

Forgiveness and Loneliness in Peer-Victimized Adolescents

**Celeste León-Moreno,¹
Belén Martínez-Ferrer,¹ David Moreno-Ruiz,²
and Daniel Musitu-Ferrer¹**

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the relationships between forgiveness, motivations for revenge, avoidance, and benevolence; loneliness, emotional loneliness and positive subjective evaluation of the social network; and peer victimization in schools, relational, overt physical, and overt verbal, based on gender. A battery of instruments was administered to 617 Spanish students (50.7% boys and 49.3% girls), aged between 10 and 16 years ($M = 13.04$ years, $SD = 1.80$ years) from primary and secondary education. A multivariate analysis of variance and a multiple block regression for data analysis was used. Study results revealed that the most victimized students showed greater motivation for revenge and avoidance, as well as a greater perception of emotional loneliness and less positive subjective evaluation of their social network. In addition, the findings obtained in the regression analysis (stepwise) indicated that being a boy between 11 and 13 years old and having a high level of emotional loneliness and high avoidance motivation were the most important predictors of peer victimization. Finally, the findings and their possible implications in the design of intervention projects that encourage forgiveness in interpersonal conflicts and integration in social networks as preventive strategies of peer victimization were discussed.

Keywords

forgiveness, loneliness, peer victimization, adolescence, ex post facto study

¹Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla, Spain

²Universitat de València, Spain

Corresponding Author:

Celeste León-Moreno, Departamento de Educación y Psicología Social, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Carretera de Utrera Km. 1, 41013 Sevilla, Spain.

Email: cmleomor@upo.es

Introduction

An increasing number of studies have explored the role of forgiveness in the quality of peer relationships in adolescents (Barcaccia, Howard, Pallini, & Baiocco, 2017; Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018). Forgiveness is defined as an emotional, behavioral, and cognitive predisposition in which the victims of a conflict or a transgression substitute negative emotion, such as anger and hatred, for positive emotions, such as empathy and compassion (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018). Forgiveness is associated with a lower probability of engaging in violent behavior (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006) and a higher probability of using constructive strategies of conflict resolution (Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; Guzmán, 2010).

The present study followed the theory developed by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997), who considered that forgiveness is a multidimensional motivational transformation that implies the reduction of the motivations of revenge and avoidance. Revenge motivation refers to “the search for personal satisfaction through the harm or injury to the other (or close persons) as a measure of reprisal” (Govier, 2002, p. 2). Avoidance motivation refers to the desire to avoid the transgressor with the purpose of preventing a conflict from occurring or aggravating the existing one (Beltrán-Morillas, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2015). Later, McCullough and Hoyt (2002) added a third dimension, benevolence motivation, which refers to those feelings, cognitions, and positive behaviors toward the transgressor aimed at solving a problem and maintaining the previous relationship. Thus, forgiveness is the outcome of a high motivation toward benevolence and a low motivation toward transgression and avoidance after a conflict (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002).

The effects of forgiveness have been particularly analyzed in schools, especially in situations of peer victimization (Barcaccia, Milioni, Pallini, & Vecchio, 2018; Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018; Watson, Rapee, & Todorov, 2016a), which is defined as an intentional physical, verbal, or psychological abuse that takes place in and around school, especially in places where adult supervision is minimal (Graham, 2006; Olweus, 1994). Peer victimization has negative effects on school climate (Ortega-Barón, Buelga, & Cava, 2016; Wang, La Salle, Wu, Do, & Sullivan, 2018) and on the health and well-being of adolescents (Cava, Povedano, Buelga, & Musitu, 2015; Randa, Reyns, & Nobles, 2019; Watson, Rapee, & Todorov, 2016b).

Another important variable considered in this study for its links to forgiveness is loneliness, understood as a negative emotional state generated by the absence or loss of affective and social bonds (Expósito & Moya, 2000). This feeling is expressed in two dimensions: emotional loneliness and subjective evaluation of the social network (Borges, Prieto, Ricchetti, Hernández-Jorge, & Rodríguez-Naveiras, 2008; Yáñez-Yaben, 2008). Emotional loneliness refers to the perception of the absence of meaningful relationships, whereas the subjective evaluation of the social network refers

to the quality of social interactions and relationships and the lack of affiliative relationships (Expósito & Moya, 2000). Previous studies have found that victims report a greater feeling of loneliness (Pouwels, Van Noorden, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2018; Van Der Ploeg, Steglich, Salmivalli, & Veenstra, 2015) which, in turn, is related to other adjustment problems, such as anxiety (Acquah, Topalli, Wilson, Junttila, & Niemi, 2016; Yuchang, Junyi, Junxiu, Jing, & Mingcheng, 2017), depressive symptomatology (Kochel, Ladd, & Rudolph, 2012; Oriol et al., 2017), and suicidal ideation (Lucas-Molina, Pérez-Albéniz, Fonseca-Pedrero, & Giménez-Dasí, 2018; Vergara, Stewart, Cosby, Lincoln, & Auerbach, 2019). Furthermore, the positive assessment of the social network is associated with psychosocial adjustment and less involvement in violent behavior as aggressor or victim (Crespo, Romero-Abrio, Martínez-Ferrer, Musitu, 2017; Garaigordobil, 2017; Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2012; Povedano, Cava, Monreal, Varela, & Musitu, 2015).

It has been pointed out that forgiveness improves the quality of peer relationships because it increases the likelihood of successfully resolving a conflict and re-establishing prior interpersonal relationships (Barcaccia et al., 2018; Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2015; Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; Watson et al., 2016a). Prior studies concluded that the poor quality relationships are related to loneliness. In other words, forgiveness encourages positive interpersonal relationships and interpersonal resources (Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; Denham, Neal, Wilson, Pickering, & Boyatzis, 2005). Conversely, difficulties to forgive others' transgressions are associated with a withdrawal from social relationships, which in turn is associated with emotional loneliness and a negative assessment of social networks (Day & Maltby, 2005).

However, there are few studies that have analyzed the relationships between forgiveness, the motivations of revenge, avoidance, and benevolence, and the feeling of loneliness in peer victimized adolescents. Nevertheless, one recent study found that forgiveness and friendships and peer relationships moderate the adverse effects of peer victimization, whereas difficulties to forgive and loneliness are associated with greater social maladjustment, which, in turn, increases the risk of being a victim (Barcaccia et al., 2018).

Regarding gender, few studies have analyzed the relationships between forgiveness and peer victimization in boys and girls, and with inconclusive results. For example, it has been highlighted that female victims tend to forgive more frequently than boys (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). In a meta-analysis conducted by Miller, Worthington, and McDaniel (2008), it was highlighted that girls tend to forgive more than boys. These authors hypothesized that these differences may be explained by the fact that girls attribute more value to interpersonal relationships and are more predisposed to maintaining established relationships. Moreover, boys and girls seem to perceive and respond differently to others' transgressions (Sani et al., 2007). Thus, boys seem to be more drawn to respond to others' transgression using

strategies that involve fighting, vengeance, or justice, whereas girls are more drawn to warmth-based virtues and utilize tend-and-befriend and emotional coping strategies (Matud, 2004; Miller et al., 2008). However, previous research did not find any gender difference in forgiveness (see Ghaemmaghami, Allemand, & Martin, 2011; Ogurlu & Sarıçam, 2018).

In fact, a recent study concluded that benevolence motivation, the one most linked to forgiveness, was more frequent in boys (León-Moreno, Martínez-Ferrer, Musitu-Ochoa, & Moreno-Ruiz, 2019), although these differences have not been confirmed by other authors (Flanagan, Vanden Hoek, Ranter, & Reich, 2012).

Considering this background, the first objective of this study was to analyze the existing relationships between forgiveness, loneliness, and peer victimization based on gender in adolescents. The second objective was to examine the weight of the dimensions of forgiveness and loneliness in the prediction of peer victimization at school, taking into account gender and age. The starting hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1: Forgiveness (low revenge motivation, low avoidance motivation, and high benevolence motivation) and loneliness (emotional loneliness and subjective evaluation of the social network) are related to greater peer victimization.

Hypothesis 2: Gender differences in the relationships between forgiveness, loneliness, and peer victimization are expected, so highly peer victimized girls show higher levels of forgiveness and less loneliness than highly peer victimized boys.

Hypothesis 3: Forgiveness and loneliness are associated with greater peer victimization.

Materials and Methods

Participants

A multistage sampling by conglomerates was carried out to select a random sample ($n = 594$) from a total population of 58,679 adolescents of both sexes aged from 10 to 16 years, residing in the province of Córdoba. The final sample was 671 adolescents of both sexes (50.7% boys and 49.3% girls), aged between 10 and 16 years ($M = 13.04$ years, $SD = 1.80$ years), who were enrolled in primary education (5th and 6th grade) and compulsory secondary education (ESO) in six schools, four public and two private/subsidized, in the province of Córdoba (Andalusia). For the sample selection, a random sampling by conglomerates was used. The primary sampling unit was the geographic area: rural (74%) and urban (26%). The secondary unit was ownership: public (75%) and private/subsidized (25%). The analyses of the mean differences based on the location of the school and its public or private status in the study objective variables were not significant; hence, these variables were not included in the subsequent analyses. No exclusion criteria

were established to select the sample. All students were suitable to participate in the study, regardless of their peer victimization status.

The average of missing data was 2.5% and never higher than 5% for an individual measure. Therefore, the estimates are accurate in relation to the expected values in the population (Graham, 2006). The missing values on the scales or subscales were processed by the regression imputation method. In addition, the criterion of treatment of the outliers of Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016) has been followed. A multivariate outlier was identified if the probability associated with a Mahalanobis distance is 0.001 or less (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Procedure and Ethics Statement

First, an informative meeting was held with the teachers and families to explain the objectives, the scope of the study, and the procedure to be followed. Next, parental consent was requested from school management and parents were also required to give their active consent for their children to participate in the study. Active consent was also requested from the participants. The instruments were administered voluntarily, anonymously and supervised in two different sessions of approximately 45 min of class time. The participants were guaranteed the confidentiality of the information obtained. Participation in the study was voluntary and neither the adolescents nor their parents received any compensation. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the hosting University and met the ethical standards of research on human beings, respecting the fundamental principles included in the Helsinki Declaration (1964), in its updates and in current regulations: informed consent and right to information, protection of personal data and guarantees of confidentiality, non-discrimination, gratuity, and the option of withdrawing from the study in any of its phases.

Measures

Forgiveness. The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002) was used, adapted to Spanish by Guzmán, Tapia, Tejada, and Valenzuela (2014). This Likert-type scale consists of 18 items that measure forgiving and unforgiving motivations when the adolescent has experienced violent behavior, with a response range from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The scale consists of three dimensions: motivation for revenge (e.g., “I want something bad to happen to him or her”), avoidance motivation (e.g., “I withdraw from him or her”), and motivation of benevolence (e.g., “Even though his or her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him or her”). The psychometric properties of the scale are adequate (see Table 1). The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) had a good model fit to the data ($SB\chi^2 = 220.74$, $df = 13$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index [CFI] = .97, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .04 [.033-.052]).

Loneliness. Russell's Loneliness Scale was used, adapted to Spanish by Expósito and Moya (1999). This Likert-type scale consists of 20 items that evaluate the feeling of loneliness experienced by the adolescent within the past year, with responses ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The scale consists of two factors (Borges et al., 2008): emotional loneliness (e.g., "how often do you feel isolated from others?"), and the subjective evaluation of the social network (e.g., "How often do you feel that there are people you can ask for help?"). The psychometric properties of the scale are adequate (see Table 1). The CFA showed a good model fit to the data ($SB\chi^2 = 258.51$, $df = 167$, $p < .01$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .035 [.026-.042]).

Peer victimization. The School Victimization Scale (Mynard & Joseph, 2000) was used, adapted to Spanish by Martínez-Ferrer, Moreno-Ruiz, and Musitu (2018). This Likert-type scale is composed of 25 items, rated from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*), that measure the frequency of violent behavior experienced by the adolescent. The scale consists of three dimensions: relational victimization (e.g., "a fellow student has told my secrets to others"), physical overt victimization (e.g., "a classmate has hit or beaten me"), and verbal overt victimization (e.g., "a classmate has insulted me"). The psychometric properties of the scale are adequate (see Table 1). The CFA showed a good model fit to the data ($SB\chi^2 = 313.56$, $df = 17$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .04 [.036-.050]).

Table 1 shows the reliability and validity indexes (Cronbach's α , composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and McDonald's omega) for the scales and subscales used. As shown in this table, the scales have adequate indices of reliability and validity.

Table 1. Reliability, Validity Indexes, Mean, and Standard Deviation.

	Reliability		Validity				Minimum	Maximum
	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	McDonald's Omega	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Forgiveness	.88	.93	.52	.95	2.80	0.52	1.11	4
RM	.86	.82	.53	.87	1.60	0.61	1	4
AM	.86	.84	.52	.88	2.08	0.71	1	4
BM	.84	.78	.50	.83	2.17	0.73	1	4
Loneliness	.89	.94	.51	.95	1.80	0.45	1	3.60
EL	.86	.89	.50	.92	1.68	0.47	1	3.64
SESN	.90	.87	.51	.90	3.06	0.61	1	4
Peer victimization	.93	.94	.51	.95	1.50	0.39	1	3.18
RV	.90	.88	.57	.91	1.56	0.48	1	3.70
OPV	.71	.74	.51	.80	1.27	0.34	1	3.25
OVV	.84	.81	.51	.86	1.67	0.50	1	3.83

Note. RM = Revenge Motivation; AM: Avoidance Motivation; BM = Benevolence Motivation; EL = Emotional Loneliness; SESN = Subjective Evaluation of the Social Network; RV = Relational Peer Victimization; OPV = Overt Physical Peer Victimization; OVV = Overt Verbal Peer Victimization.

Data Analysis

To examine the construct validity, a CFA was performed for each scale with the EQS program 6.1 (Bentler, 2006). We used the maximum likelihood estimation method and the Satorra–Bentler chi-square test for data that do not conform to normality (Yuan, Chan, & Bentler, 2000). To examine the convergent validity, the AVE and McDonald's omega coefficient were calculated. Regarding reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were calculated. Results showed adequate reliability indexes.

Next, peer victimization groups were formed. As shown in Table 1, three groups were identified: (a) low peer victimization, with scores less than or equal to the first quartile ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 0.07$); (b) average peer victimization, with scores in the interquartile range ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.11$); and (c) high peer victimization, with scores equal to or greater than the third quartile ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.34$). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether the three groups differed significantly in terms of the degree of peer victimization. Results showed significant differences between low, average, and high peer victimization, $F(2, 668) = 1,022.97$, $p < .001$.

Subsequently, a multivariate factorial design (multivariate analysis of variance [MANOVA], 3×2) was carried out with the statistical program SPSS (version 20), on peer victimization (low, medium, and high) and gender (boy and girl) as fixed factors to analyze the possible interaction effects. The three dimensions on the forgiveness scale (revenge, avoidance, and benevolence) and the two dimensions on the loneliness scale (emotional loneliness and subjective evaluation of the social network) were considered as dependent variables. Univariate tests (ANOVAs) were conducted to study the differences in the statistically significant variables and the Bonferroni post hoc test was performed ($\alpha = .05$). Finally, a multiple linear stepwise regression was carried out, with the objective of analyzing the predictive capacity in the criterion variable (peer victimization) of the variables under study (revenge motivation, avoidance motivation, benevolence motivation, emotional loneliness, subjective evaluation of the social network), taking into account gender and age.

Results

Next, we examined whether the groups were similar in terms of sociodemographic variables. As shown in Table 2, significant differences relating to group age were found, $\chi^2(4) = 23.2$, $p < .001$, where high

victimization was overrepresented in 11- to 13-year-olds. As for gender, nonsignificant differences were found, $\chi^2(2) = 5.39, p > .05$.

Multivariate Analyses

In the MANOVA, statistically significant differences were found in the main effects of school victimization, $\Lambda = .811, F(10, 1322) = 14.582, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .099$, and gender, $\Lambda = .891, F(5, 661) = 16.211, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .109$. In addition, a statistically significant interaction effect between peer victimization and gender was obtained, $\Lambda = .969, F(10, 1322) = 2.109, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .016$.

Peer Victimization

The ANOVA showed significant differences in revenge motivation, $F(2, 668) = 5.07, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .015$; avoidance motivation, $F(2, 668) = 9.92, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .029$; emotional loneliness, $F(2, 668) = 64.95, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .163$; and the subjective evaluation of the social network, $F(2, 668) = 12.84, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .037$. As shown in Table 3, the Bonferroni tests ($\alpha = .05$) indicated that adolescents experiencing high levels of peer victimization scored statistically higher on revenge motivation than those with low levels of victimization. Adolescents experiencing high and medium levels of victimization obtained higher scores in avoidance motivation than adolescents with low levels of victimization. Adolescents experiencing high levels of victimization showed

Table 2. Sociodemographic Variables.

Variables	Total Sample	Peer Victimization			χ^2
		Low N = 165	Medium N = 339	High N = 167	
Gender					$\chi^2(2) = 5.39$
Boys	340 (50.7%)	71 (43%)	183 (54%)	86 (51.5%)	
Girls	331 (49.3%)	94 (57%)	156 (46%)	81 (48.5%)	
Group age (years)					$\chi^2(4) = 23.2***$
11-13	381 (56.8%)	81 (49.1%)	182 (53.7%)	118 (70.7%)	
14-15	228 (34%)	60 (36.4%)	125 (36.9%)	43 (25.7%)	
16	62 (9.2%)	24 (14.5%)	32 (9.4%)	6 (3.6%)	

Note. χ^2 = chi-square.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Differences on Peer Victimization, Forgiveness, Loneliness, and Gender.

Peer Victimization						Gender			
	Low	Average	High	<i>F</i> (2, 668)	η^2_p	Boys	Girls	<i>F</i> (1, 669)	η^2_p
RM	1.49 (.69) ^b	1.59 (.55)	1.71 (.62) ^a	5.07**	.015	1.72 (.65)	1.47 (.54)	27.17***	.039
AM	1.90 (.71) ^b	2.08 (.64) ^a	2.24 (.82) ^a	9.92***	.029	1.99 (.67)	2.17 (.74)	11.19**	.016
BM	2.13 (.81)	2.16 (.67)	2.21 (.79)	0.44	.001	2.14 (.73)	2.19 (.74)	0.65	.001
EL	1.47 (.42) ^c	1.62 (.35) ^b	1.98 (.56) ^a	64.95***	.163	1.64 (.42)	1.71 (.51)	4.04*	.006
SESN	3.19 (.69) ^a	3.09 (.57) ^a	2.87 (.56) ^b	12.84***	.037	3.01 (.63)	3.11 (.59)	3.82*	.006

Note. RM = Revenge Motivation; AM = Avoidance Motivation; BM = Benevolence Motivation; EL = Emotional Loneliness; SESN = Subjective Evaluation of the Social Network.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$; a > b > c.

higher levels in the emotional loneliness variable, followed by adolescents from the group of medium and low victimization, respectively. Adolescents belonging to the group with high victimization also presented a poor subjective evaluation of the social network lower than those adolescents with medium and low levels of peer victimization. Therefore, the group scoring higher in victimization reported a greater desire for revenge and avoidance, as well as greater emotional loneliness and a lower subjective evaluation of their social network.

Demographic Variable: Gender

The ANOVA showed significant differences between genders in the motivation variables of revenge, $F(1, 669) = 27.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .039$; avoidance motivation, $F(1, 669) = 11.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$; emotional loneliness, $F(1, 669) = 4.04$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$; and subjective evaluation of the social network, $F(1, 669) = 3.82$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$. As shown in Table 3, the Bonferroni tests ($\alpha = .05$) revealed that boys obtained higher scores in revenge motivation compared with girls, whereas girls obtained higher scores in avoidance motivation, in the perception of emotional loneliness and in the subjective evaluation of the social network.

Analysis of Interactions

Two statistically significant interaction effects between peer victimization and gender were obtained in the benevolence motivation variable, $F(5, 665) = 2.69$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .020$, and the subjective evaluation of the social network,

$F(5, 665) = 7.08, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .051$. With regard to the first interaction, the posteriori analyses demonstrated that girls at low levels of victimization are more benevolent than boys; at medium and high levels of victimization, boys and girls do not differ in benevolence; and boys at high levels of victimization show the same degree of benevolence as girls at low levels of victimization and both have a greater level of benevolence than boys at low levels of victimization. Regarding the second interaction, it was observed that girls at low levels of peer victimization presented a positive subjective evaluation of the social network than boys and girls at medium and high levels of victimization (see Table 4; Figures 1 and 2).

Regression Analysis

Table 5 shows the results of the regression analysis (stepwise). In the first step, gender and age variables were included. The model obtained was significant, $F(3, 667) = 10,255, p < .001$. The fact of being a boy ($\beta = .09, p < .05$) and between 11 and 13 years old ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) explained 4.4% of the variance in victimization ($R^2 = .04$). The second step included the forgiveness dimensions, increasing the percentage of variance explained by 6.7%. The fact of being a boy and between 11 and 13 years old ($\beta = .11, p < .01$ and $\beta = .29, p < .001$), respectively, together with being 14 to 15 years old ($\beta = .13, p < .05$) and with avoidance motivation ($\beta = .25, p < .001$),

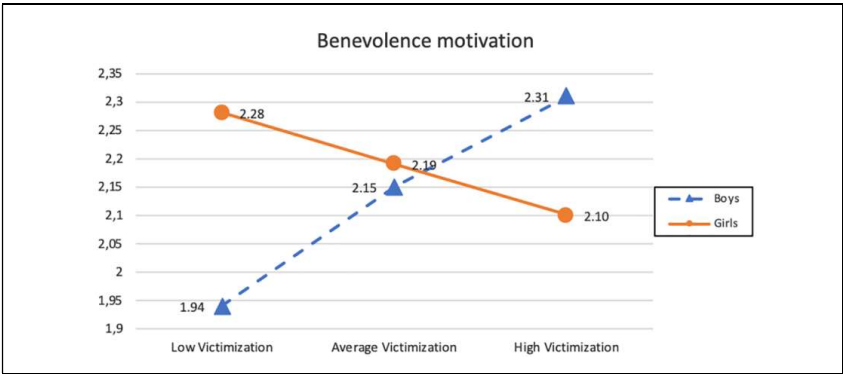


Figure 1. Interaction effect Peer Victimization × Gender and Benevolence Motivation.

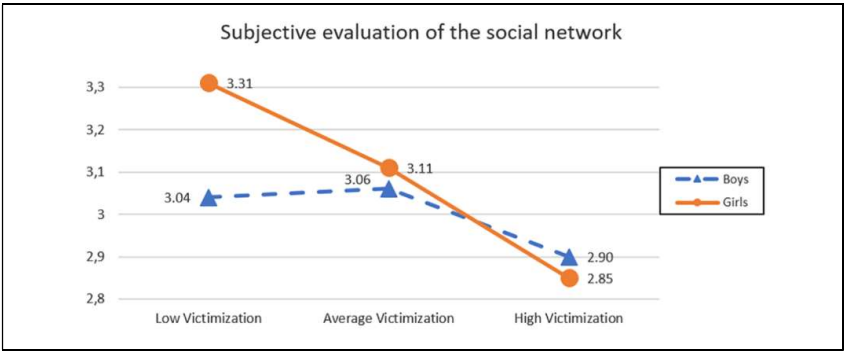


Figure 2. Interaction effect Peer Victimization $\times$ Gender and Subjective Evaluation of the Social Network.

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and Differences on Peer Victimization, and Gender, BM, SESN.

	Gender	Peer Victimization			$F(5, 665)$	η_p^2	Post hoc
		Low	Average	High			
BM	Boys	1.94 (.79) ^a	2.15 (.66) ^b	2.31 (.78) ^c	2.69*	.020	c, d > a
	Girls	2.28 (.79) ^d	2.19 (.68) ^e	2.10 (.80) ^f			
SESN	Boys	3.04 (.76) ^a	3.06 (.60) ^b	2.90 (.54) ^c	7.08***	.051	d > a, b, c, f e > f
	Girls	3.31 (.60) ^d	3.11 (.53) ^e	2.85 (.59) ^f			

Note. Significant level test on Bonferroni post hoc test comparison was indicated by $\alpha = .05$. BM = Benevolence Motivation; SESN = Subjective Evaluation of the Social Network.

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

contributed to the prediction of model, $F(6, 664) = 13.808$, $p < .001$, which explains 11.1% of the variance. Finally, in the third step, the loneliness dimensions were included, increasing the percentage of variance explained by 14.5%. Again, the fact of being a boy and between 11 and 13 years old ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .25$, $p < .001$), respectively, together with avoidance motivation ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$) and emotional loneliness ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$), contributed to the prediction of model, $F(8, 662) = 28.525$, $p < .001$, which explains 25.6% of the variance in school victimization.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to analyze the relationships between forgiveness, loneliness, and peer victimization, based on gender. Results indicated that the most peer-victimized adolescents showed higher levels of revenge motivation, avoidance motivation, and emotional loneliness and a negative evaluation of their social network. These findings allow us to partly confirm the Hypothesis 1, to the extent that no significant differences were

found in the benevolence motivation in terms of peer victimization. Previous studies have pointed out that peer-victimized adolescents have more desire for revenge (Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; León-Moreno, Musitu-Ferrer, & Cañas-Pardo, 2019) and avoidance of conflict (Randa et al., 2019; Runions, Salmivalli, Shaw, Burns, & Cross, 2018), which is associated with the negative dimensions of forgiveness, according to McCullough and Hoyt (2002). The emotional states emerging after an episode of victimization seem to enhance the desire for revenge rather than restore a positive relationship through forgiveness (Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; Runions et al., 2018). In the case of the most victimized adolescents, the feeling of helplessness is added because of the difficulty of leaving the situation, which is also reinforced by their perception of a lack of social support (Córdoba Alcaide, Del Rey Alamillo, Casas Bolaños, & Ortega Ruiz, 2016; Didaskalou, Roussi-Vergou, & Andreou, 2017; León-Moreno & Musitu-Ferrer, 2019; Oriol et al., 2017). In fact, our findings showed that the most victimized adolescents have a poor evaluation of their social network, and they may choose to keep their distance from the aggressor to cope with this situation (Hutzell & Payne, 2018; Runions et al., 2018). However, for some authors, this strategy of avoidance may aggravate the situation of victimization (Watson, Rapee, & Todorov, 2016b) and increase their feelings of fear (Randa et al., 2019) and loneliness (Fox & Boulton, 2006; León-Moreno, Musitu-Ferrer, & Cañas-Pardo, 2019) because avoidance is not always effective long-term (Hellström & Beckman, 2019; Hutzell & Payne, 2018). According to the Worthington and Wades (1999) model of forgiveness, the choice between vengeance or

Table 5. Linear Regression Analysis.

Variables	B	SE	β	p	R ²
Step 1					.04
Boys	.07	.03	.09	.025*	
11-13 years	.23	.05	.29	.000***	
14-15 years	.11	.05	.13	.052	
Step 2					.11
Boys	.08	.03	.11	.005**	
11-13 years	.23	.05	.29	.000***	
14-15 years	.11	.05	.13	.047*	
RM	.04	.03	.06	.152	
AM	.14	.02	.25	.000***	
BM	.04	.02	.08	.060	
Step 3					.25
Boys	.10	.03	.13	.000***	
11-13 years	.20	.05	.25	.000***	
14-15 years	.08	.05	.10	.100	
RM	.01	.02	.02	.573	
AM	.09	.02	.16	.000***	
BM	.02	.02	.05	.255	
EL	.32	.03	.39	.000***	

SESN	-.02	.03	-.02	.562
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Note. RM = Revenge Motivation; AM = Avoidance Motivation; BM = Benevolence Motivation; EL = Emotional Loneliness; SESN = Subjective Evaluation of the Social Network.

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

forgiveness in the event of transgression depends on the interaction of intrapersonal (e.g., gender), interpersonal factors (e.g., the quality of victim–offender relationships), and contextual factors (e.g., whether justice can be restored). Avoidance seems to be the most frequent response when the predominant emotions of the victims are shame, fear, or guiltiness (Gerlsma & Lugtmeijer, 2018).

Focusing on gender differences, it has been observed that when victimization is low, girls are more benevolent than boys. However, when the victimization is high, boys and girls do not differ; hence, the Hypothesis 2 was partly confirmed. Results highlight that victimization has a more negative effect on benevolence motivation in girls than in boys. In other words, faced with an initial situation of low victimization, girls are more benevolent than boys, whereas in a situation of high victimization, boys and girls do not differ, which indicates that the impact of a painful and stressful situation is greater in girls. The fact that the high level of victimization in girls has a more negative effect on benevolence than in boys may very probably be attributed precisely to its importance for these relationships between peers (Miller et al., 2008). Future studies on forgiveness in response to peer victimization should incorporate offense intensity.

Our findings also revealed that girls report more positive evaluation of their social network when victimization was low than when victimization was high, confirming the findings obtained in other studies which found that girls value their social network more positive than boys (Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2018; Van Deursen, Van Dijk, & Ten Klooster, 2015). However, when the victimization was high, boys and girls did not differ in the subjective evaluation of the social network. This result brings us back again to the notion that for girls, victimization is more associated with social disconnection, meaning greater isolation as well as less participation in interpersonal social networks (Muñiz, 2016).

Another likely explanation for this result could be attributable to the type of victimization among boys and girls. Recent studies have indicated that relational violence, understood as a behavior or act aimed at damaging the social reputation or social status of victims and isolating them from their group of friends, even using their peers (e.g., exclusion, social rejection, or the spreading of rumors; Juvonen & Graham, 2014), is more common in girls (Ettekal & Ladd, 2015), which could explain the decrease in the subjective evaluation of the social network together with less participation. However, the prevalence of relational violence in girls is a controversial aspect because while some authors note that girls participate more in relational violence behaviors (Ettekal & Ladd, 2015), other authors have observed that it is an more frequent behavior in boys (McDonald, Putallaz, Grimes, Kupersmidt, &

Coie, 2007), and other authors have concluded that the involvement in relational violence is the same in boys and girls (Pitula, Murray-Close, Banny, & Crick, 2015; Romero-Abrio, Martínez-Ferrer, Sánchez-Sosa, & Musitu, 2019).

An interesting nuance taken from the regression analysis is the relative importance of gender, age, emotional loneliness, and avoidance motivation in the prediction of victimization. Avoidance motivation and emotional loneliness are relevant predictors of peer victimization, which partly confirms Hypothesis 3. From these results, it seems that due to their feelings of loneliness and isolation, victims might perceive revenge as quite ineffective because, in the absence of support, they fear possible reprisals (Randa & Reyns, 2014; Randa et al., 2019). We believe that these results could also be linked to the way in which adolescents interpret benevolence and attributions of restorative justice (Barcaccia et al., 2017; Frias-Armentia, Rodríguez-Macías, Corral-Verdugo, Caso-Niebla, & García-Arizmendi, 2019). In other words, in a situation of recurrent peer victimization, far from trying to maintain a positive relationship, adolescents choose to avoid social interactions with their aggressors, likely aggravating their isolation. Moreover, some adolescents could consider that the act of forgiveness would imply justification and tolerance of the harm suffered. In this case, avoidance motivation, which is associated with less short-term stress, could be a more positive alternative than revenge and benevolence (Didaskalou et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2016b). Future studies should explore this hypothesis and incorporate the victims' interpretation of benevolence motivation.

Limitations

These findings should be interpreted with caution, due mainly to the cross-sectional nature of the data. Future investigations incorporating the temporal dimension would allow us to elaborate on the results obtained. In addition, the use of self-report measures could lead to some biases and effects of social desirability. This limitation could be resolved by including different types of information sources (such as peer groups, teachers, and family). Finally, future research should consider certain potential mediators or moderators that may better explain the link between forgiveness and loneliness.

Implications

From our results, we suggest that these variables be taken into account in the field of social and educational intervention, with the aim of promoting forgiveness as a positive strategy to improve school coexistence. Moreover, it is equally important for the victims to feel that they have access to an interpersonal support network, especially in cases of high victimization. Another practical implication of this study is the need to develop intervention programs geared to reducing peer victimization that are sensitive to gender differences and take into account the different strategies used by boys and

girls to face such situations. The findings revealed the importance of intervention strategies that foster social support, especially in victimized girls. Finally, the results highlighted the need to explore the short- and long-term consequences of avoidance as a coping response to peer victimization.

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ORCID iDs

Celeste León-Moreno <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3028-402X>

Belén Martínez-Ferrer <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0850-4575>

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Author Biographies

Celeste León-Moreno is research staff member in the Department of Education and Social Psychology at the Pablo de Olavide University (Andalusia). Her research interests focus on the study of the psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents in school contexts, as well as the development of intervention strategies aimed at preventing school violence.

Belén Martínez-Ferrer received her PhD in social psychology from the University of Valencia and is lecturer in the Pablo de Olavide University (Andalusia). She is a member of the research group, Lisis, and PAIDI (SEJ-468) “Values, family, Equality and intergenerational relations” research groups. She is also a member of the Ibero-American Network for the Study of Violence in Adolescents (RIEVA).

David Moreno-Ruiz received his PhD in social psychology from the Pablo de Olavide University (Andalusia) and is lecturer in the University of Valencia. He is member of the Lisis research group specializing in the study of adolescence and school coexistence. His scientific works analyze primarily the role of family and school climate, social reputation, and violence in the psychosocial adjustment in adolescents.

Daniel Musitu-Ferrer is member of the research team of the Department of Education and Social Psychology of the Pablo de Olavide University (Andalusia). His research interests are focused on the study and application of environmental education in school contexts, as well as the relationship between empathy, connectivity, and environmental attitudes with school adjustment, parental socialization, and satisfaction with life.