

Peer Victimization in the Chilean School Context: Results From a Study With Sixth-, Seventh-, and Eighth-Grade Students

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Abstract

Peer victimization has been scarcely researched in South American contexts. Since school contexts vary widely according to social-economic level and type of schooling (public vs. private), research in this field needs to consider the influence of these factors. Orpinas' and Frankowski's (2001) Aggression Scale was administered to 1,006 Chilean 6th to 8th graders. Results suggest that boys not only participate significantly more than girls in peer physical intimidation, they also report more physical and relational victimization. Although no differences were found on intimidation between grade levels, 6th and 7th graders reported more peer victimization than 8th graders. Students from medium-low and medium SES; and from public-municipal schools, reported more peer victimization. Results are discussed within the Chilean school context

Introduction

Only recently has there been research on school violence in the Chilean school context. The purpose of this study was to provide data concerning peer victimization in Chile. The objectives were to describe peer intimidation and victimization processes in preadolescent students pertaining to schools from different SES backgrounds and types of schools; and to analyze group differences concerning sex, grade level, and social context.

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Aggressive behavior has been described as behavior that intentionally damages others (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Different types of aggression include physical (e.g. hitting someone) and relational (e.g. threatening someone) aggression; as well as direct (e.g. threatening someone) and indirect (e.g. excluding someone) aggression.

Within the school context, research on peer aggression has mainly taken the form of bullying, a phenomenon defined as aggressive behavior that is intentional, implies an unequal balance or power between peers, and is persistent over time (Olweus, 1993, 1994). Research on bullying tends to identify bullies, victims, and spectators. Olweus (1998) defines a victim as someone who is exposed, repeatedly and during a considerable amount of time, to negative actions inflicted by one or more students.

However, not all kinds of peer aggression take the form of bullying, as defined above. It is necessary to study all kinds of peer aggression, both in the form of peer intimidation –directly or indirectly inflicting physical or

relational aggression on one or more peers- and peer victimization – receiving, whether directly or indirectly, physical or relational aggression inflicted by one or more peers.

Research on peer intimidation has shown that this phenomenon is most frequent during preadolescence, when students are in the middle-school years; an inverted U curve is observed, where peer intimidation is low during early elementary school, increases and reaches its peak during middle school years, and declines in high school years (Beane, 2006; Funk, 1997; Mooj, 1997).

Sex differences have also been observed, with male students showing more aggressive physical behaviors (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2007); but also receiving more peer victimization (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1995; Olweus, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Male students tend to identify themselves both as victims and aggressors, more than female students (Ortega & Mora-Merchán, 1997). Females, on the other hand, tend to report more relational aggression (spreading rumors and social isolation) (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2007).

Differences concerning socioeconomic background have also been informed, both in northern-hemisphere continents such as North America (Campart & Lindstrom, 1997; Lowry, Sleet, Duncan, Powell, & Kolbe, 1995) and Europe (Debarbieux, 1997; Debarbieux & Blaya, 2001); as well as southern-hemisphere South America (Berger & Lisboa, 2009).

In Chile, research studies show that in low SES backgrounds, not only do students perceive a high level of aggression between peers (Arancibia, 1994; MINEDUC/UNESCO/IDEA, 2005), they also report abusive behavior on behalf of teachers (Arancibia, 1994). A recent national survey performed by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC/UAH, 2006) showed that, overall, 83% of students perceive the occurrence of physical aggression, and 96% of students perceive psychological aggression in schools. SES differences were found, with 42% versus 34% of students from low SES reporting a high occurrence of aggressions (every day or once a week); and with 47% versus 31% of students from low SES declaring having participated in aggressive behavior.

These differences in SES background, which report more peer intimidation and situations of school violence, should be analyzed not in terms of social determination –more poverty, more violence- but in terms of social exclusion –how persistent social and economic exclusions, such as those manifested in the context of poverty or immigration, provoke rage and aggression (Debarbieux & Blaya, 2001).

Rationale and design of the study

This study sought to characterize peer intimidation and victimization processes among Chilean middle-school students. The design is non-experimental.

Method

Participants. 1.006 Chilean students enrolled in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade participated in this study. All students were enrolled in urban schools pertaining to the V Region of Chile. The sample was stratified according to sex, grade

level, SES status of the school (with four levels: medium-low, medium, medium-high, high), and type of school (with three levels: public/municipal; private/subsidized; private).

Instrument. The Aggression Scale (Orpinas & Frankowski, 2001) was used, in its Spanish version. This self-report scale contains 11 items that measure direct peer aggressive behavior, both physical and relational, performed during the last week. Students must rate how many times they incurred in this behavior (from 0 to 6+ times). With permission from the first author, the Victimization Scale was also used. This scale contains 10 items that measure direct peer aggression received during the last week, both physical and relational. The maximum score for Aggression is 66; and for Victimization, 60.

Procedure. A letter of informed consent was signed by parents, and students also signed an agreement of participation. The scale was administered in the schools. Data was analyzed using SPSS 15.0. Group differences were examined through ANOVA, and post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction, where applicable, were performed.

Results

Descriptive data. Table 1 presents means, standard deviation, and range for the Aggression and Victimization scales. Within each scale, descriptive data for physical and relational aggression are also presented. As can be observed, relational aggression was reported as the most frequent type of aggression, both performed as well as received.

Table 1
Means, standard deviation and range of physical and relational aggression and victimization.

		Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Aggression	Physical	2.42	3.87	0	24
	Relational	5.88	6.83	0	42
	Total	9.60	10.21	0	66
Victimization	Physical	1.55	2.75	0	18
	Relational	5.24	6.98	0	39
	Total	7.88	9.31	0	54

Group differences

Sex differences.

On the Aggression Scale, male students reported having participated in more acts of aggression than female students ($F(1,1102) = 15.782, p < .001, \eta^2 = .016$). Separate analyses by type of aggression (physical vs. relational) indicated that boys reported more physical aggression than girls ($F(3,1155) = 24.759, p < .001, \eta^2 = .021$). There were no significant differences between boys and girls on relational aggression (see Table 2).

On the Victimization Scale, boys reported receiving more victimization than girls ($F(1,1002) = 14.451, p < .001, \eta^2 = .014$). Separate analyses by type of aggression (physical vs. relational) indicated that boys reported receiving both more physical ($F(3,1155) = 19.547, p < .001, \eta^2 = .017$) as well as more relational ($F(3,1155) = 12.663, p < .001, \eta^2 = .011$) aggression than girls (see Table 2).

Table 2
Means (and SD) for physical and relational aggression and victimization in boys and girls.

		Boys	Girls
Aggression	Physical	3.45 (4.19)	2.25 (3.8)
	Relational	6.65 (6.69)	6.88 (7.10)
	Total	11.08 (10.57)	8.46 (9.72)
Victimization	Physical	2.21 (3.05)	1.44 (2.67)
	Relational	6.88 (7.50)	5.40 (6.80)
	Total	9.08 (9.81)	6.86 (8.72)

Grade-level differences

On the Aggression Scale, no differences were found between school-grade levels. However, on the Victimization Scale, significant differences were found ($F(2,1105) = 2.624, p < .05, \eta^2 = .016$). Post-hoc tests indicated that 6th and 7th grade students did not differ on victimization rates, but both reported more peer victimization than 8th grade students (see Table 3).

Table 3
Means (and SD) for physical and relational aggression and victimization in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students.

		6 th grade	7 th grade	8 th grade
Aggression	Physical	2.87 (3.86)	2.95 (4.27)	2.52 (4.00)
	Relational	6.12 (6.58)	7.01 (7.00)	7.57 (7.22)
	Total	9.03 (9.84)	10.03 (10.65)	9.63 (10.21)
Victimization	Physical	2.01 (3.02)	1.82 (2.93)	1.41 (2.54)
	Relational	6.47 (7.77)	6.76 (7.43)	4.56 (5.38)
	Total	8.48 (10.05)	8.59 (9.66)	5.99 (7.11)

SES differences

On the Aggression Scale, no differences were found between students from different SES background. However, significant differences were found for the Victimization Scale ($F(3,1105) = 7.912, p < .001, \eta^2 = .023$). Post-hoc tests indicated that students from Medium-Low and Medium SES did not differ in their scores, and, likewise, that students from Medium-High and High SES did not differ in their scores; but that students from Medium-Low and Medium SES reported more peer victimization than students from Medium-High and High SES (see Table 4).

Table 4

Means (and SD) for physical and relational aggression and victimization according to socioeconomic background.

	Medium-low	Medium	Medium-high	High
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Aggression	Physical	3.17 (4.34)	3.15 (4.29)	2.17 (3.53)	2.47 (3.42)
	Relational	7.27 (7.38)	6.78 (7.04)	6.33 (6.26)	7.13 (7.13)
	Total	10.34 (10.87)	10.04 (10.66)	8.57 (9.22)	9.50 (9.45)
Victimization	Physical	2.28 (3.22)	1.91 (3.01)	1.48 (2.68)	1.31 (1.91)
	Relational	7.04 (7.81)	6.93 (7.88)	4.73 (5.76)	4.48 (5.25)
	Total	9.32 (10.25)	8.84 (10.15)	6.21 (7.83)	5.80 (6.08)

Differences by type of school

On the Aggression Scale, no significant differences were found between public/municipal, private/subsidized, and private schools. However, on the Victimization Scale, significant differences were found ($F(2,1005) = 5,020, p < .01, \eta^2 = .010$). Post-hoc tests indicated that students from public/municipal and students from private/subsidized schools did not differ in their scores; and likewise, that students from private/subsidized schools and students from private schools did not differ in their scores; but that students from public/municipal schools reported more peer victimization than students from private schools (see Table 5).

Table 5
Means (and SD) for physical and relational aggression and victimization according to type of school.

		Public/municipal	Private/subsidized	Private
Aggression	Physical	3.06 (4.25)	2.51 (3.82)	2.47 (3.42)
	Relational	6.59 (7.17)	6.97 (6.40)	7.12 (7.12)
	Total	9.69 (10.57)	9.57 (9.57)	9.50 (9.44)
Victimization	Physical	1.95 (2.98)	1.70 (2.95)	1.32 (1.91)
	Relational	5.62 (6.93)	4.48 (5.25)	6.08 (7.17)
	Total	8.62 (9.82)	7.32 (9.17)	5.80 (6.01)

Discussion

The results of this study portray a picture of peer victimization that is similar in several aspects to what the research-based literature has shown.

Concerning sex differences, the results are in line with international studies which suggest that boys are a risk group, not only for peer aggression, but also for peer victimization. Separate analyses by type of aggression performed in this study suggest that, contrary to other research reports, girls do not perform nor receive more relational aggression than boys.

With respect to grade-level differences, a measure that taps into developmental differences, the results coincide with the literature, indicating that students from 6th and 7th grade report more peer victimization than 8th graders. This suggests that peer victimization declines with chronological age. It is interesting to note that no differences were found for peer aggression or intimidation. Even though students see themselves as “acting the same”, they perceive themselves as “receiving less acts of aggression”.

Last, the results of this study show no differences concerning social context, whether measured as SES or as type of school, when considering student’s self-report of intimidation or aggressive behavior inflicted. On the contrary, significant differences were found, both measured as SES or as type of school, when considering student’s report of aggression received, with students from Medium-Low and Low SES, and students from public/municipal schools, reporting more peer victimization. The similar results found in SES and type of schools are not surprising, since in Chile, schools tend to be socioeconomically segregated –whereas the majority of students from low and medium-low SES study in public/municipal schools, the majority of students from high SES study in private schools-. However, differences in student’s self-report of aggression incurred on and received (victimization) should be further analyzed.

With respect to the above differences indicating more victimization behaviors received by students from low and medium-low SES / municipal schools, we need to question whether the instruments used for screening peer victimization are not actually biased for detecting more peer victimization in contexts of poverty.

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