



# The Moderating Role of Pessimism in the Relation between Peer Victimization, Interpersonal Needs, and Suicide Ideation



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## Introduction

- Peer victimization and bullying are serious concerns experienced among children and adolescents (Hong & Espelage, 2012).
- Peer victimization is associated with suicide ideation during primary and secondary school (Russel & Joyner, 2001).
- The personality trait of pessimism is associated with elevated risk for suicide ideation (Oquendo et al., 2004).
- Aspects of the interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010), specifically thwarted belongingness (TB) and perceived burdensomeness (PB), have been significantly associated with suicide ideation in peer victimized adolescents (Opperman et al., 2015).
- The aim of this study was to examine the associations between perceived frequency of retrospective verbal and indirect peer victimization in primary and secondary school, thwarted interpersonal needs, and current suicide ideation, as well as how these relations may vary based on current pessimism in a sample of college students.

## Hypotheses

- TB and PB, in parallel, would mediate the relation between frequency of retrospective verbal and indirect peer victimization and current suicide ideation. Specifically, we predicted that greater verbal and indirect peer victimization would be associated with greater feelings of TB and PB, and in turn, greater current suicide ideation.
- Pessimism would moderate the indirect effect by moderating the association between TB and PB and suicide ideation. We hypothesized that the indirect effects between peer victimization frequency and current suicide ideation through TB and PB would be moderated by current pessimism, such that the indirect effects would be significantly stronger when current pessimism is higher.

## Method

### Participants

- $N = 330$  college students with a history of peer victimization.
- Age:**  $M = 20.09$  years,  $SD = 2.73$  years
- Gender:** 189 women (57.3%), 140 men (42.4%), and 1 transgender individual (0.3%).
- Race:** 212 Caucasian/White (64.2%), 68 Hispanic/Latino (20.6%), 24 African American/Black (7.3%), 13 Asian/Asian American (3.9%), 2 American Indian/Native American (0.6%), and 10 identified as “Other” (3.0%).

### Measures

- Positive and Negative Suicide Ideation Inventory** (Osman et al., 1998): A 14-item self-report measure of negative ideation (i.e., suicide ideation) and positive ideation. Only the negative ideation subscale was used.
- Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire** (Van Orden et al., 2012): A 15-item self-report measure of TB and PB.
- Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire-Modified** (Shäfer et al., 2004): A 50-item self-report measure of bullying victimization in primary and secondary school. Only frequency of verbal and indirect peer victimization scores were used in the analysis.
- Life Orientation Test-Revised** (Scheier et al., 1994): A 10-item self-report measure of trait optimism and pessimism. Only the pessimism subscale was used in the analysis. Lower scores indicate greater trait pessimism.
- Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21** (Lovibond et al., 1995): A 21-item self-report measure of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Only the depression subscale was used in the analysis.

### Data Analyses

- Non-parametric bootstrap mediation (Model 4) and moderated mediation procedures (Model 14) were used to test hypotheses, where 95% CIs not containing zero are considered statistically significant (Hayes, 2013). We adjusted for depressive symptoms in all analyses.

## Results

- The mediation hypothesis that TB and PB would mediate the relation between peer victimization and suicide ideation was partially supported,  $F(4, 325) = 41.35, R^2 = 0.34, p < .001$ .
  - There was a significant indirect effect through PB ( $b = 0.08, CI = 0.0299, 0.1596$ ), but not TB ( $b = 0.01, CI = -0.0030, 0.0183$ ).
- The moderated mediation hypothesis was not supported for TB, as there was nonsignificant moderated mediation through TB, and pessimism did not significantly moderate the relation between TB and suicide ideation.
  - The interaction between TB and pessimism predicting suicide ideation was nonsignificant ( $b = 0.01, CI = -0.0067, 0.0158$ ).
  - Index of moderated mediation =  $-0.001, 95\% CI = -0.0055, 0.0009$ .
- The moderated mediation hypothesis was supported for PB. There was significant moderated mediation through PB to suicide ideation, with pessimism significantly moderating the relation between PB and suicide ideation.
  - The interaction between PB and pessimism predicting SI was significant ( $b = 0.04, CI = -0.0710, -0.0106$ ).
  - Index of moderated mediation =  $.008, 95\% CI = 0.0002, 0.0220$ .
- The indirect effect between retrospective verbal and indirect peer victimization frequency and suicide ideation through PB was strongest when pessimism was high (+1  $SD; b = 0.11, 95\% CI = 0.0430, 0.2420$ ), weaker for those who are average in pessimism ( $b = 0.09, 95\% CI = 0.035, 0.1810$ ), and weakest for those low in pessimism (-1  $SD; b = 0.03, 95\% CI = 0.0250, 0.1410$ ).

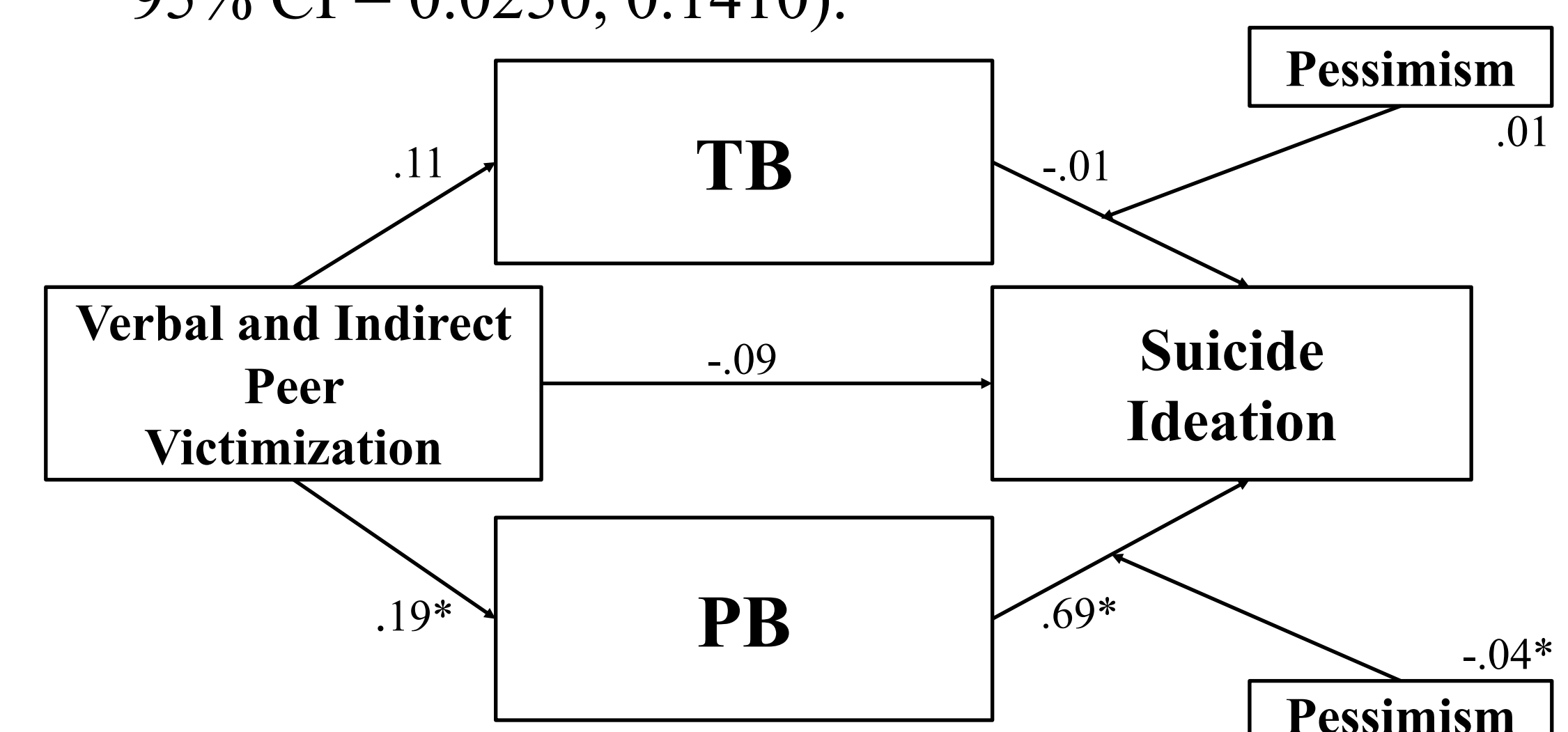


Figure 1. The figure contains unstandardized pathway coefficients. \*  $p < .001. F(7, 322) = 25.01, R^2 = .35, p < .001$ .

## Conclusions

- The current study was the first to examine the combined significant effects of verbal and indirect peer victimization.
- Further, this study was the first of its kind to examine how varying levels of pessimism are associated with current suicide ideation in a sample of young adults with a history of peer victimization within the parameters of the interpersonal theory of suicide.
- PB explained the relation between peer victimization and current suicide ideation, with this relation varying based on pessimism such that PB was strongest for those high in pessimism.
- These findings were consistent with previous findings that the effects of PB on suicide ideation is the most tested and supported association (Ma et al., 2016) as compared to the effects of TB on suicide ideation.
- It may be advantageous for clinicians working with individuals with a history of peer victimization to assess pessimism in the development of suicide ideation via thwarted interpersonal needs.
- Clinicians may consider fostering more realistic thoughts about future social interactions via cognitive restructuring and reappraisal with the aim of decreasing feelings of TB and PB for the development of suicide ideation

## Limitations

- Due to the cross-sectional design, temporal relations could not be determined between variables.
- Constructs were assessed using self-report questionnaires, which may have introduced reporting and recall biases, particularly for the retrospective assessment of peer victimization.

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