Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies: Developmental Continuity or Developmental Change?

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We evaluated the extent to which aggressive victims show unique developmental pathways that are different from those of passive victims, bullies, and uninvolved children. A total of 1,722 children were followed from 4th grade to 6th grade, and the prevalence and stability of each group were assessed. Aggressive victims became less prevalent and passive victims and bullies became more prevalent with age. Although it was common for aggressive victims and bullies to move from one group to the other across time, there was little overlap with the passive victim group. Stability estimates were higher for the bully and aggressive victim groups than for the passive victim group, and patterns of stability were influenced by peer rejection and exposure to violence.

Childhood aggression and victimization pose significant developmental risks for children. Because of the clear linkages between both aggression and victimization, research and prevention efforts have focused increasingly on how these behaviors develop both independently and jointly. A number of studies have classified children into groups based on whether children are aggressive only, victimized only, both, or neither. Although these different groups of children have been identified in developmental research, less is known about whether they display distinct developmental trajectories. Indeed, much of the extant research has compared the behavioral patterns that characterize and
differentiate these groups of children; issues of developmental change have received less empirical attention. This is clearly an important issue because effective intervention strategies and policies hinge on an understanding of the similarities and differences in the developmental trajectories of each of these groups.

Understanding distinct trajectories is particularly crucial for children who are both aggressive and victimized (generally referred to as aggressive victims). These aggressive victims are an intriguing group because they share behavioral characteristics of children who are victimized but not aggressive (generally referred to as passive victims) and children who are aggressive but not victimized (generally referred to as bullies). Although small in number, these children tend to exhibit the most disturbed functioning when compared to passive victims, bullies, and uninvolved children (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). Indeed, aggressive victims are more likely to have emotional, behavioral, social, academic, and family problems. Despite these extensive problems, little is known about how aggressive victims develop over time and the extent to which aggressive victims show unique developmental pathways that are different from those of passive victims, bullies, and uninvolved children.

To date, longitudinal studies of aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies are rare. Previous research has often taken one of two approaches to sampling—either focusing specifically on a limited age range (e.g., 5th graders; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999) or collapsing across multiple ages (e.g., 8- to 13-year-olds; Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Mynard & Joseph, 1997). This makes it difficult to test for age-related effects and to compare estimates across developmental periods.

The present study was designed to address this research gap by examining the prevalence and stability over time during the later elementary years of distinct subgroups of children determined by their aggression and victimization status. Our primary interest was on three distinct status groups: aggressive victims, who provoke their peers and respond to threats or attacks with reactive aggression; passive victims, who are weak and submit to aggressors’ demands; and bullies, who aggress against peers but are rarely attacked in return. Because we were interested in comparing these children to those who do not experience aggression or victimization, we also identified a group of uninvolved children, who are neither aggressive nor victimized, and a group of average children, who could not be classified according to predetermined cut scores. Using a longitudinal design, we assessed the prevalence of each group when children were in 4th grade and again when
they were in 6th grade. In addition to assessing age-related changes in prevalence, we also examined patterns of stability in group membership over time as well as social contextual factors that may be important determinants of this stability.

Prevalence and Stability of Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies

Previous studies comparing aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies have typically reported that aggressive victims are rare compared to passive victims and bullies. Across American, European, and Australian studies of children and adolescents, median prevalence estimates are approximately 6% (range 0.5% to 29%) for aggressive victims, but approximately 9% (range 1% to 24%) for bullies and 15% (range 5% to 40%) for passive victims (see Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001, for a summary of estimates across studies). Some variability exists in findings, however, and this variability is noteworthy in two ways. First, the data just presented suggest that aggressive victims are less prevalent than passive victims and bullies. This finding has often been reported in studies of children and adolescents (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Olweus, 1978; Pellegrini et al., 1999; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). However, some studies have also reported that aggressive victims are more prevalent than passive victims (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988) or bullies (Craig, 1998; Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Wolke et al., 2000) or both (Baldry & Farrington, 1998). Second, the range of estimates varies widely, with some studies reporting low prevalence estimates for all categories (e.g., O’Moore & Hillery, 1989) and others reporting high estimates (e.g., Baldry & Farrington, 1998). Although this variability may reflect a number of factors, including differences in sample characteristics (e.g., child gender, location), diversity of measurement techniques (e.g., self-report, peer nomination), and the extent to which classification criteria are stringent (e.g., aggression or victimization occur “at least once a week”; O’Moore & Hillery, 1989) or relaxed (e.g., aggression or victimization occur “at least once or twice”; Baldry & Farrington, 1998), the degree to which developmental differences contribute to this variability is unknown.

One aim of the present research was to examine the extent to which age differences contribute to variations in subgroup prevalence estimates. Some recent studies suggest that such an analysis is necessary. Specifically, research has demonstrated correlations between victimization and the constructs that characterize both aggressive victims (i.e., externalizing behaviors) and passive victims (i.e., internalizing behaviors)
behaviors; Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1998), but there also seem to be developmental variations in the relations between victimization and these variables, with externalizing characteristics like aggressive behavior being more strongly correlated with victimization for younger children and internalizing characteristics like withdrawal being more strongly correlated with victimization for older children (Hanish & Guerra, 2000b; Boivin, Hymel, & Hodges, 2001). Following this research, in the present study we tested the hypothesis that aggressive victims would be more prevalent (in relation to bullies, passive victims, uninvolved children, and average children) among 4th graders than among 6th graders.

A second aim of this study was to assess the stability of group classifications. Such an assessment has been absent from most previous research comparing aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies due to a reliance on correlational rather than longitudinal designs. As a result, many questions are unanswered about the extent to which membership in the aggressive victim group is static over time. One hypothesis is that group classifications are fairly homogeneous, such that children in the aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully groups are qualitatively different from one another and, therefore, do not cross group boundaries over time. Certainly, research that has identified consistent group differences in functioning for aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies would suggest this is likely (Schwartz et al., 2001). Moreover, research showing that aggression is reasonably stable, even from a young age, and that victimization becomes more stable as children get older also supports this hypothesis (Hanish & Guerra, 2000a; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984).

An alternate hypothesis is that the differences between aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully groups are differences in degree rather than in kind—that is, perhaps the boundaries between groups are diffuse, such that, for example, passive victims may become increasingly aggressive over time in an attempt to defend themselves from repeated victimization, or aggressive victims may become increasingly withdrawn and submissive in the face of persistent attacks. Evidence to support such a hypothesis comes from research that has demonstrated that children who are victimized by peers, especially those who are repeatedly victimized, are at risk for becoming increasingly aggressive as well as increasingly depressed and anxious over time (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Schwartz et al., 1998). Thus, in this study, we examined the stability of aggressive victim, passive vic-
tim, bully, and uninvolved group classifications between 4th and 6th grades.

To further assess group stability, we were also interested in differentiating children who remain in the same group from those who desist, moving out of the aggressive victim, passive victim, or bully groups. Children who follow developmental pathways marked by persistent maladjustment tend to experience more life difficulties than those whose developmental pathways are marked by temporary periods of maladjustment (Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990). Though many aspects of children’s lives may be associated with chronic membership in aggressive victim, passive victim, or bully groups, those aspects that reflect the quality of their social experiences are likely to be particularly important. In fact, current formulations of peer victimization highlight the value of considering the degree to which the social context is safe and secure versus stressful and dangerous (Salmivalli, 2001). Thus, in differentiating stable group members from temporary group members, we focused on two social context factors—peer rejection and exposure to violence—that reflect how stressful children’s social lives are.

Peer groups are central contexts for the occurrence of aggression and victimization; peers are present in most victimizing encounters and play a crucial role in either reinforcing or inhibiting an attack (Salmivalli, 2001). Moreover, one of the most influential peer group forces is peer rejection. Rejection is a social stressor that has repeatedly been associated with both aggressive behavior and victimization by peers, making its role as a correlate of both variables clear (e.g., French, 1988; Hanish & Guerra, 2000b; Hodges et al., 1997). Less is known, however, about whether and how rejection differentiates stable aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies from their respective desisting counterparts.

Exposure to violence also creates a stressful social context that can impede children’s feelings of safety and security, serving as a backdrop for aggressive and victimizing interactions among peers. Indeed, exposure to community violence has previously been linked with elevated rates of externalizing behaviors as well as with elevated rates of peer victimization (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000), although its relation to stable versus transient membership in aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully groups has yet to be explored. Thus, we examined the relation between exposure to violence and stable group membership. We hypothesized that peer rejection and exposure to community violence would differentiate children who
experience chronic patterns of involvement in peer victimization from those whose involvement in victimizing interactions is less persistent over time.

This research builds on earlier studies that examined developmental changes in children’s experiences with peer victimization in general by specifically comparing aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully subgroups as they develop over time (Hanish & Guerra, 2000a, 2002). The hypotheses were tested with a sample of African American, Latino, and White elementary school–aged children from urban, low-income neighborhoods. Both boys and girls participated in the study, and we tested for gender differences in prevalence and stability. We used a longitudinal design in which we followed a grade-based cohort of late (4th-grade) elementary school–aged boys and girls for 2 years.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were drawn from the Metropolitan Area Child Study (MACS; Guerra, Eron, Huesmann, Tolan, & Van Acker, 1997). The MACS is a longitudinal, quasi-experimental field study focusing on the assessment and prevention of aggression that has spanned 8 years and included eight birth cohorts (1981–1988) of children. Because a primary purpose for the study was to evaluate aggression at earlier and later developmental periods, most children completed initial assessments in Grade 1 or Grade 4. Follow-up assessments were administered 2 years later. This study was conducted in lower-income neighborhoods of two Midwestern cities, which were chosen to represent the “inner-city” and “other urban-poor” conditions defined by Wilson (1987). The proportion of families below the 1990 federal poverty level in the schools ranged from 2% to 85.4%. The average was 24%.

Sample recruitment procedures, which involved obtaining permission from schools and parents, are detailed in Guerra et al. (1997). The overall parent permission rate for this sample was 86.6%. The sample for the present study included all children ($N = 1,722$) who participated in the 4th-grade assessment (regardless of birth cohort). Approximately half of the children were boys (49% were boys and 51% were girls). The ethnic distribution was 40% Hispanic, 38% African American, 18% Caucasian, and the remaining 4% were of another ethnicity. At the 6th-grade assessment, the sample consisted of 1,156 (67%) children who had previously participated in the 4th-grade assessment. Boys (50%) and girls (50%) were equally likely to be followed up, and there were no significant differences in either Time 1 victimization or
Time 1 aggression for those who did not participate in assessment at Time 2. In addition, the 6th-grade sample also consisted of an additional 411 children who did not receive the 4th-grade assessment (these children had received initial assessments in Grades 1, 2, or 3 instead). These 411 children were included in all nonlongitudinal analyses.

**Procedures**

Data were collected during the spring of each academic year. Peer-nominated measures of aggression and victimization were used to identify aggressive victim, passive victim, bully, uninvolved, and average subgroups, and self-reported violence exposure and peer-nominated rejection were also assessed. Measures used in the present study were embedded within a larger assessment protocol that was group-administered in the classroom. All self- and peer-report items were read aloud by an interviewer during administration, and at least one other interviewer was present to help monitor the assessment and provide assistance. In classrooms with Spanish-speaking children, bilingual measures that had been back translated were used, and children were permitted to choose the language of testing.

**Measures**

*Peer sociometric ratings.* Victimization, aggression, and rejection were assessed with peer sociometric techniques using the method described by Eron, Walder, and Lefkowitz (1971). Recent research has demonstrated that peer nominations are reliable and valid measures of these constructs in middle childhood–aged samples (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Each child received a booklet containing randomized lists (separated by gender) of the names of all the children in the class. The children were asked to mark all peers’ names that were applicable to the corresponding question. The measure consisted of 25 items, 10 of which assessed aggression (e.g., “Who starts a fight over nothing?”; Eron et al., 1971; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984), and two of which assessed victimization (e.g., “Who are the children who get picked on by other kids?”; drawn from Perry et al., 1988). In addition, two items assessed rejection (e.g., “Who are the children that you really don’t like?”). The remaining items on the measure assessed constructs that are not relevant to the present study.

We calculated scores on each scale within-classroom by dividing the number of times a child was nominated by the number of total possible nominations. Thus, scores on each scale could range from 0 (not nominated) to 1 (nominated by everyone). These scales have demon-
strated good reliability and validity in earlier studies (Huesmann, Eron, Guerra, & Crawshaw, 1994). In the present sample, reliability estimates ranged from .82 (victimization) to .97 (aggression).

Self reports. We assessed exposure to violence using the six-item Exposure to Violence subscale of the Stress Index, a self-report measure of family and community stress (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). This measure taps the extent to which a child has been exposed to violence during the previous year (a sample item was “Have you seen anyone beaten, shot, or really hurt by someone?”). Questions were answered as either no (0) or yes (1), and responses to scale items were averaged together. The internal consistency estimate for this subscale is alpha = .61, and earlier research has demonstrated validity for this measure (Attar et al., 1994).

Results

Analyses addressed three sets of research questions. We first examined developmental differences in the prevalence of aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies among 4th and 6th graders. Next, we assessed the 2-year stability of each of these group classifications. Gender differences in prevalence and stability were also assessed. Finally, we examined the extent to which peer rejection and exposure to community violence differentiated stable and desisting group patterns.

Classification of Children

Children were classified into groups by first dividing aggression and victimization scores in Grades 4 and 6 at .5 SD above and below the mean. The decision to use this classification criterion reflected several considerations. First, a comparison of the classification criteria used in earlier studies that have relied on similar methodologies to measure victimization and aggression revealed that most prior studies have used moderately stringent criteria, ranging from +.5 SD to +1 SD, to classify children with elevated scores as high on either aggression or victimization. At the same time, these studies have relied on more lenient criteria, generally ranging from the mean to +.8 SD, to classify children as low on either aggression or victimization (e.g., Craig, 1998; Pellegrini et al., 1999; Perry et al., 1988; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 1997). Thus, to provide a rigorous estimate of both high and low victim groups that was also comparable with prior research, a classification criterion of .5 SD above and below the mean was used. Consequently, for each grade, children whose victimization and aggression scores were both above +.5 SD were classified as aggressive victims, children whose vic-
Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies

Victimization score was above +.5 SD and whose aggression score was below −.5 SD were classified as passive victims, and children whose victimization score was below −.5 SD and whose aggression score was above +.5 SD were classified as bullies. In addition, children with scores below −.5 SD on both variables were classified as uninvolved. Children who could not be classified into any of these groups were labeled as average.

**Prevalence**

We correlated aggression and victimization scores at Grades 4 and 6 to assess developmental differences in the relation between these two variables. Aggression and victimization were moderately correlated for 4th graders, $r(1,722) = .42; p < .001$, and weakly correlated for 6th graders, $r(1,567) = .17; p < .001$. Similar findings were obtained with chi-square analyses assessing the relation between dichotomized victimization (i.e., victim vs. nonvictim) and aggression (i.e., aggressive vs. nonaggressive) variables. Examination of standardized residuals indicated that, at both grade levels, uninvolved children and aggressive victims were more common than passive victims and bullies. However, this finding was stronger for 4th graders than for 6th graders. At Grade 4, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,088) = 214.19; p < .001; \phi = .44$; and standardized residuals were 8.3 for the aggressive victim group, 6.3 for the uninvolved group, −7.5 for the passive victim group, and −7.0 for the bully group. At Grade 6, the relation was weaker, though still statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1028) = 52.44; p < .001; \phi = .23$, and standardized residuals were 4.3 for the aggressive victim group, 2.9 for the uninvolved group, −3.9 for the passive victim group, and −3.2 for the bully group. Thus, aggressive behavior and victimization by peers seemed to be more differentiated for 6th graders than they were for 4th graders.

The implication of this finding is that the relative prevalence of aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies changed with age across the late elementary school years. As shown in Table 1, when children were in the 4th grade, aggressive victims were more common than either passive victims or bullies; by 6th grade, however, the prevalence of aggressive victims had declined whereas the prevalence of both passive victims and bullies rose. Moreover, at both grade levels, the majority of children were either uninvolved or average.

Analyses by gender qualified and explained these patterns. Although correlations between victimization and aggression were consistent across gender, $r(846) = .40$ for 4th-grade boys; $r(875) = .43$ for 4th-grade girls; $r(792) = .14$ for 6th-grade boys; $r(774) = .16$ for 6th-grade girls, suggesting that the overall pattern of relations between vic-
Table 1. Prevalence Estimates for Each Group by Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(18.6%)</td>
<td>(13.4%)</td>
<td>(19.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive victim</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>204 (24.1%)</td>
<td>117 (13.4%)</td>
<td>216 (13.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive victim</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>48 (5.7%)</td>
<td>82 (9.4%)</td>
<td>149 (9.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>106 (12.5%)</td>
<td>62 (7.1%)</td>
<td>237 (15.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>170 (20.1%)</td>
<td>299 (34.2%)</td>
<td>426 (27.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>318 (37.6%)</td>
<td>315 (36.0%)</td>
<td>539 (34.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies

Aggression and victimization did not vary by gender; there were significant gender differences in prevalence rates for aggressive victims, passive victims, bullies, and uninvolved children over time, $\chi^2(4, N = 1,721) = 79.03; p < .001$; and $\chi^2(4, N = 1,566) = 69.10; p < .001$, for 4th and 6th graders, respectively. As illustrated in Table 1, uninvolved children (at Grades 4 and 6) and passive victims (at Grade 4) were significantly more likely to be girls, and aggressive victims (at Grades 4 and 6) and bullies (at Grade 4) were significantly more likely to be boys. Furthermore, among both boys and girls, the prevalence of aggressive victims declined and the prevalence of bullies increased over time. However, developmental patterns for passive victims varied across gender—that is, there was little change in the prevalence of passive victims for girls, but for boys, passive victims became more common with age.

**Stability**

Group membership was moderately stable between Grades 4 and 6, $\chi^2(16, N = 1156) = 287.77; p < .001$; Cramér’s statistic = .25. Although many children remained in the same group over time, just as many or more moved from one group to another over the 2-year follow-up period. Moreover, some groups were more stable over time than others. Panel A of Table 2 shows the percentage of children classified in each group at Grade 6, conditional upon Grade 4 classifications. The highlighted values indicate stable group membership. Overall, the most stable classifications were the uninvolved, average, and bully classifications. More than 40% of those initially identified as members of one of these groups were still members of the same group 2 years later. In comparison, one fourth of passive victims and one-third of aggressive victims remained in the same group between Grades 4 and 6. It is also notable that there was a great deal of overlap between the uninvolved and average groups; most uninvolved 4th graders who changed groups became average 6th graders, and most average 4th graders who changed groups became uninvolved 6th graders. In addition, it was also common for bully, aggressive victim, and passive victim 4th graders to be classified in the average group (as well as the uninvolved group for passive victims) in the 6th grade. In contrast, there was little overlap between bully, aggressive victim, and passive victim groups, with one exception—the boundaries between aggressive victim and bully groups were relatively diffuse—that is, approximately 18% of 4th-grade aggressive victims became bullies in 6th grade, and nearly 14% of 4th-grade bullies became aggressive victims in 6th grade.
Table 2. Number and Percentage of Children in Each Group at Grade 6
Conditional Upon Group Classification at Grade 4: Overall and By Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Uninvolved</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Pass. vict.</th>
<th>Agg. vict.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
<td>145 (46.3%)</td>
<td>104 (33.2%)</td>
<td>26 (8.3%)</td>
<td>29 (9.3%)</td>
<td>9 (2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>90 (21.5%)</td>
<td>179 (42.8%)</td>
<td>61 (14.6%)</td>
<td>39 (9.3%)</td>
<td>49 (11.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>17 (13.8%)</td>
<td>36 (29.3%)</td>
<td>51 (41.5%)</td>
<td>2 (1.6%)</td>
<td>17 (13.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass. vict.</td>
<td>30 (31.6%)</td>
<td>26 (27.4%)</td>
<td>6 (6.3%)</td>
<td>23 (24.2%)</td>
<td>10 (10.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agg. vict.</td>
<td>23 (11.1%)</td>
<td>68 (32.9%)</td>
<td>38 (18.4%)</td>
<td>8 (3.9%)</td>
<td>70 (33.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Uninvolved</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Pass. vict.</th>
<th>Agg. vict.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
<td>53 (43.4%)</td>
<td>47 (38.5%)</td>
<td>11 (9.0%)</td>
<td>8 (6.6%)</td>
<td>3 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>30 (14.2%)</td>
<td>88 (41.5%)</td>
<td>35 (16.5%)</td>
<td>26 (12.3%)</td>
<td>33 (15.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>11 (14.7%)</td>
<td>19 (25.3%)</td>
<td>30 (40.0%)</td>
<td>1 (1.3%)</td>
<td>14 (18.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass. vict.</td>
<td>8 (20.5%)</td>
<td>11 (28.2%)</td>
<td>3 (7.7%)</td>
<td>10 (25.6%)</td>
<td>7 (17.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agg. vict.</td>
<td>8 (5.8%)</td>
<td>49 (35.8%)</td>
<td>23 (16.8%)</td>
<td>6 (4.4%)</td>
<td>51 (37.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Uninvolved</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Bully</th>
<th>Pass. vict.</th>
<th>Agg. vict.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uninvolved</td>
<td>92 (48.2%)</td>
<td>57 (29.8%)</td>
<td>15 (7.9%)</td>
<td>21 (11.0%)</td>
<td>6 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>60 (29.1%)</td>
<td>91 (44.1%)</td>
<td>26 (12.6%)</td>
<td>13 (6.3%)</td>
<td>16 (7.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>6 (12.5%)</td>
<td>17 (35.4%)</td>
<td>21 (43.8%)</td>
<td>1 (2.1%)</td>
<td>3 (6.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass. vict.</td>
<td>22 (39.3%)</td>
<td>15 (26.8%)</td>
<td>3 (5.4%)</td>
<td>13 (23.2%)</td>
<td>3 (5.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agg. vict.</td>
<td>15 (21.4%)</td>
<td>19 (27.1%)</td>
<td>15 (21.4%)</td>
<td>2 (2.9%)</td>
<td>19 (27.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Highlighted values represent stable group membership.
Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies

Breaking these findings down by gender suggested that the aggressive victim group was more stable for boys than for girls (see Table 2). Among boys, over one-third of the 4th-grade aggressive victims were still classified as aggressive victims 2 years later, but among girls, only about one-fourth were classified as aggressive victims at both time points. Moreover, gender differences in the estimates showing patterns of movement into the aggressive victim and the uninvolved groups augment interpretation of these findings. For boys, movement into the aggressive victim group between 4th and 6th grades was moderately likely; nearly one-fifth of the Grade 4 bullies, passive victims, and average children became aggressive victims by Grade 6. In contrast, relatively few bully, passive victim, and average girls became aggressive victims 2 years later. Instead, girls tended to move out of the other groups (particularly the passive victim and aggressive victim groups) and into the uninvolved group between Grades 4 and 6. Approximately 40% of the passive victim girls (compared to 20% of the passive victim boys) and over 20% of the aggressive victim girls (compared to nearly 6% of the aggressive victim boys) became uninvolved as 6th graders.

Differentiation of Stable and Desisting Groups

The purpose of these analyses was to assess the relations between peer rejection and group stability and violence exposure and group stability. These analyses were designed to compare children who exhibited the same pattern at Times 1 and 2 with those who exhibited a desisting pattern. Desisters were defined as those children who moved into either the uninvolved or the average groups between Times 1 and 2 (e.g., stable aggressive victims were compared with children classified as aggressive victims at Time 1 and as either uninvolved or average at Time 2; similar analyses evaluated passive victims and bullies). Using independent sample's $t$ tests to compare the stable and desisting groups, we found that stable aggressive victims had higher peer rejection scores at Times 1 and 2 than did desisting aggressive victims (see Table 3). Stable bullies also had higher peer rejection scores than did desisting bullies, but this effect was found only at Time 2, and there was no significant difference between the two groups at Time 1. The opposite finding was obtained for passive victims; stable passive victims had higher peer rejection scores than did desisting passive victims at Time 1 only. Assessment of group differences on violence exposure revealed that stable bullies were more likely to be exposed to violence at Time 2 than were desisting bullies.1

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1. Analyses by gender suggested similar patterns of effects for boys and girls. Due to reduced power when the sample was divided by gender, however, not all tests reached statistical significance. In instances in which an analysis did not reach significance, means were in the predicted direction.
Table 3. *T* Tests for Stable and Desisting Groups on Time 1 and Time 2 Peer Rejection and Exposure to Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>M (SD) Stable</th>
<th>M (SD) Desisting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Aggressive victims</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 Peer rej.</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3.57***</td>
<td>.58 (.17)</td>
<td>.45 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 Exp. viol.</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>−0.37</td>
<td>.29 (.28)</td>
<td>.31 (.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 Peer rej.</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>8.78***</td>
<td>.53 (.19)</td>
<td>.26 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 Exp. viol.</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.30 (.24)</td>
<td>.29 (.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Bullies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 Peer rej.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>.36 (.16)</td>
<td>.34 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 Exp. viol.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>−0.88</td>
<td>.34 (.24)</td>
<td>.40 (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 Peer rej.</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>2.77**</td>
<td>.31 (.14)</td>
<td>.23 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 Exp. viol.</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2.06*</td>
<td>.34 (.25)</td>
<td>.24 (.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Passive victims</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 Peer rej.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.50***</td>
<td>.42 (.12)</td>
<td>.28 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 Exp. viol.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.21 (.19)</td>
<td>.21 (.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 Peer rej.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>.29 (.14)</td>
<td>.21 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 Exp. viol.</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>−1.14</td>
<td>.15 (.18)</td>
<td>.21 (.21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

In addition, due to the modest degree of overlap between the aggressive victims and bullies, we also conducted *t* tests on peer rejection and exposure to violence to compare stable aggressive victims with aggressive victims who later became bullies and to compare stable bullies with bullies who later became aggressive victims. These analyses revealed some interesting differences between stable aggressive victims and the aggressive victims turned bullies: Stable aggressive victims had significantly higher rejection scores at Times 1 (*M* = .58, *SD* = .17) and 2 (*M* = .53, *SD* = .19) along with significantly lower exposure to violence scores at Time 1 (*M* = .29, *SD* = .28) than did aggressive victims who became bullies (*Ms* = .43, .26, and .46 and *SDs* = .17, .13, and .31 for Time 1 rejection, Time 2 rejection, and Time 1 violence exposure, respectively), *ts*(63, 95, and 60) = 3.45, 7.57, and −2.17, *ps* < .001, .001, and .05, respectively. In comparison, there were no significant differences on peer rejection or violence exposure at either time point for stable bullies and bullies turned aggressive victims.
Discussion

The findings extend earlier research on aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully subgroups by demonstrating developmental changes in prevalence rates and differential 2-year stability estimates for each of the subgroups. For some children, being an aggressive victim; a bully; or, to a lesser extent, a passive victim reflected a chronic pattern of hostile peer interactions. For others, however, membership in one of these groups was a transient state that changed over time. Comparing developmental trajectories for these children provides insights into the similarities and differences among aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully groups. The findings are discussed from a person-oriented perspective so as to highlight variations among bully, aggressive victim, and passive victim subgroups.

Bullies

Bullies became increasingly prevalent with age, representing 9.8% of the student population in 4th grade and 15.1% in 6th grade. Increases in the relative proportion of bullies were seen for both boys and girls. These results can be compared with those reported by Olweus (1994), who found that the percentage of boys (but not girls) stating that they bullied others increased at a fairly steady rate between Grades 2 and 9. It also parallels the findings of delinquency studies, which consistently demonstrate a rise in delinquency beginning in early adolescence (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995). This result may reflect previous findings that have suggested an imbalance of power in relationships that characterize bullies and victims. As children get older, they may become more capable of bullying due to physical or cognitive developments that increase their power relative to younger or weaker children (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Olweus, 1978). Indeed, as the proportion of bullies increased, so did the proportion of passive victims, at least among boys, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between these two groups.

This developmental change in the prevalence of bullies can be further understood by considering patterns of stability. Approximately 40% of 4th-grade bullies continued to be bullies in 6th grade. This finding was consistent for both boys and girls. Moreover, an additional 13.8% of 4th-grade bullies became aggressive victims in 6th grade. This finding validates research that has demonstrated high rates of stability for aggressive behavior (Huesmann et al., 1984).

Despite our finding of a relatively high rate of stability for this group, some children who were classified as bullies in the 4th grade
desisted and were classified as uninvolved or average in the 6th grade. Analyses assessing the relations between the stable and desisting bully patterns and peer rejection and exposure to violence help to clarify the findings. Notably, experiences with peer rejection and violence exposure in Grade 4 were unrelated to the stability of the bully group, but stable bullies were more likely than desisting bullies to be rejected by peers and exposed to violence in Grade 6, suggesting that the stable bullies have more lasting social risks than do desisting bullies. Research findings have indicated that some aggressive children are well liked by peers and integrated into the peer group, whereas others are actively disliked and isolated (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). The desisting bullies, in contrast to the stable bullies, seem more likely to be members of the former group than the latter. Furthermore, stable bullies’ higher rates of exposure to violence in the 6th grade may portend further involvement in aggressive behaviors as these children get older.

Aggressive Victims

Aggressive victims represented 18.6% of the 4th graders and 13.8% of the 6th graders, with boys more likely than girls to be aggressive victims. This decline in prevalence rates from Grade 4 to Grade 6 reflects our finding that aggressive behavior and victimization became more differentiated as children got older. Similar findings have also been reported in the literature (Boivin et al., 2001).

One of the most interesting findings of this study was that being an aggressive victim was only modestly stable over time. Being repeatedly classified as an aggressive victim was associated with relatively high rates of peer rejection in Grades 4 and 6, and peer rejection differentiated aggressive victims who desisted (i.e., became uninvolved or average) as well as those who became bullies. The stable aggressive victim group is particularly concerning because aggressive victims are at heightened risk (compared to bullies, passive victims, and uninvolved children) for negative developmental outcomes in multiple domains of adjustment (Schwartz et al., 2001). Thus, for those children who chronically occupy this social position, development may be seriously compromised.

It is important to note, however, that many aggressive victims changed classifications over the follow-up period. Most aggressive victims who changed classifications desisted, becoming uninvolved or average by the 6th grade. Thus, for these children, status as an aggressive victim was a temporary experience. Nearly 20%, however, became bullies. As Perry, Perry, and Kennedy (1992) noted, aggressive victims tend to use ineffectual aggression, which is an emotionally charged and under-
controlled form of aggression that typically ends unsuccessfully, whereas bullies use their aggression more effectively. Thus, perhaps these children became more skilled as aggressors as they got older, accounting for the decrease in aggressive victims and the increase in bullies between Grades 4 and 6. This finding also suggests some fluidity between these two subtypes characterized by high levels of aggression and that aggressive youth may shift between aggressive victim and bully categories over time.

**Passive Victims**

Passive victims were relatively uncommon in this sample compared to the bully, aggressive victim, and uninvolved groups. When children were in the 4th grade, passive victims constituted 7.5% of the student population, with more girls than boys being classified in this group. They were somewhat more common in the 6th grade, due primarily to an increase in passive victims among boys, although passive victims still only accounted for 9.5% of the sample. This is an intriguing finding given that most previous research has suggested that passive victims are more prevalent than bullies and aggressive victims (Schwartz et al., 2001). This result may be explained by methodological differences across studies. In the present study, the passive victim group was defined as those children with high scores (above +.5 SD) on victimization and low scores (below −.5 SD) on aggression. The criterion used to identify those children who were low on aggression was more rigorous in the present study than in previous studies. Indeed, previous research has used more relaxed criteria to identify nonaggressive (i.e., passive) children, such as scores on aggression that range from the mean to +.8 SD above the mean (Craig, 1998; Pellegrini et al., 1999; Perry et al., 1988; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz et al., 1997). Thus, some previous research has included youngsters in the passive victim group who exhibit moderate and even moderately high levels of aggression, as well as low levels of aggression. This practice may inflate prevalence estimates for this subgroup compared to what was found in the present research. For example, in the present sample, when more relaxed criteria were used to identify the low aggressive children, the number of 4th-grade passive victims increased from 130 to 206 (12%; using the mean on aggression as the cutoff score) to 340 (20%; using +.8 SD on aggression as the cutoff score).

Interestingly, stability rates for the passive victims were the lowest compared to all other groups. Only about one-fourth of passive victims remained in this category over the 2-year follow-up period. In fact, passive victims were more likely to be classified in either the uninvolved or average groups as 6th graders than they were to be classified as passive victims. Moreover, relatively few passive victims moved into the aggressive victim group, suggesting that the passive victims and aggres-
sive victims were fairly distinct and overlapped little. Thus, these two types of victims seem to be well differentiated. Being rejected by peers in the 4th grade differentiated stable passive victims from desisting passive victims. However, there was no relation with 6th-grade rejection scores. Thus, perhaps stable passive victims acquire a reputation as victims that continues to exist, even when they no longer experience elevated rejection rates. As such, they may occupy relatively low levels in the social dominance hierarchy and therefore are readily attacked by peers (see Hawker & Boulton, 2001, for theorizing about the role of the dominance hierarchy in peer victimization).

**Implications of the Findings**

This study documented gender differences and age-related changes in the prevalence and stability of distinct subgroups of children who are involved in bullying interactions. It also demonstrated that peer rejection and, to a lesser extent, exposure to violence were related to the chronicity of children’s status as aggressive victims, passive victims, or bullies. Although many questions remain to be addressed, this study provides implications for intervention. First, interventions that target young children, when aggression and victimization are less stable and more modifiable, seem to be warranted. In particular, such interventions should focus on preventing the establishment of stable aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully patterns, although this may be easier to do for passive victims than for bullies and aggressive victims.

In addition, interventions may need to contain components that are sensitive to subgroup differences. For instance, interventions would be wise to specifically address the needs of aggressive victims as distinct from those of passive victims. These two groups of victimized youth appear to be fairly unique, showing different developmental trajectories as well as different patterns of functioning. Thus, their intervention needs are also likely to be unique. Similarly, aggressive victims and bullies may also have different intervention needs. Although some overlap existed between these two types of aggressive children, the overlap was not complete, with aggressive victims experiencing more persistent rejection from the peer group and bullies experiencing more violence exposure.

**Concluding Comments**

Although we examined developmental changes in group classifications, we did so with a sample that was limited in age to the late elementary school years. Extending these findings to younger children and adolescents is necessary to demonstrate the extent to which the prevalence and stability patterns obtained with this sample generalize.
Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies

across ages; there is reason to believe that the patterns may be specific to children’s developmental stage. For instance, among preschoolers and kindergartners, externalizing characteristics are very highly related to victimization but internalizing characteristics are only minimally related to victimization (Hanish et al., in press). Thus, the prevalence rates for aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies may be different among very young children. In support of this supposition, Alsaker and Valkanover (2001) have reported relatively high prevalence rates for aggressive victims and relatively low prevalence rates for passive victims in their study of kindergartners. Furthermore, victimization becomes more stable with age, but aggression is fairly stable even from an early age (Hanish & Guerra, 2000a; Huesmann et al., 1984). Thus, compared to the stability rates reported here, stability rates for the passive victim and aggressive victim groups may be even lower for younger children and even higher for adolescents.

In summary, this study suggested that there were developmental changes as well as developmental consistencies in the expression of aggressive victim, passive victim, and bully behavior patterns during the mid- to late elementary school years. Findings highlight the value of taking a person-oriented approach and differentiating these three groups, given that each group followed a different developmental trajectory. It will be important for future research to extend these methodologies to follow aggressive victims, passive victims, and bullies as they develop from an early age into adolescence.

References


Aggressive Victims, Passive Victims, and Bullies


