



The relationship of peer victimization to social anxiety and loneliness in adolescent females

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship of overt and relational victimization to social anxiety, loneliness, and prosocial behaviours in a sample of female adolescents. The Social Experience Questionnaire, Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents, and Asher Loneliness Scale were administered to 561 girls in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades of an urban parochial high school. Consistent with prior work, overt and relational victimization were positively associated with fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance of general and new situations, and loneliness. In addition, prosocial behaviours from peers moderated the effects of relational victimization on loneliness. Implications of these findings for the role of peer victimization and prosocial behaviours in female relationships are discussed.

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Introduction

An increasing body of research has documented the relatively high frequency and negative psychosocial correlates of peer victimization in high schools (see [Juvonen & Graham, 2001](#), for a review). This victimization can take diverse forms ranging from relational aggression to overt assaults. Relational victimization harms others through manipulation, purposeful damage or threats of damage to interpersonal relationships (e.g. spreading rumors, excluding a peer from social interactions; [Crick & Grotpeter, 1996](#)). Overt victimization, in contrast, involves harming others through physical attacks or threats of such attacks (e.g. hitting, pushing, yelling). Recent

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studies have delineated a number of adjustment problems that are associated with victimization including social anxiety and loneliness (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Nansel et al., 2001; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Storch & Masia, 2001). The present research was designed to evaluate the frequencies of overt and relational victimization, and the relationships of victimization to social anxiety and loneliness in a sample of adolescent females.

Although recent efforts have enhanced researchers and clinicians understanding of the deleterious effects of peer maltreatment, to our knowledge, no published research has examined peer victimization in an all female setting. Examining overt and relational victimization in an exclusively female high school seems particularly significant for several reasons. First, the increased importance of peers during adolescence may suggest an increased frequency of overt and relational victimization (Berndt, 1982). Given the selectivity of female adolescent peer groups (Brown, 1989; Thorne, 1993), boundaries may be maintained through physical or relational acts of aggression. As girls tend to utilize relational aggressive acts more than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Rys & Bear, 1997; French, Jansen, & Pidada, 2002), it may be that relational victimization is a more common occurrence in all-female high schools. Moreover, given the potential consequences of overt aggression (e.g. school suspension; trouble with the law), relational aggression may be an alternative method of targeting peers that has fewer negative repercussions (Prinstein et al., 2001). Second, being victimized may have a more serious impact on future psychosocial adjustment for girls as compared to boys (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Girls, for example, may be more likely than boys to internalize negative acts directed at them resulting in greater anxiety and loneliness (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Evidence also suggests that girls may interpret relationally aggressive behaviours as more distressing than overt assaults (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Thus, understanding how correlates of peer victimization may differ as a function of context is of importance for identifying populations at risk for adjustment difficulties and identifying environments in need of intervention. Third, female adolescent friendships tend to be more self-disclosing as compared to males (McNelles & Connolly, 1999). This difference may increase opportunities to use personal information as a weapon when friendships fail (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995). Given the importance of identifying populations at risk for adjustment difficulties associated with peer victimization, the first goal of this study is to report rates of overt and relational victimization in an all-female high school.

Peer aggression involves the victim's unwilling participation in distressing and dangerous peer relationships (Silverman, La Greca, & Wassterin, 1995). Anxiety may be a learned response to repeated exposure to overt and relational aggression. Such exposure may fuel negative self-evaluations and lead to avoidance of social interactions. A number of studies on elementary school aged children and adolescents have found a positive relationship between overt and relational victimization, and fear of negative evaluation (e.g. concern about negative evaluation from peers) and social avoidance (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Nansel et al., 2001; Storch & Masia, 2001; Grills & Ollendick, 2002) in both boys and girls. This social avoidance and negative feedback from others may also limit victimized youths' exposure to positive peer relationships, thus interfering with the development of social skills and self-esteem. As a result, victimized youth may experience elevated levels of loneliness, a finding supported by

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