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Retaliatory Motives During Interpersonal Conflicts: Does Increased Revenge-Seeking Lead to Increased Aggression?

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Individuals may vary significantly with regard to the types of goals they pursue during interpersonal conflicts. For example, some people may value relationship harmony and equity, and may enact conflict resolution strategies in accordance with these objectives. Others may pursue instrumental gain or social dominance, resulting in the use of more assertive tactics. Of particular interest to aggression researchers has been the role of retaliatory goals, which have been linked to the use of more hostile strategies during conflicts and to the use of aggression with peers (Chung & Asher, 1996; Erdley & Asher, 1996; Lochman, Wayland, & White, 1993). However, individuals may modify the goals they wish to attain during the course of a conflict, and individual differences in goals may be more pronounced after multiple attempts at resolving a conflict have been made than at the beginning of a conflict when individuals are first trying to solve a dispute. This paper will present a series of studies examining goal modifications during conflicts with peers. In the first study, 252 children (133 boys; 119 girls) were asked to report their goals and strategies when making multiple attempts at resolving hypothetical conflicts with a same-sex peer. Results indicated that, after making a first attempt at resolving the conflict, aggressive, socially-rejected children showed increased motivation for revenge and increased reliance on aggressive strategies. In addition, aggressive-rejected children showed a reluctance to forego instrumental concerns. Follow-up studies were conducted to develop implicit measures of affiliative and retaliatory goals in response to conflict situations. Preliminary results replicate the findings from the first study – high aggressive adults evidenced increased focus on retaliatory goals when making multiple attempts at resolving a hypothetical conflict with a peer. Implications for understanding the social-cognitive and interpersonal mechanisms that may elicit these goal modifications will be discussed.

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