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Theory of mind and victimization: A preliminary study on Indonesian junior high school students

Hepi Wahyuningsih^{a*}, & Resnia Novitasari^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, Islamic University of Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 55585, +6281328838845

^bDepartment of Psychology, Islamic University of Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 55585

Abstract

This preliminary study examined the relationship between theory of mind and victimization in junior high school students. This study tested the hypothesis that theory of mind has negative correlation with victimization. The amount of subjects in this research are 372 junior high school students, ages 13-16, completed measures on theory of mind and victimization. The result indicates that students' theory of mind is significantly associated with victimization. This research also discussed about gender as moderator variable. The research findings, limitations and recommendations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social life in school has prominent role among students. There is peer relationship as major aspect in school. Several studies have shown that high quality peer relationship affects helping behavior, intimacy, and also low level of conflict (Berndt, 2002). Good quality time of friendship also helps students to avoid rejection from social environment (Masten, Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, & Eisenberger, 2012). That research also stated that good relationship will be buffer to overcome negative social experiences in the future. It can be seen that friendship, especially in school, has major influence for next stages of life.

Nevertheless, some issues arise during peers interaction in school. One problem that has negative influence is

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-000-000-0000 ; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .
E-mail address: hepi.khabibi@yahoo.com

victimization. In Indonesia, National Commission of Child Protection in 2012 conducted a survey in 9 provinces on more than 1000 students from elementary until high school (www.radioaustralia.net.au). The result has shown that 87.6% students admitted that they had physical (e.g. beating, hitting) and psychological (e.g. being insulted, humiliating, name-calling) abuse in school. In other part, 78.3% of students said that they have done aggressive behavior to their friends. It supported the facts that victimization has become important issue in schools.

The impacts of victimization are tend to be destructive for student's mental health. In a research conducted by Lohre, Lydersen, Paulsen, Maehle, and Vatten (2012) resulted that there are emotional and somatic symptoms effects. Students from grade 1-10 stated that they feel symptoms such as feeling anxious, stomach ache, stress, and head-ache. It is seen that the effects influence both mental and physical state. Turner, Filkenhor, and Ormrod (2010) in their research found that there are various effects of victimization forms on students' self esteem. The hardest impact is produced by sexual victimization, because it has longterm psychological problems for students. In conclusion, the effects of victimization are negative for student's well-being.

There are many factors that related to victimization. Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, and Sadek (2010) examined the possible factors using 153 studies by meta-analytic method. The finding shown that there are individual (e.g. gender, social problem solving, social competence, etc) and contextual predictors (family, school climate, peer status, etc) for bullying and victimization. The typical students that become victim tend to involve in externalizing behavior, low social skills, and weak in social problem solving. It is noticed that interpersonal skills for understanding others are crucial.

One of the term that closely related with understanding others is theory of mind. This concept often being compared with social cognition (Carpendale & Lewis, 2010). Social cognition is individual skill to understand social world in terms of psychology. In other way, theory of mind is understanding mental states (emotion, belief, intention, desire) of self and others. Therefore this ability will help individual to observe the mental states using obvious behavior. This skill also help a person to response others appropriately based on his observation. In addition, theory of mind also being part of social competence. Then, if someone has low skill of theory of mind, it will imply on their social functioning. Inability to understand other's mental state is referred as mindblindness (Doherty, 2009; Hughes & Leekam, 2004). When a person deficient in theory of mind skill, it will imply on his social behavior, whether become aggressive or social withdrawl.

The victims are assumed for having special characteristics. Victims often look weak physically, submissive, quiet, withdrawn, and anxious (Estevez, Jimenez & Musitu, 2008). They are tend to be defenseless than other friends. When interacting with peers, victims usually have low social skills. Therefore, they only have few friends. In one research by DePrince (2005), it is said that participants who became victims made more mistakes in recognizing violence. They are confused with social cues which referred to aggressivity. Thus, they have higher probability in revictimization.

From previous explanation, it can be seen that theory of mind has a relation with victimization. If students have high capability of theory of mind, they will understand social cues and others intention. This ability will help them to predict other's behavior. It can be a buffer for them to make some self protections. In other hand, if they have low theory of mind ability, students will get higher risk to become victims. Therefore, the hypothesis is there is correlation between theory of mind and victimization.

2. Problem Statement

Reality in field shows that there are still many students who experience victimization. From previous explanation, it can be seen that theory of mind has a relation with victimization. If students have high capability of theory of mind, they will understand social cues and others intention. This ability will help them to predict other's behavior. It can be a buffer for them to make some self protections

3. Research question

The research question is, "how is the role of theory of mind has a relation with victimization?"

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