

Social Anxiety Among Relationally and Overtly Victimized Youth

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INTRODUCTION

- Peer victimization has emerged as a critical factor in the development of youth internalizing disorders (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Victimization has been defined as negative actions directed at a peer from one or more children repeatedly over time (Olweus, 1993).
- Two distinct forms of victimization have been identified in the literature, specifically overt and relational victimization (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).
- Overt victimization harms youth through physical means (i.e., pushing, kicking and hitting), whereas relational victimization is experienced through manipulation or damage of peer relationships (i.e., excluding a youth, withdrawing friendship and spreading rumors; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Bigbee, 1998).
- Overtly aggressive youth report using aggression with their friends to harm peers outside of their friendships, whereas relationally aggressive youth report high levels of aggression within the friendship context (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996).
- Relational aggression targets the closeness and acceptance needs of victimized individuals and manipulates their relationships in order to cause harm. This harm can lead to social-psychological adjustment problems (Crick & Bigbee, 1998), such as internalizing difficulties (i.e., depressed mood), and externalizing difficulties (i.e., peer aggression; Crick et al., 2001) among victims of aggression.
- The severity of social-psychological adjustment depends on the type of aggression inflicted on the victim (Crick, 1997). Additional negative outcomes become apparent when children are both relationally aggressive and relationally victimized (i.e. bully-victim) (Crick, Nelson, Morales, Cullerton-Sen, Casas et al., 2001).
- Furthermore, provocative victims, or bully-victims, experience more negative adjustment problems than all other victim groups (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).
- Research has identified a corollary relationship between bullying situations and anxiety (Storch, Brassard & Masia-Warner, 2003; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle & Mickelson, 2001).
- More specifically, victimized children report greater social anxiety than bullies or non-involved peers (Craig, 1998). Several studies have linked relational victimization (Craig, 1998; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) and overt victimization (Storch, Zelman, Sweeney, Danner & Dove, 2002) to social anxiety.
- Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found that relational victimization is more strongly related to some forms of maladjustment (i.e., social anxiety) than overt victimization. However, contradictory findings indicate that there are also detrimental effects of overt victimization, including social-evaluative anxiety and social avoidance (Storch et al., 2002).
- Due to contradictory findings within a limited body of research, the proposed study will use multiple regression to examine the relationship between relational and overt victimization as predictors of social anxiety.
- Specifically, type of victimization (relational and overt) will be used as a predictor variable to determine if relational victimization is a stronger predictor of social anxiety than overt victimization. Involvement in bullying and/or victimization will be used as the control variable in the SEM model.

PARTICIPANTS

- 270 (148 females and 122 males) students participated in the study
- The participants consisted of 18 sixth-graders, 114 seventh-graders, 82 eighth-graders, and 56 ninth-graders.
- Ages ranged from 11-12 years old ($M = 11.78$ $SD = .43$) for the sixth-grade participants; 11-14 years old ($M = 12.57$; $SD = .52$) for the seventh-grade participants; 12-15 years old ($M = 12.98$; $SD = .73$) for the eighth-grade participants, and 13-15 years old ($M = 14.41$; $SD = .53$) for the ninth-grade participants.
- Racial distribution of the students who participated is as follows: 93.3% Caucasian, 2.2% African-American, 1.9% Asian, 1.1% Native American, .4% Latino(a), and .4% Middle Eastern.

PARTICIPANTS (cont'd)

- Socioeconomic status was analyzed using free and reduced lunch reported by each school. Seventeen percent of the total sample received free or reduced lunch and 67% did not receive free or reduced lunch.
- The sample consisted of 157 victims (87 females and 70 males), and 113 bully-victims (61 females and 52 males) for a total of 270 "victims" to analyze for the study.

PROCEDURES

- Data were collected in the Spring of 2002 from sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth grade students at three Midwestern middle schools.
- Active parental consent and youth assents were obtained for each student participant.
- Student participants completed a series of instruments which were administered during the school day and took approximately 1 hour to complete.
- Student participants were grouped according to status (i.e., victim or bully-victim) based on their responses on the Bully Survey (Swearer, 2001).

MEASURES

The Bully Survey – Student Version (BYS-S; Swearer, 2001)

The Bully Survey – Student Version is a four part survey that queries students regarding their experiences with bullying, perceptions of bullying, and attitudes toward bullying. Only part A was analyzed for this study. Bullying is defined in each section of the survey as: "Bullying is anything from teasing, saying mean things, or leaving someone out of a group to physical attacks (hitting, pushing, kicking) where one person or a group of people picks on another person over a long time. Bullying refers to things that happen in school but can also include things that happen on the school grounds or going to and from school." In Part A of the survey, students answer questions about when they were victims of bullying during the past year. A 10 item overt/covert bullying scale is included. A factor analysis divided the overt/covert scale into two factors: Relational Victimization and Overt Victimization that were analyzed in the Structural Equation Model.

Multidimensional Scale for Children (MASC, March, 1997)

This instrument is a self-report checklist assessing major dimensions of anxiety in children ages 8 to 19. The MASC consists of 39 items and covers 4 basic scales (Physical Symptoms, Harm Avoidance, Social Anxiety, and Separation/Panic), when combined these scales create a Total Anxiety Scale. Individuals are asked to rate the severity of each item based upon a four-point Likert scale from "Never true about me" to "Often true about me." T-scores greater than 65 differentiate youth with an anxiety disorder diagnosis from youth without an anxiety disorder diagnosis (March, 1997). The MASC has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability for all main factors and subscales, including a total score coefficient alpha of .90 (March, Parker, Sullivan, Stallings, & Conners, 1997). In the present study, the internal consistency reliability using coefficient alpha was .92.

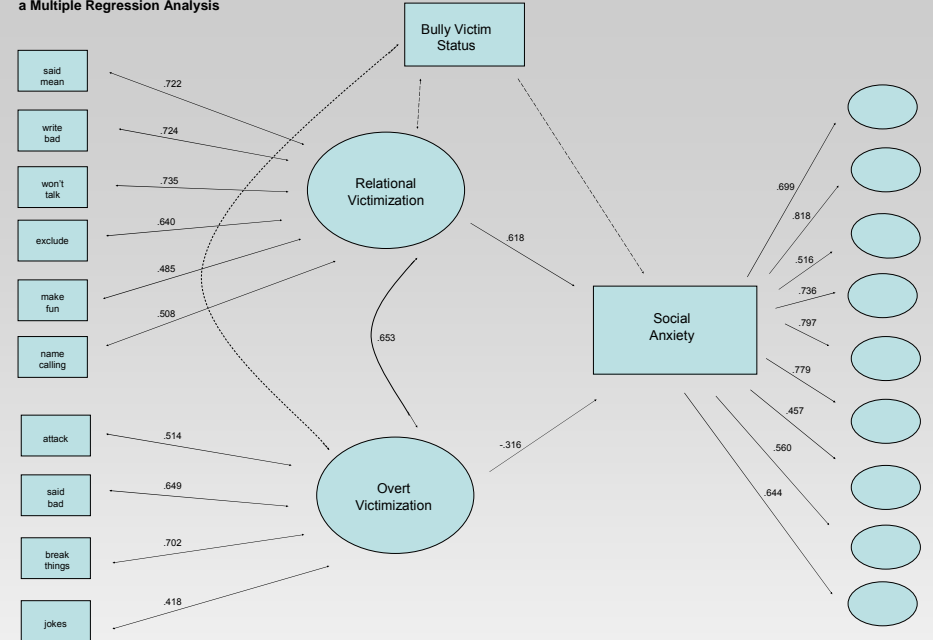
Social Anxiety Subscale:

The Social Anxiety Subscale of the MASC was analyzed in this study. This subscale assesses levels of social anxiety reported by the youth. T-Scores greater than 65 differentiate youth with clinical levels of social anxiety (March, 1997). The internal consistency reliability for this subscale using coefficient alpha was .87.

Sample Items:

- "I get worried about other people laughing about me."
- "I worry about getting called on in class."
- "I'm afraid other people will think I'm stupid."
- "I worry about what other people think of me."

Figure 1. Structural Equation Model for a Multiple Regression Analysis



RESULTS

- No differences were found across schools in terms of socioeconomic status as reported by free or reduced lunch.
- A structural equation model based on our hypothesis was analyzed using Mplus version 3.13.
 - Standardized path coefficients are shown for paths that were statistically significant; dashed lines indicate paths that were not significant.
 - The overall fit of the model was adequate $\chi^2(165, N = 270) = 484.37, p < .01$, root-mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .085, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .066.
 - These values exceed those recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999) as indicative of good model fit.
- Multiple Regression analysis was conducted to predict social anxiety from relational victimization and overt victimization.
 - Relational victimization and overt victimization were used as predictors of social anxiety and bully-victim status was utilized as a control variable in the model.
 - The regression equation with relational victimization was significant, $Z < .001, p < .05$.
 - The regression equation with overt victimization was also significant, $Z = .0074, p < .05$.

- There was no relationship between bully-victim status and anxiety once relational and overt victimization were controlled for.
- The multiple regression results suggest that relationally victimized youth were significantly socially anxious. Overtly victimized youth had an inverse relationship with social anxiety, suggesting they were not socially anxious.

DISCUSSION

- The results suggest that youth who were relationally victimized experienced higher levels of social anxiety.
- Youth who were overtly victimized experienced lower levels of social anxiety.
- There was no apparent difference in level of risk for anxious symptomatology for victims versus bully-victims with levels of relational and overt victimization controlled for.
- These results support the findings of Crick and Grotpeter (1996) who found that relational victimization is more strongly related to some forms of maladjustment (i.e., social anxiety) than overt victimization.
- Differences may be apparent because overtly victimized youth may be more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, and less anxious symptomatology than youth who are relationally victimized.
- Limitations of the current study include common method variance and a homogeneous sample.
- Additionally, relational and overt victimization were correlated and participants could have been victims of both forms of aggression.
- Future research should examine whether bully-victim status has a mediating effect on type of victimization (i.e., relational or overt) and social anxiety.