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Mutual long-term effects of school bullying, victimization, and justice sensitivity in adolescents



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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we investigate long-term relations between experiences of aggression at school and the development of justice sensitivity as a personality disposition in adolescents. We assessed justice sensitivity (from the victim, observer, and perpetrator perspective), bullying, and victimization among 565 German 12- to 18-year-olds in a one-year longitudinal study with two measurement points. Latent path analyses revealed gender differences in long-term effects of bullying and victimization on observer sensitivity and victim sensitivity. Experiences of victimization at T1 predicted an increase in victim sensitivity among girls and a decrease in victim sensitivity among boys. Bullying behavior at T1 predicted an increase in victim sensitivity among boys and a decrease in observer sensitivity among girls. We did not find long-term effects of justice sensitivity on bullying and victimization. Our findings indicate that experiences of bullying and victimization have gender-specific influences on the development of moral personality dispositions in adolescents.

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Aggression in school is a serious problem, particularly if it occurs repeatedly—as in bullying. Bullying is defined as intentional, repeated aggressive acts against victims who cannot easily defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). Both bullying behavior and victimization from bullying have been linked to impaired well-being and mental health problems (Rigby, 2003). Little, however, is known about the potential long-term effects of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence on the development of moral personality dispositions, such as the dispositional sensitivity to injustice, or “justice sensitivity.”

Justice sensitivity is a personality disposition that captures individual differences in the frequency and intensity of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to perceived injustice (Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005; Schmitt, Neumann, & Montada, 1995). It has been related to a number of pro- and anti-social behaviors in experimental and in cross-sectional studies (e.g., Bondü & Krahé, 2015; Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005), but we do not know how justice sensitivity impacts the likelihood of being a bully or being victimized by bullies in the long run. In addition, there are no empirical studies about how bullying or experiences of victimization—that often carry aspects of injustice—may affect the development of justice sensitivity over time.

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The present study, therefore, examined the mutual effects of bullying, victimization, and justice sensitivity in a sample of German children and adolescents in a one-year longitudinal study with two points of measurement. It extends the present knowledge on the link between antisocial behavior and justice sensitivity by considering repeated forms of aggression such as bullying, by taking into account victimization, and by employing longitudinal data.

Bullying and victimization

Bullying and victimization are frequent phenomena among children and adolescents. A study including more than 200,000 students at the ages of 11–15 years from 40 Western countries revealed that 12.6% could be identified as perpetrators of bullying (“bullies”), 10.7% as victims of bullying, and 3.6% as both bullies and victims (Craig et al., 2009). This is alarming because bullying and victimization are severe risk factors for a variety of adverse short- and long-term outcomes: Bullying has been linked to antisocial behavior, low prosocial behavior, school failure, or substance abuse, whereas victimization predicts psychosomatic complaints, school absenteeism, low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness (Rigby, 2003), and the development of depressive symptoms (Tofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011).

Despite abundant research on the consequences of bullying and victimization, research in this area has mainly used personality dispositions to predict who is vulnerable and who is prone to bullying and victimization (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012). For instance, De Bolle and Tackett (2013) showed that bullying and victimization in children with a mean age of about 11 years were predicted by an “undercontrolled” personality profile consisting of high Extraversion and Imagination (close to Openness in adults), high Conscientiousness and Benevolence (close to Agreeableness in adults) and moderate emotional stability (i.e., Neuroticism) as well as by a “mixed” personality profile consisting of low scores on all “Big Five” traits. The present study also takes into consideration the opposite view: it investigates how bullying and victimization experiences can shape the development of personality dispositions—specifically, justice sensitivity – as well.

Justice sensitivity as a multidimensional personality disposition

Individuals differ in how easily they perceive injustice and how strongly they react to perceived injustice (Major & Deaux, 1982; Schmitt et al., 1995). Schmitt et al. (2005, 2010) developed the Justice Sensitivity Inventory to assess individual differences in justice sensitivity from different perspectives: those of a victim (*victim sensitivity*, e.g., “It bothers me when others receive something that ought to be mine”), an observer (*observer sensitivity*, e.g., “It bothers me when someone gets something they don’t deserve”), and a perpetrator (*perpetrator sensitivity*, e.g., “It gets me down when I take something from someone else that I don’t deserve”).¹ Highly victim-sensitive individuals experience anger and moral outrage when they feel that others (could) behave unfairly towards them or (might) exploit them. Highly observer-sensitive individuals tend to feel indignant and may retaliate against the perpetrator and/or compensate the victim when witnessing injustice; highly perpetrator-sensitive individuals tend to feel guilty, to compensate the victim, or to punish themselves when they—willfully or not—treated others unfairly (Schmitt et al., 2005, 2010). Justice sensitivity has been shown to constitute a narrow, but discrete personality trait that cannot sufficiently be explained by broader personality traits or combinations of these traits (Schmitt et al., 2010). It has also been distinguished from similar traits, such as rejection sensitivity (e.g., Bondü & Elsner 2015; Bondü & Richter, 2015), or other traits associated with aggressive behavior, such as trait anger or a dispositional hostile attribution bias (Bondü & Richter, under review).

Observer and perpetrator sensitivity have been shown to predict moral, prosocial, and cooperative behaviors in both real-world situations and economic games in adult samples (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004; Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2009; Gollwitzer et al., 2005; Rothmund, Baumert, & Zinkernagel, 2014). In studies with children and adolescents, perpetrator sensitivity negatively predicted self-reported aggression, teacher-rated aggression, and conduct problems and positively predicted prosocial behavior, whereas observer sensitivity negatively predicted teacher-rated aggression only (Bondü & Elsner, 2015; Bondü & Esser, 2015; Bondü & Krahé, 2015).

Given these effects, one could assume that observer- and perpetrator-sensitive individuals have higher moral concerns for justice (Schmitt et al., 2005), more social competencies, such as empathy, and higher moral reasoning (Bondü & Elsner, 2015). Empirical results support this assumption (Rothmund, Stavrova, Schlösser, & Klein, under review; Rothmund, Männel, & Altschner, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2005). High social and moral competencies prevent individuals from behaving aggressively (e.g., Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) and—because aggressive behavior is associated with victimization by peers (Card & Little, 2006)—also from being victimized. Prosocial behavior and moral emotions associated with observer and perpetrator sensitivity should, therefore, prevent peer problems and protect children from both becoming victimizers or being victimized (Bondü & Elsner, 2015).

Victim sensitivity, on the other hand, has been shown to predict antisocial and uncooperative behavior in socially uncertain situations (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004; Gollwitzer, Rothmund, Pfeiffer, & Ensenbach, 2009; Rothmund, Gollwitzer, & Klimmt, 2011; Rothmund, Gollwitzer, Bender, & Klimmt, 2015) as well as forms and functions of aggression in adults (Bondü & Richter, 2015) and in children and adolescents (Bondü & Krahé, 2015). The negative effects of victim sensitivity have been

¹ There is a fourth justice sensitivity perspective, the “beneficiary” who profits from injustice without causing it. We did, however, not examine beneficiary justice sensitivity and therefore do not go into more detail here.

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