



Forgiveness intervention for female South Korean adolescent aggressive victims



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ABSTRACT

We investigated an intervention designed to help female aggressive victims improve their levels of psychological and school adjustment. Adolescent aggressive victims are youth who demonstrate heightened levels of aggressive behavior and are frequently victimized by others. A program focused on the psychology of forgiveness was implemented and tested against both an alternative skillstreaming program and a no-treatment control group. Forty-eight female adolescent aggressive victims in South Korea (age 12 to 21 years) were recruited from a middle school and a juvenile correctional facility. Participants were randomly assigned to groups. Both forgiveness and skillstreaming interventions were implemented in a small-group format for 12 weeks. Participants in the forgiveness group reported significant decreases in anger, hostile attribution, aggression, and delinquency at post-test and follow-up; they also reported significant increases in empathy at post-test and follow-up and grades at post-test. We discuss implications for the psychological development of adolescent aggressive victims.

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Recently, psychologists have shown a heightened degree of interest in aggressive victims, an understudied subgroup of youth initially identified by Olweus (1978). Aggressive victims are adolescents who act aggressively toward others and who are victims of others' aggression (Olweus, 1978). Aggressive victims are thought to be at greater risk for psychological, behavioral, and academic problems than those who are aggressors only or victims only (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Toblin, Schwartz, Gorman, & Abou-ezzeddine, 2005; Wienke Totura, Green, Karver, & Gesten, 2009).

Practitioners and educators need interventions that can specifically help female aggressive victims. This group of adolescents experiences more internalizing problems such as peer rejection, depression, anxiety, and loneliness than their male peers (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004). Yet there are no known intervention studies that focus on female adolescent aggressive victims exclusively. Forgiveness education is a promising intervention approach that can reduce anger (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) and may help aggressive victims overcome their pervasive difficulties. In this study we compared a

forgiveness intervention to a skillstreaming program among South Korean female adolescent aggressive victims. The interventions were implemented and tested in a middle school and in a juvenile correctional facility to explore the seriousness of issues that forgiveness programs can address.

Aggressive victims

Researchers exploring the relationship between social-cognition and aggression use different methods of classifying adolescents as aggressive victims. Therefore the incidence of aggressive victim status reported in the literature varies considerably. For example, only 2% of Rigby's (1994) sample met criteria for aggressive victim status while 15% of Austin and Joseph's (1996) sample met criteria for aggressive victim status. Regardless of the methods used for identifying aggressive victims, researchers consistently find that these youth are at-risk for negative developmental trajectories.

Aggressive victims exhibit internalizing and externalizing problems, deficits in social functioning, and academic difficulties. Researchers find that aggressive victims experience greater depression, loneliness, and anxiety than other youth (Graham et al., 2006; Toblin et al., 2005). Aggressive victims are also involved in more criminal acts and exhibit more aggressive behavior than their peers (Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, & Schwartz, 2011). Social functioning may be particularly problematic for this group. Several studies have shown that aggressive victims are rejected at a higher rate than youth who are aggressors only or victims only (Schwartz, 2000). In addition, Perren and Alsaker

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(2006) found that aggressive victims are less sociable and have fewer playmates than their peers. Aggressive victims also experience academic challenges. They tend to perform worse academically and are less engaged in school than their peers (Graham et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2000). Studies of South Korean aggressive victims find that they experience similar threats to healthy development (Park, 2003; Yang, Kim, Kim, Shin, & Yoon, 2006).

Aggressive victims clearly encounter serious risks to their development. Researchers and practitioners need to understand how patterns of aggression and victimization develop in order to create effective interventions that can help this group of youth. Social-cognitive models of aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Huesmann & Reynolds, 2001) describe and explain how aggressive behavior patterns develop. Researchers have applied these models to aggressive victims. For example, Crick and Dodge (1994) proposed a model in which aggressive behavior results from adolescents' perceptions of social cues and their attributions regarding the intent of others. Crick and Dodge (1994) posit some youth develop hostile attribution biases in which they interpret non-hostile cues as threatening. These youth frequently respond to perceived threats with aggressive behavior. Another social-cognitive model described by Huesmann and Reynolds (2001) focuses on scripts, beliefs, and observational learning. In this model, adolescents select aggressive scripts when the situations, the adolescents' emotional states, and the adolescents' beliefs about the world suggest that aggressive behavior will result in desired outcomes.

According to these models, aggressive victims develop consistent ways of thinking that lead to high rates of aggressive behavior. For example, their experiences of being targets of others' aggression could result in angry emotional states and hostile attribution biases that, in turn, lead to the development and use of scripts supporting aggressive behavior. Once developed, aggressive social-cognition and associated behavior patterns become automatic and remain stable (Huesmann & Reynolds, 2001).

Many interventions for adolescent aggressors attempt to change social-cognition by teaching adolescents how to accurately interpret social cues and by providing scripts for prosocial behavior. A representative program is Aggression Replacement Training (ART; Glick, 2003). The ART program employs skillstreaming, anger control, and moral education to teach prosocial skills and shape behavior. Evaluation studies demonstrate that ART is effective in reducing aggressive and disruptive behavior (Glick, 2003; Gundersen & Svartdal, 2006).

The amelioration of resentment and anger resulting from past victimization is not addressed in social-cognitive interventions, but may be important for treating aggression. Day, Gerace, Wilson, and Howells (2008) argue that therapeutic approaches targeting aggressive individuals could benefit from including forgiveness. We believe that the forgiveness process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) can address both the social-cognitive dimensions of aggression and the anger resulting from past victimization. Through forgiveness youth may learn to interpret social cues with less hostile bias and anger which could change their maladaptive behavior. Some evidence supports this assertion. For example, Shechtman and Nachshol (1996) conducted an intervention for aggressive adolescents that taught participants to identify and understand emotions associated with anger and victimization. The intervention reduced aggressive behavior.

Forgiveness programs

Forgiveness is a personal decision to respond to a person (or people) who committed a considerable injustice with beneficence rather than resentment and anger (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 2005). Although people who forgive develop positive attitudes toward the offender(s), forgiveness can be distinguished from condoning or excusing the offense (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Forgiveness interventions and educational programs have improved psychological adjustment for a variety of at-risk and clinical adult populations (Baskin

& Enright, 2004; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2010). In a meta-analysis Baskin and Enright (2004) demonstrated that forgiveness programs reduced participants' anger, depression, and anxiety. The programs also increased participants' self-esteem.

Forgiveness programs have been proposed as an approach to addressing anger in children who encounter stressful life events. Enright and colleagues (e.g., Enright, Knutson Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007) studied forgiveness education in developmental ecologies (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) troubled by economic hardships and intergroup conflicts. In these studies, children in the forgiveness groups showed greater reductions in anger and depression than children in the control groups. Other forgiveness interventions have produced similar results for parentally love-deprived adolescents (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995) and youth coping with their parents' divorce (Freedman & Knupp, 2003).

A study by Gambaro, Enright, Baskin, and Klatt (2008) is particularly noteworthy. Gambaro et al. conducted a forgiveness program with elementary school students with high levels of anger. This study not only explored the psychological and behavioral benefits of forgiveness, but began to investigate the extent to which forgiveness could affect general social-cognitive scripts. Students in the forgiveness group showed greater improvements in psychological, behavioral, and academic measures than children in the control group. Although Gambaro et al. showed the value of forgiveness for at-risk children, the research was conducted with a small number of participants ($n = 12$), at a single school, and with a single counselor. There is a need to replicate this study with a more rigorous research design and with youth experiencing more serious threats to healthy development.

The current study

We compared a forgiveness program to a skillstreaming program and a no-treatment control condition with South Korean female adolescent aggressive victims on adjustment indicators including hostile attributions, anger, aggression, delinquency, and academic grades. These are social-cognitive, psychological, and behavioral symptoms that aggressive victims experience. Forgiveness may be particularly effective for aggressive victims for several reasons. First, it can address victimization which is one of the underlying causes of anger. Second, the forgiveness process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) has components such as awareness of current coping strategies, reframing the offender, and development of a new worldview that could disrupt the stable social-cognitive patterns that support aggression. Third, previous research indicates that forgiveness can effectively address the psychological, behavioral, and academic challenges that aggressive victims experience. Finally, a forgiveness intervention is appropriate for a middle school sample. Intervening in middle school is early enough in life to address the negative outcomes associated with aggressive victim status and middle school adolescents have the cognitive abilities that can promote forgiveness (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989).

This study extends the work of Gambaro et al. (2008) by using a larger sample, two intervention locations, and multiple counselors. Similar to Gambaro et al. (2008) we implemented the interventions in a school classroom. To strengthen the research design, we also implemented the program in a juvenile correctional facility in which both the offenses that youth experienced and the behavioral and emotional problems that they exhibited were severe. Our goal was to investigate the severity of problems that forgiveness education could effectively address.

A skillstreaming program was selected as the alternative treatment because it is a research based program commonly used in schools. The skillstreaming program used techniques such as modeling, role playing, and feedback to influence social-information processing and provide the participants with prosocial scripts for behavior. This program was an appropriate comparison treatment for two reasons. First, it has empirical support (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). Therefore we could

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