Chapter 10

Go Back to Where You Came From:
Peer Victimization of Racial and Ethnic Minority Students

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ABSTRACT

Peer victimization is a problem for children across all demographic categories; however, peer victimization of racial and ethnic minority students is a unique problem that requires analysis and targeted intervention strategies. Racial and ethnic minority students endure a particular form of victimization whereby children target each other’s ancestry, physical features, religion, cultural traditions, and immigration status. In this chapter, the authors discuss several types of racial/ethnic peer victimization. Next, they examine data pertaining to racial/ethnic victimization among children in the United States. This section includes reports of a recent uptick in racial/ethnic harassment associated with the candidacy and election of President Donald Trump. The authors use cognitive development theory, social reflection theory, and social identity theory to shed light on the causes of racial/ethnic peer victimization. Finally, they outline three leading anti-victimization programs that could be implemented to reduce racial/ethnic peer victimization among children.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States is a racially and ethnically diverse country where values of tolerance and appreciation for racial/ethnic diversity are embedded in founding documents, espoused by many political leaders, and taught in schools. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and parental rights provide racial/ethnic groups the opportunity to pass on racial/ethnic identities to future generations. This racial/ethnic diversity creates a robust U.S. tapestry where innovation thrives as cultural ideas and practices spread and transform. However, this diversity occasionally creates tension and hostility between racial/ethnic groups that perceive that they are competing for rights and resources.

This racial/ethnic tension can permeate K–12 schools, where young people often encounter others who are racially/ethnically different from themselves. If students have internalized racist, ethnocentric, or xenophobic attitudes, they may victimize others who are racially/ethnically different. This victimization may be verbal, such as when a student taunts or intimidates a peer. Victimization may also be physical including hitting, pushing, spitting, or striking with an object. A third type, relational victimization, occurs when a victim’s reputation or relationship with others is tarnished. These forms of peer victimization, and even the threat of victimization, can cause significant student stress while hindering the learning environment.

CONCEPTUALIZING PEER VICTIMIZATION

There continues to be debate about how to talk about harm students inflict on each other. While the term “bullying” is well-known and preferred by the general public, scholars make distinctions about various forms of student harm, and have been working to standardize both the terminology and operationalization of these terms. These nuanced distinctions can aid in ascertaining the prevalence of various types of student harm. Ideally, data collected utilizing these distinctions will result in targeted intervention strategies.

Peer victimization is an all-encompassing term referring to all forms of harm that peers inflict on one another. In the school context, this harm comes from other children who are not siblings, and who are not necessarily the same age (Hawker et al., 2000). Peer victimization can be overt, such as verbal or physical assaults. Or, it can be covert, such as attacks on reputation or social exclusion (Cole et al., 2010). Peer victimization can refer to one-time acts or on-going acts that result in harm. And, there may or may not be an imbalance of power between the victimizer and the victimized. A child may even be victimized if he or she is not the intended target of the victimization.

Bullying is a form of peer victimization whereby there is an imbalance of power, and the victimizer repeats the victimization. According to Dan Olweus, one of the leading scholars and anti-victimization intervention strategists:

...a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. Negative actions can include physical contact, words, making faces or dirty gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group. An additional criterion of bullying is an imbalance in strength (an asymmetric power relationship): The student who is exposed to the negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself. (1995:197).