
Positive Peer Relationships and Risk of Victimization in Chinese and South Korean Children's Peer Groups

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Abstract

This study examined the moderating role of positive peer relationships in the relation between behavioral or academic risk factors and victimization in Asian children's peer groups. We recruited 296 children (161 boys, 135 girls) from Tianjin, China (mean age of 11.5 years) and 122 children (66 boys, 56 girls) from Seoul, South Korea (approximate mean age of 11 years). The children's behavioral, academic and social functioning were assessed with a multi-informant approach. Their behavioral and academic vulnerabilities were associated with their victimization by peers. However, these effects were mitigated for children who were able to establish positive relationships with their peers. Taken together, our findings highlight the potential buffering role of peer relationships in the cultural contexts examined.

Keywords: peer victimization; friendship; China; South Korea

This article reports two cross-sectional studies focusing on positive peer relationships as moderators of risk for victimization in Chinese and South Korean children's peer groups. Research conducted in western settings has demonstrated that a small minority of children are disproportionately targeted for persistent physical and verbal abuse by their peers (Perry, Kusel & Perry, 1988; Perry, Perry & Kennedy, 1992). Not surprisingly, these frequently bullied children often encounter adjustment difficulties across different domains of psychological functioning. For example, investigators have reported associations between peer victimization and academic failure (Juvonen, Nishna & Graham, 2000), school avoidance (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996), loneliness and depression (Hodges, Malone & Perry, 1995; Khatri, Kupersmidt & Patterson, 1994; Kupersmidt & Khatri, 1995; Olweus, 1992) and behavior problems (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone & Perry, 1997; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, Bates & The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2000).

Spurred on by these findings, researchers have sought to identify factors that might increase a child's risk for maltreatment by peers. One important focus of this work has

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been on the relation between children's social behavior and their vulnerability to victimization in the peer group. Children who manifest aggressive or submissive-withdrawn behavior seem to be especially likely to be persistent victims of peer aggression (Boivin, Hymel & Bukowski, 1995; Boulton, 1999; Olweus, 1978; Schwartz, Dodge & Coie, 1993). In contrast, children who are socially skilled and who display assertive-prosocial behavior rarely emerge as targets of bullying (Egan & Perry, 1998; Schwartz et al., 1993).

Investigators have also attempted to identify factors that might mitigate underlying behavioral vulnerabilities. In this domain of inquiry, particular attention has been focused on the potential buffering influence of positive relationships with peers. Researchers have concluded that positive peer relationships can play an important role in moderating the relation between risk factors and bully/victim outcomes (Hodges et al., 1997). Despite the risks associated with particular behavioral vulnerabilities, children who are able to establish positive relationships with at least a subset of their peers may be relatively unlikely to emerge as targets of bullying. Protective effects of this nature might reflect a number of different underlying processes. For example, positive relationships with peers could foster socialization into adaptive social skills that deter future overtures from aggressors. On a more instrumental level, peers may serve as allies or defenders of children who might otherwise emerge as frequent targets of peer aggression (Hodges et al., 1999).

As this brief review suggests, much has been learned regarding the determinants and moderators of bully/victim outcomes in recent years. However, research in this area has focused primarily on children in North American and European settings. Our relatively limited understanding of the processes underlying peer group victimization in other cultural contexts is notable, given the vast number of children who live in non-western settings. Approximately 300 million of the world's population of children come from China and South Korea alone (Wikipedia, 2002). Furthermore, an exclusive focus on western populations could obscure critically important distinctions between culture-specific and culture-free forms of child maladjustment (Weisz, McCarty, Eastman, Chaiyasit & Suwanlert, 1997).

This current project extends the existing literature on bully/victim problems by focusing on the children living in Mainland China and South Korea. We hope to learn more regarding the role of friendship and social preference across cultural contexts. These two societies have recently experienced marked changes due to rapid economic growth, the influence of western globalization and population migration to urban centers. Nonetheless, traditional Confucian values continue to influence the social development and behavior of Chinese and South Korean children (Kim & Choi, 1994; Park & Cho, 1995). In general, Confucian-based values emphasize group awareness, sensitivity to others and the minimization of direct conflict (Chen, 2000).

The value system inherent in Chinese and South Korean cultures could have important implications for children's social adjustment with peers. For example, inhibited or restrained behaviors are generally negatively evaluated in western children's peer groups (Boivin et al., 1995; Boulton, 1999; Olweus, 1978; Schwartz et al., 1993). However, there is some evidence that these behavioral styles can be associated with positive developmental outcomes in Chinese and South Korean settings (Chen, 2000). The cultural focus on self-restraint might promote acceptance of more passive or restrained interactive styles (Chen & Rubin, 1992).

Although the mechanisms underlying victimization in Chinese and South Korean children's peer groups have not been extensively investigated, some preliminary

findings are available. Schwartz and his colleagues (Schwartz, Chang & Farver, 2001; Schwartz, Farver, Chang & Lee-Shin, 2002; Xu, Farver, Schwartz & Chang, 2003) examined the concurrent correlates of victimization in these cultural contexts using these datasets. In both China and South Korea, submissive–withdrawn or aggressive behaviors and low levels of assertive–prosocial behaviors characterized persistently victimized children. Further investigation may be necessary but the available research does suggest a degree of similarity in the correlates of victimization across settings. Some researchers have theorized that these similarities in risk factors may be stemming from the recent shift in some eastern settings toward a more market economy social system. An example of this is seen in China where many urban schools have begun to include psychological health classes that encourage the development of better social skills and more assertive behavior for their students (Chen, Kaspar, Zhang, Wang & Zheng, 2004).

Poor academic functioning may also be an important risk factor for peer victimization in these cultures. Because there is a strong emphasis on achievement in Chinese and South Korean cultures (e.g., Crystal, Chen, Fuligni, Stevenson, Hsu & Ko, 1994; Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu & Kitamura, 1990), poor academic performance can be expected to lead to negative peer group attitudes. Consistent with this suggestion, Schwartz et al. (2001, 2002) reported that Chinese and South Korean children who have a poor academic performance tended to emerge as frequent targets of bullying. Interestingly, in western settings where there is comparatively less emphasis on achievement, associations between academic outcomes and peer victimization are generally modest in magnitude (Juvonen, Nishna & Graham, 2000).

This initial research provides some evidence regarding the main-effect correlates of victimization by peers. However, a remaining issue to be addressed is the role of potential moderator variables. As discussed above, western investigations have reported that the relation between risk and peer can be mitigated by the influence of positive peer relationships. However, the validity of similar interactive models in non-western settings has not yet been demonstrated. Accordingly, the objective of the current study was to examine evidence that positive peer relationships might buffer Chinese and South Korean children against the social risks associated with poor academic performance and maladaptive social behavior.

These societies contain a large percentage of the world's population and place a strong emphasis on the survival of the collective instead of the individual, which makes this present analysis particularly important. Based on the current literature we hypothesized that the role of friendship and social preference would be similar within these cultures because of these societies' collectivistic emphasis. However, despite the cultural similarities assumed to exist between Mainland China and South Korea, we felt that it was important not to lump them together as one collectivistic whole, but instead to study each culture separately.

A careful distinction was made between the positive peer relationships that occur within the context of dyadic interactions and the relationships that occur at the level of the full peer group (Hodges et al., 1999). Investigators have emphasized the need to consider dyadic friendship and acceptance/rejection by the peer group as a whole (i.e., social preference) and a separate relational system. Friendship is defined as an intimate, supportive relationship between two peers, whereas social preference refers to the collective attitude of the peer group toward a particular child (Asher, Parker & Walker, 1996; Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). From a conceptual and empirical

perspective, these aspects of adjustment with peers are likely to be highly related (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996). That is, children who are well liked by the peer group are particularly likely to have numerous friends (Bukowski, Pizzamiglio, Newcomb & Hoza, 1996). Nevertheless, social preference and friendship also contribute unique information to the prediction of psychosocial functioning (Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997). In addition, there is some evidence that social preference and friendship have distinct moderating roles in the prediction of bully/victim outcomes (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, Bates & Group, 2000), although the findings have not been consistent across studies (Hodges et al., 1997; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1999).

We expected that both friendship and social preference would function to mitigate risk for victimization in Chinese and South Korean children's peer groups. In societies that retain a collectivistic orientation, the future of individuals from the same social group is generally viewed as interrelated. Each person's well-being depends on the effort of others (Leung, 1996). Therefore, an effective way to get things done is often through one's personal relationships (Hwang, 1987). For example in China, friendship ('*You yi*' in mandarin) plays a central role in the socialization of Chinese children by helping them develop collectivistic ideologies and become part of the group that contributes to the well-being of the whole instead of the individual (Chen, 2000). Some studies have shown that this belief system also supports the idea that in-group members (e.g., family and friends) are more likely to be dependable and trustworthy than out-group members (Leung, 1988). Thus, Chinese and South Korean children might be expected to take an active role in protecting friends and other well-liked peer group members from potential aggressors. One example of the importance of friendship was reported by Chen et al. (2004), who found that friendships in China could have instrumental motives. Their study reported that Chinese children endorsed picking friends who would be able to help improve their social and academic standing. This finding highlights the importance of friendship within the Chinese culture. Unfortunately, our extensive literature search did not reveal any similar research in South Korea. We must emphasize that despite the reported importance placed on friendship within these cultures, very little is actually known regarding the moderating role of friendships.

From a more exploratory perspective, we also considered the moderating role of gender. Past researchers have described gender differences in specific types of social behavior in Chinese (Chen, Rubin & Li, 1995) and South Korean children's peer groups. For example, there are some preliminary evidence that in Chinese children's peer groups, behavioral inhibition is more closely associated with negative social outcomes for girls than for boys (Chen, Rubin & Li, 1995). It is not yet clear whether the influence of positive peer relationships is also dependent on gender for Chinese and South Korean children. Although we did not hypothesize such effects, we sought to explore the possibility carefully.

The goal of this project was to investigate the moderating role of positive peer relationships in the association between social risk factors and victimization in Chinese and South Korean children's peer groups. Given the high value placed on social relationships in both China and South Korea, we hypothesized that these relationships would protect socially or academically vulnerable peers. Our hypotheses stem from a view of positive social relationships that is non-context specific; we expected that friendship and social preference would moderate the risk for victimization across cultural settings.

We addressed our research objectives with two independent cross-sectional investigations. The participants were recruited from elementary schools in Mainland China and South Korea. Although main effect correlates were previously established for these specific samples (Schwartz et al., 2001; & Schwartz et al., 2002), the analyses presented in the current article represent new findings. Our focus was on middle childhood because this is the developmental period during which individual differences in aggression and victimization appear to stabilize (Eron, 1987; Olweus, 1979; Perry et al., 1988).

Study 1

Participants

The participants were 296 children (161 boys and 135 girls) with a mean age of 11.5 years ($SD = .7$), recruited from the fifth and sixth grades of a primary school in Tianjin, China. Tianjin is one of the five major industrial cities in China. Before data collection began, parental permission was obtained for all eligible children. The parents were given details regarding the study's goals and procedures and informed that they could refuse their child's participation without negative consequences of any kind. Although none of the parents declined permission, eight children either were absent during the data collection or chose not to participate in the project. In addition, there were some missing values because participating children could opt not to complete specific items.

Procedure

A multi-informant data collection procedure was used, with data obtained via teacher ratings, peer nominations and a review of school records. The measures were initially pilot tested in several North American samples (Schwartz & Gorman, 2003; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000) and have since been validated in multiple countries including China and South Korea (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2001, 2002; Xu et al., 2003, 2004). The devices were then translated and back translated by paid language consultants who were native to the region of China where the study was conducted. An educational psychologist, also native to the region, reviewed the translations for accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

Peer nominations were collected with a group-administered inventory that contained 16 items assessing social behavior, aggression, victimization by peers and social preference or rejection. The children were given a classroom roster and asked to nominate up to three peers who fitted each of the descriptors. Peer nomination assessments of this nature yield highly reliable indices even when single-item scales are used (Coie, Terry, Lenox, Lochman & Hymen, 1995).

In addition, the teachers (with the assistance of teacher's aides) completed the social behavior rating scale (SBRS, Schwartz, 2000). This device contains 46 descriptors of children's social behavior, victimization by peers, aggression, academic functioning and social preference. The accuracy of each descriptor is rated on a five-point scale (1 = almost never true of the child, to 5 = almost always true of the child).

For most of the constructs assessed in this study we obtained information from two separate data sources (i.e., teacher ratings and either peer nominations or data obtained

from school records). To maximize the reliability of the variables we used in our analyses, we decided to generate linear composites of the scores across informants. First, we standardized each of the variables in order to equate scale distributions. We then generated summary scores based on the mean of the relevant indicator variables for each construct.

Details regarding the specific constructs assessed by the measures are described below. Additional reliability and validity information regarding the measures, including confirmatory and exploratory factor analyses have been reported elsewhere (Schwartz et al., 2001).

Behavioral and Academic Risk Variables

Submissive-withdrawn Behavior. Eight teacher-rating items were used to assess this dimension of the children's behavior (e.g., 'likes to play alone', 'shy or timid'; $\alpha = .75$). In addition, one peer nomination item, 'kids who like to play alone . . . these are kids who would rather be alone than be with other kids', was also used to index withdrawn behavior. The correlation between the mean of the eight teacher ratings and the total number of nominations received for the peer nomination item (standardized within class) was $r = .47, p < .001$.

Assertive-prosocial Behavior. Six teacher-rating items were used to assess assertive-prosocial tendencies (e.g., 'shares with other children', 'helpful to peers'; $\alpha = .88$). In addition, two peer nomination items were used to assess assertive behavioral styles ('can stand up for self without hitting, fighting, or getting angry', 'is a good leader'; $\alpha = .63$). The correlation between the mean of the six teacher-rating items and the total number of nominations received across the two peer nomination items (standardized within class) was $r = .43, p < .001$.

Aggression. Consistent with past research conducted across diverse cultural contexts (e.g., Boulton, Bucci & Hawker, 1999; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen & McNeily-Choque, 1998; Österman, Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, Kaukianien, Landau, Fraczek et al., 1998), our measures included items designed to tap multiple subtypes of aggression, including physical and verbal forms of overt aggression as well as relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). We used eight teacher-rating items (e.g., 'taunts or teases other children', and 'threatens or bullies other children'; $\alpha = .91$) and four peer nomination items (e.g., 'kids who start fights', 'kids who hit or push other kids'; $\alpha = .89$). The correlation between the mean of the eight teacher-rating items and the nominations received across the four peer nomination items (standardized within class) was $r = .62, p < .001$.

Academic Functioning. Three teacher-rating items assessed the children's global academic functioning. We also obtained maths and language standardized test scores directly from school records. The maximum number of points on each test was 100, with a 60-points passing score. The correlation between the mean maths and language scores was $r = .85, p < .001$. The correlation between the mean of the three teacher-rating items and the maths and language scores were $r = .68, p < .001$ and $r = .66, p < .001$, respectively.

Moderator Variables

Social Preference. As part of the peer nomination inventory, the children were asked to identify the peers whom they liked most and the three whom they liked least. The total number of nominations received by each child for each of these two items was then calculated and standardized within the class. A social preference score was generated from the standardized difference between the 'like most' and 'like least' scores (Coie, Dodge & Coppotelli, 1982).

Friendship. Children who reciprocally nominated each other as 'liked most' were conceptualized as friends. The total number of friendships involving each child was then calculated (possible range of 0 to 3). The correlation between friendship and social preference was $r = .65, p < .001$.

Outcome Variables

Peer Victimization. In assessing peer victimization we adopted a measurement strategy similar to the approach described above for aggression. We used items designed to tap indirect/relational victimization as well as overt verbal and physical behaviors. We used six teacher-rating items (e.g., 'other kids hit or push this child', 'other children tease or make fun of this child'; $\alpha = .89$) and four peer nomination items (e.g., 'kids who get hit or pushed by other kids', 'kids who get picked on or teased by other kids'; $\alpha = .90$). The correlation between the mean of the six teacher-rating items and the total nominations received across the peer nomination items (standardized within class) was $r = .49, p < .001$.

Results

To examine the moderating role of friendship and social preference, we conducted separate hierarchical regression analyses for each moderating variable (friendship and social preference) and for each of the four risk variables (i.e., submissive-withdrawn behavior, low assertive-prosocial behavior, aggression and low academic functioning). In each model, victimization was predicted from the main effects of the risk variable, moderator and gender (entered on step 1); the two-way interaction terms for risk variable by moderator, risk variable by gender and moderator by gender (entered on step 2); and the three-way interaction term for risk variable by gender by moderator (entered on step 3). The steps were entered sequentially, and all the terms were entered simultaneously at each step. Significant interaction effects were conceptualized as indicative of moderation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). Interaction terms were calculated based on mean-centered values (Aiken & West, 1991).

Friendship as a Moderator

As depicted in Table 1, there were significant risk variable by friendship two-way interactions for low assertive-prosocial behaviors, submissive-withdrawn behaviors and low academic functioning. However, we did not find any theory-relevant interaction effects for aggression. In addition, we did not interpret the two-way interaction for

Table 1. Study 1: Summary of the Analyses of the Moderating Role of Friendship in the Association Between Behavioral and Academic Vulnerabilities and Peer Group Victimization

| Outcome Variables | Step | Effects in Model | β | sr^2 |
|-------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------|--------|
| Victimization | 1 | Aggression | .17 | .02** |
| | | Friendship | -.30 | .08*** |
| | | Gender | -.00 | .00 |
| | 2 | Aggression by gender | -.07 | .00 |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.01 | .00 |
| | | Aggression by friendship | .01 | .00 |
| 3 | Aggression by friendship by gender | -.00 | .00 | |
| Victimization | 1 | Academic functioning | -.62 | .30*** |
| | | Friendship | -.07 | .00 |
| | | Gender | -.06 | .00 |
| | 2 | Academic functioning by gender | .05 | .00 |
| | | Friendship by gender | .03 | .00 |
| | | Academic functioning by friendship | .21 | .03*** |
| 3 | Gender by academic functioning by friendship | -.17 | .02*** | |
| Victimization | 1 | Assertive-prosocial | -.34 | .09*** |
| | | Friendship | -.17 | .02*** |
| | | Gender | -.06 | .00 |
| | 2 | Assertive-prosocial by gender | .01 | .00 |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.01 | .00 |
| | | Assertive-prosocial by friendship | .30 | .07*** |
| 3 | Assertive-prosocial by friendship by gender | .05 | .00 | |
| Victimization | 1 | Submissive-withdrawn | .36 | .12*** |
| | | Friendship | -.25 | .06*** |
| | | Gender | .10 | .01* |
| | 2 | Submissive-withdrawn by gender | -.09 | .01 |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.09 | .01 |
| | | Submissive-withdrawn by friendship | -.19 | .03*** |
| 3 | Submissive-withdrawn by friendship by gender | .03 | .00 | |

Note: 1 All terms are entered simultaneously at each step, with steps entered sequentially.
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$.

academic functioning because this interaction was complicated by a higher-order three-way effect (i.e., a significant, academic functioning by friendship by gender effect).

We decomposed the significant two-way interactions for the low assertive–prosocial and submissive–withdrawn variables in a series of follow-up analyses. Peer victimization was predicted from each of these constructs, with friendship fixed at low (1 *SD* below the mean), medium (the mean) and high (1 *SD* above the mean) levels (as per Aiken & West, 1991). Consistent with findings previously observed in western samples, the negative relation between assertive–prosocial behaviors and peer victimization steadily declined in magnitude as the level of friendship moved from low, $\beta = -.74$, $p < .001$, to medium, $\beta = -.47$, $p < .001$, to high, $\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$. Likewise, the relation between submissive–withdrawn behaviors and victimization declined steadily as the level of friendship moved from low, $\beta = .50$, $p < .001$, to medium, $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$, to high, $\beta = .08$, *n.s.*

Next, we decomposed the three-way academic functioning by friendship by gender effect with regression models conducted separately by gender. In these analyses, peer victimization was predicted from the main effects of friendship and academic functioning, and the two-way interaction for friendship by academic functioning. For the boys, there was a significant friendship by academic functioning effect, $\beta = .39$, $sr^2 = .08$, $p < .001$. The corresponding effect for the girls was only marginally significant, $\beta = .12$, $sr^2 = .01$, $p = .05$, but may still be noteworthy, given the conservative nature of interaction effects in field designs (McClelland & Judd, 1993).

We then conducted separate analyses by gender to examine relations between peer victimization and academic functioning at low, medium and high levels of friendship (Aiken & West, 1991). For the boys, the strength of the negative association between academic functioning and peer victimization declined steadily as the level of friendship moved from low, $\beta = -.86$, $p < .001$, to medium, $\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$, to high, $\beta = .06$, *n.s.* A similar pattern emerged for the girls, with the strength of association declining steadily as the level of friendship moved from low $\beta = -.73$, $p < .001$, to medium $\beta = -.59$, $p < .001$ and high $\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$.

Social Preference as a Moderator

As shown in Table 2, there were significant risk variable by social preference by gender effects for submissive–withdrawn behavior, low assertive–prosocial behavior and low academic functioning. On the other hand, there were no theory-relevant interactions for aggression.

To decompose the significant three-way social preference by risk variable by gender effects, we examined the two-way social preference by risk variable effects separately by gender. These analyses yielded significant interaction effects for both genders for each of the three risk variables, although the effects were consistently stronger for the boys. For the boys, there were significant two-way interactions between social preference and academic functioning, $\beta = .53$, $sr^2 = .25$, $p < .005$, social preference and assertive–prosocial behavior, $\beta = .44$, $sr^2 = .13$, $p < .005$ and social-preference and submissive–withdrawn behavior, $\beta = -.37$, $sr^2 = .13$, $p < .005$. Likewise, for the girls, there were interactions between social preference and academic functioning, $\beta = .14$, $sr^2 = .017$, $p < .05$, social preference and assertive–prosocial behavior, $\beta = .34$, $sr^2 = .09$, $p < .005$ and social preference and submissive–withdrawn behavior, $\beta = .18$, $sr^2 = .03$, $p < .005$.

Table 2. Study 1: Summary of the Analyses of the Moderating Role of Social Preference in the Association Between Behavioral and Academic Vulnerabilities and Peer Group Victimization

| Outcome Variables | Step | Effects in Model | β | sr^2 | |
|-------------------|---------------|---|----------------------|--------|--------|
| Victimization | 1 | Aggression | -.04 | .00 | |
| | | Social preference | -.55 | .23*** | |
| | | Gender | .01 | .00 | |
| | 2 | Aggression by gender | -.05 | .00 | |
| | | Social preference by gender | .11 | .01 | |
| | | Aggression by social preference | -.03 | .00 | |
| | 3 | Aggression by social preference by gender | -.00 | .00 | |
| | Victimization | 1 | Academic functioning | -.51 | .16*** |
| | | | Social preference | -.24 | .04*** |
| Gender | | | -.06 | .00 | |
| 2 | | Academic functioning by gender | .03 | .00 | |
| | | Social preference by gender | .17 | .02*** | |
| | | Academic functioning by social preference | .24 | .05*** | |
| 3 | | Gender by academic functioning by social preference | -.43 | .08*** | |
| Victimization | | 1 | Assertive-prosocial | -.18 | .02*** |
| | | | Social preference | -.43 | .12*** |
| | Gender | | -.01 | .00 | |
| | 2 | Assertive-prosocial by gender | -.09 | .00 | |
| | | Social preference by gender | -.13 | .01* | |
| | | Assertive-prosocial by social preference | -.36 | .10*** | |
| | 3 | Gender by assertive-prosocial by social preference | -.16 | .01** | |
| | Victimization | 1 | Submissive-withdrawn | .34 | .11*** |
| | | | Social preference | -.48 | .22*** |
| Gender | | | .05 | .00 | |
| 2 | | Submissive-withdrawn by gender | -.04 | .00 | |
| | | Social preference by gender | .02 | .00 | |
| | | Submissive-withdrawn by social preference | -.26 | .06*** | |
| 3 | | Gender by submissive-withdrawn by social preference | .14 | .02*** | |

Note: All terms are entered simultaneously at each step, with steps entered sequentially.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$.

Table 3. Study 1: Moderating Role of Social Preference as a Function of Gender

| Risk Variable | Gender | Levels of Social Preference | | |
|----------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------|--------|
| | | Low | Medium | High |
| Academic functioning | Girls | -.61** | -.52** | -.44** |
| | Boys | -.94** | -.35** | .24* |
| Assertive-prosocial | Girls | -.65** | -.42** | -.20** |
| | Boys | -.73** | -.33** | .06 |
| Submissive-withdrawn | Girls | .46** | .28** | .11 |
| | Boys | .65** | .26** | -.14 |

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .005$.

To investigate the nature of these two-way effects, we specified regression models predicting peer victimization from academic functioning, assertive-prosocial behavior and submissive-withdrawn behavior with the level of social preference fixed at low, medium and high levels (Aiken & West, 1991). Separate models were specified for each gender. As shown in Table 3, the strength of the association between the risk variables and peer group victimization consistently declined as the level of social preference increased.

Summary of Results

The relation between academic or behavioral risk factors and peer victimization was attenuated at high levels of friendship and social preference. The findings were complicated by a pattern of gender differences and did not extend to all classes of social risk (e.g., aggression). Interpretational difficulties notwithstanding, the full pattern of findings provides initial support for an interactive model of risk in the Chinese cultural context. Behavioral and academic vulnerabilities are associated with victimization by peers in Chinese children's peer groups. However, these effects appear to be moderated by friendship and social preference. In the next study, we sought to replicate this pattern of results in South Korean children's peer groups.

Study 2

Participants

The participants were 122 children (66 boys, 56 girls) recruited from three classrooms (one classroom in each of the third, fourth and fifth grades) in a primary school located in a densely populated urban neighborhood of Seoul, South Korea. Of these children, 44 were in the third grade (mean age = 10 years), 39 were in the fourth grade (mean age = 11 years) and 39 were in the fifth grade (mean age = 12 years). In the weeks prior to the data collection, we obtained parental consent for each of the eligible children in the school. The parents were informed that their child's participation in the project was voluntary and that they could refuse permission without negative consequences of any kind.

Procedure

For Study 2, we used measures and procedures that were derived from Study 1 (with some minor modifications). Each of the devices that were developed and validated for the earlier project was translated into the South Korean language and checked for accuracy by a South Korean developmental psychologist. The measures were then group administered to the children in their classroom by a research assistant who was not affiliated with the school. In addition, the teachers completed a South Korean-language version of the SBRS within a period of several weeks following the classroom data collection.

A notable difference between the measures used for Study 1 and Study 2 pertains to our assessment of academic functioning. Because we did not have access to school records in the South Korean setting, we relied on ratings obtained directly from the teachers. However, across cultures we have found that teacher ratings of academic functioning are highly correlated with assessments obtained from other sources (i.e., grade point average and standardized test scores; based on data reported by Schwartz & Gorman, 2003).

Below we provide a brief summary of the psychometric properties of the measures used in this setting. Unless otherwise noted, the items are derived directly from the corresponding scales used in Study 1. As in the previous investigation, we generated composite variables from the mean of the standardized teacher rating and peer nomination indices assessing each construct. Further details regarding the measures are also presented by Schwartz et al. (2002).

Risk Variables

Submissive–Withdrawn Behavior. The teachers completed six items designed to tap this dimension of behavior although one item was dropped because of a negative factor loading ('gives in too easily to demands or requests from peers'; for the remaining five items, $\alpha = .76$). As in Study 1, a single peer nomination item assessed social withdrawal. We also added a second peer nomination item that assessed submissive responses to conflict overtures ('kids who cry or get upset when somebody bothers them'). These two peer nomination items were highly correlated, $r = .60, p < .001$. The correlation between the indices derived from the teacher rating and peer nomination items was $r = .50, p < .001$.

Assertive–prosocial Behavior. Six teacher-rating items were utilized to assess this dimension of children's behavioral styles ($\alpha = .74$). In addition, two peer nomination items were utilized ($r = .61, p < .001$). The correlation between the teacher rating and peer nomination indices was $r = .44, p < .001$.

Aggression. We used the eight-item teacher rating scale described in Study 1 ($\alpha = .80$) as well as the same four peer nomination items ($\alpha = .80$). The correlation between the teacher rating and peer nomination indices was $r = .46, p < .001$.

Academic functioning. Teachers completed the three academic performance rating scale derived from the SBRS ($\alpha = .80$).

Moderator Variables

Social Preference and Friendship. Social preference and friendship were assessed with procedures identical to Study 1. The correlation between social preference and friendship in the South Korean sample was $r = .38, p < .001$.

Outcome Variables

Peer Victimization. We used the six-item teacher rating scale from Study 1 ($\alpha = .84$) as well as the same four peer nomination items ($\alpha = .75$). The correlation between the teacher rating and peer nomination indices in this sample was $r = .46, p < .001$.

Results

To examine the moderating role of friendship and social preference within this dataset, we conducted separate hierarchical regression analyses, identical to analyses conducted in Study 1, for each moderating variable and for each of the four risk variables.

Friendship as a Moderator

As depicted in Table 4, there were significant risk variable by friendship by gender three-way interactions for academic functioning and low assertive–prosocial behavior.

We decomposed these effects by conducting follow-up models separately by gender. In our models, we examined the two-way interactions for academic functioning by friendship and assertive–prosocial behavior by friendship. For the girls, there was a significant interaction for assertive–prosocial behavior by friendship, $\beta = .40, sr^2 = .15, p < .005$ and a marginally significant interaction for academic functioning by friendship, $\beta = .24, sr^2 = .05, p < .07$. However, the corresponding effects for the boys did not reach significance (academic functioning by friendship, $\beta = -.11, sr^2 = .009, n.s.$; assertive–prosocial behavior by friendship, $\beta = .08, sr^2 = .005, n.s.$).

We explored the two-way interactions for the girls by specifying models predicting victimization from low assertive–prosocial behavior and low academic functioning, with the level of friendship fixed at low, medium and high levels. These analyses revealed that, for the girls, the strength of the negative association between academic functioning and victimization decreased as the level of friendship moved from low, $\beta = -.54, p < .05$, to medium, $\beta = -.23, n.s.$, to high, $\beta = .10, n.s.$ Likewise, the negative association between assertive–prosocial behavior and victimization declined in strength as the level of friendship moved from low $\beta = -.96, p < .001$, to medium, $\beta = -.31, p < .005$, to high, $\beta = .34, n.s.$

Social Preference as a Moderator

Next, we focused on the moderating role of social preference. As depicted in Table 5, there were significant two-way risk variable by social preference interaction effects for submissive–withdrawn behaviors, assertive–prosocial behaviors and academic functioning. Follow-up analyses revealed that the strength of the association between each of the variables and peer victimization decreased as the level of social preference changed. The relation between submissive–withdrawn behavior and victimization declined steadily as the level of social preference moved from low ($\beta = .59, p < .001$),

Table 4. Study 2: Summary of the Analyses of the Moderating Role of Friendship in the Association Between Behavioral and Academic Vulnerabilities and Peer Group Victimization

| Outcome Variables | Step | Effects in Model | β | sr^2 | |
|-------------------|---------------|--|----------------------|--------|--------|
| Victimization | 1 | Aggression | .57 | .31*** | |
| | | Friendship | -.20 | .04** | |
| | | Gender | .07 | .01 | |
| | 2 | Aggression by gender | .15 | .02* | |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.05 | .00 | |
| | | Aggression by friendship | -.01 | .00 | |
| Victimization | 1 | Academic functioning | -.30 | .09*** | |
| | | Friendship | -.27 | .07*** | |
| | | Gender | .04 | .00 | |
| | 2 | Academic functioning by gender | -.07 | .00 | |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.06 | .00 | |
| | | Academic functioning by friendship | -.02 | .00 | |
| | 3 | Academic functioning by friendship by gender | .28 | .03* | |
| | Victimization | 1 | Assertive-prosocial | -.48 | .21*** |
| | | | Friendship | -.11 | .01 |
| Gender | | | .04 | .00 | |
| 2 | | Assertive-prosocial by gender | .12 | .01 | |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.11 | .01 | |
| | | Assertive-prosocial by friendship | .18 | .02* | |
| 3 | | Assertive-prosocial by friendship by gender | .32 | .05*** | |
| Victimization | | 1 | Submissive-withdrawn | .69 | .34*** |
| | | | Friendship | -.03 | .00 |
| | Gender | | .23 | .05*** | |
| | 2 | Submissive-withdrawn by gender | -.28 | .05*** | |
| | | Friendship by gender | -.12 | .01 | |
| | | Submissive-withdrawn by friendship | -.02 | .00 | |
| | 3 | Submissive-withdrawn by friendship by gender | -.18 | .01 | |

Note: All terms are entered simultaneously at each step, with steps entered sequentially.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$.

to medium ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), to high ($\beta = .22$, $p = .07$). The relation between low assertive-prosocial behavior and victimization also declined steadily as the level of social preference moved from low ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$), to medium ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .005$), to high ($\beta = -.12$, *n.s.*). Finally, the relation between academic functioning

Table 5. Study 2: Summary of the Analyses of the Moderating Role of Social Preference in the Association Between Behavioral and Academic Vulnerabilities and Peer Group Victimization

| Outcome Variables | Step | Effects in Model | β | sr^2 |
|-------------------|---|---|---------|--------|
| Victimization | 1 | Aggression | .33 | .07** |
| | | Social preference | -.41 | .10** |
| | | Gender | .10 | .01 |
| | 2 | Aggression by gender | .17 | .01 |
| | | Social preference by gender | -.01 | .00 |
| | | Aggression by social preference | .02 | .00 |
| 3 | Aggression by social preference by gender | .06 | .00 | |
| Victimization | 1 | Academic functioning | -.09 | .01 |
| | | Social preference | -.58 | .03** |
| | | Gender | .09 | .01 |
| | 2 | Academic functioning by gender | -.05 | .00 |
| | | Social preference by gender | -.13 | .01 |
| | | Academic functioning by social preference | .18 | .02* |
| 3 | Academic functioning by social preference by gender | .10 | .01 | |
| Victimization | 1 | Assertive-prosocial | -.21 | .03* |
| | | Social preference | -.47 | .14** |
| | | Gender | .07 | .01 |
| | 2 | Assertive-prosocial by gender | .07 | .00 |
| | | Social preference by gender | -.17 | .02 |
| | | Assertive-prosocial by social preference | .27 | .06** |
| 3 | Assertive-prosocial by social preference by gender | -.02 | .00 | |
| Victimization | 1 | Submissive-withdrawn | .52 | .21** |
| | | Social preference | -.41 | .14** |
| | | Gender | -.13 | .01 |
| | 2 | Submissive-withdrawn by gender | -.19 | .03** |
| | | Social preference by gender | .01 | .00 |
| | | Submissive-withdrawn by social preference | -.24 | .04** |
| 3 | Submissive-withdrawn by social preference by gender | -.01 | .00 | |

Note: All terms are entered simultaneously at each step, with steps entered sequentially.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$.

and victimization declined steadily as the level of social-preference moved from low ($\beta = -.20, p = .08$), to medium ($\beta = -.10, n.s.$), to high ($\beta = -.01, n.s.$).

Summary of Results

Positive peer relationships can moderate the association between social risk and victimization in South Korean children's peer groups. However, the findings were not consistent across the examined risk factors and gender. Similar to Study 1, no theory-significant moderating effects were reported for aggression. However, the relations between each of the remaining social risk variables and peer victimization were moderated by friendship and/or social preference.

General Discussion

The results of Study 1 were generally supportive of our hypotheses and were consistent with past findings reported for western samples. As predicted, the relation between academic or behavioral risk factors and peer victimization was attenuated at high levels of friendship and social preference. Our initial results do seem to suggest that positive peer relationships can play an important moderating role in the association between social risk factors and victimization in Chinese children's peer groups. This protective role fits in well with the ideals of a collectivistic culture, which emphasizes the importance of social and group preference. Chinese children who have a friend or who are socially accepted by their peer group would be less likely to be victimized by their peers.

Interestingly, the overall pattern of moderating effects was stronger for the boys than the girls. In the absence of *a priori* hypotheses, we will avoid making strong conclusions regarding gender differences. However, in past analyses we found some evidence that, in the Chinese cultural context, peer victimization is a more central issue for boys than girls (i.e., boys are initiators and recipients of bullying more often than girls; Schwartz et al., 2001). In addition, one study conducted by Chen and his colleagues found that within the Chinese culture there was a difference in the social involvement of girls compared with the boys. Chinese girls were reported to spend most of their time socializing with members of the family instead of their peers and boys were encouraged to form friendships and associate with peers more than girls were (Chen et al., 2004). This expectation may explain why there were slightly stronger effects for social preference and friendship in the boys compared with the girls. There may also be differences in the underlying processes of risk for girls and boys; our findings suggest a need for further exploration.

The results of Study 2 partially replicated our findings in China. We found evidence that positive peer relationships can moderate the association between social risk and victimization in South Korean children's peer groups. However, the findings were not consistent across the examined risk factors and there were notable gender differences. The findings regarding potential gender differences in South Korea were different from the findings in China. The analyses we conducted provided some limited evidence that friendship serves a stronger moderating role for girls than boys in the South Korean setting. However, in China, friendship seemed to exert a more powerful influence for boys than girls. It is possible that the disparity in findings reflects differences between the two settings in the gender-defined role of friendship but any such conclusions would be premature, especially because there is no literature within this culture that

describes gender role differences with regard to social interactions and the function of friendships. At this point, the available data might simply support the need for a more theory-driven focus on the interacting role of gender and positive peer relationships in determining social outcomes across cultures.

Taken together, the findings from the two studies summarized in this article provide evidence that positive peer relationships moderate risk for peer victimization across cultural contexts. Consistent with research conducted in North America and Europe, previous analysis on these datasets have demonstrated that Chinese and South Korean children who exhibited specific behavioral or academic vulnerabilities were relatively likely to experience frequent peer victimization. However, in these cultural settings, the strength of the association between social and academic risk factors and peer group victimization appears to be dependent on the children's level of social preference/rejection and friendship. More specifically, the association between social and academic risk factors and peer victimization appears to be attenuated at high levels of friendship and social preference.

Although these initial findings are supportive of the hypothesized interactive model of risk, the specific mechanisms through which positive relationships with peers might moderate associations between social risk factors and victimization remain to be identified. Western researchers have suggested that friends could serve as protectors for vulnerable children (Hodges et al., 1999) and that they might facilitate the development of social reputations that dissuade potential aggressors (Schwartz et al., 1999). Although the findings of the current investigations do not support causal conclusions, similar processes may be relevant in the Chinese and South Korean settings. These findings are especially relevant when we take into account the instrumental values that are placed on friendships in China and South Korea, where friends may be chosen to fulfill a social or academic need (Chen et al., 2004).

Alternatively, in Chinese and South Korean children's peer groups, friendship and social preference may be important marker variables rather than direct buffering mechanisms. Children who have numerous friends and who are socially preferred despite significant behavioral deficits are likely to be characterized by other strengths or competencies. For example, children who are socially withdrawn and who lack assertive social skills may still be well liked by peers because they are physically attractive, especially intelligent, or skilled athletically. Those attributes, in turn, may serve to reduce the probability that they will emerge as targets of bullying. Under these conditions, positive peer relationships could be conceptualized as distal indicators of more proximal moderating mechanisms that have yet to be identified. However, even in this case, the present findings would still be consistent with an interactive model of risk for peer group victimization.

Regardless of the specific mechanisms through which positive peer relationships exert an influence, the pattern of findings with regard to aggression will require further investigation. In both China and South Korea, we found no moderating effects for aggression although effects were observed for each of the other examined risk factors. We suspect that this outcome reflects negative social attitudes toward aggressive behavior in collectivistic cultures. Because the dominant social values emphasize restrained behavior and respect for others, aggression may be particularly likely to result in social sanctions and mistreatment by peers. Under these circumstances, external protective factors (such as friendship) may not be sufficient to promote resilience. Aggressive behavior toward peers has been linked to social rejection in a number of different cultural contexts (Coie, Dodge & Kupersmidt, 1990). For example,

in Chinese society, restrained behavioral styles are highly valued (Chen, Rubin & Sun, 1992) so that aggression and other disruptive behavior may have a particularly negative valence. Under these conditions, protective factors that compensate for other vulnerabilities might not be sufficient to mitigate the high risk associated with aggression, which has been demonstrated in the main effect studies on this dataset (Schwartz et al., 2001, 2002).

It is important to recognize that we know little regarding the social relationships of aggressive children in these settings. Research in the West has shown that aggressive children tend to befriend aggressive peers (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest & Garipey, 1988) and that the friendship of these children is characterized by high levels of negative features (Laird, Pettit, Dodge & Bates, 1999). It seems reasonable to hypothesize that in China and South Korea, aggressive children's peer relationships will also differ in important ways from those of their non-aggressive classmates. These differences could have important implications for the potential role of positive peer relationships in predicting bully/victim outcomes.

Of course, we also need to be careful to avoid interpreting the null hypothesis by making inferences based on the non-significant findings for aggression. The conservative nature of interaction effects in quasi-experimental designs has been well documented (McClelland & Judd, 1993). There may have been modest effects for aggression that we simply lacked the statistical power to detect. We believe that both studies demonstrated sufficient power; however, we concede that our study in South Korea might have benefited from a larger sample.

It might also be worthwhile to consider differences in the moderating role of distinct indicators of positive peer relationships. In the two settings, we found interactions between risk factors and peer relationships at the levels of both the dyad (i.e., friendship) and group (i.e., social preference). Cross-sectional research conducted with western samples has generally produced a similar pattern of findings (Hodges et al., 1997, 1999). However, longitudinal research conducted in North America provided some evidence that dyadic friendships might serve a key role in buffering against long-term risk for peer group victimization. This issue might warrant further investigation because cultural processes may have implication for the social meaning of different relational systems. In addition, it might be beneficial to test and see whether the moderating role of dyadic versus group friendships would differ as a function of the type of victimization being studied.

The findings of this study have the potential to enhance current understanding of the mechanisms underlying victimization in Chinese and South Korean children's peer groups. However, several caveats and potential shortcomings of this research need to be discussed. To begin, it is important to emphasize that the studies described in this article do not provide direct information regarding differences *between* cultural groups. We focused our analyses on processes *within* groups in an attempt to learn more about the correlates of peer victimization in theoretically interesting cultural contexts. Studies conducted within groups can serve an important role in generating hypotheses regarding differences between groups, but the conclusions remain limited.

Likewise, issues related to external validity should be considered in research within as well as between cultural groups (Bukowski & Sippola, 1998). Children do not all experience their culture in the same way and there is great diversity in customs, belief systems and cultural practices. These interpretational difficulties might be somewhat complicated by the nature of our study design. Given the difficulties associated with

research conducted across international boundaries, we did not recruit large numbers of participants and did not attempt to identify a sample that was representative of a wide range of the examined contexts.

Apart from the ambiguities involved in carrying out research in other cultural communities, there are some fundamental design issues to consider. In this initial descriptive research, we employed a cross-sectional design. Relevant research conducted in western settings has included both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. However, the evidence for longer term moderating effects for positive peer relationships has been equivocal. For example, Schwartz (2000) and Schwartz et al. (1999) concluded that friendship could moderate the prediction of bully/victim outcomes over the course of several years. On the other hand, Hodges and Perry (1999) found that friendship does not play a role in the prediction of changes in victimization over time. Thus, there seems to be a need for further investigation across contexts.

One other possible limitation was that our measures were formulated in the West with the help of individuals that were familiar with the cultures of China and South Korea. However, it may be beneficial for future research to formulate measures of victimization and risk factors taking into account specific descriptors provided by children in the populations of China and South Korea. We feel it is important to stress that these measures have been extensively used in studies on the eastern population (e.g., China) and have demonstrated a high level of validity (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2001, 2002; Xu et al., 2003, 2004).

To summarize, our findings in the Chinese and South Korean contexts were generally consistent with results from past research conducted in North America and Europe. In both settings we found evidence that positive peer relationships moderate the association between behavioral and academic risk factors and peer victimization. However, there are unanswered questions regarding gender differences and the social implications of aggressive behavior for Chinese and South Korean children. Further research that incorporates a longitudinal design is warranted.

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