



Peer victimization and subsequent disruptive behavior in school: The protective functions of anger regulation coping



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ABSTRACT

Peer victimization is linked to adjustment problems in youth, including aggressive behavior, yet not all victimized youth are aggressive. The present study investigated whether youth's anger regulation coping might attenuate the positive association between peer victimization and subsequent aggressive behavior. Longitudinal data from 485 7th-grade students (55% female, mean age = 12.84 years) and their teachers were collected in the fall and six months later. Teacher ratings of youth aggressive behavior at follow-up were the primary outcome, with statistical adjustments for baseline aggressive behavior and demographics. Results from multilevel models showed significant interactive effects of baseline anger regulation and peer victimization on residualized teacher-rated aggressive behaviors that were consistent with the hypothesis that anger regulation played a protective role: under high levels of peer victimization, youth with higher levels of anger regulation displayed lower levels of aggressive behavior than their counterparts with lower levels of anger regulation. These findings suggest that targeting and improving students' ability to regulate their anger may be protective in the face of peer victimization and reduce subsequent aggressive behavior.

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1. Introduction

Peer victimization is a significant public health problem that contributes to psychological, social, and school maladjustment problems in children and adolescents, including aggression (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2007; Iyer, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eisenberg, & Thompson, 2010; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Ostrov, 2010; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Sullivan, Farrell, & Klierwer, 2006). Youth can be victimized overtly (e.g., being hit) and relationally (e.g., being excluded) (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Between 40% and 80% of school-aged youth have experienced peer victimization; 10–15% of youth are victimized chronically (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Teen suicides that are linked to victimization have increased public awareness of the seriousness of this issue, and many schools have adopted anti-violence programs as a result. However, the focus of these programs has been on primary prevention – reducing the

incidence of peer victimization; many programs do not address secondary prevention – coping in ways that decrease the likelihood of subsequent victimization (Terranova, 2009). Toward that end, it is important to identify factors that could potentially protect youth from negative outcomes related to victimization. One potential factor is anger regulation, which can influence how youth respond to victimization and whether they become aggressive themselves.

Youth respond to victimization in different ways with two types of response profiles possibly perpetuating the cycle of violence (Hanish & Guerra, 2004). Passive and unassertive victims are more likely to be depressed and socially anxious with lower rates of self-esteem and higher rates of aggression inhibitions (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). Passive victims are seen by their aggressors as non-threatening and tend to experience chronic victimization. On the other end of the spectrum are aggressive or provocative victims, who are more likely to be disruptive, argumentative, hot-tempered, and to retaliate against their aggressor (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2001). These aggressive victims in particular are at high risk for victimization due to their overly reactive behavior (Pope & Bierman, 1999; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). The current study focuses on this latter group who become more aggressive in the face of violence because they are not only increasing their risk of being

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victimized, but they also pose a risk to others as a result of their aggressive behaviors.

One reason that victims of violence may become aggressive is that experiences of victimization can undermine the development of effective emotion management and coping strategies in some youth (Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, & Flynn, 2009). Emotion regulation includes the ability to evaluate, monitor, and modify emotional reactions and is a vital component of communicating, influencing, and empathizing with others (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). Experiences of victimization may contribute to restraint problems in some adolescents by overwhelming them with hostile or retaliatory feelings that cause them to behave in an angry, defensive way (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Jaggi, 2013; Raine et al., 2006). Victimized adolescents report significantly more self-restraint problems, particularly an inability to control anger (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

To the extent that victimized youth are better able to regulate their anger, they might not become aggressors themselves. This logic is supported by research linking greater anger regulation coping to lower levels of physical aggression with peers (Sullivan, Helms, Kliever, & Goodman, 2010). Based on this previous research, we predict that greater anger regulation coping would be protective against increased levels of aggression among victimized youth. That is, the positive relation between violence exposure and subsequent aggressive behavior will be attenuated among youth who have better anger regulation coping skills relative to youth who have poorer anger regulation coping skills. Protective factors reinforce healthy development by counteracting the effects of risk factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Protective effects would be indicated by a significant interactive effect of anger regulation coping and peer victimization on teacher-reported aggressive behaviors. This study contributes to the literature by examining longitudinal associations between peer victimization and teacher-rated aggressive behavior, and by examining the moderating role of anger regulation. Strengths of the study include a large and diverse sample of adolescents, a longitudinal design and utilization of youth and teacher report.

We hypothesized that: (a) peer victimization would be positively associated with teacher-reported youth aggressive behaviors at baseline and follow-up, and (b) a higher level of anger regulation would attenuate the positive relation between peer victimization and teacher-reported youth aggressive behaviors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and setting

This study used survey data from a large multi-site randomized controlled trial designed to reduce the adverse effects of exposure to community and peer violence. In the trial, the experimental group wrote expressively on six occasions about their different experiences with violence, whereas the control group wrote about six neutral topics (i.e., healthy diet, healthy advertising to teens, daily physical activity, sleep and relaxation habits, school and community supported physical activity). Research assistants from the university read the instructions aloud to the students while they followed along in a booklet. The study was implemented in three middle schools: one urban school in Philadelphia, PA, and two from suburbs of Richmond, VA. Two of the schools had a high percentage of students from low-income families with between 61% (Richmond school 1) and 81% (Philadelphia) meeting the eligibility requirement for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. The second Richmond-area school served middle income families, with just 6% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. All 7th-grade classrooms in the three schools participated in the trial.

Of the 1280 students eligible to participate, 999 received parental consent and provided assent to participate (78% accrual rate). Only adolescents who participated in the control arm of the intervention were included in the current analysis. The present longitudinal analysis used data from baseline (pre-intervention) and the first follow-up (wave 2, post-intervention), six months later. These data were collected in one academic year, so they include the same teacher raters at baseline and wave 2. Participants included 498 seventh-grade youth (55% female). The majority self-identified as white (47%) followed by Latino/Hispanic (22%), black/African American (16%), biracial/multiracial (15%), Asian (6%) or American Indian/Alaskan Native/Pacific Islander (1%). The mean age of the sample was 12.84 ($SD = .44$). Thirteen adolescents were lost to follow-up (wave 2) due to relocation away from the school district, lowering the total sample at wave 2 to 485. There were no differences between the 13 students and the rest of the sample based on race, sex, school, or age.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Peer victimization

Peer victimization was measured at baseline using the relational and overt victimization subscales of the Problem Behavior Frequency Scales (PBFS). The PBFS is a valid and reliable measure (Farrell, Kung, White, & Valois, 2000). The 12-item measure assesses the frequency (1 = never, 2 = 1–2 times, 3 = 3–5 times, 4 = 6–9 times, 5 = 10–19 times, 6 = 20 or more times) of victimization by peers in the previous 30 days and consists of two subscales: relational victimization and overt victimization. The relational victimization subscale assesses peer threats or attempts at harming the youth's peer relationships (e.g., "Had someone spread a false rumor about you"). The overt victimization subscale assesses peer threats or attempts to harm the youth's physical well-being (e.g., "Been hit by another kid"). Mean item scores were computed for analyses, with a maximum score of 6. The two subscales were highly correlated ($r = .62$) and when analyses were run separately the models were identical. In order to simplify interpretation and results, the subscales were combined into one scale of total peer victimization. Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .86$ for the combined scale.

2.2.2. Anger regulation

The anger regulation coping scale from the Children's Anger Management Scale (CAMS) was administered at baseline to assess the extent that youth can control and deal with their anger (Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). The scale is reliable and valid (Zeman et al., 2002). The five-item scale measures how often in the prior two weeks (1 = hardly ever, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often) youth regulated their anger (e.g., "I tried to calmly deal with what was making me feel mad"). A summed score was used in the analyses. The possible maximum score was 15 with higher scores indicating a higher level of anger regulation. Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .83$.

2.2.3. Teacher-reported aggression

The Teacher Report Form (TRF) was completed by teachers to assess aggressive and rule-breaking behaviors in students at baseline and wave 2. The TRF is a reliable and valid measure that is part of the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (Achenbach, 1991). The 20-item aggressive behavior subscale of the TRF assessed whether the teacher observed aggressive behaviors in their students (e.g., "physically attacks people"). Mean item scores were computed for the subscale, with a possible maximum of 3. Cronbach's alpha for aggressive behavior in the current sample was $\alpha = .97$ at both measurement waves.

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