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The Role of Status, Attractiveness, and Sex Ratio in Adolescent Aggression

In 2013, researchers Zwaan, Dijkstra, and Veenstra explored the impact of how status, attractiveness, and sex-ratio related to aggression in middle school adolescents. More specifically, they tested whether differences in social hierarchies, physical attractiveness ratings within same-gender peers, or the number of males to females within a class increased or decreased physical and relational aggression among students.

The research sample consisted of 3,145 pre-adolescents from the Netherlands-51% of which were female. All participants sent in peer nominations to the researchers that listed classmates they considered (1) aggressive (i.e. students who got into fights or gossiped often), (2) high status (i.e. students others wanted to be associated or connected with), and (3) attractiveness (i.e. who students thought were “good looking”). The male sex ratio was calculated by dividing the number of male students in each class by the number of female students in each class and vice versa of the female sex ratio. Students were unrestricted on the number of peers nominated for each category and peers could be nominated for multiple categories.

Analysis found evidence that higher social status was positively related to physical and relational aggression in males and relational aggression in females. However, this association differed in strength and the strongest association occurred in classes that had less established social hierarchies. Research findings bolstered pre-existing notions that physical attractiveness is more important within female relationships. But results also suggested an association between physical attractiveness and dominance in males and that physical attractiveness play a larger role in intra-sexual competition and aggression than previously thought. Finally, results found that

only relational aggression in males was affected by a decreased classroom sex-ratio (i.e. the more males in a classroom compared to females, the more relational aggression in males).

It is interesting that results from the study conclude that less established hierarchies-or more egalitarian classrooms-actually increase aggression among middle school adolescents. This suggests that aggression arises when higher status peers feeling pressured to defend their social rank, rather than lower social status peers rebelling against elitism and well-established peers abusing their power. However, a limitation of the study is that it is cross-sectional and therefore unable to consider the fickle nature of middle school social relationships. In addition, researchers only focused on the classroom setting, limiting generalizability to any other setting where middle schoolers may interact with one another. Regardless, this study provides useful insight into possible connections between status, attractiveness, and sex-ratio and aggression, and supports future longitudinal studies on the cause of aggression by middle schoolers.

References

Zwaan, M., Dijkstra, J. K., & Veenstra, R. (2013). Status hierarchy, attractiveness hierarchy and sex ratio: Three contextual factors explaining the status-aggression link among adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 37(3), 211-221.