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The social skills problems of victims of bullying: Self, peer and teacher perceptions

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Background. A small number of prior studies have found that victims of school bullying tend to exhibit poor social skills. Few of these have examined this issue from multiple perspectives, and there has been a focus on a restricted range of social skills.

Aims. To determine the extent to which self, peers, and teachers regard victims as having poorer social skills than non-victims across 20 behaviours/competencies.

Sample. A convenience sample of 330 pupils aged between 9 and 11 years (162 girls and 168 boys) provided self-report and peer-report data. They were drawn from 12 classes from 6 junior schools in the UK. Additionally, 11 of the class teachers provided data.

Method. Three separate methods were employed and in each case, participants were provided with 20 short statements that described a different social skill: (1) participants who were classified as either 'victims' or 'non-victims' (using peer nominations) rated themselves on a 3-point scale in terms of how like them each description was, (2) participants were asked to think of a victim and a non-victim in their class and to rate both of these people on each description, and (3) teachers were asked to rate a previously identified victim and a non-victim from their class on each description.

Results. Using a direct discriminant function analysis of the self-ratings, six of the social skills items were found to discriminate between victims and non-victims, and the discriminant function was able to correctly classify 80% of the participants. For 18 of the items, peer ratings indicated significantly more pronounced social skills problems for victims than for non-victims. Teacher ratings were significant for eight of the social skill items, and in each case, victims were rated as having greater problems.

Conclusion. The finding that victims are perceived by three different sources to have poor social skills has important implications for interventions to support victims of bullying.

The capacity to interact successfully with others at school is an important developmental task for all pupils (see Schneider, Attilli, Nadel, & Weissberg, 1989).

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Psychologists and others often employ the terms 'social skills' and 'social competence' to describe such a capacity. Although there is disagreement about how these constructs should be defined, it seems to be universally accepted that specific behaviours underlie them both. Such a view is captured in McFall's (1982) proposition that social skills are 'the specific behaviours that enable a person to be judged as socially competent by others on a particular social task' (p. 12). More recently, Merrell and Gimpel (1998) referred to a socially skilled individual as someone who can develop and maintain friendships easily, resolve difficult social problems tactfully, and 'essentially breeze their way through the social thicket of life' (p. 17). By contrast, those individuals deficient in this area are, 'plagued throughout their lives with significant interpersonal, occupational, academic, and emotional-behavioural problems' (p. 17).

Although researchers have been interested in a wide range of social correlates and consequences of poor social skills, one issue that has received increased attention over the past decade is peer bullying in school. It has been suggested that victims of school bullying ('victims' henceforward) are socially unskilled. For example, Elliott (1991) stated that victims of bullying are 'lacking the qualities that ease every day social interactions' (p. 11), and that victims of bullying 'lack social skills, have no sense of humour, have a serious "demeanor" and are incapable of the relaxed give and take of every day life' (p. 11). While such initial ideas were not supported by systematic evidence, they were important because they stimulated focused studies. Much of the ensuing research has supported the view that victims of bullying have social skills problems. For example, several studies have found that victims tend to display 'non-assertive' behaviour (e.g. Patterson, Littman, & Bricker, 1967; Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). It has also been found that victims of bullying are prone to cry easily (Patterson *et al.*, 1967; Perry *et al.*, 1990; Pierce, 1990), and they tend to 'hover' rather than try to enter the peer group (Pierce, 1990). Other studies have found that victims tend to display an anxious vulnerability (Olweus, 1978; Troy & Sroufe, 1987).

Perry *et al.* (1990) assessed peers' perceptions of the way children respond when bullied. They found that the children perceived 'victims' as 'likely to reward their attackers with tangible rewards and signs of distress and as unlikely to punish their attackers by retaliating' (p. 1321). A similar study by Pierce (1990) examined peers' perceptions of the behavioural characteristics of 'aggressive' (i.e. provocative) and 'non-aggressive' (i.e. passive) victims. Both aggressive and non-aggressive victims were found to cry easily. However, aggressive victims were perceived as displaying a range of 'externalizing behaviours' (e.g. argumentativeness, putting the blame on others, pushy peer group entry style, disruptiveness, lying, stealing). On the other hand, non-aggressive victims were perceived as withdrawn, depressed, anxious, avoidant of conflict, and as 'hovering' on the edge of the peer group.

Schwartz *et al.* (1993) used contrived playgroups to examine the behavioural characteristics of victims of bullying. They found that boys who were later targeted for victimization by their peers rarely initiated assertive behaviour (i.e. 'persuasion attempts' and 'social conversation'). They also spent more time in passive play states (i.e. 'parallel play'). Schwartz *et al.* (1993) proposed that this behaviour marks children out as easy targets, and once selected for victimization, such individuals reward their attackers by submitting. These children also became more withdrawn as a result of being victimized.

In a number of studies conducted in North America, Hodges and colleagues (e.g. Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges & Perry, 1999) also found that

certain behavioural characteristics can increase the risk of being victimized. They referred to these behaviours of the victim as 'individual risk factors'. In the first prospective longitudinal study, 229 pupils were assessed at two time points over the course of an academic year (Hodges & Perry, 1999). The children completed a modified version of the Peer nomination inventory (PNI; Wiggins & Winder, 1961). They found that internalizing problems (e.g. withdrawal, anxiety/depression, hovering peer entry style) and physical weakness were independently predictive of gains in victimization over time. In addition, victimization predicted changes in internalizing problems, which suggests that these problems are not merely related to victimization in a unidirectional manner.

However, the use of common informants in the above study can lead to alternative interpretations being offered (e.g. response bias and shared method variance). As a result, Hodges *et al.* (1999) improved upon the design by using multiple informants. In addition, by using the Child Behaviour Questionnaire (Rutter, 1967), they assessed 'clinically significant' (internalizing/externalizing) problems. A large sample of 393 French–Canadian pupils (mean age 10;7) participated in this 1-year longitudinal study. Victimization was assessed using peer report, and teachers were asked to complete the Child Behaviour Questionnaire. They found that internalizing and externalizing problems predicted increases in victimization over time.

Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1999) conducted a similar study to that conducted by Hodges *et al.* (1999). They were also interested in the association between 'clinically significant' behaviour problems and later victimization. 389 children (aged between 5 and 6 years) from three geographic regions in North America, were assessed each year, over a 4-year period. Teachers completed the teacher report form of the child behaviour checklist (CBC; Achenbach, 1991), and victimization was assessed using peer nomination interviews. 'Externalizing problems', 'attention problems', and 'social problems' at Time 1 were found to predict victimization at Time 4.

In the UK, Lowenstein (1978) asked teachers and a psychologist to differentiate between bullied and non-bullied children in terms of physical characteristics, personal characteristics, and certain social and family background features. Thirty-two children who were referred to a psychologist (by a parent and a teacher) were identified as victims of bullying. These children were matched with a same-sex classmate who was not classified as a victim or a bully. The children were observed over the course of 3 days by a teacher and a psychologist, and were rated on certain characteristics. The observers did not know why they were observing and rating the children. The authors concluded that, 'Social skills and the capacity to communicate (. . .) are likely to mitigate against being bullied' (p. 318). In particular, non-victims were found to join in with others in work more effectively, were not excessively dominating, aggressive, boastful, attention seeking, or demanding of others to do work for them.

Other researchers have focused on how children respond to victimization, particularly on which behaviours dissuade, and those which seem to promote further victimization (e.g. Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996). Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997) conducted two interviews (in the Fall and the Spring) with 199, 5- to 6-year-old children. Children were asked about peers' responses to peer aggression and about their own victimization experiences. They found that 'having a friend help' was associated with reduced victimization for boys, whereas 'fighting back' was related to stable victimization for boys. The finding that fighting back was related to stable victimization is important for intervention strategies, as it goes

against popular opinion of the usefulness of retaliating using physical means. On the basis of this limited evidence, it seems that a better response strategy is to get a friend to help.

Salmivalli *et al.* (1996) also looked at how victims responded to bullying. A questionnaire was completed by 573 pupils (aged between 12 and 13 years) from schools in Finland. Participants were asked to nominate victims of bullying and evaluate each victim's behaviour. Three subscales of respondes were established: (1) counter-aggressive, (2) helpless, and (3) nonchalant. It was found that helplessness (e.g. starting to cry) and counteraggression in girls, and counteraggression in boys were perceived to make bullying start or continue. The absence of helplessness in girls and nonchalance (e.g. acting as if they didn't care), and the absence of counteraggression in boys were perceived as factors which make bullying diminish or stop.

In summary, certain behavioural characteristics that can be considered manifestations of poor social skills have been found to put children at increased risk of being victimized. Social skills have been defined as, 'The specific behaviours that enable a person to be judged as socially competent by others on a particular social task' (McFall, 1982, p. 12). However, there has been a narrow focus on the 'internalizing/externalizing problems' of victims. Indeed, very few previous studies have focused on examining a broad range of behaviours that are thought to reflect social skills. Only the study by Lowenstein (1978) has examined social skills *per se*, and this suffers from a small, unrepresentative sample of victims. Moreover, most previous studies have been conducted in North America. The findings from these studies will not necessarily generalize to other countries since behaviour that is appropriate in one country/culture may not be successful or appropriate in another (Schneider, 2000, Spence, 1995). In addition, national differences for peer victimization have been documented (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 1999). For these reasons, the aim of the present study was to examine and compare a broad range of social skills of victims and non-victims in the UK.

Several different methods have been devised to study children's social skills, and three of the most common are self-, peer-, and teacher-ratings. While each method has recognized strengths and weaknesses, it is now generally accepted that the different approaches can each tell us something of value (see Schneider, 2000). Recognizing this last point is important because Elliott, Sheridan, and Gresham (1989) found that different informants (i.e. parents, teachers, peers) may have different views about which individuals do and do not have social skills problems. As far as we are aware, no study has yet looked at the associations between victimization and a wide range of social skills behaviours from the perspective of children themselves, their peers, and their teachers. The specific aim of the present study, then, was to test the hypothesis, based on prior studies conducted primarily in North America, that victims would exhibit greater social skills problems than non-victims. Moreover, by using self-, peer-, and teacher-ratings of the same social skills items, we were able to investigate the extent of agreement/disagreement between different informants.

Method

Participants

Two groups of participants were involved in this study. One group consisted of pupils from six schools in Eastbourne and Hailsham (East Sussex, UK). The schools were

selected on a convenience basis. To minimize disruption to the schools, just one class of Year 5 pupils (modal age 10 years) and one class of Year 6 pupils (modal age 11 years) were targeted in each school (mean age of sample = 10;3). Of these, five parents declined to give consent for their child to participate and 13 children decided not to take part. This left a total sample of 330 pupils (168 male and 162 female). The pupils provided both self- and peer-report data (see below). The second group of participants consisted of 11 out of the 12 class teachers (the other teacher was provided with a questionnaire but failed to return it due to workload pressures).

We focused on the 9–11 year group because the incidence of bullying has been found to peak at this age (Whitney & Smith, 1993). As one of the aims of the larger research project was to develop a social skills training programme, it was felt appropriate to intervene at an age when children are most at risk.

Materials

The first stage of the present study involved the identification of 20 social skills items. We generated some of the items on the basis of prior findings concerning the specific behaviours associated with an elevated risk of victimization. Other items we adapted from existing social skills rating scales, including the Social Skills Questionnaire (Spence, 1995), the social skills rating system (Gresham & Elliott, 1990), and the skillstreaming checklist (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). Both positive and negative items were included to control for response bias (see Table 1). They were incorporated into a pupil questionnaire and a teacher questionnaire (see below).

When generating the items ourselves, we ensured that they adhered to the definition of social skills by McFall (1982). For some of the items, the decision was made to make the items specific to the bullying situation because social skills can vary depending on the situation, as noted by Spence (Spence, 1995, p. 9), '(. . .) problems of social relationships do not always occur with all people, in all situations'. Also, as the aim of the study was to assess the relationship between peer victimization and social skills problems, of particular interest were those behaviours, which are interpersonal in nature. In contrast, we were not interested in self-management social skills, such as 'keeping your desk neat and tidy'. On the basis of previous research (see Introduction), it is argued that non-assertive behaviour, provocative behaviour (including fighting back), and withdrawal/solitary behaviour are indicative of poor social skills.

Procedure

Self- and peer-ratings

Pupil participants were tested on a whole-class basis. A researcher (the first author) gave each child a questionnaire and began by reading out standardized instructions which informed the participants that she wanted to find out what children are like. They were informed that their parents had given their consent, but that they did not have to answer the questions if they did not want to (here, 13 children declined to participate). They were told that it was not a test and that there were no right or wrong answers. They were asked to take their time, and to think very carefully about their answers. Confidentiality was assured, and the children were asked to keep their answers covered so that no one else could see them. The researcher then read out a definition of bullying to ensure that all participants had a common understanding of the construct for the purposes of the study. For instance, it highlighted that bullying can be physical or verbal,

Table 1. Mean (and standard deviation) self, peer and teacher ratings of victims and non-victims for social skills items

Social skill item	Mean (and SD) self-ratings			Mean (and SD) peer ratings			Mean (and SD) teacher ratings		
	Victims	Non-victims	Correlation[a]	Victims	Non-victims	t[b]	Victims	Non-victims	t[c]
1. Looks scared	2.14 (.83)	1.47 (.65)	.68[d]	2.08 (.82)	1.28 (.60)	14.50***	1.82 (.75)	1.18 (.40)	2.61*
2. Gives in to the bully too easily when picked on	2.14 (.79)	1.52 (.68)	.56[d]	2.15 (.84)	1.40 (.66)	12.04***	1.91 (.70)	1.55 (.69)	1.08
3. Cries when picked on	2.05 (.79)	1.55 (.68)	.50[d]	2.12 (.82)	1.41 (.67)	11.76***	1.91 (.83)	1.36 (.67)	1.75
4. Stands in way that looks like she/he is weak	2.00 (.71)	1.49 (.67)	.49[d]	1.99 (.82)	1.42 (.70)	8.99***	2.09 (.94)	1.18 (.40)	2.89*
5. Talks very quietly	1.91 (.81)	1.61 (.66)	.34[d]	1.85 (.85)	1.62 (.74)	3.47***	2.00 (.89)	1.82 (.75)	<1.0
6. Looks like an unhappy person	1.87 (.71)	1.52 (.72)	.33[d]	2.10 (.78)	1.38 (.69)	12.00***	2.27 (.65)	1.09 (.30)	5.22***
7. Fights back when picked on	1.81 (.75)	2.20 (.79)	.31	1.92 (.86)	2.11 (.88)	2.67***	2.09 (.83)	2.27 (.79)	<1.0
8. Stands up for self if other kids behave badly towards her/him	2.14 (.77)	2.40 (.72)	.27	1.90 (.85)	2.40 (.76)	7.91***	2.09 (.70)	2.64 (.50)	1.75
9. When picked on, tells the bully to go away and stop bullying her/him	2.09 (.87)	2.36 (.78)	.26	2.19 (.86)	2.34 (.82)	2.32*	2.18 (.60)	2.27 (.65)	.36
10. Will put up with other kids being nasty toward her/him without doing anything	2.00 (.84)	1.72 (.76)	.26	2.04 (.84)	1.66 (.81)	5.66***	2.18 (.75)	1.55 (.52)	2.61*
11. Looks like a shy person	1.86 (.89)	1.61 (.73)	.25	1.93 (.86)	1.46 (.69)	7.73***	1.82 (.87)	1.55 (.69)	<1.0
12. Lets other kids know that they can't pick on her/him	1.90 (.77)	2.18 (.74)	.25	1.67 (.78)	2.25 (.79)	9.05***	1.91 (.83)	2.36 (.81)	1.17
13. Runs away when picked on	1.91 (.87)	1.58 (.71)	.24	2.05 (.84)	1.48 (.72)	9.32***	2.09 (.69)	1.55 (.69)	2.21
14. Stands up for self in an argument	2.43 (.68)	2.58 (.64)	.19	1.94 (.82)	2.54 (.71)	9.85***	2.00 (.89)	2.45 (.82)	1.04
15. When picked on, says things back to the bully so they do it even more	1.62 (.74)	1.83 (.78)	.16	2.03 (.90)	1.82 (.83)	2.84**	2.18 (.60)	1.45 (.69)	3.73**
16. When picked on, shows that she/he is not bothered	1.81 (.68)	1.99 (.81)	.15	1.78 (.80)	2.09 (.85)	4.54***	1.45 (.69)	2.18 (.60)	3.07*

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Social skill item	Mean (and SD) self-ratings			Mean (and SD) peer ratings			Mean (and SD) teacher ratings		
	Victims	Non-victims	Correlation[a]	Victims	Non-victims	t^b	Victims	Non-victims	t^c
17. Tries to spoil other kids games	1.32 (.72)	1.26 (.57)	.07	1.55 (.77)	1.91 (.85)	<1.0	2.09 (.54)	1.18 (.40)	4.30**
18. Looks really serious	2.19 (.81)	2.27 (.73)	.05	1.91 (.85)	2.35 (.78)	6.75***	2.09 (.70)	1.64 (.50)	1.46
19. Looks like she/he is really confident	2.14 (.73)	2.19 (.71)	.05	1.69 (.76)	2.36 (.72)	10.85***	1.72 (.90)	2.36 (.67)	<1.0
20. Annoys other kids or gets on other kids nerves	1.57 (.81)	1.60 (.65)	.04	1.99 (.85)	1.77 (.81)	2.88**	2.72 (.47)	1.27 (.47)	7.02***

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
[a]Correlation with discriminant function.
[b]Due to missing data the *df* does vary between items (from 308 to 320).
[c]*df* = 1, 10.
[d]Meets criterion as a predictor that merits being interpreted (see text).

and can include things such as social exclusion and spreading rumours. We employed the adaptation by Whitney and Smith (1993) of Olweus' (1991) well-known description:

> We say a child or young person is being bullied, or picked on when another child or young person, or a group of children or young people, say nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a child or young person is hit, kicked threatened, locked inside a room, sent nasty notes, when no one ever talks to them and things like that. These things can happen frequently and it is difficult for the child or young person being bullied to defend himself or herself. It is also bullying when a child or young person is teased repeatedly in a nasty way. But it is not bullying when two children or young people of about the same strength have the odd fight or quarrel (see Whitney & Smith, 1993, p. 7).

The researcher drew participants' attention to the instructions in the questionnaire to think of someone in your class who gets bullied a lot (but who does not bully other children) and someone in your class who never gets bullied (but who does not bully other children). For each of the 20 items on the questionnaire, participants were asked to state if it is *a lot like this person*, *a bit like this person*, or *not at all like this person* (coded as 3 to 1, respectively). These data constituted the peer-ratings of victims and non-victims.

   The participants were also asked to rate themselves on each of the 20 social skills items using the same 3-point scale. So that we could compare the self-ratings of victims and non-victims, participants were also asked to write down the names of three children in their class who get bullied a lot. For each child, the number of nominations they received for this item was divided by the number of children that provided nominations in their class and then multiplied by 100. This score represents the percentage of victim nominations received by each participant, and it was used to categorize participants as victims or non-victims. Following Boulton and Smith (1994), children who received more than 33% of nominations were classified as victims ($N = 22$), and the remaining children were classified as non-victims ($N = 308$). As in the Boulton and Smith (1994) study, 33% of our sample represented approximately one standard deviation above the mean. This criterion has been employed by other researchers, such as Pellegrini, Bartini, and Brooks (1999), and Schwartz (2000).

   The researcher then guided the children through a practice item and the first two social skills items. They were then allowed to work through the rest of the items at their own pace, but they were invited to ask for assistance if they did not understand any of the terms used in the questionnaire. When all of the class had finished, the researcher read out a closing statement asking the children to keep their answers private and thanked them for their help.

Teacher-ratings

Each teacher was asked to complete a questionnaire that required them to rate two children from their class identified by the researcher. It contained the same social skills items and the same rating scale that were used in the pupil questionnaire. One of these target children was the individual who received the highest victim nomination score (see above), and the other was a randomly selected classmate, matched in sex and age, who received no nominations and did not report being victimized themselves. To avoid bias that might arise from reputation/labelling effects, the teachers were not informed as to why these children were selected.

Results

Self-perceptions of social skills: Victims versus non-victims

The mean (and *SD*) self-ratings of victims ($N = 22$) and non-victims ($N = 308$) for the 20 social skills items are shown in Table 1. The simplest way to determine whether or not victims and non-victims rated themselves differently on each of the 20 social skills items would have been to compute a separate unrelated *t*-test for each one. However, interpreting these results would be problematic due to Type 1 error. In order to ensure that any such differences were not the result of capitalizing on chance due to carrying out multiple tests, we conducted a direct discriminant function analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). This approach to analysis produced several results that directly allowed us to address the stated aims of the study (see below).

In this analysis, the 20 social skills items served as predictors of membership of the two groups of interest (i.e. victims and non-victims). Given that there were only two groups, it was only possible to extract one discriminant function. There was a strong and significant association between this function and the predictors, $\chi^2(20) = 43.04$, $p = .002$. An analysis of the proportion of cases that were and were not correctly classified on the basis of the discriminant function was conducted. Overall, 80.4% of the participants were correctly classified. Thus, collectively, the social skills items significantly discriminated between victims and non-victims. In order to identify which of the specific social skills items were the best predictors of victim group status, the loading matrix of correlations between each of the social skill items and the discriminant function was examined (Table 1). As Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) point out, there is no consensus regarding how high correlations in a loading matrix must be in order to be interpreted. They noted that .33 (i.e. 10% of variance) is a convention, and we adopted that here. Six of the social skills items met this criterion (i.e. 'looks scared', 'gives in to the bully too easily when picked on', 'cries when picked on', 'stands in a way that looks like she/he is weak', 'talks very quietly', and 'looks like an unhappy person'). These items constituted the most effective predictors. Another item, 'fights back when picked on', approached this cut-off value (correlation = .31). In order to interpret the direction of the group differences on these items, Table 1 also displays the mean (and standard deviation) scores for the victims and the non-victims. For the six most effective predictor items, victims' scores indicated greater social skills problems than non-victims. For the item, 'fights back when picked on' the ratings indicated greater social skills problems for non-victims, compared to victims (this unexpected finding will be discussed later).

Peer perceptions of the social skills of victims and non-victims

The mean (and standard deviation) ratings provided by participants for victim and non-victim targets for each of the 20 social skill items are shown in Table 1. These data indicate that victims tended to receive ratings that suggested greater social skills deficits compared with non-victims. In order to determine if there was a significant difference on the ratings given by participants to victims and non-victims, multiple related *t* tests were conducted (which raises the possibility of a Type 1 error). Discriminant function analysis is not appropriate here since the data are related. The *t* tests revealed significant differences for 19 of the items. On all but two of the 19 items (Item 7 - 'fights back when picked on', and Item 18 - 'looks really serious'), victim ratings suggested significantly greater social skills deficits than non-victims.

Teacher perceptions of the social skills of victims and non-victims

The mean ratings for each social skill item given by teachers to victim and non-victim targets are presented in Table 1. In all but one case (item 7 – 'fights back when picked on') victims were rated as having greater problems/deficits than non-victims. The teacher data were analysed using a series of related *t*-tests (see Table 1) and so the risk of Type 1 error must be acknowledged.

The differences between the means were significant for eight of the social skills items. From examination of the means, it is clear that victims were viewed as having greater social skills deficits compared to non-victims. Some of these items reflect those social skills problems that indicate a behavioural vulnerability (e.g. 'looks scared', 'stands in a way that looks like he/she is weak', and 'looks like an unhappy person'). Others represent a non-assertive behavioural style (e.g. 'will put up with other kids being nasty towards him/her . . .' and 'when picks on shows that she/he is not bothered' [non-victims]). The five items that have been mentioned can be viewed as passive social skills problems. In contrast, three of the items that were found to differentiate between victims and non-victims represent what can be classified as quite provocative behaviours (e.g. 'when picked on says things back to the bully so they do it even more', 'tries to spoil other kids games' and 'annoys other kids or gets on other kids nerves').

Discussion

Table 1 shows that for three items, the three sources of data are in agreement. The items are as follows: 'looks scared', 'stands in a way that looks like he/she is weak' and 'looks like an unhappy person'. These items map onto previous research (see Introduction) which has found that victims of bullying display a behavioural vulnerability (Olweus, 1978; Troy & Sroufe, 1987), and this behaviour marks these children out as 'easy targets' (e.g. Schwartz *et al.*, 1993). For six items, both peers and self were in agreement. These were as follows: 'looks scared', 'stands in a way that looks like he/she is weak', 'looks like an unhappy person', 'gives in to the bully too easily when picked on', 'cries when picked on', and 'talks very quietly'. The first three have already been described as representing a 'behavioural vulnerability'. The three others are supported by the following research findings: (1) victims tend to display non-assertive behaviour (e.g. Patterson *et al.*, 1967; Perry *et al.*, 1990; Schwartz *et al.*, 1993), (2) victims of bullying tend to reward their attackers by showing signs of distress (Perry *et al.*, 1990), and (3) victims of bullying tend to be quite withdrawn and solitary in their behaviour in that they 'hover' on the edge of the play group (Pierce, 1990), and engage less in social conversation (Schwartz *et al.*, 1993). All of the items mentioned so far can be described as those tapping 'passive' social skills problems.

In terms of the teacher data, for eight items there were significant differences, and seven of these were items for which pupils perceived there were differences. For three of the seven there was agreement between self-, peer-, and teacher data. For the four items where there was agreement for the peer and teacher data only, two of the items represent submissive/non-assertive behaviour ('will put up with other kids being nasty towards him/her without doing anything to stop them', and 'when picked on shows that she/he is not bothered'). The two remaining items are very different to those described thus far in that they represent 'provocative' (as opposed to 'passive') social skills problems: 'when picked on says things back to the bully so they do it even more',

and 'annoys other kids or gets on other kids nerves'. These two items map onto previous research which has found that some victimized children display a range of externalizing problems, e.g. aggressiveness, disruptiveness, argumentativeness (Pierce, 1990). These behaviours have also been found to put children at increased risk of peer victimization (Hodges *et al.*, 1999).

Two unexpected findings were that non-victims were rated as more likely to 'fight back when picked on' (using self, peer, and teacher data). Also, non-victims received higher ratings from peers for the item 'looks really serious'. This latter finding is contradictory to a statement made by Elliott (Elliott, 1991; see Introduction). However, 'looks really serious' is ambiguous and could have been interpreted in many different ways. Some of the raters may have interpreted this item as 'looks really hard/tough', which may explain why the children rated this as more characteristic of non-victims.

The finding that non-victims were rated as more likely to fight back when picked on (compared to victims) is contrary to what we expected based on the findings of previous studies (see Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996). These studies found that fighting back was a factor more likely to make bullying start or continue. We would argue that simply assessing whether or not a child fights back when picked on is insufficient. Rather, future studies should focus on how effective children are at fighting back, since it has been argued that children who are bullied may be inept at handling aggressive provocations (i.e. they are 'ineffectual fighters'; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

The fact that there are discrepancies in the findings between informants (i.e. self, peers, and teachers) is perhaps not surprising. As noted earlier, it is important to use multiple informants because those involved have different views, which are not always in agreement (Elliott *et al.*, 1989). Beck (1986) stated that teachers are in a good position to assess children's social skills because they observe them in class every day and can make comparisons between children of the same developmental level. However, teacher scales are hampered by the problem of response bias, for example, teachers may attribute good characteristics to a child because they do well academically (i.e. the halo effect). It is acknowledged that children are an important source of information about their own social competence (Spence, 1995). However, self-report data are often biased because some children are self-critical and underestimate their social achievements. Other children overestimate their social success and are unaware of the negative reactions of others (Spence, 1995). Regarding peers, it is widely believed that peers can provide valuable information about those children with problems (e.g. Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). It has been argued that peers are probably more aware of certain behaviours/issues, compared to teachers (Worthen, Borg, & White, 1993).

One limitation of the study is that the definition of 'victim' differed between informants. The peers were asked to compare the social skills of pure victims (i.e. not bully-victims) with controls (i.e. not bullies or victims). In contrast, the self-ratings were used to compare victims and non-victims selected on the basis of peer nominations of victimization. A smaller subsample of these victims and non-victims were then selected for the teachers to rate. It is quite possible that some of these victims identified were also bullies. This is an important point since it has been found that provocative victims (or bully-victims) have different characteristics to 'passive victims'. In particular, they are characterized as going out of their way to irritate and provoke their peers, even to the extent of teasing and taunting those known to be aggressive (Pierce, 1990). Any future use of multiple informants in this way must ensure that the definition of victims and non-victims is the same across informants. This would require additional peer nomination items to assess bullying behaviour.

In summary, victims of peer bullying at school were generally perceived as having greater social skill problems than non-victims. This result is in accord with North American data (see Introduction), and it attests to the robust nature of the effect. A major contribution of our investigation is the finding that self-, peer-, and teacher ratings converged to highlight a core of social skills problems associated with peer victimization. In support of previous research, victims of bullying were perceived to: (1) display a behavioural vulnerability (e.g. looking scared), (2) be non-assertive (e.g. 'give in to the bully too easily. . .'), (3) reward and thus reinforce the bully's behaviour (e.g. 'cries when picked on'), (4) be withdrawn and solitary in their behaviour (e.g. 'talks very quietly'), and (5) be quite 'provocative' (e.g. 'annoys other kids. . .').

Perry *et al.* (1990) suggested that social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) could be used to explain the behaviour of bullies. The theory proposes that people have beliefs ('outcome expectancies') concerning the rewards and punishments for their behaviour in different types of situations, and this determines to some extent their behaviour. Also, behaviour is thought to be influenced by how much value people attach to the consequences of their actions ('outcome values'). In the bully-victim context, aggressors are thought to interpret the weak and submissive stance of peers as an indication that they will receive the positive outcomes (e.g. appearing dominant and powerful) that they value highly. According to this view then, the behaviour of victims is believed to reward and thus reinforce the bully's behaviour.

On the basis of empirical research and psychological theory, we propose that non-assertive behaviour (in relation to bullying) indicates poor social skills. However, there may be some situations where non-assertive behaviour is adaptive, for instance, running away when on the receiving end of extreme physical violence. There is a need to acknowledge that adaptive responses will vary depending on the type of victimization. Little is known about appropriate social skills/responses in relation to indirect/relational bullying. Other characteristics of bullying episodes may also have an influence, for example, bullying by one individual or a group. Future research could investigate this issue so that children can be better informed about how to cope with different types of victimization.

A related issue is that of sex and age differences. As noted by Smith, Shu, and Madsen (2001), 'The relative success of different coping strategies will be affected by the age and sex of the pupil. . .' (p. 345). Hanish and Guerra (2000) also observe that studies that have examined sex as a moderator of the relationship between individual behaviours and peer victimization have produced conflicting findings. They argued that there is good reason to expect sex to emerge as a significant moderator. Studies have found that boys and girls experience different forms of victimization at different rates (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Also, some studies suggest that internalizing problems (e.g. depression and withdrawal) are a greater risk factor for boys compared to girls, possibly because withdrawn behaviour is more sex inappropriate for boys than girls (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001).

Future research could also examine age differences and work towards refining a developmentally appropriate model. Hanish and Guerra (2000) found no association between withdrawal and victimization for first and second graders. They argued that the behavioural characteristics of the child (i.e. submission) are unlikely to emerge as a significant predictor for peer victimization in younger children because young children are not skilled at recognizing this behaviour (e.g. Younger & Boyko, 1987; Younger, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1985).

One of the main limitations of the present study is that as data were collected concurrently, it would be inappropriate to make statements (however, tentative) about the causal direction of effect. The use of a prospective longitudinal design is advantageous because it establishes a temporal precedence in the relationship between two variables. Also, by using multiple regression analysis it is possible to statistically control for previous levels of victimization. These factors make it possible to investigate changes in victimization over time – helping to unravel the causal direction of effect. However, as noted by Vernberg (1990), the absence of a true experimental design limits the interpretation of results to statements of 'consistent with' rather than proof of causal relationships (p. 191).

The findings have important implications for interventions to help children who are at risk of being bullied by peers. They suggest that any attempt to improve children's social skills may have a positive effect on children's risk for peer victimization. Over the past few decades, a number of social skills training (SST) programmes have been developed. Examples include: (1) Skillstreaming the elementary school child (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997), (2) Teaching social skills to children and youth (Cartledge & Milburn, 1995), and (3) Social skills training: enhancing social competence with children and adolescence (Spence, 1995). Unfortunately, as Gresham (1998) points out, 'Social Skills Training has not produced particularly important, long-term or generalizable changes in the social behaviour of children and youth' (p. 19). Nevertheless, some studies have been able to show that positive changes can occur as a result of SST. However, what is less certain is whether these changes are long-lasting (maintenance) and whether children can generalize ('transfer') these newly acquired skills to real life. In addition, while positive changes in behaviour are sometimes noticed, it seems that SST has little impact on peer relations (known as 'social validity').

Nevertheless, in an attempt to reduce children's risk for peer victimization, we developed a SST programme for victims of peer bullying, and evaluated its effectiveness (see Fox & Boulton, 2003a, 2003b). The findings suggest that children do indeed find it hard to generalize their new skills to settings beyond the training group. A positive finding is that the training led to an increase in self-esteem. A high self-esteem has been highlighted as a factor likely to protect 'at risk' children from peer victimization (Egan & Perry, 1998). We are currently evaluating a refined version of this programme that encourages a sense of self-efficacy and challenges negative self-beliefs that may make it difficult for targets of bullying to display appropriately and safe assertive behaviour when they are bullied.

In conclusion, self, peer, and teacher perceptions converged to support an association between social skills problems and peer victimization. By helping children overcome such social skills deficits, we suggest we can help them reduce their risk of victimization. We would resist any charge that we are somehow 'blaming' the victim for their plight because we believe that it is aggressive behaviour that is unacceptable and must also be the target of our efforts. Nevertheless, bullying in schools remains a problem and we propose that equipping children with the social skills to resist it is a worthy endeavour.

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