



## School violence, social support and psychological health among Taiwanese junior high school students

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This paper examines how peer social support mediates the association between school victimization and student psychological health among junior-high students in an Asian context (Taiwan), and further examines how gender and ethnicity differ in the interrelationships of school violence, peer social support and psychological health.

**Methods:** Data were obtained from a large-scale random sample of 1650 junior-high students (grades 7–9) in one diverse county of Taiwan. Students were given an anonymous structured questionnaire, including items regarding basic demographics and school social experiences.

**Results:** The results of structural equation modeling analysis provided a good fit for the sample as a whole. The final model accounted for 26% of the variance in student psychological health. Overall findings showed that student psychological health is not significantly directly associated with victimization by students and student maltreatment by teachers; however, student psychological health is indirectly associated with victimization by students, mediated through peer social support. Similar findings were found for both male and female and both Han Chinese and Indigenous students.

**Conclusion:** The findings imply that peer social support plays an important mediating role between exposure to school violence and student psychological health. The findings provide empirical evidence and information to help school practitioners and policymakers justify developing or incorporating social support into prevention and intervention strategies. The findings suggest that interventions or policies promoting social support incorporated at a national level could be effective across genders and ethnicities in Taiwan.

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### Introduction

Over the past few decades, studies on the outcomes of school violence have mainly examined how exposure to school violence directly impacts student psychological health (e.g., Baldry, 2003, 2004; Chen & Wei, 2011b; Flannery, Singer, & Wester, 2004; Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; Graham & Bellmore, 2007). Recently, a few empirical studies have shown that peer social support plays an influential mediating role between exposure to school violence and its negative outcomes (Malecki, Demaray, & Davison, 2008; Seeds, Harkness, & Quilty, 2010). However, these studies were conducted in Western countries, using small convenience samples. Little is known about how peer social support mediates outcomes of school violence in Asian cultures, and even less is known about how student gender and ethnicity influence the interrelationships of these factors in Taiwan.

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Using a large-scale random sample from Taiwan, this study expands the literature on school victimization by examining how peer social support mediates the association between exposure to school violence and student psychological health in an Asian context. This inquiry also examines how gender and ethnicity differ in the interrelationships of school violence, peer social support and psychological health among Taiwanese students.

Taiwan is one example of an Asian country in which long-standing cultural values and outside influences must be considered simultaneously when examining these interrelationships. It has experienced democratization, rapid industrialization and urbanization, a growing population of immigrants from other Asian countries, and an expanding economy over the past four decades (e.g., Chen & Astor, 2010, 2012). Yet Taiwanese are still primarily guided by values stemming from a blend of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

Recently, a handful of published studies have indicated that school violence is severe in Taiwan. For example, a report indicated 26.9% of Taiwanese students were exposed to physical, emotional and sexual types of maltreatment by teachers, even though teacher aggression against students is strictly prohibited and banned in Taiwan (Chen & Wei, 2011a, 2011b). Other national data indicate that 59.7% of Taiwanese students have been involved in school peer violence (e.g., Chen & Astor, 2009a, 2009b). These studies suggested immediate attention should be paid to design an effective intervention to alleviate school violence (e.g., Chen & Astor, 2009a, 2009b; Chen & Wei, 2011a, 2011b).

### Definition

School violence in this study is defined as any behavior intended to harm students psychologically or physically while in school (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). The term “violence” includes physical violence (e.g., beating), verbal and social violence (e.g., cursing and social exclusion), and threatening behavior (e.g., extortion) (see Benbenishty & Astor, 2005 for a critical discussion). Based on this definition, the two most common types of school victimization discussed in current literature are: student victimization by students (e.g., Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Chen & Wei, 2011b) and student maltreatment by teachers (e.g., Chen & Wei, 2011a, 2011b). This study examines these two types of school victimization.

Social support has been defined as assistance, help or information leading individuals to believe they are loved, cared for and valued and that they share mutual obligation with members of a network (Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Seeman, 1996). It includes emotional support (e.g., trust and empathy), instrumental support (e.g., time and money), appraisal support (e.g., evaluative feedback) and informational support (e.g., knowledge and skills) (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Tardy, 1985). In addition, social support can be categorized into *actual use* of social support and *perception* of social support (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). Studies have indicated that perception of peer support has greater influence on adolescent mental health than does actual received social support, whether from peers or from other sources, such as parents and school adults (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2009). Thus, this study examines students' perception of peer social support.

### Literature review

Theories related to trauma or violence posit that exposure to school violence can lead to student psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety (Baldry, 2003, 2004; Chen & Wei, 2011b; Flannery et al., 2004; Gladstone et al., 2006; Graham & Bellmore, 2007). However, why and how school victimization leads to these negative psychological outcomes is less well explained (Malecki et al., 2008; Seeds et al., 2010). Furthermore, existing empirical studies on the link between school victimization and distress are mixed; some indicate a strong association (e.g., Baldry, 2003, 2004), while others show a weak or insignificant relationship (e.g., Chen & Wei, 2011b). These findings raise the question of whether the levels of the psychological outcomes of school violence depend on how certain psychosocial mechanisms react to violence exposure (Chen & Wei, 2011b).

The literature suggests that social support can be a potential psychosocial mechanism in the link between exposure to school violence and poor student mental health (e.g., Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Two models have been widely examined in the literature related to this topic: the stress buffer model and the main effect model (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985; Davison and Demaray, 2007; Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Kaniasty & Norris, 1993; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006). The stress buffer model examines how social support moderates the negative outcomes of exposure to school violence, hypothesizing that high level of support can reduce negative outcomes. By contrast, the main effect model examines how high levels of social support promote mental health, regardless of the level of victimization. This model suggests that all students can benefit from social support even if they are not experiencing school violence. However, the empirical findings about these models appear contradictory; some support the stress buffer model, some the main effect model, and others neither (e.g., Chen & Wei, 2011b; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Davison and Demaray, 2007; Kaniasty & Norris, 1993; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Williams et al., 2005).

### Social support as mediator

Alternatively, the social support deterioration model theorizes that trauma and stressful events can both directly and indirectly, through perceived social support, influence psychological well-being (Kaniasty & Norris, 1993; Norris & Kaniasty, 1996; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2010; Prelow et al., 2006; Punamaki, Komproe, Qouta, El-Masri, & de Jong, 2005). Specifically,

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