Peer victimization and suicidal ideation: The role of gender and depression in a school-based sample

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The current study investigated the relations among traditional and cyber victimization, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and gender in a school-based sample of 403 9th grade (13 to 16-year-old) adolescents. Path analyses indicated that both traditional victimization and cyber victimization were associated with suicidal ideation indirectly through depressive symptoms. Although there was little evidence of gender differences in the associations among peer victimization and depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, the relation between depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation was found to be significantly stronger for girls than boys. The current investigation confirms the complexity of the association between peer victimization and suicidal ideation and that depressive symptoms, as well as gender, may play a role in this complex relation. Future research should continue to explore the associations among victimization, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation within a social ecological framework.

1. Introduction

Peer relationships play an important role in social and emotional development in children and adolescents (Sturaro, van Lier, Cuijpers, & Koot, 2011; Wang, Hatzigianni, Shahaeian, Murray, & Harrison, 2016). Research has demonstrated that adolescents who are bullied in both physical (i.e., in-person) and cyber (i.e., through technology) contexts are at an elevated risk for internalizing distress, including depression and suicidal ideation (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). This risk for internalizing problems is especially problematic given the high prevalence of bullying, both traditional and cyber, among adolescents (Nansel et al., 2001; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Even more alarming are the high rates of suicidal behaviors among youth, with approximately 22% of females and 12% of males reporting thoughts of suicide in the previous 12 months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are recognized as a significant health concern for adolescents. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 24, with rates of 18.2 and 4.6 per 100,000 for males and females, respectively (CDC, 2015; Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016). Suicidal behavior and tendencies are defined as a continuum of behaviors, with suicidal ideation on one end of the spectrum, followed by suicidal intent, suicidal attempt, and finally death by suicide (Mazza, 2006). Research that focuses on the beginning of this continuum—suicidal ideation—may better inform youth suicide prevention efforts.

Although there has been increased interest in bullying research, there lacks a clear picture of the effects of traditional and cyber victimization both together and separately on social emotional outcomes, particularly suicidal ideation. One of the strongest risk factors for suicidal behaviors is depression (Stewart et al., 2016) and given the recent focus—particularly in the media—on the relation between peer victimization and suicide, it is essential for scholars and clinicians to understand the relation between peer

victimization, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation among school-aged youth. Although conducting research on suicidal behaviors presents unique ethical challenges for investigators (Hom, Podlogar, Stanley, & Joiner, 2017), suicide screening is a safe—and essential—component to youth suicide prevention efforts (Cotter et al., 2015; Gould et al., 2005; Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009). Thus, the primary purpose of the current investigation was to investigate the role of depressive symptoms in the association between traditional and cyber victimization and suicidal ideation in a school-based sample of adolescents utilizing psychometrically sound measures.

1.1. Traditional and cyber victimization

Although there have been numerous definitions of traditional bullying and victimization presented in the literature, the CDC definition is vastly used and agreed upon by researchers in the field. This definition requires that the unwanted, aggressive behavior (a) inflicts harm or distress, (b) is repeated or has a high likelihood to be repeated, and (c) occurs where there is an observed imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). There have been inconsistencies in the way that cyberbullying has been defined in related research. Differences in conceptualization of cyberbullying has led to methodological issues and development of psychometrically sound measures has been limited (Mehari, Farrell, & Le, 2014). Some researchers use very broad definitions and terms, such as "internet harassment" and "internet aggression" (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Numerous studies have utilized a parallel definition of traditional bullying and require that cyberbullying be intentional, repeated, and involve an imbalance of power (Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2015). For example, cyberbullying has been defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith & Slonje, 2010, p. 249). Research has generally found a significant association between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, and some research suggests that cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying (Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012; Modecki et al., 2014).

Prevalence rates for traditional and cyber victimization vary, as they are largely dependent on how victimization is defined and measured. In general, cyber victimization is reported less frequently than traditional victimization (Modecki et al., 2014). According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 20% of high school students reported being bullied on school property in the previous 12 months and 16% of high school students reported they were bullied electronically in the previous 12 months (CDC, 2015). Kowalski et al. (2012) found 37.8% of students in their sample of 6th to 12th grade students reported being victims of traditional bullying and 17.3% reported being victims of cyberbullying. Previous research has found fairly consistent gender differences in traditional victimization, with boys being at greater risk for direct physical and verbal victimization, while girls tend to be equally or more likely to experience indirect or relational forms of victimization (Ostrov & Kamper, 2015; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). Gender differences in cyber victimization tend to be inconsistent. Some studies report no gender differences in cyber victimization (Brown, Demaray, & Secord, 2014; Jackson & Cohen, 2012; Williams & Guerra, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007), while other studies have found a higher proportion of females as victims (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

Further, research that has reported prevalence rates among urban, suburban, and rural schools is equivocal. Some studies have found prevalence of bullying victimization to be higher among rural communities and smaller schools (Klein & Cornell, 2010). In their sample of rural middle and high school students, Isernhagen and Harris (2004) found that 50% of middle school students and 37% of high school students reported being bullied in the past year, which is somewhat higher than national prevalence rates ranging from 11% to 38% (Nansel et al., 2001; Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). Other studies have reported no differences in prevalence rates among rural and urban communities (Klein & Cornell, 2010; Nansel et al., 2001). Although these differences may currently be unclear, youth in rural communities may experience unique risk factors (e.g., barriers to treatment, socioeconomic stress) that underscores the necessity of examining peer victimization in this population (Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011; Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013).

1.2. Peer victimization, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation

Research has consistently demonstrated that traditional victimization (e.g., Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Puura, 2001; Van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003) and cyber victimization (e.g., Bottino, Bottino, Regina, Correia, & Ribeiro, 2015; Hemphill, Kotevski, & Heerde, 2015) are significantly and positively related to levels of depression. Research has also demonstrated that adolescents who are victims of bullying are at an elevated risk for not only depression, but also suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completed suicides (Holt et al., 2015; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Reed, Nugent, & Cooper, 2015). In their meta-analysis on bullying and suicidal behaviors, Holt et al. (2015) found an average statistically significant odds ratio (OR) of moderate size for victimization and suicidal ideation (OR 2.34; 95% CI 2.03–2.69) across 41 studies. Longitudinal studies have linked peer victimization to suicide attempts in adulthood (Meltzer, Vostanis, Ford, Bebbington, & Dennis, 2011) and completed suicides in young adults (Klomek et al., 2009). Several high-profile cases covered by the media have associated cyber victimization to suicide in adolescents (e.g., Cloud, 2010). Recent research suggests that cyber victimization is significantly and positively related to suicidal ideation (Bottino et al., 2015; Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Utilizing a sample of 1963 students in 6th to 8th grade, Hinduja and Patchin (2010) found that participants who experienced cyber victimization were 1.9 times more likely to have attempted suicide than participants who were cyberbullies or uninvolved. However, traditional and cyber victimization are generally thought of as one of many risk factors related to suicidal behaviors (Hertz, Donato, & Wright, 2013; Hong, Kral, & Sterzing, 2015). In the study by Hinduja and Patchin (2010), only 6% of the variance in suicidal ideation was explained by traditional and cyber victimization. In a special issue focusing on bullying and suicidal behaviors published by