Preadolescents’ Daily Peer Victimization and Perceived Social Competence: Moderating Effects of Classroom Aggression

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Preadolescents’ Daily Peer Victimization and Perceived Social Competence: Moderating Effects of Classroom Aggression

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Few studies have assessed children’s daily peer experiences, and even fewer have considered their daily self-perceptions. This daily diary study examined relations between preadolescents’ daily reports of peer victimization and perceived social competence, along with moderating effects of classroom aggression. A racially diverse sample of 182 children in 5th grade (105 boys; M age = 10.64 years; 35% White, 31% Black, 17% Hispanic, 17% other or not reported) completed daily measures of peer victimization and perceived social competence, with most children completing measures on 8 school days. Teachers completed measures of aggression for each participating pupil. Four types of peer victimization (verbal victimization, social manipulation, social rebuff, and property attacks) predicted decreased daily perceived social competence. Daily social rebuff predicted decreased daily perceived social competence beyond the effects of the other types of victimization. Classroom aggression moderated the relation of verbal victimization with perceived social competence, such that this relation was significant in classrooms with lower aggression and nonsignificant in classrooms with higher aggression. Results indicate that preadolescents’ daily self-perceptions fluctuate with daily victimization by peers, particularly with social rebuff. Findings also suggest that the impact of verbal victimization on children’s self-views could be exacerbated in classrooms that better manage peer-to-peer aggression. Accordingly, targeted interventions appear critical for children who continue to experience peer victimization in schools with highly effective aggression prevention programs.

Every day at school, countless children are victimized by peers. These experiences appear to impact children’s current functioning (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Tsousis, 2016), along with their well-being several years later (McDougal & Vaillancourt, 2015). Although there is a vast research literature on the numerous correlates and consequences of peer victimization (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Kumpulainen, 2008; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), few studies have examined its day-to-day effects. Assessing peer victimization’s daily impact may shed light on the processes through which it influences child adjustment. To help fill this gap, the current study examines links between children’s daily self-perceptions of peer victimization and social competence.

PEER VICTIMIZATION AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Peer victimization is defined as the experience of aggression by peers. When it is perpetrated intentionally and repeatedly by more powerful aggressors, it is considered bullying (Cornell & Limber, 2015). Peer victimization occurs overtly
or covertly and encompasses multiple forms of aggression. Traditional peer victimization takes place through in vivo social interaction, whereas cyber victimization is enacted through electronic media (Landoll, La Greca, Lai, Chan, & Herge, 2015; Wigderson & Lynch, 2013). Given the current study’s focus on peer victimization during the school day, we chose to assess traditional (but not cyber) victimization.

Based on a previous literature review (Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, & Thomson, 2014), we identified five types of traditional peer victimization: physical victimization (e.g., pushing and hitting), verbal victimization (e.g., teasing and name calling), social manipulation (e.g., gossiping and convincing others to turn on a child), social rebuff (e.g., ignoring and excluding), and property attacks (e.g., stealing or damaging a child’s belongings). Although different types of peer victimization tend to co-occur, they also appear to have unique effects on several aspects of children’s psychosocial functioning, including their self-perceptions (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Johnson, 2015; Mynard & Joseph, 2000; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2003).

According to Crick and Dodge’s (1994) social information processing (SIP) model, children construct beliefs about themselves from their cumulative history of social interactions. Negative peer experiences, such as peer victimization, provide children with salient data signaling that they are disliked by peers or unwelcome in their peer group. Such repeated daily experiences could lead children to perceive themselves in a negative light, particularly their own social competence (Boulton, Smith, & Cowie, 2010). For this study, we selected a fifth-grade sample because peer victimization appears increasingly stable (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001), and self-perceptions become more realistic and grounded in social comparison around this period of development (Harter, 1998). We also restricted our focus to children’s self-perceived social competence (abbreviated hereafter as “perceived social competence”), which reflects their perceptions of how well they get along with others, maintain interpersonal relationships, and respond appropriately across different social contexts (Orpinas, 2010).

At least two meta-analyses have examined relations between children’s peer victimization and self-perceptions. Hawker and Boulton (2000) analyzed nearly two decades of studies examining cross-sectional relations of peer victimization and multiple indicators of child adjustment, including self-esteem and perceived social competence. Across studies, they found modest concurrent negative associations of peer victimization with children’s global and social self-perceptions. In a more recent meta-analysis combining cross-sectional and longitudinal research, Tsaousis (2016) observed a similarly moderate negative relation between peer victimization and self-esteem, as well as an aggregate of different domain-specific self-perceptions. Collectively, these meta-analyses, and myriad individual studies (e.g., Grills & Ollendick, 2002; Neary & Joseph, 1994; Raskauskas, Rubiano, Offen, & Wayland, 2015), provide robust evidence that children who experience more frequent peer victimization endorse more negative global and domain-specific self-perceptions.

A handful of longitudinal studies also document prospective associations between peer victimization and negative self-perceptions. In terms of global self-views, peer victimization appears to have both short- and long-term effects on self-esteem (Fanti & Henrich, 2015; Olweus, 1994; Overbeek, Zeevankink, Vermulst, & Scholte, 2010). Several studies also indicate short-term relations between peer victimization and perceived social competence. Boulton and colleagues (2010) followed preadolescents over 5 months and found support for short-term bidirectional effects, such that earlier peer victimization negatively predicted later perceived social competence, and vice versa. Similarly, Egan and Perry (1998) assessed youth in the fall and spring of 1 school year and found reciprocal prospective negative relations between seventh-grade children’s peer victimization and perceived social competence. Together, the studies reviewed thus far indicate that peer victimization is linked to children’s current and future self-perceptions, including their perceived social competence.

**Daily Peer Victimization and Daily Perceived Social Competence**

To our knowledge, few studies have examined the day-to-day frequency of peer victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2001). Comparisons reveal that daily assessments of peer victimization generally converge with more traditional methods (e.g., retrospective self- and peer-report tools) but also capture different aspects of peer victimization (Pouwels, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2016). Daily measurement is also considered less susceptible to retrospective bias (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaele, 2003) and thus likely to provide a more fine-grained estimate of children’s day-to-day instances of peer victimization. In addition, daily assessment permits examination of how daily functioning covaries with daily experiences. By using daily measurement in this study, it was possible to explore how children’s daily perceived social competence fluctuates with their daily experiences of peer victimization.

Relatively few studies have utilized daily assessment to study children’s peer victimization, and even fewer have examined both daily peer victimization and daily self-perceptions. A majority of studies focused on how children’s daily mood or emotions fluctuate with their daily negative encounters with peers. Several studies have found that children’s daily negative peer experiences predict increases in daily negative emotions, including anger, sadness, anxiety, and humiliation (Herres, Krauthamer Ewing, & Kobak, 2016; Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, et al., 2014; Nishina, 2012; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). In contrast, at least one study found no relation between early adolescents’ daily peer victimization and daily negative affect; however,
daily peer victimization did predict lower daily academic functioning (Espinoza, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2013). Despite this discrepancy, a small yet growing body of research is emerging on the day-to-day connections between peer victimization and emotion.

Nonetheless, this research has largely proliferated without consideration of children’s daily self-perceptions. In one exception, Esposito, Kobak, and Little (2005) administered daily measures to a small sample of 41 preadolescents at the end of 7 school days. Each day, children reported on their negative peer experiences and self-esteem. Peer nominations were used to assess children’s aggression. Using multilevel modeling, daily negative peer experiences did not predict daily self-esteem; however, there was a moderating effect of child aggression. For children high in aggression, daily negative peer experiences negatively predicted daily self-esteem; however, there was no relation for children low in aggression. This study suggests that aggression may be an important moderator of the relation between daily peer victimization and daily self-perceptions. In contrast with this study, we chose to assess children’s perceived social competence, rather than self-esteem, because theory and research suggests that social self-perceptions are more likely than global self-perceptions to vary in response to interpersonal events, such as peer victimization (Egan & Perry, 1998).

For this study, we hypothesized that children’s experience of daily peer victimization would predict decreases in daily perceived social competence. However, by assessing multiple types of peer victimization, we could examine whether specific types are more strongly tied to children’s daily perceived social competence. In line with Crick and Dodge’s (1994) SIP model, different types of peer victimization offer children information on different aspects of themselves (e.g., physical strength, intelligence, and social skills). For instance, being gossiped about, ignored, or excluded could yield data that are more relevant to perceived social competence, compared to other types of victimization. That is, socially oriented peer victimization may provide children with stronger cues about their own social skills, relationships, and status among peers. As such, it was hypothesized that daily social manipulation and social rebuff would predict daily perceived social competence beyond the effects of the other types of peer victimization (physical victimization, verbal victimization, and property attacks).

A Moderating Role of Class Aggression

In the last two decades, researchers have also begun to explore the ways in which larger social contexts influence children’s behaviors, experiences, and adjustment. In particular, classrooms have been conceptualized as unique socioecologies that reinforce or inhibit various social behaviors based on how prevalent (or normative) they appear throughout the class (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004). Many previous studies examined classroom norms for aggression and collectively indicate that children exposed to higher levels of classroom aggressive behavior tend to exhibit higher levels of individual aggression (e.g., Kellam, Rebok, Ialongo, & Mayer, 1994; Rohlf, Krahé, & Busching, 2016; Thomas & Bierman, 2006).

Classroom behavioral norms may also influence the ways in which children’s behaviors are linked to their psychosocial adjustment. Chang (2004) theorized that more normative behaviors are reinforced with social acceptance, whereas less normative actions invite rejection. In support of this model, several studies have found that classroom aggression moderates the effect of children’s own aggressive behavior on their peer relations. Specifically, the negative impact of aggression on peer acceptance and social preference is attenuated in classrooms with higher aggression (Boor-Klip, Segers, Hendrickx, & Cillessen, 2017; Chang, 2004; Jackson, Cappella, & Neal, 2015). Nevertheless, it is unclear whether classroom norms for aggression also influence the effects of children’s experiences of aggression on their adjustment. That is, classroom aggression could shape how children respond to their own peer victimization.

To explore this possibility, the current study examined whether classroom aggressive behavior moderates the effects of daily peer victimization on children’s daily perceived social competence. Per Salmivalli (2010), classroom behavioral norms can have a paradoxical effect on the links between children’s experiences and adjustment. For instance, Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, and Salmivalli (2012) found peer-victimized children to exhibit higher self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms in classrooms with higher levels of peer victimization than in classrooms with less victimization. Moreover, Nishina (2012) found that witnessing others’ peer victimization at school attenuated the impact of experiencing peer victimization on children’s daily feelings of humiliation and anger. Contextual norms for aggression could play a similar role in this study by blunting the effect peer victimization on perceived social competence. Thus, we hypothesized that the effect of daily peer victimization on children’s daily perceived social competence would be attenuated in classrooms with higher levels of aggression.

METHOD

The current study was conducted as part of a larger project examining preadolescents’ daily experiences and daily psychological functioning (see Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, et al., 2014; Morrow, Hubbard, & Swift, 2014). All aspects of this project were approved by the second author’s university’s Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Consent forms were distributed to 225 fifth-grade children in nine regular education classrooms from four public schools within one district in a mid-Atlantic region of the United States. A total of 201 consent forms were returned,
with 188 children having received parental permission to participate. Six of the children transferred out of participating classrooms before data collection began, which left a final sample of 182 children (105 boys). Parents who consented were instructed to complete a brief demographic form attached to the consent form. Parents reported on their children’s age (M = 10.64 years, SD = .74 years) and race/ethnicity: 35% White, 31% Black, 17% Hispanic, 9% Mixed, 3% Asian, and 1% American Indian. For 4% of the children, parents declined to report race/ethnicity. Two schools were located in suburban areas, whereas the other two were situated in more urban settings; however, all schools were designated as low income by the state, with 39% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch across the district.

Procedure

Children and teachers were asked to complete packets of paper-and-pencil measures in the late fall and early winter of 1 school year. Children completed daily scales of peer victimization and perceived social competence, with most children completing measures on 8 days. Although a majority of these data were collected on consecutive school days, many children were absent throughout the daily collection period. As a result, the researchers returned over the next 2 weeks to collect additional daily observations from those children. Overall, 167 children provided data on 8 school days, and 15 children provided data for 4–7 days (two for 4 days, two for 5 days, nine for 6 days, and two for 7 days). Together, these missing daily reports (43) represent less than 3% of the total possible number of daily reports (1,456).

The principal investigator or a graduate research assistant group-administered the daily measures to participating children. One or two undergraduate research assistants circulated around the classroom to answer questions or read measures aloud to small groups of children with reading difficulties (as identified by their teachers prior to data collection). Overall, 10 to 15 children required reading assistance across classrooms. The daily measures were administered in the final 30 min of each school day and took approximately 10 min to complete. An assent form was administered to children at the start of the first daily collection; the children were also verbally reminded of their right to withdraw at each subsequent collection.

Following the daily collections, teachers were asked to complete an aggression measure for each participating child in their classroom. Student participation rates ranged across classrooms from 72.22% to 89.29% (M = 81.48%, SD = 5.66%). Teachers were given 2 weeks to complete these measures and were each compensated with $200 for their participation. All children in each classroom, regardless of their participation in this study, were compensated with a brief celebration hosted by the researchers that included fun games and healthy snacks.

Measures

**Daily Peer Victimization**

Children’s daily experiences of peer victimization were assessed with the Comprehensive Scales of Traditional Peer Victimization (Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, et al., 2014). This measure includes five four-item subscales designed to capture five types of peer victimization: physical victimization (e.g., A kid hit or pushed me), verbal victimization (e.g., A kid called me mean names), social manipulation (e.g., A kid tried to make my friends turn against me), social rebuff (e.g., A kid refused to talk to me), and property attacks (e.g., A kid tried to break something of mine). For each item, children are asked to report the number of times (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or more) that they experienced a specific type of victimization today at school. Five peer victimization scores were computed by summing the four items of each subscale. Possible daily scores range from 0 to 16 for each type of victimization. Previous factor analyses indicate that the five subscales are positively correlated yet distinct (Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, et al., 2014).

Internal consistency was calculated for each subscale by computing alphas for each day and then averaging them. All average daily internal consistency estimates were adequate (Table 1). A novel procedure was also used to calculate between- and within-child reliability estimates for the peer victimization variables (see Cranford et al., 2006; Wenze, Gunthert, Forand, & Laurenceau, 2009). Between-child estimates represent how reliably a scale captures variability in peer victimization between children, whereas within-child estimates reflect how reliably a scale captures daily variation in peer victimization. For instance, the Physical Victimization subscale reliably captured 70% of between-child variability and 65% of daily change. Between- and within-child reliability estimates were acceptable for each type of peer victimization (Table 1) (Iida, Shrout, Laurenceau, & Bolger, 2012).

**Daily Perceived Social Competence**

Daily perceived social competence was measured with a scale adapted from Harter’s (1985) Social Competence subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children. The original subscale consists of six items that include opposing descriptions (e.g., Some kids find it hard to make friends BUT Other kids find it’s pretty easy to make friends); children are asked to decide which description best fits them and rate how well that description fits them. This scale has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and convergence with measures of global self-esteem (Egan & Perry, 1998; Harter, 1985).
This measure was adapted for assessing daily (rather than general) perceived social competence. First, items were collapsed into a single statement (e.g., I think it’s pretty easy for me to make friends) that children rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Second, the instructions were revised so that children rated their agreement with the statement for today at school. Perceived social competence scores were computed by averaging the six items within day. Possible daily scores range from 1 to 5; higher values indicate greater daily perceived social competence. The average daily internal consistency, within-child reliability, and between-child reliability were satisfactory (Table 1); this scale reliably captured 95% of between-child variation and 84% of daily change in perceived social competence.

**General Aggressive Behavior**

Aggressive behavior was assessed once through teacher report using the 14-item Aggression subscale of the BASC Teacher Rating Scales for Children (ages 6–11; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992). Teachers rated the frequency of different aggressive behaviors (e.g., arguing, teasing, and hitting) displayed by each child in the last 6 months (or as long as the teacher has known the child) on a 4-point scale from 1 (never) to 4 (almost always). This measure has adequate 8-week test–retest reliability and correlates highly with other established measures of aggression (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992). Items were averaged to create a child aggression score (possible range of 1–4); higher scores indicate greater aggression. Internal consistency was satisfactory (Table 1). Classroom aggression scores were computed by aggregating all child aggression scores for each class (Chang, 2004).

**RESULTS**

The data are organized in three levels, with daily observations nested in children, and children nested in classrooms. Level 1 (day) includes 1,422 daily reports, Level 2 (child) includes 182 children, and Level 3 (class) includes nine classrooms. Nested data are typically interdependent, such that data from the same higher level unit (e.g., within one child or one classroom) tend to correlate more strongly than data from different units (e.g., between two children or two classrooms). Failure to account for interdependence tends to yield biased standard error estimates and inflated risk of Type I error (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). To account for interdependence, multilevel regression was used via HLM 7 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & Du Toit, 2011) to estimate relations among the variables. Per Raudenbush and Bryk (2002), multilevel regression accounts for interdependence by partitioning the variance of dependent or criterion variables across each level. Notably, though a small percentage of data were missing at the daily level (3%), it was not necessary to remove any participants. That is, all participants provided enough daily data for inclusion in the primary analyses.

**Descriptive Statistics and Demographic Differences**

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for peer victimization and perceived social competence at Level 1 and aggression at Level 2. Verbal victimization was reported as the most frequent experience, followed by social rebuff. The three other types of peer victimization were reported as occurring with relatively similar daily frequency.

Demographic tests were conducted to determine whether demographic variables should be included as covariates in the primary analyses. First, independent t
tests were conducted to explore child-level gender differences. Child gender was dummy coded (boys = 0, girls = 1), and Level 2 scores were computed for the daily variables by aggregating children’s scores across all of their daily reports. Notably, two children lacked aggression scores due to administrator error during data collection. There were no gender differences in any of the five types of peer victimization (ps = .26–.81). Girls reported significantly higher perceived social competence (girls’ $M = 3.80$, boys’ $M = 3.41$), $t(180) = -2.20$, $p = .03$. Teachers rated boys as significantly higher in aggression (boys’ $M = 1.51$, girls’ $M = 1.29$), $t(178) = 3.03$, $p = .003$.

Because the primary analysis involved regression, race-ethnicity was dichotomized as the most prevalent group (White) and all others (White = 0, Other = 1). Independent $t$ tests were conducted for all Level 2 variables. Teachers rated White students lower in aggression (White $M = 1.28$, Other $M = 1.47$), $t = -7.03$, $p < .001$. White students reported more physical victimization (White $M = .78$, Other $M = .43$), $t = 3.70$, $p < .001$; social rebuff (White $M = .93$, Other $M = .62$), $t = 2.76$, $p = .01$; and property attacks (White $M = .63$, Other $M = .43$), $t = 2.27$, $p = .02$.

Multilevel Regression

Relations Among Different Types of Peer Victimization

Prior to testing the relations of peer victimization with perceived social competence, associations among the five types of peer victimization were explored. Because these data were nested in both children and classrooms, multilevel regression was utilized. Three-level regression models were tested for each pair of victimization variables, with one variable specified as the criterion and the other as the predictor (and vice versa in a separate model). All variables were uncentered, and slopes were set as random. Because the five victimization variables were significantly skewed (Table 1), these models were estimated with robust standard errors. Per Huber (1981), this procedure permits estimation of parameters and standard errors that are resilient to non-normality.

Table 2 includes unstandardized regression coefficients for each model. Every type of peer victimization significantly predicted (and was predicted by) each other type, with coefficients ranging from .21 to .88. These coefficients represent the average daily change in the criterion variable observed for every one-unit daily increase in the predictor. For example, every one reported property attack was associated with an average increase in daily physical victimization by .34. Thus, children who experienced three daily property attacks were also likely to experience roughly one instance of physical victimization that day.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>1. PV</th>
<th>2. VV</th>
<th>3. SM</th>
<th>4. SR</th>
<th>5. PA</th>
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</thead>
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<td>1. PV</td>
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<td>.24*</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. VV</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SM</td>
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<td>.88**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. SR</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. PA</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.66*</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td>.44**</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients computed in separate three-level regression models. PV = physical victimization; VV = verbal victimization; SM = social manipulation; SR = social rebuff; PA = property attacks.

*p < .01, **p < .001.

Relations of Peer Victimization with Perceived Social Competence

To examine links between daily peer victimization and daily perceived social competence, a series of three-level regression models were tested with daily perceived social competence specified as the criterion variable. Given the gender difference found in perceived social competence, gender (boys = 0, girls = 1) was entered in each model as a Level 2 uncentered covariate. Because there was no racial/ethnic difference in perceived social competence, race-ethnicity was not included as a covariate in any of the proceeding models. In five separate models, one specific type of peer victimization was included as an uncentered Level 1 predictor. In the final model, every specific type of peer victimization that significantly predicted perceived social competence in the previous models were simultaneously specified at Level 1 as uncentered predictors. Each model was estimated with robust standard errors, and all slopes were set as random.

Intercepts and unstandardized regression coefficients are presented for all models in Table 3. The proportions of variance explained at Level 1 is also presented for each model (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002); these percentages reflect the amount of total daily variation in perceived social competence explained by the peer victimization predictor(s) specified in each model. Because boys were coded as zero, intercepts reflect the average daily perceived social competence for boys reporting no instances of daily peer victimization. The peer victimization slopes reflect the average change in daily perceived social competence observed for every one experience of daily peer victimization reported. Collectively, four types of victimization (verbal victimization, social manipulation, social rebuff, and property attacks) predicted significant reductions in perceived social competence at the daily level. When these four types of peer victimization were included as simultaneous predictors, social rebuff continued to predict significant reductions in daily perceived social competence.
**Moderating Influences of Class Aggression**

Finally, the researchers explored whether classroom levels of aggression moderated the relations of peer victimization with perceived social competence. Six three-level regression models were tested with perceived social competence as the criterion and gender as a Level 2 covariate. In each model, one type of peer victimization was included as a Level 1 uncentered predictor. Class aggression was grand mean centered (i.e., the overall class aggression mean was subtracted from each individual class aggression score) and entered at Level 3 as a covariate and a predictor of the slope between peer victimization and perceived social competence. Each model was estimated with robust standard errors, and all slopes were set as random.

Table 4 presents the intercepts and unstandardized regression coefficients for all models. Proportions of variance explained are also provided for daily and classroom-level variation in perceived social competence. Intercepts reflect the average daily perceived social competence for boys reporting no instances of victimization in classrooms with average levels of aggression. The effects of class aggression on perceived social competence reflect the average change in class perceived social competence observed for every one-unit increase in class aggression. The effects of class aggression on the peer victimization slopes reflect the average change in class slope between peer victimization and perceived social competence observed for every one-unit increase in class aggression. The peer victimization slopes continue to reflect the average change in perceived social competence observed for every one reported instance of daily peer victimization. Class aggression did not predict perceived social competence but did significantly moderate the effect of verbal victimization on perceived social competence.

This significant cross-level interaction was examined by testing and graphing verbal victimization slopes for classes with aggression scores falling above and below the median (high and low class aggression, respectively). To accomplish this, a three-level regression model was specified with perceived social competence entered as the criterion variable; gender was entered at Level 2 as an uncentered covariate and verbal victimization was entered uncentered as the only Level 1 predictor. This model was estimated with robust standard errors, and all slopes were set as random. The model was estimated twice, once for low-aggression classes and once for high-aggression classes. As seen in Figure 1, the verbal victimization slope was negative and significant for low-aggression classes and nonsignificant for high-aggression classes. In other words, verbal victimization was associated with lower perceived social competence in classrooms with lower levels of aggression; however, verbal victimization was unrelated to perceived social competence in classrooms with higher levels of aggression.

**DISCUSSION**

The current study used a daily assessment approach to examine the day-to-day associations between children’s
peer victimization and perceived social competence at school. As noted earlier, few studies have explored connections between children’s peer experiences and psychosocial adjustment at the daily level (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2001), and even fewer have considered the ways in which children’s self-perceptions fluctuate on a daily basis. We also tested whether children’s perceived social competence is more reactive, or likely to decline, in response to different types of peer victimization, as well as whether classroom aggression moderates the relations of peer victimization with perceived social competence.

**Daily Peer Victimization and Daily Perceived Social Competence**

Overall, the daily peer victimization rates observed in this study are consistent or slightly higher than those observed in other daily-report studies (e.g., Espinoza et al., 2013;
Pouwels et al., 2016). These higher rates are likely attributable to our decision to use a more comprehensive daily measure of multiple types of traditional peer victimization. It was generally hypothesized that children’s experience of daily peer victimization would predict decreased daily perceptions of social competence. In line with this hypothesis, children reported lower perceived social competence on days in which they experienced more frequent victimization by peers. This finding extends previous research on children’s daily peer interactions (Herres et al., 2016; Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, et al., 2014; Nishina, 2012; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005) by revealing that, along with children’s daily emotions, their daily self-perceptions can also fluctuate with their daily peer experiences. Thus, researchers are encouraged to include self-perceptions in their assessment of children’s daily functioning in future studies.

It was also predicted that social forms of peer victimization, specifically social manipulation and social rebuff, would predict decreased perceived social competence above and beyond the other types of peer victimization. This hypothesis was partially supported. When tested separately, four types of peer victimization (verbal victimization, social manipulation, social rebuff, and property attacks) were linked to decreased perceived social competence. It is noteworthy that physical victimization had no impact on daily perceived social competence, given that in a past analysis of the same data (Morrow, Hubbard, Barhight, et al., 2014), it evidenced the most robust effects on children’s daily negative emotions. These findings reinforce the notion that different types of peer victimization are associated with different aspects of psychosocial functioning (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2015; Mynard & Joseph, 2000); they also emphasize the need to assess peer victimization as multiple related yet unique experiences.

Consistent with our hypothesis, social rebuff maintained its effect on perceived social competence when all five types of peer victimization were included as simultaneous predictors. Regarding Crick and Dodge’s (1994) SIP model, social rebuff could provide children with data that are more relevant to their social self-perceptions than do other types of peer victimization. More specifically, social rebuff occurs overtly and captures experiences of being ignored, excluded, or snubbed by peers (Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982). Such daily experiences likely provide targets with salient cues that peers do not enjoy their company or want to include them in their activities, which could reduce their daily perceptions of social competence. With that said, other types of peer victimization could influence children’s daily self-perceptions, but do so in different domains. For example, physical victimization may have no impact on perceived social competence but a powerful impact on children’s perceptions of their own physical strength or capacity to physically defend themselves. Future research on peer victimization and self-perception could include a wider range of self-views to explore how different types of victimization are linked to various self-perceptions.

In contrast with our hypothesis, social manipulation did not remain a significant predictor of perceived social competence when controlling for the effects of all types of peer victimization. Although this finding was surprising, it could be explained by the covert nature of social manipulation. Social manipulation typically occurs outside of targets’ direct observation. As such, this experience likely provides children with more ambiguous data about their victimization (e.g., perpetrator, method, reason). When such details are ambiguous, children may be less likely to attribute the experience to any particular cause, including internal factors, which would minimize its impact on their self-perceptions. Future studies could explore whether more ambiguous instances of peer victimization have less impact on children’s self-views, perhaps via hypothetical vignettes of varying levels of ambiguity. It is also important to recognize that the increased ambiguity of social manipulation may actually exacerbate its impact in other areas. In a previous analysis of the same data (Morrow, Hubbard, & Swift, 2014), social manipulation was the only type of peer victimization that correlated with academic achievement; we speculated that relative to other types of victimization, social manipulation leads to more distraction and rumination due to its ambiguous nature, which in turn impedes academic performance. Thus, more covert peer victimization may be less likely to impact immediate adjustment; however, the potential lingering effects of such experiences could give rise to later maladjustment.

A Moderating Role of Class Aggression

The final hypothesis was partially supported, such that the relation between daily verbal victimization and daily perceived social competence was blunted in classrooms with higher levels of aggression. That is, verbal victimization does not appear to “bruise” children’s social self-perceptions to the same extent in classrooms where aggression is more normative. This finding adds to the growing literature emphasizing the importance of classroom ecologies, as well as the occasionally paradoxical effects of classroom behavioral norms on children’s adjustment (e.g., Chang, 2004; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Salmivalli, 2010). That is, more prosocial classrooms can inadvertently increase certain children’s risk for maladjustment.

This paradoxical effect could be explained from an attributional perspective. For example, Kelley (1967) theorized that the attributions that individuals make to explain their experiences are influenced by perceived consensus, the extent to which they view others as having the same experience in similar situations. Individuals are more likely to make internal attributions when consensus is low and external attributions when consensus is high. In classrooms where aggression is rampant, children could be more likely
to attribute verbal victimization to external causes. However, in classrooms where aggression is scarce, children could be more likely to blame themselves. Research has shown that internal attributions for peer victimization are linked to multiple internalizing symptoms (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Prinstein, Cheah, & Guyer, 2005; Schacter & Juvonen, 2017). Accordingly, when classroom aggression is low, children may be more prone to blame themselves for their victimization by peers, which could in turn lower their perceived social competence.

Notably, it was not specifically predicted that classroom aggression would moderate the effect of verbal victimization on perceived social competence. However, this result could relate to the fact that verbal victimization was the most frequent form of peer victimization reported, which is a common trend across studies (e.g., Mynard & Joseph, 2000). If verbal aggression was also the most frequent form of classroom aggressive behavior, then children from highly aggressive classes would have observed greatest consensus between their own verbal victimization and others’, which may have attenuated the impact of these specific experiences on their perceived social competence. Because we did not assess different types of classroom aggression, it was not possible to tests whether the blunting effect of classroom aggression is specific to the same types of aggression and victimization. Although we could have assessed whether different types of classroom peer victimization moderate the effects of different types of child peer victimization on perceived social competence, we opted against this to minimize shared method variance and avoid additional risk of Type 1 error.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant discussion. Although the current sample was racially/ethnically diverse, all participants were enrolled in fifth-grade classrooms within a low-income school district. Thus, the findings may not generalize to other age groups or to schools with greater socioeconomic advantage. In addition, the current sample was distributed across nine classrooms, which is a relatively low number of higher level units for multilevel regression. Moreover, we did not have the full participation of all students in any classrooms. Consequently, some class aggression scores may not accurately capture classwide aggressive behavior, especially in classrooms with less study participation from boys. Nonetheless, it is impressive that with few classrooms and partial student participation, the hypothesized effect of classroom aggression was detected. Notably, it would have also been helpful to consider teacher gender and race/ethnicity in this study. For example, the match between teacher and student race/ethnicity appears to influence teachers’ evaluation of student behavior (Downey & Pribesh, 2004).

In addition, we proposed and tested a sequential model, such that daily peer victimization contributes to daily perceived social competence; however, the inverse relation is also plausible, with daily perceived social competence increasing risk for daily peer victimization (Boulton et al., 2010). Furthermore, assessing several additional variables would have strengthened this study. For instance, traditional peer victimization was thoroughly measured, but cyber victimization was not assessed. Assessing children’s attributions for peer victimization would have also allowed us to test whether attributions account for the blunting effect of classroom aggression on the relation between peer victimization and perceived social competence. It would have also been helpful to assess children’s daily coping behavior to determine whether certain strategies are more likely to protect children’s self-perceptions from peer victimization. For instance, a recent study found that preadolescents’ use of active problem-focused coping for peer rejection was linked to higher perceived social competence (Reijntjes, Stegge, & Meerum Terwogt, 2006). Finally, a closer examination of children’s gender and race/ethnicity may be warranted in future studies. It is possible that peer victimization has different effects on perceived social competence across gender and between different racial/ethnic groups.

Implications

We sincerely hope this study will spur continued interest in research on children’s daily experiences and adjustment across different classroom ecologies. Moreover, the current findings may have implications for school-based aggression prevention programs. The results suggest that peer victimization may have more pronounced effects in classroom communities that do a better job curbing aggression among peers. Schools with effective aggression prevention programs will undoubtedly reduce overall risk for student maladjustment. However, some individual students will inevitably experience peer victimization, and these experiences in that school context could actually heighten risk for psychosocial difficulties. That is, reducing schoolwide aggression may inadvertently exacerbate the impact of peer victimization on the individual students who continue to experience peers’ aggression. Therefore, the need for individualized supports and services for targets of peer victimization may be even more critical in schools and classrooms that effectively manage aggression among peers.

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REFERENCES


