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Mansini, Addi, "Investigating the Relationship between Classroom Sense of Belonging, Friendship Quality, and Peer Victimization." (2022). *Honors Theses*. 1609.
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**Investigating the Relationship between Classroom Sense of Belonging, Friendship Quality,
and Peer Victimization**

by

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Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Psychology Department

University of Richmond

Richmond, VA

April 28, 2022

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Abstract

Research examining the predictors of peer victimization, the experience of being aggressed upon by one's peers, is important because studies have shown that peer victimization can have negative mental health and academic outcomes. This research aimed to examine classroom sense of belonging, the degree to which children feel that they are a valuable part of their class, as a predictor of peer victimization, with the hypothesis that high classroom belonging would be predictive of lower peer victimization among third through fifth grade students ($N = 233$; 119 female; M_{age} at recruitment = 9.48, $SD = .68$). A second objective was to evaluate whether or not friendship quality would alter the association between belongingness and peer victimization. Self-report data on classroom belonging, peer victimization, and aspects of friendship quality were collected at two time points (T1 and T2) separated by a 6-month lag. Results from multiple regression analyses found that belongingness at T1 was predictive of peer victimization at T2. The interaction of classroom belonging and friendship quality (companionship; help/aid) at T1 was not predictive of victimization at T2. Findings reveal the importance of classroom sense of belonging as a predictor of peer victimization. Despite the fact that friendship has often been found to serve a protective function, friendship quality did not moderate the association between belonging and victimization in the current study.

Keywords: Peer victimization, belonging, friendship quality, peer relations

Investigating the Relationship between Classroom Sense of Belonging, Friendship Quality, and Peer Victimization

Children experience a wide variety of peer experiences in school. Peer interactions are sometimes positive, but other times they involve aggression and harmful interactions such as peer victimization. Peer victimization has widely been described as the repeated occurrence of aggressive interactions with one's peers over time (Iyer-Eimerbrink et al., 2015). Peer victimization often involves a power "imbalance of strength", where the aggressor has some sort of stronger social position or control over their victim, allowing for repeated attacks (Olweus, 1993). This definition highlights the fact that victimization, which can be physical, verbal, or relational, often does not occur between two children of equal status.

A growing body of research has determined that peer victimization occurs with an alarming frequency. For example, a 2010 study found that nearly 20% of students, a significant portion of children within a school community, reported frequent victimization (Stadler, 2010).

The prevalence of peer victimization in schools is cause for further research into combatting this occurrence, especially due to the negative outcomes associated with peer victimization. For example, numerous empirical studies have shown that peer victimization is correlated with negative mental health outcomes such as increased levels of depression, stress and anxiety among children (Tran et al., 2012), and there is longitudinal evidence showing that these effects are long-lasting past adolescence into young adulthood (Oncioiu et al., 2021).

Consequences of Peer Victimization

Across a variety of studies, there has been a consensus that peer victimization results in negative social and emotional outcomes. For example, a quantitative meta-analysis revealed that peer victimization had negative effects on levels of psychosocial maladjustment measures like

anxiety, depression, loneliness, and self-worth (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Victimization was found to contribute negatively to both social and psychological forms of maladjustment. Given the maladaptive effects that peer victimization has on youth, particularly school-aged children, there is a need for further research into the risk and protective factors associated with victimization.

In particular, it is important to consider the antecedents of victimization, or risk factors that increase children's propensity to be victimized. A child's sense of belonging in their classroom environment is one possible antecedent of peer victimization.

Sense of Belonging

Within a school and classroom environment, the sense of belonging that a student has can play a large role in their educational experience. Sense of belonging describes the perception of how much one fits in and is valued by a community to which they belong, and a key component to feeling like one belongs is having "frequent, affectively pleasant interactions" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In school in particular, a sense of belonging is the need to form bonds with a group, where a personal identification is developed within a group or classroom that involves respect and understanding (St-Amand et al., 2017). In a classroom setting, a sense of belonging looks like a cohesive group of students who have formed a level of trust among their peers and their teacher. Teacher-student interactions that successfully foster a sense of belonging in a classroom are ones where interactions are viewed as "close, but independent" in a way that is not overbearing, but allows for reliable guidance (Juvonen, 2006). The sense of belonging to one's classroom is a self-perception that is fostered by positive relations and climate.

A sense of belonging within a classroom is associated with positive outcomes for students, and a lack of belonging has been shown to foster maladaptive behaviors. Research on

sense of belonging and psychological outcomes revealed that positive mental health outcomes were correlated with a sense of belonging (Anant, 1966). These include a higher sense of self-efficacy and better academic success (Allen et al., 2021). Maladaptive effects have been found for when belonging in the classroom is not felt by students. For example, a lack of belonging can lead to antisocial behavior and an increased risk of both mental and physical illness (Allen et al., 2021). Specifically in schools, a 2013 study described the consequences of lack of belonging in schools to be academic disengagement as well as school disengagement overall (Phan, 2013). Disengagement involves students' withdrawing from all aspects of school, including academic tasks and making personal social connections. The clear divide between the positive and negative consequences of sense of belonging demonstrates that there is a clear need to study belonging among youth in schools further.

Sense of Belonging and Peer Victimization

As research shows, lacking a sense of belonging in a classroom environment can lead to negative mental health outcomes and maladaptive social responses. There is reason to believe that a lower sense of belonging could lead to greater peer victimization. Children who do not feel like they belong may be more easily targeted for victimization because they may stand out as vulnerable or alone, signaling to aggressors that they may be easier targets for victimization (Veenstra et al., 2005). Students who feel a strong sense of belonging may be less likely to appear vulnerable. Thus far, there is not extensive literature that investigates how belongingness may serve as a predictor of peer victimization, but in one study of over 1,000 fifth-graders, higher levels of peer victimization were predicted from lower reports of school-level climate, a variable that closely measures belonging (Wang et al., 2014). This research supported earlier findings, where school connectedness predicted levels of peer victimization, such that higher

feelings of connectedness were associated with lower levels of victimization (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). Investigating belonging as a predictor of victimization is the next clear step in understanding the relationship of the factors among children in schools.

Protective Quality of Friendship

Research has demonstrated that there are factors that can help reduce levels of victimization and the negative effects that follow. Friendships, specifically high-quality friendships, are one factor that have been shown to reduce levels of peer victimization. For example, research shows that mutual friendship protects against victimization for children high on depressive symptoms (Kochel et al., 2017). In another study of late elementary students, the relation between behavior factors and peer victimization was mitigated for students with a mutual best friendship (Hodges et al., 1999). If having one quality friend can help alleviate the threat of victimization for children who experience depression and behavior issues, it is reasonable to assume that quality friendships could be a protective factor for children who report low levels of classroom belonging. In other words, for students who report low levels of belonging, having a high quality friendship within a classroom may make them less susceptible to victimization. With higher quality friendships, the negative relationship between low classroom belonging and peer victimization may be moderated, such that children with high quality friendships might report less victimization.

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Method

Participants

Participants included 233 elementary school children (119 female; M_{age} at recruitment = 9.48, $SD = .68$). Two participants did not report demographic information. The sample consisted of third ($n = 74$), fourth ($n = 126$), and fifth ($n = 31$) graders from 23 classrooms in two elementary schools in a metropolitan area of the Southeast United States. The participants were recruited in the Fall of 2015. Demographic information revealed the sample was primarily Caucasian (63.1%). Other participants were African American (7.7%), Asian (7.3%), Latino/Hispanic (4.7%), multicultural (10.6%), and other (1.3%) backgrounds.

Procedure

Researchers obtained approval to conduct the study from both the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board and the school district. Three principals were invited to participate after receiving approval from the school district's Director of Research. After meeting with the principals of these three schools, the principal investigator (PI) obtained

permission from two principals to invite teachers in their school to participate in the study.

Teachers from 23 classrooms opted in to participate. The researchers visited the participating classrooms and distributed information about the study, demographic forms, and parental consent forms to all students. Students were instructed to return their forms to the PI in a prepaid envelope through the US mail, or in a sealed envelope to their teacher who then forwarded to the PI. Of the students given forms and recruited to participate, 64% received parental consent. Of those whose parents consented, 97% of students assented to participate in the study.

Data were collected from students in their classrooms during the school day in October or November of 2015/2015 (Time 1) and April or May of 2016/2017 (Time 2). Participants used laptops to complete the data collection through a Qualtrics web-based survey. The PI read instructions aloud to the participants while research assistant's circulated to assist students and address questions. The survey lasted around 40 minutes. Both participating and non-participating students received compensation through a University pencil and a snack following the survey. Participating classrooms received a donation to be used towards school supplies.

Measures

Measures collected consisted of Peer Victimization, at both T1 and T2, Classroom Belonging at T1, and Friendship Quality, specifically subscales of Companionship and Help/Aid, at T1.

Peer Victimization

Peer Victimization was indexed using four self-report items (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Participants indicated how often in the past two weeks (0 = never, 5 = everyday), peers in the classroom had: (1) 'hit or kicked you at school?', (2) 'said mean things to you at school?', (3)

‘said bad things about you to other kids at school?’, (4) ‘picked on you at school?’. Peer victimization scores were calculated by separately averaging the four items, at T1 ($\alpha = .79$) and T2 ($\alpha = .86$).

Classroom Belonging

Students’ sense of belonging in the classroom was measured using 18 items from The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993). Participants self reported how often in the past two weeks (1 = almost never, 5 = almost everyday) they : (1) ‘feel like a real part of my classroom’, (6) ‘don’t feel as if I belong in this class’, (17) ‘feel proud of belonging to my class.’ Sense of belonging was calculated by averaging across the 18 items for each participant (T1 $\alpha = .82$).

Friendship Quality

Friendship Quality was indexed using 7 items from two subscales of the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS; Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). The two subscales included Companionship (4 items) and Help/Aid (3 items). For the Companionship subscale, participants self-reported how true (1 = not true, 5 = really true) the following statements are when thinking about their best friend: (1) ‘My friend and I spend all of our free time together’, (9) ‘My friend thinks of fun things for us to do together’, (16) ‘My friend and I go to each other’s houses after school and on weekends, (21) ‘Sometimes my friend and I just sit around and talk about things like school, sports, and things we like’. On the same scale, participants self-reported how true items were for the Help/Aid measure: (3) ‘If I forgot my lunch or needed a little money, my friend would loan it to me’, (4) ‘My friend would help me if I needed it’, (11) ‘My friend helps me when I am having trouble with something.’ Companionship (T1 $\alpha = .51$) and Help/Aid (T1 $\alpha = .64$) were calculated by separately averaging the items for each subscale.

Results

To analyze the results of this study, I conducted descriptive statistics for the variables of T1 sense of belonging, T1 and T2 peer victimization, and two features of friendship quality at T1: Companionship and Help/Aid. Descriptive statistics included reports of means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables. To evaluate sense of belonging and the friendship quality variables as predictors of T2 peer victimization, two regression analyses were conducted. T1 levels of peer victimization were controlled for in both analyses.

Descriptives

Bivariate correlations, means and standard deviations of all relevant variables appear in Table 1. Descriptive statistics reveal that T1 peer victimization occurred somewhat rarely to students within the past two weeks on a five point rating scale ($M = 1.60$, $SD = .79$). Time 2 reports were higher, with victimization occurring between sometimes and a lot on average ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .89$). Reports on sense of belonging were moderate, with students feeling like they belonged and held valued opinions between some and most of the time on a five point scale ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .56$). Participants reported higher levels of companionship ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .74$) than help/aid ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .64$) on the Friendship Qualities Scale (Table 1).

There were several significant correlations between the measured variables. Sense of belonging and T2 peer victimization were moderately negatively correlated such that higher reports of belongingness correlated with lower levels of peer victimization. T1 companionship and T1 help/aid were not correlated with T2 peer victimization. T1 and T2 peer victimization were strongly correlated with one another, such that T1 peer victimization predicted T2 peer victimization. The Friendship Quality measures of companionship and help/aid were strongly correlated measures with each other as well.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	Mean	SD
1. T1 Peer Victimization					1.44	.64
2. Sense of Belonging	-.26				3.38	.56
3. Friendship Quality: Companionship	-.03	.24			3.33	.74
	1.	2.	3.	4.	Mean	SD
4. Friendship Quality: Help/Aid	.05	.21	.51		3.63	.89
5. T2 Peer Victimization	.44	-.27	-.01	.04	1.60	.79

Note. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2. Coefficients in bold are significant at the 0.01 level.

Regression Analyses

In the first regression analysis, I examined T1 sense of belonging, T1 companionship, and the interaction of the two as the predictors of T2 peer victimization. Sense of belonging significantly predicted peer victimization beyond controlling for levels of Time 1 peer victimization, ($B = -.265, t(170) = -2.887, p = .004$) and explained a significant amount of the variance in peer victimization levels, $R^2 = .287, F(4,174) = 17.114, p < .001$. Findings suggest that as sense of belonging increases, levels of victimization decrease. Companionship, an element of the measure of friendship quality, was not a significant predictor of T2 peer

victimization. The interaction between T1 sense of belonging and T1 companionship was not a significant predictor of T2 peer victimization (Table 2).

In the second analysis, I examined T1 sense of belonging, T1 help/aid, and the interaction of the two as predictors of T2 peer victimization. Sense of belonging again significantly predicted peer victimization while controlling for levels of Time 1 victimization, ($B = -.276$, $t(170) = -2.966$, $p = .003$) and explained a significant amount of the variance in peer victimization levels, $R^2 = .282$, $F(4, 176) = 16.863$, $p < .001$. Again these findings suggest that as sense of belonging increases, levels of victimization decrease. The moderating variable of help/aid, a level of the friendship quality measure, was not a significant predictor of variance in peer victimization levels. The interaction between T1 sense of belonging and T1 help/aid was not a significant predictor of T2 peer victimization (Table 2).

Table 2
Regression Coefficients for Predicting Levels of Time 2 Peer Victimization

Variable	B	β	t	p	R ²
T1 Sense of Belonging	-.27	-.20	-2.89	.00	
T1 Friendship Quality: Companionship	.05	.05	0.73	.46	
T1 Victimization	.58	.46	6.84	.00	
T1 Sense of Belonging X T1 Companionship	.12	.09	1.32	.19	
					.29***
T1 Sense of Belonging	-.28	-.21	-2.97	.00	
T1 Friendship Quality: Help/Aid	.04	.05	0.78	.44	

T1 Victimization	.56	.44	6.58	.00
T1 Sense of Belonging X T1 Help/Aid	.06	.05	.68	.50
				.28***

Note. N = 175. *** p < .001

Discussion

The current study sought to examine one factor, classroom sense of belonging, that could contribute to peer victimization. I hypothesized that a lower sense of classroom belonging would predict increases in peer victimization, on the basis of theory that low belonging likely heightens the vulnerability of children (Veenstra et al., 2005). Results revealed that sense of belonging in the fall predicted peer victimization in the spring, above and beyond prior levels of victimization. These findings suggest that students’ perceptions of belongingness play an important role in predicting later peer victimization.

I also hypothesized that for those students who perceive low belonging, friendship quality might reduce the risk for victimization. This is because previous research has cited that high quality friendships have been a protective factor for students at risk of experiencing peer victimization (Kochel et al., 2017). With friendship being protective for youth, having a high quality friend could make them less vulnerable to victimization, as they have a friend to share experiences and bond with. Results showed that the interaction of belongingness and friendship quality in the fall was not a significant predictor of peer victimization in the spring. In other words, friendship quality did not serve a protective function by mitigating risk for peer victimization among children who reported low levels of belongingness. This was the case for both the friendship quality measures, such that the interaction between belonging and companionship, as well as the interaction between belonging and help/aid, were not predictive of

later victimization. These findings suggest that these certain aspects of friendship quality may not play a role in predicting levels of peer victimization and that the protective factor of friendship quality may not be enough to outweigh the disadvantages of low classroom belonging. This result was somewhat surprising in the context of previous work that found that having a friend significantly reduced peer victimization (Kochel et al., 2017). My findings, which went against the Kochel et al. (2017) findings, could be due to the fact that a low classroom sense of belonging is a highly important predictor of well-being, so much so that friendship is not enough to protect individuals.

For example, research suggests that low belongingness is closely associated with psychological and academic problems, including low levels of self-efficacy (Allen et al., 2021; Phan, 2013). This means that children who did not feel valuable and a real part of their classroom community can report having less motivation, classroom success, and lower well-being in schools. Reports of high friendship quality may not be enough to reduce the risk of these outcomes when belonging is low. According to my findings, disadvantages of low classroom belonging may also include social difficulties (i.e. peer victimization). In other words, it appears that having a low sense of belonging in the classroom does make children particularly vulnerable to peer victimization and the negative effects that follow as a result. It is important therefore, to identify factors other than friendship quality, or in addition to, that might also reduce the negative effects of belonging on victimization. For example, perceptions of empathy in the classroom, from both teachers and peers, could contribute to the relationship of belongingness in the classroom. In a longitudinal study of peer victimization, empathy was found to be a relevant factor, such that increases of peer victimization led to decreased reports of empathy in children (Malti et al., 2010). With this finding, it is reasonable to test whether

increased empathy levels could moderate between classroom belonging to predict lower levels of peer victimization. In a similar way that friendship may be expected to be protective for vulnerable children, high levels of empathy may be protective and play a role in moderating the consequences of peer victimization.

Implications

The results of the current study have implications for children, and therefore educators, in schools. With low classroom belonging being predictive of peer victimization, prevention measures for victimization may need to rely on facilitating belonging among classroom and school communities. This is particularly true due to the fact that friendship quality was not a moderating factor, emphasizing that classroom friendships might not provide protection for students who perceive that their belonging is low. The adverse mental health outcomes of victimization have been increasingly cited, but the results of this study help direct efforts towards another predictor of victimization. Teachers should aim to facilitate belonging in their classrooms, reducing the perception of victimization before the negative consequences occur. In fact, research shows that belonging is likely to be higher, and victimization likely lower, when teachers are attuned to the level of victimization occurring in the classroom (Norwalk et al., 2016). There is now reason to investigate how to foster belonging in classrooms in order to increase classroom belonging and in turn reduce perceptions of peer victimization.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the current study is that only two aspects of friendship quality were tested as potential moderators between the relationship of belongingness and peer victimization. Companionship and help/aid were two factors of the friendship quality measure that were chosen due to their apparent relatedness with different types of peer relationships like both belonging

and victimization. Because there are other factors of friendship quality, like measures of closeness or conflict, it cannot be assumed that all factors of friendship quality do not serve as moderators between the relationship of belonging and peer victimization. Future studies should investigate other aspects of friendship quality to determine if they serve as protective factors against victimization and have a role in moderating the relationship from belonging to victimization.

Results of this research came from a sample that was almost equally male and female and consisted of 63.1% Caucasian individuals, so researchers should aim to replicate findings with more diverse samples, including participants from racial and ethnic minorities, as well as diverse gender identities, to ensure that research findings are generalizable.

In sum, study findings added to what is known about risk factors for peer victimization by showing that low classroom belonging is a significant predictor of victimization. The risk factor of low classroom belonging can likely be related to the attribute of vulnerability in children. Findings added that high friendship quality, specifically the aspects of companionship and help/aid, do not moderate this relationship between classroom belonging and victimization. The results of this study suggest that there should be further investigation into the relationship and moderators between classroom belonging and peer victimization.

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