



Research article

Peer victimization, deviant peer affiliation and impulsivity: Predicting adolescent problem behaviors



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 December 2015

Received in revised form 3 June 2016

Accepted 4 June 2016

Keywords:

Peer victimization

Problem behaviors

Deviant peer affiliation

Impulsivity

ABSTRACT

Abundant evidence has demonstrated an association between peer victimization and adolescent problem behaviors. However, there is a large gap in knowledge about the potential mediators that associate peer victimization with problem behaviors and the potential moderators that exacerbate or buffer this association. The current study examined whether deviant peer affiliation mediated the association between peer victimization and problem behaviors and whether the direct and indirect associations were moderated by impulsivity. A sample of 1401 adolescents (50.1% boys, 11–14 years old) completed anonymous questionnaires regarding peer victimization, impulsivity, deviant peer affiliation, and problem behaviors. Gender, age and socioeconomic status (SES) were controlled for in the analyses. Structural equation models showed that peer victimization was significantly associated with more problem behaviors, and this association was mediated by deviant peer affiliation. Impulsivity moderated both the direct association (peer victimization → problem behaviors) and the second stage of the indirect path (deviant peer affiliation → problem behaviors). Specifically, these associations were especially stronger for adolescents with higher impulsivity. Identifying the processes by which peer victimization is associated with adolescent problem behaviors has important implications for an integrative framework of theory and prevention.

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1. Introduction

Peer victimization involves a person being the recipient of any form of attack from similar-aged peers, such as physical (e.g., being hit), verbal (e.g., being teased) and relational (e.g., social ostracism) damage (Card & Hodges, 2008; Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1994). Being the object of peer victimization is unfortunately a relatively common experience for children and adolescents (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). The prevalence of peer victimization has been reported to range from 11% to 37% among adolescents across cultures (Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004; Verlinden et al., 2014). A growing body of literature has identified peer victimization as a risk factor for problem behaviors (Begle et al., 2011; Ostrov, 2010).

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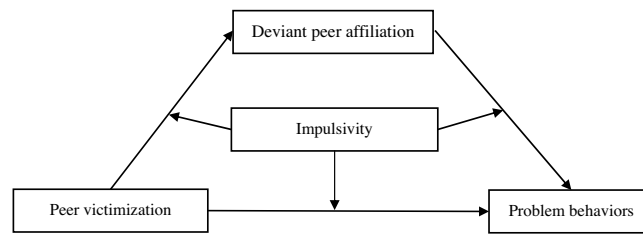


Fig. 1. The conceptual model of the proposed moderated mediation framework.

The term “problem behaviors” points to those behaviors (e.g., fighting, alcohol use) committed by adolescents who are under the legal age of majority (Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979; Burfeind & Bartusch, 2005). Coping theory provides insight into why peer victimization might promote problem behaviors (Begle et al., 2011; Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Peer victimization as a stressor usually provokes maladaptive coping responses that can relieve negative affect (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Aggression, alcohol use and other problem behaviors have been recognized as maladaptive coping strategies to deal with the tension engendered by victimization (Sullivan et al., 2006). That is to say, problem behavior may occur in response to undesirable affective states stemming from peer victimization. In line with this theoretical framework, Rose and Rudolph (2006) postulated that exposure to peer victimization may give rise to a vulnerability to problem behaviors in the form of behaviors such as aggression and antisocial behavior. Such work stimulated Ostrov (2010) to test this hypothesis; he found that peer victimization as a unique predictor was associated with an increased likelihood of aggression over time. More importantly, longitudinal data have suggested a possible causal connection, in that peer victimization as an antecedent put adolescents at higher risk for problem behaviors, even after controlling for other types of interpersonal violence (Aceves & Cookston 2007; Jackson, Hanson, Amstadter, Saunders, & Kilpatrick, 2012).

A major shortcoming of previous research is that we know little about the possible processes that might underpin the association between peer victimization and adolescent problem behaviors. There is an especially large gap in knowledge of the potential mediators that associate peer victimization with problem behaviors and potential moderators that exacerbate or buffer the direct/indirect association. In the current study, we expanded on previous research by proposing the moderated mediation model (see Fig. 1) that investigates the role of both processes (i.e., mediation and moderation).

1.1. Deviant peer affiliation as a mediator

Deviant peer affiliation refers to the selective affiliation of adolescents who show serious problem behaviors (e.g., cheating, substance abuse and aggressive behavior) (Fergusson & Horwood, 1999; Fergusson, Wanner, Vitaro, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2003; Keijsers et al., 2012). Adolescents generally are inclined to affiliate with deviant peers via the process named homophily selection, which emphasizes the importance of common features; in this view, adolescents prefer friends who are like them (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Sijtsema, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010; Veenstra & Dijkstra, 2011). For example, victimized adolescents may voluntarily affiliate with deviant peers who are similarly rejected, depression and/or experience low school connectedness (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988; Fergusson et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2012; Kochel, Ladd, & Rudolph, 2012; Mrug et al., 2014; Zhu, Zhang, Yu, & Bao, 2015). Another possible explanation for the relationship between peer victimization and deviant peer affiliation is the process of default selection (Sijtsema et al., 2010). For example, because of the low peer acceptance (Kochel et al., 2012), victims may have a chance for peer acceptance only among deviant peers. Victimized adolescents might also expect that some traits (e.g., aggressiveness) perceived in deviant peers can protect them from victimization (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). In a U.S. longitudinal study, Rudolph et al. (2014) showed that peer victimization was associated with higher levels of deviant peer affiliation through a default selection and homophily selection process.

The notion that deviant peer affiliation advances escalations in adolescent problem behaviors has been strongly advocated by some researchers (Mrug et al., 2014; Tompsett, Domoff, & Toro, 2013; Vitulano, Fite, & Rathert, 2010). Tompsett et al. (2013), for instance, reported that adolescents exposed to substance-using peers reported a higher level of drug or alcohol abuse symptoms. This connection may be deviancy training, which refers to social processes occurring in the context of repeated peer reinforcement for norm-violating behaviors (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996). This process gradually urges victims to acquire problem behaviors by imitating deviant peers' behavior (Akers et al., 1979) when victimized by other adolescents. A small set of studies has uncovered that deviant peer affiliation can be a mediator in the association between risk condition (e.g., substance use, maladaptive parenting, harsh school climate) and problem behaviors among youth (Bao, Li, Zhang, & Wang, 2015; Keijsers et al., 2012; Van Ryzin & Dishion, 2014). For instance, in a longitudinal study, Keijsers et al. (2012) found that parental over-supervision of friendship actually increased the chances that adolescents would affiliate with deviant peers, and indirectly predicted an increase in problem behaviors. Moreover, Bao et al. (2015) showed that school climate (i.e., teacher support, student–student support, and opportunities for autonomy in the classroom) decreased problem behaviors through changes in deviant peer affiliation. These findings provide convincing evidence that deviant peer affiliation is an essential mediator in the associations between risk factors and adolescent problem behaviors. Based on these findings, we proposed the following hypothesis:

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