

Investigating the Dimensions of Victimization in Sixth-Grade Male Students and Its Association with Subjective Well-Being in School and School Bonding

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Abstract

Background: Victimization in schools has become one of the most prevalent problems in the worldwide education system. This study explored the dimensions of victimization in sixth-grade male students in Kermanshah City, Iran and its association with subjective well-being in school and school bonding.

Methods: The current study was conducted using a descriptive correlational design. The statistical population included all male students in the sixth grade in Kermanshah City, Iran in the academic year 2022-2023. A sample of 374 individuals was selected using the multi-stage cluster random sampling method. To collect information, the Multidimensional Victimization Scale (MPVS), School Bonding Questionnaire (SBQ), and Elementary School Students' Subjective Well-Being (ESSWBSS) were administered. Pearson's correlation coefficient and multiple regression were performed using SPSS version 27 to analyze the data.

Results: Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant inverse association between victimization at school and its dimensions with subjective well-being in school ($r=-0.37$) and school bonding ($r=-0.010$). Furthermore, the results of multiple regression showed that school bonding ($\beta=-0.15$, $P=0.009$) and subjective well-being in school ($\beta=-0.33$, $P=0.031$) were significant negative explanatory variables of victimization at school.

Conclusions: Risky behaviors such as feeling victimized can hinder students' educational achievements. Therefore, it is recommended that school counselors identify students who feel victimized by their peers and provide them with appropriate educational interventions and workshops to enhance their subjective well-being in school and school bonding.

Keywords: Victimization, Education, Psychological well-being, Bullying, Primary school, Students, Children

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1. Introduction

School bullying victimization is a matter of public health concern that significantly affects a substantial number of children and adolescents. An individual is classified as a victim when one or more students deliberately subject them to bullying or cause physical, verbal, or relational harm. Peer victimization involves persistent aggressive behaviors aimed at harming other children or adolescents who are not the victim's siblings and may not necessarily be the same age. Nonetheless, peer victimization inherently involves repetitive aggression and a power imbalance (1). Victimization takes various forms, occurs in diverse contexts, and targets various aspects of the victim. Peer victimization can manifest in physical victimization (e.g., physical assault), verbal victimization (e.g., taunting, humiliation, and insults), relational or

social victimization (e.g., exclusion from groups, character defamation, spreading false rumors, slander, and deceit), and sexual victimization (e.g., sexual harassment). Contextually, victimization can manifest through face-to-face interactions or electronic communication (cyber victimization). Research demonstrated that being a victim in a school setting increases the likelihood of experiencing cyber victimization. Lastly, the focus of peer victimization may or may not revolve around the victim's attributes, such as gender, race, ethnicity, or weight. Therefore, peer victimization is a complex, multidimensional construct (2, 3).

The background of the research highlights a staggering prevalence of severe victimization among children and adolescents. A recent synthesis of existing knowledge and research findings indicated that in Asia, Africa, and North America,

at least 50% of all children had encountered acts of violence within the past year (4). Research by Ladd and colleagues discovered that among students from nursery school to the 12th grade, approximately 40–60% of US youth had experienced some form of peer victimization, whether physical, verbal, or relational. Approximately 24% of youth experienced prolonged victimization during their school years (5). The estimated victimization prevalence in Iran is 33% (6). School bullying is acknowledged as a widespread issue affecting many children, with research indicating that boys are more likely to experience physical and verbal victimization, while girls are more susceptible to relational victimization (7).

Despite being a potentially modifiable factor, peer victimization is strongly associated with various mental health problems, including internalizing disorders (such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies) and externalizing problems (such as antisocial behavior, violence, and delinquency). Generally, students exposed to any form of victimization are likelier to perform poorly in school, drop out, report low self-esteem, and exhibit withdrawal tendencies. They often have few friends at school and harbor negative perceptions of their educational experience (8). In a 20-year longitudinal study on victimization in childhood and adolescence conducted by Oncoiu and colleagues, irrespective of the intensity and duration of exposure to peer victimization in childhood or adolescence (whether low, medium, or high), the victimized group reported higher levels of internalizing and externalizing psychological disorders (9).

Low social status among peers and victimization have detrimental effects on physical health. According to de Bruine and colleagues, adolescents who have experienced peer victimization report a higher incidence of physical health problems (10). Agnew's general strain theory posits that peer victims endure unwelcome emotions that give rise to stress or strain, necessitating adopting coping strategies to alleviate or manage these emotions. While children may employ adaptive strategies, such as seeking assistance from a trusted adult, their coping mechanisms may manifest as maladaptive behaviors contributing to unfavorable academic outcomes. Specifically, child victims may attempt to avoid future victimization by skipping classes or avoiding the school environment altogether (11).

Among various factors related to the school environment, school bonding is defined as the degree of closeness and connection students feel with the school environment and its staff (12). In other words, school bonding encompasses a multidimensional concept that includes students' relationships within the school, their perception of their teachers' care and respect for them (i.e., attachment to teachers), their level of interest and sense of belonging to the school (i.e., attachment to the school), their participation in extracurricular activities (i.e., school involvement), and their commitment to learning and belief in the value of education (i.e., school commitment). Regardless of how one conceptualizes their connection to the school, high levels of this essential academic construct are associated with positive academic outcomes, such as increased academic enthusiasm, enhanced academic self-esteem, improved academic performance, and reduced problematic behavior (13).

School is recognized as a fundamental platform for the social-emotional growth of students as well as their academic development. Therefore, ensuring safety in the school environment is not only a fundamental human right but also crucial for the positive development of students. A higher degree of school connectedness is estimated to reduce school delinquency and violence. According to research by Ma and Chan, a positive connection with school, serving as a protective factor, moderates the association between peer victimization and adverse behavioral outcomes in adolescents (12). Elevated levels of school belonging enhance students' perceptions of approval, admiration, and acceptance by their peers within the school environment. This sense of belonging is inversely related to instances of victimization at school (14).

In recent years, positive psychologists have focused on applying their findings in educational settings, including schools. One of the variables within this branch of psychology is subjective well-being in school. Subjective well-being in school encompasses students' self-assessment of their school experiences, encompassing cognitive evaluations (i.e., satisfaction with school) and emotional experiences (i.e., positive and negative emotions during school). Successful students excel academically and derive satisfaction from their school life. These conditions appear to differ for

students who are victims of bullying (15). Drawing from the model proposed by Tian and colleagues regarding subjective well-being in school, satisfaction with school and the frequency of positive emotional experiences during the school day serve as indicators for assessing subjective well-being in school (16).

In conclusion, the school environment is recognized as a pivotal factor in the psychosocial development of students, particularly during the primary school years, which represent a critical period in shaping students' current and future engagement, success, and sense of belonging in school. Prior research predominantly focused on the physical and negative psychological consequences of victimization while paying less attention to the impact of victimization on the reduction of positive emotional and social dimensions, such as subjective well-being in school and school connectedness. Additionally, there has been no prior investigation into the interplay of these variables within the context of school victimization. Therefore, this innovative study aimed to address this gap by examining the dimensions of victimization among sixth-grade male students in Kermanshah City, Iran and their associations with perceived subjective well-being in school and school connectedness.

2. Methods

The existing research was conducted using a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population included all male students in the sixth grade in Kermanshah City, Iran who were studying during the academic year 2022-2023. From the statistical population of the research (N=13,596), a sample of 374 students (n=374) was carefully chosen through the multi-stage cluster random sampling method.

Initially, District 3 was selected from the three educational districts in Kermanshah, Iran. Subsequently, five primary schools were chosen from the boys' schools in this district, and three sixth-grade classes were selected from each school. The inclusion criteria consisted of willingness to participate in the research, being a sixth-grade student, and being a male. The criterion for excluding samples was the incompleteness of answer sheets and the absence of physical or psychological illness. Additionally, ethical research principles were

strictly adhered to, including comprehension of the research's nature and objectives, informed consent to participate, confidentiality of questionnaire data, and the right to withdraw.

2.1. Procedure

In the initial stage, the required permits were acquired through correspondence between Payame Noor University Islamabad Gharb and the Kermanshah Education Department. Following this, District Three was chosen from the educational districts in Kermanshah city, and elementary schools were subsequently selected from within this district.

Next, five schools from the pool of boys' schools within the elementary group of this district were selected. Three sixth-grade classes were chosen for participation in the study in each of these schools. It is important to emphasize that all participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

Each participant was allocated a specific time frame of 30 to 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Once the allotted time had elapsed, a total of 374 questionnaires had been duly completed by the participants. These completed questionnaires were then collected for further analysis.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. The Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale (MPVS): Developed by Mynard and Joseph (17), this scale assesses victimization characteristics through 16 items organized into a four-dimensional structure. These dimensions include physical victimization (e.g., "they punched me"), verbal victimization (e.g., "they mocked me"), social manipulation (e.g., "tried to get me into trouble with my friends"), and attacks on property (e.g., "tried to break something of mine"). Responses are recorded on a three-point Likert scale (0=not at all; 1=once; 2=more than once). Scores on this scale can range from 0 to 32, with higher scores indicating a more significant experience of peer victimization. The tool developers reported reliability using Cronbach's alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.85 for physical victimization, 0.75 for verbal victimization, 0.77 for social manipulation, and 0.73 for attacks on

property. Akbari Balootbangan and colleagues (18) conducted a study that utilized internal consistency, reporting a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 for this scale. A systematic review by Joseph and Stockton (19) found concurrent validity, demonstrating a correlation of $r=0.54$ with the Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (20). In this study, Cronbach's alpha method yielded a value of 0.78 for questionnaire matching.

2.2.2. School bonding questionnaire (SBQ): Developed by Rezaei Sharif and co-workers (21), this 40-item self-report scale measures students' school bonding. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=seldom to 5=almost always). The questionnaire comprises six factors: attachment to teachers (Items 1 to 9), attachment to school (Items 10 to 19), attachment to the school's staff (Items 20 to 25), involvement in school (Items 26 to 31), belief (Items 32 to 37), and commitment to school (Items 38 to 40). Total scores range from 40 to 200, with higher scores indicating stronger connections between students and school aspects. Ebrahimitabar Gerdoodbari and colleagues reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93 for the entire school bonding questionnaire, with constituent factors between 0.70 and 0.88 (22). The validity of the content of this scale was assessed by Rezaei Sharif and co-workers (21) through input from five experts in educational psychology and education, confirming its validity. Predictive validity was calculated by correlating academic averages with bonding to the school and its six subscales, yielding values of 0.24, 0.16, 0.26, 0.34, 0.31, 0.16, and 0.16, respectively. The reliability obtained in the present study was 0.81.

2.2.3. Elementary School Students' Subjective Well-Being in School Scale (ESSWBSS): Designed by Kamalimohajer and colleagues based on an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, this scale consists of 55 items rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (4=very much, 3=much, 2=low, 1=shallow). Notably, item 47 is scored inversely (23). Scores on this scale range from 55 to 220, with higher scores indicating a more robust perception of subjective well-being in school. This tool encompasses six factors: school environment, cultural aspects, student friendships, self-perception, teaching quality, and managerial effectiveness. Jafari and colleagues reported content validity index values of 0.75 and internal consistency of 0.86 for subjective well-being in

the school questionnaire (24). Kamalimohajer and colleagues (23) calculated a content validity index (CVI) of 0.735 for the Elementary School Students' Subjective Well-Being on the School Scale, and the content validity ratio (CVR) for each item exceeded the threshold of 0.54. In the current study, the scale's internal consistency was determined to be 0.85.

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data was coded, stored, and analyzed using SPSS version 27, employing the Pearson correlation test and multiple regression analysis methods. A significance level of 0.05, with a two-tailed approach, was used to establish statistical significance in this research.

3. Results

The frequency distribution and age percentages of the students revealed that, out of the 374 selected samples, 123 individuals (33%) were 11 years old, 135 children (36%) were 12 years old, and 116 people (31%) were 13 years old. Table 1 presents the statistical description results related to the variables' mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis.

As displayed in Table 1, within the victimization subscales, the highest mean corresponds to verbal victimization. Among the school bonding subscales, the highest score is associated with attachment to the school. Regarding the school's subjective well-being variable, the highest mean pertains to the student friends' subscale. The results also indicated that skewness ranges from -0.17 to -0.31, falling within the suitable range of normality between -2.0 and +2.0. The kurtosis values range from -0.12 to +0.27, within the acceptable normality range between -3.0 and +3.0. Based on these two normality indices, the skewness and kurtosis values confirmed the normal distribution of the experimental data in this study. The correlation matrix for the independent variables is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 reveals a negative and significant association between victimization and its components with school bonding and students' subjective well-being. Multiple regression analysis was employed to estimate victimization at school through school bonding and school students' subjective well-being variables. Before analyzing the research, hypotheses using regression assumptions were assessed. As indicated

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation (SD), and normality status of research variables

| Variables | Mean (SD) | Minimum | Maximum | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------|---------|---------|----------|----------|
| Physical Victimization | 5.22 (2.27) | 2 | 6 | -0.19 | -0.20 |
| Verbal Victimization | 6.17 (2.12) | 4 | 7 | -0.17 | -0.23 |
| Social Manipulation | 2.11 (1.03) | 1 | 8 | -0.21 | -0.27 |
| Attacks on Property | 6.13 (1.10) | 3 | 6 | -0.23 | -0.22 |
| Victimization Total | 12.50 (3.17) | 6 | 23 | -0.25 | -0.19 |
| Attachment to Teachers | 38.27 (6.28) | 11 | 40 | -0.20 | -0.21 |
| Attachment to School | 39.47 (5.77) | 17 | 42 | -0.19 | -0.21 |
| Attachment to School's Staff | 38.16 (5.75) | 12 | 24 | -0.23 | -0.23 |
| Involvement in School | 29.14 (6.62) | 12 | 31 | -0.22 | -0.27 |
| Belief | 39.13 (7.84) | 16 | 29 | -0.19 | -0.23 |
| Commitment to School | 38.10 (7.41) | 4 | 18 | -0.20 | -0.23 |
| School Bonding Total | 178.11 (12.23) | 70 | 181 | -0.22 | -0.23 |
| School Environmental | 27.22 (6.28) | 21 | 39 | -0.28 | -0.23 |
| Cultural | 18.51 (4.17) | 19 | 30 | -0.18 | -0.19 |
| Student Friends | 32.37 (6.29) | 16 | 43 | -0.17 | -0.19 |
| Student Self | 21.42 (4.62) | 9 | 23 | -0.18 | -0.12 |
| Teaching and Teacher Ethics | 19.20 (5.17) | 11 | 20 | -0.19 | -0.20 |
| Managerial Executive Teaching | 12.96 (4.84) | 6 | 15 | -0.19 | -0.27 |
| School Students' Subjective Well-Being Total | 130.21 (13.11) | 83 | 210 | -0.31 | -0.23 |

Table 2: Pearson's correlation matrix for the research variables (n=374)

| Variables | School Bonding | School Students' Subjective Well-Being |
|------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------|
| Physical Victimization | -0.215** | -0.456** |
| Verbal Victimization | -0.296* | -0.416** |
| Social Manipulation | -0.371** | -0.302** |
| Attacks on Property | -0.315** | -0.389** |
| Victimization Total | -0.391** | -0.263** |

**P<0.001; *P=0.04

Table 3: The results of Multiple regression analysis to estimate peer victimization based on school bonding and school students' subjective well-being

| Model | B | β | t | P value |
|----------------------------------------|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| Constant | 55.41 | - | 5.89 | P=0.001 |
| School Bonding | -0.32 | -0.15 | -3.35 | P=0.009 |
| School Students' Subjective Well-Being | -0.42 | -0.33 | -4.32 | P=0.031 |

in Table 1, the data distribution was expected, and the variables were measured at the interval scale level. The Durbin Watson (DW) statistic was utilized to check for autocorrelation in the residuals of the statistical regression analysis. DW test statistic values in the range of 1.5 to 2.5 are considered relatively acceptable. In this research, the DW statistic's value equaled 2.18, indicating the independence of the residuals and meeting the assumption of independence. Additionally, the variance inflation factor (VIF) used to assess the non-linearity assumption for all explanatory variables was approximately equal to 1, far from 10.

Table 3 illustrates that the multiple correlation of school bonding (P=0.009) and school students'

subjective well-being (P=0.031) with peer victimization in students was 0.62. This indicates a negative and inverse relationship between the independent variables (school bonding and school students' subjective well-being) and the dependent variable (peer victimization). The values of the non-standard coefficient B indicate that school bonding and students' subjective well-being have a negative and significant correlation with peer victimization. This means that for every unit change in school bonding and school students' subjective well-being, there is a 0.32 and 0.42 unit change in peer victimization. Finally, the β values in Table 3 suggest that school bonding and students' subjective well-being negatively and significantly account for 15% and 33% of the variance in peer victimization (P=0.001).

4. Discussion

Across cultures and countries, approximately 30 percent of children report experiencing peer victimization at some point during their education (9). This study aimed to investigate the facets of victimization in sixth-grade male students in Kermanshah, Iran and its correlation with subjective well-being in school and school bonding. The findings indicated a significant negative relationship between school-based victimization and its components with school bonding and subjective well-being. Additionally, the multiple regression analysis results demonstrated that roughly 48% of the total variance in school-based victimization could be attributed to school bonding and subjective well-being in school ($P < 0.001$). These outcomes align with the research conducted by Mohebbi and Mirnasab, who reviewed 16 studies and showed that school bonding is protective against the risk of victimization and bullying in school (25).

This protective function of school bonding extends to peer interactions and, as evidenced by the research of Bryan and colleagues, to situations involving perceived teacher discrimination (13). Other studies in the background of this research further supported these findings. For instance, Varela and co-workers demonstrated that school attachment significantly correlates negatively with attitudes toward violence and violent behavior. Consequently, the protective role of school bonding in mitigating bullying behaviors and victimization within the school environment is underscored (26). Moreover, the current study aligned with the research of Alajbeg, which found a negative correlation between school bonding, fear of school, and the extent of victimization (27). To explain this discovery, it can be posited that experiencing victimization in school can generate negative emotions, such as disgust and resentment towards the school environment, leading to avoidance and detachment from the school among victims. The literature suggested that a disorderly school environment signals to students that school is a dangerous place. Being victimized at school and perceiving a threat to safety can motivate students to avoid attending. As long as students are recurrently subjected to bullying without being able to respond effectively, it may result in negative emotions like depression and anger. This, in turn, prompts a proclivity to avoid situations that trigger feelings of

victimization. Naturally, the consequence of this avoidance is a diminished sense of attachment to school (28). Our study suggested that victimization and its components are significantly and negatively associated with school students' subjective well-being, with this independent variable accounting for 33% of the variance in school victimization.

In an analogous vein, a study by Katsantonis found that psychological well-being negatively explained school bullying (29). Similarly, Chen and colleagues concluded in another study that a significant negative correlation exists between subjective well-being and school victimization (30). To elucidate this finding within the framework of pressure interaction model by Lazarus and Folkman, it can be postulated that stress-inducing behaviors like peer victimization may precipitate psychological distress. When not effectively addressed, such distress accumulates and leads to internal issues such as depression and anxiety, diminishing perceived psychological well-being within the school environment (31). In this context, research of Yaghoubi and colleagues indicated that victimization positively and significantly correlates with external shame. Shame comprises two primary components: internal shame, where an individual assesses themselves as flawed and incomplete, and external shame, where they perceive themselves as unappealing in the eyes of others, rendering them susceptible to rejection. From the standpoint of perceived external shame, it amplifies vulnerability to being bullied by others (32). Therefore, students who endure bullying and ridicule may curtail their social interactions and participation in academic activities due to their sense of insecurity in the school setting. This predicament ultimately leads to class avoidance and engenders negative emotions related to learning. Consequently, being caught in this cycle of school avoidance and concerns about interpersonal relationships has detrimental consequences for the psychological well-being of victimized students.

Furthermore, the study's findings underscored that one component of school students' subjective well-being is the frequent experience of positive emotions within the school environment. However, due to the circumstances stemming from victimization at school, this positive psychological impact is attenuated. In explaining this observation, it is imperative to consider that students victimized by their peers may develop a negative self-image

due to the perceived helplessness associated with their inability to prevent distressing incidents. Over time, this inclination leads them to believe they are undesirable within the group and incapable of attaining social standing among their peers. Such rejection may lead these victimized students to conclude that others hold a negative opinion of them, further deepening their victim vulnerability. This, in turn, diminishes the sense of school bonding and school students' subjective well-being.

4.1. Limitations

This study has some limitations that warrant acknowledgment and should be addressed in future research. The cross-sectional design of the study precludes establishing a causal relationship between variables. Additionally, limitations are associated with the study's sample, which was confined to sixth-grade male students; hence, the findings may not necessarily apply to female students and other educational levels beyond the statistical sample of this research. Another limitation pertains to the data collection method, namely the questionnaire. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies interview students, parents, and teachers for a more precise assessment. Moreover, this study exclusively measured traditional forms of victimization; thus, future researchers should consider examining other types of victimization, particularly cyber victimization. Lastly, given that the data relied on self-report scales, it is plausible that students may have self-censored or refrained from accurately reporting their situations due to their youth and the shame associated with being a victim.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the current study indicated that school bonding, along with its components (attachment to teachers, attachment to the school, attachment to school staff, involvement in school, belief, and commitment to school), as well as school students' subjective well-being, play a crucial role in explaining both the protective factors and vulnerabilities associated with peer victimization in a school setting. Consequently, the results of this research carried significant implications for counseling, therapy, and the field of behavioral and health sciences. Specialists can utilize these findings to inform therapeutic interventions to assist victimized students within the school environment.

Ethical Approval

The Ethics Review Board of Payame Noor University approved the present study with the code of IR.PNU.REC.1402.111. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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Authors' Contribution

Borzoo Amirpour: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, interpretation of data for the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content, Fatemeh Takallou: Substantial contributions to the design of the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content, Danesh Valadbeigi: Acquisition and analysis of data, drafting the work. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such that the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

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