



Perceived attachment security to parents and peer victimization: Does adolescent's aggressive behaviour make a difference?

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ABSTRACT

Peer victimization is one of the most prominent problems during adolescence. Research has distinguished aggressive and non-aggressive victims; however, there are still significant drawbacks in understanding the social and family functioning of these different groups of victimized adolescents. This study aimed to compare social behavior and perceived attachment security to parents of Portuguese adolescents, classified as aggressive victims, non-aggressive victims and non-victims. The sample consisted of 222 adolescents (115 boys, 107 girls) who completed the *Kerns Security Scale* and the *Extended Class Play*, to assess perceived attachment security and social behavior, respectively. Controlling for age and sex, aggressive victims and non-aggressive victims differed in anxious withdrawal but shared a similar profile in peer exclusion and pro-social behavior. Only aggressive victims reported lower attachment security to mother and father when compared to non-victims. These findings underline that victimized adolescents constitute a heterogeneous group in terms of their social and family functioning.

Peer victimization at school, defined as the experience of physical and verbal aggression in the peer group, is one of the most prevalent forms of abuse during youth (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013). According to a transnational study conducted in 40 countries, nearly 25% of adolescents are regularly victimized by peers (Craig et al., 2009). This public health problem (World Health Organization, 2012) has been associated with adjustment difficulties in the physical, psychological, social and academic domains at short and long term (Arsenault, 2017; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). Moreover, such adjustment difficulties have substantial costs for individuals, families and society (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). A better understanding of the social behavior of victimized adolescents is essential to prepare more effective interventions aimed at preventing its occurrence and at reducing the risk of developing adjustment difficulties.

1. Social behavior of victimized adolescents

Empirical studies (e.g., Haynie et al., 2001; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Veenstra et al., 2005) have gone beyond the reductionist approach that assumes that victimization and aggression are mutually exclusive categories and have recognized the need to distinguish different groups among adolescents who are victimized by peers (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Kochel, Ladd, Bagwell, & Yabko, 2015).

According to this perspective, the majority of peer victimized adolescents exhibit a more inhibited and socially withdrawn

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behavior when compared with non-victimized adolescents, by dealing with peer aggression in a passive and submissive way (Haynie et al., 2001; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001; Veenstra et al., 2005). In fact, the avoidance of social interactions of anxiously withdrawn adolescents may be perceived by peers as deviant from normative social patterns (Rubin, Bowker, & Gazelle, 2010) and may signal to peers that they are “easy targets” who will not retaliate against aggressors (Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015). However, there is also the case of other adolescents who are victimized by peers and display an aggressive and hostile behavior, provoking and retaliating peer aggression (Haynie et al., 2001; Olweus, 2001; Unever, 2005; Veenstra et al., 2005).

Research focusing on the different groups of victimized youth has examined the negative social behaviors that are closely associated with peer victimization, namely peer rejection and exclusion. In fact, excluded and rejected adolescents tend to be perceived as “easy targets” for peer victimization, because the knowledge that peers dislike or look down on these adolescents may justify to subject them to bullying (Sentse, Kretschmer, & Salmivalli, 2015). Empirical studies have shown that victimized adolescents have more negative peer experiences (Leiner et al., 2014; Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, Ruan, & the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children Bullying Analyses Working Group, 2004) and are more rejected by peers than non-victimized adolescents, especially when they display hostile and aggressive behavior (Juvonen et al., 2003; Veenstra et al., 2005).

Due to their potential protective role against negative psychosocial consequences, there has been an increasing interest on positive social behavior in the peer victimization literature. In fact, being popular (i.e., being liked by the peers) and prosocial (i.e., having behaviors intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, or other forms of kindness) enables adolescents to deal more effectively with the social pressures of the peer system and it is associated with a greater likelihood of having friends or belonging to social groups, which may serve as buffers against peer victimization (Gradinger, Strohmeier, Schiller, Stefanek, & Spiel, 2012; Navarro, Yubero, Larrañaga, & Martinez, 2012; Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Sentse et al., 2015). Empirical studies have found that victimized youth display lower levels of popularity and prosocial behavior than non-victimized adolescents, but these drawbacks in positive social behaviors seem to be more pronounced among aggressive victims when compared with non-aggressive victims (Juvonen et al., 2003; Veenstra et al., 2005).

Notwithstanding their contribution, most empirical studies on peer victimization (e.g., Haynie et al., 2001; Leiner et al., 2014; Nansel et al., 2004; Unever, 2005) have used self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability. Given the normative cognitive and social changes that happen during adolescence, peer nomination measures capture the perspective of those who influence each individual's social reputation and who are also the best informants of social behavior (Correia, Santos, Freitas, Rosado, & Rubin, 2014). The few studies that have used peer nomination measures to identify different groups of victimized adolescents (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2003; Veenstra et al., 2005) have followed a unidimensional approach, rather than assessing the multiple dimensions of positive and negative social behavior, which are characteristic of the vast majority of adolescents. New studies are needed to provide a better understanding of the broader social behavior of aggressive and non-aggressive victims, using multidimensional peer nomination measures.

2. Perceived attachment to parents in victimized adolescents

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982), attachment experiences with parents are associated with the quality of subsequent social relationships, including those with peers (Pallini, Baiocco, Schneider, Madigan, & Atkinson, 2014, for a review). Specifically, children who consistently receive responsive and sensitive parenting from primary caregivers start to develop expectations that others can be trustworthy and dependable and that the *self* is worthy of love and affection (Bosmans & Kerns, 2015). These expectations about others and about the *self* are internalized as mental representations (internal working models) during infancy and become consolidated by adolescence, influencing how individuals interpret and process the social information and react to social situations (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Children who construct positive expectations about others and about the *self* during the interactions with the primary caregivers are able to explore the world with confidence and to develop emotional and social competencies (Brumariu, 2015; Groh et al., 2014) that help them to establish and maintain healthy peer relationships (Veríssimo, Santos, Fernandes, Shin, & Vaughn, 2014; Veríssimo et al., 2011).

Although the relation between parent-child attachment security and peer relationships during childhood is well established (Pallini et al., 2014), few studies have examined perceived attachment security to parents among adolescents who suffer from peer victimization. In fact, insecurely attached children tend to develop negative expectations about the self and about social relationships, as well as to interpret and process social information in a negatively biased fashion (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011), making them more likely to be targets of peer victimization (Walden & Beran, 2010). On the other hand, an insecure parent-child attachment does not provide a context for learning about relationships and self-regulation in a way that fosters the development of social and emotional competence (Brumariu, 2015; Groh et al., 2014; Van Rizin & Leve, 2012) which, in turn, can protect children against peer victimization (Zych, Farrington, Llorent, & Tfofi, 2017). The protective role of both these positive expectations about the self and social relationships and of these social and emotional competencies against peer victimization may be particularly important during adolescence. In fact, this is a stage where youth begin to develop autonomy from parents and must integrate and establish positive relationships with the peer group, as well as to form close dyadic friendship or romantic relationships (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

The few empirical studies on this topic have shown that victimized adolescents perceive lower quality and security in attachment to parents (Klomek et al., 2016; Walden & Beran, 2010), or report more insecure attachment styles (Dykas, Kiv, & Cassidy, 2008; Kokkinos, 2007, 2013; Williams & Kennedy, 2012) when compared with their non-victimized peers (see Coleman, 2003, for an exception). However, most of these studies involve samples of early adolescents (aged 10–13 years old; Kokkinos, 2007, 2013; Walden & Beran, 2010; Williams & Kennedy, 2012) — apart from the studies of Dykas et al. (2008) and Williams and Kennedy (2012), that focused on late adolescents (i.e., mean ages of 18–19 years). Moreover, these studies have also failed to compare

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