Correlation between attitude toward violence and peer victimization

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Article Info

Abstract

Documentation on peer victimization is well established in Western countries. Research indicates that peer victimization contributes to poor school performance, low self-esteem, and delinquent activities. However, studies related to this topic in Thailand are limited. This study examined the prevalence of peer victimization among Thai students by looking at verbal, property, and physical victimization. In total, 1,887 participants from secondary schools in Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand were sampled. The findings presented natural or negative attitudes toward violence. However, students were victimized by their peers at an alarming rate. Approximately half of the participants reported some kind of victimization in the past year. The study also showed that attitudes toward violence were significantly correlated with all types of peer victimization but physical victimization presented the highest correlation.

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Introduction

Juveniles are deemed to be an essential force in the country. Data from the Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection in Thailand from 2004–2008 shows that delinquency rates have increased continuously, particularly in drug-related offences (Ministry of Justice, 2009). When looking at recidivism rates, delinquents recommitted an offense approximately 12 percent in 2007 and 18 percent in 2008 (Ministry of Justice, 2009). Interestingly, even though the rates of recidivism were not proportionally high, the number of delinquency cases had increased. This might possibly explain why the majority of youths who entered into the juvenile justice system are more likely to be the first-time offenders. Therefore, studies related to the propensity for delinquent behavior and prevention need to be a central focus.

Juveniles not only have a high propensity to be involved in delinquent behavior but are also one of the groups most likely to become victimized. Data show that on average, juveniles aged 12–17 years are more than twice as likely as adults to be the victims of a violent crime (Baum, 2005). Another concern is peer victimization which can include physical, verbal, or relational abuse. Peer victimization has been shown by numerous studies to have adverse effects on children's development resulting in anxiety and depressive symptoms, aggression and delinquency, and school maladjustment (Card & Hodges, 2008; Rudolph et al., 2014). Therefore studies that examine the correlation of peer victimization and attitude violence are very important in identifying or predicting the pathway of delinquent behavior.

In the current study, the authors gathered data from 1,887 students who were enrolled in secondary schools in Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand to examine the correlation between peer victimization and attitudes toward violence. Nakhon Pathom province is known to have a particularly high delinquency rate. Despite this, it is considered a higher education hub of Thailand including four of the elite universities and a suburb of Bangkok. For example in June 2010, a student set fire to Mahidol Wittayanusorn School resulting in damage of more than THB 300 million. Moreover, Nakhon Pathom is located in the Metropolitan Region which is experiencing rapid changes in urbanization. Consequently, Nakhon Pathom province is an ideal location to study deviance- and delinquency related issues.

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Literature Review

Peer Victimization

Peer victimization can be described as the experiences of children who are the target of aggressive behavior by other children, who are not siblings and not necessarily age-mates (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hellström, Beckman, & Hagquist, 2013). Peer victimization is one of the biggest problems in the Thai school system. Each year, studies show that children have been victimized approximately 30–60 percent of the time (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000; Rigby, 2000; Smith & Shu, 2000) and the majority of children indicated that they were victimized more than once. It is estimated that around 6–15 percent of children can be considered frequent victims (weekly or more) (Rigby, 2000; Smith & Shu, 2000; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Peer victimization can take different forms such as physical victimization, property victimization, verbal victimization, and social manipulation. Peer victimization also includes victimization through electronic means such as the Internet, social media, and mobile phones (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Findings from the Second National Children's Exposure of Violence Study showed that more than one-quarter of children were victims of relational aggression in which the relationship serves as the means of harm (excluding someone from a social group, spreading rumors, or other activities intended to damage someone's reputation or social relationships). Approximately one-fifth had been assaulted by peers (Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2015). Therefore, it is not an overstatement that most children experience peer victimization at least once in their lifetimes (Card & Hoges, 2008).

There are several factors that contribute to peer victimization. Studies show that children who are physically weak, have low self-concept, and exhibit low levels of prosocial and socially skilled behavior are more likely to experience peer victimization. This victimization also affects their school performance. Some children experience several forms of academic maladjustment such as absenteeism, low school enjoyment, and negative perceptions toward schools. Peer victimization victims also more likely to have low peer acceptance and high peer rejection (Card & Hoges, 2008). The detrimental effects of peer victimization can led to issues in internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, depression, and low self-worth (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), issues in externalizing behaviors such as aggression and delinquency (Khatri, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 2000; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chine, 2001), and peer rejection (Hodges & Perry, 1999). These issues can have both a short and long term effect. Peer victimization experience can possibly also lead toward changes in a juvenile's attitude, particularly to violence.

Attitudes Toward Violence

Attitudes can be depicted as hypothetical constructs or latent variables that are determined by internal value systems (Chokprajakchat, Kuanliang, & Sumretphol, 2015; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Funk, Elliott, Urman, Flores, & Mock, 1999; Mueller, 1986; Roth & Upmeyer, 1989). The developmental process of attitudes is very complex and selective based on cognitive and affective reactions to life experiences. Attitudes present direction and can change throughout life. Attitude is not behavior, like some people understand, but it can affect behavior (Chokprajakchat et al., 2015).

One of the factors researchers believe contributes to an attitude toward violence is desensitization which can be defined as the attenuation or elimination of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to a stimulus. Desensitization can occur through real-life experiences both directly and indirectly or through media such as news, movies, or video games. Repeated exposure to violence undermines the customary relationship between violence and anxiety, altering both cognitive and affective reactions (Chokprajakchat et al., 2015; Farrell & Bruce, 1997; Friedlander, 1993; Funk et al., 1999). The key variables of desensitization are reduced empathy and an increased pro-violence attitude (acceptance of violence) (Chokprajakchat et al., 2015; Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004).

Peer Victimization and Attitude Toward Violence

When discussing peer victimization and attitudes toward violence, the literature consistently presents a relationship between peer victimization and attitude toward violence. For example, a study addressing attitudes among students in grades 7 through 9 found that aggressive attitudes and peer violence perpetrated among youths to be particularly prevalent (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hernshbeger, 1999). Another study found that among youths, holding attitudes in support of fighting were significantly related to behavioral intentions to fight, which in turn were significantly linked to actual violent behavior (Roberto, Meyer, Boster, & Roberto, 2003).

Even though attitude and behavior do not have the same meaning, attitude can affect behavior. Therefore, it is a good idea to expand our understanding on the correlation of peer victimization and violent behavior. Some literature has focused on the relation between peer victimization and violence, particularly in terms of the aggressive behavior of victims. Hanish and Guerra (2002) suggested that peer victimization might be a risk factor for subsequent serious maladjustment such as externalizing behavior due to the fact that victims may have limited opportunities for peer interaction and developmentally salient socialization experiences (Hanish & Guerra, 2002). Moreover, a study found that peer victimization was correlated with externalizing problems, and may constitute both a cause and a consequence of externalizing problems, such as aggression (Reijntjes et al., 2011). Perren, Ettekal, and Ladd (2013) found that hostile attributions (a tendency to attribute a hostile intent to another person even in ambiguous and neutral situations) can be considered one potential mechanism through which negative experiences with peers lead to increases in children's aggressive and delinquent behavior.

Ostrov (2010) examined the association between peer victimization and aggressive behavior. He found that victimization experiences can increase aggressive behavior among children. Moreover, he suggested that the aggression can increase over time, if it is reinforced with children that aggressive behavior can reduce peer victimization and facilitate goal obtainment such as social status. Another study found that

peer physical victimization is strongly associated with physical and relational aggression and delinquent behavior, and relational victimization made a unique contribution in the concurrent prediction of this behavior. When examining gender, physical victimization is more closely related to aggression and delinquent behavior among boys rather than girls. On the other hand, relational victimization is more closely related to physical aggression among girls than boys (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006).

Methodology

The current study was conducted using stratified random sampling of all the students in 29 schools in Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand. Students enrolled in grade 8 and grade 11 from each school were randomly selected resulting in 1,887 participants composed of 808 males and 1,079 females comprising 1,027 students in grade 8 and 860 in grade 11. The participants were 14 years old (54.4%) and 17 years old (45.6%) respectively. Due to the homogenous structure of Thailand's demographic, a race or ethnic variable was not collected in this study. To ensure anonymity and to increase response validity, the research team did not obtain any information that could identify any participant. Consent was obtained from the appropriate legal guardian prior to participation. The participants were given two self-reported instruments: the Attitudes Towards Violence Scale (Funk et al., 1999) and the Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale (Mynard & Joseph, 2000). Both instruments were translated into Thai.

The Attitudes Towards Violence Scale developed is made up of 14 questions, with each question answered using a Likert-format scale. The instrument has two important components. The first is a reactive violence sub-scale which measures violence used in response to actual or perceived threats. The second sub-scale looks at the culture of violence and identifies more pervasive, ingrained identification with violence as an acceptable and valued activity. Those 14 statements were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The total scores ranged from 14 to 70 points and the higher scores indicate stronger pro-violence attitudes (Chokprajakchat et al., 2015).

Peer victimization among participants was examined using the Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale which measures both direct forms (openly confrontational attacks) and indirect forms (covertly manipulative attacks). The scale consists of 15 items. Participants were asked about their peer victimization experiences over the past year. Each item was answered using a Liker-format scale that featured values from 0 to 2 indicating how often such events occurred (0 = not at all, 1 = once, 2 = more than once). The Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale represents four main factors: physical victimization, verbal victimization, social manipulation, and attacks on property. The scores range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicting greater degrees of victimization (Chokprajakchat et al., 2015).

In the current study, the authors tried to identify whether there was a correlation between peer victimization and attitudes toward violence. Later, gender-specific variables were examined to present similarities or differences of the correlation between peer victimization and attitudes toward violence among male and female participants. Descriptive statistics were employed to present demographic factors and score both instruments. Furthermore, the research team used Spearman's correlation coefficient to identify directional and significant correlations between both peer victimization experiences and attitudes toward violence.

Results

The Attitudes Towards Violence Scale (Funk et al., 1999) was used to examine two main factors. The first was reactive violence which includes items such as "if a person hits you, you should hit them back." and "it's okay to do whatever it takes to protect myself." "Reactive violence" related to variables that represent justifiable statements to use violence as a mean to respond to actual or perceived threats. The culture of violence factor embodies statements which show violence as a valued activity such as "it is okay to use violence to get what you want." and "people who use violence get respect" (Funk et al., 1999).

As shown in Table 1, on a scale of 1 to 5, reactive violence had a slightly higher mean score than the culture of violence mean score (2.73 and 2.37, respectively). The total of the attitudes toward violence indicates that on average, participants disagreed or were undecided on each item on the scale. This can possibly be interpreted as on average, participants had a neutral or negative attitude toward the use of violence.

Table 2 shows peer victimization experiences. Alarmingly, approximately three in every four students had been victimized verbally in the past year. Moreover, more than half of the students (53.93%) indicated that they had been verbally victimized more than once. When we examine physical victimization, it shows that roughly one in every five students were victimized physically. The number of those who were victims of physical victimization more than once was approximately double the number of students who were physically victimized only once, (21.62% and 11.27%, respectively). More than half the students had experienced attacks on property with 31.65 percent answering that there were attacks on property more than once and about 20 percent reporting that it had happened to them only once. When we look at social manipulation, the percentage of students who were manipulated socially only once and more than once is almost identical (18.56% and 18.45%, respectively). As can be seen from these findings, it is very shocking that about 40 percent of students experienced peer victimization.

Table 1
Mean of attitude toward violence (n = 1,887)

Attitude toward violence	x̄	SD
Reactive violence	2.73	0.69
Culture of violence	2.37	0.41
Total	2.52	0.46

Table 2
Peer victimization   (n = 1,887)

Peer victimization	x̄	SD	% Once	% More than once
Verbal victimization	0.54	0.41	18.74	53.93
Physical victimization	0.22	0.35	11.27	21.62
Attacks on property	0.33	0.49	19.76	31.65
Social manipulation	0.19	0.33	18.56	18.45
Total	0.31	0.3	17.15	29.91

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the correlation between peer victimization and attitudes toward violence, implemented (Table 3). Every category of peer victimization presented a genuine relationship with both types of attitude toward violence—reactive violence and culture of violence. Physical victimization showed the strongest relationship to attitudes toward violence. Physical victimization was positively related to attitudes toward reactive violence, with a coefficient of $r = .265$, which was significant at $p < .01$. The coefficient of determination presented that physical victimization shared 7.02 percent of the variability in attitude on reactive violence. The physical victimization was positively related to attitudes toward a culture of violence, with a coefficient of $r = .231$, which was significant at $p < .01$. The coefficient of determination showed that physical victimization contributed 5.33 percent of the variability in attitudes to reactive violence. Overall physical victimization was positively related to attitude toward violence, with a coefficient of $r = .286$, which was significant at $p < .01$. The coefficient of determination showed that physical victimization contributed 8.17 percent of the variability in attitudes toward violence. Attacks on property were the least significantly positively related to attitudes toward violence with a coefficient of $r = .094$ for attitudes on reactive violence and with a coefficient of $r = .087$ for attitude on culture of violence.

Discussion

The current study was very important in reinforcing the literature on attitudes toward violence and peer victimization. It also reduces the gap in the literature regarding the Asian population. From the current findings, the majority of students had a neutral or negative attitude toward violence. When examining peer victimization, it was very shocking that almost half of students were victims of peer victimization. Victimization was even higher in the verbal category with more than 70 percent of the students claiming to have been victimized.

The findings on the correlation between peer victimization and attitudes toward violence were all statistically significant in every model. Every category of peer victimization presented a genuine relationship with both types of attitude toward violence—reactive violence and culture of violence. Physical victimization, however, presented the strongest correlation to attitudes toward violence. This finding was not quite a surprise due to the fact that physical victimization is considered the most serious type of victimization. Victims are more than likely to learn from their experiences and eventually accept violent means as a way to protect themselves or solve problems. This process is known as desensitization (Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994; Murray, Guerra, & Williams, 1997). The acceptance of violence ultimately results in behavioral changes (Funk et al., 1999). Therefore, the Department of Education and school officials need to pay close attention to this issue. Policies and programs need to be implemented immediately to reduce the rate of peer victimization. The policies and programs will later reverse negative attitudes toward violence and eventually prevent delinquent and criminal behavior.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Due to limitations in the current study, future research needs to include variables that examine the use of technologies such as the Internet, smart phones, and social media in peer victimization and attitudes toward violent behavior. These technologies make it more difficult for teachers and parents to identify students who might be victimized by their peers. The other issue that future research needs to consider is the cultural differences of the participants. For example, in the current study, the majority of students had strong negative attitudes toward guns as a means or symbol of violence. This finding may be different in countries where concealed weapons are legal and easily obtained, such as in the United States. Therefore, a comparison study would be crucial to validate any generalization from the current study.

Table 3
Correlation coefficient of peer victimization and attitude toward violence   (n = 1,887)

Item	Reactive violence		Culture of violence		Total	
	r	r²	r	r²	r	r²
Verbal victimization	.201*	.04	.100*	.01	.176*	.03
Physical victimization	.265*	.07	.231*	.053	.286*	.081
Attacks on property	.094*	.008	.087*	.007	.105*	.011
Social manipulation	.154*	.023	.147*	.021	.173*	.029
Total	.226*	.051	.181*	.032	.235*	.055

* $p < .01$

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