Article info

Victimization: Child's characteristics, parenting practices, and peer relationships. A mixed methods study

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the role of children's characteristics, parenting practices, and peer relationships in school victimization. The research employed a mixed methodology. The quantitative phase of the research included 374 children and their parents. The children completed the Revised Olweus Bullying and Victimization Questionnaire, the Behavioral Inhibition Instrument, the Parental Bonding Instrument, and the Social Acceptance Scale. The qualitative phase of the research included eight children, who were randomly selected from the quantitative phase. Data in this phase were collected through a focus group. The results of the quantitative phase showed that victimization is positively predicted by behavioral inhibition, while it is negatively predicted by maternal and paternal care, and peer relationships. The results of the qualitative phase were consistent with the results of the quantitative phase. In addition, new characteristics and concepts emerged from the qualitative data, such as the victim's characteristics (low self-esteem, inability to support oneself and express one's opinion, low success, victim diversity). Therefore, a complex and comprehensive profile of school victims was developed through the mixed methodology, which includes the child's behaviors and characteristics and parental and social factors. The research results are useful for designing prevention and intervention programs related to children and adolescents' psycho-emotional empowerment.

Keywords: Victimization; quantitative phase; qualitative phase; mixed methodology; child's characteristics; parenting practices; peer relationships

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Introduction

Peer victimization is a major social problem affecting children in all parts of the world. According to the World Health Organization (2012), victimization is a global phenomenon, with an average incidence of 32% of children victimized in 38 countries. Victimization is defined as the victim's exposure to aggressive behavior, which is systematic and intentionally intending to cause the victim physical or mental injury (Klomek et al., 2007; Olweus, 1993). Peer victimization affects children's functionality in various areas of their lives and is linked to subsequent adjustment and emotional problems (Chan, 2013; Cole et al., 2015; Georgiou & Fanti, 2014). During childhood and adolescence, peer victimization experiences can disrupt critical developmental processes, including difficulties in growing independence, exploring one's interests, and forming healthy peer relationships (Oberle et al., 2018).

Victimization is a complex phenomenon. No single cause can explain why some children are victimized. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model, individual characteristics and contextual factors (such as the family and social environment) interact with and influence the child's holistic, psycho-emotional development. In school bullying and peer victimization, this model focuses on understanding how individual characteristics of children interact with environmental (family and peers) contexts to promote or prevent victimization and perpetration (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) classic ecological model, the present study aims to examine the risk factors associated with school victimization. Specifically, the study investigates how individual characteristics, family (parenting practices), and social factors (relationships with peers) are associated with child victimization. Identifying the risk factors contributes to improving and developing prevention and intervention programs.

Parenting Practices and Peer Victimization

Parenting practices are a factor that is consistently examined concerning the development of peer victimization. Parenting practices relate to parents' behavior toward their children, including parental care and protection (de Haan, Prinzie, & Dekovic, 2009; Hermandez-Gzman et al., 2013). High care includes parenting practices such as affection and empathy, while low care involves coldness, alienation, rejection, and indifference. Parental protection includes autonomy, independence, and freedom that can be given to the child, while high protection refers to parental actions limiting a child's autonomy and independence, such as overprotection (Canetti et al., 1997; Mullineaux et al., 2009). Research has often shown that when negative parenting practices are developed, such as parental rejection, lack of parental control, alienation, and overprotection, then the child may be more easily victimized (Beran, 2009; Bibou-Nakou et al., 2012; Bowes et al., 2009; Dehue et al., 2012; Georgiou, 2008a; Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2016; Lereya et al., 2013; Nikiforou et al., 2013; Papanikolaou et al., 2011; Thornberg, 2010).

Peer Relationships and Peer Victimization

Relationships with peers refer to children's social interactions with other children their age (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). These social relationships serve many positive functions, such as informing the child about his/her values, promoting and acquiring new skills, and acting as a protective factor against negative events (Bukowski & Adams, 2005). In addition, these relationships are an essential factor in children's adaptation and wider social and emotional development (Asher & Coie, 1990). Research has shown that negative relationships with peers, lack of support, and acceptance from peers are risk factors for child victimization (Barboza et al., 2009; Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006; Jingu & Eunha, 2019; Long et al., 2020; Nikiforou, Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2013; Rigby, 2005). In particular, Perren and Alsaker's (2006) research showed that victims are more isolated, less social, less likely to have playmates, and more withdrawn from peer-to-peer social situations.

Individual Characteristics, Behavioral Inhibition, and Peer Victimization

Research has linked specific individual characteristics to peer victimization. Such characteristics are low self-esteem, social anxiety, and fear of negative criticism from their peers (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011). Other personal characteristics that lead to peer victimization are reduced copying skills, inability to support themselves, social withdrawal, and shyness (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). Another individual characteristic is behavioral inhibition. Behavioral inhibition is defined as a stable trait that refers to a person's negative emotional and behavioral reactions to new situations and stimuli (Kagan et al., 1984). The behaviorally inhibited children are socially withdrawn and shy, play alone, do not interact with other children in the game, and prefer to observe other children (Degnan, Almas, & Fox, 2010). However, only two studies have investigated the relationship between behavioral inhibition and victimization. For instance, Gladstone, Parker, and Malhi's (2006) research examined adult retrospective narratives regarding their childhood victimization experiences and their emotional and behavioral reactions, such as behavioral inhibition. The study's findings suggested that adults who exhibited behavioral inhibition were shy and sensitive in childhood and were more likely to be bullied by their peers. Also, the study of Ioannidou and Zafiroupoulou (2021a) highlighted that behaviorally inhibited children are more likely to be victimized and develop internalizing symptoms, especially if their parents indicate negative practices toward them.

Research Purpose

The present study aims to enhance the understanding of school victimization by examining a blend of individual (behavioral inhibition trait and other characteristics), familial (parenting practices), and social factors (peer relationships) through a unique mixed-methods approach. Unlike prior research, which predominantly employed quantitative paradigms, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses to offer a more

nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon (Lereya et al., 2013; Nikiforou et al., 2013). Few qualitative and mixed studies have been conducted in relation to children's and adolescents' views on bullying and peer victimization, especially in the Cyprus population (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2013; Guera, Williams, & Sadek, 2011). The mixed methodology allows for a more detailed and comprehensive analysis and interpretation of research results (Johnson, Onwugbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). The study's quantitative method quantifies the extent to which behavioral inhibition, parenting practices, and peer relationships predict peer victimization. The qualitative component aims to explore children's subjective experiences and perceptions regarding the constructs of interest (e.g., their views on how parental behavior and peer relationships impact victimization) and provide depth and context to the quantitative findings, offering a more holistic understanding of the phenomena. Also, the qualitative method uncovers nuanced aspects of the child, family, and peer dynamics that contribute to victimization, which might not be fully captured through quantitative measures. Furthermore, the innovation of the present study relies on developing a multifactorial profile of victims arising from both the children's perspectives and surveys. The research takes into account multiple factors, such as individual, family, and social, that contribute to child victimization. While previous research has separately investigated the roles of parenting practices, peer relationships, and individual traits in the context of victimization, this study's integrated approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact. It provides insight into the complex, multifaceted nature of victimization, which has been less explored in a combined framework. Finally, the research examined the role of behavioral inhibition, which has so far not been examined in relation to victimization, apart from the existence of only two studies. This appears to be an important gap in the literature, and this makes it necessary to examine behavioral inhibition in relation to victimization to clarify whether it is a characteristic of victimized children. The study seeks to empirically test this relationship, offering insights that can inform targeted interventions for behaviorally inhibited children.

Research Hypotheses for the Quantitative Phase

a) It is expected that maternal and paternal care will negatively predict child and adolescent victimization.
b) Maternal and paternal protection is expected to positively predict child and adolescent victimization.
c) It is expected that the child's peer relationships will negatively predict child and adolescent victimization.
d) It is expected that behavioral inhibition will positively predict child and adolescent victimization.

Research Questions for the Qualitative Phase

e) What reasons do children describe as the factors that led a child to be victimized by their peers?
f) How do children perceive the characteristics of children who are the target of school bullying?
g) How do children describe and perceive the relationships children who are victims of school bullying have with their peers?
h) How do children describe and perceive the relationship that children who are victims of school bullying have with their parents?

Method

Quantitative Method

Participants and Procedure

The study participants were 374 Greek-Cypriot children and adolescents aged 10 to 14 years and their parents/guardians. As shown in Table 1, the 217 children came from the fifth and sixth elementary school grades, while the 157 children came from the first and second high school grades (average age = 12.04, TA = 1.03). Of the 374 children, 174 were boys (46.5%), and 200 were girls (53.5%). The mothers and fathers had secondary education (42% and 58%, respectively) and university education (40% and 57%). In addition, 87% of the children lived with both parents, 10% had divorced parents, and 3% were from single-parent families.

The study was approved by the Cyprus National Bioethics Commission, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, the Office of the Commissioner for the Protection of Personal Data, and the schools' directors. In addition, the written consent of the parents/guardians was a prerequisite for the children's participation. Initially, the researchers gave a sealed envelope to parents/guardians, including the parent consent form, and he parent demographic form. Then, the children completed the student demographic form and the relevant research questionnaires on the school premises during a teaching period.

Measures

Peer Victimization: The Revised Olweus Bully / Victim Questionnaire was used to examine whether children are victims of bullying (Olweus, 1996). It is a self-report scale consisting of 40 questions. The questionnaire consists of two subscales, one for victimization and one for bullying.

Tab. 1. Participants by Gender and Grade, Quantitative Phase.

		Grade				Total
		5th grade of Elementary school	6th grade of Elementary school	1st grade of High school	2nd grade of High school	
Gender	Boys	36	54	50	34	174
	Girls	69	58	40	33	200
	Total	105	112	90	67	374

For this study, only the victimization subscale was used. The child is asked to answer on a five-point Likert scale (0 = not valid at all to 5 = very valid) whether he/she has experienced the victimization incident that describes each question. Some examples of victimization subscale questions are: "Someone or some of my classmates are making fun of me," "Someone or some of my classmates are calling me various offensive adjectives," The internal consistency for this sample was α = .95.

Parental Bonding Instrument: The Parental Bonding Instrument was used to evaluate parenting practices (Parker, Tuplin, & Brown, 1979). It is a self-report tool that consists of 25 questions, and the child evaluates the behavior of his father and mother separately. Answers are graded on a four-point scale, depending on how common or not the parent's behavior was. The questionnaire consists of two scales, care (12 questions) and protection (13 questions), which lead to four different types of parental practices (maternal and paternal care and maternal and paternal protection). Some examples of questions about maternal/paternal care and maternal/paternal protection are: "Spoke to me with a warm and friendly voice," "Seemed emotionally cold to me," "Tried to control everything I did," "Let me decide things for myself." The internal consistency for this study was α = .88 for the Maternal Care scale, α = .81 for the Maternal Protection scale, α = .88 for the Paternal Care scale, and α = .84 for the Paternal Protection scale.

Peer Relationships: The Social Acceptance Sub-Scale, from the Child Self-Perception Profile Questionnaire, was used to measure children's peer relationships and their perception of acceptance by their peer group (Harter, 1985). This sub-scale consists of six questions that record either high or low acceptance (indicative statements: "some children have many friends," "other children do not have many friends"). Each question consists of two opposite statements: "some children would like to have more friends" while "other children have as many friends as they want." The child has to choose which of the two statements best describes him/her and then answer whether this statement is partially correct or very correct for himself/herself. The internal consistency for this study was α = .95.

Behavioral Inhibition: The Behavioral Inhibition Instrument assessed children's behavioral inhibition (Muris et al., 1999). It is a self-report questionnaire, which consists of four items that refer to shyness ("I am shy when I have to talk to a stranger"), communication ("I talk easily to a stranger"), fear ("I feel nervous when I have to talk to a stranger") and joy ("I feel good and I can laugh when I talk to a stranger"). Each question is graded on a four-point scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = always). The internal consistency of the Behavioural Inhibition Instrument was good α = .93.

Qualitative Method

Participants and Procedure

Eight children (four boys and four girls) who participated in the quantitative phase were randomly selected in the second phase. Two children (1 boy and 1 girl) participated from each grade (5th and 6th grade of elementary school and 1st and 2nd

grade of high school). The random selection of the participating children aimed to avoid targeting and stigmatizing children as victims or perpetrators. A telephone conversation followed with the children's parents to explain and describe in detail the second phase and emphasize confidentiality and personal data protection. The participating children are referred to by their initials to preserve their anonymity.

Measures

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted in which eight children participated. According to Krueger (1988), the ideal size of a focus group is around 8-10 participants. Small focus groups make children feel safe and trust each other, listening to other children's opinions, and in this way, they express and share more thoughts and feelings (Curry et al., 2009). Furthermore, in qualitative research, the focus is often on the richness and depth of data obtained from each participant rather than the number of participants. Given the specific focus on peer victimization and the detailed, personal nature of the experiences being investigated, a smaller, focused sample allows for an in-depth exploration of each participant's unique perspective (Guest et al., 2006).

The focus group lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The purpose of the focus group was for children to share their thoughts and perceptions about victimization and bullying and discuss the characteristics of child victims (Curry et al., 2009). The senior author conducted the focus group at the University site. At first, the group leader (senior author) explained the purpose of the study, the confidentiality issues, and the recorder's use. A semi-structured interview was designed to explore the experiences, perceptions, and insights of children regarding peer victimization, victim characteristics, parenting practices, and peer relationships. The interview followed a flexible guide that included open-ended questions and imaginative situations to encourage children to express their thoughts and reactions (Patton et al., 2017). The questions (Appendix 1) were designed to reflect the survey items and allow for open-ended discussion of the dynamics of victimization. For example, participants were asked: "How do you think the relationship of these children with their parents is? How would you describe it?", "Describe some characteristics or behaviors of these children that can lead to their victimization", "How do you think these children behave when they are in a place they have never been before and do not know the other children?".

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. The thematic analysis method is considered the most appropriate for examining the research questions since the thematic analysis allows theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also, this method helps the researcher to identify common themes between the data (Hopkins et al., 2013). This was helpful in the present study, as it was possible to identify common perceptions and beliefs of children about the reasons for

Tab. 2. Means and Standard Deviations.

	Mean	SD
Maternal care	2.48	0.45
Maternal protection	1.44	0.55
Paternal care	2.36	0.40
Paternal protection	1.22	0.58
Peer relationships	3.00	0.73
Behavioral inhibition	2.03	0.77
Victimization	1.75	0.85

Results

Overview

The primary goal of this study was to determine whether parenting practices, peer relationships, behavioral inhibition, and other child characteristics predict peer victimization through the mixed methodology. To address these questions, we report analyses of survey data followed by the focus group study results.

Quantitative Phase

Data Analysis

The results were processed with the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 26). At first, frequency analysis, descriptive statistics, correlations, and internal consistencies were calculated. The following fundamental analysis performed was the multiple regression analysis.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Means and standard deviations of the variables are shown in Table 2. The bivariate correlations between variables are presented in Table 3. All correlations were statistically significant and were generally in the expected direction. Multicollinearity did not appear to be infringed, as the Tolerance index was greater than 0.2 and the *VIF* index was less than 10.

victimization. The thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software. NVivo supports deep, insightful qualitative data analysis and helps manage, analyze, and report on qualitative data, such as interview transcripts (Bazeley, 2007). It facilitates the identification, categorization, and exploration of themes and patterns within the data, which seems vital for interpreting the qualitative phase of the research, including focus group discussions (Zamawe, 2015). The thematic analysis method was based on the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following this process, initial codes emerged, grouped into themes based on common characteristics and elements. The thematic dimensions extracted were extensively discussed among the raters to ensure a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the textual materials. This collaborative process helped refine the themes and subthemes, ensuring reliability and consistency in the analysis.

Tab. 3. Bivariate Correlations for all Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Maternal Care	1						
2. Maternal Protection	-.34**	1					
3. Paternal care	.84**	-.26**	1				
4. Paternal Protection	-.31**	.52**	-.31**	1			
5. Peer relationships	.71**	-.20**	.74**	-.47**	1		
6. Behavioral Inhibition	-.70**	.35**	-.72**	.42**	-.71**	1	
7. Victimization	-.77**	.28**	-.80**	.40**	-.80**	.88**	1

** $p < .01$

Tab. 4. Multiple Regression Analysis.

		95% CI			
	Unstandardized B	LL	UL	SE B	Standardized β
Constant	2.79	2.37	3.21	.21	
Maternal care	-.24	-.39	-.09	.08	-.13**
Maternal protection	-.06	-.14	.02	.04	-.04
Paternal care	-.34	-.51	-.17	.09	-.16**
Paternal protection	.01	-.07	.08	.04	.00
Peer relationships	-.25	-.33	-.17	.05	-.22**
Behavioral inhibition	.58	.51	.65	.04	.53**

$R^2 = .86$, * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Multiple Regression Analysis

The multiple regression analysis examined whether the independent variables of maternal care, maternal protection, paternal care, paternal protection, peer relationships, and behavioral inhibition predict peer victimization (dependent variable). Initially, the basic conditions of the multiple regression were checked, which showed that the condition of error independence was not violated since the value of the Durbin - Watson index was close to 2 (*Durbin - Watson* = 1.972). The condition of multicollinearity also did not seem to be violated since the Tolerance index was greater than 0.2 and the VIF index was less than 10. The homoskedasticity condition and the condition of the regularity of errors were not violated.

The results of the multiple regression showed that the model was statistically significant, F (6,367) = 362.976, p <.001, interpreting 86% of the total peer victimization variation (r^2 = .856, *Adjusted* r^2 = .853). As shown in Table 4, the absolute value of β (standardized) indicates the importance of the independent variables on the victimization. Results showed that maternal care (β = -.13, p < .01), paternal care (β = -.16, p <.001), and peer relationships (β = -.22, p < .001) negatively predicted peer victimization. Behavioral inhibition (β = .53, p < .001) positively predicted peer victimization. The maternal protection (β = -.04, p > .05) and paternal protection (β = .01, p > .05) were not statistically significant predictors.

Qualitative Phase

Thematic Analysis

Through the thematic analysis, various themes emerged regarding peer victimization concerning the victims' characteristics, the peer relationships, and the parent-victim relationships.

Victim Characteristics

The topic of "victim characteristics" refers to how children describe victims concerning their behavior and character. These characteristics describe the weak elements of the victim, which make it an easy target for school bullying, such as social and behavioral inhibition, low self-esteem, inability to support oneself and express one's opinion, low success, and victim physical appearance.

Social and Behavioral Inhibition

Social and behavioral inhibition refers to the child's behaviors, characterized by shyness and inability to speak to other children who may or may not know. Some children reported that the victim is usually a child who is reluctant to talk to other children, especially when he/she does not know them, so he/she prefers to isolate himself/herself from others.

"He will not feel comfortable talking to the other children. He will be isolated from the rest because he is ashamed" (G., 13 years old)

"She will be scared and will not talk to the other children. She will not trust the other children because she has met those bad guys who bother her, and she will think that everyone is like that" (K., 10 years old)

Low Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to how individuals think and feel about themselves (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Several children reported that the victims have a negative image of themselves.

"Most have very low self-esteem and do not have a friend to comfort them, to tell them something to feel good" (T., 12 years old)

"They have low self-esteem and believe that they are not capable of doing things" (A., 12 years old)

Inability to Support Oneself and Express One's Opinion

Most children described the victim as a child who was unable to support himself/herself and express his/her views, especially in cases of bullying.

"I think they will be afraid to say their opinion because they will think that they will be bullied and mocked" (F., 11 years old)

"These children are quiet, do not speak a lot, and that is why they cannot support themselves and tell others to stop teasing them" (P., 10 years old)

Low Success

Low success refers to the victims being not good students and having low grades.

"These children may be bad students, and they may not have good grades" (R., 14 years old)

"Usually they are not good students, and they can say something wrong in class, and classmates make fun of them" (G., 13 years old)

Victim Physical Appearance

Victim physical appearance refers to the victim's appearance characteristics, making him/her look different from other children of his/her age.

"Usually, they make fun of children who may be fatter or very short" (K., 10 years old)

"These children may be fat, wear glasses, have acne" (A., 12 years old)

Peer Relationships

The topic "peer relationships" refers to children's reports describing victims' social interactions with other children their age. The children agreed that it is not easy for victims to have friends because they are mainly introverted characters

and because the perpetrators motivate other children not to associate with them.

"They have few friends who do not bully other children either" (K., 10 years old)

"They may have only one or two friends, who may be shy and quiet as them" (N., 11 years old)

Parent-victim Relationships

The theme "parent-victim relationships" refers to children's perception regarding victims' relationships and interaction with their parents. Children described that parents use parental overprotection and rejection towards their children.

Parental Overprotection

The topic of parental overprotection describes parents' strict and protective attitude towards their children, which does not allow children to take the initiative.

"Maybe their parents are always on top of them, not letting them take initiatives, not letting them do what they want and like" (R., 14 years old)

"I believe that their parents are very protective and restrictive with them" (G., 13 years old)

Parental Rejection

Most children argued that the parents of these children are usually parents who do not pay proper attention and interest to their children.

"Their parents do not take care of them, do not play with them, do not talk to them" (T., 12 years old)

"Their parents may work a lot, and do not have time to play and discuss with them" (N., 11 years old)

Discussion

The present study investigated the role of children's characteristics, parenting practices, and peer relationships in school victimization through a mixed methodology. Drawing on surveys and focus group results, it is clear that peer victimization is a complex phenomenon embedded in a social context. Quantitative findings revealed that behavioral inhibition, negative parenting practices, and peer relationships predict child victimization. In addition, the results of the qualitative phase were consistent with the quantitative phase results. However, new characteristics and concepts emerged from the qualitative data, such as the victim's characteristics (low self-esteem, inability to support oneself and express one's opinion, low success, and victim's physical appearance).

Both quantitative and qualitative results indicated that social and behavioral inhibition is a risk factor for peer victimization cases. Children's behaviors, such as shyness, negative behavioral reactions to other children and situations, social withdrawal, and fear, seem to predispose them to be more

easily targeted for school bullying incidents (Degnan, Almas, & Fox, 2010). This finding is in line with other research results indicating that behaviorally inhibited children are particularly hesitant and shy, feeling anxious and insecure when interacting with other children, resulting in peer victimization, isolation, withdrawal, and emotional problems (Albano, Chorpita, & Barlow, 2003; Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; Ioannidou & Zafiropoulou, 2021a; Lund et al., 2010).

In addition to the above finding, the focus group revealed further victims' characteristics, such as low self-esteem, difficulty supporting themselves, and expressing their views because they are afraid of negative criticism (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Another victim characteristic that emerged was the low success of victims, which refers to low grades in school performance (Glew et al., 2005; Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2006). Furthermore, the children described that victims might differ from other children in appearance or physical characteristics. Indeed, research indicates that victims are often overweight, too short, wear thick myopia glasses, or have mental problems (Olweus, 1993).

Another result that emerged from the children's reports and the surveys is the victim's peer relationships. The children perceived victims as having difficulties forming relationships with their peers. They characterized them as closed and introverted characters. It seems that the lack of acceptance, interest, and support from peers and the lack of a close and supportive friend function as risk factors for the development of peer victimization and adjustment problems (Ioannidou, 2022; Jingu & Eunha, 2019; Nikiforou, Georgiou, & Stavrinides, 2013; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

Quantitative findings also confirmed that low maternal and paternal care predicts peer victimization. The thematic analysis results also highlighted a link between parental rejection and child victimization. Our results suggest that when parent treat their child with low parental care, such as rejection, coldness, alienation, and indifference, then the child is more likely to be victimized (Beran, 2009; Bowes et al., 2009; Ioannidou & Georgiou, 2021; Nikiforou et al., 2013; Papanikolaou et al., 2011). Parents who are uninvolved in their children's lives and do not provide them with the proper importance, care, and interest are likely to create an unsafe family environment, and children may develop emotional problems and be victimized (Dehue et al., 2012; Ioannidou & Zafiropoulou, 2021b; Jingu & Eunha, 2019; Lereya et al., 2013; Plexousakis, 2019).

The last theme that emerged through the thematic analysis is parental overprotection and its link to victimization. However, contrary to expectations, the quantitative phase highlighted that parental protection does not predict peer victimization. Research has produced mixed findings regarding the role of parental protection in peer victimization. Some studies have found that high levels of parental control and overprotection are associated with higher levels of child victimization, possibly because these children are less equipped to deal with conflicts independently (Ioannidou & Georgiou, 2021; Georgiou, 2008b; Kokkinos, 2013; Plexousakis, 2019; Rigby, Slee, & Martin, 2007). Conversely, other research suggests that supportive and involved parenting, which can include protective actions, is linked to lower levels of victimization (Bowes et al., 2009; Lereya, et al., 2013; Ostrov & Kamper-DeMarco, 2019).

These divergent findings may reflect the complexity of parenting behaviors and their varied impacts depending on context, child characteristics, and the nature of the protective actions. Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1977), child development is influenced by various nested environmental systems, from immediate family interactions to broader societal influences. Within this framework, parental protection is just one factor among many in the microsystem affecting a child's experience with peer victimization. The effectiveness of parental protection may be moderated by factors in the child's mesosystem, such as school policies and peer group dynamics, or macrosystem factors like cultural norms around bullying and parental involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This contrary result highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how different forms of parental protection influence children's risk of being victimized, underscoring the importance of considering the broader ecological context (school, peers) and individual differences (age, temperament) in future research on this topic.

Limitations and Future Research

There may be some limitations to the present study. For example, the results may not be generalized to other cultural contexts and cultures. Another limitation may be that all quantitative measurements resulted from children's self-reports. In addition, the sample of the qualitative phase is relatively small (eight participants), so it can not be generalized, but we can analyze the results to interpret the factors associated with the child's victimization. As far as future research is concerned, it would be helpful for future research to use various measurement methods, such as multiple sources of information (parents, teachers, social context) and observations. Further, longitudinal studies would also provide more detail on the developmental course of victimization.

Conclusion and Implication of the Study

The present research results can offer a theoretical and practical contribution to the international literature and the local community. The study's mixed methodology contributes to the more in-depth and detailed analysis and interpretation of the issue of peer victimization (Creswell, 2002). Furthermore, a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective emerged of the factors that lead a child to be victimized. This multifactorial profile of victims includes all the systems surrounding children (individual characteristics, family, and social environment).

Another implication of this study concerns prevention and intervention programs to combat bullying at schools. Knowing that specific individual, family, and social factors contribute to peer victimization, we can develop programs aiming at the psychoemotional empowerment of children and strengthening social and family relationships. In addition, these programs could improve school well-being and climate and decrease school bullying. Finally, the role of schools, teachers, parents, and mental health professionals will be crucial in promoting a safe school environment in which a positive social system supports all students.

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Appendix I

Semi-structured Interview

"What does bullying at school mean to you? Can you describe what it looks like?"

"Have you seen or heard about bullying at your school? What happened in those situations?"

"When you think of someone who gets bullied, what kind of person comes to mind? What are they like?"

"How do you think someone acts or behaves that might make them a target for bullying? Can you give any examples?"

"Describe some characteristics or behaviors of these children that can lead to their victimization."

For example, could some personal characteristics of theirs (like their character and social skills) be the reason they became a victim? (Clarifying question if needed). For example, do they have low self-esteem? Are they shy? (Clarifying question and example if needed)

"How would you describe the children who are victims of school bullying in terms of their social skills?"

For example, can they easily make friends? Do they find it challenging to speak in a discussion? (Clarifying question if needed).

"Do you believe that children who are victims of school bullying have friends? What do you think they do with their friends?"

"Are they accepted by other children their age? That is, do other children want to be around them? If not, what are the reasons that other children might not want to be around them?"

"How do you think these children behave when they interact with/talk with other children their age? For example, are they shy, do they find it difficult to talk to other children, or are they sociable and easily talk to other children?"

"How do you think these children behave when they are in a place they have never been before and do not know the other children?"

Imaginary situations:

For example, they have enrolled in a new sport like soccer and do not know any of the other children. What will they do? How will they behave in this new situation?

Will they try to approach the other children and talk to them, just observe, or wait for the other children to approach them and not speak? (Clarifying question if needed)

"How do you think they feel in this new situation where they do not know any of the children?"

For example, do they feel nervous and shy, or on the contrary, do they feel comfortable? (Clarifying question if needed)

"How do you think the relationship of these children with their parents is? How would you describe it?"

For example, do they talk to their parents about their problems, and do their parents listen to them? Are their parents strict with them? Are they overprotective? (Clarifying question if needed)

"What do you think about how the parents of someone who gets bullied might act at home? Do you think it affects bullying?"