



Affiliation value and extracurricular commitment moderate associations between peer victimization and depression

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether the prospective association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms is moderated by early adolescents' affiliation value (i.e., desire for social contact and close relationships) and extracurricular commitment (i.e., importance attributed to involvement in adult-led organized activities). Data were collected initially from 123 early adolescents in the fifth or sixth grade and again ten months later, following the transition to middle school. The association between peer victimization and adolescent-reported depressive symptoms was stronger at higher levels of parent-reported affiliation value compared to lower levels of affiliation value, and this moderation effect was consistent across models with adolescent-, parent-, and teacher-reported peer victimization. In addition, teacher-reported peer victimization predicted depressive symptoms among adolescents who were not highly committed to an organized extracurricular activity. Results suggest that social values and extracurricular commitment may be useful prevention or intervention targets.

Introduction

Peer victimization is broadly defined as experiencing negative treatment from peers, including physical, verbal, or relational aggression (Boivin et al., 2010). Approximately 10% of children report frequent peer victimization experiences and approximately 50% report occasional peer victimization experiences and approximately 50% report occasional peer victimization (Arseneault et al., 2010; Nansel et al., 2001). Rates of peer victimization peak around the transition to middle school (Wang et al., 2009), which may be related to realignment of peer networks and corresponding competition for social power and status in middle school (Eccles et al., 1998; Lafontana & Cillessen, 2010; Pelligrini & Bartini, 2000). During the same developmental period, children experience elevated distress about peer maltreatment (Somerville et al., 2013; Westenberg et al., 2007), and peer victimization is consistently linked with depressive symptoms in early adolescence (Reijntjes et al., 2010; Troop-Gordon, 2017).

Negative outcomes of peer victimization are well documented, yet it is increasingly evident that the effects of peer victimization vary depending on individual differences and other social experiences (Tofl et al., 2014). In the present study, moderators of the association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms were examined in early adolescence, a developmental period when elevated rates of peer victimization coincide with other social and biological changes to increase susceptibility to psychological maladjustment (Lord et al., 1994;

Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). More specifically, we examined affiliation value (the desire for social contact and close relationships) and extracurricular commitment (importance attributed to at least one adult-led organized activity) as moderators of the prospective association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms across the transition to middle school.

The roles of affiliation value and extracurricular commitment as potential protective or vulnerability factors in the context of peer victimization may be understood in terms of basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), a mini theory within the self-determination theory framework. Although self-determination theory is a broad theory focused on motivations and psychological needs, BPNT specifically emphasizes the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to BPNT, all individuals seek opportunities to meet these basic psychological needs. Efforts to meet these needs may be heightened in response to experiences that thwart them, such as peer victimization.

Peer victimization may undermine feelings of competence, as early adolescents who are victimized often feel less socially competent (Fox & Boulton, 2005). Peer victimization may also undercut the need for autonomy if victimized adolescents react or behave in ways that are not congruent with their typical behaviors or values, such as seeking revenge (Dirks et al., 2014). Finally, peer victimization may interfere with feelings of relatedness because adolescents who experience peer

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victimization report feeling isolated and lonely (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Reijntjes et al., 2010) and have fewer friends (Card & Hodges, 2008). Thus, when the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are thwarted through experiencing peer victimization, early adolescents may attempt to meet basic psychological needs through affiliation with others or extracurricular activity involvement.

Affiliation value

Affiliation value refers to the desire for social contact and close relationships. Few studies have examined relations between affiliation value and adjustment outcomes such as depressive symptoms. In one exception, adolescents aged 12–16 who reported higher levels of affiliation value reported higher levels of well-being (Vinas et al., 2014). Similarly, affiliation-related goals (i.e., social development goals), such as building social competence, improving relationship quality, and developing a social life (Ryan & Shim, 2006), have been linked to lower levels of loneliness and a stronger sense of belonging in the school group among elementary school children (Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009).

Affiliation value may also operate as a vulnerability or protective factor in the context of peer victimization. Kawabata and Onishi (Kawabata & Onishi, 2016) defined relational interdependence, a construct similar to affiliation value, as the degree to which people consider close friends and family part of themselves. Relational interdependence moderated the association between relational victimization and depressive symptoms for early adolescent boys, such that the association between relational peer victimization and depressive symptoms was stronger at higher levels of relational interdependence compared to lower levels of relational interdependence. Although Kawabata and Onishi (Kawabata & Onishi, 2016) found that relational interdependence exacerbated depressive symptoms in the context of peer victimization, this effect applied only to boys and the sample was comprised of Japanese participants, whose more collectivist culture may result in a different moderating effect compared to an American sample.

An alternative possibility is that affiliation value serves a protective function for victimized early adolescents. Valuing social contact and close relationships may counteract retaliatory responses to peer victimization and allow adolescents to connect with other peers or adults who provide effective social support, serving needs for competence and relatedness in particular (Averdijk et al., 2014). We hypothesized that associations linking peer victimization with depressive symptoms would be attenuated among early adolescents with higher affiliation value, but elevated among early adolescents with lower affiliation value.

Extracurricular commitment

Extracurricular commitment is conceptualized in the present study as the importance that early adolescents attribute to their adult-led organized activities, as both the organization of activities (e.g., structure provided by adults) and importance attributed to activities are consequential features of extracurricular involvement. For example, Fredricks and Eccles (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005) examined the benefits of school-based extracurricular involvement for adolescents. Adolescents who spent more time in adult-led organized activities reported fewer depressive symptoms than adolescents who did not spend time in organized activities. Attesting to the benefits of extracurricular commitment, or importance attributed to activities, early adolescents who participated in sports reported higher levels of well-being (e.g., positive self-concept) compared to early adolescents who participated in passive activities (e.g., television watching), and reports of the importance of the sport uniquely contributed to early adolescents' self-reported happiness (Holder et al., 2009). Extracurricular commitment as reflected in moderate-intensity of involvement also confers advantages, as

extracurricular involvement has been linked with less depressive symptoms for adolescents who are moderately involved (e.g., 10–15 h per week; (Randall & Bohnert, 2009)).

Extracurricular commitment may also provide a protective function in the context of adversity. For example, adolescents' intense involvement in adult-led organized activities was protective against internalizing problems in the context of domestic violence, but lack of involvement and moderate involvement were not protective (Gardner et al., 2012). Even more relevant to the present study, Driessens (Driessens, 2015) examined whether adolescent- and parent-reported activity involvement moderated the association between self-reported peer victimization and self-reported adjustment. The association between peer victimization and internalizing problems was weaker for early adolescents who participated in sports than for early adolescents who were less involved.

Organized activities provide youth with contexts that enhance their abilities and strengths, facilitate friendships, and offer support and guidance from adults (Badura et al., 2016). Thus, extracurricular commitment could serve as a protective factor (i.e., moderator) in the face of peer victimization, as adolescents participating in these activities may learn social skills or establish supportive peer and adult relationships that serve needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Indeed, meeting needs of competence and relatedness mediated the association between participation in extracurricular activities (based on breadth and frequency of participation) and adolescent well-being (e.g., life satisfaction; (Leversen et al., 2012)). Thus, we hypothesized that extracurricular commitment would moderate the association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms, such that the association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms would be weaker at higher levels of extracurricular commitment and stronger at lower levels of extracurricular commitment.

The present study

The present study examined (1) whether adolescent-, teacher-, and parent-reported peer victimization predicted early adolescents' self-reported depressive symptoms across the transition to middle school, (2) whether early adolescents' parent-reported affiliation value and self-reported extracurricular commitment predicted depressive symptoms across the transition to middle school, and (3) whether affiliation value and extracurricular commitment moderated the association between peer victimization and depressive symptoms.

Multiple informants of peer victimization (adolescent, parent, and teacher) were used in the present study to test for corroborating evidence of moderation across informants with different perspectives on peer victimization (Goodman, De Los Reyes, & Bradshaw, 2010). For example, adolescents may report on overt and relational victimization and the full continuum of subtle to extreme victimization, whereas parents or teachers may be aware of more overt or severe victimization incidents, victimization that occurs in a particular context (e.g., neighborhood or school), or victimization experiences that are not apparent to adolescents themselves (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Consistent evidence for moderation across informants of peer victimization would provide more robust evidence for the vulnerability or protective functions of affiliation value or extracurricular commitment, whereas inconsistent evidence for moderation would suggest vulnerability or protection that is limited to particular perspectives on peer victimization.

Method

Participants

Data for the current study were collected as part of a larger longitudinal study that followed participants across the transition to middle school. At Time 1 (T1; before the middle school transition) a total of

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