Long-Term Psychosocial Consequences of Peer Victimization: From Elementary to High School

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Prior research has demonstrated that victims of peer victimization show reduced psychological adjustment, social adjustment, and physical well-being compared with nonvictims. However, little research has addressed whether this maladjustment continues over the long term. This study examined adjustment in 72 high school students who had participated in a peer-nomination procedure assessing peer victimization when in elementary school (5 to 8 years earlier). Thirty-five high school students who had been peer nominated as overtly and/or relationally peer victimized were compared with 37 peers who were not nominated as victimized in elementary school. High school students completed self-report measures of psychological adjustment, social adjustment, physical well-being, and current overt and relational victimization. In addition, a retrospective self-report measure of peer victimization in elementary school was administered. Results revealed that, although current self-reported peer victimization was negatively related to adjustment, elementary-school peer-nomination measures of victimization were unrelated to high-school adjustment. Further, current self-reports of remembered victimization in elementary school were associated with lowered adjustment. These results indicate that current and past perceived peer victimization is negatively related to adjustment, but past experience of peer-identified victimization has a more complex relation to current adjustment.

Keywords: Peer-victimization, bullying, adjustment

Peer victimization takes place from preschool through the adult workplace, and is associated with concurrent psychosocial difficulties at all ages (e.g., Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2007). Those who report victimization by their peers tend to have higher levels of depression, anxiety, suicidality, diminished work and school performance, and increased health concerns (e.g., Nansel et al., 2001). Although there is extensive evidence supporting the concurrent negative effect of peer victimization, few studies have examined what, if any, long-term consequences result from childhood peer-victimization experiences. Furthermore, many studies exclusively utilize retrospective measures, which are problematic due to the lack of reliability of long-term memory (e.g., Meltzer, Vostanis, Ford, Bebbington, & Dennis, 2011). Despite notable limitations in long-term outcomes research, numerous educators, health professionals, and policymakers assume a pervasive and enduring negative impact of peer victimization. Given the ubiquity of peer-victimization experiences among youth (76.8% of an adolescent sample reported being victimized at some point in school; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992), the logic of identifying such experiences as a long-term risk factor should be questioned. The current study utilizes a prospective design to investigate if being victimized by one’s peers in middle childhood has a long-term negative impact on psychosocial functioning. The current study assesses peer victimization in three ways: elementary-school peer nominated, self-reported current (in adolescence), and self-reported retrospective (assessed in adolescence, reflecting on peer-
victimization experiences when participants were in elementary school). Each of these represents a unique method of assessing peer-victimization experiences. Although peer nomination and self-report methods assess different aspects of peer victimization, they will both be treated in the present study as valid measures of current victimization.

Current Peer Victimization Relates to Current Maladjustment

Peer victimization is here defined as being the recipient of physical or verbal aggression from one’s peers over time (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). This victimization can be overt, when the child experiences direct physical or verbal aggression from peers, or relational, when the child experiences aggression through a peer’s effort to harm the reputation or social relationships of the victim. Although some research refers to victimization by peers as “bullying,” the two terms can be used interchangeably (Eisenberg & Aalsma, 2005).

The relationship between peer victimization and concurrent psychosocial adjustment has been examined by a number of studies. A meta-analysis of 23 studies by Hawker and Boulton (2000) considered a series of internalizing psychological adjustment indices (e.g., depression, anxiety, self-esteem, loneliness) in relation to peer victimization. Overall, they found that both social and psychological maladjustment were related to victimization, though these effects were stronger when asking the same informant to report on both adjustment and victimization (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Given the breadth of literature used by Hawker and Boulton in their meta-analysis, they clearly point to significant distress related to ongoing peer victimization in children and adolescents. In the years since this meta-analysis was published, researchers continue to demonstrate that victimized children report negative adjustment concurrent with experiences of victimization (e.g., Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006). Unfortunately, the majority of studies that examine victimization are correlational in nature. To better understand the nature and impact of this relation, research examining the long-term consequences for victims of peer victimization is needed. Additionally, the vast majority of studies over longer time periods addressing this question have utilized retrospective methodology, asking adults to report their memories of being peer victimized in childhood.

Challenges of Retrospective Reporting of Childhood Peer Victimization

Retrospective studies consistently find that adults’ recall of being peer victimized in childhood is associated with an array of negative outcomes. These negative outcomes can range from lower self-esteem to higher likelihood of attempting suicide (Meltzer et al., 2011; Schäfer et al., 2004; Staubli & Killias, 2011). Although researchers acknowledge the importance of ensuring that retrospective reports are valid and free from bias (Hardt & Rutter, 2004), little research has tested the validity of retrospective reports of peer victimization. Only a single study has compared retrospective with contemporaneous reports, finding that retrospective self-report of ninth-grade peer victimization taken at age 23 was significantly associated with peer nomination of peer victimization assessed in ninth grade ($r = .58$; Olweus, 1993b). However, Rivers (2001) also found that adult participants were not consistent when retrospectively reporting on multiple aspects of experiences of peer victimization (e.g., frequency of peer victimization). This highlights the methodological uncertainty when utilizing adult retrospective reports as measures of childhood victimization.

A critical concern is that mood-congruent memory likely biases reports of childhood events (Miranda & Kihlstrom, 2005). When in low mood, participants are apt to recall more negative memories (Salovey & Singer, 1988) and fewer positive memories (Natale & Hantas, 1982). These findings have lead researchers to contend that retrospectively reported memories of childhood victimization are likely to be influenced by current functioning or even daily mood (Pirkola et al., 2005). The current study utilizes peer-nomination data collected during elementary school to assess Time 1 experiences of peer victimization. Time 2 is assessed in late high school, during which participants are asked to report their recollection of childhood experiences of peer victimization as well as current experience of being victimized by peers. Thus, the present study assesses the impact of current
reports of peer victimization on retrospective reports of peer victimization.

**Longitudinal Studies of Childhood Peer Victimization and Later Maladjustment**

One set of frequently cited prospective studies of peer victimization stems from the work based on the 1981 Finnish Birth Cohort Study (for more comprehensive information, see Almqvist et al., 1999). The original sample from this important cohort study consisted of 10% of the population of children born in 1981 in Finland (Sourander et al., 2007). Assessments on various subsets of this sample were conducted at age 8 (N = 5,813 children; 2,946 boys and 2,867 girls), and throughout adolescence and young adulthood. Regarding peer victimization, at age 8, child self-reports, parent reports, and teacher reports were collected, each with one item assessing perpetrating peer aggression and one item assessing experiences of being victimized by one’s peers (Sourander et al., 2007). For self-report, children were asked to choose from three options: “I bully other children almost every day,” “I bully sometimes,” and “Usually I do not bully.” Victimization was assessed similarly (e.g., “Other children bully me almost every day”), and the single item was reworded to be appropriate for parent and teacher reports (e.g., “The child bullies other children,” with response options “doesn’t apply,” “applies somewhat,” or “certainly applies”). There was no definition for bullying provided, and no other items or measures assessing type of bullying or victimization were used. Cross-participant agreement on victimization status was low, with weighted k in the range of 0.11 to 0.22 (Rønning et al., 2009). Although this data set is large and tracks participants prospectively, the limited number of items assessing peer aggression and peer victimization make the data difficult to interpret and conclusions drawn from these data problematic (e.g., see Esbensen & Carson, 2009).

In addition to the research based on the Finnish Birth Cohort Study, a population-based prospective study was recently conducted by Copeland and colleagues (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Similar to the Finnish study, Copeland et al. assessed peer aggression and victimization without providing a definition of peer victimization, and using two broad questions (i.e., “Do you get teased or bullied at all by your siblings or friends?” and “Are other boys and girls mean to you?”). Similar to findings from the Finnish studies, the results of the Copeland et al. (2013) study indicated that engaging in peer aggression and experiencing peer victimization were risk factors for later psychiatric disorders, though many of these associations became nonsignificant after controlling for childhood psychiatric disorders and environmental risk factors (e.g., family dysfunction, maltreatment; Klomek et al., 2009; Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000; Sourander et al., 2009).

Olweus (1993b) also utilized a longitudinal design to examine populations of elementary and middle school children, and looked at follow-up data in early adulthood. Olweus’s follow-up sample consisted of 71 23-year-old men from a Time 1 sample size of 276 (15 men identified as victims of peer victimization in sixth or ninth grades; 56 men as a representative sample of controls). Victims were boys whose teachers identified them as long-term recipients of overt aggression, and who were identified as unpopular and overtly aggressed upon in a peer-nomination measure. At follow-up, Olweus gave self-report adjustment measures and found mixed results. Specifically, he observed that former victims were significantly more depressed and had significantly lower self-esteem than controls at age 23. However, results showed no differences between former victims and former nonvictims at age 23 on measures of current victimization or social isolation, worry in achievement situations, frustration tolerance, aggression and assertiveness, and extraversion. In addition, no differences were observed on measures of the stress hormone adrenaline. Similarly, Lösel and Bender (2011) found that peer victimization in childhood does not significantly correlate with emotional problems in adolescence, when controlling for other risk factors. Olweus interpreted his findings as evidence that former victims normalize (or recover) over time, and that much of their maladjustment was due to a peer-victimization situation rather than a personality disturbance. Olweus (1993b) stated that the “pattern of results implies that a good deal of the anxiety-related/internalizing characteristics of the victims as measured during the school years [are] situationally determined, that is, relatively transient effects of the harsh treatment they were
exposed to from aggressive peers” (p. 336). He thought recovery might be facilitated by leaving school, entering a setting in which peer victimization was minimal, and being able to choose one’s own social and physical environment.

These data and findings, in part, contradict the results of the Finnish studies and Copeland et al. (2013) study, most of which indicate that victimization places at least a subset of victims (e.g., females, but not males, in Sourander et al., 2009) at higher risk for long-term negative outcomes. Given the small sample size in Olweus’s (1993b) early study and the challenges inherent in the Finnish studies and Copeland et al. (e.g., single-item assessment of peer aggression and victimization), further prospective longitudinal studies are needed in order to address these conflicting results.

The prospective longitudinal studies that exist provide important first steps in understanding the long-term effects of peer victimization on later psychosocial functioning. Many of these have been summarized in two recent meta-analyses combining both longitudinal prospective and retrospective studies of victims of peer victimization (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012). Klomek et al. concluded that being peer victimized is a risk factor for later suicidal ideation and behavior. Ttofi et al. conclude that being peer victimized is a significant risk factor for later depression, but with the effect size diminishing over longer follow-up periods. Although these are important findings, the combination of studies utilizing prospective and retrospective reporting likely exaggerates the negative effects of previous peer victimization, as participants who are currently victimized may overreport prior victimization. In addition, a meta-analysis by Reijnjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, and Telch (2010) found that peer victimization was a significant predictor of later internalizing problems, even when controlling for internalizing problems at Time 1. However, the follow-up intervals in the studies analyzed were short (longest interval was 24 months), meaning that the majority of participants remained in the same developmental stage across Time 1 and Time 2 assessments (e.g., participants who were 7 years old at Time 1 had likely not transitioned to adolescence at 9 years of age).

The Current Study

The current study begins to address some of the limitations in the literature through prospectively examining the long-term relationship between peer victimization in elementary school and later high school psychosocial adjustment. Several methodological limitations of prior long-term outcome studies of peer victimization are taken into consideration. Specifically, in comparison with prior research, the current study has a larger sample of victimized youth (35 compared with 15 in Olweus, 1993b), includes both boys and girls (Olweus, 1993b; Sourander et al., 2007), examines both overt and relational peer victimization (Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000; Sourander et al., 2007), and reviews several areas of psychosocial adjustment (Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000). Further, although studies have commonly used adult retrospective reporting to examine long-term outcomes associated with peer victimization, critics contend that retrospective methods might be subject to bias based on current functioning (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993). This is the first study to begin to assess the validity of retrospective reports of peer victimization by comparing these reports with peer nominations of victimization taken when students were in elementary school. Given the scarcity of prospective longitudinal studies examining long-term (i.e., over a multiyear period) effects of peer victimization on later psychosocial adjustment, this study provides an important step toward examining how childhood peer victimization can affect adolescent functioning. Given the mixed findings in previous studies, it is not clear whether previous experiences of peer victimization will relate to current maladjustment. However, it is hypothesized that retrospective reports of peer victimization will be incongruent with peer-nomination findings from childhood. This is expected, given the hypothesized influence of current functioning on one’s perception of past events (i.e., mood-congruent memory; Miranda & Kihlstrom, 2005). Therefore, it is expected that participants who are experiencing current distress will report more frequent and severe peer victimization in childhood than those who are not experiencing current distress.
Method

Participants

The data in this investigation were drawn from 3,636 students (50.4% boys, 48.8% girls) from a school district in a midsize southwestern city. The study was institutional review board approved. Consent from parents and assent from students were obtained prior to students participating in the study. During the first wave of data collection (2002 to 2004), students in third, fourth, or fifth grades were given a peer-nomination measure in their classrooms. The district’s school population is racially diverse (47% Caucasian, 33.7% Hispanic, 16.1% African American, 1.6% Asian, 0.4% American Indian). No additional demographic information such as socioeconomic status or academic information such as GPA was collected. At the first data collection point (Time 1), 246 children were peer nominated as victimized overtly, but not relationally (72% boys); 286 children were identified by peers as relationally, but not overtly, victimized (69.9% female); and 225 children were identified by peers as being both relationally victimized and overtly victimized (55.1% boys, 44.9% girls).

Participants were recruited for follow-up in 2009 and 2010 by sending letters to parents of students who had taken part in the initial wave of data collection. Of the initial group of participants, contact information at Time 2 was available for 340 students in the victimized group and 312 students in the control group. All potential students were contacted via postal mail two times and invited to participate, yielding 35 participants for the victimized group (10.3% response rate) and 37 participants for the control group (11.9% response rate). Follow-up measures were administered on the Internet from 2009 to 2010). Data were collected from a total of 72 students (52.8% boys, 47.2% girls). At the time of follow-up, students were in 10th (25%), 11th (20.8%), or 12th grade (37.5%), or were no longer attending school (6.9%; 9.7% did not report). This sample was also racially diverse (68.1% Caucasian, 20.8% Hispanic, 9.7% African American, and 1.4% Asian).

Measures

Peer nomination. The initial wave of the study used a modified version of Crick and Grotpeter’s (1995) peer-nomination measure to sort children into groups based on behavioral characteristics. The instrument used has six scales (24 items in total), including overt and relational victimization, plus two questions to assess sociometric status (“Circle the names of up to three children in your class you like to play with the most” and “Circle up to three children in your class you like to play with the least”). Two questions assess overt victimization (“Kids who get picked on by being hit, kicked, or scratched by others” and “Kids who get pushed, shoved, or have their hair pulled by other kids”), and two questions assess relational victimization (“Kids who get left out of the group when someone is mad at them or wants to get back at them” and “Kids who get told ‘You aren’t my friend’ if they don’t go along with what a classmate asks”).

Psychological distress. The Kessler 6 (K6) is a measure of current psychological distress developed for epidemiological research that shows consistent performance across sociodemographic groups (Kessler et al., 2002). This measure consists of six questions asking how often, in the past month, participants have experienced symptoms of distress (e.g., “Tired out for no good reason”). The ratings are obtained using a 5-point Likert format, with choices ranging from none of the time (0) to all of the time (4). Higher scores indicate increased psychological distress. Scores can range from 0 to 24, with scores above 13 indicating serious distress. The measure was designed and validated on the general population, showing good psychometric properties across major subsamples (Kessler et al., 2002), and specificity at low levels of distress (Furukawa, Kessler, Slade, & Andrews, 2003). In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .77.

Life satisfaction. Students’ level of perceived well-being across several domains was assessed with the Brief Multidimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS: Huebner, Suldo, Valois, Drane, & Zullig, 2004). The measure considers student satisfaction in the domains of family, friends, school, living environment, and self (six questions in each domain, and one rating of overall satisfaction). The rat-
nings are obtained using a 7-point Likert format, with choices ranging from terrible to delighted. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .83.

School connectedness. The extent to which students feel connected to their schools was measured using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (Goodenow, 1993). The measure consists of 18 questions assessing the level of connection students feel with their school. The ratings are obtained using a 5-point Likert format, with choices ranging from not at all true to completely true. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .91.

Somatic complaints. Students completed the somatic complaints subscale of the Child Behavioral Check List, Youth Self-Report normed for ages 11 to 18 (Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Conners, 1991). The Somatic Complaints scale, embedded within the internalizing scale of the measure, has an alpha of .67 and consists of nine items (e.g., “I am extremely tired,” “I suffer from stomach aches”). Each item is rated on a scale consisting of not true, somewhat true, and certainly true, and assesses complaints that are current or have occurred within the last 6 months (higher scores indicating more complaints). This individual subscale showed a fairly low Cronbach’s alpha coefficient in the study, at .609.

School performance. Student’s academic performance was assessed by asking their current or most recent GPA or class rank, and number of absences in the most recent school year. Students were also able to indicate, using an 8-point Likert scale, the grade they normally get in classes (e.g., A/B, B, B/C).

Current victimization. Social Experiences Questionnaire-Self Report (SEQ; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) is a 15-item self-report scale, consisting of three subscales to assess the frequency with which children have been the recipient of overtly aggressive and relationally aggressive behaviors from peers (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (all of the time), and the subscales are scored separately to determine the frequency of being the recipient of the specified behaviors. The psychometric properties of the SEQ are well established, and a recent large study supported the appropriateness of its use with older adolescents (Storch, Crisp, RobertiBagner, & Masia-Warner, 2005). In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .91.

Retrospective self-report of elementary school peer victimization. As little work has been done on the long-term effects of peer victimization, a question assessing student’s retrospective impressions of their own victimization experiences was presented. Students were asked on a 5-point Likert-type scale, “Compared to others your age, how often were you bullied or picked on in elementary school?” This question was offered at the end of testing.

Procedure

In order to test whether childhood peer victimization is associated with long-term maladjustment, this study compared the current adjustment in high school of students who had been identified as victimized in elementary school with the current adjustment of a control group of students who were identified as peer nonvictimized in elementary school. Both groups filled out the same questionnaires, which included a series of adjustment measures, as well as ratings of current victimization and a retrospective report of levels of elementary school peer victimization. This design allowed for the two groups to be compared for current functioning, and also to consider the relative relationship to current functioning of current victimization, perception of past victimization in elementary school, and peer report of past victimization in elementary school.

In the initial waves of data collection (2001 to 2004), graduate students administered the peer-nomination instrument to third, fourth, and fifth graders in the classroom (for detailed data collection procedures at Time 1, see Dempsey, Fireman, & Wang, 2006). During the second wave of collection, parents were contacted for consent individually by mail.

High school students completed a questionnaire online, which required approximately 10 min. Participants were given a $20 gift certificate for completing the study.

Results

Overview

A multivariate analysis of variance was utilized to examine the differences between groups of students who were peer nominated as victims in
elementary school and controls on the dependent measures. In addition, exploratory correlations were conducted to examine the relation between peer-nominated victimization in elementary school with retrospective elementary-school victimization assessed in high school.

Elementary-school peer-nomination scores were used to group students from the initial study (2001 to 2004) identified as victimized. Using $z$ scores, those who scored one standard deviation above the mean in relational victimization, overt victimization, or both are classified as “victimized” (Crick & Grot Peters, 1996). Although the intention was to examine relational and overt victimization separately, this was not possible due to the small number of participants.

For self-report measures, all initially failed the Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic. Square-root and log transformations were conducted to ensure all variables met assumptions of normality and linearity. For all multivariate analyses, preliminary checks were conducted to ensure all assumptions were met, and no serious violations were noted. Additionally, gender was examined as a possible moderating variable, and no significant differences were found. This is in contrast to predictions, given that previous literature has suggested differences in the manifestation and effects of victimization on males and females. It is possible that differences were not found in the current study due to a small sample size.

Self-Reported Current Victimization and Current Adjustment

To investigate the influence of self-reported current victimization on current maladjustment, a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed. As shown in Table 1, there was a significant difference between current victims and current nonvictims on the combined dependent variables (psychological distress, life satisfaction, psychological sense of school connectedness, and somatic complaints), $F(4, 61) = 4.30, p = .004, \text{Wilks'} \lambda = .78$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$, with those currently victimized reporting higher levels of general maladjustment than those not currently victimized. Using a Bonferroni adjustment alpha level of .013, three of the four variables reached statistical significance (life satisfaction, somatic complaints, and school connectedness). Thus, as predicted, self-reported current victimization is related to poorer adjustment.

Previous Peer-Nominated Victimization and Current Adjustment

A Mann–Whitney $U$ test was used to test whether peer-nominated elementary-school victims more commonly reported current victimization than those who were not victimized in elementary school. Results revealed no significant difference in the current victimization levels of elementary school victims ($\text{Mdn} = 14.0, n = 32$) and nonvictims ($\text{Mdn} = 12.6, n = 36$), $U = 517.5, z = -7.29, p = .466, r = .08$. As predicted, victimization status in elementary school was not significantly related to victimization later in adolescence.

A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate the effect of elementary-school victimization on maladjustment in high school. There was no statistically significant difference between peer-nominated elementary-school vic-

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>Victimized (Current)</th>
<th>Nonvictimized (Current)</th>
<th>Victimized (Retrospective)</th>
<th>Nonvictimized (Retrospective)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>3.92</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>14.06</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>11.41</td>
<td>1.96</td>
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Note. $K6 = \text{Kessler 6 measure of psychological distress}; \text{BMSLSS} = \text{Brief Multidimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale measure of life satisfaction}; \text{PSSM} = \text{Psychological Sense of School Membership measure of school connectedness}; \text{SC} = \text{Youth Self-Report Somatic Complaints subscale measure of somatic complaints}.
timed and nonvictims on the combined dependent variables (i.e., psychological distress, life satisfaction, school connectedness, and somatic complaints), $F(4, 62) = .94, p = .448$, Wilks’ $\lambda = .94$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$.

Chi-square analyses were performed looking at peer-nominated victimization status, and average grades in classes and absences from school. Results indicated that there was no difference between the groups for school absences, but a significant association between peer-nominated victimization status and average grades in classes, $\chi^2(2, N = 69) = 7.492, p = .024$, Cramer’s $V = .330$. Although statistically significant, this finding demonstrated high self-reported academic performance for both groups, with nonvictimized students more likely to report getting As and victimized students more likely to report getting A/Bs. Thus, the hypothesis of higher maladjustment for previously victimized students was not supported. Children who were peer nominated as victimized in elementary school report similar levels of current adjustment when compared with nonvictimized youth.

**Self-Reported Retrospective Victimization and Current Adjustment**

A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance was performed to investigate the influence of retrospective victimization on maladjustment. As shown in Table 2, there was a statistically significant difference between self-reported retrospective victims and retrospective nonvictims on the combined dependent variables (psychological distress, life satisfaction, psychological sense of school membership, and somatic complaints), $F(4, 61) = 2.72, p = .038$, Wilks’ $\lambda = .85$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$. Using a Bonferroni adjustment alpha level of .013, life satisfaction, $F(1, 64) = 5.65, p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$, and sense of school connectedness, $F(1, 64) = 14.81, p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$, remained statistically significant. An inspection of mean scores in the non-transformed variables showed that for both dependent variables, students who retrospectively report being victimized in elementary school showed higher levels of current maladjustment.

**Retrospective Self-Reports of Elementary School Victimization**

The relationship between retrospective self-report of elementary-school victimization and peer nomination of elementary-school victimization was investigated using Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient. There was a small, positive correlation between the two variables, $\rho = .28, n = 68, p = .022$, with higher levels of retrospective victimization associated with peer nomination of victimization status. It is of note that although the relation is in the predicted direction, the strength of this positive relation is smaller than expected.

Next, the relationship between retrospective self-report of elementary school victimization and self-report of current victimization was investigated. There was a small, positive correlation between the two variables, $\rho = .32, n = 68, p = .007$, with higher levels of retrospective victimization associated with higher levels of current victimization. Finally, the relationship between peer-nominated elementary-school victimization and self-report of current victim-

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>MANOVA $F(4, 61)$</th>
<th>ANOVA $F(1, 64)$</th>
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<td>Victimization (V)</td>
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<td>Gender (G)</td>
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<td>V × G</td>
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<td>.08</td>
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*Note. K6 = Kessler 6 measure of psychological distress; BMSLSS = Brief Multidimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale measure of life satisfaction; PSSM = Psychological Sense of School Membership measure of school connectedness; SC = Youth Self-Report Somatic Complaints subscale measure of somatic complaints. 
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 

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ization was investigated using Spearman’s rank
order correlation coefficient. There was no sig-
nificant relationship between the two variables,
$p = .09, n = 68, p = .474$. Thus, being iden-
tified as a victim in elementary school by peers
did not relate to self-reporting peer victimiza-
tion in high school.

Qualitative Exploration of Retrospective
Self-Reports and Current Adjustment

A qualitative and descriptive review of a sub-
set of the participants support the finding that
self-reported previous peer victimization may
be considered one’s perception of one’s past,
influenced by current adjustment. This review
indicates that students who self-reported being
peer victimized in elementary school, but were
not peer nominated as such ($n = 14$), had the
lowest current adjustment scores out of all par-
ticipants for life satisfaction ($M = 29.64, SD =
1.34$), school membership ($M = 59.96, SD =
3.73$), and somatic complaints ($M = 12.82,
$SD = .67$). These students believed they were
highly victimized when they were younger, but
others did not view them as such. In contrast,
those who were peer nominated as victimized,
but retrospectively self-reported not being vic-
timized, had the highest current adjustment
scores of all participants on two of four outcome
measures—life satisfaction ($M = 34.04, SD =
1.34$) and somatic complaints ($M = 11.36,
$SD = .67$).

Discussion

Overall, results of the current study suggest
that victimization in elementary school does not
necessarily result in the victim being at high risk
for long-term, negative consequences. Although
correlational research demonstrates that peer
victimization often has concurrent negative con-
sequences in multiple domains (e.g., aca-
demic performance, depression, suicidality),
these consequences do not necessarily endure
over time (Owlews, 1993a). Across multiple
measures of current functioning (e.g., life satis-
faction, psychological distress), peer-nominated
elementary-school victims do not report higher
levels of maladjustment when assessed in ado-
lescence. This supports Owlews’s (1993b) con-
clusion that peer victimization’s negative con-
sequences may disappear once the victim’s
context (e.g., social groups, friendships) has
changed.

Previous correlational research suggests
that adolescents who self-report current peer
victimization also self-report lower current
psychosocial adjustment than participants
who do not indicate current peer victimization
(e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000). The current
study confirms this finding. Additionally, stu-
dents who were peer nominated in elementary
school as victimized, but do not report current
peer victimization, self-report current,
healthy, psychosocial adjustment. Thus, cur-
rent victimization appears to be a substan-
tially stronger predictor of negative current
psychosocial adjustment than prior peer vic-
timization.

Retrospective Reporting

In another related finding, self-reports of
previous elementary-school peer victimization
had a small, positive correlation with
peer-nominated previous victimization. Al-
though this may be explained, in part, by
cross-informant agreement, differences in ad-
justment were found among participants
whose recall of being peer victimized was
inconsistent. Specifically, those who retro-
spectively self-reported being peer victimized
but were not peer nominated as such had
lower adjustment on multiple dependent mea-
sures compared with students who were peer
nominated as victimized but did not retro-
spectively self-report victimization. Thus,
one’s current experience with peer victimiza-
tion and present perception of previous vic-
timization appear to be more powerful forces
in predicting psychological distress and mal-
adjustment than simply past experiences of
bullying.

Interestingly, participants who do not self-
report elementary-school victimization but were
peer nominated as victims currently report high
levels of adjustment. A possible explanation for
this is that adolescents who were peer victim-
ized in elementary school have reframed their
previous experiences and no longer see victim-
ization as part of their personal narrative. Al-
though one could argue that this group did not
perceive themselves as victimized during ele-
mentary school, this is unlikely as a high per-
centage of children self-report victimization
Instead, it may be that these individuals remember being victimized, but frame the experience as time (developmental period) or context (socializing with a bad group) dependent, and not as self-defining. Future research should explore this potential explanation. Specifically, studies may examine the relationship between retrospective self-reports and other measures of being peer victimized in the past (e.g., peer nominations or self-report measures from a previous time period). In addition, an examination of the personal narratives of students nominated as peer victimized in elementary school, but who do not self-report previous victimization, may help clarify the meaning these students make of such experiences.

Given that many studies rely exclusively on retrospective reports of peer victimization (e.g., Staubli & Killias, 2011), the current study demonstrates that retrospective reports of previous peer victimization do not strongly correlate with past peer nominations of victimization. This is an important cautionary note when interpreting retrospective studies. In fact, retrospective reports of past peer victimization correlated more closely with current self-reported peer victimization than with peer nominations of victimization in the past. This is consistent with the literature on mood-congruent recall of past events (e.g., Miranda & Kihlstrom, 2005). Given the ubiquity of past experiences of peer victimization, it is likely that adolescents currently being victimized and experiencing the concurrent negative psychosocial effects of such victimization are more likely to recall and report previous negative peer experiences. This is not meant to suggest that retrospective reports are biased as in wrong or false; instead, it suggests that retrospective reports are influenced by associative activation yielding enhanced coherence of personal memories with current social, emotional, and cognitive experiences.

**Limitations**

The current study has some notable limitations, including a low retention rate from the original sample to follow-up, and no measure of psychosocial adjustment at Time 1. Although retention in long-term prospective studies is typically a challenge and the current sample is larger than in many prior studies, it is still limited in size. Further, the small percentage of students who agreed to participate in high school suggests that current findings should be interpreted with caution. An examination of the demographic data at Time 1 did not distinguish this subset from the larger sample, and findings from the current study are consistent with those of other longitudinal studies of a similar nature (e.g., Olweus, 1993b). Although this provides support for the representativeness of the sample, the set of information for comparison is small, and bias due to attrition remains a notable threat to both the internal and external validity of the findings. For example, unexamined factors such as geographic and school mobility, school dropout, mental illness, or willingness to respond to questions about bullying could affect the representativeness of the sample. Future research would benefit from a larger set of initial data, more time points for assessment, and closer tracking of participants in order to examine the nonrandom effects of attrition. With the aforementioned limitations in mind, the findings are significant and novel, highlighting the power of context and suggesting that retrospective reports should be considered as meaningful constructions rather than simple recordings of past peer-victimization experience.

**Future Directions**

The current study supports findings of Olweus (1993b) that victims of peer victimization can “recover” over time when individuals are able to find contexts in which they are no longer victimized by peers and have positive social relations. This idea has been popularized by the It Gets Better Project, which focuses on the ability of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth to lead satisfying and fulfilling lives after experiencing significant peer victimization during childhood and adolescence. Although much media coverage focuses on the serious and potentially devastating concurrent effects of peer victimization, it also is critical to send the hopeful message that peer victims are not typically victimized long term. With new settings, new social groups, and new friendships, these children are as likely to feel as satisfied with life as those who have never had to.
experience significant peer victimization. Future research should further test this hypothesis, with particular emphasis on longitudinal research that follows children across time and multiple social settings (e.g., elementary school through high school). These studies should assess peer victimization and psychosocial adjustment at multiple time points, in order to more fully understand the relationship between previous experiences of peer victimization and maladjustment. Additionally, qualitative analyses can explore in depth how those identified as victims at an early time point (either identified by peer nomination or self-report) view their past experiences once their social environment has shifted.

References


