



Peer victimization and prosocial behavior trajectories: Exploring sources of resilience for victims



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the developmental trajectory of a potential source of resilience, prosocial behaviors, and children's peer victimization from third to sixth grade. Trajectories were examined for 1091 children (540 females, 81.4% Caucasian) from Phase 3 of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care. Latent growth mixture modeling indicated that three latent classes emerged (labeled resilient, at-risk, and normative). Follow-up analyses with covariates further supported the presence of these classes. The resilient class, of particular interest in this study, indicated high initial, but dramatically decreasing victimization coupled with high-stable prosocial behaviors over the 4-year period. These findings suggest the potential protective function of engaging in prosocial behaviors for victims and highlight the need to examine potential heterogeneity among victims.

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Trajectories of peer victimization are closely associated with the developmental changes in children's social context and relationships. Although peer victimization trajectories become important aspects of adjustment as early as preschool (Barker et al., 2008), in general, findings indicate that the frequency of victimization tends to increase most dramatically in middle to late childhood (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). This transition tends to be one of the most dramatic periods of change for many school-aged children (Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989) as shifts often occur both within their environment (i.e., moving from a smaller school to a larger, more complex school system; Crockett et al., 1989) as well as their peer group. Within this transition children are often tasked with restructuring their peer group, a process wherein some children exert social dominance over others as they cope with more complex peer contexts, actions that may account, in part, for the increase in peer victimization seen throughout this time (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010; Pellegrini, 2002). Children are also more likely to compare themselves to their peers at this age (Keil, McClintock, Kramer, & Platow, 1990; Krayer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008). The increased awareness and concern regarding social standing and relationship status further intensifies the potential for peer victimization to occur (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995).

Although a majority of studies examining peer victimization from middle to late childhood and early adolescence have addressed issues of stability and change by examining the *overall* trajectory of peer

victimization within a sample, there is increasing evidence suggesting the need to account for heterogeneity in children's peer victimization throughout this developmental period (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2002). To examine this heterogeneity, the current study utilized latent growth mixture modeling (LGMM), a person-centered approach, to examine potential subgroups and distinct trajectories of peer-victimized children across the transition to middle school. Given that a majority of the studies examining heterogeneity among victims continue to focus on understanding the various risk factors associated with victimized youth, the current study employs a strengths-based model to examine the parallel trajectories of peer victimization and prosocial behaviors, a potential source of resilience for victims.

Trajectories of peer victimization

Studies utilizing person-centered approaches such as group-based or growth mixture modeling have generally found evidence for three to five distinct trajectories of peer victimization (Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2014). Typically, these trajectories include a low/stable and a high/chronic trajectory along with more atypical trajectories defined by decreasing or increasing victimization over time (see Biggs et al., 2010; Boivin, Petitclerc, Feng, & Barker, 2010; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2014). In a longitudinal study by Boivin et al. (2010), findings indicated 85.5% of a sample of third through sixth graders showed stable-low victimization, with the remaining 14.5% reporting either high-increasing (10%) or extremely slightly decreasing (4.5%) trajectories. In a similar longitudinal study of children in third through fifth grade, findings indicated five trajectories of peer victimization including low, moderate, increasing, decreasing,

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and chronic victimization (Biggs et al., 2010). Examination of the sample as a whole suggested a majority of participants (88%) indicated low to moderate peer victimization that either remained stable or increased over the 3-year period. Together, these findings suggest that although a majority of youth experience low to moderate victimization, there is consistent evidence suggesting the presence of more atypical trajectories such as victims who are experiencing high, increasing victimization as well as those with extreme, yet decreasing trajectories.

Given the potential for increased stressors within this developmental period, current studies examining factors associated with the trajectories of peer-victimized youth have often focused on associated risk factors (Barker et al., 2008) or maladjustment outcomes (Boivin et al., 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & O'Brennan, 2013). For example, the study by Boivin et al. (2010) focused on examining the relations between peer victimization trajectories and children's social and emotional difficulties (i.e., aggression, withdrawal, and emotional vulnerability) in middle to late childhood. Even among studies that have examined both risk and potential sources of resilience for peer-victimized children, there continues to be a deficits-based focus. Findings from a longitudinal study of fifth through seventh graders found evidence of four trajectories of victimization including: non-victims with significantly low levels of victimization, desisters who started high and then showed decreasing victimization, late onset victims with increasing victimization, and stable victims with consistently high victimization (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2007). Although protective factors were identified in the study, the focus was primarily on attributes of the non-victims including low internalizing outcomes, low aggression, and high-quality friendship. The desisters, those who started out as victims and showed a decreasing trajectory, had one significant protective factor, a decrease in aggression.

Findings from Goldbaum et al. (2007) exemplify common strategies (and potential limitations) in the peer relations risk and resilience research. The first being identification of factors associated with the non-victim group as serving a protective function. Although the presence of quality friendships and low internalizing outcomes, for example, may be predictive of a non-victim status, these factors were not associated with decreasing the risk for those *already* victimized. Focusing on factors that are associated with a group that has decreasing victimization may provide insight into behaviors that could serve a potential protective function for children who are currently being victimized. A second common strategy is the focus on negative behaviors as risk factors linked to poorer outcomes and, accordingly, the absence of negative behaviors as indicative of a protective orientation. This focus limits the ability to inform researchers and practitioners about factors for resilience that could be promoted among victimized youth. However, given evidence of a group of seemingly resilient victims with high levels of peer victimization that significantly decrease over time (e.g., 6% of the sample in Biggs et al., 2010) a more direct examination of the potential sources of resilience for these victims appears to be a logical and potentially beneficial next step.

Resiliency theory

Sources of resilience are defined as characteristics of the individual or their environment that impact or are associated with positive developmental trajectories in the face of risk. Within resiliency research, there is often a distinction between two ways of approaching a study, either through variable- or person-focused methods (Luthar & Cushing, 1999; Masten, 2001). Variable-focused studies are meant to assess the associations, for example, between a risk factor and a positive developmental outcome and account for the various factors that may play a role in this association. To date, variable-centered models often assessed at one time point have been the most common way of assessing risk and resilience (Masten, 2001). Person-centered studies of resilience, on the other hand, seek to determine how resilient patterns occur, often by tracking individuals for several years to identify likely contributors to positive outcomes among at-risk individuals (Cowen et al., 1997). Within

this approach, resilience is viewed as a dynamic process and one that should be modeled over time to capture the change and constancy of factors contributing to resiliency. Although using a person-centered approach aligns with the shift toward understanding underlying resilient processes within developmental research (Masten & Wright, 2010), longitudinal analyses of the potential sources of resilience among peer-victimized children using a person-centered approach have often gone unexamined. In working to address this need, the current study examines the parallel trajectories of peer victimization and prosocial behaviors.

Prosocial behaviors as a potential source of resilience for victims

Prosocial behaviors are behaviors intended to benefit another person or persons (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006) and often take the form of helping, sharing, or other acts of kindness (Carlo, Crockett, Randall, & Roesch, 2007). Children who are well-accepted by their peers tend to display prosocial behaviors more frequently and are likely to benefit from attendant, positive peer interactions, thus increasing the number of opportunities they have to practice prosocial behaviors. Those who initially are not well-accepted at the peer group level are subsequently less likely to benefit from this positive socialization cycle (Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). Prosocial children are less likely to indicate stress within their peer relationships, and in turn, less likely to be chosen as victims by their peers (Coleman & Byrd, 2003).

Although correlational analyses may suggest prosocial children are less likely to be victims, and victims are less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, this falls short of linking prosocial behavior to resiliency relative to peer victimization. The contention that a need to belong is fundamental to development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) provides support for the notion that some victims may be able or more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors. According to this theory, humans are innately motivated to form and to maintain social bonds, thus threats to one's need to belong (e.g. peer victimization, exclusion) should energize an adaptive response that would, at least in part, be focused on regaining (or maintaining) social acceptance and a sense of belongingness. In further fulfilling this need to belong, prosocial behaviors may serve to distract from stressors, providing individuals with feelings of purpose and meaning in difficult times (Midlarsky, 1991). Experiencing stress, such as that associated with peer victimization, may also increase an individual's awareness of others' suffering which, in turn, may lead to engagement in more helping behaviors. Increased emotional sensitivity is proposed to lead to an increase in identifying with other victims and their suffering (i.e., an emotional sensitivity hypothesis; Staub, 2005).

Although empirical findings have often indicated an inverse relationship between victimization and prosocial behaviors, for some children the need to belong (or similar social motivation) may be strong enough that even in the face of peer victimization they continue to pursue behaviors that support positive peer relationships to meet this need. This notion is supported by a recent study utilizing a moderation model to examine the association between peer victimization and prosocial behaviors (Griese & Buhs, 2014). Findings from this longitudinal study indicated that children who were relationally victimized and highly prosocial had significantly less loneliness than their similarly victimized, less prosocial counterparts one year later. This study provides initial support for the notion that some peer-victimized youth are engaged in prosocial behaviors, and that this engagement can subsequently impact adjustment outcomes.

The current model

Although there appears to be emerging theoretical and empirical support suggesting that some victims may be able to engage in prosocial behaviors in the midst of social stressors, studies have yet to identify trajectories of potentially resilient subgroups of victims. The goal of the current longitudinal study is to examine children's peer victimization

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