Understanding the Effects of Physical and Relational Victimization: The Utility of Multiple Perspectives in Predicting Social-Emotional Adjustment

Crystal Cullerton-Sen and Nicki R. Crick
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus

Abstract. Current tools for assessing children’s social behavior in school psychology research and practice typically do not adequately measure issues most salient for young girls (e.g., experiences of relational victimization). The relation among teacher, peer, and self-reports of relational and physical peer victimization was examined for 119 fourth grade boys \( n = 58 \) and girls \( n = 61 \) as part of a larger, longitudinal study. Girls were more likely to be victims of relationally aggressive acts, whereas boys were more often targets of physical victimization. Teacher reports added unique information in the prediction of social-emotional adjustment (acceptance, rejection, internalizing, and externalizing) beyond that accounted for by peer and self-reports. Teacher reports of relational victimization differentially contributed to the prediction of adjustment beyond that accounted for by physical victimization for boys and girls. The need for further research and implications of these findings is discussed.

Over the last 20 years, much attention has been paid to children’s experience of peer harassment in schools (for reviews see Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Schools are a common place for peer victimization to occur, and research has confirmed that peer victimization in schools can have negative outcomes on children’s development, particularly if endured over time (Kochenderfer Ladd & Ladd, 2001). Victims, compared to their nonvictimized peers, experience higher levels of peer rejection, depression, delinquency, school avoidance, and dissatisfaction with school (Khatri, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Neary & Joseph, 1994; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). Given the negative consequences of peer harassment, school professionals, particularly school psychologists, should be privy to children’s peer

Preparation of this article was supported by a FIRST Award from the National Institute of Mental Health (No. MH53254) and a Faculty Scholars Award from the William T. Grant Foundation to Nicki R. Crick. Portions of this article were submitted in partial fulfillment of a Masters degree awarded to the first author by the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota. Send correspondence to: Crystal Cullerton-Sen, Institute of Child Development, 51 East River Road, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455; E-mail: cull0065@umn.edu

The authors would like to thank the principals, and most of all, students and teachers of the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metropolitan area who graciously contributed their time and assistance to this work. We also wish to thank Sandra Christenson and Scott McConnell for their feedback on earlier versions of this report, as well as the associate editor, Thomas Power, and the anonymous reviewers whose comments greatly helped us refine and improve this article.

Copyright 2005 by the National Association of School Psychologists, ISSN 0279-6015
interactions to identify those who are targets of peer harassment so that appropriate school-based interventions can be developed.

Our understanding of children's harassment at this point remains limited. First, much of the work on peer harassment in schools primarily has focused on forms that are overt and instrumental in nature, such as being the victim of physical or verbal aggression (e.g., being hit, pushed, teased, or called mean names). Some researchers have found that these overt forms of peer maltreatment may be more characteristic of the experiences of boys than of girls, particularly during elementary school (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick et al., 2001; Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). In addition to the possible gender differences, a primary focus on physical or verbal forms of harassment has resulted in the failure to identify children who are victims of other forms of peer maltreatment, such as relational victimization (defined below, Schäfer, Werner, & Crick, 2002). Second, much of the current knowledge of children's peer victimization is based on self- or peer reports of their peer relationships. Although children and their peers are certainly good sources of information, there are a number of reasons why obtaining teacher reports is also important. Teacher assessments have long played a vital role in the identification of problem behaviors among school children. As articulated by others, teacher assessments are often easier and faster to administer than peer nominations, and they can help reduce parents' and teachers' anxiety about having their students receive a negative nomination from their peers (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power, 1999). In addition, teacher reports of student behaviors aid in the monitoring or evaluation of intervention efforts. Therefore, it is important to develop measures of problematic peer relationships that assess forms of victimization characteristic of all children and that can be administered to teachers as well as peers and individual students. The goal of the current study is to provide a first step in that direction—namely, to examine the utility of a teacher report of physical and relational victimization in the prediction of children's adjustment.

Researchers have found that assessing only overt and more general forms of peer harassment results in the failure to identify subgroups of victimized children, particularly relationally victimized girls. Relational victimization is the experience of being directly or indirectly excluded or socially manipulated by individuals who intentionally use their relationship with the victim as the vehicle for harm (e.g., being ignored or excluded from play groups by friends or peers; being told "I don't like you, you're not my friend anymore"); for a review see Crick, Nelson et al., 2001). A number of studies that have assessed multiple forms of victimization have demonstrated that boys are more likely to experience overt forms of victimization and general bullying, whereas girls tend to experience more indirect and relational forms of victimization (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotz, 1996; Lagerspetz & Björkqvist, 1994; Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Schäfer et al., 2002). However, this gender difference is far from clear and not always consistent (Crick & Grotz, 1996; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vemberg, 2001). What is clear, however, is that even in studies in which boys and girls do not differ in their self-reported relational victimization, girls are significantly more likely to be the target of relationally aggressive acts than of physically aggressive acts (Phelps, 2001), and girls report higher levels of negative affect than boys in response to relational victimization (Crick, 1995; Crick, Grotz, & Bigbee, 2002; Paquette & Underwood, 1999).

Findings from several studies indicate that the inclusion of relational victimization in our examination of peer harassment provides unique information in the prediction of social-emotional functioning, such as children's internalizing difficulties (depression, social anxiety, and social avoidance) and peer status (acceptance and rejection), above and beyond that accounted for by physical victimization (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotz, 1996; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Grimes, & DeNero, 1999). It is important to note that these findings are based on peer and self-reports of victimization. To date, no study has examined the use of teacher
reports of relational victimization. Indeed, few studies of peer victimization have included teacher reports, and these investigations have focused almost exclusively on physical or overt forms of peer harassment (e.g., Olweus, 1993; Pellegrini et al., 1999). In a recent meta-analytic review of cross-sectional research conducted on peer victimization over a 20-year period, Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that only five studies reviewed assessed relational/indirect forms of peer victimization, and none of these studies used teacher reports of relational victimization.

The lack of research related to teacher reports of relational victimization may be due in part to teachers' general lack of awareness of such experiences among their students. In one study, teachers interviewed about girls' relational lives only were able to identify girls who were the targets of vicious rumors and reported that they were often not aware of exclusionary behaviors until it was very serious (e.g., such severe experiences of exclusion that the girls contemplated suicide; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). This is consistent with findings from a study conducted by Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) in which teachers were less likely to view exclusionary behaviors as bullying compared to overt behaviors. In addition, teachers were less likely to intervene when these incidences occurred relative to episodes involving physical or verbal aggression. Because the participants in the Owens et al. (2000) study were older adolescents (15 years old), teachers may not have been aware of the relational victimization of their students for several reasons. First, relational forms of victimization become more complex and differentiated over the course of development, taking on a more covert complexion that may be difficult for teachers to see by the time students become teenagers (e.g., via instant messaging, stealing boyfriends). Second, junior high and high school teachers have few opportunities to observe their students' behaviors, because students move to different classrooms throughout the day where indirect forms of bullying, including exclusion, are more likely to be observed (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Elementary teachers, therefore, are in the advantageous position to assess relational victimization among their students because younger children spend the majority of school time in their classrooms. Based on the findings of Owens et al., it seems extremely important for teachers to gain perspectives on victimization early, before such experiences lead to painful consequences.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate the need to expand our assessment of victimization to include experiences that are characteristic of girls, as well as boys, and the need to obtain teacher perspectives to understand the relation between peer victimization and adjustment difficulties faced by many school-aged children. Given the potentially harmful consequences of experiencing relational victimization, and the relative ease with which teacher reports can be administered, teacher reports of relational victimization may be vital for the early identification of students in need of intervention services.

School practitioners have long understood the importance of gaining information about children's adjustment from several sources; at minimum, from teachers and students. Researchers argue that multi-informants should be used to identify victimized children as well (Boulton, 1997; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Perry et al. (1988) examined the overlap among peer-, self-, and teacher-identified children who were targets of physical, verbal, and ambiguous (e.g., "gets picked-on") forms of aggression. Moderate correlations were found between peer and self-reports ($r = .42$), as well as between peer and teacher reports ($r = .62$). These authors found that teacher reports appeared to vary widely from peer and self-reports on the number of children they nominated and the number of items they endorsed for children. Based on these findings, the authors warned against using only one informant in the assessment of children's problematic social interactions.

Work that has examined the utility of using teacher measures of aggression in addition to peer and self-reports also has demonstrated the important function teachers serve as informants of children's peer interactions (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Pellegrini & Bartini,
Crick (1996) examined the utility of teachers as reporters of overt and relationally aggressive behaviors, and found a significant degree of overlap between peer nominations and teacher ratings of relational aggression \( (rs = .57 - .63) \), values that appeared to be consistent with earlier work on overt forms of aggression \( (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1988) \). However, Crick argued that the degree of nonoverlap is also of interest, in that teachers and peers are likely to have different perspectives on the social relationships among children in a classroom. Crick found that teacher- and peer-assessed relational aggression contributed unique information to the prediction of adjustment for girls. More importantly, the failure to include relational aggression on both teacher- and peer-nomination measures has resulted in the failure to identify 60% of participating aggressive girls and 7% of aggressive boys \( (Hennington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998) \). Given this pattern of findings, it is clear that teachers offer an additive, as well as unique perspective about children’s social interactions. It is important, then, to examine the extent to which teacher reports of physical and relational victimization contribute to our understanding of children’s adjustment, above and beyond that accounted for by self- and peer reports.

There were two primary goals in conducting this exploratory study. The first goal was to examine the relation between teacher reports of victimization and indices of social-emotional adjustment. Specifically, we wanted to know if teacher reports of relational victimization add to an understanding of children’s adjustment problems over and above reports of physical victimization. In addition, we wanted to explore gender differences in the rates of victimization and in the prediction of children’s adjustment. The second goal of this study was to explore the unique contributions of teacher reports of relational victimization to the prediction of indices of social and psychological adjustment, above and beyond that of self- and peer reports of victimization. Based on the examination of multi-informants used in studies of relational aggression, it was projected that teachers’ reports of relational victimization would offer a unique perspective on students’ adjustment not accounted for by peer and self-reports.

**Method**

**Participants**

The data were collected in an urban school district and a suburban district in the Midwest as a part of a larger longitudinal study, “Project KIDS,” that began in 1997 to examine the antecedents \( (e.g., parent-child relationships), correlates \( (e.g., friendship qualities), and consequences \( (e.g., psychological adjustment) of relational and physical aggression and victimization. The districts were similar in size, but varied substantially on several demographic variables. Overall, significantly more students in the urban district received free or reduced lunches, spoke English as their second language, and were more ethnically diverse than in the suburban district. Once district permission was obtained, one large, public elementary school in the suburban district, and eight public elementary schools from the urban district agreed to allow our researchers into their schools. All third grade teachers in the nine schools were invited to participate during the recruitment year when children were in third grade \( (1997–1998) \). Fifteen teachers \( (79\%) \) agreed to allow us in their classrooms. All students in these classrooms were invited to partake in class-administered peer nominations as well as home interviews. The average consent rate per classroom for the peer nominations was 80%, and a 35% consent rate was obtained for the home interviews. However, families whose level of English proficiency greatly limited their understanding of the consent process were not interviewed. Thus, the actual participation rate for the home interviews was, on average, 33% per classroom \( (or a total of 125 children) \). The current study was conducted while these children were enrolled in fourth grade during the following school year \( (1998–1999) \).

When children reached fourth grade, the 125 participating students were again invited to complete peer nominations at school (see description below). Children’s homeroom
teachers were also asked to complete several behavioral scales for each of the target students. Forty-one fourth grade classroom teachers in 21 schools were invited to participate (14% of the students had moved into different schools by the time they reached fourth grade, adding 12 more schools from the previous year). Thirty-nine teachers (15 suburban; 24 urban) agreed to provide information for each participating child in this study. Most teachers (56.4%) completed questionnaires for multiple students (3–8 students per classroom) and the remaining teachers (43.6%) completed forms for only 1 student per classroom.

Parental consent and student assent was received from all 125 fourth graders (62 girls, 63 boys). Based on the information collected as part of the larger, longitudinal study, children lived in families with diverse household incomes (22% in households with incomes ranging from $8,000–$30,000; 38.1% with incomes from $31,000–$70,000; 39.9% with incomes greater than $71,000). Of the total 125 students with permission, 119 (61 girls, 58 boys) students had complete teacher data and were included in the final analyses. Teachers provided information about children’s ethnicity (32% White-European; 37% African American; 23.2% Hispanic/Latino; and 5.6% other).

Assessment of Victimization

Self-reports of victimization. Children's perceptions of peer victimization were assessed using the Social Experience Questionnaire—Self-Report, an instrument that has been used in prior research with adequate internal consistency reliability and construct validity (SEQ-S; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotzule, 1996; Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003). Children completed the SEQ-S as part of the individually administered, home-based interviews conducted by trained graduate students for Project KIDS. The SEQ-S measure is composed of three subscales, including self-reports of physical victimization (five items; e.g., “How often do you get hit or kicked by other peers at school?”), relational victimization (five items, “How often does another peer exclude you when they want to get back at you for something?”), and receipt of prosocial acts (5 items; “How often do other kids say nice things to you?”). Children answered these questions using a 5-point Likert scale, almost never to almost always. The receipt of prosocial acts subscale served as filler items in the present study. Children’s responses were summed across the physical and relational victimization subscales, respectively. Cronbach’s alpha was .74 for children’s responses to the physical victimization subscale and .80 to the relational victimization subscale.

Peer reports of victimization. Trained graduate students obtained peer reports of victimization through a class-wide administration of a slightly modified version of the Social Experience Questionnaire—Peer Report (SEQ-P; Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Children were given a class roster comprising the names of every classmate, as well as an identification number for each student. Children were then asked to nominate up to three peers of either gender who were victims of physical aggression (three items; e.g., “Find the numbers of three children who get pushed or shoved a lot by other classmates”) and victims of relational aggression (three items; e.g., “Find the numbers of three people who get ignored by classmates when someone is mad at them”). Nominations were then summed for each child for physical and relational victimization items and standardized within each classroom. The internal consistency reliability for the physical and relational victimization subscales was adequate, \( r = .87 \) and \( r = .75 \), respectively.

Teacher reports of victimization. The Social Experience Questionnaire—Teacher Report (SEQ-T) was developed by the second author for use in the current study. The SEQ-T consists of six items that assess teachers’ perceptions of children’s physical and relational victimization experiences. Trained graduate students met individually with teachers to explain the procedures and answer any questions.
they had. Teachers were asked not to complete the ratings for all participating students in their classroom at once, and were encouraged to take breaks between completing student forms. In addition, researchers left written instructions that reminded the teachers that they should consider each child individually. Teachers rated the extent to which each of the participating children was the target of physically aggressive acts (three items; "this child gets hit or kicked by peers"; "this child gets pushed or shoved by peers"; "this child gets physically threatened by peers") or relationally aggressive acts (three items; "this child gets ignored by other children when a peer is mad at them"; "this child gets left out of the group when someone is mad at them or wants to get back at them"; "this child is the target of rumors or gossip in the playgroup") using a 5-point Likert scale (from never to almost always). Teachers were given 10 dollars per completed form to partially compensate them for their time.

Cronbach's alpha was computed for each subscale on the Social Experience Questionnaire—Teacher Report (SEQ-T). Results indicate high levels of internal consistency for each subscale, with alpha coefficients equal to .82 for the relational victimization subscale (M = 5.4, SD = 2.6) and .93 for the physical victimization subscale (M = 4.3, SD = 2.1). The correlation between relational and physical victimization subscales was .51 (p < .01), indicating that the SEQ-T measures similar, yet distinct forms of victimization.

**Assessment of Adjustment**

**Peer reports of adjustment.** Two measures of social-emotional adjustment were also obtained via peer-reports. Acceptance and rejection scores were obtained via sociometric formats used in past research (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Children were asked to identify three children with whom they liked to play, and three children with whom they did not like to play. The number of nominations children received on each item was standardized within each classroom and used as measures of acceptance and rejection, respectively. Peer rejection and peer acceptance were negatively correlated, r = -.29, p < .01, indicating that these measures tap different dimensions of peer status.

**Teacher reports of adjustment.** Teachers completed the internalizing and externalizing subscales of the Child Behavior Checklist, Teacher Form (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). Teachers rated the extent to which participating children exhibit anxious, withdrawn, or depressive symptoms, aggressive or delinquent behaviors on a 3-point scale ("Not at all True" to "Really True"). Items were summed across subscales to yield a total internalizing score composed of 28 items, and a total externalizing score composed of 34 items. Teachers' responses to the CBCL items for this sample demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas of .90 for the internalizing subscale and .96 for the externalizing subscale. The CBCL also includes items that assess the extent to which children exhibit psychosomatic symptoms of depression. These items were not included in the computation of the internalizing subscale because so few teachers endorsed any of these items.

**Results**

To address the study objectives, analyses were conducted to: (a) examine relations among the multiperspectives of victimization via teacher, peer, and self-reports; (b) examine gender differences in children's experiences of relational and physical forms of victimization; and (c) assess the unique information provided by teacher reports of relational victimization in the prediction of adjustment.

**Relation Between Multi-Informants**

Correlation coefficients were computed to assess associations among teacher-, peer-, and self-reported relational and physical victimization. A modest correlation was found between teacher and peer reports of relational forms of victimization, r = .34, p < .01, and a somewhat smaller, but significant correlation was found between teacher and peer reports of physical victimization, r = .21, p < .05. Teacher and self-reports of victimization cor-
related \( r = .29, p < .05 \) and \( r = .22, p < .05 \) for relational and physical victimization, respectively. The correlations between self- and peer reports of relational and physical victimization were \( r = .30, p < .01 \) and \( r = .18, \text{n.s.} \), respectively. Fisher's \( z \) statistic was computed to examine the levels of cross-informant agreement among the multiple forms of the SEQ. Specifically, correlations between teacher and peer reports of relational and physical victimization were \( r = .30, p < .01 \) and \( r = .18, \text{n.s.} \), respectively. Fisher's \( z \) statistic was computed to examine the levels of cross-informant agreement among the multiple forms of the SEQ (i.e., teacher, peer, and self-reports of victimization).

**Gender Differences in Victimization**

To examine possible gender differences in children's experience of victimization, three sets (teacher, peer, and self-reports) of repeated measures of analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Form of victimization (physical and relational) served as the within-subjects variables and gender served as the between-subjects variable. Significant victimization by gender interactions emerged for teacher reports, \( F (1,116) = 20.3, p < .000 \), and for peer reports, \( F (1,108) = 24.9, p < .000 \). Eta squared was computed to examine the size of the interaction effects for teacher and peer reports of victimization, revealing modest effects of gender on level of victimization, \( \eta^2 = .15 \) and \(.19\), respectively. Follow-up simple effects analyses of variance were conducted separately for boys and girls. The simple effects analysis of teacher-reported victimization showed a significant main effect of victimization for girls only, \( F (1,59) = 40.3, p < .00 \). According to teachers, girls were more relationally victimized \( (M = 5.68, SD = 2.75) \) than physically victimized \( (M = 3.67, SD = 1.63) \). Follow-up simple effects analyses of variance for peer reports of victimization revealed significant main effects of victimization for girls, \( F (1,55) = 18.0, p < .00 \), and boys, \( F (1,53) = 10.1, p < .00 \). According to peers, girls were more relationally victimized \( (M = .38, SD = 2.41) \) than physically victimized \( (M = -.81, SD = 2.35) \), and boys were more physically \( (M = 1.00, SD = 3.27) \) than relationally victimized \( (M = -.42, SD = 1.75) \).

**Victimization and Social-Emotional Adjustment**

Unique contribution of teacher reports of relational and physical victimization. A series of hierarchical multiple-regression equations were computed to examine the unique information provided by teacher reports of relational victimization about adjustment beyond that accounted for by reports of physical victimization. Children's adjustment scores served as the dependent variables and teacher reports of the two different forms of victimization served as independent variables. Because of the gender differences that emerged on teacher-reported victimization, analyses were conducted separately for boys and girls. This permitted the examination of possible different associations among teacher reports of relational and physical victimization and indicators of adjustment for boys and girls. Such a pattern might imply a differential importance of gaining teacher ratings of these experiences for understanding boys' versus girls' social-emotional adjustment. For the first series of regression equations, teachers' reports of physical victimization were entered at Step 1 and reports of relational victimization were entered at Step 2 (see Table 1). To account for increased risk of making a Type 1 error, the significance of \( R^2 \) change was evaluated at a \( p \)-value of .01. For boys, teacher reports of relational victimization added significantly to physical victimization in the prediction of teacher-reported internalizing and externalizing behaviors. A somewhat different pattern emerged for girls. Teacher-reports of girls' relational victimization added significantly to physical victimization in the prediction of peer-reported peer acceptance and peer rejection, as well as teacher-reported externalizing problems.
Table 1
Unique Contribution of Teacher-Rated Relational Victimization to the Prediction of Social-Emotional Adjustment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable (social-emotional adjustment)</th>
<th>Model One</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model Two</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Step 1: Physical Victimization</td>
<td>Step 2: Relational Victimization</td>
<td>(F change)</td>
<td>Step 1: Relational Victimization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R_{\text{change}}^2$</td>
<td>$R_{\text{change}}^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$R_{\text{change}}^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(0.5)</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>(1.9)</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>(15.2)</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>(20.6)</td>
<td>.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>(7.7)</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>(45.2)</td>
<td>.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>(1.6)</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>(6.2)</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .00$. 
Utility of Multiple Perspectives

Another set of regression equations was computed in which relational and physical forms of victimization were entered in a reversed order (i.e., relational victimization at Step 1, and physical victimization at Step 2). Again, changes in $R^2$ were evaluated using a $p$-value of .01. Findings indicate that for both boys and girls, physical victimization added unique information above and beyond relational forms of victimization in the prediction of externalizing behaviors only.

Teacher versus peer and self-reports of victimization. To evaluate the unique contribution of teacher reports in the prediction of social-emotional adjustment, a series of hierarchical multiple-regression equations were computed in which children’s adjustment scores served as dependent variables and teacher, peer, and self-reports of victimization served as independent variables. In these equations, peer and self-reports of relational and physical victimization were entered at Step 1, teacher reports of physical victimization were entered at Step 2, and teacher reports of relational victimization were entered at Step 3 (see Table 2). Findings were evaluated using a $p$-value of .01. Teacher reports of physical victimization contributed significantly to the prediction of externalizing behaviors. Likewise, the addition of teacher reports of relational victimization added significantly to the prediction of peer rejection, internalizing, and externalizing difficulties beyond that provided by peer and self-reports of relational and physical victimization and teacher reports of physical victimization.

Discussion

This study was conducted as an initial step in understanding teachers’ perspectives of children’s relational victimization. Findings add significantly to research in this area, in that few studies on peer victimization include teachers as reporters (see Hawker & Boulton, 2000), and unlike previous studies (Putallaz et al., 1999), teacher measures of both physical and relational forms were included in the assessment and analyzed separately. Findings indicate that teacher reports of relational victimization are not only distinct from teacher reports of physical victimization (as well as self- and peer reports of victimization), but are also uniquely related to children’s adjustment problems, particularly their experiences of peer rejection, internalizing, and externalizing difficulties. Moreover, these findings emerged when children’s level of adjustment was assessed using both peer and teacher reports and after accounting for children’s victimization as reported by self and peers, indicating that the relationship between relational victimization and adjustment could not be explained by shared method/informant variance.

Findings provided support for the favorable psychometric properties of the Social Experience Questionnaire—Teacher Report (SEQ-T). Both the physical and relational subscales of this instrument evidence high internal consistency reliability. In addition, these scales were moderately related, indicating that they measure similar, yet distinct constructs. The relations between informants’ ratings of relational victimization appear to be similar to those found in previous studies, and suggest that informants provide both convergent and divergent information about children’s social experiences (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). That is, teacher-reports of relational and physical victimization were generally related to peer and self-reports at similar, albeit modest, levels.

Somewhat consistent with other studies that have found gender differences using peer nominations of physical and relational forms of victimization (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Schäfer et al., 2002), peer and teacher reports in the present study indicate that girls were more relationally victimized than physically victimized. However, only peers rated boys as more physically victimized than relationally victimized. Based on self-reports of victimization, both boys and girls viewed themselves as equally relationally and physically victimized. This may be related to the type of self-report assessment used. For example, using rating scales such as the SEQ-S, as reported here, researchers have reported no gender differences in frequency of victimization (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Paquette & Underwood,
Table 2
Unique Contribution of Teacher Reports of Victimization to the Prediction of Social-Emotional Adjustment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable (social-emotional adjustment)</th>
<th>Peer &amp; Self Reports</th>
<th>Physical Victimization</th>
<th>Relational Victimization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Relational And Physical Victimization</td>
<td>$R^2_{change}$</td>
<td>$R^2_{change}$</td>
<td>$R^2_{change}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Teacher Rated Physical Victimization</td>
<td>($F_{change}$)</td>
<td>($F_{change}$)</td>
<td>($F_{change}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Teacher Rated Relational Victimization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .00$. 

156
1999). However, using an interview technique, Paquette and Underwood (1999) found that, relative to boys, girls remembered more incidences of relational victimization than physical harassment, but the reverse was true for boys. Children who experience one form of victimization may develop an overall perception of themselves as victims, unless asked to think about particular experiences. This is further evidenced by the relatively high correlation between self-reports of physical and relational victimization, suggesting that when children are asked to rate the frequency of their own harassment, they may not differentiate between various forms.

Victimization and Social-Emotional Adjustment

The findings of the present study provide evidence for the need to include relational victimization in research on children’s social experiences and well-being, particularly using teachers as informants. Teacher reports added unique information in the prediction of social-emotional adjustment measured across informants, above and beyond peer and self-reports of victimization. There are important implications of these findings. First, they demonstrate that teachers in elementary schools may be good reporters of these types of aversive experiences. More importantly, the results indicate that without the inclusion of teachers as reporters, significant information related to children’s adjustment may be missed. Teacher reports of victimization, particularly relational victimization, added to peer and self-reports of victimization in the prediction of all adjustment indices (as measured by both teachers and peers). In addition, teacher reports of physical and relational victimization may make differential contributions to the prediction of girls’ and boys’ adjustment. Specifically, teacher reports of relational victimization added unique information to physical victimization in the prediction of internalizing and externalizing behaviors for boys, and acceptance, rejection, and externalizing for girls. Teachers’ reports of relational victimization appeared to account for much of the variance in the prediction of adjustment for boys and girls, as evidenced by the fact that physical victimization added unique information in the prediction of externalizing behaviors only for both boys and girls. Once again, these findings highlight the importance of including assessments of children’s relational lives, particularly relational victimization, on teacher measures at the elementary grade level.

Study Limitations

Readers should use discretion when generalizing the findings from the present study because the student sample represents the 33% of the total possible students recruited who participated in home interviews during the first year of the study. Relatively low consent rates in longitudinal research designs have been cited in previous research. The implications of low rates of participation and strategies for more successful recruitment are offered elsewhere (e.g., Hogue et al., 1999; Iverson & Cook, 1994). In addition, generalizability is limited due to the relatively low number of teachers included in this study and the limited information provided about the teacher characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, education, and time spent in the school district. Another limitation was that teachers served as informants of children’s peer victimization experiences, as well as reporters of their internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Therefore, the relations among these variables may be due in part to shared-method variance. Future research should include multiple indicators of adjustment, including measures that do not rely on the same informants (e.g., number of visits to the school nurse or psychologist, attendance.). However, given that teacher reports of relational victimization also made differential predictions of girls’ and boys’ peer acceptance and rejection (based on peer nominations), issues of shared-method variance in the current study may not be problematic. Finally, a little over half (56%) of the teachers provided information about multiple students in their classroom (the number of students teachers rated ranged from 1 to 8). Therefore, independence among teacher ratings of victimization and adjustment cannot be guaranteed. However, to reduce the potential for a
lack of independence, teachers were given explicit instructions on how to complete their forms, asked to think about each child independently, and advised to take breaks between completing assessments for their students.

Future Directions

School psychologists often consult with teachers and parents about peer harassment, and as articulated by Leff and colleagues, "it's essential that they have a good grounding in both the assessment and treatment of children's peer-oriented behaviors" (Leff et al., 1999, p. 505). Researchers, teachers, and parents have begun to show a strong interest in developing interventions aimed at helping children negotiate their experiences of relational victimization (e.g., Leadbeater et al., 2003). It is important to be able to measure relational victimization both for the purposes of identifying at-risk students (e.g., a screening instrument) and to monitor intervention success. Teachers play a valuable role in such endeavors, and this study represents the first step in that direction. However, due to the aforementioned limitations and the fact that the current data represent only one point in children's development, replication research is needed. Longitudinal investigations should be conducted using larger sample sizes and teachers from several different grade levels. In addition, it may be important to gain the perspectives of several teachers for each child, for instance from both homeroom and art teachers. Leff and colleagues (1999) found that reports of victimization were greatly enhanced when several teachers were asked to nominate children who were bullied. Additionally, it will be important for future studies to explore the extent to which teachers' differential expectations for boys and girls affect their assessment of victimization.

Conclusion

This study has important implications for school-based mental health professionals. The findings clearly demonstrate the importance of assessing both physical and relational forms of victimization in order to understand children's experiences of peer harassment and social-psychological well-being. It is also important to use a multifaceted, multimethod approach to fully capture the prevalence of victimization in schools. Research is needed to further develop and refine measures of victimization so that instruments can be employed to identify at-risk students, plan and monitor interventions (i.e., formative evaluations), and evaluate intervention outcomes (i.e., summative evaluations).

Footnotes

1 Urban school district: 48,797 enrolled students; 66% receiving free or reduced priced lunches, 17% with Limited English Proficiency; 43.3% African American; 30.2% White, non-Hispanic; 14.3% Asian/Pacific Islander; 6.5% Hispanic; 5.7% American Indian. Suburban District: 40,378 enrolled students; 15% receiving free or reduced priced lunches; .8% with Limited English Proficiency; 92.2% White, non-Hispanic; 2.8% Asian/Pacific Islander; 2.5% African American; 1.2% Hispanic; and 1.3% American Indian.

2 Although this consent rate is relatively low, it is somewhat expected given that families were consenting to a 2-hour home interview for 3 consecutive years. Correspondence with other researchers conducting such work indicates that this is not entirely uncommon. In addition, based on a comparison of group means, the 125 students who completed home interviews did not differ significantly from their peers without home interviews on peer status variables (aggression and victimization) or ethnicity.

3 Demographic information was not obtained for the teachers in this study; however, they should be representative of the teachers in the respective school districts. For the urban school district, the average teaching experience was 11.9 years, and 51% had earned a bachelors degree, 40% had earned a masters degree. In the suburban school district, the average experience was 15.6 years, and 47% of the teachers had earned their bachelors degree, and 53% had earned their masters degree.

References


Crystal Cullerton-Sen is a school psychology doctoral student at the University of Minnesota, working with the Newton Public School District and the Child Witness to Violence Program, Boston Medical Center in Massachusetts. She is interested in the impact of violence on children’s psychosocial and educational adjustment, and multisystemic interventions for victimized children and their families.

Nicki Crick is a Professor at the Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, and currently serves as an editorial board member for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Development and Psychopathology*, and *Social Development*. She received her PhD in 1992 in clinical psychology from Vanderbilt University. Her research focuses on the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of relational and physical aggression and victimization across the life-span.