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Peer Victimization and Achievement in Middle School:  
An Examination of Students from Different Ethnic Groups

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### Abstract

Few studies exist that examine peer victimization among ethnic minority children living in urban areas with high rates of poverty, social problems, and community violence. This study examines the relationship between peer victimization and achievement among African American and Latino students (N=1008). Student self-report data were analyzed to measure rates of self-perceived victimization as a function of ethnicity and gender. Results showed that Latino students reported greater perceptions of peer victimization compared to African American students. Negative correlations found that self-perceptions of victimization, achievement, and school adjustment varied as a function of gender and ethnicity of students. Peer victimization was strongly related to peer acceptance and rejection status. These findings emphasize the broad social context in which adolescents of color live and the multiple challenges they face. The importance of gender and ethnic sensitivity in interventions for urban middle school students is discussed.

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It is estimated that one child in ten is repeatedly and persistently victimized by peers and many more children are victimized less severely (Olweus, 1978; Rigby & Slee, 1991). This act not may only result in immediate physical and psychological harm, but peer victimization may also take its toll on aspects of a child's everyday school activities. Several recent studies have found that being victimized by peers places children at risk for experiencing a number of academic, social, and psychological adjustment problems (Hanish & Guerra, 2000b; Olweus, 1994; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Although various studies have examined the effects of peer victimization on children (e.g. Wentzel & Asher, 1995), its effects on urban populations are seldom addressed. Therefore, little is known about whether there is a significant difference in the achievement of African American and Latin American students dealing with peer victimization.

Studies examining the effects of peer victimization in relationship to psychological well-being and school functioning have emerged in various literatures. Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham (2000), investigated the relationship between peer harassment, psychological adjustment, and school functioning using a diverse sample of seventh and eight grade middle school students. A structural equation model (SEM) was used to test the relationship between three constructs: 1) self perceived peer harassment, 2) psychological adjustment, and 3) school adjustment. The analyses revealed that perceived peer harassment predicted psychological adjustment, and psychological adjustment in turn predicted school outcomes. The data also revealed that the most typical incidents of victimization involved indirect (e.g. nasty rumors and insults) or direct

(e.g. name-calling and public ridicule) psychological intimidation. Gender differences suggested that boys were more likely to report incidents of victimization than girls.

Much of the peer victimization research has been conducted with predominately Caucasian children. There are only a few studies examining peer victimization among ethnic minority children living in economically distressed urban communities. Some researchers such as Hanish and Guerra (2000a) have taken the important step of extending this research to understudied populations. They specifically focus on the various challenges faced in urban schools due to external stressors examining peer victimization among a sample of African American, Latino, and Caucasian urban and inner city elementary school children.

The results showed that, in urban neighborhoods children's risk for adjustment problems was elevated due to the number of stressors present in a student's life compared to peer victimization in less stressful contexts. Gender trends in the rates of peer victimization revealed that boys were not only more likely to be victimized than girls, but also they were more also likely to be repeatedly victimized over time. The results also showed that attending ethnically integrated schools was associated with a higher risk of victimization for Caucasian children, a lower rate of victimization for African American children, and had no effect on the risk of victimization for Latino children.

### Overview of Study

Peer victimization is an important social issue that negatively affects a large number of students in our schools. Generalizability to other ethnic groups and other settings is limited by the paucity of peer victimization research and its overall neglect of non-white, non middle income children. This research study examines the relationship between peer victimization and achievement in middle school students from two ethnic minority groups. The data for this study

were taken from a three-year longitudinal project examining peer victimization in middle schools. Student self-report data were analyzed to measure rates of self-perceived peer victimization. Victimization will be defined in this paper as when one person or a group of people physically, verbally, or emotionally picks on another person over a long period of time. Semester grade point averages for academic subjects and a questionnaire measuring students' attitudes towards school were also examined. Finally, relationships between perceived victimization, perceived acceptance, and perceived rejection by peers were also measured.

The purpose of this research is to examine whether there is a difference between self reported victimization between genders and different ethnic groups, specifically as it relates to school achievement. In order to examine the linkage between peer victimization and school adjustment outcome, the relationship between self reported victimization and school achievement and attitudes across different ethnic groups and genders were examined. Therefore, it was hypothesized that those who perceived greater victimization would be more likely to show lower achievement than those who did not perceive themselves as victimized.

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study included students from eight multi-ethnic public middle schools in lower socioeconomic status, working class communities in the greater Los Angeles area. Approximately 1008 (485 males and 573 females) students were drawn from a larger sample of 6th grade students (N=1223) from diverse ethnic groups. The ethnic composition of this present sample consisted of African American (N=447) and Latino (N= 561) students.

## Procedures

Only students who returned a signed consent form with the required parent signature were allowed to participate in the study. Trained researchers working in pairs administered questionnaires to students during their homeroom period. Since the student population was ethnically diverse, efforts were made to have an ethnically diverse team of researchers.

Participants were asked to use books or folders to create private space between them and their classmates as a way to maximize confidentiality. One researcher read the questions out loud, while the other circulated around the room to assist individual students as needed. The questionnaire consisted of two indicators of harassment and three measures of psychological adjustment.

## Self Perception of Victimization Measure

Self-report measures were used to measure rates of self-perceived peer victimization. Participants were presented with four items from the Peer Victimization Scale (PVS: Neary and Joseph, 1994). For each item, students were asked to determine which two types of persons were most like them (e.g., some kids are picked on by others, but other kids are not picked on by other kids). After students decided the type of person that best described them, they were asked to indicate whether the description was “really true for me” or “sort of true for me.” A four-point scale was derived for each type of peer victimization, with higher scores indicating stronger feelings of victimization. Items were also summed and averaged to create a measure of subjective perception of victimization.

## School Adjustment Measure

Three measures of school adjustment were used in this study: grade point averages (G.P.A.), attitudes towards school, and student engagement.

*Grade point averages* (G.P.A.) were calculated using each student's grades in academic classes taken the semester immediately prior to data collection. Each grade, A, B, C, D, and F corresponded to a score of 4, 3, 2, 1, and 0 points respectively. Scores were then summed and averaged to create an academic G.P.A. score. Students G.P.A. for all classes were also calculated using the same procedure.

*Attitudes towards school* were measured using two subscales of the Effective School Battery (ESB: Gottfredson, 1984). The *school climate* subscale consists of six items that measure attitudes about one's school environment (for example, "Everyone knows what the school rules are" and "The school rules are fair"). The *school enjoyment* subscale consists of three items, "I like school," "I would rather be anywhere but school," and "I look forward to going to school." Each item was measured on a three-point scale. All of the items on the ESB use an "almost always," "sometimes," and "almost never" response format.

*Student engagement* was assessed using teacher reports. Teachers responded to six items that measured perceptions of each student's academic engagement and motivation. Examples of items included whether the student "pays attention," "concentrates on doing his/her work in my class," and "works hard in my class." Each item was rated on a 4-point scale (1= not at all and 4= very much).

### Social Adjustment Measure

Peer acceptance and rejection, as measured by sociometric procedures, were used as the indicators of social adjustment. Participants were asked to list the names of students they "like most" (acceptance) and "like least" (rejection) from class rosters arranged in alphabetical order and by gender. Students' scores were averaged across academic and all (i.e. including non

academic classes) classes to create a single 5 point index of G.P.A. Scores were created by dividing the number of nominations received for each question by the number of nominators.

## Results

In order to examine the effects of the independent variables gender and ethnicity (African American and Latino) on the dependent variable self-perception of victimization, a 2X2 ANOVA was performed. Gender trends in rates of peer victimization were similar for male ( $M=2.214$ ,  $SE=.039$ ) and female ( $M=2.166$ ,  $SE=.033$ ) students, reflecting a lack of a reliable main effect for self reported victimization by gender. Results showed a main effect of ethnicity with Latino students reporting greater perceptions of victimization ( $M=2.25$ ,  $SE=.034$ ) compared to African American students ( $M=2.13$ ,  $SE=.038$ ),  $F(1006,1)=5.79$ ,  $p<.02$  (See Table 1).

Although only marginally significant, the data suggest a trend towards an interaction, whereby Latino males' perceptions of victimization ( $M=2.32$ ,  $SE=.050$ ) were particularly higher than those reported of Latina females ( $M=2.18$ ,  $SE=.046$ ), and African American males ( $M=2.11$ ,  $SE=.059$ ) and females ( $M=2.15$ ,  $SE=.049$ ),  $F(1006,1)=3.05$   $p<.09$  (See Table 2).

Correlational analyses were used in order to investigate whether there was a relationship between self reported victimization and school adjustment measures. Table 3 shows the correlations between self-perceptions of victimization, and school engagement, academic G.P.A., and attitudes towards school. A reliable negative correlation was found between self-perceptions of victimization and school adjustment. In other words, higher perceptions of victimization correspond with lower GPA scores, school engagement, school enjoyment, work habits, and cooperation. Correlations between self-perceptions of victimization and school adjustment were also conducted separately as a function of student gender (Table 4) and ethnicity (Table 5). For males, higher perceptions of victimization corresponded with lower school engagement, and

school enjoyment. For females, on the other hand, perceived victimization corresponded with decreased school engagement, G.P.A., school enjoyment, work habits, and cooperation. Table 5 suggests that for African American students' perceptions of victimization corresponded with lower engagement and G.P.A. For Latino students, perceived victimization corresponded with decreased school engagement, G.P.A., school enjoyment, work habit, and cooperation.

Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between self perceived victimization and school adjustment measures for each gender x ethnicity subgroup (See Table 6). For African American males, no reliable correlations were found between self perceived victimization and school adjustment. For African American females, peer victimization was negatively correlated with G.P.A., school engagement, and work habits. ( $r=.26$ ,  $p<.001$ ) For Latino males, perceptions of victimization were reliably ( $r =.26$  ,  $p<.001$ ) negatively correlated with school engagement, G.P.A. and cooperation. Finally, for Latina females, perceptions of victimization were negatively correlated with school engagement, school enjoyment, and cooperation ( $r =.26$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

In order to examine the relationship between peer victimization, peer acceptance, and rejection, correlations were examined between three types of peer rated victimization (i.e. verbal, physical, and relational) and acceptance and rejection by peers. Table 7 shows that all the three types of peer victimization were reliably negatively correlated with positive peer nominations and positively correlated with negative peer nominations. In other words, the more victimized a student was, the more likely they were to be rejected by peers.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the dynamics of peer victimization within an ethnic minority sample of urban middle school age children. In particular, the perceptions of

peer victimization among African Americans and Latino students and the role of school adjustment factors in moderating these perceptions were examined. Results suggest that being highly victimized by peers could be related to a number of subsequent school adjustment problems. When measuring self-reported victimization as a function of both ethnicity and gender, results showed that Latino males were more likely to perceive being victimized than Latina females, African American males, or African American females. Although children in urban neighborhoods are at greater risk of adjustment problems due to a number of stressors, perhaps Latino males face greater adjustment challenges in middle school. These challenges may include earlier or later physical maturation, greater externalizing (e.g. aggression) or internalizing (e.g. depression and withdrawal) behavior problems, being at the bottom of the social hierarchy, language barriers, or attending schools where they are the minority. Perhaps Latino males may exhibit behaviors that are perceived by their peers to be atypical or unpleasant at a greater rate. Previous research suggests that African American students are more likely to report high self esteem despite low academic achievement (Graham, 1989). Perhaps here a similar phenomenon is occurring whereby African Americans perceive themselves as being socially accepted despite possible victimization.

In examining the second hypothesis, the results revealed that for females, victimization would likely lead to lower academic achievement and lower class behavior. For males, victimization would likely lead to lower school engagement and school enjoyment. The differences between genders possibly suggest that females are more likely to experience greater victimization in the classroom than males. This in turn may affect their academic achievement and in class behavior. On the other hand, males may be more likely to experience greater victimization outside of the classroom, which results in lower school engagement and school

enjoyment. In examining ethnic differences, the results indicated that there may be different response behaviors to victimization with Latino students disengaging themselves from school as a result of victimization more than African American students. Perhaps Latino students, many of whom are children of immigrants, may experience greater psychological or social adjustment challenges. On the other hand, African American students may have possible strategies for coping with victimization. These results also revealed that peer perceptions of victimization are critical determinants of who gets victimized.

These findings have implications for designing interventions and future research. Most existing research used to formulate intervention strategies has relied largely on Caucasian middle class samples. The result of our study, that members of different ethnic groups experience victimization differently, illustrates the need to examine how both ethnicity and school context influence perceptions and perpetration of victimization (Hanish and Guerra, 2000a; Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham, 2000). Taking ethnic differences into account when developing intervention strategies will result in more effective and more culturally sensitive interventions. In summary, these findings demonstrate the importance of continuing cross-cultural research and the problems of generalizing research with homogeneous populations to other groups.

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Table 1

Self reported victimization as a function of ethnicity.

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Self Reported Victimization	
Ethnicity	
Latino	2.25
African American	2.13

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Table 2

Self reported victimization as a function of ethnicity and gender.

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Self Reported Victimization	
Ethnicity x Gender	
Lat. Male	2.25
Af.Am. Male	2.11
Lat. Female	2.18
Af.Am. Female	2.15

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Table 3

Correlation between self reported victimization and school adjustment measures.

	School Engagement	G.P.A. Academic classes	G.P.A. all classes	School enjoyment measure	Work habits	Cooperation
Self Reported Victimization	-.163**	-.114**	-.111***	-.100***	-.070*	-.067*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (1-tailed)

Table 4

Correlation on self-perception of victimization and school adjustment measures across genders.

	School Engagement	G.P.A. Academic classes	G.P.A. all classes	School enjoyment measure	Work habits	Cooperation
Self (male) Reported Victimization	-.143**	-.068	-.049	-.080*	-.026	-.020
Self (female) Reported Victimization	-.171*	-.138*	-.148*	-.111*	-.095*	-.095*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (1-tailed)

Table 5

Correlation on self-perception of victimization and school adjustment measures across ethnicities.

	School Engagement	G.P.A. Academic classes	G.P.A. all classes	School enjoyment measure	Work habits	Cooperation
Self (Af. Am.) Reported Victimization	-.173*	-.116*	-.131*	-.064	-.071	-.042
Self (Latino) Reported Victimization	-.195*	-.144*	-.136*	-.137*	-.016*	-.164*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (1-tailed)

Table 6

Correlation between self-perception of victimization and school adjustment as a function of student ethnicity and gender.

	School Engagement	G.P.A. Academic classes	G.P.A. all classes	School enjoyment measure	Work habits	Cooperation
Self (Af. Am.) Reported (male) Victimization	-.124	-.029	-.038	-.066	-.030	-.046
Self (Af. Am.) Reported (female) Victimization	-.192**	-.200***	-.221**	-.067	-.137*	.077
Self (Latino) Reported Victimization	-.213***	-.149	-.127*	-.097	-.108	-.131*
Self (Latina) Reported Victimization	-.134**	-.095***	-.098	-.159***	-.081	-.154**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (1-tailed)

Table 7

Correlation between three types of peer rated victimization and peer nominations of acceptance and rejection.

	Positive Nomination	Negative Nomination
Verbal Victimization	-.265**	.460**
Physical Victimization	-.245**	.396**
Relational (rumor) Victimization	-.102**	.457**

\*\*  $p < .001$  (2-tailed)