

Protective and Risk Factors of Peer Victimization among Adolescents: A Perspective from Victims

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Abstract. Peer victimization occurs when inappropriate behavior deviant from the social moral norm is conducted repeatedly, causing detrimental harm to victims. Growing numbers of studies cast focus on the deleterious consequences of peer victimization and the factors associated with it. The current study reviews previous research and summarizes risk and protective factors linked to peer victimization from a victim's perspective with a focus on social resources, psychological resources, parent-child relationships, and the peer selection process. The popularity enjoyed by adolescents is a protective factor against peer victimization, while peer rejection increases the likelihood of victimization. The number of friends buffers peer victimization, whereas quality's role is unclear. Shyness and internalizing problems increase peer victimization, both of which signal the submissiveness of victims in social interaction and thus be viewed as a weak target. A negative family pattern such as parental psychological control and child maltreatment put adolescents at risk of peer victimization by suppressing autonomy and a deficit of functional social skills, respectively. In addition, the dilemma faced by a victimized individual or internalizing adolescent caused by peer selection is discussed, which implies that the group of people is facing more obstacles in building peer social resources, yet they need it more imperatively. Interventions should be further explored and targeted at the risk and protective factors reviewed in the current study.

Keywords: Peer victimization; Internalizing problems; Child maltreatment; Peer Selection; Adolescents.

1. Introduction

Peer victimization is a universal problem around the world and across different cultures. Although society and schools are paying increasing attention to the alarming problem, it has still remained unsolved. Accounting in about 80 studies, researchers reported that the average prevalence rate of victimization and preparation were 35% and 36% respectively [1]. Consistent exposure to physical or psychological injury that is purposefully inflicted by peers, typically with power imbalance and frequent hostility, is known as peer victimization [2]. Direct forms of peer victimization encompass physical attacks and obvious verbal offense, while the indirect pattern is featured by relational victimization (e.g. peer exclusion and malicious gossip) [3].

Peer victimization can injure adolescents' development process and lead to maladjustment. The episode of peer victimization is linked to internalization problems such as depressive symptoms and chronic anxiety problems [4]. Without intervention, adolescents tend to be trapped in victimization difficulties in the long run. The moderate types of peer victimization are frequently disregarded, because schools and parents characterize them as purely interpersonal problems. However, sufficient studies have demonstrated devastating impacts on adolescents in the long run. Chronic peer victimization occurs during adolescence age may lead to deviations from normal brain development that are psychopathology-related, causing mental health problems [5]. As a bridge between immature and adulthood, adolescence is a crucial stage where cognitive ability is improved, and emotional growth takes place. During this period, life-long values are gradually developing, with their influences extending to later life. Yet, significant pressures, such as victimization experiences, severely disrupt psycho-social processes and impede the formation of a healthy self-concept [6]. Thus, it is essential to take an insight into the mechanism linked to peer victimization and take necessary prevention.

Peer victimization is excessively prevalent and also troublesome for adolescents because this group of people is highly exposed to a single social context, such as school. Victimization such as relational exclusion and power imbalance requires relative fix personnel composition and unavoidable interaction in the long term to form a hierarchy of social status. Therefore, peer victimization frequently occurs in relatively close-knit communities, such as schools. Peer abuse patterns are influenced by demographic variables like gender and culture. Property, physical and verbal forms of peer victimization were less common in girls than boys in both western and eastern cultures, whereas social manipulation, including relational attacks, was found to be more common in girls in the western study [7]. However, no difference was found between boys' and girls' chances of social manipulation in Asia society [8].

This study is a preliminary review of risk and protective factors regarding peer victimization from a victim aspect to reveal how social resources (popularity & friendship), psychological resources (anxiety sensitivity & internalizing problems), and parent-child interaction (psychological control & child maltreatment) are linked to peer victimization. Meanwhile, a vicious circle of the internalizing problem and peer victimization based on peer selection theory is discussed.

Although a good deal of research has explored peer victimization or school bullying from a single factor or aspect (e.g. friendship; maltreatment), there are few of them systematically summarize factors in general with a special focus on the victim side. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the risk and protective characteristics of adolescents, from the victim side, including 4 aspects (social resources & psychological resources & parent-child interaction & how some of the body of factors interact). A summary of factors associating with peer victimization not only can inspire further study of the interaction effect of these factors, but also constitute practical implications for the development and evaluation of the multiple-level intervention, which ranges from individual, family to school approach, instead of rather than a single approach.

2. Social Resources

The possessed social resources of the individual are associated with peer victimization among adolescents. Social resources refer to the symbolic or material items which are exchanged as objects in society [9]. The categories of social resources are not limited to tangible material things, such as money and goods. Social resources also consist of the intangible exchange of spiritual support, praise, respect, admiration, and interpersonal network. Intangible social resource exchange occurs in many forms in daily life. People feel needed and satisfied when helping others, probably because they earn recognition and gratitude from the one they help, which gives them a sense of self-worth. In an intimate relationship between couples, the exchange can be love, affection, and support. In a group of people, social resources can be reflected in one's prestige that can be earned by making contributions to the group.

Peer victimization is a representation of the negative side of peer interaction, in which social resources play a significant role. Peer exclusion, rumor humiliation, and aggressive behavior are more likely to occur when there is little social support for the victims within the relational cycle. Social resources are not only shield defending against injustice threats from peers, but they are also sources of support buffering hurt followed by victimization. Adolescents who maintain good interpersonal relationships are less likely to suffer from peer victimization.

2.1. Social Popularity

The popularity enjoyed by adolescents in school strongly protects them from being peered victimized. For adolescents, social popularity reflects the degree to which an individual is admired, respected and liked by a group of people. For instance, the class leader elected by peers is typically a popular student in the class. Distinct from friendship, which is a more in-depth warm relationship between 2 individuals, popularity is a social image and status among peers which contains characteristics of hierarchy. Popularity among classmates, in the school context, reflects the

individual's social status with hierarchy characteristics. Research showed that children in school who experienced sporadic victimization had a higher level of popularity than children who suffer from variable or stable peer victimization [10]. Popular adolescents had a lower risk of being abused by bullies because the bullies are more likely to assume that they will face retaliation not only from the individual who has been mistreated, but also from the uninvolved peers who are close to the individual. Furthermore, it is likely that popular adolescents share wild respect among peers when the wild respects create social conformity, which means the group of peers tends to obey and follow the silent rules even though they may not actually think in the same way. If the majority of people in the group do not dare or are willing to victimize the person, then the individual would not likely breach this conformity.

2.2. Friendship

Friendship serves as emotional support and it is indispensable for adolescents' development. It is generally believed that friendship buffer peer victimization and contributes to one's well-being. Findings from a meta-analysis also suggested a negative association between peer victimization and friendship [11]. Indeed, having a few friends in school can be a director-degrading enzyme to peer exclusion, which is a powerful protective factor against peer victimization and bullying. In the adult world, interpersonal network, or friend sourcing, is regarded as equivalent to powerful financial status in various aspects of life. Here, in terms of the school context, possessing and maintaining satisfying friendships is enough to provide strength and confidence when dealing with peer relationships with other classmates. People get acquainted with others not only in person, but also from the comments of the intermediary. Additionally, individuals who own the ability to establish and maintain a supportive relationship with peers can show the signal of good personality and personal charisma from the traditional public's view, which indirectly shapes social reputation. A study reviewed how quantity and quality of friendship affect peer victimization among adolescents, with the conclusion that the quantity of friendship serves as a forceful protective buffer when encountering peer abuse, although more for early adolescents at a younger age [12]. Having one friend is even effectively protecting adolescents who possess the characteristic of a high level of withdrawal and forgiveness [12].

On the other hand, the quality of friendship with a supportive function serves as mitigation for negative impacts followed by peer victimization in both concurrent and longitudinal situations [13, 14]. However, evidence showed that whether the quality of friendship buffer victimization and its harmful internalizing problems depends on whether adolescents perceive their friends are also victimized [15]. In other words, high-quality friendship does associate with decreased internalizing problems following peer victimization, only if their friends are free from perceived victimization.

To conclude, the quantity of friends shows a clear protective function against peer victimization, with dichotomous of presence or absence of friends being more indicative. The role of friend quality is unclear in preventing peer victimization, while the high-quality friend does buffer mental harm caused by the negative impact of peer victimization.

3. Psychological Resources

3.1. Shyness

Temperamental shyness refers to a disposition characterized by fearful and inhibited interaction with strange social contexts that occur early in life, and it remains moderately stable over time [16]. By means of questionnaires, a study evaluated the mediation of peer victimization between shyness personality and aggression in students [17]. The results confirmed that children who are shyer are more vulnerable to peer victimization and the aggressive tendency will be to bring out mediated by victimization, because of their difficulty in managing interpersonal contradiction and inadequacy in dealing with the threat [17]. Shy children are less good at managing emotional stability, due to their over-concern about external appraisal to some extent, and therefore having problems appropriately

releasing negative emotions. The common manifestation is that aggressive actions are carried out other than a rational way to deal with conflicts. Gao and his colleagues revealed the relationship between maternal praise, temporal shyness, and response type against peer victimization [18]. According to their research, children who have a temperamental shyness trait respond to peer victimization with less assertiveness and more submissiveness, which is mediated by anxious-withdrawn behaviors [18]. It was also revealed that maternal praise serves as a moderator, alleviating the negative effects of temperamental shyness and decreasing children's submissive compromise to victimization [18].

These studies' findings are consistent with the previous analysis of social resources. Without sufficient social skills, shy children tend to withdraw from social interaction. Similar to people who are introverts, it is not easy for shy adolescents to find their friends, and they take more time to develop close relationships compared with their peers who are outgoing. Perpetrators subsequently take advantage of shy children's deficits in relation networks, which makes peer victimization more easily occur.

3.2. Internalization Problems

Children who suffer from internalization problems such as anxiety disorder and depression possess less psychological strength and competitiveness in social interaction, especially when faced with negative conflict. In addition, on the premise that social capital such as popularity and friendship among peers is a powerful weapon against victimization, adolescents with internalizing problems are in unfavorable situations because they are more likely to have difficulties building up their interpersonal network. In the study on peer victimization and its relationship to parenting style, Zhou and colleagues discovered the mediation role of internalizing difficulties, which significantly predicts the likelihood of peer abuse at a within-person level [19]. Another study also confirmed the results, suggesting that adolescents with internalizing problems tend to be viewed as less amiable and socially incompetent among peer groups and accordingly be treated as weak targets by aggressors [4].

The disposition of anxiety sensitivity raises the possibility of peer victimization, closely related to internalizing problems. Anxiety sensitivity is described as the fear of anxiety-relevant bodily sensations, which arises from the perception that these sensations would have negative effects on one's physical, psychological, and social functioning [20]. Higher level of anxiety sensitivity puts children at risk of future internalizing problems and peer victimization, which is 11.53 and 2.70 times more susceptibility with an explanation that anxiety-sensitive children tend to show negative self-cognition, and they are also judged by teachers as being more inclined to seek reassurance as well as encouragement. [21]. Shyness and anxiety sensitivity, both being risk factors for peer victimization, share common characteristics. When interacting with peers, teenagers who suffer from shyness and anxiety sensitivity often exhibit a certain degree of submissiveness and weakness. Their lack of assertiveness makes them appear defenseless in the eyes of perpetrators.

4. Parent-Child Interaction

4.1. Parental Psychological Control

Restrained type of parenting featured by psychological control is a risk factor for peer victimization in adolescents. Parental style significantly shapes children's traits and behaviors, for example, self-competence, extrovert versus introvert personality, and social skills which are closely related to the interpersonal connection. There is a bidirectional prediction between parental psychological control and peer victimization [19]. As explained by self-determination theory, psychological control stifles adolescents' ability of autonomy, and satisfaction with relationships, leading to psycho-social malfunctioning [22]. Psychological control, often accompanied by the suppression of children's autonomous thoughts and behavior, impairs self-esteem and self-efficacy. Because of its latency, psychological control is frequently overlooked, particularly in some families with hierarchical characteristics. For example, control-type parents frequently impose their will on

their children, interfering with their autonomous choices ranging from food, clothing, and even career planning. Children raised in a control-type family have to compromise and tolerate their parents, which becomes the norm of their behavior over time. Once children get accustomed to such submission and suppression in the family context, it is likely that they also react in the same pattern in peer interaction, which peers perceive as a sign of weakness faced with conflicts and deficiency in protecting themselves.

4.2. Child Maltreatment

Acting as a risk factor, child maltreatment here refers to the abuse or neglect that happens in the family context. Common child maltreatment types can be physical violence and verbal humiliation. Adolescents who have experienced maltreatment are more susceptible to peer pressure because it impedes their psychological functioning. Exposure to maltreatment can lead to alteration in the brain function of children, which is accustomed to the atypical family context, while the alteration hinders social interaction among peers in the social context [23]. Through brain alteration, child maltreatment put adolescents at risk of peer victimization and rejection, leading to deficits in their mental health and well-being. Similar to the anxiety-sensitive trait mentioned previously, brain-function alteration is caused by maltreatment, contributing to exaggerated, or oversensitive responses when encountering perceived threats [24]. At the same time, maltreated adolescents may show an atypical response to typical social reward that gives rise to new interpersonal stress, and therefore increase the probability of being victimized. For children, violence at home, including the witness of violence between intimate partners, is significantly linked to peer victimization or bullying of perpetrators [25]. Moreover, there is a higher chance that children who experience family abuse, fail victims of bullying than becoming a perpetrator [25]. To conclude, adolescents living in a maltreatment context tend to react differently compared with other peers. Their deficiency in dealing with interpersonal issues in normal social contexts makes them vulnerable to peer victimization.

On the contrary, positive parent-child relation serves as a protective role against peer victimization. According to a systematic review, communication between parent and child generally serves a protecting role in victimization, with 61% of studies reviewed supporting the statement [26]. The review study also found that higher levels of supportive parental involvement in school life, parent-child cohesion, or family cohesion predict less peer victimization in children [26]. These factors can even buffer the detrimental consequence after a peer victimization incident has already taken place. The bond between adolescents and their parents serves as a foundation for adolescent socialization outside of the family. Adolescents tend to adopt their parents' maladaptive communication style when interacting with their peers if they experienced it themselves as children. A better communication style with parents provided teenagers with social skills such as how to express themselves correctly and how to take into account the thoughts of others.

In general, a healthy family environment is contributing to adolescents' positive interaction with peers, which decreases the likelihood of peer abuse, whereas child-maltreatment damages teenagers' normal mental growth, leading to a higher likelihood of peer victimization.

5. Peer Selection Process

There is a paradox within common solutions provided by schools and parents are engaging in peer interaction and building up their own social networks. Adolescents with internalizing problems are more vulnerable to peer victimization. And strengthening social networks does help to mitigate the situation of peer victimization, according to what is mentioned previously. Nevertheless, forming friendships, no matter among adolescents or adults often follows the rules of the "similar-adorable" principle, which means people like people who share similar personalities or features. Similarity-based selection generally displays in an active way (preferential attraction & repulsion), as well as a passive way (Default selection) [27].

Preferential attraction occurs when an adolescent actively contacts a peer who is similar to them, while repulsion is a process of alienation from a dissimilar group [27]. Laursen believed that sharing characteristics, and attributes between adolescents promote mutual understanding and a sense of self-validation, which facilitates the formation of friendship [28]. In contrast, adolescents are prone to dislike peers who have contradicting attributes, which further strengthens the preferential selection process and left the social network pool only with those who possess more resemblances. The default selection is a passive formation of friends selection that involve marginalization, suggesting that it is more effortful for victimized adolescents and adolescents with internalizing difficulties to build up friendship with normal and non-victimized peers [27].

From this evidence, it can be inferred that adolescents with internalizing difficulties are apt to make friends who possess similar problems. Adolescents who suffer from peer victimization are likelier to be friends with those with analogous experiences. Moreover, the passive default selection further constrains friendship options. Vulnerable adolescents tend to be in marginal states of a group of peers, on account of which, they can only make friends with peers that are at the periphery too, not owing to the similarity-based selection, but because they are the only choice left by others [29]. Friendship building is more like an emotional and support exchange, for which, adolescents with internalizing problems and being victimized could receive little support from friends in similar circumstances. Additionally, they have difficulties maintaining friendships with non-victimized peers because victimized individuals struggle to offer social benefits [30]. To conclude, victimization experiences or internalization problems set an invisible screen between adolescents with these problems and normal adolescents to some extent. Building up a social network is a powerful safeguard against peer victimization, yet the peer selection process inhibits adolescents who experience hardship from peer victimization from freely selecting their social network.

6. Solutions to Peer Victimization

From the individual aspect, social skills training could be effective for adolescents who are vulnerable to peer victimization, as better social skills are predictive of less victimization. Deficiency in social resources is a significant risk factor leading to peer victimization. Competent social skills that help the adolescent to engage in peer interaction are beneficial for gaining more social resources, for example, popularity and friends. Moreover, besides promoting social networks, social skills are necessary to protect individuals in interpersonal conflicts. Adolescents who possess better social skills to behave in a way that fits into the social norm. They can sensitively be aware of others' feelings and also effectively protect their own rights from being harmed, which helps resolve interpersonal conflicts. Adolescents with better social skills are more welcomed in a group and earn more social resources to protect them from peer victimization. Therefore, intervention based on social skills training can be beneficial for adolescents in terms of preventing peer victimization.

Besides efforts from individual adolescents, school climate is crucial to prevent happens of peer victimization. A multi-informant study revealed that peer victimization among adolescents is significantly reduced in a positive school climate [31]. School climate consists of what the majority of students, teachers and other staff collectively believe in, and how they actually behave. One common way to shape school climate is by setting up a school motto. A positive school climate could be a common virtue of amiability, justice, or awareness of mutual help. With a beneficial school environment, even when peer victimization occurs, non-involved peers are more likely to step up to prevent such victimization. When adolescents are struggling to change some of the risk factors of their own, which are quite effortful and sometimes beyond their control, the involvement of a third party can effectively protect them from being victimized. In order to build a proper school climate, the school is responsible to enact strict regulations on peer victimization or school bullying, with a clear demonstration of punishment for each crossline behavior. A practical implementation schedule is also needed to ensure regulations against peer victimization are exactly carried out. As long as the aggressor reacts to incentives and punishments, the rules at least help to prevent serious victimization

and bullying. However, for some types of peer victimization that are vague, for example, peer isolation, it is unrealistic to define them in the school rules. In this situation, another approach is to facilitate adolescents' attachment and a feeling of belonging towards the school and lead to a positive common spirit. Encouraging various kinds of school activities is a good way for students to show their competence and make friends with those who share similar interests.

In addition, managing the coping strategy is a feasible approach to dealing with peer victimization when the victimization has already occurred. Conflict resolution encompasses the solution-oriented approach, control, and non-confrontation approach [32]. Solution-orientation strategy is targeted at leading communication on the interpersonal conflict involving compromising and consideration of others' needs, whereas the opposite pattern is the non-confrontational strategy that occurs when individuals try to withdraw from conflicts and passively suppress their expression of feelings [32]. Solution orientation means a wise concern for others, rather than restating self-standing, or trying to manipulate [33]. Adolescents who take both self-interest and others' consideration into account certainly build up intimacy with peers easier. Distinct from submissiveness, a solution orientation strategy is not purely a compromise to others' requirements. Instead, it requires comprehension of the core conflict of interest and active resolutions, showing one's intelligence and confidence. Given that peer victimization and bullying have already occurred, a solution-oriented strategy that attenuated depressive symptoms and loneliness functions better than non-confrontational ones that lead to increased loneliness [34]. The non-confrontational reaction does not represent psychological resilience or forgiving the perpetrator. It is likely to be a helpless choice or tolerance without support and solutions. Despite that anger summing up, the victimized individual has to withdraw, being afraid of the further negative consequences of confronting. This discrepancy between mental thought and actual behavior aggregates discomfort and causes damage to mental health. In addition, non-confrontation in western society is viewed as an inability in terms of autonomy and assertiveness [33]. Hence, training targeted at problem-solving strategy could be included in peer victimization intervention when trying to minimize the negative consequences followed by victimization episodes.

7. Conclusion

Risk and protective variables for teenage peer victimization were discussed in the paper, from individual perspectives including social resources, psychological resources as well as family-child relationships. In addition, the study explains how the peer selection process shapes the dilemma of victimized adolescents. Low popularity among peers, deficiency in friends' quantity and quality, shyness, internalizing problems, parental psychological control, and child maltreatment make adolescents more vulnerable to peer victimization and its negative consequences.

This study contributes to relevant intervention by indicating target factors in regard to peer victimization. As widely recognized, rich social resources from peers are a strong guarantee of avoiding peer victimization. It will be great if adolescents find out ways to build up their social network and engage in friendships. Nonetheless, according to the peer selection paradox demonstrated previously, there are some constrain and invariable tendency that makes victimized adolescent hard to build mutual support friendship. Therefore, to alleviate peer victimization problems and buffer, the current paper suggests further research into the breach of dilemma that victimized adolescents are trapped in a vicious circle of peer support.

Profound research has demonstrated that child maltreatment and family violence are risk factors for adolescent victimization (as victims) and bullying (as aggressors). However, little research is targeted at what other factors lead to the different pathways to victims and aggressors in peer victimization and school bullying. Future research can delve further into the mechanism in that association and its moderator, for example, individual personality and self-esteem.

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