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Longitudinal Associations Between Peer Victimization and School Belonging in
Elementary-Aged Children

By

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Abstract

Belonging, a feeling of acceptance, mattering, and being valued (Strayhorn, 2019), is crucial for children's social adjustment. Peer victimization, or being the recipient of a peer's aggression repeatedly over time, has the potential to threaten belonging. Alternatively, it is possible that low levels of belonging can elicit higher levels of victimization. My primary study aim was to determine the directionality of the relationship between peer victimization and classroom belonging. A secondary aim was to examine whether gender moderates the relationship between these constructs. Participants included 231 elementary school students in 23 classrooms across 2 time periods over one school year. I conducted two regressions, with the first looking at peer victimization as a predictor of belonging and the second looking at belonging as a predictor of peer victimization. For both regressions, I examined gender as a moderator. There was no evidence that high levels of peer victimization were associated with decreases in classroom belonging; however, low levels of classroom belonging in the fall were associated with marginally higher levels of peer victimization in the spring. Gender did not moderate the relationship between these constructs. These findings have implications for young children who lack belonging and suggest that those who work in schools should consider the importance of implementing interventions to promote belonging.

Keywords: belonging, peer victimization, elementary school, gender

Longitudinal Associations Between Peer Victimization and School Belonging in Elementary-Aged Children

Belonging has become a buzzword in education research, but research indicates just how pervasive the need to belong is. Strayhorn (2019) defines belonging as “students’ perceived social support [...], a feeling or sensation of connectedness and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus, such as faculty, staff, and peers.” Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) places only safety and physiological needs as more important than belonging, suggesting that belonging is crucial for living a fulfilling life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging has essential implications for multiple aspects of children’s adjustment. Given that children spend eight or more hours a day in school, investigators typically study children’s belonging in the context of schools and classrooms.

School belonging refers to students’ feelings of acceptance, respect, and inclusion by peers and teachers in their school environment (Seon & Smith-Adcock, 2021). Research shows that belonging affects school adjustment, relationships, behaviors, and psychological well-being (Lodewyk et al., 2020; Xu & Fang, 2021). Belonging correlates with higher academic effort and achievement (Goodenow, 1993), positive learning attitudes and outcomes (Xu & Fang, 2021), and school connectedness and engagement (Seon & Smith-Adcock, 2021). Children and adolescents with higher levels of school belonging are more connected to their families (O’Brennan & Furlong, 2010) and have better peer relationships (Emond, 2012; Uslu & Gizir, 2016). Students with higher levels of belonging also tend to exhibit prosocial behaviors like kindness (Lee & Huang, 2021) and engage in fewer high-risk behaviors (O’Brennan & Furlong, 2010). Several studies have demonstrated that school belonging is associated with a higher sense

of well-being (Xu & Fang, 2021) and identified school belonging as a protective factor for students' mental health (Arslan et al., 2018, 2020). In contrast, a lower sense of school belonging is associated with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Fisher et al., 2015; Hagerty et al., 1996). Given the implications of student belonging on child and adolescent adjustment, factors contributing to or undermining school belonging should be investigated.

Childhood Peer Victimization Predicts School Belonging

One factor that can thwart belonging is peer victimization or repeatedly being the recipient of a peer's aggression, whether physical, verbal, relational, or indirect. Peer victimization is marked by a power differential between the perpetrator and victim and an intent to harm (Salmivalli & Peets, 2018). Because peer victimization can lead to lower levels of classroom belonging (Goldweber et al., 2013), it has often been studied as a correlate of belonging. There are at least two hypothesized ways peer victimization may affect belonging.

First, peer victimization experiences may reduce children's sense of belonging by limiting opportunities for children to connect positively with their peers (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Research shows that victimized students have fewer opportunities to create positive peer connections because victimization causes ostracization and marginalization, and victims may avoid further engagement with peers due to a fear of continued victimization (Youngblade et al., 2009). It has been asserted that peer connections are crucial for healthy development (Cohen, 2022, p. 25). Peer relations are especially developmentally significant during late childhood and adolescence (Hay, 2005; Rubin et al., 2011). Children who lack healthy peer relationships may feel alone and that they do not belong.

A second reason why victimization might lead to lower levels of belonging is by signaling that the harmed child does not matter, that they are 'less than' or not worthy. Mattering

is one critical component of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018, p.118). Students are made to feel that they matter when others depend on them, and they play essential roles in the classroom (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 15). If students feel they are not a significant member of the classroom community, they may feel they do not matter to their peers (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which may decrease their sense of classroom belonging. Consistent with this perspective, victimized children tend to feel unimportant, unworthy, and lonely (Schwartz et al., 2002) because they lack support. In sum, peer victimization may affect feelings of mattering, which in turn may cause harm to a child's sense of belonging.

School Belonging and Childhood Peer Victimization

Conversely, there is evidence that children's initial lack of belonging may lead to peer victimization, which could be because students who lack belonging may have lower levels of psychological well-being, marked by low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Karaman & Tarim, 2018; Tian et al., 2015).

Students who do not feel they belong may feel less positive about themselves, which may result in lower self-esteem. Studies have shown that self-esteem and belongingness are positively correlated, which may indicate that a lack of belonging influences how individuals feel about themselves (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2006; Lee & Robbins, 1998). There is also evidence that self-esteem and peer victimization are linked. This connection is possible since children with lower self-esteem may seek out interactions with peers that confirm their low sense of self. Egan and Perry (1998) found that poor self-esteem predicted increased victimization in elementary and middle schoolers over six months. The authors theorized that low self-esteem contributed to feelings of social inadequacy and a lack of confidence in one's position in his or her peer group. Students with lower self-esteem may be more likely to be victimized (Hawker & Boulton, 2000;

Van Geel et al., 2018) because these children present themselves as easier targets who are less likely to fight back.

Students who do not feel they belong may also be more susceptible to depression because belonging is a basic human need (Maslow, 1943), so the lack of this need causes psychological harm. A plethora of research has investigated the detrimental effects of lack of belonging on the mental well-being of individuals, such that those who have low levels of belonging experience higher levels of depression typically (Joyce & Early, 2014; McCallum & McLaren, 2010; Parr et al., 2020). There is also evidence linking high levels of depression with high levels of victimization (Kochel et al., 2012, 2017). Like low self-esteem, high levels of depression may put children at risk for victimization if it makes them appear more vulnerable. In conclusion, belonging may lead to victimization through its detrimental effects on children's self-esteem and mental health.

Moderating the Link Between Peer Victimization and Belonging

Given the theoretical link, backed by research, between peer victimization and belonging, risk and protective factors must be examined to determine what moderates this relationship. By identifying moderators, teachers, parents, and students can be more aware of who is more or less at risk, setting the foundation to create interventions for children at risk. One factor that has been studied as a moderator of belonging and peer victimization is gender, but the findings are not conclusive, and much remains to be learned.

There is growing evidence that the association between peer victimization and later belonging may differ by gender. Victimization, primarily relational victimization, may be a stronger predictor of lack of belonging for girls because girls are more often relationally oriented. Studies have shown that relational and peer group stress were related to increased

anxiety and depression for girls, indicating that girls may rely more on relationships for well-being than boys do (Rudolph, 2002). Consistent with this perspective, research has suggested that victimization has a larger effect on the belonging of girls than that of boys (Williford et al., 2019). In one study, girls who reported higher victimization than is typical for them proceeded to report decreased school belonging at subsequent time points (Davis et al. 2019).

It is also possible that initial levels of belonging as a predictor of later peer victimization may be moderated by gender. Lack of belonging may be more likely to predict victimization for boys due to gender norms. Young boys in the United States are often taught to be a certain way: strong, masculine, and independent, whereas young girls are often taught to be soft, feminine, and rely on others. Parents and other adults shape these gender perceptions, which can influence how children behave and feel (Meyer & Gelman, 2016). Gender stereotypes can have a cost for those who do not fall into the normative categories (Hyde, 2005). Boys who have lower levels of belonging may act more socially withdrawn and vulnerable, which makes them more likely to be victimized. Kochel et al. (2012) found that children who exhibited gender-atypical problem behavior, compared to gender-typical problem behavior, experienced struggles in their peer relationships. For example, withdrawn boys experienced higher levels of peer victimization and participated in fewer mutual friendships. Similarly, Egan and Perry (2001) found that peers may be more likely to victimize others who exhibit gender atypical behaviors as children who do not conform to gender expectations tend to experience consequences in their relationships. In sum, it is possible that if boys feel a lack of belonging, they may exhibit less gender-typical behavior, which in turn may elicit more victimization.

Overview of Current Study

This study aims to identify the direction of effect between peer victimization and belonging. I hypothesize that I will find support for both directions of effect, as suggested by the literature. If I obtain support for low levels of belonging predicting high levels of peer victimization, then I hypothesize that boys will be more affected by this than girls, possibly due to the harsh effects of gender atypicality. However, if I find support for high levels of peer victimization predicting lower levels of belonging, I hypothesize that girls will be more affected than their male counterparts as relationships may matter more to the well-being of girls.

Methods

Participants

Participants included 231 students (126 girls, 105 boys) in third ($n=74$), fourth ($n=126$), and fifth ($n=31$) grades (M_{age} at recruitment = 9.48, $SD=.68$). The participants came from 23 different classrooms across 2 elementary schools in a metropolitan area of the Southeastern United States. The students were recruited in the fall of 2015. Their primary caregivers, including mothers (68%), fathers (14%), and others (16%), provided demographic information. The participants were primarily Caucasian (66.5%), as well as African American (8.1%), Asian (7.7%), Hispanic or Latino (5.0%), mixed-race (11.6%), or a different race (1.4%). Racial demographics were representative of the county in which both elementary schools were. Parental education was also measured, with 2.7% having doctoral degrees, 21.8% having master's degrees, 41.4% having bachelor's degrees, 21.8% having an associate's degree or attending some college, and 12.3% having a high school diploma or attending some high school.

Procedure

The principal investigator (PI) obtained approval for the study from the university Institutional Review Board and the school district. The PI met with two elementary school principals close to the University, and they permitted their schools to participate in the study. The research team then visited the 23 classrooms to give information letters, demographic questionnaires, and consent forms to the students whose teachers agreed to participate. Of the students in these classrooms, 64% were given parental consent, and 97% of those students agreed to participate. The data were collected at two time points. Time 1 (T1) was October/November of 2015 or 2016, and Time 2 (T2) was May/June of 2016 or 2017.

The students used school laptops to complete the web-based survey. The PI read the instructions aloud for each measure while the research assistants monitored. The survey took approximately 40 minutes to complete. The non-participating students completed an alternate activity assigned by the teacher. The participating and non-participating students received a university pencil and a snack. The participating classrooms received a \$100 donation for classroom supplies.

Measures

Peer Victimization. Students completed a 4-item scale measuring their individual levels of peer victimization (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). They reported how frequently (*1=never, 5=every day*) they had been a victim in the past two weeks due to another student in their classroom. The questions included: “how often has anyone in your class: (1) hit or kicked you at school (physical), said mean things to you at school (verbal), (3) said bad things about you to other kids at school (relational), and (4) picked on you at school (general).” A total peer victimization score was computed by averaging the scores for each item (T1 $\alpha=.787$, T2 $\alpha=.860$)

Belonging. Students completed The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993), which was adapted to assess classroom belonging. This was an 18-item scale. They answered the questions on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “almost never” and 5 being “almost always”. The questions included “I feel like a real part of my classroom,” “It is hard for people like me to be accepted in my class,” “Sometimes I feel as if I do not belong in this class,” and “I am included in lots of activities in my classroom.” The total belonging score was taken by averaging the standardized scores for each item (T1 $\alpha=.846$, T2 $\alpha=.896$)

Results

I conducted descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all study variables and regression analyses to examine the direction of association between classroom belonging and peer victimization. I further evaluated gender as a moderator to investigate whether the link from peer victimization to classroom belonging and/or from classroom belonging to peer victimization would differ for boys and girls.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were conducted for peer victimization and classroom belonging scores. On average, students responded that they had relatively low levels of peer victimization at T1 and T2 ($M_{T1} = 1.43$, $SD_{T1} = 0.64$; $M_{T2} = 1.60$, $SD_{T2} = 0.80$). Girls expressed that they had slightly higher levels of peer victimization at T1 ($M_{T1} = 1.46$, $SD_{T1} = 0.67$; $M_{T2} = 1.58$, $SD_{T2} = 0.76$), and boys’ levels were slightly higher at T2 ($M_{T1} = 1.42$, $SD_{T1} = 0.62$; $M_{T2} = 1.63$, $SD_{T2} = 0.61$) as seen in Table 1. However, as a whole, students did not report high levels of peer victimization, as the highest possible score was 5, and the average was below 2. The students indicated moderate classroom belonging levels ($M_{T1} = 3.37$, $SD_{T1} = 0.56$; $M_{T2} = 3.42$, $SD_{T2} =$

0.63), with boys reporting slightly higher levels at T1 and T2 ($M_{T1} = 3.40$, $SD_{T1} = 0.57$; $M_{T2} = 3.48$, $SD_{T2} = 0.61$) than girls ($M_{T1} = 3.35$, $SD_{T1} = 0.54$; $M_{T2} = 3.35$, $SD_{T2} = 0.65$).

The correlation between T1 peer victimization and T1 classroom belonging was negative and significant for boys ($r = -.321$, $p < .01$) but not significant for girls ($r = -.198$). However, the relationship between T2 peer victimization and classroom belonging was negative and significant for both girls ($r = -.422$, $p < .01$) and boys ($r = -.381$, $p < .01$). In addition, the T1 peer victimization and T2 classroom belonging were linked negatively and significantly for boys ($r = -.215$, $p < .05$) but not for girls ($r = -.080$). Finally, the correlation between T1 classroom belonging and T2 peer victimization was negative and significant for boys ($r = -.305$, $p < .01$) and girls ($r = -.221$, $p < .05$). Belonging and peer victimization were more stable from T1 to T2 for girls ($r = .453$, $p < .01$ and $.657$, $p < .01$, respectively) than boys ($r = .434$, $p < .01$ and $.582$, $p < .01$, respectively).

Table 1

Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	Mean	SD
1. T1 Peer Victimization		-.198	.453**	-.080	1.46	0.67
2. T1 Classroom Belonging	-.321**		-.221*	.657**	3.35	0.54
3. T2 Peer Victimization	.434**	-.305**		-.422**	1.58	0.76
4. T2 Classroom Belonging	-.215*	.582**	-.381**		3.35	0.65
Mean	1.42	3.40	1.63	3.48		
SD	0.62	0.57	0.83	0.61		

Note: T1= Time 1. T2= Time 2. Above the horizontal line, the results are shown for girls, and below the horizontal line, the results are shown for boys. * $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$.

Regression Analyses

I conducted regression analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) to evaluate the direction of association between peer victimization and classroom belonging. I included gender as a moderator to examine whether the link between these variables differed for boys and girls.

I obtained partial support for the hypothesis that peer victimization and classroom belonging would be bidirectionally related. Contrary to my hypothesis, peer victimization did not significantly predict classroom belonging ($B = .022$, $t(229) = .235$, $p = .815$) when controlling for prior peer victimization. Gender was a marginal predictor of T2 classroom belonging ($B = -.126$, $t(229) = -1.735$, $p = 0.84$), indicating that girls reported marginally higher belonging at T2 than boys. The interaction between gender and peer victimization did not significantly predict levels of classroom belonging at T2 ($B = 1.042$, $t(229) = -.328$, $p = .743$). This suggests that there is no evidence for moderation. In other words, the association between T1 peer victimization and T2 belonging did not depend on gender.

Classroom belonging was a marginally significant predictor of peer victimization ($B = -.187$, $t(229) = -.693$, $p = .092$) and explained a small proportion of variance in peer victimization scores ($R^2 = .257$) when controlling for prior classroom belonging. These findings suggest that as classroom belonging decreases, peer victimization frequency increases, which is consistent with the hypothesis. Gender was not a significant predictor of peer victimization at T2 ($B = -.020$, $t(229) = -.230$, $p = .818$), indicating that boys and girls reported similar levels of peer victimization. The interaction of classroom belonging and gender was also not a significant predictor of T2 peer victimization ($B = -.060$, $t(229) = -.361$, $p = .719$), demonstrating that gender does not moderate the relationship between belonging and victimization. When gender is

removed from the analyses, belonging is a significant predictor of victimization, yet the inclusion of gender removes this significance.

Discussion

This research examined the relationship between peer victimization and classroom belonging with gender as a moderator. The first research aim was to examine the directionality of the relationship between peer victimization and classroom belonging. I found some evidence for the perspective that low levels of classroom belonging in the fall were associated with higher levels of peer victimization in the spring. However, I found that high levels of peer victimization in the fall were not associated with lower levels of classroom belonging in the spring. The second research aim was to determine the role of gender as a moderator between peer victimization and classroom belonging. I discovered that gender did not moderate the relationship between fall belonging and spring peer victimization or fall peer victimization and spring belonging.

A key finding was that low levels of belonging were associated with higher levels of subsequent victimization. This finding is not surprising in light of past research. For example, students who do not feel they belong may have lower levels of self-esteem (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2006; Lee & Robbins, 1998) and higher levels of depressive symptoms (Joyce & Early, 2014; McCallum & McLaren, 2010; Parr et al., 2020), both of which can put children at risk for peer victimization, perhaps because these children are more vulnerable and appear to be “easier” targets (Egan & Perry, 1998). There is previous evidence to support the perspective that low self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Van Geel et al., 2018) and high levels of depression are associated with frequent victimization (Kochel et al., 2012, 2017). This finding adds to the literature because my study is one of the few that directly addresses the link between low levels

of belonging and high levels of victimization. This is important to understand, especially for elementary school students, so preventative measures can be implemented to promote student belonging. This time period is crucial for children's adaptive development, making peer victimization highly detrimental.

Another key finding was that high levels of peer victimization were not associated with lower levels of later belonging. It makes sense that high levels of peer victimization could forecast low levels of belonging because peer victimization can limit children's opportunities for positive connections with peers (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Victimization can cause children to withdraw due to a fear of continued victimization (Youngblade et al., 2009), and the lack of positive peer relations may cause children to feel alone and that they do not belong. In addition, victimization can signal to a child that they do not matter, and mattering is a key component of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018, p.118). However, I did not find support for this perspective, which could be due to victimized children having coping mechanisms in place, like discussing the events with friends, that buffer the effects of victimization on their sense of belonging. Or, victimized children may have alternate sources of support, such as strong peer relations or people who help them cope with being victimized (Kendrick et al., 2012). In addition, these children may be supported by their teacher, and previous research suggests that the student-teacher relationship has important implications for maintaining belonging (Sulkowski & Simmons, 2017). It is also possible that belonging is more reflective of how children feel that their peers as a whole are perceiving them. For example, it could be that the children in my sample are victimized by one or a few of their peers but feel supported by the rest of their classmates. Perhaps if these children have strong peer relations outside of the perpetrator, these relationships can strengthen their belonging or block the negative effects of victimization

(Sandler et al., 1989). For example, friendships provide coping support and help children deal with adverse circumstances. This would allow children to maintain a strong sense of belonging despite being victimized.

Contrary to predictions, gender did not moderate the relationship between peer victimization and belonging in either direction. There was reason to believe that gender would be a moderator and, specifically, that the link between early peer victimization and later belonging would be stronger for girls. This is because girls are more relationally oriented, and this trait solidifies further with age (Gådin & Hammarström, 2000). Because relational and peer group stress is related to increased anxiety and depression for girls especially (Rudolph, 2002), girls' sense of belonging may be more affected by relationship problems like victimization. Consistent with this perspective, there is research that suggests that victimization has larger effects on the belonging of girls than boys (Williford et al., 2019). However, I did not obtain support for this perspective. Gender likely does not moderate this relationship because there may not be as many differences between boys and girls at this age. Gender roles evolve and solidify over time, and while there are differences at this age, they are much less significant than for adolescents and adults. Given that the children in this study were 3rd through 5th graders, they had not hit puberty yet, which is the time in which sex differentiation emerges most fully. A study by De Bolle et al. (2015) established that the sex differences observed in adults emerge in adolescence and strengthen over time, showing that the present study may have looked at a sample too young to have established differences.

Conversely, I hypothesized that the link between early belonging and later peer victimization would be stronger for boys, as boys often suffer consequences when they act outside of what is gender normative. A child who lacks belonging may be less engaged in

classroom social dynamics, have fewer social ties, and be more withdrawn. One potential consequence of these behaviors may be victimization. This is because these behaviors are outside of typical gender norms, specifically for boys, and children who exhibit gender-atypical behavior are more likely to experience struggles in their peer relationships (Kochel et al., 2012), which may elicit victimization. However, this study did not provide evidence that gender moderated the relationship between lack of belonging and increased victimization. I did not look at the exact victimization experiences, such as who the perpetrators were and whether the victimization was a consequence for children who violated gender norms.

While this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the link between school belonging and peer victimization, it has limitations. This study only used self-report data, and self-perceptions may not tell the whole story. Especially because these are pre-adolescents, they may be less reliable narrators, inconsistent with the perspectives of others. Future studies should include other informants to provide alternate perspectives, adding to the findings reported here. Alternate informants could be parents or guardians, teachers, or peers. Another limitation is that this longitudinal study was only over one school year, which may not be long enough to truly see how peer victimization and lack of belonging are related across time. In addition, researchers should investigate this study's research questions, especially related to gender differences, among adolescents, as this data was from pre-adolescents. Interesting findings from an older age group may emerge because peer relations increase in importance at this age, as many look to peers to establish a sense of self-worth and confidence (Bukowski et al., 2011). Finally, future studies should focus on additional variables, such as friendship quality and social withdrawal, to identify whether these are predictors of belonging or victimization or whether they moderate the relationship between the two. Looking at friendship quality could help explain

the lack of a relationship between peer victimization and decreased belonging, as students with higher friendship quality would likely be able to recover from victimization due to their alternate sources of belonging. However, if the perpetrator of victimization is the person whom the victim perceives as an in-group member or as a friend, the victimization may affect belonging to a larger degree.

As this research suggests, children who lack belonging are at a higher risk of being victimized. Therefore, protective measures should be implemented in elementary schools to help children who do not feel they belong. Elementary and middle schools should enact belonging interventions to increase levels of belonging. Research has determined that this can encourage positive peer relationships and build children's strengths through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interventions (Allen et al., 2021). Treating the issue of a lack of belonging in the classroom early on and identifying when children begin to struggle with this may prevent peer victimization. A feeling of belonging is vital for proper adjustment and establishment of peer relationships, and the implications of a lack of belonging are serious.

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