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Facial attractiveness as a moderator of the association between social and physical aggression and popularity in adolescents

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Abstract

This study examined the relations between facial attractiveness, aggression, and popularity in adolescence to determine whether facial attractiveness would buffer against the negative effects of aggression on popularity. We collected ratings of facial attractiveness from standardized photographs, and teachers provided information on adolescents' social aggression, physical aggression, and popularity for 143 seventh graders (70 girls). Regression analyses indicated that facial attractiveness moderated the relations between both types of aggression and popularity. Aggression was associated with a reduction in popularity for adolescents low on facial attractiveness. However, popularity did not decrease as a function of aggression for adolescents high on facial attractiveness. Aggressors with high facial attractiveness may experience fewer negative consequences to their social standing, thus contributing to higher overall rates of aggression in school settings.

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1. Introduction

Although many children who behave aggressively are disliked by their peers, some aggressive youth are able to maintain high social status in their peer ecologies (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Coie & Koepl, 1990; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000).

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Historically, researchers have tended to view aggressive youth as having low social status; however, recent evidence suggests that some aggressors are regarded favorably by their peers and are prominently involved in their peer ecologies (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). In acknowledging the heterogeneity in the social status of aggressive youth, some researchers have categorized children into one of four categories: popular–aggressive, popular–nonaggressive, nonpopular–aggressive, and nonpopular–nonaggressive (e.g., Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006). Aggressive–popular youth are often perceived as *being cool*, a measure of social status, by their classmates (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, et al., 2006; Rodkin, Farmer, Van Acker, et al., 2006).

Recent attention has been devoted to identifying youth who are both popular and aggressive (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). Educators and psychologists may more easily identify aggressors with low social status who are rejected by their peers than aggressors who enjoy high status and are actively involved in their peer networks. It is important that popular aggressors not go undetected as these children are often prominent members of socially connected groups who are able to influence the norms of their peer ecology. Aggressive behavior on the part of this group calls into question the school-sanctioned notion to refrain from aggressive conduct, and may even encourage aggressive behavior in other youth (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, et al., 2006; Rodkin, Farmer, Van Acker, et al., 2006; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Rodkin et al. suggest that “reputational support among peers for aggressive children can subvert intervention attempts and is a serious international concern” (p. 176).

Given the influence aggressive youth may have on their peer group, it is important to understand why some aggressors are perceived as unpopular whereas other aggressors enjoy high social status (Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Children who are both aggressive and popular may possess certain characteristics that buffer against the negative effects of aggression. Rodkin et al. (2000) found two subtypes of popular boys based on their analyses of teacher ratings. The group that they termed “model boys” was rated high on popularity and prosocial behavior, and the group that they termed “tough boys” was rated high on popularity and aggressive behavior. Both subtypes of popular boys were rated high on Olympian characteristics, which are operationally defined as being “good looking”, “good at sports”, and “wins a lot” (Rodkin et al., 2000; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, et al., 2006; Rodkin, Farmer, Van Acker, et al., 2006; Xie, Cairns & Cairns, 1999). Alternatively, those boys who were aggressive and unpopular received low ratings on Olympian characteristics.

Similarly, Vaillancourt and Hymel (2006) examined the moderating effect of a composite measure of peer-rated positive qualities including attractiveness, sense of style, humor, athletic ability, and special talents. The composite measure of positive characteristics moderated the relationship between aggression and popularity; overtly and relationally aggressive adolescents were perceived as more popular if they had high ratings on the composite measure of peer-rated positive characteristics as compared to low ratings on the composite measure of peer-rated positive characteristics.

The work of Rodkin et al. (2000) and Vaillancourt and Hymel (2006) suggest that possessing positive qualities helps to buffer against the negative effects of aggression on popularity. Facial attractiveness may be one important characteristic that moderates the relationship between aggression and social status. Attractiveness is positively associated with popularity (Eder, 1985; Xie, Li, Boucher, Hutchins, & Cairns, 2006), and individuals

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