



Victimization as a cause of delinquency: The role of depression and gender

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ABSTRACT

Victimization as a correlate of delinquency has been largely neglected in the criminological literature, despite research on Agnew's general strain theory (GST) suggesting that victimization is a type of strain likely to cause delinquency (Agnew, 2002). This study examined the role of depression and gender as potentially indispensable mechanisms in the victimization–delinquency relationship. Findings indicated that victimization has a positive effect on both delinquency and depression, and consistent with a GST explanation, the connection between victimization and delinquency is most pronounced for males with trait depression. This study added to the GST literature by distinguishing between trait and state emotion and by delineating GST predictions regarding each emotional form.

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Introduction

While studies have shown a clear empirical link between criminal behavior and victimization (Esbenson & Huizinga, 1991; Fagan, Piper, & Cheng, 1987), there is relatively little focus in the criminological literature on victimization as a cause of crime. Much of the victimization research has highlighted the homogeneity of offender and victim characteristics and suggested that victims and offenders may not represent two truly distinct groups (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1990; Singer, 1981; Wolfgang, 1958). The literature examining a potentially causal relationship between offending and victimization has tended to approach criminal behavior as an antecedent to victimization (see Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1998; Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005; Sampson & Lauritsen, 1990). In recent years, however, a small literature has begun to explicitly examine the effect of victimization on offending using Agnew's general strain theory (GST) and found a positive effect (Hay & Evans, 2006; Moon, Blurton, & McCluskey, 2008; Ostrowsky & Messner, 2005; Piquero & Sealock, 2004; Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2006). This study added to the GST literature by testing the extent to which victimization increases delinquency among a sample of juveniles. It further explored the role of depression and gender in the GST process by distinguishing between state and trait depression, outlining GST predictions for each, and testing for effects separately by gender.

Victimization and delinquency

Empirical evidence has established that individuals engaging in criminal behavior are at a higher risk of victimization (Esbenson &

Huizinga, 1991; Lauritsen et al., 1991; Paetsch & Bertrand, 1999). Conventional explanation of this link has been through routine activities theory. Individuals engaging in criminal behavior are more likely to be perceived as suitable targets and find themselves in environments lacking capable guardians and are therefore more likely to be victimized (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1998; Nofziger & Kurtz, 2005). Additional research has identified a reciprocal relationship between victimization and crime (Eitle & Turner, 2002; Lauritsen et al., 1991; Shaffer & Ruback, 2002). Yet, existing research has often failed to identify potential theoretical explanations of victimization as a cause of offending. A notable exception is the argument put forth by Singer (1986) and explored by later researchers (e.g., Baron, Kennedy, & Forde, 2001; Brezina, 1998; Fagan et al., 1987) proposing a subcultural explanation. Violence is learned and reinforced in subcultural environments, thus the experience of victimization may be viewed as a direct exposure and reinforcement of offending (Fagan et al., 1987; Singer, 1986).

Empirical studies finding victimization to be an antecedent of crime have often failed to test theoretical explanations for the link. Both Lauritsen et al. (1991) and Shaffer and Ruback (2002) found significantly increased likelihood of victimization among juveniles involved in delinquent lifestyles, and they interpreted this as a routine activities process. Yet, the authors also found reciprocal effects such that victimization significantly increased delinquency, and neither study addressed potential causal mechanisms for this finding. Eitle and Turner (2002) further found that direct victimization was a significant predictor of offending. An evaluation of causal mechanism was beyond the scope of the authors' study; they acknowledged the power of several competing theories, including Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (GST) to account for this relationship.

Agnew's GST provides a particularly compelling theoretical explanation of the process by which victimization may increase

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delinquent behavior. Agnew (1992, 2006) posits that strain, in the form of negative stimuli, the loss of positive stimuli, or the failure to achieve positively valued goals, will increase the likelihood of offending. In recent explications of strain theory, Agnew (2006) suggests that strain may increase the likelihood of offending in two ways: (1) individuals may respond to a specific strain with a particular emotional state, which increases the likelihood of criminal coping to alleviate the strain, and (2) chronic or repeated strains may create a predisposition to offending, by increasing negative emotional traits that are conducive to crime. As such, Agnew (2006) suggests that negative emotion may play a mediating role in the GST model in the form of “state emotion” as well as a moderating role in the form of “trait emotion.” State emotion reflects an individual’s emotional state at a particular time (e.g., sadness in response to a breakup) and may therefore account for the relationship between strain and offending. Trait emotion reflects an individual’s predisposition to experience an emotional state (e.g., the tendency to experience depression) and may therefore condition the relationship between strain and offending (Agnew, 2006; Mazerolle, Piquero, & Capowich, 2003; also see Deffenbacher et al., 1996; Spielberger, 1999).

To the extent, then, that victimization results in negative emotional states or traits, Agnew’s GST would predict that victimized individuals would be more likely than non-victimized individuals to offend. Victimization research has found that victimization is likely to result in negative emotion, particularly depression. In a meta-analytic review of nearly two decades of research on the relationship between peer victimization and psychosocial maladjustment, Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that victimized juveniles tended to be more depressed than their non-victimized peers. Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor (1995) found that violently victimized juveniles were twice as likely to report recent experience of sadness. Later research by Boney-McCoy and Finkelhor (1996) further found that the relationship between children’s victimization at Time 1 and their depressive symptoms at Time 2 remained even when controlling for preexisting depression. Additional research indicated that the effect of victimization on depression persisted; peer victimization was connected to both concurrent psychiatric symptoms and future psychiatric symptoms (Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000).

Numerous studies have identified victimization as a source of strain (e.g., Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000; Wallace, Patchin, & May, 2005), and Agnew (2001) found that physical peer victimization was a source of strain that resulted in delinquency. Accordingly, Agnew (2002, 2006) has highlighted physical victimization as among the types of strain that are most likely to cause delinquency and suggested that future GST research examine the role of negative emotion and gender in the relationship between victimization and delinquency.

Victimization, depression, and delinquency

Previous tests of GST have focused on anger as the primary negative emotion in the causal mechanism because anger tends to energize the individual and reduce inhibitions, and because anger has been linked to delinquency (Agnew, 1985; Broidy, 2001; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997). For example, in an exploration of victimization, anger, and GST, Hay and Evans (2006) found that victimization significantly increased the likelihood of delinquency, and this relationship was partially mediated by anger. Yet, negative emotions other than anger—such as depression—have also been identified as both an affective response to strain (Brezina, 1996) and as a potential motivator for delinquent behavior (Bao, Haas, & Pi, 2004; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Ostrowsky & Messner, 2005; Piquero & Sealock, 2004) and may significantly affect the relationship between victimization and delinquency.

Most existing GST research on depression has examined whether depression mediates the relationship between strain and offending. Sigfusdottir, Farkas, and Silver (2004) found that, while forms of

family conflict did increase the experience of depression, depression did not mediate the relationship between family conflict and delinquency when controlling for anger. In a later study examining the relationship between sexual abuse and offending, Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, Gudjonsson, and Sigurdsson (2008) found that depression did not mediate the relationship for girls, although there was a weak effect for boys. Among a sample of Chinese students, Bao et al. (2004) found that depression mediated the effect of negative relations on minor school-based deviance, but not for violent or property offenses. Drapela (2006) found that measures of despair did not mediate the relationship between a form of family conflict and drug use. In an explicit consideration of victimization and depression, Piquero and Sealock (2004) found physical abuse to be significantly related to increased depression among males, although the association was not present for females, and depression was not linked to delinquent behavior. Ostrowsky and Messner (2005) examined the effect of a variety of strain measures, including victimization, on delinquency and found victimization significantly increased both property and violent offending. They further found that depression mediated this effect, for males [the gender implications of the above findings will be considered in more detail below].

The above findings are inconsistent but show little support for depression as a mediating mechanism, with the exception of Sigfusdottir et al. (2008) and Ostrowsky and Messner (2005) who found significant mediating effects for males only. This suggests the need for additional research on the role of depression in GST, generally, as well as in the victimization and delinquency relationship. Limited support for the mediating effect of depression may simply reflect that, unlike anger, depression reduces energy and the desire to act (Agnew, 1992, 2006; Broidy, 2001; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997). Depression may therefore be less likely to motivate delinquency as an immediate response to strain and more likely to moderate the relationship between strain and delinquency. If depression alters an individual’s perception of the world such that they feel they have little to lose, this may reduce social control or foster the social learning of crime, thereby increasing the likelihood of delinquent responses to strain over time (Agnew, 2006; Obeidallah & Earls, 1999).

The inconsistent findings above may also be due to an incongruity between the theoretical predictions of GST and the measures used to test it. All the above analyses, including Piquero and Sealock (2004) and Ostrowsky and Messner (2005), used measures of trait negative emotion to test for mediating effects, despite GST’s assertion that state negative emotion mediates the relationship between strain and offending (Agnew, 2006). It is difficult to test the relationship between state depression and delinquency, as data sets tend not to measure an individual’s level of depression at the time they engage in delinquency but rather offer conventional depression scales. Such measures reflect respondents’ tendency to respond to events in a particular way across a period of time, rather than their emotional response to a specific strain at one point in time; this, therefore, is a measure of trait emotion.¹ Recent research has advised against using trait emotion as a proxy for state emotion, as it is likely to attenuate the relationship between emotion and offending (Agnew, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2003).

As described above, Agnew (2006) suggests that negative trait emotion may play a role in the GST process, by moderating the strain and offending relationship. Researchers have demonstrated this process with trait anger, finding those high in trait anger more likely than others to respond to strain with crime (see Agnew, 1985; Brezina, 1998; Hay, 2003; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1997; Mazerolle et al., 2003; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). Though support has been found for the moderating effect of trait emotion, in general, the moderating effect of trait depression has received little attention. In a test of a range of conditioning variables identified as salient in GST research, Johnson and Morris (2008) found that depression had a significant, but weak, moderating effect on the relationship between victimization and delinquency; the moderating effect was only present for males.

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