



Revenge is seductive, if not sweet: Why friends *matter* for prevention efforts



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ABSTRACT

A surprising omission of much research on bullying is the role of retaliation, a common response to bullying that predicts increased victimization. Retaliation appears to be a ubiquitous feature of human society and may be used to justify bullying. Yet bullying evaluations rarely measure whether programs have reduced retaliation. This paper examines the utility of multiple theoretical frames for understanding the implications of retaliation for bullying prevention. It summarizes evolutionary, cultural, and developmental affordances, and presents a recursive model of bystander–friend reciprocity. The authors argue that adolescents influence retaliation in their friends by contributing to emotion regulation, advising responses to bullying, and by serving as mediators or proxy retaliators. The help they give friends is posited to engender powerful feelings of pride and other identity-relevant feelings that encourage future assistance, and elicit reciprocal feelings of obligation and influence. Implications of the model for prevention efforts are detailed.

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Revenge has long fascinated humankind, perhaps because of the ambivalence it arouses. Biblical quotations provide contrasting views of retaliation (“fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth,” Leviticus 24:19 versus “To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also,” Luke 6:29). Literature abounds with stories of damage inflicted on the self and others by the dogged pursuit of revenge (e.g., *Moby Dick*). Film writers and video game designers often celebrate retaliation, providing scenarios of prior injustice to help disengage viewers’ moral standards and repugnance in the face of violence and mayhem (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). Given the prevalence of revenge in popular media, it is not surprising that the most common school yard aggression in early adolescence is retaliatory (Frey, Newman, & Onyewuenyi, 2014).

In the research literature, the term retaliatory aggression appears to be used interchangeably with reactive aggression, and retaliation with revenge. Retaliation is an aggressive act committed in response to a threat to a person’s physical, social, or emotional well-being. Such actions also threaten self-identity by making the person appear weak or vulnerable, which leads to increased aggressiveness in response to threat (Richardson, Vandenberg, & Humphries, 1986). Some threats explicitly target one’s personal or social identity (e.g., insults, rumors). Identity threats appear to elicit particularly strong retaliation (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993), although threats to friends and relations may also

elicit strong responses, i.e., third-party or proxy retaliation (Krienen, Tu, & Buckner, 2010). Threats can be real or imagined. In either case, they elicit a sense of injustice, a perceived need to re-establish the perceived rightful order by paying the offender back. Thus, the constructs of retaliation and revenge overlap with punishment. Referring to the spread of aggression throughout a community, Sultkin (2013) points out that the best predictor of aggression is a prior aggressive event.

Whether or not victims retaliate may have profound effects on the dynamics of bullying, and on victim adjustment. Despite the role of revenge in the transmission and escalation of aggression (McAuliffe, Hubbard, Rubin, Morrow, & Dearing, 2007), bullying researchers have paid it scant attention. An electronic search using *PsycInfo* uncovered 2932 manuscripts when the search included the words bully, bullying, or bullies in the title. Adding the terms retaliation, retaliatory or revenge, the search generated only 16 articles. Similarly, a search for victim, victims, or victimization revealed 6428 publications, but only 20 when retaliation, retaliatory or revenge were included in the title. Further, third-party punishment or retaliation has seldom been addressed by bullying researchers (but see Craig & Pepler, 1995; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), although some have speculated that allies may retaliate on behalf of friends (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Ttofi, Farrington, & Baldry, 2008). Bystanders include disinterested witnesses. When we refer to bystanders in this paper, however, we mean those who are friends, allies, and supporters of young people who have been bullied or experienced similar social threats.

This paper examines other neglected aspects of current bullying research: cultural norms of reciprocity, bystander influence on victim

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reactions, and identity formation. Integrating theory in these arenas may suggest avenues for improving intervention practice during adolescence, a time when program efficacy appears to decline (Yeager, Fong, & Espelage, 2014). To do so, we first provide an overview of conceptual distinctions and overlap between reactive aggression, proactive aggression and bullying. We then consider theoretical perspectives that are particularly relevant for a proposed reciprocity model of bystander influence on responses to bullying. These encompass distal factors such as evolutionary affordances, and cultural allegiance to honor codes (see Fig. 1) as well as proximal influences, such as the impact of personal retaliation norms and identity formation during adolescence. Finally, we draw from bystander research to examine friends' role in retaliation and pacific responses to bullying. The proposed reciprocity model posits that adolescent identity formation is a key mechanism in bystander intervention on behalf of a victim. We suggest that by providing resources (as advisor, supporter, mediator, or proxy retaliator) to friends who have experienced a social threat, bystanders (1) bolster their own self-identities with feelings of pride, belonging, agency, and purpose; and (2) increase their influence on the victim in an expanding web of gratitude and obligation. In each section, we describe implications of theory for bullying research and practice.

Theoretical Distinctions and Overlap: Bullying and Aggression

Advances in understanding bullying and aggression have been limited by the existence of parallel tracks in the research. Until Olweus (1991) helped focus attention on bullying, most developmental research and prevention efforts were based on social cognitive deficit models of aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Bullying research has brought a much-needed focus on maladaptive relationships (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 1999) and the social ecology (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Yet research on retaliation has usually been confined to describing victims' actions, without considering contributing mechanisms. In order to understand the role of retaliation in bullying relationships and adolescent development, we start with models of aggression that include both bullying and retaliation.

Social cognitive theory has provided influential models of aggression development. The social Information Processing (SIP) model theorizes two functional types of aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1991). The first, *proactive aggression*, is motivated by the goal of obtaining rewards (e.g., resources, social status, power) and is characterized as cold-blooded, goal-driven, and controlled. The second,

reactive aggression, is a response aimed as escaping or changing an aversive situation. It is characterized as hot-headed, impulsive, and dysregulated. Considerable evidence attests to differences in the behaviors, beliefs and processing characteristics associated with the two types (Card & Little, 2006; Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010). Bullying is aggression that repeatedly targets individuals of lesser power in order to gain power and resources, and is most closely linked to proactive aggression (Dodge, 1991; Fossati et al., 2009; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Although some individuals primarily display either reactive or proactive aggression, others exhibit high levels of both (Frey et al., 2014). Meta-analysis shows moderate to high correlations between the two types (Card & Little, 2006).

A potential contributor to this overlap, and a limitation of the SIP model is the confounding of regulatory processes and goals. A particular source of confusion is the categorization of retaliatory actions that have the well-regulated quality of proactive aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Dodge, 1991; Frey et al., 2014; Rudolph, Abaied, Flynn, Sugimura, & Agoston, 2011). For example, when revenge is delayed until the avenger holds the upper hand, the hostile goal is paired with strategic thinking. In response to this limitation, some investigators have proposed a model based on two orthogonal dimensions (Howard, 2011; Runions, 2013). The first dimension refers to goals: either to obtain rewards or seek relief from an aversive situation. The second refers to the degree of self-control: impulsive, emotionally dysregulated actions versus strategic and controlled. The resulting four types include two that correspond to classic definitions of proactive and reactive aggression. The other two include impulsive attempts to gain rewards, and controlled acts of hostility.

Does bullying include more than one of these four types of aggression? We can only speculate, because commonly accepted definitions of bullying rest on power inequities and the chronicity of aggression. Bullies do seek rewards, however, and may use power effectively. Thus, controlled reward-seeking is likely to be an appropriate category for much of their aggression. Long-standing bullying relationships, however, do not require extended appraisal of relative power. Impulsively seizing an opportunity to generate excitement at the expense of a hapless victim may result in aggressive "jokes" that appear devoid of hostility despite obvious harm (Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003). Further, a single event can reflect a blend of emotional escape and reward (dominance) goals, blurring distinctions between reactive and proactive aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Dodge, 1991).

Goal pursuit

Dominance, like competence and empowerment, is an example of an agentic goal. Agentic goals and communion-belonging goals form two fundamental dimensions of human striving (Ojanen, Gronroos, & Salmivalli, 2005) and self-identity (McAdams, 2001). Youth who bully or are otherwise proactively aggressive are strongly motivated to dominate others (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Jealousy experienced when a peer attains a higher status may even be construed as a provocation (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011).

Encountering threats to self-identity or barriers to dominance, people may pursue revenge (de Castro, Brendgen, Van Boxtel, Vitaro, & Schaeper, 2007; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008) as a proximal goal (Troop-Gordon & Asher, 2005) intended to ameliorate an aversive situation in two ways. First, retaliation may serve dominance goals by re-establishing the desired social hierarchy (de Castro, Verhulst, & Runions, 2012). It may provide a venue to showcase dominance over a previously victorious adversary. Impulsive retaliators may have similar goals, but with less likelihood of success than controlled retaliators. Second, merely contemplating revenge may help aggressive youth escape unpleasant emotions (Arsenio, Adams, & Gold, 2009; Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, & Dweck, 2011) by enhancing feelings of power and dominance (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Amodio, &

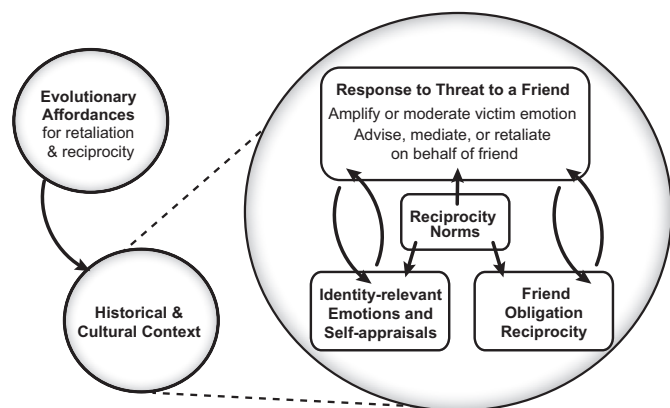


Fig. 1. A culturally-informed reciprocity model of peer support and influence following threat. Distal contributions to bystander behaviors include evolutionary affordances and cultural norms regarding retaliation and reciprocity. These pervade every level of the social ecology. Proximal influences in the exploded view include two hypothesized recursive processes. Pride and enhanced feelings of connection, agency and purpose encourage bystanders to become advisors, mediators and proxy retaliators when friends are targeted. Feelings of connection and obligation on the part of the threat target encourage reciprocal behavior on behalf of the former bystander, when he or she is the object of threat.

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