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Does peer victimization predict low self-esteem, or does low self-esteem predict peer victimization? Meta-analyses on longitudinal studies

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ABSTRACT

In the current study two meta-analyses are performed on longitudinal studies on peer victimization and self-esteem. The goal of these meta-analyses was to analyze whether a low self-esteem predicts future peer victimization, or whether peer victimization predicts future low self-esteem. The databases PsycINFO, MEDLINE, and ERIC were searched for relevant literature. Two authors independently went through the retrieved articles and found four doctoral dissertations and 14 peer reviewed articles eligible for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Articles were independently coded by two authors, with good interrater agreement. A total of 16,230 youth were included in the meta-analysis on peer victimization and self-esteem, and a total of 16,394 youth were included in the meta-analysis on self-esteem and peer victimization. Significant prospective pathways were found from peer victimization to self-esteem, and from self-esteem to peer victimization, which suggests that peer victimization and self-esteem are related in a transactional manner. Analyses suggested a negligible role of publication bias in the obtained results. Moderator analyses revealed that effect sizes were smaller for studies that used peer reports, and for studies that considered longer time-spans. The results of the current study suggest that peer victimization could have long lasting negative effects on self-esteem, but also point out that children may become victims because of low self-esteem.

Introduction

Peer victimization is related to a plethora of negative outcomes, as demonstrated in meta-analyses on concurrent (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Van Geel, Goemans, & Vedder, 2015; Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014) and prospective (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Reijntjes et al., 2011; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011) studies. One often studied concept in relation to peer victimization is self-esteem, and a meta-analysis suggests significant relations between peer victimization and self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). However, because this meta-analysis is based mostly on cross-sectional studies, it remains elusive whether it is peer victimization that causes low self-esteem, or whether low self-esteem ‘invites’ victimization. Theoretical mechanisms have been proposed for both prospective pathways. Adolescents who are victimized may develop lower self-esteem because victimization communicates a negative evaluation of the victim by peers, which may in turn be

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internalized (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Alternatively, adolescents with low self-esteem have been argued to 'attract' victimization because they communicate that they will not defend themselves when harassed, or indeed fail to defend themselves when harassed, leading to increased chances of future victimization (Egan & Perry, 1998; Overbeek, Zeevalkink, Vermulst, & Scholte, 2010). One explanation need not exclude the other as victimization and self-esteem could be related in a cyclical fashion, reinforcing one another as proposed in transactional models (Boulton, Smith, & Cowie, 2010; Sameroff, 1987).

Though several longitudinal studies on the relation between victimization and self-esteem have been published, some studies found that low self-esteem puts children at risk for victimization but not that peer victimization predicts low self-esteem (Egan & Perry, 1998; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005), but others reported that peer victimization predicts low self-esteem, but not that low self-esteem invites victimization (Overbeek et al., 2010). Yet other articles have found evidence for a model, wherein peer victimization predicts self-esteem and vice-versa (Boulton et al., 2010; Houbre, Tarquinio, & Lanfranchi, 2010).

The search for moderators

As stated, longitudinal studies about peer victimization and self-esteem have provided different results. It is possible that these different results have emerged because of differences in the studies' designs or differences in the studied populations. In a meta-analysis it can be analyzed whether differences in effect sizes are related to study characteristics through moderator analyses. In the current study we focus on participant age, the use of peer reports or self-reports, and study length.

Recent meta-analyses on cross-sectional studies (Van Geel, Goemans, & Vedder, 2016; Van Geel, Toprak, Goemans, & Vedder, 2017) and a meta-analysis on the relation between peer victimization and depression later in life (Tofi et al., 2011) suggest that adverse mental health outcomes of bullying are worse for younger than for older children. It is not clear why younger children would suffer more from peer victimization. It has been reported that peer victimization tends to be more prevalent in younger age groups (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006). To the extent that prevalence is not just indicative of the amount of victimization but also the severity and the time it prolongs, it could be argued that it impacts on the strength of the relationship between peer victimization and adverse health outcomes in younger children. At the same time, it has also been suggested that adolescents may be more susceptible to developing mental health problems as a result of peer victimization because adolescents place more importance on peers than younger children, making rejection by peers all the more painful (see for example Casper & Card, 2017).

With regards to peer and self-reports several meta-analyses have pointed out that effect sizes in studies about peer victimization tend to be stronger in studies using only self-reports (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Van Geel et al., 2017). A likely explanation for these larger effect sizes is 'same-method variance', an inflated effect size because of the reliance on a single reporter for both risk factor and outcome (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Same-method variance is in itself cause for concern because it may lead researchers and policy-makers to overestimate effect sizes between variables, but scholars in the field of peer victimization have warned against the unique reliance on self-reports also because bullies and victims may under-report their behavior and experiences out of shame or social desirability (Branson & Cornell 2009; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004). On the other hand, covert experiences of victimization may be more easily detected by self-reports (Gromann, Goossens, Olthof, Pronk, & Krabbendam, 2013), and it has been advised that both self- and peer reports should be considered in the study of peer victimization.

The length of longitudinal studies has not often been addressed as a moderator in meta-analyses on peer victimization, but one meta-analysis suggests that the link between peer victimization and depressive symptoms becomes weaker when more time passes (Tofi et al., 2011). Although victimization can be relatively stable, children who were once victimized need not be victimized throughout their whole school experience (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Pouwels, Souren, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2016). Over longer periods past victims may cease being victims and have the chance to deal with their traumatic experiences. Nonetheless, peer victimization can have long lasting adverse mental health consequences, even up to forty years later (Kerr, Gini, & Capaldi, 2017; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014), and it has even been argued that being victimized for some children becomes akin to a personality trait, being victimized for many years and across several contexts (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). So though on average we may expect that adverse outcomes decrease with longer timespans, the question how long peer victimization remains harmful should remain a topic of investigation, and analyzing whether studies with longer timespans show weaker relations between peer victimization and self-esteem (and vice versa) might shed more light on this issue.

Current study

The goal of the current paper is to use meta-analyses to analyze the prospective relations from peer victimization to self-esteem, and from self-esteem to peer victimization. Using meta-analysis, the outcomes of several studies can be statistically combined to obtain an overall effect size. The incremental values of a meta-analysis beyond a statistical summary of effect sizes are that moderators affecting effect sizes can be statistically tested, and publication bias can be analyzed. Publication bias can emerge because journals may favor studies that report significant results. Studies that report non-significant results are less likely to be published and end up in the 'file drawers' of researchers. If this consistently happens, a relation between two variables might mistakenly be concluded because the existing null-findings have never been made available (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009). Though results have varied, several articles have provided support for significant longitudinal relations from peer victimization to self-esteem as well as from self-esteem to peer victimization (Boulton et al., 2010; Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011; Leeuwis, Koot, Creemers, & Van Lier, 2015; Overbeek et al., 2010; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). Based thereon, we hypothesize significant relations in both directions.

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