, 2010).

Social cognitive and social learning theorists frequently conceptualize anger and hostility as components of aggression, with anger representing the emotional component of aggression and hostility the cognitive component (Bandura, 1986; Berkowitz, 1993; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2012). Whereas anger can be defined as an intense negative emotional state or feeling of displeasure, hostility is more likely to be experienced as thoughts and feelings of antagonism, resentment, and alienation (Spielberger, Jacobs, Russell, & Crane, 1983). It could be stated that hostility involves the hoarding of negative cognitions about the world and the people in it (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Anger and hostility can be viewed as antecedents to aggression (Berkowitz, 1993) but they are also sensitive to influence from other variables and various self-regulatory processes (Bandura, 1986). This makes them potentially effective mediator variables in that a mediator should be responsive to the independent variable as well as capable of influencing the dependent variable (Wu & Zumbo, 2008). Therefore, while anger and hostility are related constructs, they are far from identical and differ significantly from the third putative mediator examined in this study (i.e., the emotion of depression).

In presenting his general strain theory of offending behavior, Agnew (1992) proposed that certain emotions mediate the association between victimization and aggression. The emotion held by general strain theory to be most effective in mediating the victimization–aggression association is anger. In fact, Agnew (2012) recently proposed that anger plays a key role in mediating the association between victimization and other strain experiences, on the one hand, and subsequent aggressive behavior, on the other hand. He further postulated that other emotions, like depression, are far less effective in mediating the strain–aggression association. A conceptual framework that incorporates aspects of Agnew's (1992, 2012) general strain theory into its tenets is Walters' (2017) control model of criminal lifestyle development. According to the control model of criminal lifestyle development, low self-control increases the risk of general strain which then leads to aggression by way of cognitive mediators like reactive (impulsive) criminal thinking and hostility. Hence, general strain theory predicts that the bullying victimization–bullying perpetration association should be mediated by anger but not depression and the control model of criminal lifestyle development predicts that the bullying victimization–perpetration connection should be mediated by hostility but not anger or depression.

Despite strong evidence of a temporal nexus between prior bullying victimization and subsequent hostility, anger, and depression, moderate evidence of a temporal connection between prior hostility and anger and subsequent bullying perpetration, and modest evidence of a temporal link between prior depression and subsequent bullying perpetration, there is still a need to evaluate these variables in a single design using a multivariate methodology like causal mediation analysis. When Sigfusdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson (2010) did this in a sample of 7194 Icelandic youth they discovered that anger mediated the connection between bullying victimization/perpetration and delinquency. Similarly, in a study of 1013 high school students from Belgium and the Netherlands, Claes, Luyckx, Baetens, Van de Ven, and Witteman (2015) ascertained that depression mediated the association between bullying victimization/perpetration and non-suicidal self-injury. The problem with these two studies is that they failed to satisfy basic criteria for mediation analysis. Both studies employed cross-sectional data and failed to control for pre-existing individual differences on the predicted variables, thus creating model misspecification of both the causal order and causal direction types (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). A longitudinal design, in which precursor measures of each predicted variable serve as covariates, is required to properly evaluate mediated associations.

From the results of their study, Sigfusdottir et al. (2010) concluded that the strain created by victimization led to anger and that anger led to delinquency, a pattern consistent with Agnew's (1992) general strain theory. Walters (2017) offers a slightly different perspective on strain in his control model of criminal lifestyle development. According to lifestyle theory, cognitive constructs like hostility do a better job of mediating the strain–aggression association than emotional states like anger and depression (Wu & Zumbo, 2008). Based on prior research (Marini et al., 2006; Wei et al., 2010) and the control model of criminal lifestyle development (Walters, 2017), it was hypothesized that depression would be just as strongly associated with bullying victimization as hostility but that it would be a weaker predictor of bullying perpetration. It was further hypothesized that anger, being more emotional than cognitive, would be less effective than hostility in mediating the bullying victimization–perpetration association. The research hypothesis for this study held that hostility but not depression or anger would mediate the pathway running from bullying victimization to bullying perpetration. Age, sex, race, family support, and delinquency, all of which have been found to correlate significantly with bullying victimization and/or perpetration (Alvarez-Garcia, Garcia, & Nunez, 2015; Antonio & Moleiro, 2015; Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012; Lee, Liu, & Watson, 2016; Wei, Chang, & Chen, 2015), served as control variables in this study.

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