Patterns of peer- and teacher-rated aggression, victimization, and prosocial behavior in an urban, predominantly African American preadolescent sample: Associations with peer-perceived characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated peer-perceived social/reputational correlates of patterns of aggression, victimization, and prosocial behavior. Participants were a predominantly African-American (i.e., 87%) sample of 320 fourth and fifth graders (45% male, Mean age = 10.4 years) attending six urban public elementary schools. Using latent profile analysis, profiles of peer-perceived and teacher-perceived aggressive, victimized, and prosocial youth were identified. These latent profiles were then compared on a range of peer-perceived social/reputational characteristics. Results indicated that teachers and peers identified similar profiles of normative and prosocial students. However, whereas peers distinguished between aggressive and victimized profiles, the teacher-identified victimized profile was also perceived as aggressive. Results also indicated that there was modest agreement between peers and teachers about who was involved in peer victimization. Findings underscore the importance of including both informants in efforts to identify youth involved in peer victimization.

1. Introduction

Peer victimization, defined as aggressive actions taken by one or more peers (perpetrators) with the specific intention of inflicting physical or psychological pain or injury on a designated victim (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999), is common. Thirty to 60% of school-age youth report being the victim (Card & Hodges, 2008) and 25–35% report perpetrating peer victimization within a school year (Nansel et al., 2001; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). These aggressive acts primarily take two forms, namely overt aggression, which includes hitting, pushing, threatening and name-calling, and relational aggression, which includes intentionally damaging the victim's peer relationships and social standing through rumor spreading and exclusion from group activities (Card, Stucky,

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Sawalani, & Little, 2008). Past research has found high correlations between overt and relational aggression and overt and relational victimization (Card et al., 2008) indicating that youth often perpetrate or experience peer victimization in multiple forms. Peer victimization becomes more common and problematic as youth move toward adolescence and transition to middle school because peer relationships and concerns about social standing within the peer network become increasingly important (Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2003; Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995). Therefore, it is critical to identify youth involved in peer victimization before these patterns become entrenched as peer victimization involvement is linked with a variety of negative long-term consequences, including anxiety, suicide, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and incarceration (Clemans, Musci, Leoutsakos, & Ialongo, 2014; Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Huesmann, Eron, & Dubow, 2002; Ladd, Ettekal, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2017; McDougall & Vailliancourt, 2015).

1.1. Differences in adjustment among youth involved in peer victimization

1.1.1. Perpetrators of peer victimization

Youth involved in peer victimization reflect a heterogeneous group who differ in the extent to which they perpetrate and experience victimization, and in their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning (see Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001 for a review). Typical perpetrators of peer victimization, often identified as non-victimized aggressors, are perceived as physically strong, and though not necessarily well-liked, maintain high levels of perceived popularity in the peer network (e.g., Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Giang & Graham, 2008; Hess & Atkins, 1998; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Olweus, 1978; Schwartz, 2000; Veenstra et al., 2005). However, these non-victimized aggressors also exhibit a variety of conduct and academic problems (e.g., Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Goldweber, & Johnson, 2013; Estell, Farmer, & Cairns, 2007; Haynie et al., 2001; Lovegrove, Henry, & Slater, 2012; Schwartz, 2000; Veenstra et al., 2005). Some research has identified a subgroup of aggressive youth who also engage in high levels of prosocial behavior. These youth, termed bistrategic controllers, use a combination of aggressive and prosocial strategies to win influence over their peers and enjoy greater peer regard and higher perceived popularity than their purely aggressive peers (Hawley, 2003; Hawley, Little, & Card, 2007; Hawley, Little, & Card, 2008; Wurster & Xie, 2014).

1.1.2. Victims of peer victimization

Typical victims of peer victimization, often referred to as non-aggressive victims, are perceived as physically weak, shy, socially withdrawn, submissive, unpopular, and not well-liked (Hess & Atkins, 1998; Olweus, 1978; Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001; Schwartz, 2000). They also experience significant internalizing behavior problems (e.g., anxiety, sadness, low self-esteem) (Giang & Graham, 2008; Olweus, 1978; Perry et al., 2001; Schwartz, 2000), and academic performance difficulties (Giang & Graham, 2008; Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006). Many studies have identified a subgroup of victimized youth who are also perpetrators of peer victimization (e.g., Bettencourt & Farrell, 2013; Bettencourt, Farrell, Liu, & Sullivan, 2013; Giang & Graham, 2008; Lovegrove et al., 2012; also see Schwartz et al., 2001 for a review). These youth, referred to as aggressive-victims, tend to fare more poorly than any other subgroup involved in peer victimization. They are less popular, and more rejected, anxious, sad, and lonely than non-victimized aggressors, and more emotionally and behaviorally dysregulated than non-aggressive victims (e.g., Giang & Graham, 2008; Hawley et al., 2007; Hess & Atkins, 1998; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2001; Toblin, Schwartz, Gorman, & Abou-ezzeddine, 2005). These youth also tend to exhibit more conduct and academic difficulties compared to all other subgroups (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Giang & Graham, 2008; Haynie et al., 2001; Toblin et al., 2005; Veenstra et al., 2005).

Given that youth involved in peer victimization differ in both their role in these experiences and in their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment, they are likely to benefit most from interventions tailored to meet their unique needs. A first step toward addressing the unique needs of these subgroups is accurately identifying who is involved in peer victimization and what role they play in these experiences. Being able to correctly identify non-victimized aggressors, bistrategic controllers, non-aggressive victims, and aggressive-victims will aid school professionals in selecting appropriate targeted interventions designed to provide students with the specific skills and supports needed to address the psychosocial consequences of their involvement and prevent subsequent involvement in peer victimization.

1.2. Identifying subgroups of youth involved in peer victimization

There are several important factors to consider when attempting to identify youth involved in peer victimization. One important consideration is the method of assessment of aggression, peer victimization, and their correlates. A second important consideration is the method used to assign youth to subgroups involved in peer victimization. We review existing research on both key considerations in the sections below.

1.2.1. Assessment method

Aggression, peer victimization, and their correlates are typically measured using reports from one or more informants, including self-, peer-, and teacher-reports (Crothers & Levinson, 2004). Self-reports, which usually take the form of surveys/rating scales, are the most commonly used approach to assess children's social-emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment. The benefits of self-report measures are that they do not require much time or people resources to administer, there is evidence of adequate reliability and validity, and they allow for capturing the child's perspective on their own experiences (Card & Hodges, 2008; Crothers & Levinson, 2004). However, researchers have expressed concern that self-reports may be highly susceptible to under and over-reporting biases (Card & Hodges, 2008; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988).