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Stability of peer victimization: A meta-analysis of longitudinal research



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ABSTRACT

A meta-analysis was conducted of 77 longitudinal studies that contained at least one over-time correlation (range 1 to 36) between scores for peer victimization measured at different time points. The overall stability of self-reported peer victimization was determined at centered values (age 10, one-year interval). The effects of interval length, age, and type of informant (self, peer, teacher, other/combined) on the stability of victimization were also examined. Moderate overall stability of self-reported victimization at age 10 across a 1-year interval was found. Stability decreased across larger longitudinal intervals. Peer- and other/combined-reports of peer victimization yielded higher stability estimates than self-reports. Teacher-reports yielded stability estimates that were equal to those for self-reports. An interaction was found between age and informant type (peer vs. self), indicating a larger increase in the stability of victimization with age for peer-reports than for self-reports. Implications for further research and practice were discussed.

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Introduction

Peer victimization is a common problem in schools. Children and adolescents are victimized when they are exposed to harmful behavior, repeatedly and over time, and when they are unable to defend themselves (Olweus, 1994; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). It has been estimated that 9 to 32% of youths in Western and non-Western countries are victims of bullying (Stassen Berger, 2007). These rates are

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alarming, because victimization is associated with serious negative outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing problems and poor school adjustment (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Reijntjes et al., 2011; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010).

Stable victimization is even more serious than incidental victimization. The *chronic stress model* states that children who are persistently exposed to stressful events are at greater risk than those who are temporarily exposed (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1981). In line with this model, stable victims show higher levels of internalizing problems (Burk et al., 2011; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; L. H. Rosen et al., 2009), reactive aggression (Camodeca, Goossens, Terwogt, & Schuengel, 2002), and social dissatisfaction (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001) than youths who are less persistently victimized.

An increasing number of longitudinal studies have examined the stability of peer victimization. The results have varied from low to high stability. For example, across studies the percentages of stable victims have ranged widely from 8 to 43% (e.g., Burk et al., 2011; Schäfer, 2005; Scholte, Burk, & Overbeek, 2013; Sourander, Helstelä, Helenius, & Piha, 2000); a variability that may very well be due to differences in study characteristics. Given the serious consequences of peer victimization in general and stable victimization in particular, a clear estimate of the stability of victimization is needed, as well as an understanding of the study factors that influence the estimate. To address these issues, we conducted a meta-analysis of a large number of previous studies to estimate the stability of self-reported victimization centered across 1 year at age 10. We also determined to what degree the following study characteristics influence this estimate: the length of the interval between data collection waves, the source of information on victimization (peer-, teacher-, other/combined- vs. self-reports), and the age of the participants.

Mechanisms of stable peer victimization

There may be different mechanisms of stable peer victimization. For some youths, victimization is stable due to the continuity of their dysfunctional social interaction patterns (Caspi, Elder, & Bern, 1987). When children enter a new peer group, bullies initially direct their aggression to different victims (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Perry, Perry, & Boldizar, 1990) and observe their responses. Bullies then restrict their aggression to a smaller group of victims who react in ways that are rewarding for the bullies, such as with reactive aggression, crying, or withdrawal. These peers are then likely to continue to be victimized (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Schwartz et al., 1998).

Continuity in the social environment also may contribute to the stability of victimization. The *cumulative continuity model* (Caspi et al., 1987) states that youths with maladaptive behavior tend to select environments that further reinforce their maladaptive responding. Victims are likely to become friends with other victims who also lack social skills (Browning, Cohen, & Warman, 2003; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997). Thus victims limit their positive experiences with peers and opportunities to develop prosocial skills. Instead, they may acquire social skill deficits, dysfunctional interaction styles, and adjustment problems which contribute to continued victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Scholte, Engels, Overbeek, de Kemp, & Haselager, 2007).

Further, victims often are rejected in the peer group and lack friend support (Hodges & Perry, 1999). The risks associated with bullying a low-status peer are low. Therefore, bullies can easily show their dominance by continuing to bully the same low-status peers – thus also contributing to the stability of victimization.

The effect of interval length on the stability of peer victimization

One study factor associated with the stability of victimization may be interval length. Some studies address children's development within a school year (e.g., across 6 months); others over longer periods (e.g., across 12 to 132 months). In general, the stability of a developmental dimension is lower over longer time intervals (Wohlwill, 1973). There are different reasons why the stability of victimization also may decrease as time intervals increase. As time passes, there is more room for biological and environmental changes that contribute to variability in children's behavior. Victimization also may change over time due to fluctuations in the composition of the peer group. Children, parents, and teachers may use strategies to reduce victimization, which also impact stability (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner,

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