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The Longitudinal Relation between Being Victimized by Peers and Aggressive Behavior

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In this talk I examine the relations between aggression and peer-victimization across the life span from childhood into middle adulthood with data from three longitudinal studies. While being victimized is not a very stable characteristic over time, I show that being victimized and being aggressive are correlated positively both in childhood and adulthood. Although the strength of the positive relation decreases substantially across the elementary school years, it remains significantly positive even into middle adulthood. The lagged pattern of influence seems to be fit best by a reciprocal influence model in which behaving aggressively makes being victimized more likely while being victimized seems to reduce the likelihood of subsequent aggression.

Additionally, while in the early grades the few victimized children who are not aggressive are likely to be among the more popular children, by late childhood this is no longer true, and being victimized is correlated with being unpopular regardless of how aggressive the child is. It is proposed that this pattern of results is a consequence of one static process and two developmental trends. First, on the average aggressing against a peer always will increase the risk of being subsequently victimized by that peer or a friend of that peer. Second, over time the pain of being victimized causes youth to reduce their own aggression some. Third, as they get older, when youth do behave aggressively, they more selectively victimize peers on the basis of their perceptions of their potential victims' unpopularity and un-aggressiveness which diminishes the likelihood of retaliatory aggression.

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