Aggressive anger management and friendship involvement among adolescents-a cross-lagged panel study on selection and socialization

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Managing anger at a friend within the context of a close friendship places youth in a bind. On the one hand they may feel obliged to tell their friend about their angry feelings but on the other hand, such disclosures can result in the deterioration and ultimately in the dissolution of the friendship. Thus, adolescents who regularly engage in aggressive forms of anger management likely have fewer reciprocal friendships over time. This is the selection perspective. The socialization perspective predicts that within the context of close friendships, friends teach each other how to use socially acceptable ways of managing angry feelings that do not include aggressive management strategies. Thus, adolescents with more reciprocal friendships should engage less often in aggressive forms of anger management. It is possible that both perspectives operate in friendships. In order to solve this question on the direction of effects, 287 German adolescents completed the SAR-A, a questionnaire on strategies of anger regulation for adolescents in the beginning and end of grade 7 (T1 and T2) and in grade 9 (T3). At all times, adolescents completed an interview about their supportive peer network that provided the number of reciprocal friends. Autoregressive cross-lagged panel models were calculated in Mplus that used either peer ratings (Model 1) or teacher ratings (Model 2) of physically aggressive behavior and number of reciprocal friendships while controlling for gender and peer acceptance. Model 3 used adolescents’ self-reports of their aggressive anger management. Model 1 and 2 (with good fit characteristics) both resulted in large gender effects and non-significant socialization paths. Selection paths were significant in both models: adolescents who were known to be physically aggressive had fewer reciprocal friends at T3. Specifically, physically aggressive adolescents had a difficult time maintaining friendships over longer periods of time. Model 3 (with equally good fit indices) provided support for a socialization perspective. Adolescents with more reciprocal friends reported using aggressive forms of anger management less often at the next time point. Results were marginally significant from T1 to T2 (i.e. in friendships in the first year after a change into a new school), but more pronounced from T2 to T3 (i.e. in the 20-month period from early to middle adolescence when adolescent friends tend to know each other better). Results will be discussed from the selection and socialization perspectives as well as the influence of the reporter.