



The effects of single-sex versus coeducational schools on adolescent peer victimization and perpetration



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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a growing public health concern for South Korean adolescents. In our quantitative investigation, we analyze the frequency with which Korean adolescents in single-sex versus coeducational schools are targets of or engage in three peer aggressive behaviors (verbal, relational (social exclusion), and physical (including theft)). We use two nationally representative datasets, the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the 2005 Korea Education Longitudinal Study (KELS), and rely on propensity score matching (PSM). For adolescent girls, we find that being in all-girls schools mitigates both their exposure to and engagement in peer victimization. For adolescent boys, we find that boys in all-boys schools have significantly higher odds of experiencing more frequent verbal and physical attacks versus their counterparts in coeducational schools. Our findings strongly suggest that interventions to mitigate peer victimization and aggression in Korea should consider the gendered schooling contexts in which they are implemented.

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Introduction and motivation

Peer victimization has become a significant public health concern for South Korean adolescents, placing not only their physical and psychosocial well-being in jeopardy, but resulting in tragic suicides that have captured national attention. In March 2013, a 15 year old boy from Gyeongsan and a 12 year old girl from Busan took their lives, both expressing in their suicide notes how bullying made their lives unbearable (Woo, 2013; Yoo, 2013). Though the consequences of peer victimization are well established (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Rigby, 2002; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), the underlying determinates of peer victimization are less clear. They are multifaceted and interconnected, including myriad factors ranging from psychological traits at the individual-level (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Oldehinkel, De Winter, Verhulst, 2005) to societal factors at the broader macro-level (Cook et al., 2010; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2011). Identifying and increasing our understanding of these determinants can help stem the rising tide of peer victimization and, most importantly, mitigate its potentially negative consequences on the development of Korean youth.

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An important micro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) factor highly influential in explaining peer victimization experiences among adolescents are children's school environments (Hong & Espelage, 2011; Olweus & Limber, 2010). The school environment, or *social milieu* (Olweus & Mortimore, 1993), includes children's peers and teachers who can provide supportive relationships that can potentially mitigate the harmful effects of peer victimization (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006; Holt & Espelage, 2007). Yet, one feature of the school environment remains less well understood: the gender composition of schools (Silbaugh, 2013). Importantly, whether the gender context of schools matters for peer victimization is an unresolved question lacking solid empirical footing (Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers, & Smith, 2005; Silbaugh, 2013). Furthermore, there are no prior quantitative investigations situated in the Korean context examining how the gender composition of schools impacts the frequency of both peer victimization and peer aggression. This is critical to understand given Korea's national school assignment policy known as the *equalization policy* (EP) (T. Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2008) that randomly assigns children to either coeducational or single-sex schools. Importantly, if a school's gender composition matters for peer victimization and aggression, then Korea's school assignment policy may have far-reaching unintended negative or positive consequences, particularly on the specific types of peer aggressive behaviors adolescents engage in and/or experience. Accordingly, in our study—which is the first to our knowledge—we ask a critical albeit unresolved question: How do single-sex schools (all-boys or all-girls schools) versus coeducational schools differentially impact peer victimization and aggression among Korean adolescents?

Understanding how the gender environments of schools influences the incidence of peer victimization and aggression can reveal whether school contexts have the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate its harmful psycho-social and physical effects. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the gender contexts of peer victimization and aggression can ultimately lead to interventions specifically tailored to intervene in those contexts.

Background and context

Peer victimization and aggression

For the purposes of this study, we define *peer victimization* as the phenomenon of children being targeted by the aggressive behaviors of another student or groups of students (Hawker & Boulton, 2000, p. 441; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Aggressions can range in type including direct (e.g., physical confrontations or theft) (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988), verbal, and indirect (e.g., social exclusion) (Craig, 1998). *Peer aggression* refers generally to children's engagement in aggressive behaviors towards other children. An associated term used in the peer victimization and aggression literature is *bullying* which is recognized as a subtype of aggression (Perry et al., 1988, p. 807) that is intentional, repeated, and characterized by an asymmetric power relationship in which the bully is dominant relative to the victim (Olweus, 1994, p. 1174).

Peer aggression in Korean schools is often regarded as collectivistic (i.e., group- versus individual-based) in nature, consisting of verbal abuse or social exclusion rather than physical abuse (Y. S. Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2004; Koo, Kwak, & Smith, 2008; S. Lee, Smith, & Monks, 2012). The term widely used to describe peer victimization in Korean, *wang-ta*, means "severe exclusion" but refers more broadly to either a socially excluded person or the excluding behavior (Lee et al., 2012). Koo et al. (2008) found that the number of *wang-ta* aggressors were larger than the number of victims confirming the collectivist nature of victimization in Korea. Also, both the aggressors and victims were almost always found to be in the same grade and more than three quarters of the time they were in the same classroom (Koo et al., 2008). Gender differences in the prevalence rates of peer victimization have been mixed in Korea especially by the type of victimization. That is, although research has consistently shown Korean boys to be more frequently engaged in and victims of physical or verbal aggression than girls, findings on social exclusion have been more mixed (Kim et al., 2004; Koo et al., 2008; Shin, 2010; Yang et al., 2006). Lastly, research examining the relationship between peer victimization and student background characteristics indicates that low socio-economic status, low parental education levels, and single parenthood are all risk factors for peer victimization in Korea (Kim, Leventhal, Koh, & Boyce, 2009).

Victimization within single-sex versus coeducational environments: Rationales and evidence

Though there is a substantive body of literature on gender dimensions of peer victimization (Felix & Green, 2010), the bulk of gender related bullying and victimization research within schools tends to examine gender only at the *individual level*. Research examining the broader gendered contexts and how that might shape victimization and aggression behaviors is limited, especially work related to the incidence and experience of victimization for boys and girls under single-sex and coeducational environments (Silbaugh, 2013). Of the evidence that does exist, overall, single-sex environments for girls appear to be an overwhelmingly protective factor from victimization. Below, we synthesize from the extant literature the underlying theoretical rationales behind differential rates and forms of victimization and aggression in single-sex versus coeducational school environments and provide an overview of the empirical evidence documenting these differences.

Rationales. One underlying rationale for why differential rates of victimization might occur in single-sex versus coeducational environments is connected to the notion of *gender-conformity* (Silbaugh, 2013; Young & Sweeting, 2004). In general, "Students are more likely to be victimized when they do not conform to their school's gender norms" (Silbaugh, 2013, p. 1043). This plausibly suggests that if the gender norm is predominately male as it is in all-boys schools, boys who are gender non-conforming or exhibit gender-atypical behaviors (i.e., boys who do not exhibit traditional stereotypical male traits such

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