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Söderberg, Patrik; Björkqvist, Kaj

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VICTIMIZATION FROM PEER AGGRESSION AND/OR BULLYING: PREVALENCE,
OVERLAP, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Patrik Söderberg

Åbo Akademi University

Kaj Björkqvist

Åbo Akademi University

Patrik Söderberg, Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Pedagogics and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland; Kaj Björkqvist, Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Pedagogics and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Patrik Söderberg, Åbo Akademi University, Strandgatan 2 / 65100 Vasa, Finland, E-mail: patrik.soderberg@abo.fi, phone: +358 (0)50 5424980

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Abstract

Bullying and peer victimization are overlapping concepts related to aggressive behaviors by peers, prevalent among children and adolescents worldwide. Bullying has been suggested to be particularly harmful for the victim, yet few studies have empirically explored the differences between peer victimization and victimization from bullying. In the present study, a multinomial approach was applied to examine the prevalence and psychosocial profiles of teenagers that reported frequent peer victimization and/or episodes of being bullied, in a sample of 3,447 Finnish middle school students (1,757 girls and 1,690 boys; mean age 14.3 years). Convergent, multi-identified victims were found to be most likely to show high levels of depressive symptoms, but all categories of victims showed increased levels of depressive symptoms compared to non-victims. Notably, victims of bullying and victims of peer aggression differed in terms of aggressive behavior and perceived peer support. The results are discussed in terms of victim identity and identification.

Keywords: Adolescent, Aggression, Victim, School Violence

Victimization from peer aggression and/or bullying: Prevalence, overlap, and psychosocial characteristics

Introduction

Bullying and peer victimization episodes among adolescents take place worldwide (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Due et al., 2005), and have been shown to both predict and be predicted by low levels of psychosocial well-being and adjustment (Kochel, Ladd, & Rudolph, 2012; Rudolph et al., 2014). Over the last decades, bullying research has successfully brought attention to this particular form of peer aggression and has informed intervention and prevention practices worldwide, not least in Scandinavia (Olweus, 1978; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005). Nevertheless, researchers have also pointed out uncertainties and disagreements in the conceptualization and operationalization of the term bullying – and have argued for a return to a broader focus on peer victimization (Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012). However, few studies to date – and no study in Finland – have included measures of both peer victimization and victimization from bullying in the same sample.

Conceptualization and prevalence estimates

Bullying is commonly identified as a subcategory of peer aggression (Arora, 1996). According to one of the most commonly accepted definitions, bullying may be characterized by a power imbalance between a perpetrator and a victim, hostile intent on behalf of the perpetrator, and a certain amount of repetitiveness (Olweus, 1996). However, while most bullying researchers would be expected to agree to descriptions along those lines, there is a notable lack of consensus about the finer details, and considerable inconsistency in the operationalization of the phenomena (Monks & Smith, 2006; O'Brien, 2009; Rigby, 2004; Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2014). For example, in contrast to

prevention measures, strict definitions of bullying have been noted to exclude sexual assaults (Turner et al., 2014) as well as serious non-repeated aggressive episodes (Finkelhor et al., 2012). Recently, Olweus (2012) has also noted that non-repeated serious aggression may be categorized as bullying if there is long-lasting harm, such as in cases of cyberbullying where online content (e.g. comments, pictures or videos) may remain accessible months and even years after being uploaded. Similarly in the United States, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2014) have expanded the definition of bullying to include the phrase "...or is highly likely to be repeated" instead of simply "repeated". Furthermore, it has been shown that behaviors not intended to cause harm may still be experienced that way by the victim (Thomson & Gunther, 2008), and that a power imbalance between target and perpetrator(s) may be the outcome rather than the precursor of victimization (Lee, 2006; Smith, 2014).

Moreover, scientific definitions of bullying do not necessarily align with colloquial use (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Lee, 2006). Younger students have been found not to include power imbalance or social exclusion in their conceptualization of bullying (Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefhoghe, 2002). Also, older students, teachers, and prospective teachers have been found to depart from formal criteria in their usage of the term (Lee, 2006; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Since bullying is commonplace in educational settings, Arora (1996) and Smith et al. (2002) have questioned the value of ready-made definitions of bullying in survey research, arguing that survey respondents may still apply their own understanding of bullying rather than conform to definitions by the researchers.

Given the conceptual and methodological challenges inherent in bullying studies, some researchers have advocated for a shift in research and intervention from bullying-only to a broader focus on peer-related aggressive behavior and experiences that cause psychosocial

harm (Arora, 1996, Finkelhor et al., 2012; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013; Sawyer, Bradshaw & O'Brennan, 2008).

In contrast to bullying, the concept of peer victimization – defined as a situation in which someone is the target of frequent aggressive behaviors by peers (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996) – does not explicitly assume a power imbalance between perpetrator(s) and victim(s). Peer victimization can thus be expected to be more commonly reported than bullying victimization, and the few studies to include measures on both bullying victimization and peer victimization confirm this expectation. For example, Sawyer et al. (2008) found behavior-based measures – whereby respondents were asked to report on specific behaviors such as being hit, being called names, or being excluded from a group – to provide larger prevalence estimates than a definition-based bully measure. Similarly, Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros and Oppenheim (2012) found that lists of multiple victimization experiences resulted in higher prevalence rates than measures that used the word "bully", regardless of whether bullying measures included a formal definition or not (see also Kert, Coddling, Tryon, & Shiyko, 2010). Furthermore, Felix, Sharkley, Green, Furlong and Tanigawa (2011) have suggested that the word "bullied" may convey a stigma not congruent with the respondent's self-image, and that youth therefore may underreport experiences of victimization from bullying in comparison to peer victimization.

Prevalence rates of peer victimization and bullying vary according to variable operationalization, study population and sample characteristics, but has in general been found to amount to approximately 10–15% of children and adolescents (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Victimization experiences have on average been found to reach its peak around middle childhood and early adolescence and decline throughout adolescence (Nylund, Bellmore, Nishina, & Graham, 2007; Sumter, Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2012), although it has been suggested that the rank order stability of victimization remains fairly constant even as

the absolute frequency of victimization drops (see Troop-Gordon, 2017). Studies on gender differences have produced mixed findings (Due & Holstein, 2008; Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016).

Cross-national studies have found a large variation in victimization rates across nations (Due et al., 2005), but it remains unclear to what extent national differences are to be considered behavioral or linguistic (Smith et al., 2002). Either way, children from ethnic minority groups have not been consistently shown to experience more bullying than ethnic majority children (Sawyer et al., 2008). Within the Finnish school system, the concept of bullying is well established in both official languages (*kiusaaminen* in Finnish, *mobbning* in Swedish) with no clear differences in prevalence between Finnish and Swedish schools. It is also worth noticing that bullying rates in Finland have been decreasing during the 21st century, arguably in part due to nationwide use of the KiVa-school bullying prevention program (Kärnä et al., 2011). However, no studies to date have explicitly compared the overlap of bullying and peer victimization in Finland.

Psychosocial concomitants

Victimization from peer aggression and bullying has been related to a number of psychosocial maladjustment variables, including depression, low self-esteem, peer rejection, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Cook et al., 2010; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Holt et al., 2015). In a recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies, Kljakovic and Hunt (2016) found adolescent victimization to be predicted by conduct problems, social problems, and internalizing problems, in addition to previous victimization. Moreover, the connection between victimization experiences and internalizing behaviors has been suggested to be stronger in adolescence than in childhood, as adolescents show heightened self-consciousness and susceptibility to peer influence (Sebastian, Brunett & Blakemore, 2008).

The relational dynamics inherent in bullying suggest that victimization from bullying may be particularly harmful, even when compared to other forms of peer victimization (Green et al., 2013; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). However, researchers have questioned whether the bullying criteria are the only or even the most relevant ones to use in order to assess the severity of victimization (Turner et al., 2014), and studies that have directly tested this assumption report mixed findings. For example, Oliver and Candappa (2003) found that verbal and physical abuse had an equally detrimental effect regardless of the intention of the perpetrators, and Finkelhor et al. (2012) noted that non-repeated episodes of serious peer aggression may be just as harmful as repeatedly occurring but less severe bullying. Other studies have found that the frequency of victimization – commonly used as a proxy for repetition (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014) – produces a substantially negative effect on the psychological well-being of victims (Ploeg, Steglich, Salmivalli, & Veenstra, 2015; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). In a comparison of aggravating features of peer victimization, including power imbalance, weapon involvement, injury, sexual content, and other components, Turner et al. (2014) found that episodes that resulted in serious injury were particularly harmful for the victim, but they also found a unique detrimental effect of power imbalance. Similarly, Ybarra et al. (2014) found that both repetition and differential power contributed to the severity of victimization consequences.

Other studies report relatively small differences between bullying victimization and peer victimization in terms of internalizing behaviors. Felix et al. (2011) found that students who were identified as being bullied scored somewhat lower on life satisfaction, hope, and school connectedness than students who were victims of peer aggression without a power imbalance, but the results were not consistent across grades. Additionally, although Hunter, Boyle and Warden (2007) found that bullied students reported significantly more depressive symptoms than victims of peer aggression, the effect was arguably not substantial ($\eta^2 = .01$). In addition,

Ybarra and colleagues (2014) found that youth who are victimized but do not meet the criteria of being bullied still show elevated rates of socio-emotional problems when compared to non-victims.

Victimization experiences, both from bullying victimization and other forms of peer victimization, have also been bi-directionally associated with aggressive behaviors (Reijntjes et al., 2011). That is, aggressive youth have been found to be more likely to provoke aggression by peers (Storch & Ledley, 2005), and victimized children and adolescents have been found to be more likely to adopt aggressive behaviors over time (Snyder et al., 2003). However, while the connection between student aggression and victimization has been highlighted by terms such as bully-victim, aggressive victim, and provocative victim (e.g., Jansen, Veenstra, Ormel, Verhulst, & Reijneveld, 2011), students who bully others have also been found to be less likely to be recognized as victims by teachers (Haataja, Sainio, Turtonen, & Salmivalli, 2016). Notably, the role of aggressive behavior has not been studied in the context of distinctions and overlap between peer victimization and bullying victimization.

Finally, yet importantly, victimization status has been connected to levels of peer support and friendships networks. Whereas social isolation has been found to pose a heightened risk for adolescent victimization (Saarento et al., 2013), high-quality relationships have been shown to both protect against victimization and buffer against detrimental long-term effects (Berger, 2007; Storch & Ledley, 2005; Troop-Gordon, 2017). It has also been noted that not only may victimization status make it harder for victims to gain new friends, but lack of peer support may also establish power differences that invites to further victimization (Hodges, Boivin, Viatro, & Bukowski, 1999). Since power differences has been considered a key feature of bullying victimization (Solberg and Olweus, 2003), victims of

bullying might be expected to experience less peer support than other victims of peer aggression. However, this assumption has not been explicitly tested in empirical research.

Research questions and hypotheses

In the present study, a multinomial approach was applied in order to examine the extent to which frequent peer victimization and bullying victimization may be considered overlapping or distinct experiences. In particular, the aims were to identify (a) the proportion of students who either report being victims of frequent peer aggression or identify themselves as being bullied, or both; (b) the similarities and differences in psychosocial adjustment variables (i.e. depressive symptoms, aggressive behaviors and peer support) between each group of victims; and (c) potential gender, grade or school language effects.

Since bullying has been defined as a subcategory of peer aggression, peer victimization was expected to be more prevalent than bullying victimization (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Furthermore, experiences of bullying victimization and peer victimization were expected to be more prevalent among students with higher levels of depressive symptoms, higher levels of aggressive behaviors, and lower levels of peer support (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Reijntjes et al., 2011; Rudolph et al., 2014). Furthermore, convergent victims – i.e. students who both reported frequent peer victimization and identified themselves as being bullied – were expected to show the highest levels of psychosocial maladjustment (Green et al., 2013). However, due to the somewhat mixed findings on the aggravating features of victimization (cf. Oliver & Candappa, 2003; Turner et al., 2014), the analyses of psychosocial differences and overlaps between victims of peer aggression and victims of bullying were exploratory. Finally, younger students were expected to report more victimization than older students (Nylund, Bellmore, Nishina, & Graham, 2007; Sumter et al., 2012).

Method

Sample

In spring 2013, cross-sectional data was collected in western Finland among 7th and 9th grade students by means of the Ostrobothnian Youth Survey (OYS-13), a regional survey on youth welfare and participation sponsored in part by the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education. Prior to data collection, school principals and heads of education were informed about the project and local associates were appointed to help trained research assistants with the practical arrangements. In accordance with the ethical guidelines of Åbo Akademi University, all students were informed about the purpose of the project, and project assistants were present during the survey completion to address any uncertainties. Students under the age of 15 required parental consent in order to participate, but only a small proportion of students (< 1%) were omitted from the sample in this way.

Twenty-five schools took part in the project, with 3645 students completing the survey. After the data collection, the research team examined survey response patterns to exclude careless and dishonest responses that would otherwise inflate prevalence estimates (Cornell, Sheras & Cole, 2006). For example, respondents reporting to be 12 years of age and attending 9th grade (where the mean age is 15 years) were marked with a “red flag”, and respondents with 4 or more of such warning signs were excluded from the data. In this way, 7% of the students (6% of the girls and 8% of the boys) were removed from further analysis.

The final sample included a total of 3447 students (1757 girls and 1690 boys; mean age 14.3 years), representing 81% of 7th and 9th grade students in the participating schools. Missing value analysis showed that no variable had missing values for more than 10% of the cases; missing data was imputed by the EM procedure in SPSS.

Measures

Victimization from Bullying. Victimization from bullying was measured by asking students about whether and in what setting they had been bullied within the last six months. Respondents that had been bullied were able to select multiple settings, including "on the way to school", "in the classroom", "during breaks", "at public places", "in my neighborhood", "at home", "at a relative's place", "at a friend's place", "over the phone", "online", and "somewhere else". For the purpose of the study, the items were collapsed into one dichotomous variable that indicated whether or not the respondent identified himself or herself as a victim of bullying. Instead of providing a formal definition of bullying, the questionnaire thus allowed respondents to identify episodes of bullying victimization according to their understanding of the term.

Peer Victimization. Peer victimization was measured with three items from the victimization subscale of the Mini Direct Indirect Aggression Inventory by Österman and Björkqvist (2008; see also Österman, 2010), which is a short form of the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales by Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Österman (1992). Students were asked how often – on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) – they had been exposed to physical (e.g., hitting, kicking), verbal (e.g., shouting, calling names), or indirect aggression (e.g. talking behind someone's back). Responses for each item were dichotomized and combined into one variable that indicated whether or not a student had been often or very often victimized by at least one form of peer aggression (1 = frequently victimized by at least one form of peer aggression, 0 = not victimized).

Next, the victimization from bullying and peer victimization variables were combined into a single variable with four categories. Students were then classified as either non-victims, victims of frequent peer aggression only, victims of bullying only, or convergent, multi-identified victims (i.e. victims of both bullying and frequent peer aggression).

Depressive Symptoms. Depressive symptoms were measured with five items from the depression subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory by Derogatis (1975; see also Franke, Jaeger, Glaesmer, Barkmann, Petrowski, & Braehler, 2017). Students were asked how often – on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) – they had been suffering from feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, apathy, loneliness, and feeling blue. The five items were combined into a mean scale, which showed good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).

Aggressive Behavior. Aggressive behavior was measured with three items from the aggression subscale of the Mini Direct and Indirect Aggression Inventory by Österman and Björkqvist (2008; see also Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Österman, 1992; Österman, 2010). Students were asked how often – on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) – they had been using physical, verbal or indirect forms of aggressive behavior towards their peers. The three items were combined into a mean scale, which showed adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .74$).

Peer Support. Peer support was measured with four items from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley (1988). Students were asked to what extent they agreed – on a scale from 0 (completely disagree) to 4 (completely agree) – with statements such as “my friends really try to help me” and “I can count on my friends when things go wrong”. The four items were combined into a mean scale that showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$).

Statistical Analysis

All the analyses were done in SPSS 21. Descriptive statistics were used to screen the data, after which binomial and multinomial logistic regression was conducted to address the research questions. In contrast to linear regression, logistic regression does not require study

variables to be normally distributed, but does assume that there are respondents with valid outcome values for each combination of predictor categories, that is, that there are no empty cells in the regression models. As an extension of binary logistic regression, multinomial regression assesses the probability of participants being in each of several outcome categories (victimized by peers, bullied, or both) relative to a reference category (non-victim), from a set of predictor variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Thus, multinomial regression allows researchers to disentangle conceptual overlaps and to avoid an erroneous rejection of a null hypothesis – for example, to separate students that only identify themselves as being bullied from students that also report frequent peer victimization, in comparison to non-victims.

Since SPSS does not automatically compare relative strengths of odds ratios across outcome categories, post-hoc analyses were completed by re-running the model with different reference categories for the outcome variable. This allowed the assessment of whether and to what extent students in different type of victim categories differed not only from non-victims but also from each other in terms of psychosocial adjustment characteristics.

Results

Eleven percent of the students identified themselves as being bullied during the last six months, while almost twice as many (20%) reported that they had been frequently victimized by their peers. Combined, 13% of the students reported peer victimization only, 4% victimization from bullying only, and 6% convergent victimization (Table 1). In terms of measurement sensitivity, about a third (32%) of the students who reported peer victimization also identified themselves as victims of bullying, while more than half (60%) of the students who identified themselves as

being bullied also reported frequent peer victimization. The two measurement strategies thus partly overlapped, although they also identified somewhat different groups of students as victims.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of study variables (N = 3447).

	<i>N</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Victimization categories						
Non-victims	2630	76.3				
Victims of peer aggression	456	13.2				
Victims of bullying	142	4.1				
Convergent victims	219	6.4				
Socio-demographic variables						
Gender (1: boys)	1690	49.0				
Grade (1: 9 th)	1678	48.7				
School language (1: Swedish)	1682	48.8				
Psychosocial variables						
Depressive symptoms			1.03	0.92	0	4
Aggressive behavior			0.57	0.63	0	4
Peer support			3.14	0.85	0	4

Victims of bullying and multi-identified, convergent victims both reported that victimization primarily took place in the classroom (reported by 4 % of the students), during breaks (7%), online (3%), or at public places (2%). Victims of bullying typically reported one setting where bullying took place ($M_{\text{bully}} = 1.37$, $sd = .70$, median = 1), whereas convergent victims typically selected two settings ($M_{\text{convergent}} = 2.00$, $sd = 1.27$, median = 2; $t = 5.47$, $p < .001$).

More girls (15%) than boys (11%) and more students in Finnish-speaking schools (15%) than in Swedish-speaking schools (11%) reported frequent peer victimization ($\chi^2_{\text{gender}} =$

16.54, $p < .001$; $\chi^2_{\text{language}} = 12.79, p < .01$), but no gender or school differences were found for bullying victimization or convergent victimization. Furthermore, no significant grade effects were found for any form of victimization. The 9th graders did report higher levels of aggressive behaviors than the 7th graders, which might indicate that younger students experienced more inter-grade but less intra-grade victimization than the older students. However, since preliminary analyses indicated that gender was the only significant socio-demographic predictor in any regression model, the variables for student grade and school language were omitted from the final model.

Furthermore, in order to avoid empty cells in the regression models the scales for depressive symptoms, aggressive behaviors, and peer support were categorized at +/- 1 standard deviation to indicate low, medium and high levels. For aggressive behaviors this procedure produced two categories (low/medium vs high aggressive behavior). The final results of the multinomial regression analyses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Odds ratio (and 95 % confidence intervals) of variables predicting victimization from peer aggression and/or bullying vs non-victimization (N = 3447).

	Victims of peer aggression (A)	Victims of bullying (B)	Convergent victims (C)	Likelihood Ratio Test	Inter-category contrast
Gender					
Girls	1	1	1	<.01	A > B, C
Boys	0.69 (.55-.87)	0.76 (.52-1.10)	0.98 (.71-1.34)		
Depressive symptoms					
Low	1	1	1	<.001	C > A, B
Moderate	2.41 (1.65-3.52)	1.83 (1.06-3.16)	3.10 (1.60-6.04)		
High	5.71 (3.76-8.67)	2.96 (1.57-5.60)	14.16 (7.16-28.02)		
Aggressive behavior					
Low/Moderate	1	1	1	<.001	A > C > B
High	5.92 (4.67-7.52)	1.32 (.79-2.22)	4.17 (3.00-5.78)		
Peer Support					
Low	1	1	1	<.001	C, B > A
Moderate	0.83 (.62-1.10)	0.50 (.33-.74)	0.42 (.30-.59)		
High	0.81 (.57-1.14)	0.33 (.19-.58)	0.34 (.21-.54)		

Note: Variable levels significant at $p < .05$ are presented in **boldface**. The Likelihood Ratio Test indicates whether a general effect exists, whereas the Inter-category contrast shows the results of post-hoc analyses.

Depressive symptoms were found to play a significant role in victim categorization, as students with higher levels of depressive symptoms were more likely to report peer victimization, bullying victimization, and convergent victimization than students with low depression levels. Post-hoc analyses (presented in the rightmost column in Table 2) further revealed that the effect of depressive symptoms was the highest for convergent victims, and equally strong for victims of bullying and victims of peer aggression.

The role of aggressive behavior was somewhat different from that of depressive symptoms. Preliminary binary regression analysis (not shown in the table) indicated that aggressive students would be more likely to be victims of both peer aggression and bullying. However, the multinomial model found that while aggressive students were more likely to report peer victimization and convergent victimization, they did not identify themselves as being bullied in the absence of peer victimization. In other words, the face-value association between aggressive behaviors and victimization from bullying was found to be a false positive explained by the overlap between peer victimization and bullying victimization. Post-hoc analyses showed that the effect of aggressive behaviors was stronger on peer victimization than on convergent victimization.

Students with higher levels of peer support, on the other hand, were less likely to identify themselves as being bullied or to be convergent victims, but were not less likely to report peer victimization than students with low peer support. In other words, bullied students experienced less peer support than non-victims, whereas students frequently exposed to aggression from their peers experienced the same level of peer support as non-victims. Again, preliminary binomial regression indicated a face-value association between lower levels of peer support and peer victimization, which was shown to be a false positive in the multinomial model.

Finally, girls were somewhat more likely than boys to be victims of frequent peer aggression, but no other gender effects, including interaction effects, were found. Student grade and school language were re-included one by one to test for interaction effects between socio-demographic and psychosocial predictors, but no significant interaction effects were found.

Discussion

Although bullying and peer victimization figures have been showing a downward trend in Finland (Kärnä et al., 2011), one in nine (11%) of the 7th and 9th grade students in Ostrobothnia still reported being bullied over the past six months, and one in five (20%) reported frequent exposure to aggression from their peers. In terms of overlap, 60% of the students that reported victimization from bullying also reported peer victimization, while 32% of the students who reported peer victimization also reported victimization from bullying. These results attest to the assumption that victimization from bullying and peer victimization are partly overlapping but not identical constructs in adolescence.

Previous research have found adolescent victimization to be predicted by conduct problems, social problems and internalizing problems (Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016). In the present study, these dimensions were operationalized as aggressive behaviors, depressive symptoms, and low peer support. While all three variables were found to be correlated to victimization experiences, the role of each differed somewhat for victims of bullying, victims of peer aggression, and convergent, multi-identified victims.

Students who identified themselves as being bullied but who did not report peer victimization can be assumed to have experienced less-than-frequent or even just single

episodes of serious aggression, which they nonetheless conceptualized as bullying episodes (Finkelhor et al., 2012). In support for this assumption, these students mostly reported only one setting for their victimization experiences. Compared to non-victims, bullied students were characterized by more depressive symptoms and lower peer support. However, they were not more likely than non-victims to display aggressive behaviors. In other words, primarily those aggressive students who also reported peer victimization identified themselves as victims of bullying. Previous studies have suggested that the word "bullied" may not comply with respondents' self-image, which may lead to an underestimation of victimization from bullying (Green et al., 2013). The present study adds to this line of research by suggesting that aggressive students may be particularly reluctant to frame themselves as (defenseless) victims of bullying. This finding may also contribute to explaining why teachers are less likely to identify perpetrators of bullying as victims (Haataja et al., 2016), since students who do not identify themselves as victims of bullying also might be less inclined to bring any victimization experiences to their teachers' attention.

Another category of students reported frequent peer victimization but did not identify themselves as bullied. These students may have been frequently involved in fights and quarrels without a power imbalance (Olweus, 2007). However, it may also be that students within this category did not want to label themselves as bullied, regardless of whether they would fit any formal criteria or not (Felix et al., 2011). Compared to non-victims, students who reported frequent peer victimization were more likely to report depressive symptoms and aggressive behavior. This finding supports the notion that victims of peer aggression suffer from lower psychological well-being even when they are not identified – by themselves or others – as victims of bullying (Turner et al., 2014). Students who were frequently victimized did, however, not differ from non-victims in terms of peer support. This may indicate that

quarrels and fights between equally popular students do not decrease their perceived peer support, or, in other words, that students with poor peer support are less likely to have someone that stands up for them and thus are more likely to experience and interpret victimization episodes as cases of bullying.

Convergent, multi-identified victims, i.e. students who both reported victimization from bullying and peer victimization, were more likely than non-victims and bullied-only students to report aggressive behavior, and more likely than non-victims and victims of peer aggression to report low peer support. They were also more likely than any other category to report high levels of depressive symptoms, which may be seen as support for the assumption that relational dynamics beyond victimization frequency affect the severity of victimization experiences (Green et al., 2013; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Within this group of students, one would also expect to find the bully-victims, who in other studies have been found to score the lowest on socio-emotional wellbeing (Jansen et al., 2011).

The lack of any strong gender or school language effect was not surprising given the mixed findings of previous research (Craig et al., 2009). The lack of a significant grade difference was, on the other hand, somewhat unexpected, as other studies have found students to score the highest on both peer victimization and victimization from bullying around early adolescence and following a school transitions (Nylund, Bellmore, Nishina, & Graham, 2007; Sumter et al., 2012). Since the rate of inter-grade victimization may be expected be higher for the younger students, the fact that 7th graders reported less aggressive behaviors than 9th graders might suggest that the younger students experienced less intra-grade victimization than the older ones. However, future studies would be required to determine to what extent the results are due to cohort effects or contextual factors.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study represents a rare empirical attempt to examine the distinction between peer victimization and victimization from bullying in adolescence. With that said, certain study limitations are noted. To start with, the cross-sectional nature of the data means that the results need to be interpreted with caution in terms of direction of effect. In comparison, a longitudinal design would provide the means not only to assess causality and bi-directional links between victim categories and psychosocial adjustment (cf. Reijntjes et al., 2011, Kochel et al., 2012), but also to examine to what extent victim sub-categories remain stable across time and in response to for example school transitions and changing friendship dynamics.

Furthermore, as the operationalization of study variables guides the outcome, it is worth stressing that the bullying victimization variable did not include a ready-made definition of bullying but rather allowed the respondents to apply their own understanding of the term. Within the Finnish school system, *kiusaaminen* and *mobbning* are commonplace terms, not least thanks to the nationwide use of the KiVa-program, and as noted by Arora (1996) and Smith et al. (2002), even when definitions are included, respondents may apply their own understanding of the term rather than conforming to definitions provided by the researchers. However, to continue exploring the role of definitions and variable operationalization on prevalence estimates, as well as ethno-cultural effects, future studies are advised to use a control group design to contrast behavioral measures of peer victimization with measures of bullying victimization that either include or omit ready-made definitions. Moreover, future studies are also recommended to include measures of not only peer aggression but also of bullying perpetration in order to better understand the relation between self-image, aggressive behavior, and victimization.

Finally, the current study did not take into account school- or classroom-level effects on the overlap between peer victimization and victimization from bullying, or on the psychosocial characteristics of victimized students (cf Saarento et al., 2013). Multi-level analysis might address this short-coming. Specifically, a multi-level multinomial design would allow researchers to simultaneously examine the unique effects of school-level factors, such as school language and school personnel experiences (cf. O'Brien, 2009), classroom-level factors, such as classroom culture and norms against bullying, and individual-level factors, such as aggressive behaviors or depressive symptoms, on the prevalence and overlap between victim categories.

With these limitations in mind, the results suggest that different measurement strategies identify partly distinct categories of students as victims. The roles of aggressive behavior and peer support, respectively, indicate that the attribution of victim status may be informed by psychosocial concomitants, while the role and prevalence of depressive symptoms support both the notion that relational dynamics beyond victimization frequency may affect the severity of victimization experiences (Solberg & Olweus, 2003) as well as the notion that peer victimization has unique detrimental effects on mental well-being, regardless of whether students identify themselves as bullied or not (Turner et al., 2014). Together, these findings highlight the need for research and practice to attend to adolescent peer victimization from a multidimensional perspective.

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