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Student-Teacher Congruence in Reported Rates of Physical and Relational Victimization Among Elementary-School-Age Children: The Moderating Role of Gender and Age

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Student–Teacher Congruence in Reported Rates of Physical and Relational Victimization Among Elementary-School-Age Children: The Moderating Role of Gender and Age

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The present study investigated the degree of congruence between student self-reports and teacher reports of relational and physical victimization and tested whether gender and age moderated these relations. Mixed effect regression models were conducted on a sample of 294 students (50.7% male) in Grades 2 to 5 and their classroom teachers. Results revealed that, despite its covert nature, greater agreement was found between students and teachers on reported rates of relational victimization. However, contrary to our expectations, teacher and student reports of physical victimization were unrelated. Greater agreement was also found among girls and teachers as well as between older students and teachers, however, on reported rates of relational victimization only. Implications are discussed in light of school-based intervention efforts to address peer victimization among students.

KEYWORDS physical victimization, relational victimization, gender, elementary-school-age children

Peer victimization leads to significant consequences for children, with victims consistently reporting elevated rates of individual, peer, and school-related problems. For example, victims often report increased rates of loneliness,
depression, social anxiety, and peer rejection, and experience problems at school as evidenced by poorer school adjustment and lower academic performance when compared to nonvictimized youth (Juvonen, Graham, & Shuster, 2003; Nakamato & Schwartz, 2010; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). Accordingly, school personnel, especially teachers, play a critical role in effectively preventing and intervening with incidents of peer victimization because these incidents often occur on school grounds (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Fite et al., 2013). However, teachers are not always aware of peer victimization (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2007), particularly incidents involving more covert and relational forms of aggression (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000), which early studies found to be more common behaviors among girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997) and to increase in prevalence among older children (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Moreover, many victims do not report their victimization to teachers (Fekkes et al., 2005; Smith & Shu, 2000; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Vernberg, Ewell, Beery, Freeman, & Abwender, 1995), which poses significant challenges to intervention efforts in schools. When school personnel are not aware of victimization incidents, some victims may be left to their own accord to handle these incidents, thus potentially leading to further negative impacts on their development as the victimization persists (Graham & Juvonen, 2001). This lack of awareness on the part of school personnel, combined with the underreporting of victimization by students, may inadvertently lead to an overreliance on biased or incomplete information, and consequently, misguided intervention efforts. In other words, the lack of congruence between teacher- and student-reported rates of victimization could lead to ineffective responses as teachers might not identify all incidents of victimization or might misidentify or ignore incidents, thus exacerbating negative developmental outcomes for children victimized by their peers.

However, the degree of congruence among reporters has seldom been examined in the peer victimization literature. Thus, an important extension is to investigate the degree of congruence between student self-reports and teacher reports on rates of relational and physical victimization and whether the level of congruence differs by gender and age. Understanding this degree of concordance is key for extending intervention efforts in schools. Accordingly, studies are needed to investigate discrepancies in reported rates as such findings may indicate a need for further training for school personnel in recognizing and addressing victimization among students and suggest that additional reporting procedures, particularly those that allow for anonymity, are needed in schools to encourage greater reporting among students victimized by their peers. To that end, the present study addresses an important gap in the literature and is the first study to our knowledge to investigate the degree of congruence by the form of victimization and to examine the
potential moderating roles of gender and age for both relational and physical victimization.

Relational and Physical Victimization

In the present study, we define peer victimization as exposure to intentional negative actions by peers that are meant to cause harm or injury, consistent with the definition of aggression. Of note, harm or injury to another person, either physical or psychological in nature, is the principal indicator that an aggressive act has taken place (Gendreau & Archer, 2005). While some studies define victims as those experiencing bullying according to the definition offered by Olweus (1993), our study defines victims as anyone targeted by the aggressive acts of others. This distinction is important as not all acts of aggressive behavior fit the definition of bullying, where repetition and power differentials between a bully and his or her victim are key defining characteristics (see Vaillancourt et al. [2008] for a review of these definitional issues).

Of note, peer victimization may take several forms. Physical victimization is characterized by behaviors such as hitting, kicking, pushing, physical intimidation, and threats directed at individuals with the intention of causing physical harm (Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003; Olweus, 1993). Relational victimization, via peer relationships as the primary means of inflicting harm on others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Coie, McKnight, & Grimes, 2004), includes behaviors such as talking about others (e.g., gossiping, breaking confidences, rumor spreading) and employing exclusionary tactics (e.g., ignoring, ostracizing; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Underwood, 2003).

Recent estimates suggest that a substantial number of children are victimized by their peers, with many exposed to multiple forms of victimization (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). In fact, studies suggest that up to 20% of students are repeatedly victimized by their peers (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010), and approximately 60% of elementary school students are be exposed to some form of victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). However, age and gender differences, particularly across different forms of victimization, exist. Early work investigating relational aggression found that girls might be relationally victimized by their peers more often than boys (i.e., Crick & Grotputer, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997); however, recent meta-analytic work does not report such differences. For example, although Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little (2008) found consistent gender differences in rates of physical aggression among boys across the 148 studies reviewed, gender differences in rates of relational aggression were negligible. Regardless, relational victimization may become more common in girls' peer networks as they age (Galen &
Considering that peer relationships become more important as youth transition from childhood to adolescence (Steinberg, 2005), it is theorized that girls, more often than boys, use relationally aggressive behaviors to maintain exclusivity in their peer groups (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Conversely, there is some evidence to suggest that physical forms of aggression decrease for both boys and girls as they age (Brame, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2001; Côté, Vaillancourt, LeBlanc, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2006).

### Role of Teachers in Prevention and Intervention

Teachers are one of the most valuable resources in preventing and intervening with peer victimization as they are ideally positioned on the periphery of students’ peer groups (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). As such, teachers are seen as reliable reporters of child behaviors, including involvement in aggression and exposure to victimization (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Of great concern, however, studies show that adults intervene in incidents of peer victimization only about 10% of the time on the playground (Craig & Pepler, 1997) and less than 20% of the time in the classroom (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Consequently, children and youth often report that adults in their school are either ineffective in their efforts to intervene or are unwilling to stop the victimization from occurring (Novick & Isaacs, 2010; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). This phenomenon is a likely reason as to why studies find many victims do not report their victimization to teachers (e.g., Fekkes et al., 2005; Smith & Shu, 2000; Vernberg et al., 1995; Whitney & Smith, 1993). However, when students believe school personnel are caring and fair, they are more willing to report their experiences with peer victimization and seek help from adults in their school (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010).

One possible reason for teachers failing to intervene might be that many school personnel overlook more covert and relational forms of victimization (Craig et al., 2000); thus, some school staff may assume that its manifestations must be physical. Indeed, teachers may not accurately identify peer victimization stemming from the hands of children who otherwise appear to be competent and successful (Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002). In fact, evidence suggests that children who engage in relational forms of aggression are more likely to demonstrate greater prosocial behavior because they must use prosocial skills to gain the support and assistance of their peers (Card et al., 2008). Thus, instances of relational victimization may be more difficult to identify as children engaging in this form of aggression, and consequently their victims, may be less likely to come to the attention of teachers.

To date, few studies have investigated the degree of agreement between students and teachers on reported rates of peer victimization. Most often, studies report concordance across informants as it relates to the measurement benefits of having multiple informants (e.g., Rudolph, Troop-Gordon,
Hessel, & Schmidt, 2011; Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001). For example, several authors note that assessing rates of peer victimization from multiple informants (i.e., self, peer, teacher, parent) addresses informant bias from a single source, has the potential to contribute unique information from different vantage points, and has greater psychometric merit as this approach should produce more reliable results by creating a more accurate set of indicators for this complex construct (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002; Rudolph et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2001). Of note, however, advantages to examining congruence among different reporters might have important benefits beyond adding methodological rigor to a study. As incongruence might suggest that intervention efforts are be misdirected when based on biased information, it follows that improving congruence between teachers and students, for example, would improve the precision of these efforts. For example, student self-report data will likely shed light on the common forms of victimization, reveal certain locations where victimization occurs, and uncover certain groups that might be more likely to be the target of peer victimization within a particular school setting, whereas teacher-reported data are likely to reveal incidents of victimization that students are reluctant to report if occurring in their presence. Thus, triangulating multiple sources of data stands to expose both unreported and unseen instances of peer victimization, thereby possibly leading to more successful intervention efforts. It is important to note, however, that while multiple sources of data will likely identify a greater number of incidents, some incidents might still go unaddressed, particularly those that are more covert in nature.

Nonetheless, potential methodological and practical benefits of using multiple data sources do exist, yet few studies to our knowledge have had the explicit purpose of examining the concordance between student and teacher reports of peer victimization, with several noteworthy exceptions. Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2002) found that teacher-reports were more congruent with peer reports of victimization as compared to teacher and self-reports. However, interesting gender differences were found. For girls, their self-reports in Grades 2 and 3 were more congruent with teacher reports than for boys at these grade levels. For both genders, the degree of convergence increased by grade level. Cornell and Brockenbrough (2004) investigated concordance between self-, peer, and teacher reports of both bullying and victimization among middle school students. Their findings revealed little congruence between self- and either peer or teacher reports, although teacher reports were less congruent than peer reports. Last, Löhre, Lydersen, Paulsen, Mæhle, and Vatten (2011) also found little concordance between self-, peer, and teacher reports among their sample of 7- to 16-year-olds. However, their teacher ratings only included two questions that assessed teasing and exclusion, which may have limited the degree of agreement found. Nonetheless, these studies collectively suggest that individuals,
peers, and teachers might differ in their perceptions of peer victimization, and according to Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2002), age and gender may be important characteristics that account for some of the differences reported by informants. Of note, none of these studies examined the degree of concordance by the form of victimization.

To our knowledge, the degree to which students and teachers report congruent rates of physical and relational victimization has yet to be examined; however, this information may have important implications for intervention efforts in schools. Moreover, gender might be an important characteristic as to why students and teachers vary in their reports of different forms of victimization, given the gender differences in reported rates of physical victimization and in light of evidence suggesting that teachers may be less likely to identify relational forms of victimization. Thus, examining gender as a potential moderator is warranted and an important extension of the peer victimization literature. Further, some evidence suggests that greater agreement between older students and teachers might be found among elementary school-age children (e.g., Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002); therefore, examining age as a potential moderator is also important to assess.

The Present Study

The present study assessed the degree of congruence between self-reported and teacher-reported rates of both relational and physical victimization and tested for gender and age moderation for both forms of victimization in a sample of elementary school children and their teachers who had received brief training on bullying (1.5 hour training sessions each semester of the academic year prior to the study period; see the discussion section for greater detail on the training content). Our primary research questions included: (a) To what degree do students and teachers report congruent rates of physical victimization and relational victimization? and (b) Does gender and/or age moderate the associations between student- and teacher-reported rates of physical victimization and relational victimization? Do different patterns emerge by the form of victimization? We hypothesized that students and teachers would report greater concordance for physical victimization as compared to relational victimization given evidence that relational forms of victimization are often overlooked by school personnel. We expected that gender would moderate the relationship between student- and teacher-reported rates of physical victimization, favoring boys, and relational victimization, favoring girls. Overall, however, we expected the degree of concordance to be higher between girls and teachers and to be higher for both genders as students age, consistent with prior evidence (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002).
METHOD

Participants

Participants for the present study included 294 students (50.7% male) in Grades 2 (24.8%), 3 (25.9%), 4 (28.6%), and 5 (20.7%) from an elementary school located in a small, rural Midwestern community, and their classroom teachers. The study sample includes only students who indicated some exposure to peer victimization, thus representing a subsample from a larger study examining a number of developmental outcomes for elementary-school age youth, such as academic achievement, substance use, and peer victimization. In the full sample, rates of peer victimization were similar to those reported elsewhere (see Nansel et al., 2001). Since our study’s aim was to investigate the degree of congruence between students and teachers on reported rates of peer victimization, we limited the present analyses to only those students who had experienced peer victimization, either relationally or physically. All students in the second through fifth grade \((N = 490)\) were recruited for participation. The study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board as well as by school administrators. Caregiver consent and youth assent were obtained before student-reported data were collected. Recruitment was conducted during a community-wide informational session for caregivers regarding the upcoming school year, where study personnel provided information to families interested in enrolling their child in the study. Consent forms were also sent home to the caregivers of the remaining eligible students at the beginning of the academic year. Overall, consent forms were returned by 73% of the families \((n = 358)\); of these, 89% of caregivers gave permission for their child to participate in the study \((n = 318;\) approximately 65% of the eligible children). Data were missing for 16 students who were absent on the days of testing, four children who declined to participate, two children who did not complete the study because they required special testing accommodations, and two children who had transferred to another school between the time of obtaining consent and data collection.

The sample consisted of 149 males and 145 females who ranged from 7 to 11 years of age \((M = 8.7, SD = 1.2)\). School records indicated that the racial composition of students attending the elementary school was predominantly White, with less than 21% identifying as a racial minority (9% African American, 6% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 4% American Indian, 2% Asian). Socioeconomic data were not available from the participants; however, per capita income for the city was approximately $25,369, with 5.1% of individuals living below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to school records, approximately 35% of all students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
Measures

**STUDENT-REPORTED PEER VICTIMIZATION**

Student reports of peer victimization were assessed using a modified version of the Victimization of Self (VS) scale of the Peer Experiences Questionnaire (PEQ; Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999). A downward extension of the PEQ was created by modifying the original questionnaire items to be appropriate for children reading at or below a third-grade level (Dill, Vernberg, Fonagy, Twemlow, & Gamm, 2004). The measure includes three items assessing relational (e.g., “A kid ignored me on purpose to hurt my feelings,” “A kid told lies about me so other kids wouldn’t like me,” and “Some kids left me out of things just to be mean to me”) and four items assessing physical (i.e., “A kid said he or she was going to hurt me or beat me up,” “A kid hit, kicked, or pushed me in a mean way,” “A kid grabbed, held, or touched me in a way I didn’t like,” and “A kid chased me like he or she was really trying to hurt me”) victimization that were used for the current analyses. Students were asked to rate the frequency of such occurrences since the beginning of the current school year (i.e., over a 10-week period) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a week). Mean scores were created and used for analyses, with higher scores indicating more severe experiences of victimization. The VS scale has demonstrated good internal consistency among samples of both children (Dill et al., 2004) and adolescents (Vernberg et al., 1999). Both the physical and relational scales demonstrated good reliability in the current sample (relational victimization $\alpha = .81$ and physical victimization $\alpha = .77$).

**TEACHER-REPORTED PEER VICTIMIZATION**

Teacher reports of victimization were assessed using a measure adapted from a peer-nominated scale (Crick & Bigbee, 1998), and teachers were asked to complete this measure for each student. The measure included six items pertaining to victimization, with three items evaluating physical victimization (e.g., “gets hit, kicked, punched by others”) and three items evaluating relational victimization (e.g., “other kids tell rumors about them behind their back”). Teachers indicated the frequency of victimization on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). Mean scores for each subscale were calculated and used for analyses, with higher scores indicating higher levels of victimization. In this sample, both subscales demonstrated good internal consistency (relational victimization $\alpha = .83$ and physical victimization $\alpha = .86$).

**Procedures**

Student data collection occurred approximately 10 weeks into the academic year. Student-reported measures were collected through group
administration in the classrooms over the course of one week, with an
adult-to-child ratio between 1:4 and 1:8. Students were assured of the con-
fidentiality of their responses and provided verbal assent prior to their participation (98.7% agreed to participate; \( n = 4 \) refusals). Data collection sessions were approximately 30 minutes in duration. A trained research assis-
tant read standardized instructions to the students, provided a description of the response scales, and then read each questionnaire item aloud. Trained research assistants circulated through the classroom to answer individual questions and help children who had difficulty reading or understanding par-
ticular items. Homeroom teachers provided written informed consent (\( n = 24; 100\% \) participation) prior to completing study measures. Teacher-reported data of each student within their classroom was collected through online sur-
veys in the same month in which student-reported data were collected. All school classrooms received a $75 gift card upon completion of the study, and teachers were paid $7 as compensation for each student survey completed.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Correlations, means, standard deviations, and ranges of scores for study vari-
ables can be found in Table 1. Older students reported lower rates of physical victimization, while teachers reported observing higher rates of relational vic-
timization among older students. Both students and teachers reported higher rates of physical victimization for boys than girls. Both students and teach-
ers suggested that physical and relational victimization were related. There was moderate agreement between teacher and student reports of relational victimization; however, teacher and student reports of physical victimization were unrelated. \( T \)-tests were also conducted in order to determine if there were mean level differences in victimization across genders. As shown in Table 2, both student and teacher reports of victimization suggested that boys experienced higher levels of physical victimization. No gender differences in rates of relational victimization were evident.

Regression Analyses

Mixed effect regression models were estimated using the PROC MIXED
procedure using SAS statistical software in order to take into account the
nesting of students within classrooms, with a random intercept included in all models. Two series of models were estimated; one set of models focused on relational victimization, and the second set of models focused on physical victimization. A hierarchical approach was used to evaluate: (a) whether student reports of victimization were associated with teacher reports of victimization, (b) whether the association between student-reported
TABLE 1 Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables for Entire Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender victimization type</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Student-reported relational</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Student-reported physical</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teacher-reported relational</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Teacher-reported physical</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>8.71</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>7–11</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>1–3.67</td>
<td>1–3.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01.

TABLE 2 T-Test Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victimization type</th>
<th>Boys (n = 149)</th>
<th>Girls (n = 145)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-reported relational</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-reported physical</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-reported relational</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-reported physical</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01.

and teacher-reported victimization depended on gender or age (two-way interactions), and (c) whether the moderating effects of gender depended on age (three-way interactions). In the first models, teacher-reported victimization was regressed on student reported victimization, gender, and age to determine unique first order effects. In subsequent models, the multiplicative terms between student-reported victimization and gender and age were added to the model one at a time. Finally, a three-way interaction between student-reported victimization, gender, and age was added to the model. All variables were standardized prior to analyses in order to aid in the interpretation of the interaction effects. Significant interactions were probed for boys and girls in order to evaluate the interaction effect according to standard procedures (Aiken & West, 1991).

RELATIONAL VICTIMIZATION

The total variance estimate for the first-order effects relational victimization model was .94, with the random intercept accounted for 12% of the model variance (z = 2.04, p = .02). Student-reported relational victimization was positively associated with teacher-reported relational victimization (see Table 3). Additionally, age was positively associated with teacher-reported relational victimization. The multiplicative term between
TABLE 3 Random Effects Regression Models Examining the Association Between Teacher-Reported Victimization and Student-Reported Victimization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Relational effect model</th>
<th>Physical effect model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First order</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-RV</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-RV x gender</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-RV x age</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-RV x gender x age</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. S-RV = Student-reported victimization.
*p < .05, **p < .01.

FIGURE 1 Association between student-reported and teacher-reported relational victimization for girls and boys.

Student-reported relational victimization and gender was added to the model and a significant interaction emerged. As shown in Figure 1, for both boys and girls, student-reported victimization was positively associated with teacher-reported victimization; however, the strength of this association was stronger for girls (β = .48, p < .0001) than for boys (β = .16, p = .006). The multiplicative term between student-reported relational victimization and age was then added to the model and a significant interaction emerged. As shown in Figure 2, student and teacher agreement was high for older students (+1 SD; β = .63, p < .0001). However, student- and teacher-reports of victimization were unrelated for younger students (−1 SD; β = .02, p = .79). Further, there was no evidence of a three-way interaction.
PHYSICAL VICTIMIZATION

The total variance estimate for the first order effects physical victimization model was .85, with the random intercept accounting for 32% of the model variance ($z = 2.84, p = .00$). Gender was the only variable associated with teacher-reported physical victimization, with being male associated with higher levels of physical victimization than being female (see Table 3). Further, neither gender nor age moderated the association between student-reported and teacher-reported physical victimization, and no three-way interaction was evident.

DISCUSSION

The present study advances the literature by investigating the degree of congruence between student self-reported and teacher-reported rates of both relational and physical victimization and testing whether gender and age moderated these relationships. Consistent with prior evidence (Brame et al., 2001; Côté et al., 2006; Galen & Underwood, 1997), we found that physical victimization was less evident among older youth as reported by students, whereas relational victimization rates appeared to be more evident among older children as reported by teachers. Also consistent with prior evidence (Card et al., 2008), boys reported more physical victimization than girls, yet gender differences in relational victimization were not detected. Despite some early evidence indicating that girls engage in more relationally aggressive behaviors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997) and thus experience greater relational victimization, recent meta-analytic work
has not found such differences (see Card et al., 2008). The present findings support more recent findings that girls and boys may be exposed to similar levels of relational victimization. Nonetheless, some evidence suggests that girls may experience greater maladjustment as a result of being relationally victimized (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Thus, gender differences may be more apparent in the outcomes associated with relational victimization rather than in the rates of exposure to it.

Contrary to our expectations, however, teacher and student self-reports of physical victimization were unrelated. In light of evidence suggesting that teachers might be more likely to identify physical victimization and thus be less likely to identify relational forms of victimization (e.g., Craig et al., 2000), we expected greater agreement to be found among students and teachers for physical, rather than relational, forms of victimization. Yet, our findings suggested that, for this sample, students and teachers exhibited stronger agreement on relational victimization. It is important to note that more students reported exposure to relational victimization (92%) than physical victimization (57%) in the current sample. These percentages combined with the finding that less physical victimization was reported by older students might simply mean that fewer instances of physical victimization occurred, and therefore, there were fewer opportunities for teachers to detect incidents of physical victimization. It is also possible that physical acts of victimization occur outside of the school context in locations where teachers are not present. Indeed, a recent study on this same sample found that victimization was commonly reported in contexts outside of the school environment (Fite et al., 2013).

Conversely, greater agreement was found between students and teachers for relational victimization, which contrasts prior evidence (Craig et al., 2000). Of note, teachers in this school had been exposed to two 1.5-hour workshops throughout the academic year (one each semester) led by faculty from a local university who conduct research and engage in applied work with youth involved in aggression and bullying. The workshops focused on defining bullying and victimization, recognizing behaviors and warning signs that someone is being victimized, and discussing ways to intervene. Exposure to this training might have improved congruence, as teachers were more knowledgeable about the nature of bullying and appropriate intervention responses. However, physical victimization was touched on in the training, but the video vignettes and assessment activities focused specifically on relational victimization in light of evidence noting this form of victimization might be overlooked by school personnel (Craig et al., 2000). Therefore, it is possible that teachers involved in the present investigation were more attuned to the nature of relational aggression and victimization. Moreover, it could be argued that the general public at large has become more familiar with the various forms aggression can take, and therefore adults, especially teachers, may be more likely to carefully examine indirect forms of
children’s aggressive behavior. Consequently, teachers might have a heightened awareness about covert and relational acts of aggression and therefore monitor their students’ behavior more closely for these kinds of incidents. Nonetheless, this unexpected finding warrants further investigation. Further research, specifically studies that examine how peer victimization incidents come to the attention of teachers (i.e., reported by the victim, by another peer, or by a parent; teacher witnessed the incident), might help to clarify this finding.

Moreover, we found interesting moderating effects for gender and age for relational victimization. Consistent with prior evidence (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002) and with our expectations, greater agreement was found among girls and teachers as well as between older students and teachers on reported rates of relational victimization only. Several explanations may be possible for these moderating effects. First, girls and older students might be more advanced in their language abilities to express experiences of peer victimization to teachers. In fact, research suggests that girls in general have a heightened perceptual sensitivity to their own experiences (Else-Quest, Hyde, Goldsmith, & Van Hulle, 2006), and girls have been found to outperform boys in multiple aspects of language performance (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2004). Thus, it is possible that girls, particularly as they age, are better attuned to their own and their peers’ experiences with relational victimization and, therefore, more capable of seeking help from teachers. However, we did not find a three-way interaction between student-reported victimization, gender, and age. Consequently, further research is needed to examine the relationships between gender, age, and relational victimization. Alternatively, some evidence suggests that girls are more willing to seek help from teachers when compared by boys (Eliot et al., 2010); thus, teachers might be more aware of peer victimization that occurs among girls.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the focus on elementary school-age students, as current findings might not generalize to other age groups. Additionally, data were collected approximately 2.5 months into the academic year. It might be that teachers become even more aware of victimization as the school year progresses. Thus, additional research examining teacher and student agreement in victimization across the academic year is needed to determine how agreement in levels of victimization changes throughout the year. Moreover, both relational and physical victimization were assessed using only a handful of items. Although these measures are internally consistent and have been repeatedly used in the literature, it would be beneficial to evaluate student-teacher agreement in these behaviors using more comprehensive measures. Finally, teachers in this study were exposed to two brief training sessions and therefore differ from other samples of teachers.
who either have not been exposed to such training or were exposed to a different kind of antibullying training. It is also possible that teachers who receive more frequent trainings or training of a longer duration differ from the present study’s sample. Replicating the study’s key findings with a variety of teacher populations will be an important direction for future research.

Implications and Future Directions

Despite the noted limitations, the current study has several important implications for understanding the nature of peer victimization. Improving the degree of congruence between teachers and students will likely improve the precision of prevention and intervention efforts because more incidents of peer victimization should be identified, which would contribute to more accurate information about the most common forms, locations, and groups targeted at specific schools. As prior research has found (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003), teachers are vital contributors to effective peer victimization prevention and intervention efforts. Despite prior evidence suggesting teachers are less aware of relational forms of victimization (Craig et al., 2000), results indicate that teachers in the present study were more aware of nonphysical acts of victimization. This may be the result of the trainings that teachers experienced as well as greater general public awareness of relational and other covert acts of victimization. It is important to note, however, that an increased awareness of relational victimization might lead to paying closer attention to the experiences of girls, thus identifying more acts of relational victimization. Although recent evidence indicates that girls and boys engage in similar rates of relational aggression (Card et al., 2008), it is possible that trainings for teachers, particularly those developed by schools themselves, reinforce gendered notions of youth’s aggressive behavior, and thus inadvertently promote the outdated stereotype that “boys hit and girls gossip.” However, future studies, specifically those that assess teachers’ perceptions of aggressive behavior and peer victimization by gender, are needed to explore whether gendered notions of aggression persist among teachers. On the other hand, it is unclear why the teachers in the present study were less attuned to student reports of physical victimization. It is important for future research to examine additional factors that affect rates of teacher and student agreement (e.g., where the victimization takes place; teacher training efforts) to better understand the limited concordance found in the present study for physical victimization.

Interventions that help students find ways to effectively report experiences of victimization are warranted. More specifically, boys might need assistance with reporting both physical and relational forms of victimization, whereas girls might need additional assistance in reporting physical victimization. Some evidence suggests that when students believe school personnel are caring and fair, they are more likely to report their experiences
of victimization to adults at school (Eliot et al., 2010). Strategies that focus on building trust and effective communication skills between teachers and students might be an important place to start. Additionally, strategies to help teachers become aware of peer relationships inside (e.g., anonymous reporting procedures for peer victimization incidents) and outside (e.g., writing assignments about friends) the school context might be helpful for teachers to gain knowledge about their students’ experiences with peers. A next step in this line of research is to assess the potential barriers (e.g., fear level of the perpetrator, school policies regarding bullying) that prevent students from reporting victimization to their teachers as well as characteristics of teachers (e.g., level of experiences, attitudes about aggression, relationship with parents) associated with their being attuned to their students’ peer victimization experiences.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no conflicts of interest with regard to the topic or the findings of this manuscript.

REFERENCES


Student–Teacher Congruence


