Examining co-occurring and pure relational and physical victimization in early childhood

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A B S T R A C T

The current study took a novel approach to examining peer victimization experiences on a continuum in early childhood. A bifactor approach was used to examine co-occurring victimization as well as the relative contribution of subtypes of victimization, including both physical and relational victimization. To date, no known research has examined co-occurring victimization in early childhood. The fit of a bifactor model, as well as the utility of the model in testing associations with internalizing problems, was examined. The short-term longitudinal study ($N = 231$; 109 girls; $M_{age} = 47.46$ months, $SD = 7.35$) found support for a hierarchical structure of victimization, including co-occurrence and "pure" victimization dimensions, in early childhood. Regression analyses supported that both co-occurring victimization and relational victimization were associated with internalizing adjustment outcomes. These associations differed by gender. A bifactor model may be a useful statistical technique to address the common finding of co-occurrence of victimization to better understand peer harassment experiences and risk for adjustment problems.

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Introduction

Research on peer victimization is important because it has been identified as a common experience among children that may lead to adjustment problems such as internalizing problems (i.e., depression

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and anxiety) for some youths (Card & Hodges, 2008; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Peer victimization can broadly be defined as the receipt of aggression or threats of aggression (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). Two types of victimization that are commonly discussed in the literature are physical victimization (e.g., children harmed or threatened to be harmed with physical force such as pushing, punching, and kicking; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick et al., 1999) and relational victimization (e.g., children harmed or threatened to be harmed with damage to their relationship with others such as social exclusion and malicious secret spreading or gossiping; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick et al., 1999). Verbal aggression can be defined as any hostile verbal act such as teasing, taunting, or making fun of another that does not expressly include physical threats or threats to the relationship (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). In the current study, verbal victimization was not included; although physical and relational acts can involve verbal components in their expression, they differ in regard to the content of these acts. Previous research in adolescence has identified that individuals who experience multiple forms of victimization have been found to be at greater risk for adjustment problems such as internalizing problems (Card & Hodges, 2008; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Malti, Perren, & Buchmann, 2010; Olweus, 1993; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005). Moreover, receiving peer victimization in early childhood has been found to be associated with adjustment problems later in life, suggesting that early victimization can have a lasting impact (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). One of the challenges the current literature faces is how best to examine the co-occurrence (receiving multiple forms of victimization) of peer victimization and its associated adjustment problems. Previous analytic strategies have grappled with how to best measure co-occurring victimization, and to our knowledge co-occurring victimization has not been examined using an early childhood sample.

Recent statistical approaches have typically focused on a single type of victimization while controlling for the other form of victimization and grouping children into dichotomous categories. These approaches have limitations in their ability to examine co-occurrence of victimization. Furthermore, although there have been a few concurrent studies demonstrating links between forms of peer victimization and social–psychological adjustment in early childhood (e.g., Crick et al., 1999; Garner & Lemerise, 2007; Nelson, Robinson, Hart, Albano, & Marshall, 2010; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2004), there has been limited longitudinal work on early childhood peer victimization experiences and adjustment problems (cf. Kamper-DeMarco & Ostrov, 2017). Previous meta-analyses examining peer victimization and adjustment (see Casper & Card, 2016; Reijntjes et al., 2011) included only three early childhood studies. Given the relative lack of research examining peer victimization more generally as well as co-occurrence in early childhood, more research is needed that may inform the design of prevention and intervention efforts earlier in development (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). To this end, the current study is an examination of the overlap or co-occurrence of the subtypes of peer victimization among a young sample using a bifactor model approach, which differs from previous studies examining peer victimization in childhood and adolescence.

Co-occurrence of victimization and adjustment

Historically, research focused largely on physical forms of peer victimization, and this work supported an association between physical victimization and internalizing problems (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Crick et al., 1999; Olweus, 1993). However, the sole focus on physical victimization was problematic because it is more commonly experienced by boys in comparison with girls (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick et al., 1999). Hence, a focus on just physical victimization may have biased findings that failed to identify peer harassment experiences for girls, suggesting that girls are not victimized. Crick and Bigbee (1998) estimated that failure to consider relational victimization in their middle childhood sample likely excluded 30% of the "victims," and many were girls. Thus, researchers since 1996 have argued that it is important to consider relational victimization for a more gender-balanced approach to understanding victimization experiences (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). More current research has identified that relational victimization has also been found to be associated with several internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety, particularly for girls in middle childhood and adolescence (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick et al., 1999; Kawabata, Crick, & Hamaguchi, 2013; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996b; Prinstein et al., 2001; Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, & Flynn, 2009).