

Why Do Children Pick on Gender-Nonconforming Boys? A Longitudinal Test of Target-Specific Aggression.

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Introduction

Children and adolescents who display cross-gender typed (CGT) behavior (e.g. playing with the opposite sex, acting like the opposite sex) are often rejected and victimized by peers. However, the cognitive characteristics of children who target CGT boys for aggression have been underexplored.

Pauletti et al. (2014) found that preadolescents of both sexes who possess “self-discrepant gender identity”—who derogate and shun other-gender peers and activities yet question their fit with their own gender—increased their harassment of same-sex CGT peers over a school year.

In the present study, we examined another type of self-discrepancy that might motivate preadolescents to harm CGT boys. Many preadolescents view physical attractiveness as extremely important to their self-worth; indeed, self-perceived physical attractiveness is among the strongest correlates of self-esteem (Harter, 2006).

However, only some children who view physical attractiveness as important are able to achieve a strong sense of self-worth; some are unable to do so, and for them the gap between the high value they place on attractiveness and their low self-esteem may be a painful self-discrepancy conducive to aggression (Higgins, 1987).

Methods

- Participants were 195 children (M age = 10.1 years; 94 girls).
- Attractiveness importance and self-esteem were measured by self-reports.
- Aggression and CGT behaviors were measured by peer-nominations.
- Measures were collected over the school year.

Analysis

- A within child beta was computed for each child assessing the degree to which the child increased or decreased the in aggression toward CGT boys (relative to other boys) in HLM.
- Betas were then predicted from between-child variables (age, sex, importance ratings, self-esteem, trait aggression, and interactions).

Fig. 1. Boys' change in aggression towards CGT boys as a function of the interaction of self-esteem and attractiveness importance.

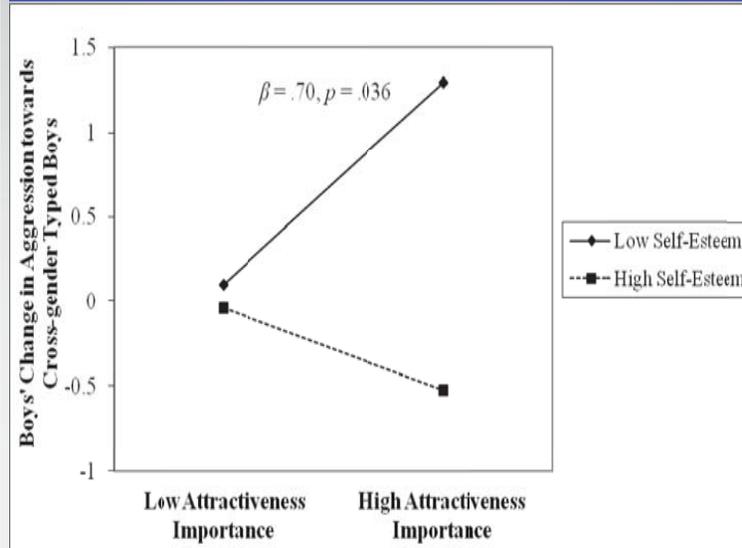
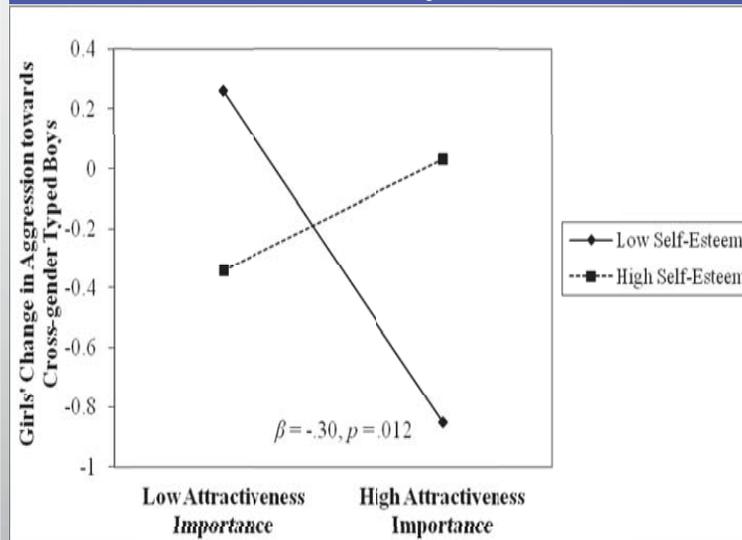


Fig. 2. Girls' change in aggression towards CGT boys as a function of the interaction of self-esteem and attractiveness importance.



Discussion

The interactions are depicted in Figures 1 and 2 for boys and girls respectively.

The self-discrepancy hypothesis was clearly confirmed for boys, in that boys who placed high importance on physical attractiveness yet had low self-esteem increased their selective abuse of CGT boys the most.

On the other hand, girls with this self-discrepancy actually decreased their aggression toward CGT boys the most.

Perhaps boys are more likely than girls to experience ego-threatening self-discrepancies as frustrating and angering.

For girls, this self-discrepancy may make aggression toward CGT boys feel “unattractive” thereby reducing aggressive tendencies over time.

SRCD Diversity

- This research focuses on an underrepresented group of participants, gender-nonconforming preadolescent boys.
- This work also addresses the underlying motivations that fuel sex-specific and target-specific aggressive behavior.

References

- Pauletti, R. E., Cooper, P. J., & Perry, D. G. (2014). Influences of gender identity on children's maltreatment of gender-nonconforming peers: A person x target analysis of aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*, 843-866.
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