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# Do I fit in? Psychosocial ramifications of low gender typicality in early adolescence<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The current longitudinal study was designed to examine one of the possible underlying mechanisms that can help account for why low gender typicality (i.e., not feeling like a typical boy or girl) is related to subsequent psychosocial adjustment problems: peer victimization. Relying on a large (N = 5,991, 52% female), ethnically diverse U.S. sample, the results suggested that peer victimization at 7th grade partially accounts for associations between 7th grade gender typicality and 8th grade social anxiety, somatic complaints, and externalizing behavior, when controlling for earlier (e.g., 6th grade) levels of adjustment. Associations were similar across ethnic groups. Peer victimization mediated associations for boys and girls across all outcomes; however, girls showed stronger associations with somatic complaints and boys showed stronger associations with externalizing behavior. These results suggest that attempts to improve adjustment for youth feeling low gender typicality should focus in part on reducing peer victimization.

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## 1. Introduction

Youth often suffer negative social and psychological repercussions if they do not fit in with their social reference groups (Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2007). Not fitting in with one's gender category is particularly salient. Starting in childhood, low gender typicality—i.e., perceived lack of fit with a binary gender category—is associated with a variety of adjustment difficulties. For example, low typicality is associated with lower self-worth from middle childhood (Egan & Perry, 2001) to mid-adolescence (Menon, 2011). Low gender typicality is also linked to higher internalizing symptoms in general (Carver, Yunger, & Perry, 2003), and to specific internalizing symptoms such as anxiety (Jewell & Brown, 2014). Measures of gender typicality in the aforementioned studies span from behaviorally specific (e.g., engagement in sex-typed behaviors; Young & Sweeting, 2004) to broad sense of lack of fit (e.g., extent to which participants feel similar to other boys/girls; T. E. Smith & Leaper, 2006). In the current study, we focus on the subjective sense of gender typicality as we examine an underlying mechanism that can help explain why young adolescents who perceive themselves not to be gender typical in middle school may manifest subsequent psychosocial or behavioral problems: peer victimization.

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### 1.1. Gender typicality and peer interactions

In addition to having intrapersonal ramifications (e.g., internalizing symptoms), gender typicality is inherently a social construct. Gender norms associated with the gender binary are learned through observation and social feedback; this learning process starts early in life with parents and caregivers as role models and providing feedback (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2014; Kane, 2006). During adolescence, youth spend less time with family (e.g., Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996), and have more opportunities to interact with same-age peers with little direct adult supervision. During this same developmental period, adolescents become particularly sensitive to social signals from peers, strengthening their role as (gender) socializing agents (cf. Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

As peers become increasingly important, observations of negative feedback in the form of peer ridicule and intimidation further convey what is not tolerated or accepted in a particular group or setting (Juvonen & Galvan, 2009). When peers target behaviors, mannerisms, or appearances that are not gender typical, they “police” and reinforce gender norms (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Although gender policing may start in early childhood with comments like “boys don’t play with dolls,” the social repercussions of deviating from gender norms tend to increase with age (Carter & McCloskey, 1984; Zosuls, Andrews, Martin, England, & Field, 2016). Physical changes with the onset of puberty can increase the salience of gender, and peer victimization related to gender typicality continues into adolescence (e.g., Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995; Pascoe, 2012; Young & Sweeting, 2004).

Given that less gender typical youth are at risk for peer victimization, and that peer victimization is robustly associated with concurrent and subsequent adjustment problems (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010), the question then is whether psychosocial adjustment problems associated with low gender typicality are due—at least in part—to peer victimization. Such a model has been directly examined in only a few cross-sectional or retrospective studies (except for studies of sexual minorities, e.g., D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). For example, relying on concurrent data, Jewell and Brown (2014) demonstrated that gender-based teasing mediated the association between gender typicality and depression in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Similarly, T. E. Smith and Leaper (2006) showed that peer acceptance partially mediated the concurrent association between gender typicality and self-worth for a sample of 12- to 17-year-old youth recruited from an athletics camp. Using a retrospective measure of childhood gender nonconformity (as opposed to gender typicality) Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, and Austin (2013) reported that bullying helped to account for the association found between nonconformity and depression in 12- to 30-year-olds.

Low gender typicality is likely to directly, as well as indirectly, contribute to psychosocial adjustment problems. Those who perceive themselves not to be gender typical may feel distressed, in part, because they feel that they do not fit in the way they should, or because they worry about what not fitting in may imply (e.g., about their sexual orientation). However, negative social feedback is also potent, regardless of whether it is from family (e.g., Kane, 2006), teachers (e.g., Pascoe, 2012), or peers (e.g., Jewell & Brown, 2014). We focus in the study on peer victimization in middle school because such mistreatment increases during early adolescence (Pellegrini & Long, 2002) and, at the same time, sensitivity to negative social signals is heightened (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Presuming that peer victimization is a particularly salient and impactful experience in general, but in particular for youth who do not feel like or act like most other same-gender peers, we examine how such experiences shape psychosocial adjustment across middle school years.

### 1.2. Differences by sex and ethnic group

Psychosocial adjustment outcomes associated with gender typicality may vary by sex. In one study of middle school participants, associations between gender typicality and adjustment were stronger for boys (Jewell & Brown, 2014), whereas in another study of third through eighth graders, gender typicality was related to self-worth only for girls (Carver et al., 2003). Yet other studies have found no sex differences (e.g., Egan & Perry, 2001). The reasons behind these different patterns are unclear; one possibility is that age and pubertal development may play a role. Girls tend to experience pubertal onset earlier than boys (Carskadon & Acebo, 1993), which may result in variations in the relative salience of gender norms at different ages. Timing of pubertal development in comparison to peers may drive some peer victimization and adjustment outcomes as well (Nadeem & Graham, 2005; Reynolds & Juvonen, 2011).

Another possibility is that boys and girls express psychosocial adjustment problems differently, particularly in adolescence. For example, researchers have demonstrated stronger links between stressors and internalizing symptoms such as depression in girls (e.g., Mezulis, Funasaki, Charbonneau, & Hyde, 2010); further, health complaints are more commonly reported among depressed girls than boys (e.g., Bennett, Ambrosini, Kudes, Metz, & Rabinovich, 2005). In contrast, externalizing behaviors are typically reported at higher levels and endorsed more by adolescent boys in response to stressors (e.g., Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999). As such, it is important to examine a wide range of psychosocial outcomes when estimating the effects of low gender typicality and peer victimization in adolescence.

Compared to sex differences, less is known about racial or ethnic differences with regard to gender typicality. Most samples in studies of gender typicality have been comprised primarily of White youth, limiting confidence in generalizability of findings. Our literature review revealed one study that explicitly examined differences among White, Black, and Hispanic fifth grade students in associations between gender identity and adjustment (Corby, Hodges, & Perry, 2007). The association between typicality and self-worth differed such that there was a stronger association for White participants, weaker association for Hispanic participants, and no association for Black participants. There were also some differences in associations

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