

THE RELATIONSHIP OF SELF-ESTEEM AND PEER VICTIMIZATION AMONG SCHOOLCHILDREN

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Abstract

Bullying and peer victimization have long been considered an important social and clinical problem. Bullying experiences among schoolchildren can cause low self-esteem and mental health problems. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between peer victimization by bullying behavior and self-esteem. The target group of this study consisted of 157 respondents aged 12-15, of which n=82 were female and n=75 male. The quantitative method was used to accomplish this research using the random sampling technique. Self-report questionnaires, PRQ (Rigby & Slee, 1993) were used for data collection, which aims to measure victimization from bullying at school, while the Rosenberg (1965) questionnaire was used to measure the level of self-esteem. The results show that a moderate significant negative correlation was found between peer victimization and students' self-esteem. Regarding the differential analysis, the results showed that there are no significant gender differences in the level of victimization. While the regression analysis shows that statistically, victimization contributes significantly to the expression of self-esteem, although at a low level. These findings suggest that adequate institutions intervene and pay more attention to these aspects, because the negligence of institutions can produce victims of bullying who can fall into a vicious circle, where after being victimized, their self-esteem level drops, so that they can be victimized again, which results in other negative mental health effects. Therefore, interventions that focus on the self-esteem of victims would be effective, and another suggestion is to conduct more longitudinal studies in the future.

Keywords: self-esteem, peer victimization, schoolchildren, Kosovo

1. Introduction

The development of self-esteem is considered one of the most important developmental processes of adolescence (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). Hewitt (2009), defined self-esteem as a person's overall subjective assessment of his or her worth, while Smith and Mackie (2007), defined it as self-concept, which means that we think about ourselves in terms of positive or negative self-evaluations and how we feel about it. Self-esteem is often seen as a personality trait, meaning that it tends to be stable. It may include a variety of beliefs about oneself, such as one's evaluation of one's appearance, beliefs, emotions, behaviors, and one's ability to engage successfully or at least adequately with the world (Burton, 2015). In the mid-1960s, sociologist Morris Rosenberg developed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), which became the most widely used scale to measure self-esteem in the social sciences.

Some of the theories that describe self-esteem are: sociometric theory, attachment theory, and Maslow's theory. Sociometric theory from an evolutionary psychological perspective proposes that the structure of self-esteem is a measure of interpersonal relationships. According to this theory, self-confidence is a measure of the efficiency of social interaction that is related to acceptance or rejection by others. This theory states that self-esteem has evolved to control the level of status and their acceptance in the social group (Leary et al., 1995). Attachment theory assumes that the care given to the child and the relationship with the parents determine the child's self-esteem. Children need a sufficient amount of attention, and parents must be responsive to the child's signals. If these needs are met, the child will feel safe, which will lead to a positive view of himself and the ability to trust others (Johnsson, 2003). Maslow's theory (1943) the need for self-

esteem plays an important role in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which describes self-esteem as one of the basic human motives. Maslow suggested that people need both esteem from others and internal self-esteem. Both of these needs must be met in order for a person to achieve self-actualization. According to Maslow, without the fulfillment of the need for self-esteem, individuals will be driven to seek it and cannot grow and obtain self-actualization. Maslow showed that the need for respect or reputation is most important for children and adolescents and precedes self-esteem or true dignity. Maslow indicated that the need for respect or reputation is most important for children and adolescents and precedes real self-esteem or dignity.

Experiencing physical and verbal abuse repeatedly from one or more people is known as peer victimization (Olweus, 1991). Peer victimization at school is an important health and educational issue. Peer victimization can include physical, verbal, or psychological bullying or abuse and can contribute to mental and physical health consequences (Olweus, 1994; Graham & Bellmore, 2007). However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 5 youth report experiencing some type of victimization at school (Kann, 2018). School bullying and peer victimization are major social problems affecting children and adolescents in all parts of the world. The serious consequences of peer bullying and victimization have generated considerable attention from the media and the public, as well as from educators, school officials, researchers, practitioners, and legislators in recent years (Phillips, 2007). Peer victimization is a frequent and noticeable social stressor that affects development throughout life, but it is especially prevalent in early adolescence when children are transitioning to the upper grades in a new school setting and placing more value on their peer relationships and social standing (Bettencourt et al., 2013).

Research around the world has shown that peer victimization is a common phenomenon among students in educational institutions. Peer victimization here refers to various forms of repeated physical or emotional harm directed at a child (Litman et al., 2015). There are different reasons why a person becomes a victim of bullying by their peers. Previous studies have highlighted that self-perception of being overweight was more strongly related to the experience of bullying than objective obesity (Carey et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2018). Dissatisfaction with body image appears to be a risk factor for being a victim of peer aggression, possibly due to its negative effects on general self-esteem and associated effects on social interaction difficulties and isolation, which may increase the likelihood of being a victim. In general, the way a teenager is treated by people who are significant to them affects their self-esteem, which in turn affects how they relate to others in the future.

Peer victimization is negatively related to self-esteem (Suárez García et al., 2020), and self-esteem is negatively related to shyness and social anxiety in adolescents (Ran, Zhang & Huang, 2018; Seema & Kumar, 2017). At school, victimization can be downright physical or verbal aggression (hitting, pushing, insulting), sexual harassment (unwanted sexual comments and harassment), and relationship victimization (spreading rumors, social exclusion). The experience of victimization at school is different for males and females as they experience forms of victimization at different rates from each other. It has been hypothesized that victimization is more severe when students move from elementary to middle school because there is a change from adult to peer interactions, more demands on the curriculum, less teacher attention, and more social stresses (Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2003). A study conducted by Tsaousis (2016), aimed to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and bullying behavior (ie, perpetration and victimization by peers) using meta-analytic procedures. From an original pool of 936 studies, 121 non-duplicate studies were identified that met the inclusion criteria. The analyzes revealed that peer victimization is negatively related to self-esteem, with an average effect size of $r = - 0.27$.

Finkelhor et al. (2005) studied multiple forms of victimization in the home, school, and community. They reported that boys experienced physical assault and property victimization more often than girls, while girls experienced higher rates of sexual victimization than boys. Crick and Bigbee (1998), also found gender differences, in that girls were more likely to experience relational victimization (also referred to as indirect aggression) than boys, while boys were more likely to experience direct physical and verbal victimization

than girls. However, peer victimization can have long-lasting negative mental health consequences, even up to forty years later (Kerr, Gini & Capaldi, 2017).

2. Methodology

2.1. Purposes of the research: The purposes of research are description, and prediction. To provide answers regarding the research questions, the description of the variables as well as the tendency to identify the question of whether there is a correlation between peer victimization and self-esteem among school children and whether there are differences regarding victimization depending on gender.

2.2. Research questions: From this research problem, the following research questions are derived:

- P1. Is there a correlation between peer victimization and self-esteem among school children?
- P2. Are there gender differences in the level of victimization?

Research hypotheses

The hypotheses raised for this study are:

- H1. There is a correlation between peer victimization and self-esteem among school children. There is a significant negative correlation between peer victimization and self-esteem among school children, as the level of victimization increases, self-esteem decreases and vice versa.
- H2. There are differences in the level of victimization regarding gender: Women are more victimized compared to men.

2.3. Sample: A random sampling technique was used for this study. This technique was chosen because every member of the population is likely to be a member of the sample. A simple random sample is an unbiased sampling technique. The research was carried out in Pristina, in the Republic of Kosovo. The research was carried out in the period of April 2022. The total number of participants in this study is 157 students from grades 7-9. Of these, 82 (52.2%) belong to the female gender and 75 (47.8%) to the male gender. The age of the children ranges from 12-15 years old with an average age of $M=13.2$.

2.4. Methods and instruments: Quantitative method was used as a method for this research, answering descriptive and differential method questions. For the realization of this research, the questionnaire that measures the relevant variables was used as a measuring instrument. A self-reported questionnaire was used to collect the data. Each student has been subjected to the research procedure, starting with demographic questionnaires and then continuing with the questionnaire for measuring self-esteem by Rosenberg (1965), with a total of 10 questions on a Likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 4= strongly agree. While for victimization, the PRQ scale (Rigby & Slee, 1993) was used, from which only the victimization questions were taken from the total of 20 questions that the respondent had. Each question is rated using a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes, 2 = Usually, 3 = Often). Scoring is done by adding points from the answers given to each question. High values indicate a higher level of self-esteem/victimization and vice versa. The reliability of the questionnaire for self-confidence is Cronbach's Alpha =.891, while for victimization it is Cronbach's Alpha =.817.

2.5. *Research procedure:* The research procedure went step-by-step as planned. After receiving the permission of the school authorities, an introductory lecture was held on the victimization of peers and information on the purpose of the research. The respondents were informed on how to fill out the measuring instruments, discussing any possible ambiguity presented. The testing was anonymous. The time for completing the questionnaires was 10–12 minutes.

3. Results

Data analysis of this research was done through SPSS (statistical package). Below are presented the tables with the relevant analyses derived to prove the research hypotheses. Below is a descriptive table in order to continue with other correlation, regression, and t-test analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD.
Gender	157	-	-	-	-
Age	157	12.00	15.00	13.2102	.88457
Valid N (listwise)	157				

Note. DS = Standard Deviation. N = number of participants. M = mean. Min=minimum. Max = maximum

Table 2. Pearson correlational analysis between self-esteem and peer victimization

Pearson		Self-esteem	Peer victimization
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.287**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	157	157
Peer victimization	Pearson Correlation	-.287**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	157	157

***.* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

From Pearson's correlational analysis, it can be seen that self-esteem and victimization have a moderate significant negative correlation ($r = -.287^{**}$; $p = .000$), which means that they have a negative correlation, so as one variable increases, the other variable decreases.

After the correlation we will see if self-esteem can be predicted by victimization. A linear regression analysis was performed to see the impact of victimization on self-esteem.

Table 3. Regression analysis

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
Peer victimization	-.244	.066	-3.726	.000

Dependent Variable: self-esteem

As shown in table 3, peer victimization ($\beta = -.244$, $p < .000$) statistically significantly contributes to the explanation of self-esteem. The results obtained show that $R^2 = 0.082$, which shows that 8.2% of the change in self-esteem is explained by peer victimization, ($F = 13.886$; $p < .000$). In the following table, the t-test analysis is set to see the gender differences in the victimization variable.

Table 4. Analysis of the t-test for gender differences in the variable of peer victimization

Variable	t	df	Sig	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Interval Difference Lower	Confidence of the Upper
Peer victimization	.029	155	.977	.00241	.08246	-.16049	.16531

According to the analysis of differences between groups referring to victimization, we have $t = 0.029$ and the significance result is $Sig = 0.977$, which has exceeded the limits of statistical significance 0.05 in the 95% confidence interval and means that there are no differences based on gender $p > 0.05$, although on average, women have shown a higher level of victimization, but not so much in contrast to men.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to see the relationship between self-esteem and victimization by peers. Our research aimed to verify the hypotheses. Our first hypothesis was that self-esteem and victimization have a negative correlation, and the correlational analysis proved that there is a moderate significant negative correlation between these two variables ($r = -.287^{**}$; $p = .000$). These findings are also consistent with the findings by Suárez García et al., 2020, where according to them peer victimization is negatively related to self-esteem as well as with the study by Tsaousis (2016). While the first hypothesis aimed to verify the correlation, the second hypothesis was to look at gender differences in the level of victimization.

Hypothesis 2 has been partially verified. According to the analysis of the differences between the groups, referring to victimization, we have $t = 0.029$ and the significance result is $Sig = 0.977$, which means that there are no differences based on gender, but on average women have shown a higher level of victimization, but not that much unlike men. This result was also supported by other studies. However, other studies have reported that the level of victimization depends on the type of victimization. So Finkelhor et al. (2005) reported that girls experienced higher rates of sexual victimization compared to boys. Crick and Bigbee (1998) also found gender differences, in that girls were more likely to experience relational victimization (also referred to as indirect aggression) than boys.

Contrary to these two hypotheses, we also performed regression analysis where in table 3 it is seen that peer victimization contributes statistically significantly to the explanation of self-esteem. The results obtained show that 8.2% of the change in self-confidence is explained by peer victimization ($R^2 = 0.082$; $p < .000$). Although in a low percentage, it is important that self-esteem is affected by the victimization of peers. Based on Maslow's Theory, which suggested that people need evaluation from people as well as their own internal evaluation, it can be seen that the ratio of peers at this age has great value, therefore it is important to pay great attention to this variables in order to reduce the level of bullying which leads to victimization and to raise children with self-esteem without fear of appearing in public and being themselves.

This research makes a special contribution in the field of educational, social, school and clinical psychology, but not only.

5. Recommendation

Based on the literature and clinical experience, cases requiring psychological services at this age are more often the result of peer victimization. In light of these assessments, as well as the negative implications stemming from peer victimization according to the literature, there should be greater awareness among institutions, researchers, educators, and clinicians interested in creating a safe environment to enhance the academic functioning and social of children. Therefore, it is recommended to hold informative meetings for increased awareness of the negative consequences of peer victimization as well as the factors that promote and protect someone from this experience, victim-informed interventions are more likely to show success. Another recommendation is to hold group meetings in schools with students to identify children who are victimized and to become more aware of the effects of bullying, support meetings and psycho-social educational programs. As for other research, it is recommended that more longitudinal studies be conducted in the future and that other variables are taken into account.

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