RISK OR PROTECTION: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE OF BLACK GIRL AGGRESSION

By

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ABSTRACT

The safety of a school directly affects the likelihood of a student's experience of peer victimization. Black girls are at an alarming risk of peer victimization, and school policies do not protect their safety but instead contribute to discipline disproportionalities. Aggression has been shown to be an instrumental factor in protecting vulnerable individuals from victimization. The current study analyzed 293 Black high school females' experiences of peer victimization, perceptions of school safety, and levels of aggression to examine whether aggression plays an adaptive role in protecting Black girls from victimization in unsafe schools. Results indicate aggression plays a significant moderating effect in the association between school safety and peer victimization. The results are discussed in relation to norms of aggression in minoritized populations and the implication for the safety of the school environment.

INDEX WORDS: Peer victimization, School safety, Aggression, Black girl aggression

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most American children have experienced some form of victimization at least once in their lifetime (Card & Hodges, 2008; Finkelhor et al., 2009). Experiences of peer victimization are related to aversive school, social, and mental health outcomes (Waschbusch et al., 2019). Specifically, involvement in victimization as a victim or perpetrator is associated with higher levels of internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) problems (Reijntjes et al., 2010, 2011). Black students, in particular, are at exceptionally high risk for experiencing the harmful effects of peer victimization, as they report higher levels of violent victimization than their White peers (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Further, Black girls have the highest risk of verbal and physical peer victimization in comparison to other female students from minoritized backgrounds (Koo et al., 2012).

A students' likelihood of experiencing victimization at school is directly related to the safety of the school environment (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Unsafe schools are linked to more frequent displays of aggression and peer victimization (Felix & You, 2011; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Schools often address instances of victimization with reactive and punitive practices that fail to curb further victimization (Ross et al., 2012) and contribute to the disproportionate discipline of students of color. This is particularly troublesome for Black girls as they are more likely to attend less safe high-poverty schools (Orfield et al., 2012), and are at a higher risk for not only victimization (Dhami et al., 2005), but related disciplinary consequences (Wallace et al., 2008).

As the safety of the school environment is created by its' members (Morrison & Furlong, 1994), students' aggressive or violent behavior may jeopardize the collective perception of school safety (Astor et al., 2001). Despite the general perception of childhood or adolescent aggression as an indicator of future conduct problems (Moffitt, 1993), aggression may function as protection for individuals whose personal safety is threatened. Specifically, aggression can be instrumental in decreasing experiences of peer victimization (Brendgen et al., 2013b; Jackson et al., 2017; Persson, 2005). However, a gap in the literature exists in relation to the moderating role of aggression for vulnerable youth at risk of peer victimization, particularly for Black girls. Thus, the current study seeks to investigate how aggression may protect Black girls from peer victimization in unsafe schools.

<center>Theoretical Underpinning</center>

The present study is guided by Swearer and Hymel's (2015) Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model. The model helps explicate bullying behaviors by using a combination of the Social-Ecological model and the Diathesis-Stress model. The Social-Ecological Model, conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1979), proposes that development is shaped by the individual and the multiple systems they develop within. This theory is especially relevant to the present study as peer victimization does not exist in a vacuum; the environment of the school impacts the behavior of its students. The Diathesis-Stress model suggests that abnormal behavior occurs as a result of environmental triggers to biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Together, the Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model posits that experiences of peer victimization can activate biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities—when interacting with adverse contextual and personal factors—leading to internalizing and externalizing problems. Thus, in relationship to the current investigation, this theory posits that the unsafe

environments in which individuals develop will affect their propensity to be victimized. This perception of potential victimization may trigger an individual's diathesis, causing them to either internalize or externalize their experience.

Note: Readers may notice differences in race-based language throughout the present study, such as African American and Black. Although these terms have been used interchangeably in the past, they are not synonymous. African American refers to those of American nationality who trace their lineage to Africa. When possible, the authors have chosen to employ the broader racial label of Black as the implications of the present study do not solely affect American individuals with roots in Africa.

Peer Victimization

Peer victimization is defined as physical, verbal, or psychological harassment perpetrated by an individual who intends to cause harm (Olweus, 1993). Although peer victimization and bullying appear to be synonymous, peer victimization is a broader, more encompassing term. Bullying is characterized by repeated acts of victimization occurring through a power imbalance between victim and bully (Olweus, 1994). In contrast, instances of victimization occurring between alike peers are considered peer victimization (Smith et al., 2004). Due to the global awareness of the impacts of bullying, most research investigating victimization in schools has focused on bullying. The implications of peer victimization and bullying are similar as bullying is a subset of peer victimization (Hunter et al., 2007); thus, they will be discussed in tandem throughout the review of the literature.

Peer victimization is so prolific that research has shown 87% of American children have experienced some form of victimization in their lifetime (Finkelhor et al., 2009). According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics Report on Indicators of School Crime and

Safety, about 14% of public schools reported that bullying occurred at least once a week among students (Irwin et al., 2021). In contrast to previous findings of males experiencing higher levels of bullying in school (Barboza et al., 2009; Brendgen et al., 2013b; Espelage & Holt, 2001; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001), a higher percentage of females (25% vs. 19%) reported being bullied in the 2019-20 school year (Irwin et al., 2021). These statistics are especially concerning as victimization has a more severe impact on girls. Girls tend to form closer relationships with their peers. As a result, girls are more likely than boys to report feeling self-conscious, embarrassed, afraid, and less confident following instances of peer victimization in schools (Lipson, 2001).

Any level of victimization can be harmful; however, the rate at which Black individuals experience victimization in schools is alarming. When comparing rates of victimization of students aged 12–18 across races, Black students experience more victimization in total than their Hispanic counterparts and higher rates of violent victimization than their White counterparts (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Compared to other female students from minoritized populations, Black girls have a higher risk of verbal and physical peer victimization (Koo et al., 2012). The severity of victimization is even greater for Black girls as they report the highest instances of being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (Ross et al., 2012).

Rates of victimization are concerning as these experiences place individuals at an elevated risk for detrimental school, social, and mental health outcomes (Waschbusch et al., 2019). Specifically, peer victimization is a risk factor for poor academic performance (Macmillan & Hagan, 2004; Mundy et al., 2017; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2005; Wei & Williams, 2004), lower school engagement (Dorio et al., 2019), truancy (Ringwalt et al., 2003), and school dropout (Beauvais et al., 1996; Cornell et al., 2013; Macmillan &

Hagan, 2004). Experiences of peer victimization are also associated with poor peer relations, inhibited abilities to make friends, and rejection (Nansel et al., 2001). Peer victimization is consistently associated with adjustment difficulties such as diminished sense of belonging, poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and violent behaviors (Bond et al., 2001; Card & Hodges, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Schwartz et al., 2005).

Peer victimization may be a catalyst for mental health problems as it is associated with both internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) problems (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Reijntjes et al., 2010, 2011). The diathesis-stress model of psychopathology suggests that individual factors (i.e., biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities) interact with environmental triggers leading to pathological symptoms (Hinshaw & Beauchaine, 2017). Cognitive appraisals regarding activations from the environment contribute to the development of either internalizing or externalizing psychopathology. For instance, diminished self-concept mediates aversive outcomes of peer victimization (Shemesh & Heiman, 2021). Increases in negative self-schemas following victimization (e.g., "Everyone hates me; I am a loser") may lead to a negative outlook on the world and subsequent internalizing problems (Card & Hodges, 2008), or may lead to externalizing problems as negative self-concept is a significant predictor in the perpetration of victimization—in attempts to increase positive self-perceptions (Marsh et al., 2001).

Externalizing behaviors might also be an antecedent of victimization through the act of provoking a tormentor or may be a consequence of repeated torment, decreasing the likelihood of frequent occurrences (Reijntjes et al., 2011). Similarly, internalizing behaviors may be a consequence following victimization or may be an antecedent of victimization, increasing

vulnerability through perceptions of being an "easy target" (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Hong & Espelage, 2012). While the causal nature of these associations is unknown, the bi-directional principles of multifinality and equifinality suggest individual factors, interacting with the socio-ecological context, contribute to antecedent and consequent factors of peer victimization (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

In addition to contributing to internalizing and externalizing behaviors, a history of frequent victimization in or out of school may also prime adolescents to react aggressively. Experiences of victimization put individuals at risk for further victimization (Finkelhor, 2008) and increase the likelihood of perpetrating aggression (Reijntjes et al., 2011), becoming the victimizer themselves. Victims of aggression are more likely to display higher levels of aggression (Ostrov, 2010), even following the cessation of victimization (Schwartz et al., 1998). Longitudinal findings provide evidence of a potential causal relationship, demonstrating that peer victimization serves as an antecedent increasing the risk of physical aggression in adolescents (Aceves & Cookston, 2007). Findings from a monozygotic twin study also provide evidence of peer victimization as an antecedent factor of aggression as victimization in childhood is associated with blunted cortisol reactivity, which in turn predicts social and behavior problems such as aggression (Ouellet-Morin et al., 2011).

Rather than being a vulnerable target, individual characteristics such as physical strength and aggressive tendencies can ward off potential victimization (Jackson et al., 2017). Greater physical strength predicts significantly less peer victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1999), especially when rates of peer rejection are high, suggesting the critical role of social capital and "belonging" in protecting victims (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Further, peer victimization in elementary school precedes social alienation, which in turn predicts association with deviant

peers in middle school (Rudolph et al., 2014). A mechanism of this developmental pathway from early experiences of peer victimization to subsequent reductions in pro-social behavior may be through increases in aggression as retaliation or self-protection. In a longitudinal study, young children who were above average in aggression experienced significantly lower levels of peer victimization over a year later (Persson, 2005), signifying the protective nature of aggression serving to establish dominance in social hierarchies.

There is also evidence that individual externalizing behaviors such as aggression may serve as a risk factor for peer victimization. "Provocative" victims are seen as hostile, aggressive, argumentative, and impulsive (Olweus, 1978), which may irritate their peers and contribute to their risk of victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1999). For instance, displays of aggression in the early school years (i.e., preschool, kindergarten) are associated with higher rates of peer victimization in the later school years (Barker et al., 2008; Jansen et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2003). Similarly, genetic predisposition of aggressive behavior is associated with a higher risk of victimization by peers (Brendgen et al., 2013b), suggesting the association of aggression and peer victimization may result from an "evocative" gene-environment correlation.

The mixed findings of aggression as an antecedent and consequence of peer victimization may be explained by the distinct subtype of a bully/victim, an individual who is both a victim and a perpetrator of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Pellegrini and colleagues (1999) describe this subtype as "aggressive victims" who respond to provocation with displays of aggression. Rather than using aggression in an instrumental and calculated manner, these individuals tend to display hostile social interaction styles in response to aggravation (Pellegrini et al., 1999). The temperament of the aggressive victim subtype is especially important as high levels of emotionality may result in deficits in emotional regulation leading to the display of explosive,

reactive aggression (Pellegrini et al., 1999). Elevated levels of emotionality and poor emotional control may also attribute to the high rates of peer rejection (Perry et al., 1988), leading to instances of victimization.

Research has continually demonstrated that being involved in peer victimization as both a victim and a perpetrator may place individuals at an exceptionally high risk of the adverse effects of victimization (Eslea et al., 2004; Glew et al., 2008; Juvonen et al., 2003; Nansel et al., 2001). In comparison to their aggressive and victimized peers, bully/victims experienced higher levels of anxiety and depressive disorders and were at the highest risk of suicidality in their young adult years (Copeland et al., 2013). Bully/victim status also has severe implications on perceptions of school as bully/victims reported lower levels of teacher support and feelings of safety in school and were also significantly more likely to skip school because of fear (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012). Feelings of insufficient safety in school may contribute to the extreme actions that bully/victims take to protect themselves as they are more likely to endorse that it is "not wrong" to carry a gun to school (Glew et al., 2008).

Incidences of victimization, both in and out of school (Turner et al., 2011), may be affected by factors such as perceived vulnerability (Hodges & Perry, 1999), social-economic status (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Due et al., 2009) and race (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Seaton et al., 2013). Previous research is mixed regarding rates of victimization by race. Some research points to Black youth experiencing less victimization than their White or Hispanic peers (Nansel et al., 2001; M.-T. Wang et al., 2009), while other recent research demonstrates the opposite (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; see also Felix & You, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2008). The inconsistent findings suggest that race alone is not the only factor contributing to victimization experiences (Vervoort et al., 2010) and researchers must consider the inter-connected systems of context (Swearer &

Hymel, 2015). For instance, factors such as diversity and racial composition of a school context impact the relationship of ethnicity and peer victimization (Fisher et al., 2015). Individuals in the minority racial group of a given environment may experience higher rates of victimization than if they were in the majority group. Despite mixed findings of inter-racial experiences of peer victimization, Black students are victimized frequently through experiences of discrimination (Seaton et al., 2013). Although race-based discrimination is unique from general peer victimization, the harmful effects are similar and could be compounded by individuals who experience both forms of harassment.

What is most concerning is that the research shows Black youth experience high rates of violent victimization in the community (Hammond & Yung, 1993) and at school (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Research indicates that African Americans are more likely than other races to report both victimization and perpetration of aggression (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007) which may be due to feelings of safety within their environments. For example, almost one-third of African American adolescents live in poverty, resulting in regular exposure to high rates of violence (Paxton et al., 2004). Specifically, the data reveals that as many as 75% of urban African American adolescents have witnessed one or more violent events in the past six months (Howard et al., 2002). Additionally, Black children disproportionately attend high-poverty schools (Orfield et al., 2012), associated with more significant risks of victimization for girls (Dhami et al., 2005). Employing an ecological approach, investigating the unique experiences influencing the development of Black girls can improve our understanding of peer victimization.

School Safety

Schools reflect the safety environment of the communities in which they reside. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs underscores the necessity of safety in facilitating well-

being. Students' feelings of safety in schools are powerful in promoting positive development, which is an essential precursor to academic achievement (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). While schools are purported to be a safe space for developing youth, unfortunately, not all students report feeling safe while at school (Elsaesser et al., 2013; Felix & You, 2011; Glew et al., 2008). School safety refers to the physical and psychological security provided by schools for students. The safety of a school is shaped by its members (i.e., school personnel, students) and policies, such as the establishment of order and enforcement of discipline (Morrison & Furlong, 1994).

According to the Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety from the 2019-2020 school year, students ages 12–18 experienced 764,600 criminal victimizations (i.e., theft, robbery, assault, sexual assault, aggravated assault) at school—15% higher than students' experiences of victimization outside of school (Irwin et al., 2021). These staggering statistics suggest the gravity of school safety as most incidences of criminal victimization occur on school campuses. Compared to schools with a more significant percentage of high-income students, schools with more low-income students tend to have higher peer victimization rates (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004). Multi-race students, followed by Black students, were most likely to experience serious victimization at school (Irwin et al., 2021).

Schools amplify the vulnerability of Black students. Not only do Black girls have to be prepared to endure racism and sexism but also, they must learn the skills to protect themselves from violence, harassment, and assault. The 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection report on School Climate and Safety report shows Black students experience the highest levels of harassment on the basis of race (U.S. Department of Education). African American girls report widespread sexual harassment as a major issue in schools (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). Black girls'

safety is especially threatened in school as they have a significantly higher risk of violent victimization than their White peers (Koo et al., 2012).

Experiences of victimization at school promote further conflict. The 2019-2020 School Crime and Safety shows 8% of high school students reported being in a physical fight on school property within the last 12 months (Irwin et al., 2021). The percentage of students involved in physical disputes at school was higher for Black students (15.5%) than for White (6.4%), Hispanic (7.8%), Asian (4.9%), and multi-race (11.0%) students (Irwin et al., 2021). In the 2017-18 school year, 58% of middle schools and 78% of high schools took at least one serious disciplinary action (out-of-school suspension for 5 or more days) for student offenses ranging from physical fighting to use or possession of a weapon (Irwin et al., 2021). Rates of serious disciplinary actions were higher among public schools, with over 25% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch compared to schools that consisted of fewer students eligible for free and reduced lunch (Irwin et al., 2021).

The data regarding rates of fights at school may reflect institutional levels of disproportionality. Disproportionate discipline practices of racially minoritized populations begin in early childhood and particularly impacts Black boys and girls (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). The research reveals that disproportionalities in disciplinary consequences do not stem from differences in disruptive behavior but rather the differential application of consequences, resulting in more frequent and harsher punishments for students from racially minoritized backgrounds (Skiba, 2015). Research demonstrating that Black youth receive harsher and more frequent punishment for the same behaviors as White youth (Shi & Zhu, 2022) may be explained by the attention devoted to policing the behavior of minoritized youth. Eye tracking research

reveals teachers pay more attention to the behavior of Black youth, and thus, witness more incidences of misbehavior as a result (Gilliam et al., 2016).

Another issue contributing to discipline disproportionality is that exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., in-school/out-of-school suspension, expulsion) are not always reserved for serious offenses and may be used in response to a continuum of non-violent transgressions (e.g., dress code violations, disrespect, tardiness, loitering) among minoritized students. For instance, a study among a diverse school district in the U.S. Midwest found that Black girls most often received citations for defiant behaviors followed by inappropriate dress, profane language, and physical aggression (Blake et al., 2011). Although boys of all races account for higher rates of discipline consequences than girls, Wallace et al. (2008) found the disparities between Black and White students are more significant among females. Black girls' risk of receiving exclusionary discipline consequences is high as Black girls are twice as likely to receive in-school and out-of-school suspensions than their female peers (Blake et al., 2011).

Experiences and perpetration of victimization are related to negative perceptions of school safety (Bowen & Bowen, 1999), and poor perceptions of school safety may cause emotional distress and behavioral problems among students (Astor et al., 2001). Students ages 12-18 report feeling more concern regarding an attack or being harmed while at school than they do away from school (Irwin et al., 2021). Students who feel threatened at school are more likely to miss school and receive poorer grades (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). On any given day, up to 160,000 students miss school due to fears of potential victimization (Astor et al., 2001). Furthermore, students who see their school climate as unfavorable are less likely to report instances of victimization (Unnever & Cornell, 2004), leading to under reporting, causing the experiences of victimization to continue and engendering additional problems to school safety.

Students' perception of school safety is directly related to the school's environment impacting the likelihood of student victimization and aggression (Felix & You, 2011; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Unsafe school environments increase the risk of victimization among African American youth (Felix & You, 2011; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010). Research indicates that non-White youth typically perceive the school environment less favorably than their peers (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Adverse school environments are common in urban schools as violence and aggression are disproportionately prevalent among urban school-aged minority youth (Basch, 2011).

As school-aged youth spend a majority of their time at school interacting with peers, the environment of schools is a critical factor in development. The work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and his Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the impact of the environment as influential on the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From his emphasis on the environment, researchers have developed a robust understanding of the reciprocal role of the environment's impact on behavior. The school environment has been a significant focus in investigations of development as it is a common setting for youth, shaping the behavior of its students (Masten et al., 2008).

Peer groups within schools are one of the most salient social contexts for children and adolescents. The norms of school environments shape students' behavior, and schools norms are fundamental in understanding the risk of peer victimization (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Individual schools create their own culture in which the collective body determines approval of aggression (Felson et al., 1994). Sociological perspectives indicate that school norms—particularly within developed countries—perpetuate inequality, alienation, oppression, and aggression among students regarding their race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background (Leach, 2003). Instances of victimization are more likely to occur within classrooms

characterized by social norms that support aggression (Brendgen et al., 2013a; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). School norms that favor non-violent responses to aggression may encourage students to utilize alternative strategies (Henry et al., 2011). These results were particularly stronger among females than males, suggesting the importance of creating a culture condemning aggression in disrupting the cycle of aggression and peer victimization for girls.

Another important factor influencing the likelihood of student victimization is related to school policies regarding violence and aggression (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Schools that emphasize awareness of school violence and set clear expectations with consistent consequences report lower individual levels of physical aggression (Astor et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2011). A large-scale study conducted with over 7,300 students and 2,900 teachers found that consistent enforcement of school discipline was associated with higher levels of school safety (Gregory et al., 2010). Policy research supports these findings as interventions intended to raise awareness of the importance of school safety and establish clear rules and policies are found to reduce violence and aggression in schools (Astor et al., 2005). However, interventions tend to focus on the individual student rather than the larger context of the school as broader-level systems changes are more difficult to create (Cooper, 2008; Ross et al., 2012). Hence, schools' current prevention and intervention practices provide youth little protection from peer victimization, leaving them to fend for themselves in establishing a sense of safety at school.

Sadly, school policies related to violence and aggression may cause more harm than protection for Black girls. Administrators' and teachers' responses to the harassment of Black girls in school are inadequate, shaped by harmful racial and gender stereotypes (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Many Black girls receive citations in schools for behaviors that defy traditional standards of femininity and parallel the behaviors of stereotypical images of Black women as

hypersexualized, angry, and hostile (Blake et al., 2011). Implicit biases and the persistent

criminalization of Black youth make schools risky for Black girls (Morris & Perry, 2017).

School personnel often misidentify Black girls defending themselves against their harassers as

the aggressors (Miller, 2008). Rather than focusing on the social dilemmas that arise preceding

fights on campus, schools typically respond with disciplinary action, suspending all students

involved, regardless of their role in involvement (Talbott et al., 2002). Therefore, school

policymakers are in a challenging situation through the difficulty of compromising between

acting to protect overall school safety and providing support for individual students displaying

behavioral problems.

Aggression

Aggression may serve as an instrumental factor in defending oneself. While early

experiences of aggression may typically be considered a risk factor for a life of delinquent

behaviors and conduct problems (Moffitt, 1993), aggression may also serve to protect vulnerable

youth living without a sense of safety. Evolutionary psychologists, Buss and Shackleford (1997),

posit that aggression was an adaptive development that resulted in certain advantages. For

instance, aggressive behavior may serve as a mechanism to intimidate and ward off a potential

assailant (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

In general, modern civilization has provided a sense of safety in development; humans

are no longer in a position of constant competition for the security of resources, shelter, or

mating partners. Aggression hinders the overall functioning of cooperative social communities,

and therefore, is undesirable by societal standards. Thus, displays of aggression may be

maladaptive to development as this trait is no longer necessary for survival. The adverse

consequences of aggression demonstrate its maladaptive effects. Physical aggression is a risk

factor for current and future adjustment problems (Dodge et al., 2006). Specifically, adjustment problems related to childhood aggression include depression, loneliness, anxiety, and peer rejection (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Additionally, early displays of aggression are related to low pro-social behavior, delinquency and place individuals at risk of following a developmental trajectory toward anti-social tendencies in adulthood (Moffitt, 1993).

Despite the evidence of the negative outcomes associated with aggression, aggression may serve a distinctive role in communities of marginalized individuals living without a sense of safety. The infamous enslavement of Africans in American history places Black individuals in a unique position in today's society. Unlike many other minority groups who immigrated to the United States and assimilated by choice, Black individuals were forced into the country and punished for lack of conformation to White values (Kazembe, 2021). The American novelist, James Baldwin, stated, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time." The disparities in the lack of safety Black American individuals experience are unparalleled. Black individuals cannot depend on the protection provided by law enforcement as Black men have the highest risk of being killed by police (Edwards et al., 2019). Sequestered in unsafe neighborhoods or "ghettos," facilitating crime and violence, Black individuals' use of aggression can be instrumental in protecting themselves.

Research has identified two different forms of aggression—physical aggression and relational aggression. Physical aggression refers to overt or direct acts of physical behavior intended to cause harm (Olweus, 1978). The literature regarding physical aggression has revealed two distinct motivations of aggression, reactive or proactive. Proactive aggression is the display of aggression in anticipation of self-serving benefits, whereas reactive aggression is in response to a provocation or a blocked goal (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Girls who experience social

vulnerability may use reactive physical aggression in response to direct incitement (Lockwood, 1997). Reactive aggression is associated with impulsivity, hostility, social anxiety, low peer status, and difficulties interpreting social cues in adolescence (Lahey & Waldman, 2017). The outcomes of proactive aggression are more severe; it is associated with delinquency, poor school motivation, poor peer relationships and hyperactivity in childhood and psychopathic personality, delinquency, and violent severe offending in adolescence (Lahey & Waldman, 2017).

Relational aggression refers to behavior intended to hurt others by damaging their self-esteem, reputation, and social relationships. While physical aggression is most notable for males, relational aggression (e.g., gossiping, exclusion) is most prominent in females (Olweus, 1993). Due to the overt manner of male aggression, research has historically focused on investigating physical aggression in boys. However, more recent research demonstrates that girls have always been as likely to be aggressive as boys, but they employ their social intelligence rather than physical dominance when in conflict (Crothers et al., 2005).

Distinctions in socialization practices within same-sex peer groups may contribute to sex differences in displays of aggression. Girls focus on interpersonal matters through adolescence, such as popularity and security within their social standing (Moretti et al., 2001). Thus, rather than direct confrontation disturbing order within the group, girls learn to use and prefer indirect means of expressing anger (Putallaz et al., 2007). The magnitude of the effects of relational aggression for girls are as harmful as the effects of physical aggression for boys (Crick et al., 1996). The invisibility of girlhood aggression allows for conflict to fester. School policies focused on combating the overt manner of physical aggression in boys fail to weigh the impacts of the distinct social systems that girls function within (Lipson, 2001).

As youth enter adolescence, the peer group has an increasingly powerful impact on behavior. For instance, girls who display high rates of physical aggression do so in the company of their friends (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Conformity toward anti-social behavior peaks around when students enter high school (Berndt, 1979) which may be why displays of violence and aggression are highest in high school students (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Irwin et al., 2021). Findings from twin studies demonstrate moderate shared environmental influences in the development of physical aggression were found for girls but not for boys (Baker et al., 2008), signifying the importance of the environment in girlhood aggression. Additionally, The amplifying impact of the peer group may be due to homophily effects, as youth seek affiliations with like-minded peers (Rudolph et al., 2014). Research findings reveal that bullies typically associate with others who engage in victimization, encouraging further engagement in bullying behavior (Espelage et al., 2003). This relationship appears to be bidirectional as genetic predispositions for physical aggression are more likely to be expressed when peer group norms favor aggressive behavior (Brendgen et al., 2013a).

Children's attitudes and beliefs regarding aggression shift to be more approving over time (Rigby & Slee, 1991). Among older children, in particular, aggressive behavior may be valued and used to maintain dominance within the peer group (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Group norms show a similar developmental change, as high school students endorse pro-bullying behaviors as permissible in school (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Students even suggest that pro-bullying behaviors are expected at times; it is more harmful to get in the way of conflict resolution by informing a teacher of the bullying or protecting the victim (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

Aggression in Black Youth

Most research emphasizes the risks passed down to Black boys growing up in inner-city neighborhoods when examining minoritized populations. Black girls growing up in the same environment inherit similar risk factors, but the research emphasizes relational outcomes (Lloyd, 2005). Black girls are not immune to the consequences of poverty, racism, and violence. The distinct stress of living in a low-income urban setting wherein some level of violence is acceptable may contribute to the persistent use of physical aggression by African American adolescent girls (Lockwood, 1997).

The socialization of Black youth is unique as parents must prepare their children to deal with oppression, prejudice, and overt and covert forms of racism and discrimination (Crothers et al., 2005). Cultural norms associated with aggression differ as African American students are more likely than White students to endorse retaliatory attitudes of aggression (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Further, African American students are perceived as more overtly aggressive than their peers (David et al., 2000), which may be in part due to the importance of defending oneself in the Black community. Perceptions of violence in marginalized communities are shaped by the expectation of protecting one's status and preventing further victimization (E. Anderson, 2000).

The expectation of defending one's reputation is significant to the experiences of the Black community and persists through lessons and rituals passed down through generations. For instance, games of teasing and insults such as "playing the dozens," "joning," or "signifying" are standard and deeply rooted in Black culture (Jemie, 2003). Although Black students recognize these traditions as funny banter, individuals from other cultural backgrounds may perceive these games as instances of victimization (Fisher et al., 2015). A number of theories have been developed to explain the importance of playing the dozens in Black culture, ranging from a form

of entertainment, an outlet for aggression, an educational avenue to develop verbal abilities, or as a determinant of status (Lefever, 1981). Levine (1977) suggested that the ritual developed during a time in which Black Americans were subjected to the insults of White Americans with no opportunities for retaliation; thus, playing the dozens developed as a means to control one's emotions and temper.

Researchers posit that African American families engage in less sex-specific socialization practices than European American families; Black daughters are encouraged to be assertive, strong, and independent, in the same manner as Black sons (S. Hill & Sprague, 1999). For Black girls, fighting is a part of identity and social development (Zenz Adamshick, 2010). Social capital and close peer relationships protect from victimization but may also contribute to other social predicaments. In order to stick up for a friend, Black girls may perceive friends to be worth fighting for (Lloyd, 2005). Disrespect plays a prominent role as an antecedent to physical aggression among Black girls. Minor slights, teasing, spreading rumors, and other forms of relational aggression frequently precede violent acts at school (Lockwood, 1997).

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, out of all female high school students, African American girls are the most likely to engage in a physical fight on school property (Kann et al., 2018), which may be explained by significant threats to their safety while at school (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ross et al., 2012). Qualitative interviews conducted with students attending an alternative school imply that girls aim to display aggressive tendencies as a means to protect themselves (Zenz Adamshick, 2010). Due to the importance of social functioning among girls, the consequences of relational disputes may lead to physical conflicts.

The findings regarding differences in effects of race and gender on aggression may be particularly important within the school context. Consistent with the theoretical argument of the

Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model, a twin study conducted by Brengden et al. (2013b) showed significant findings regarding the impact of genetic predispositions of aggression varied as a function of the school context. Their results indicate that aggressive tendencies place students at a higher risk of peer victimization in classrooms with norms that opposed aggression, yet the opposite was true in classrooms with norms that favored aggression. Specifically, students' genetic disposition of aggression served as a protective factor, reducing the likelihood of peer victimization in classrooms characterized by norms that favored aggression (Brendgen et al., 2013b). Taken together with the literature on Black girls' victimization and lack of safety in schools, the results of Brendgen and colleagues suggest promising effects for Black girls' instrumental use of aggression.

Current Study

The aforementioned literature points to the alarming rate and aversive effects of peer victimization in American schools (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Rates of peer victimization are exceptionally high for Black girls as reactive school discipline policies fail to prevent instances of victimization (Irwin et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2012). Instead, school practices apply universal punitive measures to all involved students, regardless of the context (Talbott et al., 2002). Thus, Black girls in unsafe schools must employ their own resources (e.g., social, physical) to protect themselves. Although aggression is typically examined as a negative characteristic, the research demonstrates that aggression may provide advantageous effects—preventing potential victimization (Brendgen et al., 2013b; Jackson et al., 2017; Kawabata et al., 2010). The focus of the current study is to investigate the moderating role of aggression in the relationship between school safety and peer victimization among Black high school girls. I hypothesize (1)

experiences of peer victimization will be higher within unsafe schools, (2) individuals high in aggression, attending unsafe schools, will experience lower levels of peer victimization.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

Peer victimization is a pervasive problem in schools (Card & Hodges, 2008; Finkelhor et al., 2009) as experiences of peer victimization are linked to aversive school, social, and mental health outcomes (Waschbusch et al., 2019). Peer victimization is so prolific that research has shown most American children have experienced some form of victimization at least once in their lifetime (Card & Hodges, 2008; Finkelhor et al., 2009). Peer victimization is consistently associated with adjustment difficulties such as diminished sense of belonging, poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and violent behaviors (Bond et al., 2001; Card & Hodges, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Schwartz et al., 2005). Black students are at exceptionally high risk for experiencing the harmful effects of peer victimization. Specifically, Black students report higher levels of violent victimization than their White peers (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018), and Black girls, in particular, have the highest risk of verbal and physical peer victimization in comparison to other female students from minoritized backgrounds (Koo et al., 2012).

Previous research has identified systems-level factors that place students at a high risk of peer victimization. For instance, a students' likelihood of experiencing victimization at school is directly related to the safety of the school environment (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). In fact, unsafe schools are linked to more frequent displays of aggression and increase the risk of peer victimization among African American youth (Felix & You, 2011; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Research demonstrates that non-White youth typically perceive the school environment less

favorably than their peers (Bradshaw et al., 2009), which may be due to the disproportionate prevalence of violence and aggression among urban school-aged minority youth (Basch, 2011).

Other peer victimization research has focused on individual causal and consequential factors of peer victimization (Card & Hodges, 2008). Peer victimization may be a catalyst for mental health problems as it is associated with both internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) problems (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Reijntjes et al., 2010, 2011). Externalizing behaviors might be an antecedent of victimization through the act of provoking a tormentor or may be a consequence of repeated torment, decreasing the likelihood of frequent occurrences (Reijntjes et al., 2011). Similarly, internalizing behaviors may be a consequence following victimization or may be an antecedent of victimization, increasing vulnerability through perceptions of being an "easy target" (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Hong & Espelage, 2012). While the causal nature of these associations is unknown, the bi-directional principles of multifinality and equifinality suggest individual factors, interacting with the socio-ecological context, contribute to antecedent and consequent factors of peer victimization (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

A notable gap in the literature exists regarding individual factors that may moderate a student's risk of peer victimization in unsafe schools. As the safety of the school environment is created by its' members (Morrison & Furlong, 1994), students' aggressive behavior jeopardizes the collective perception of school safety (Astor et al., 2001). However, aggression serves an adaptive purpose, functioning as a means of protection for individuals whose personal safety is threatened. Although aggression is typically examined as an undesirable characteristic, the research shows that aggression may provide advantageous effects, decreasing experiences of

peer victimization (Brendgen et al., 2013b; Jackson et al., 2017; Kawabata et al., 2010; Persson, 2005).

Research indicates that African Americans are more likely than other races to report both victimization and perpetration of aggression (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007), which may be due to feelings of safety within their environments. For example, almost one-third of African American adolescents live in poverty, resulting in regular exposure to high rates of violence.(Paxton et al., 2004) Compared to schools with a more significant percentage of high-income students, schools with more low-income students tend to have higher peer victimization rates (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004). Disparities in access to safe learning environments are especially problematic for Black females; Black students disproportionately attend high-poverty schools (Orfield et al., 2012), relating to a higher risk of victimization for girls (Dhami et al., 2005). Employing an ecological approach, investigating the unique experiences and the interaction of systems influencing the development of Black girls can improve our understanding of peer victimization.

Cultural norms associated with aggression also differ across races as African American students are more likely than White students to endorse retaliatory attitudes of aggression (Bradshaw et al., 2009). The socialization of Black youth is unique as parents must prepare their children to deal with oppression, prejudice, and overt and covert forms of racism and discrimination (Crothers et al., 2005). Researchers posit that African American families engage in less sex-specific socialization practices than European American families; Black daughters are encouraged to be assertive, strong, and independent, in the same manner as Black sons (S. Hill & Sprague, 1999). Not only do Black girls have to endure racism and sexism but also, they must learn the skills to protect themselves from violence, harassment, and assault. The skills of

protecting oneself are especially important among Black girls as they report the highest instances of being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (Ross et al., 2012).

An important factor influencing the likelihood of student victimization is related to school policies regarding violence and aggression (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Schools that emphasize awareness of violence and set clear expectations with consistent consequences report lower individual levels of physical aggression (Astor et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2011). Policy research supports these findings as interventions intended to raise awareness of the importance of school safety and establish clear rules and policies that are found to reduce violence and aggression in schools (Astor et al., 2005). However, interventions tend to focus on the individual student rather than the larger context of the school as broader-level systems changes are more difficult to create (Cooper, 2008; Ross et al., 2012). Hence, schools' current prevention and intervention practices provide youth little protection from peer victimization, leaving them to fend for themselves in establishing a sense of safety at school.

Sadly, current school policies related to violence and aggression may cause more harm than protection for Black girls. Administrators' and teachers' responses to the harassment of Black girls in school are inadequate and often shaped by harmful racial and gender stereotypes (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). School personnel often misidentify Black girls defending themselves against their harassers as the aggressors (Miller, 2008). Rather than focusing on the social dilemmas that arise preceding fights on campus, schools typically respond with disciplinary action, suspending all students involved, regardless of their role in involvement (Talbott et al., 2002). Additionally, many Black girls receive citations in schools for behaviors that defy traditional standards of femininity and parallel the behaviors of stereotypical images of Black women as hypersexualized, angry, and hostile (Blake et al., 2011). Thus, implicit biases and the

persistent criminalization of Black youth make schools risky for Black girls (Morris & Perry, 2017).

The aforementioned literature points to the alarming rate and aversive effects of peer victimization in American schools (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Rates of peer victimization are exceptionally high for Black girls as reactive school discipline policies fail to prevent instances of victimization (Irwin et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2012). Thus, Black girls in unsafe schools must employ their own resources (e.g., social, physical) to protect themselves. Research has clearly demonstrated the increased risks of peer victimization in unsafe school environments. However, due to the undesirability and harm caused by aggressive behaviors, there is a lack of literature examining the adaptive benefits of aggression—protecting individuals from potential victimization. The focus of the current study is to investigate the moderating role of aggression in the relationship between lack of school safety and peer victimization among Black high school females. The present study is guided by Swearer and Hymel's Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model (Swearer & Hymel, 2015), which posits that experiences of peer victimization can activate biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities—when interacting with adverse contextual and personal factors—leading to internalizing and externalizing problems. The authors hypothesize (1) Black girls experiences of peer victimization will be higher within unsafe schools, (2) Black girls high in aggression, attending unsafe schools, will experience lower levels of peer victimization.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Participants

Data for the current study are drawn from a larger dataset, the Coordinated Community

Student Survey. The Coordinated Community Student Survey (C2S2) project was a 5-year

(2005–2009) longitudinal study designed to assess self-reported students' attitudes, beliefs, and

behaviors (Barnes et al., 2009). The C2S2 project was conducted in a large Midwestern county,

surveying students from 159 schools (21 school districts) in the 4th to 12th grade (Barnes et al.,

2009). Parental consent and student assent were obtained from participants under 18 years of

age. Participants aged 18 or older provided informed consent. Students completed the

anonymous self-report survey yearly, assessing their physical, social, and psychological

functioning (Barnes et al., 2009). Participants answered questions regarding their physical,

social, and psychological functioning on a Likert scale.

The 4th wave of the C2S2 project contained the largest number of Black female High

school students. Thus, inclusionary criteria for the current study included female gender, African

America/Black race, and in grades 9-12 during the selected survey year. Out of the 32,210

enrolled participants in the C2S2 project, 11,597 students completed the survey in wave 4, and

1,571 of those participants were female high school students. The subsequent sample after the

inclusion criteria and removing the seven participants with missing data resulted in a sample size

of 293 Black female participants in the 9th-12th grades.

Instrumentation

Demographic Variables. The C2S2 demographics section prompted participants to indicate their

gender, grade, birthday, and ethnic/racial background (i.e., African American, American Indian,

Asian, Hispanic, Multiracial, White, and Other). Participants were not able to select more than

one ethnic/racial background. Thus, participants who identified solely as African American were

included in the current study.

Peer Victimization. Experiences of peer victimization were assessed through a 6-item measure

on a 4-point Likert scale from (1) Never, (2) Not Much, (3) Sometimes, (4) Always. Items

included in the measure are comparable to those within other empirical studies investigating peer

victimization among adolescents (e.g., Felix & You, 2011; Tharp-Taylor et al., 2009). To best

capture the varying experiences of peer victimization, the measure collected experiences from a

wide range of potential events. Example questions from the victimization measure range from

physical victimization "A kid at my school hit or pushed me when they were not playing

around," to gossiping "A kid at my school told lies or false rumors about me," and exclusion "I

have been left out or ignored by kids at my school." For the current study, the peer victimization

scale showed acceptable internal consistency (α =.632).

Lack of School Safety. Student perception of school safety was assessed through a single item,

"I felt safe at my school," measured on a 4-point Likert scale. Response options ranged from (1)

Never to (4) Always. Responses were reverse coded so that higher scores indicated poorer levels

of school safety.

Aggression. Self-reported levels of aggression were assessed using a 5-item measure on a 4-

point Likert scale from (1) Never to (4) Always. Sample items include "I yelled at other kids," "I

got into a physical fight with someone," and "I hit or punched someone." For the current study,

the aggression scale showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .764$).

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 26. Interclass correlations (ICC) were run due to

the nesting of students in school. Preliminary analyses revealed experiences of victimization

(ICC = 0.127), perceptions of school safety (ICC = 0.118) and levels of aggression (ICC =

0.074) were not affected by school membership. Therefore, the data was analyzed at the

individual level. To examine whether individual level aggression moderated the relationship of

lack of school safety and peer victimization, the data was analyzed through a moderation model

using PROCESS (Model 1), a regression path analysis tool (Hayes, 2018). The PROCESS macro

utilizes bootstrapping for inference of indirect effects, which was conducted with 5,000 random

samples generated from the covariance matrix to estimate significance and 95% confidence

intervals. Levels of aggression were separated into three groups—low (1SD below the mean,

average (mean), and high (1SD above the mean). Only participants who provided complete data

were included in the current study; therefore, no procedure for missing data was required.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

<u>Preliminary Analyses</u>

Table 1. depicts means and standard deviations of the key predictor and outcome

variables by participants' grade level. A correlation matrix of the independent and dependent

variables is presented in Table 2. A simple bivariate correlation resulted in significant

associations between all variables of interest. Results indicate a positive correlation between the

independent variables: aggression and lack of school safety. Lack of school safety also had a

positive correlation with peer victimization, the outcome variable; illustrating students are more

likely to experience peer victimization in schools perceived to be less safe. Lastly, aggression

and peer victimization were positively correlated, indicating aggressive individuals are more

likely to experience peer victimization overall.

Table 1.
Frequency (Percent) and Means (SD) by Participants' Grade Level

Grade	Frequency (%)	School Safety	Aggression	Peer Victimization
9th	141 (48.1)	2.09 (.894)	8.79 (2.83)	8.57 (2.778)
10th	66 (22.5)	2.14 (.926)	9.20 (3.28)	8.667 (2.770)
11th	60 (20.5)	2.05 (.999)	8.33 (2.91)	9.050 (2.683)
12th	26 (8.9)	1.92 (.977)	7.73 (2.54)	8.692 (2.782)
Total	293 (100)	2.08 (.927)	8.70 (2.94)	8.700 (2.750)

Table 2.
Means and Intercorrelations Between Measured Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. School Safety	–		
2. Aggression	.311**	–	
3. Peer Victimization	.203**	.233**	–
Range	1-4	5-20	6-24

*p< .05; **p< .001.

<u>Predictive Analyses</u>

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to analyze the effects of lack of school safety on peer victimization as moderated by aggression. The initial results of the multiple regression analysis indicated lack of school safety and proposed moderator, aggression, produced a significant predictor effect explaining 33.9% of the variance in experiences of peer victimization, $F (3, 289) =12.477$, $p < .001$. The model remained significant after adding the interaction effect and explained an additional 4.15% of the variance in experiences of peer victimization, $F (1, 289) =13.554$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1. and Table 3. for path coefficients). Results indicated aggression plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between lack of school safety and experiences of peer victimization (see Figure 2.). Low levels of aggression in schools perceived to be safe were associated with the lowest amount of peer victimization ($b =$ .98, $SE = .23$, $p < .001$). However, in schools perceived to be unsafe, low levels of aggression were associated with the highest levels of peer victimization. Average levels of aggression were associated with low levels of peer victimization in schools perceived to be unsafe and higher levels of peer victimization in schools perceived to be safe ($b = .63$, $SE = .18$, $p < .001$.). High levels of aggression did not moderate the relationship between perceived school safety and peer victimization ($b = .11$, $SE = .19$, $p = .57$) as students high in aggression experienced high levels of peer victimization across school environments.
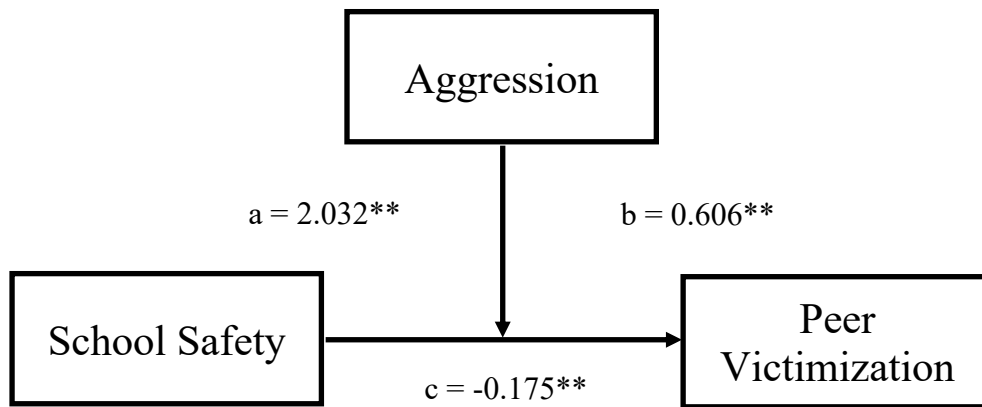
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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │                     │
                    │     Aggression      │
                    │                     │
                    └──────────┬──────────┘
                               │
    a = 2.032**                │        b = 0.606**
                               │
                               ▼
┌─────────────────┐                    ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │                    │      Peer       │
│  School Safety  │───────────────────▶│  Victimization  │
│                 │   c = -0.175**     │                 │
└─────────────────┘                    └─────────────────┘
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Figure 1. Results of the Moderation Model

Depiction of moderation model representing the experiences of peer victimization based on perceived school safety at differing levels of aggression. *Note:* * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table 3.
Direct and Indirect Effects of Lack of School Safety on Peer Victimization at Differing Levels of Aggression

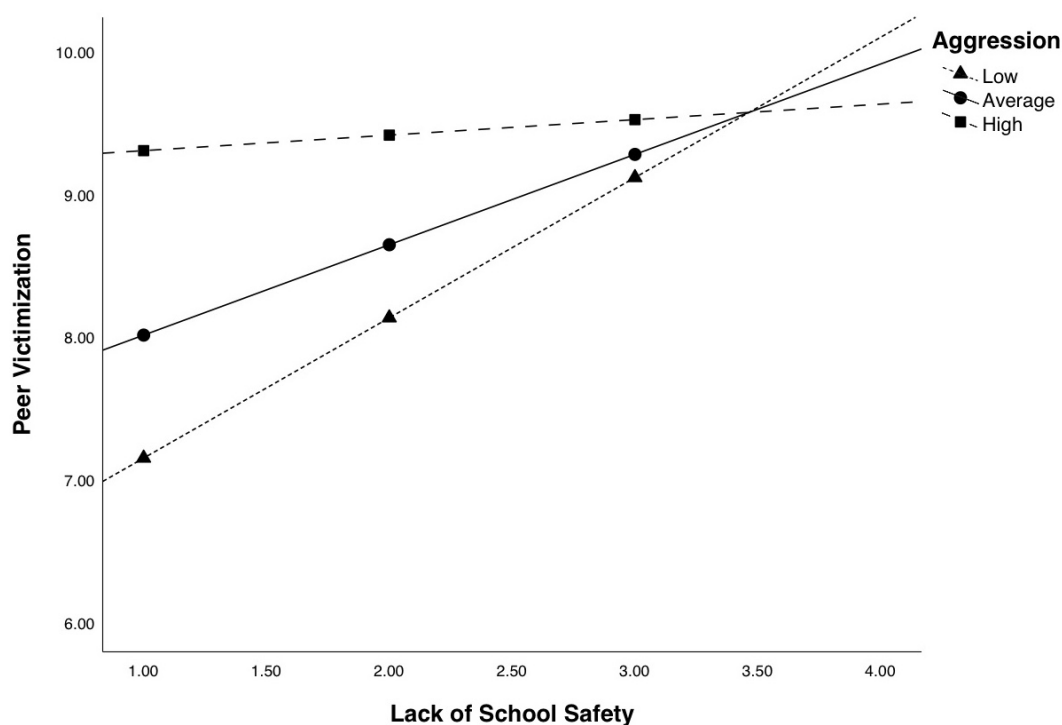|	Direct Effect			Indirect Effect		
	β	SE	95% CI	β	SE	95% CI
SS → PV (a)	2.032**	0.469	(1.109, 2.954)			
AG → PV (b)	0.606**	0.129	(0.352, 0.859)			
SS x AG → PV (c)				-0.175**	0.048	(-0.268, -0.813)

*p< .05; **p< .001.

Figure 2.

Post Hoc Analyses

Based on the findings, additional analyses were run to investigate the lack of significance

at the highest level of aggression. Post hoc analyses were conducted to compare between-race

differences of Black female participants and the majority ethnic/racial group, White high school

females, in the selected survey year. Table 4 illustrates the frequency, percentage, and means of

the target variables by race. A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference

between race within all variables of interest. Most notably, the average level of aggression

among Black female participants was significantly higher than the White female comparison

group $F(1, 1341) = 107.476$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the mean level of aggression among Black

female participants in the present study represents a significantly higher level of aggression than

the comparison group. Thus, the results suggest that higher levels of aggression among Black

girls (in comparison to average levels of aggression among White females) may be protective in

reducing experiences of victimization within schools perceived to be unsafe.

Table 4.
Frequency (Percent) and Mean (Standard Deviation) of Race

Race	Frequency (%)	Lack of School Safety	Aggression	Peer Victimization
African American	293 (21.8)	2.08 (.927)	8.696 (2.944)	8.700 (2.750)
White	1050 (78.2)	1.56 (.769)	6.960 (2.409)	9.851 (3.405)
Total	1343	1.68 (.834)	7.339 (2.633)	9.599 (3.307)

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the moderating role of aggression in the association between perceived lack of school safety and peer victimization among Black female high school students. Consistent with our first hypothesis, a significant association was found between perceived lack of school safety and peer victimization. This finding is supported by previous research, which shows experiences of peer victimization are higher for Black students within unsafe schools (Felix & You, 2011; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010). The identification of school safety as a factor influencing the likelihood of student victimization is well known. However, attempts to improve the safety of schools through anti-bullying campaigns may be unsuccessful unless moderators impacting the context of this association are acknowledged.

In regard to the findings of our second hypothesis, the relationship between perceptions of school safety and peer victimization among Black girls was moderated by aggression. However, in contrast to our second hypothesis, the interaction was not significant at the highest level of aggression. This may be explained by the findings of post-hoc analyses which revealed that the average level of aggression among participants was significantly higher than a White comparison group. Thus, these higher levels of aggression among Black girls (in comparison to average levels of aggression among White females) may have been protective in reducing experiences of victimization within schools perceived to be unsafe. This relationship is further supported by the findings that the perception of school safety and experiences of victimization differ significantly between Black and White girls.

The absence of support for our second hypothesis may be explained by normative levels of aggression in minoritized populations. Specifically, the lack of significance at the highest level of Black female aggression may be explained by their considerably higher level of aggression than the general population. Olweus posits that "provocative" victims are seen as hostile, aggressive, argumentative, and impulsive (Olweus, 1978), which may irritate their peers and contribute to their risk of victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Rather than using aggression in an instrumental and calculated manner, these individuals display hostile social interaction styles in response to slight aggravation (Pellegrini et al., 1999). Thus, participants who exhibit the highest level of aggression within the sample may provoke peers, inciting further victimization than typical in a given school context.

Although this study is one of the first to investigate aggression as a protective factor of peer victimization in unsafe schools, particularly among Black female youth, research broadly demonstrates the advantages of aggression in preventing victimization (Jackson et al., 2017; Persson, 2005). Longitudinal research provides evidence of a potential causal relationship, demonstrating that peer victimization serves as an antecedent, increasing displays of physical aggression in adolescents (Aceves & Cookston, 2007). A mechanism of this developmental pathway may be through increases in aggression as retaliation or self-protection. For instance, qualitative interviews conducted with students attending an alternative school imply that girls aim to display aggressive tendencies as a means to protect themselves (Zenz Adamshick, 2010).

Strengths and Limitations

This study has many strengths, including the alternative perspective of viewing behavior in light of the adaptive benefits in specific environmental contexts. The current study aims not to advocate for aggression to be characterized as a desirable trait but instead to view the behavior

within the context of minoritized individuals' experiences. Most of the research surrounding

minorized populations, specifically African Americans, focuses on deficits rather than

resiliencies (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). This can be harmful to the community as much of the

problems are out of their locus of control. For instance, a plethora of prior research points to the

disproportionate discipline practices of Black youth in American schools (Wallace et al., 2008),

and while Black boys are disproportionately affected by harsh discipline practices in schools,

there is a larger discrepancy between discipline rates of Black girls and White girls (Morris &

Perry, 2017). This example illustrates how harmful stereotypes, such as the 'aggressive Black

woman,' may cause implicit biases in the perception of Black girls' behavior in schools (George,

2015). Thus, the current study sought to employ a strengths-based approach in examining the

resilience of Black female students in unsafe environments.

Despite the noted strengths, the results of the present study must be interpreted in light of

its limitations. The first limitation is that the present study was cross-sectional. Longitudinal

findings demonstrate that experiences of peer victimization may lead to higher levels of physical

aggression (Aceves & Cookston, 2007; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). However, due to the cross-

sectional nature of the study, the generalization of aggression serving to protect Black high

school females in unsafe schools is limited to concurrent associations. Thus, future research

should employ longitudinal designs to investigate the causal mechanism of the development of

aggression as protection from peer victimization for Black students in unsafe school

environments.

A second limitation of the current study is due to the nature of secondary data analysis.

Schools surveyed through the C2S2 project stem from a large, majority White district in the

Midwestern US. This is especially noteworthy to the current study as the racial compositions of

schools affect experiences of victimization, such that individuals in the minority racial group of a given environment may experience higher rates of victimization than if they were in the majority group (Fisher et al., 2015). Thus, the generalizability of the current findings may be limited to Black students attending schools within the Midwestern US. Lastly, the Cronbach's alpha of the peer victimization measure was α =.632, which may be due to the wide range of victimization experiences the instrument assessed for. Items measuring both physical and relational victimization were included as the research demonstrates both forms of victimization play an impactful role on aggression (Elsaesser et al., 2013). However, the manner, and thus severity, of victimization may have differential effects on aggression; thus, future research should investigate the potential differences in displays of aggression varied by form of peer victimization.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

The current study's findings highlight the importance of context in the prevention and treatment of peer victimization in schools. The impetus is placed on school administration, policymakers, and professionals in the field to focus their efforts on creating safe environments so that individuals, especially those who are vulnerable and minoritized, do not experience a need to protect themselves. Unfortunately, however, current one-size-fits-all discipline practices intended to improve school safety and reduce instances of peer victimization have disproportionate effects on Black students (Skiba, 2015). These findings are especially significant considering discipline disparities between White and Black students are more significant among girls (Morris & Perry, 2017). Despite the findings of the current study suggesting the efficacy of instrumental aggression in decreasing experiences of peer victimization, Black girls defending themselves are often mistaken by school staff as the

aggressors of conflict (Miller, 2008). Rather than focusing on the social dilemmas that arise preceding fights on campus, schools typically respond with disciplinary action, suspending all students involved, regardless of their role in involvement (Talbott et al., 2002).

The aforementioned shortcomings of current practices highlight the necessity of culturally responsive alternatives to universal programs, such as restorative justice. Restorative justice effectively reduces student behavior referrals and suspensions by employing methods alternative to disciplinary actions (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). By investigating causal factors of an incident, restorative justice encourages school personnel to acknowledge differences in culture and life experiences leading to conflict and thereby reducing racial disproportionalities in discipline practices (C. Anderson et al., 2014). seeks to reduce, prevent and improve harmful behavior within schools (C. Anderson et al., 2014). The emphasis of restorative justice is on the reparation of relationships following conflict by (a) collaborative decision making, (b) accountability for harm, (c) engagement of family and community stakeholders, and (d) reducing, preventing, and improving harmful actions by changing behavior and the conditions that caused the incident (Skiba, 2015).

Lastly, as greater diversity in schools has been found to increase minoritized students' perception of safety by decreasing feelings of vulnerability (Juvonen et al., 2011), school personnel must be proactive in supporting the social and behavioral development of minoritized youth. Interventions focused on developing positive interpersonal relationships and discussing issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and oppression significantly decreased aggression among Black girls (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). Additionally, school personnel should support the development of minoritized students' ethnic identity as it has been found to increase prosocial behaviors and decrease violence (Belgrave & Allison, 2006).

Human Subjects Approval Statement

The Institutional Review Board of Michigan State University approved data collection

procedures of the broader C2S2 study. The present study's secondary analyses of the data

collected previously was deemed exempt from IRB review.

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