



# Peer victimization in adolescence: Concordance between measures and associations with global and daily internalizing problems<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to shed further light on what is measured by self-, peer-, and daily diary-reports of victimization in adolescence. First, the concordance between self-, peer-, and daily diary-reports of victimization was assessed. Participants were 188 Dutch adolescents (43% male,  $M_{age} = 16.07$  years,  $SD = .84$ ) who participated in a classroom assessment and daily diary assessment (5 consecutive school days). Peer-reports (15%) and self-reports (13%) yielded higher prevalence rates than diary-reports (3%). Second, associations of self- and peer-reported victimization with self-, peer-, and daily diary-reported internalizing problems were examined. Due to its low prevalence, diary-reported victimization could not be related to internalizing. The association of self- and peer-reported victimization with internalizing problems varied by informant (self- vs. peer-reported internalizing) and problem type (interpersonal vs. intrapersonal). Self- and peer-reported victimization were positively associated with daily internalizing affect. Results indicate that self-, peer-, and daily diary-reports tap into different aspects of victimization.

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## Introduction

Peer victimization among youths is an important concern. In western countries, 5–30% of children and adolescents are victims of bullying (Eslea et al., 2004; Stassen Berger, 2007). Adolescents are victimized when they are repeatedly and over time exposed to harmful behavior by peers. There is often a power imbalance between bullies and victims because it is difficult for victims to defend themselves (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Peer victimization has been assessed most often with self-reports and peer nominations (Stassen Berger, 2007). Recently, daily diary assessments also have emerged as a promising method to examine victimization (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Espinoza, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2013; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000).

Although self and peer assessments should be measuring the same phenomenon, they seem to tap into different aspects of victimization (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000) as indicated by an often weak to moderate correlation (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Scholte, Burk, & Overbeek, 2013) and a large number of self-reported victims who are not identified as victim by their peers (Oldenburg et al., 2015). To further address this issue, this study examined the concordance of adolescents' self-

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and peer-reports of victimization with each other and with daily reports of victimization. In addition, we examined how self-, peer-, and daily diary-reports of victimization are related to internalizing problems. This will shed further light on what is measured by each method and how victimization as assessed with each method is related to internalizing problems in adolescence.

#### *Self-, peer-, and daily diary-reported victimization*

Self-reports of peer victimization tap into adolescents' subjective experiences of victimization by asking them to report on the frequency of being victimized over a certain period of time (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Self-reports of victimization can be used on a continuous scale or as a categorization into a victim role. Adolescents are identified as victims when they report a higher frequency of victimization than the sample mean or a pre-determined threshold (e.g., once a week) (Schäfer, Werner, & Crick, 2002; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Self-reports are based on adolescents' past experiences. Based on negative past social experiences adolescents develop an interpretation style for future social events (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Therefore, adolescents' perceptions of victimization may be biased when they have been victimized before (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). For example, it has been found that bully-victims are likely to interpret ambiguous situations as bullying (Pouwels, Scholte, van Noorden, & Cillessen, 2016). Self-reports thus may lead to an overestimation of the prevalence of victimization. However, self-reports may sometimes also underestimate victimization as some adolescents deny their victim status (see e.g., Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

Peer-reports capture adolescents' reputation in the classroom. Adolescents are asked to nominate classmates they see as victims of bullying (Perry et al., 1988). Like self-reports of victimization, peer-reports can either be used in a continuous or in a categorical way. Adolescents are classified as victim when they receive more victimization nominations than their classmates (e.g., 1 SD above the standardized classroom mean or being named by at least 10% of their classmates) (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). In contrast to self-reports, peer-reports are less susceptible to biased perceptions based on individual victimization experiences. Reliable scores are created by aggregating the nominations of multiple peers, which increases the reliability of peer nominations (c.f. Marks, Babcock, Cillessen, & Crick, 2013). Nevertheless, nominations may be biased by a student's general reputation in the classroom (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990; Scholte et al., 2013) that may not always be in line with a student's own experience. Peers may not be aware of all the bullying that occurs, especially when it takes on covert forms (Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010; Schäfer et al., 2002). And peer nominations of victimization may be driven by a student's previously established victim status rather than by actual recent victimization incidents (Hymel et al., 1990; Scholte et al., 2013).

Daily diary assessments tap into adolescents' victimization experiences during a school day. They provide more insight into what happens during a single school day. As diary-reports are a form of self-report, some biases may apply equally to self- and diary-reports, such as biases related to interpreting ambiguous situations as bullying. Keeping the reporting interval short helps participants to accurately remember the victimization episodes that occurred. Self- and peer-reports usually ask adolescents to report the frequency of victimization over a few weeks or months. By using shorter reporting intervals, diary-reports are less prone to memory biases than self- and peer-reports (Bolger et al., 2003; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). The downside is that diary reports are usually collected only for a few days. The victimization incidents during these few days may not represent what happens over a longer period such as a semester or year in school, because the frequency of victimization may differ from week to week. It is therefore important to combine daily diary-reports with self- and peer-reports.

#### *Self- and peer-reported victimization and internalizing problems*

Internalizing problems are an important outcome of peer victimization in middle adolescence (e.g., Storch, Masia-Warner, Crisp, & Klein, 2005; Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006). It has been shown that self- and peer-reported victims experience high levels of withdrawal, social anxiety, loneliness, and depressive symptoms, and low levels of self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). Like victimization, internalizing problems also have been assessed with self- and peer-reports.

Studies using the same informant for victimization and internalizing problems have shown larger effects than studies using different informants (Reijntjes et al., 2010), which may be partly due to shared common variance. Self-reported victimization may also be more strongly related to global self-reported internalizing problems than peer-reported victimization, because self-reports tap into the subjective experience of being victimized (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Scholte et al., 2013). Like self-reports of victimization, self-report measures of internalizing problems also may be prone to memory bias (Bolger et al., 2003). Victims may overestimate their internalizing problems in global reports because of negativity bias; people have a general tendency to more easily retrieve negative than positive feelings (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The stronger association of peer-reported victimization with peer-reported internalizing problems than with self-reported internalizing problems may be partially due to interpretation bias. Adolescents may be more likely to perceive internalizing problems in peers with a victim status than in peers with a non-victim status (Hymel et al., 1990).

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