The severity and spread of adjustment problems of adolescents involved in mutually hostile interactions with others[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In the literature, bully-victims report a wider range of adjustment problems than "pure" bullies or victims. This may not be confined to the school context, but might be found in other settings as well. Involvement in mutually hostile interactions across everyday settings may more reflect adolescents' characteristic way of handling conflicts with others. We used data from a longitudinal study of a community sample of adolescents (N = 992). Cluster analyses for specific everyday settings and across settings yielded clusters high on both exposing others and being exposed to hostility. Adolescents in these clusters, and particularly across settings, reported a wider range of externalizing, internalizing, and academic problems, than adolescents in other cluster groups. Longitudinal analyses showed support for bidirectional relationships between mutually hostile conditions and problematic adjustment. We conclude that adolescents' mutual hostility experiences are associated with profoundly problematic adjustment.

1. Introduction

Being in conflict situations with others where one is both exposed to hostility and exposing others to hostility may be one of the unhealthiest experiences of some adolescents. In bullying research, students who are both perpetrators and victims of peers' hostility, the bully-victims, consistently show more severe and widespread adjustment problems than "pure" bullies or victims (Haynie et al., 2001; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Povedano, Estévez, Martínez, & Monreal, 2012). There are indications in some recent studies that there are also high levels of adjustment problems among adolescents who are exposing others to hostility and are exposed to others' hostility in interpersonal settings (Latina & Stattin, 2016; Martínez-Ferrer & Stattin, 2016). In the present study, we propose that there are adolescents who experience mutually hostile interactions with other people in different settings – at home with parents, at school with peers and teachers, and with people in free-time. Like the bully-victims they will show a wide range of adjustment problems, particularly if they are involved in mutually hostile interactions *across* their everyday interpersonal settings. In short, being involved in mutually hostile interactions with others is presumed to be associated with a profound set of problematic adjustment problems.

Adolescents who are exposed to others' hostility report high depressive mood (for reviews, see Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011) and low self-esteem (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; for a review, see; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Exposing others to various forms of hostility is characteristic of adolescents with externalizing behavior problems (Kupersmidt

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& Coie, 1990; for a review, see; Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012). Thus, internalizing problems are primarily characteristic of young people who are exposed to others' hostility, while externalizing problems characterize young people who expose others to their hostility. But this clear differentiation between types of problems may not apply to the adolescents who are both perpetrators and the targets of others' hostility.

1.1. Bully-victims at school and being both a perpetrator and a victim in other settings

Adolescents who expose others to hostility and are themselves exposed to others' hostility have been extensively studied in bullying research. These adolescents, the bully-victims, present both the internalizing problems that are characteristic of victims of bullying, and the externalizing problems that are characteristic of bullies. For example, bully-victims show considerably higher levels of depressive mood (e.g., Kelly et al., 2015; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001; Özdemir & Stattin, 2011), behavioral misconduct (Haynie et al., 2001; Juvonen et al., 2003; Stein, Dukes, & Warren, 2007), and delinquency (Arseneault et al., 2006; Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008), and also lower academic performance and more school dissatisfaction (Arseneault et al., 2006; Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2009) than adolescents who are bullies or victims only. Also, it seems as if the adjustment problems of adolescents who are involved in mutually hostile interactions with their peers at school are greater and more widespread than those of adolescents with other hostility experiences with their peers at school (Kelly et al., 2015; Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000; Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

Two recent studies have examined the link between mutually hostile interactions and psychosocial problems in other interpersonal settings. Latina and Stattin (2016) reported that being involved in mutually hostile relationships with parents at home, and peers and teachers at school, was more detrimental with regard to self-harm than exposing others or being exposed to hostility by others only. In this study, the authors also found that the more mutually hostile contexts the adolescents were involved in, the higher were their levels of self-harm. Similarly, Martínez-Ferrer and Stattin (2016) found that many adolescents who reported a co-occurrence of high depressive mood and delinquency were both exposing others and being exposed to hostility in their relations with parents at home, peers and teachers at school, and other people encountered in leisure time. The findings were especially strong for the adolescents exposing others and being exposed by others to hostility across contexts. All this suggests that problematic adjustment is to be found among adolescents involved in mutually hostile interactions in their relationships other than with classmates in school, and the more settings in which they are involved, the poorer is their psychosocial adjustment. Overall, these findings show that profoundly problematic adjustment is not limited to bully-victims at school.

1.2. Cross-situational patterns of mutually hostile interactions

For some adolescents, the mutually hostile interactions they experience in one setting can be explained by conditions in that specific setting, and might not necessarily be connected to their hostility experiences in other settings. For example, antagonistic interactions with teachers at school, due to defiance or truancy, might not necessarily affect the degree of hostility of these adolescents' interpersonal experiences in other settings. In discussing their findings, Martínez-Ferrer and Stattin (2016) suggested that adolescents who are both exposed to others' hostility and expose others to their own hostility in several of their most important interpersonal settings may suffer from graver pathological responses to conflict situations than adolescents with context-bound experiences of mutually hostile interactions. This suggestion is in line with some previous lines of reasoning. For example, if adolescents' problematic experiences are tied to a particular everyday life context, the adolescents might cope by having more satisfying interpersonal relations in other contexts (Call & Mortimer, 2001); but, if their experiences occur in several everyday contexts, they might not have a clear escape route. Hence, a cross-setting pattern of mutual hostility may be a stronger indicator of a person's hostile behavior being characteristic of his or her way of handling conflict than that provided by setting-specific conditions.

1.3. Directions of effect

Do mutually hostile interactions increase the likelihood of later problematic adjustment, or do adjustment problems precede mutually hostile interactions? Both types of influences have been reported in the bullying literature. Arseneault et al. (2006) found that high levels of earlier externalizing, internalizing, and school adjustment problems, and a lack of pro-social behavior, predicted being a bully-victim at early school ages. Predicting future adjustment problems, Sourander et al. (2007) reported that bully-victims at age 8, were, later, by ages 18 to 23, overrepresented among individuals with psychiatric diagnoses of anxiety and antisocial personality disorders. These two studies concerned bully-victims at school. However, the question of directions of effect should be asked more generally. Is involvement in mutually hostile interactions with others in settings other than the school a consequence of prior adjustment problems, or do these problems result from involvement in mutually hostile interactions? To our knowledge, there is no study that has examined whether being involved in mutually hostile interactions with others in settings other than school is a consequence or predictor of various kinds of adjustment problems.

2. The present study

There is a lack of systematic knowledge about the link between experiencing mutually hostile interactions in various everyday settings and broader problematic adjustment among adolescents. A common denominator to the Latina and Stattin (2016) and Martínez-Ferrer and Stattin (2016) studies was the finding that mutually hostile interactions across everyday interpersonal settings