A prospective investigation of peer-victimization and loneliness in best-friend dyads: The effects of gender and friendship stability

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Background
- Young people on the cusp of their teenage years (grades 6 and 7) reported higher levels of loneliness when they were victimised by peers (Graham & Juvenon, 1998).
- Meta-analyses suggest that the relationship between peer victimisation and loneliness is stronger among adolescents than preadolescents and among girls than boys (Wu et al., 2015).
- Friendships offer important contexts within which healthy adolescent development can take place (Berndt, 1996; Bukowski et al., 1996).
- Friends can also offer protection, with children having a greater number of friends being at a reduced risk for peer-victimization. However, this may be dependent on the identity of children’s friends and their ability to offer this protection (Fox & Boulton, 2006).
- There is evidence that friends share many similarities. An important element of friendship is the similarity of those involved (Rubin et al., 1994), with the assumption that ‘birds of a feather flock together’, what is known as the homophily hypothesis (Kandel, 1978).
- Similarity may also emerge as a function of friends influencing one another’s characteristics and behaviours over time (Linden-Andersen et al., 2009).
- Similarity can be positive, but it can also occur with negative characteristics and behaviours, e.g. depression and anxiety (Stone et al., 2013).

Method
- 1,234 young people aged 11-13 years completed a battery of self-report measures (including peer-victimization, loneliness, and depression) on two occasions approximately 6 months apart.

Results
- From the total sample, 443 reciprocal best friend dyads were identified at T1, and of those, 87 were dyads who remained reciprocal best friends at Time 2.
- Turning to the longitudinal data, the APIM model allowed us to control for earlier levels of loneliness as well as earlier depression scores, and we investigated whether gender or stability of friendship moderated any of the paths of interest.
- The overall model was an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 22.33 \text{ (df} = 17),$ $p = .172,$ CFI = .995, RMSEA = .027 (90%CI = .000, .054), accounting for approximately 35% of the variance in loneliness at T2.
- For all participants, their T1 loneliness was associated with their own later T2 loneliness ($\beta = .33^{***}$) and their T1 depressive symptomatology was also associated with their own later T2 loneliness ($\beta = .24^{***}$).
- For boys, victimization was not associated with their own later loneliness, and nor was victimization associated with their friend’s later loneliness.
- In contrast, for girls, victimization was significantly associated with their own later loneliness ($\beta = .09^*)$ and with their best friend’s later loneliness too ($\beta = .20^{***}$).
- Finally, best-friends’ levels of loneliness were not associated with one another at T1. However, they were at T2, among stable dyads ($\beta = .42^{***}$), but not among those dyads who were no longer friends.

Key references

Implications
- The findings suggest that peer-victimization aimed at one’s friends can affect one’s own feelings of loneliness. This could be because of the effect this has on a child’s social network, which may be negatively affected simply by associating with a child who is victimized.
- The finding that the loneliness of a best-friend can, for stable best-friend dyads, be associated with a partner’s levels of loneliness implies that these friendships should not be viewed as a panacea for young people’s problems.