



Close relationships and attributions for peer victimization among late adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Late adolescence
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Attribution
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This study examined the effect of close relationships (best friendship and romantic relationship) on late adolescents' casual attributions for peer victimization. A total of 1106 twelfth grade students completed self-report measures of perceived peer victimization, self-blame attribution, psychological maladjustment (loneliness and social anxiety), and quality of close peer relationships. Results indicated that self-blame partly mediated the link between peer victimization and psychological maladjustment. Relationship quality moderated the victimization–self-blame relation. Participants were more likely to endorse self-blame attributions for peer victimization when they had a negative relationship with a best friend or romantic partner. The moderated effect of negative best friendship quality was only significant for girls, whereas the moderated effect of negative romantic relationship quality was only significant for boys. Implications of these findings for future research on close relations during adolescence and for interventions to reduce the effects of peer victimization were discussed.

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Introduction

Hitting, name-calling, and social ostracism – these, physical, verbal, and relational forms of peer victimization (harassment) at school are so pervasive that they have been labeled a public health concern by the American Medical Association (Elliott, 2001). Recent cross-national surveys suggest that depending on age and nationality, 6 to 22 percent of school-aged children report moderate to severe levels of peer victimization while in school or traveling to or from school (see review in Ladd, 2005). American research indicates that about 10% of school children are chronically victimized (e.g., Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). A growing literature also has documented the negative consequences of peer victimization. Children who have been victimized by peers tend to experience more depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Harassed youth are also more rejected and less likely to have friends than their non-victimized peers (e.g., Hodges & Perry, 1999; Juvonen et al., 2003).

In the research reported here, we further examine some of the psychological consequences of peer harassment at school while addressing three limitations in the current literature. First, most peer victimization research has been conducted with elementary and middle school students. This might be expected inasmuch as the experience of victimization is thought to increase over middle childhood and then peak during early adolescence and the middle school years (Nansel et al., 2001). Little is known about the experience of harassment during the high school years, especially the later high school years, a time when peer abuse at school may become more covert and less likely to be reported. Second, it has been established that close friendships may buffer the negative effects of peer victimization (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999) but little is known

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about the quality or types of protective close relationships that develop during the high school years. For example, do romantic relationships protect a victim in the same way that close friendships do? And third, not much research has examined underlying mechanisms, or the processes that might explain victimization–maladjustment relations or why friendships might have a buffering effect. One possible mechanism involves the attributions that victimized youth endorse to explain their plight. Does it make a difference, for example, whether a victim attributes the harassment to some personal characteristic (“it must be *me*”) as opposed to attributions that do not implicate the self? Guided by an attribution framework, the current study extends prior research to examine the role of close friendship and romantic relationship quality in shaping 12th grade students’ causal appraisals for peer victimization.

Attribution theory

A fundamental premise of attribution theory is that psychological outcomes depend on how victims construe the reason for their plight and that particular perceived causes for victimization have distinct psychological consequences (Weiner, 1986, 1995). According to attribution theory, all causal ascriptions have three dimensions: *locus*, or whether a cause is internal or external to the individual; *stability*, which designates a cause as constant or varying over time; and *controllability*, or whether a cause is subject to volitional influence. Each causal dimension is uniquely related to a set of cognitive and emotional consequences. Locus of causality is associated with self-directed emotions (e.g., pride, shame, guilt). Causal stability influences subjective expectancy about future outcomes. For example, a child who attributes his/her social failure (e.g., being picked on by peers) to a physical handicap (stable over time) is more likely to anticipate recurring harassment than a child who believes that victimization is due to some temporary reasons (e.g., bad luck). The controllability dimension is related to a number of social emotions that have motivational significance. For example, when peer victimization is attributed to uncontrollable causes such as physical disabilities, individuals feel greater shame and tend to withdraw. In contrast, victimization ascribed to controllable factors (e.g., being in the wrong place at the wrong time) elicits feeling of guilt or regret and motivation to change the situation. Guided by research with adults on attributions for rape (Janoff-Bulman, 1979), Graham and Juvonen (1998) defined attributions that were internal (“It must be something about me”), stable (“It will happen again in the future”) and uncontrollable (“I can do nothing to change my plight”) as characterological self-blame (from now on self-blame attribution). Their study with middle-school students showed that victims were more likely than non-victims to endorse self-blame attributions as a cause of victimization, and that self-blame then partly mediated the relationship between perceived victimization and adjustment problems. As victim status and self-blame increased, students reported more loneliness and social anxiety.

Can best friendship influence attribution?

Another line of research has documented the role of best friendship in victims’ lives. In a longitudinal study with 4th and 5th graders, Hodges et al. (1999) found that the presence of a best friend eliminated the effects of victimization on internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, etc.) one year later. In related research on friendship quality, high quality best friendships buffered the effect of victimization on anxiety, depression and loneliness, whereas poor quality friendships exacerbated some of those effects (Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007; Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009).

One testable hypothesis about the mechanisms underlying the buffering effect of best friendship is that a high quality close friendship can help shift the attribution for victimization away from the self (“It must be *me*”). A supportive friend can provide emotional and tangible aid. The warm climate in positive friendships can serve as disconfirming evidence to ward off self-blame. For example, someone experiencing victimization but with the support of a best friend is likely to conclude that “I get along well with good kids. This is not my fault”. On the other hand, a best friendship may also have negative features, such as conflicts, pressure and rivalry (Berndt, 2002). Such a friendship could make self-blame unavoidable (e.g., “Even my best friend is mean to me, so it must be something about *me* that causes the trouble”).

The role of romantic relationships

Besides close friendships, romantic relationships play a central role in adolescents’ lives. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) showed that involvement in dating increases dramatically between the ages of 12 and 18. Approximately 25% of 12-year-old, 50% of 15-year-old, and 70% of 18-year-olds reported a romantic relationship in an 18-month time frame (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Contrary to the myth that adolescent romantic relationships are fleeting and superficial, current research has documented the significant impact of adolescent romance. During late adolescence, romantic partners surpass best friends and parents and rank highest in three domains of closeness – interaction frequency, interaction diversity, and strength of influence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Laursen, 1996). Despite the salience of romantic relationships during adolescence, no study has examined the link between quality of romantic relationships and victims’ adjustment. Empirical studies have shown that romantic relationship quality is associated with feelings of self-worth (Connolly & Konarski, 1994), and by late adolescence, self-perceived competence in romantic relationships emerges as a reliable component of general competence (Mastern et al., 1995). These findings imply that romantic relationships could influence adolescents’ self-appraisals. Similar to best friendship, one might hypothesize that victims having a negative romantic relationship would be more likely to blame themselves for their social failures. On the other hand, a positive romantic relationship might serve to ward off self-blame ascriptions for peer victimization.

Gender differences in close peer relationships

Thus far we have suggested that the presence of a close friendship and a romantic relationship might reduce the link between the experience of victimization and self-blame. It is also quite plausible that these moderating influences differ by gender. Previous research suggests that close friendship and romantic relationship offer different provisions for boys and girls. Girls are more likely than boys to receive several types of provisions in their friendships, such as higher levels of closeness, affection, support, acceptance and enhancement of worth (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). On the other hand, boys see their relationships with romantic partners to be more supportive than do girls (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Such findings imply that close friendships may be more meaningful among girls and romantic relationships may have more meaning for boys in the sense of providing support and closeness. In the context of peer victimization, one might hypothesize that best friendship quality might be a more important determinant of late adolescent girls' self-blaming attributions for peer victimization, whereas romantic relationship quality might be a more important determinant of boys' attributions.

The current study

Guided by attributional analyses and the significance of close relationships in adolescents' lives, the present study had two goals. The first goal was to examine victimization and self-blame attributions in a late high school sample of boys and girls. We expected that self-blame attribution would partly mediate the relation between peer victimization and psychological maladjustment, thus supporting previous research with early adolescents (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). The second and more important goal of this study was to investigate whether best friendship and a romantic relationship quality moderate the association between victimization and self-blame. We expected that positive best friendship and a romantic relationship would weaken the association between victimization and self-blame whereas negative quality friend and romantic relationships were hypothesized to strengthen the victimization–self-blame linkage. We also explored possible gender differences in the moderators.

Method

Participants

Participants were 1106 twelfth grade students (487 boys and 619 girls, M age = 17.93 yrs, SD = .41) taking part in a larger longitudinal study of peer relations in racially diverse schools in metropolitan Los Angeles. The data reported in the current study were collected during spring semester of 12th grade. According to students' self-reported ethnic affiliation, the sample was 49% Latino, 19% African American, 13% Asian, 10% White, and 9% multiracial.

Procedure

Participants with both parental consent and student assent completed confidential questionnaires in their classrooms. A trained research assistant was present and read all questionnaire items aloud as students provided individual responses on their questionnaire booklets. Each student received \$20 for their participation.

Measures

Self-perceived victimization

Four items from the Peer Victimization Scale (PVS; Neary & Joseph, 1994) and two new items written for the current study were used to create a 6-item measure of subjective feelings of victimization. The measure adopted the format used in Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985) to minimize social desirability effects. For each item, students were presented with two statements separated by the word "but" with each statement reflecting high or low self-perceived victimization. An example item was "Some kids are *not* called bad names by other kids *BUT* other kids are *often* called bad names by other kids." Students were first instructed to choose (circle) the statement that was most true for them. They then indicated whether that statement was "really true for me" or "sort of true for me". That created a 4-point scale for each item, where a higher score indicates more perceived victimization. The three other items from the PVS assessed being picked on, pushed around, and laughed at. The new items measured whether participants felt that they were gossiped about by others (a form of indirect or relational victimization), and whether their possessions were damaged or stolen by others (direct victimization targeted toward property rather than person). Ratings for the six items were averaged to create a single measure of self-perceived victimization (α = .83).

Self-blame attribution

The instrument developed by Graham and Juvonen (1998) was used to measure self-blaming attributions for hypothetical peer victimization. Participants were presented with a scenario where they imagined that they were the target of peer harassment at school. The scenario used in 12th grade described a situation of public humiliation: a classmate intentionally put a wad of gum on the target student's seat, which became stuck to the student's pants, causing everyone in the class to laugh as he/she stood up. Participants then rated on 5-point scales how much they agreed with 32 statements that captured

what they would think, feel, and do if the incident actually happened to them. For this study, we used the characterological self-blame subscale identified by factor analysis in Graham and Juvonen (1998). This subscale consists of 6 items (e.g., “Kids do this to me because they know I won’t cause trouble”; “If I were a cooler kid, I wouldn’t get picked on”). Scores on the six items were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .93$).

Loneliness

The Loneliness Scale (Asher & Wheeler, 1985) measured students’ feelings of loneliness at school. Minor modifications to the 16-item scale were made to make it more age appropriate for adolescents (e.g., “I have nobody to talk to”). For each item, students rated how true the statement was for them, from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (always true). Scores on the 16 items were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .92$).

Social anxiety

A 9-item modified version of the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (La Greca & Lopez, 1998) was used to measure discomfort in social settings. Students responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 5 = all the time) to items such as “I worry about what others think of me” and “It is hard for me to ask others to do things with me.” Scores on the 9 items were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .90$).

Best friendship

A newly developed 15-item instrument was used to assess both positive and negative qualities of students’ best friendship. Students were asked to think about one person who they considered to be their best friend at school, and then rated that person on each of 15 statements about “my best friend” (1 = not true at all, 5 = always true). Exploratory factor analysis using a principal component extraction method and a varimax rotation of all the 15 items revealed three meaningful factors with eigenvalues over 1.0. The first factor accounted for 33.44% of the variance (eigenvalue = 5.02) and included seven items ($\alpha = .87$) such as “My best friend is mean to me” and “My best friend and I fight and argue a lot”. We labeled this factor *conflictual best friendship*. The second factor, labeled *supportive best friendship* accounted for 15.46% of the variance (eigenvalue = 2.32) and included five items ($\alpha = .76$) such as “My best friend cares about my feelings” and “My best friend sticks up for me when others say mean things about me”. The third factor, labeled *school performance of my best friend* accounted for 8.58% of the variance (eigenvalue = 1.29) and included three items. As shown in Table 1, the absolute value of factor loadings for each item were greater than .60 for all three factors. In the remaining analyses, we focused only on the conflictual and supportive best friendship factors inasmuch as they were the relationship quality factors that emerged. Scores for each factor were calculated by averaging the individual item scores.

Romantic relationship

Current relationship status was determined by asking participants to choose one statement that best described their own situation from a list of six possible relationship alternatives (e.g., “I have a steady, romantic relationship with one person”, “I date but do not have a steady, romantic relationship with one person”, “I am not dating or seeing anyone right now”). Only students ($n = 457$) who reported that they had a steady romantic relationship with one person were included in analyses involving variables about romantic relationship quality. Romantic relationship quality was assessed by the Behavioral Affect Rating Scale (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1994). Students responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 7 = always) on items describing their romantic partners’ behavior during the past month. The measure includes two subscales: *warmth* (9 items, e.g., “acts loving and affectionate toward you”) and *hostility* (13 items, e.g., “Shouts or yells at you because he/she was

Table 1
Factor loadings of best friendship scale.

Item	Conflictual best friendship	Supportive best friendship	School performance of best friend
Is mean to me	.803	-.099	-.047
Gets pushed around	.750	-.198	.062
Gets put down	.730	-.186	-.091
My best friend and I have trouble making up after a fight or an argument	.720	-.143	.053
Fights/pushes other kids around	.719	-.044	-.257
My best friend and I fight and argue a lot	.710	-.068	-.126
Puts other kids down and makes fun of others	.708	-.044	-.278
I can talk about problems with my best friend	-.180	.750	.033
Cares about my feelings	-.248	.738	.168
Sticks up for me	-.119	.730	.059
Is popular	.04	.603	.075
My parents like me to spend time with my best friend	-.134	.601	.195
Completes all school assignments on time	-.019	.343	.792
Gets good grades in school	-.046	.393	.769
Hates school	.321	.110	-.613

Note. Factor loadings >.60 are in boldface.

Table 2

Mean and standard deviation of study variables.

	Boys	Girls	Total
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Self-perceived victimization	1.53 (.52)	1.45 (.53)	1.49 (.53)
Self-blame attribution	1.78 (.96)	1.78 (.90)	1.78 (.93)
Loneliness	1.69 (.62)	1.65 (.61)	1.76 (.62)
Social anxiety	1.79 (.64)	1.83 (.69)	1.81 (.67)
Supportive best friendship	3.87 (.74)	4.22 (.63)	4.07 (.70)
Conflictual best friendship	1.68 (.75)	1.43 (.58)	1.54 (.67)
Warm romantic relationship	6.00 (.96)	6.21 (.86)	6.13 (.91)
Hostile romantic relationship	2.35 (1.11)	1.92 (.96)	2.09 (1.04)

mad at you”) between partners. Scores on the items within each subscale were summed and averaged ($\alpha = .79$ and $.93$, for the warmth and hostility subscales respectively).

Results

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for all variables.¹ A series of *t*-tests conducted separately within each gender revealed that, for both boys and girls, students scored significantly higher on supportive best friendship than on conflictual friendship ($t(464) = 40.26, p < .001$; $t(595) = 70.69, p < .001$ for boys and girls respectively). A similar pattern was found for romantic relationship quality ($t(174) = 31.67, p < .001$; $t(262) = 40.85, p < .001$ for boys and girls respectively). Such findings indicate that in general, late adolescents are getting along well with their best friends and romantic partners. Between gender analyses indicated that boys scored significantly higher than girls on conflictual best friendship ($t(1065) = 6.30, p < .001$) and hostile romantic relationship ($t(445) = 4.11, p < .001$); and they scored significantly lower on supportive best friendship ($t(1071) = -8.27, p < .001$) and warm romantic relationship ($t(444) = -2.14, p < .05$). Boys also reported more self-perceived victimization than did girls ($t(1072) = 2.43, p < .05$). No gender difference was found on self-blame or the adjustment indicators (loneliness and social anxiety) in this late adolescent sample. As shown in Table 3, variables were correlated in expected ways.

Testing mediation

In this section, we evaluated the hypothesis that self-blame attributions mediate the association between peer victimization and psychological maladjustment. To test the most parsimonious model, we combined respondents' loneliness and social anxiety scores ($r = .57, p < .001$) to create a single index of maladjustment. With this simple three-variable model, we followed the regression approach outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test the mediated effect. This procedure requires three multiple regression analyses: (a) regression of the mediator (self-blame) on the independent variable (self-perceived victimization), (b) regression of the dependent variable (psychological maladjustment) on the independent variable, and (c) regression of the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator. Mediation is documented if victimization influences self-blame in the first equation, victimization affects adjustment in the second equation, and self-blame (the mediator) also affects maladjustment in the third equation. The effects of victimization on psychological adjustment should be smaller in the third equation (controlling for the mediator) than in the second equation.

The results of regression analyses showed that all three conditions for documenting mediation were met. In the first analysis, the path from self-perceived victimization to self-blame attribution was significant ($\beta = .347, p < .001$). In the second analysis, victimization was a significant predictor of maladjustment ($\beta = .374, p < .001$). In the third model, the path from self-blame attribution to maladjustment was significant ($\beta = .411, p < .001$), as was the path from self-perceived victimization to the dependent variable ($\beta = .236, p < .001$). More importantly for documenting mediation, the path coefficient from victimization to psychological adjustment dropped from .374 to .236 after controlling for self-blame attribution (mediator). The Sobel test (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) of the mediation path revealed a significant indirect effect ($z = 9.07, p < .001$). A very similar pattern of mediation was documented for both boys and girls when their data were analyzed separately ($z = 5.62, p < .001$ for boys; and $z = 7.40, p < .001$ for girls). Thus there was evidence for the partially mediating role of self-blame attribution in this late adolescent sample.

Testing moderation

Next we tested hypotheses about the moderating roles of close relationship quality on the victimization–self-blame linkage. Each type of close peer relationship (supportive best friendship, conflictual best friendship, warm romantic

¹ For warm and hostile romantic relationship, we only included students who were in a stable romantic relationship ($n = 457, 181$ boys, 276 girls). Of these, 23 students (5%) reported having a same-sex romantic partner. *T*-tests revealed no significant mean difference between homosexual and heterosexual adolescents on any of the variables. We therefore retained sexual minority youth in all analyses.

Table 3
Correlations between variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Victimization	–	.34**	.45**	.30**	–.25**	.28**	–.31**	.26**
2. Self-blame	.35**	–	.45**	.35**	–.27**	.21**	–.26**	.20**
3. Loneliness	.33**	.48**	–	.56**	–.38**	.35**	–.34**	.31**
4. Anxiety	.28**	.46**	.58**	–	–.17**	.19**	–.17*	.10
5. Sup-friend	–.25**	–.27**	–.46**	–.32**	–	–.28**	.35**	–.15
6. Conf-friend	.20**	.25**	.34**	.12**	–.31**	–	–.13	.35**
7. Warm-relat.	–.15**	–.12	–.26**	–.22**	.28**	–.17**	–	–.08
8. Hostile-relat.	.31**	.18**	.24	.17**	–.32**	.24**	–.44**	–

Note. Correlations for boys are presented above the diagonal, and correlations for girls are presented below the diagonal. Sup-friend = supportive friendship; Conf-friend = conflictual friendship; Warm-relat. = warm romantic relationship; Hostile-relat. = hostile romantic relationship.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

relationship and hostile romantic relationship) was examined in a separate hierarchical regression analysis. For each analysis, students' ethnicity² was entered at step 1 as a control variable. The main effects of self-perceived victimization and close peer relationship quality (friend or romantic partner) were entered at step 2. At step 3, we added the two-way interactions between victimization and close peer relationship quality to test for the moderating role of best friendship (romantic relationship) quality on the victimization–self-blame link. All predictors and moderators in the regression models were first centered to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). The analyses were conducted separately for boys and girls.

Positive relationship quality

The analyses of positive peer relationship quality revealed that for both boys and girls, supportive best friendship predicted less self-blame attribution (boys: $\beta = -.219$, $p < .001$; girls: $\beta = -.161$, $p < .001$). For boys, warm romantic relationship was also a significant predictor of less self-blame ($\beta = -.179$, $p < .05$). However, the non-significant interaction in each analysis indicated that neither supportive best friendship nor warm romantic relationship moderated the association between self-perceived victimization and self-blame attribution.

Negative relationship quality

The findings for negative relationship quality were quite different. The analyses for a conflictual best friendship are displayed in Table 4. Main effects analyses at Step 2 revealed that conflictual best friendship significantly predicted more self-blame for both gender groups (boys: $\beta = .148$, $p < .01$; girls: $\beta = .191$, $p < .001$). More pertinent to our concerns, the interaction between conflictual best friendship and peer victimization was significant, but only for girls ($\beta = .099$, $p < .05$).

Follow-up analyses for decomposing significant interactions in multiple regression were carried out according to the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991). Comparing the β s across different levels of the moderator variable (-1 , 0 , and $+1$ SD; i.e., at low, medium, and high levels of the moderator) allows one to see how the relation between the predictor and the outcome variable changes with level of the moderator. As displayed in Fig. 1, for girls, self-perceived victimization became increasingly linked with self-blame attribution across low, medium and high levels of conflictual best friendship (respective β s = .196, $p < .001$; .295, $p < .001$; .394, $p < .001$).

Table 5 shows the analyses for hostile romantic relationships. At Step 2, hostile romantic relationship was not a significant predictor of self-blame for either boys or girls. However, Step 3 reveals a significant interaction between romantic relationship quality and victimization but only for boys: ($\beta = .169$, $p < .05$). Again following the Aiken and West (1991) procedures, Fig. 2 displays the regression of peer victimization on self-blame for boys at low, medium, and high levels of hostile romantic relationships. As hostile romantic relationship quality increased, there were corresponding increases in the victimization–self-blame association (respective β s = .080, *ns*; .249, $p < .01$; .418, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Few studies to date have examined peer victimization during late adolescence. Research with middle school students found that the relation between self-perceived victimization and psychological maladjustment was partly mediated by self-blame attribution (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). The maladaptive consequences of self-blame are rooted in its presumed causal properties as an ascription for failure. From an attributional perspective, characterological self-blame is internal (“It must be me”) and therefore lowers self-esteem and engenders feelings of shame; it appears to be stable and therefore leads to an expectation of reoccurring victimization; and it is likely to be perceived as uncontrollable, which suggests that the victim is not capable of altering the course of future harassment. The present study provides support for the attributional explanation

² Five ethnic groups (White, Latino, African American, Asian and other) were dummy coded with White as the reference group. Asian girls were found to score significantly higher on self-blame attribution than White girls. Because ethnicity is not the focus of current study, differences between ethnic groups are not discussed in the remaining analyses.

Table 4

Hierarchical multiple regression predicting self-blame attribution from victimization and conflictual best friendship.

Predictor	Self-blame attribution			
	Boys		Girls	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.006		.036***	
Ethnicity				
Step 2	.136***		.139***	
Victimization		.299***		.290***
Conflictual best friendship		.148**		.191***
Step 3	.002		.009*	
Victimization*conflictual best friendship		.044		.099*
Total R^2	.144***		.184***	
<i>n</i>	487		619	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

of peer victimization by replicating prior findings with a high school sample. Thus the role of causal appraisals as a mechanism explaining victimization–maladjustment linkages from early to late adolescence seems fairly robust.

More importantly, the current study contributes to existing research on peer victimization and attribution theory by incorporating the role of two significant peer relationships that are especially important by late adolescence – best friendships and romantic relationships. Our findings suggested that a conflictual best friendship and hostile romantic relationship interacted with self-perceived victimization to predict self-blame. Because best friends and romantic partners are often perceived as sources of security and support (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981), it is not hard to understand that negative encounters with close friends and romantic partners would intensify the tendency to blame oneself for peer harassment. According to Kelly's (1967) co-variation model, causal ascriptions to either person or environmental factors are made based on three criteria: *consensus* (“do others do this?”), *consistency* (“does he/she always do this?”) and *distinctiveness* (“does he/she do this in similar situations?”). The theory predicts that high consistency cues (i.e., the event occurs repeatedly) and low distinctiveness cues (i.e., the event occurs across different situations) result in an attribution to the person. Frequent negative experiences (high consistency) with peers in general and in dyadic close relationships as well (low distinctiveness) make self-blaming ascriptions for social failures more likely.

The gender findings revealed that a best friend and romantic partner had distinct moderating influences for boys and girl. For girls, victims of peer harassment who scored higher on conflictual best friendship were more likely to endorse self-blame attribution than those who had a less conflictual best friendship. For boys, a hostile romantic relationship strengthened the link between peer victimization and self-blame attribution.

Why are boys especially sensitive to the influence of a hostile romantic relationship, whereas girls are more influenced by a conflictual best friendship? In the introduction we reviewed evidence suggesting that a close friendship and a romantic relationship offer different provisions for boys and girls (see Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Close friendships may be more meaningful among girls and romantic relationships may have more meaning for boys in the sense of providing support and

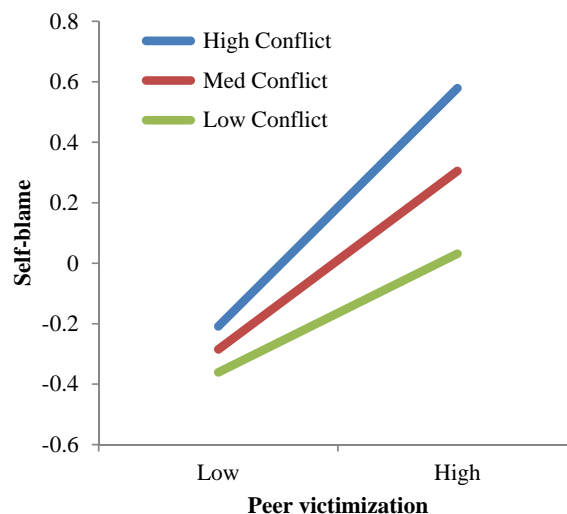
**Fig. 1.** Conflictual best friendship quality * peer victimization interaction for girls (all variables are in standardized form).

Table 5

Hierarchical multiple regression predicting self-blame attribution from victimization and hostile romantic relationship.

Predictor	Self-blame attribution			
	Boys		Girls	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.010		.012	
Ethnicity				
Step 2	.097***		.077***	
Victimization		.279**		.245***
Hostile romantic relationship		.098		.080
Step 3	.025*		.013	
Victimization*hostile romantic relationship		.169*		.130
Total R^2	.132***		.102***	
n	181		276	

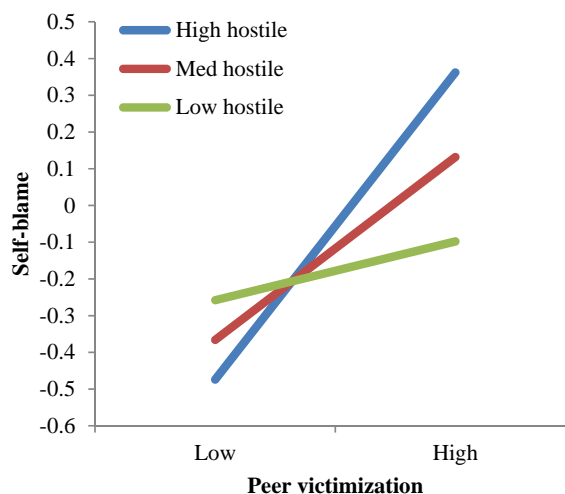
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

closeness. If these gender differences in the significance of relationships exist, then one might hypothesize that girls with conflictual best friendships and boys with hostile romantic relationships deviate from what is normative for their gender peer group. In previous victimization research with early adolescents, the attributional consequences of deviation from the norm have been documented. Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, and Juvonen (2009) found that 6th grade youth who were members of the majority ethnic group in their classroom were most likely to endorse self-blaming attributions as their victim reputation increased. Thus deviation from the norm (victim status when one's group holds the numerical balance of power) was particularly related to self-blame. In related research on pubertal timing and victimization, early maturing boys who were also victims (i.e., they deviated from their group norm to be physically assertive and socially dominant) experienced the most psychological distress (Nadeem & Graham, 2005).

In the context of the current study, given gender differences in the significance of best friend and romantic relationships, girls in a highly conflictual friendship and boys in a highly hostile romantic relationship could be seen as deviating from the norm for their gender group. Deviations from typical relationship norms could strengthen self-blaming tendencies and their known psychological consequences. We suspect that in most social dilemmas, deviation from the norm for one's group exacerbates self-blaming tendencies.

We acknowledge the possibility of a more parsimonious explanation less rooted in the gender literature. Because best friendships in this study tended to be same-gender and romantic relationships were overwhelmingly heterosexual, it could be that conflictual friendships and hostile romantic relationships only affected self-blame when the partner was female (girls' best friend and boys' romantic partner). Additional research with a more representative sample of same-gender and cross-gender best friends and romantic partners will be needed to rule out this alternative explanation.

Although we believe that the current study makes a significant contribution to the literature on attributions and adolescents' peer relationships, some limitations and caveats should be noted. First, with an attribution vignette, we studied hypothetical or imagined experiences with peer victimization rather than actual experiences which vary greatly between individuals and would be difficult to capture "in the heat of the moment" with a large sample. We acknowledge the

**Fig. 2.** Hostile romantic relationship quality * peer victimization interaction for boys (all variables are in standardized form).

limitations of vignette studies such as the one employed here. But as attribution theorists, we believe that what individuals say they would think, feel, and do if certain conditions are present can provide insight into what they would actually think, feel, and do in those situations. We also believe that simulation methods have heuristic value when the researcher's goal is to test new hypotheses about how social dilemmas are perceived and interpreted.

A second limitation is that the moderated effect of best friendship and romantic relationship were tested separately. However, these two types of close peer relationships are known to be correlated (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Some students might even consider their romantic partner as their best friend. A clearer definition is needed in future research to discriminate “non-romantic” and “romantic” best friends. It is also plausible that a highly supportive best friendship and a hostile romantic relationship concurrently exist for one person. Future research should further explore how best friendship and romantic relationship jointly shape victims' causal ascriptions for their plight. Third, the present study was cross-sectional in nature, and only provides a snapshot of subjects' relationship quality at 12th grade. Developmental changes in the role of best friendship and romantic relationship on victims' casual ascriptions warrant consideration in future research with longitudinal designs.

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our findings have implications for intervention. Given the influential power of close peers in shaping causal explanations, it may be very helpful to include relationship education components (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004) in victim intervention programs. In addition, once self-blame attributions are endorsed, intervention can focus on changing maladaptive causal beliefs (e.g., changing self-blame into external attributions, such as the belief that there are some perpetrators who randomly single out unsuspecting targets). The notion of altering dysfunctional causal thoughts to produce changes in behavior has produced a rich empirical literature on attribution retraining in educational settings (see reviews in Graham & Williams, 2009; Wilson, Damiani, & Shelton, 2002). There is no reason why the guiding assumption of that research cannot be applied to alleviating the plight of adolescent victims of harassment.

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