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Toward a More Comprehensive Understanding of Peer Maltreatment: Studies of Relational Victimization

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Abstract: Although many past studies of peer maltreatment have focused on physical victimization, the importance of an empirical focus on relational victimization has only recently been recognized. In relational victimization, the perpetrator attempts to harm the target through the manipulation of relationships, threat of damage to them, or both. We review what is currently known about relational victimization with three issues in mind: (a) developmental changes in the manifestation of relational victimization, (b) gender differences in the likelihood of being victimized, and (c) evidence that relational victimization is harmful.

Keywords: victimization; gender; relational aggression

Although victimization by peers has long been considered a significant area of empirical inquiry in other countries (e.g., Olweus, 1978), in the United States it has only recently emerged as a “hot” research topic. In this country, increased interest has likely been fueled by several horrific episodes of peer violence that have attracted significant national media attention (e.g., the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado). These events have highlighted the importance of increasing understanding of peer victimization so that people can intervene before troubled interactions escalate to fatal proportions. Interestingly, even in the cases that ended in serious physical injuries and death to the victims, perpetrators (or persons close to them) often cited relational slights (e.g., being excluded from salient social groups, which is one kind of relational victimization) as significant motivating factors in their physically aggressive acts (e.g., Johnson & Brooke, 1999).

Although many past studies of peer maltreatment have focused on physical victimization (e.g., Olweus, 1978; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988), the importance of an empirical focus on relational victimization has only recently been recognized (for a review, see Crick et al., 2001). Anecdotal evidence for the salience of this construct abounds, but this research area is still in its infancy.

What is real victimization?

In contrast to physical victimization, which involves being the frequent target of peers’ physically aggressive acts, relational victimization involves being the frequent target of peers’ relationally aggressive strategies. Relationally aggressive behaviors are those in which the perpetrator attempts to harm the victim through the manipulation of relationships, threat of damage to them, or both (Crick et al., 2001). Thus, for example, a relational victim may have friends who threaten to withdraw their affection unless he or she does what they want, may be excluded from important social gatherings or activities when a peer is angry with him or her, or may be the target of nasty rumors within the peer group that are designed to motivate peers to reject him or her.

Relationally aggressive acts deprive children of opportunities to satisfy their social needs for closeness, acceptance, and friendship in peer relationships, social psychological experiences that have been shown to be critical for children’s development and well-being (for a review, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A certain degree of exposure to these behaviors is likely to be normative for most children (and adults), and is unlikely to be detrimental for most individuals. It is the children who are targeted at extreme levels that we are concerned about and whom we consider to be relationally victimized. In our studies, we have defined “extreme” as referring to greater exposure than what is average in a relevant, same-age peer group (e.g., an elementary-school classroom).

Studies of relational victimization are important not only because of the hypothesized salience of relational victimization for all children, but also because of their potential for increasing knowledge of the

social development of girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). This is because studies of physical victimization have shown the targets to be primarily boys, but relational victimization is more likely than physical victimization to involve girls as victims. We review what is currently known about relational victimization with three issues in mind: (a) developmental changes in the manifestation of relational victimization, (b) gender differences in the likelihood of being victimized, and (c) evidence that relational victimization is harmful. This discussion is organized with respect to three developmental periods: preschool, middle childhood, and adolescence.

Developmental Changes in the Manifestation of Relational Victimization

The manifestation of relational victimization changes with development, reflecting the social, cognitive, and emotional changes that occur with increasing maturity (Crick et al., 2001). Thus, for example, relational victimization among preschool children tends to involve direct, face-to-face behaviors, such as threatening to exclude someone from a birthday party (e.g., “You can’t come to my birthday party unless you let me play in your group”) or signaling ignoring by holding one’s hands over one’s ears (i.e., the preschool equivalent of the “silent treatment”). During middle childhood, relationally victimized children encounter more sophisticated manifestations of peer maltreatment, including both indirect and direct relationally aggressive acts. For example, a peer may spread rumors about them (an indirect act) or may refuse to choose them as team members during gym class as retaliation for a past grievance (a direct act).

These types of victimizing behaviors continue into adolescence (with increasing complexity and subtlety). In addition, the increased salience of opposite-sex friendships and romantic relationships during this developmental period provides new contexts for the expression of relational victimization. For example, a relationally victimized adolescent may find that a peer “gets even” with her for a past grievance by stealing her boyfriend. Or she may discover that her best friend has “shared” negative information about her with her boyfriend in an attempt to damage her romantic relationship. Further, her boyfriend himself may give her the silent treatment when he wants to control or manipulate her (e.g., “I won’t talk to you until you do what I want”). Although cross-sectional studies show these developmental trends (Crick et al., 2001), it should be noted that no longitudinal studies of developmental changes in the manifestations of relational victimization have yet been conducted.

Gender Differences in Relational Victimization

The study of relational victimization was initiated to generate a more gender-balanced view of peer maltreatment, so it is not surprising that several studies have been conducted to evaluate whether there are indeed gender differences in relational victimization. Among preschool-age children, existing findings are mixed with regard to this issue, at least in the case of studies that have assessed victimization by using reports of teachers or peers. Specifically, results of one study showed that girls were more relationally victimized than boys (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999), whereas two other studies yielded no gender differences (Bonica, Yershova, & Arnold, 1999; Hart et al., 1999). In contrast, studies that have employed observational methods have shown that girls are significantly more relationally victimized than boys (e.g., Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2002).

Research findings for middle childhood and adolescence are also conflicting. Studies in which children and adolescents have been asked to describe the aggressive interchanges that take place in their peer interactions indicate that relational aggression most commonly takes place in female-female interactions (e.g., Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; French, Jansen, & Pidada, in press). However, studies that have assessed victimization by asking children and adolescents or their teachers to answer more standardized questionnaires have yielded mixed findings, with some studies indicating that girls are more relationally victimized than boys and others showing no gender differences (Crick et al., 2001).

Given the paucity of research in this area, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding gender differences in the frequency of relational victimization. However, the salience of relational victimization for increasing understanding of maltreated girls cannot be judged solely on the basis of gender differences in exposure. At least two additional issues must be considered. First, it is important to note that assessing relational victimization results in the identification of significantly more peer-victimized girls than does focusing on physical victimization only, as was done in the past (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Second, given evidence that females are more likely than males to become distressed by negative interpersonal events (Leadbeater, Blatt, & Quinlan, 1995), the consequences of relational victimization may be more serious for girls than for boys. Thus, regardless of whether or not future research indicates the existence of gender differences in the frequency of relational victimization, the study of relational victimization is likely to have significant utility for enhancing knowledge of the social development of females.

Relational Victimization and Social Psychological Harm

Two approaches have been taken to establish a link between relational victimization and social psychological harm. In the first, children and adolescents have been asked to describe the types of aggressive harmful behaviors that they have observed in their peer groups (e.g., Crick et al., 1996; French et al., in press). These studies have shown that relationally aggressive acts are among the most commonly cited mean behaviors, a finding that provides evidence of the hurtful nature of relational victimization.

The second approach to assessing the potentially damaging consequences of relational victimization has focused on evaluation of the association between this type of peer maltreatment and indices of social psychological adjustment. These studies have demonstrated that, during the preschool, middlechildhood, and adolescent years, relational victimization within the general peer group is associated with significant concurrent adjustment problems, such as poor peer relationships, internalizing problems (e.g., depressive symptoms), and externalizing difficulties (e.g., delinquent behavior; for a review, see Crick et al., 2001). Recent research has also demonstrated that relational victimization predicts future difficulties such as peer rejection (Crick et al., 2001).

Conclusions and Future Directions

Given the potentially harmful nature of relational victimization, it will be important to identify factors that predict individual differences in children's risk for exposure to this type of maltreatment and in their propensity for developing other problems related to these experiences (e.g., depressive symptoms). For example, it may be that children who have been exposed to particular kinds of aversive family environments (e.g., parental rejection or neglect, relational victimization by siblings) are more sensitive than other children to relational victimization by peers or are more likely to be viewed within the peer group as easy targets (e.g., peers may sense that these children are more vulnerable than others to social exclusion). For these children, even relatively low levels of relational victimization may be distressing and likely to result in other adjustment difficulties, as well as additional victimization in the future. In contrast, some children may be relatively resilient when confronted with relational victimization, perhaps because of supportive family environments, and may not react negatively to these experiences. This, in turn, may make them less likely to encounter relational victimization in the future (e.g., because they do not react in ways that are rewarding to the perpetrators). These and other factors warrant attention so that researchers can build theoretical models of the processes involved in relational victimization.

A number of future research directions are suggested by existing research and theory. One of the most urgent needs is for longitudinal studies. It is clear from existing studies that relational victimization is associated with concurrent difficulties in adjustment, as well as with difficulties in the short-term future; however, long-term prospective investigations are necessary to establish that relational victimization

results in lasting harm. This type of research is also needed to discover whether, as we suggested in the introduction, relational victimization sometimes plays a role in physical violence directed toward peers. Studies of the factors that contribute to relational victimization (e.g., family factors, contextual factors, individual characteristics) are also sorely needed so that empirically based intervention programs can be developed for children who experience this type of peer abuse.

Studies utilizing observational approaches for assessing relational victimization are also needed, along with studies that directly compare the utility and validity of various measures of relational victimization. In addition, it would be useful for future research to evaluate chronicity and severity of relational victimization and their relative contributions to social psychological difficulties. Another important avenue for future work involves generating and applying theory to guide exploration of the impact of relational victimization on children's development. For example, this aversive peer treatment may influence children's interpretations of future peer interactions in negative ways (e.g., they may begin to interpret peers' behavior as intentionally hostile, even when it is not). Social information-processing models may be useful for understanding this phenomenon.

Finally, another issue that warrants attention in future research concerns the role of the relationship context in which victimization occurs. Most previous investigations of relational victimization have evaluated maltreatment in a large, peer-group context (e.g., a classroom). However, given recent evidence that relational peer abuse can also occur in smaller groups or dyads, such as between best friends or in a romantic relationship (for a review, see Crick et al., 2001), future research that considers and systematically compares these various contexts is needed. This may be particularly important for females because relational victimization within the dyadic context has been shown to be particularly problematic for girls (Crick & Nelson, in press).

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