**Proposal**

**Title:** **The Effect of Self-Perception on the Relation between Social Status and Peer Victimization**

**Project Proposal:** A child experiences peer victimization, or bullying, when "he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" (Olweus, 1993). Bullied children are at risk for a variety of maladaptive outcomes (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), but not all children remain victims and not all victims suffer. Researchers have sought to understand why some children are more resilient in the face of bullying than other students. The goal of the present study was to examine the relation between children's social status (or peer acceptance) and their level of peer victimization. More specifically, I examined whether athletic ability or physical appearance moderated that relation.

School bullying affects about 10% of all students and is highly stable for some children (Olweus 1978, 1991), resulting in both short-term and long-term negative effects. Short-term effects associated with peer victimization include internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression, chronic absenteeism from school, lower academic performance, feelings of loneliness and abandonment, difficulty sleeping, and, in worst case scenarios, thoughts and possibly actions of suicide (Smokowski & Kopasz,

2005). Victims of bullying have also been found to suffer from long-term effects such as lower academic achievement, depression, anxiety, and difficulty in social situations (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). The effects of peer victimization have led researchers to seek ways to prevent victimization and to help children who are chronically victimized by their peers.

There have been findings suggesting that victims have certain physical and psychological characteristics that place them at a greater risk of being victimized. Physically, and particularly among boys, victims tend to be smaller in stature and appear weak and frail (Olweus, 1978, 1993; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Psychologically, victims tend to show internalizing behaviors, such as being more anxious, depressed, submissive, withdrawn, and prone to crying than children who are not victimized (Olweus, 1978; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). Victims generally have low self-esteem, viewing themselves as more troublesome, more anxious, less popular, less intelligent, less physically attractive, and more inadequate than their non-victimized peers (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Although there is some confusion about whether these characteristics put children at risk for being victimized or whether children show these characteristics because they have been victimized, Hodges & Perry (1999) found that physical weakness and internalizing behaviors, as well as children's peer relationship problems, not only followed being victimized, but also preceded and contributed to gains in frequency of victimization over time. These findings suggest that children at risk for peer victimization can be readily identified and perhaps helped before they suffer the ills of repeated bullying. Researchers find that peer victims also show deficits in social skills and lack friendships and acceptance by peers. Victims tend to

interpret inaccurately the social signals of others, have difficulty entering into peer groups or conversations, and have limited pro-social characteristics such as friendliness, cooperativeness, and a sense of humor (Dodge et al., 1986; Schwartz et al., 1993; Egan & Perry, 1998). Victims are also prone to being overly submissive and non-assertive, especially in aggressive situations or situations that require leadership behavior. Victims generally display more withdrawing behavior and a hovering entry style in peer group situations (Perren & Alsaker, 2006). Finally, victims typically have less friends are more often rejected by peers.

Hodges and Perry (1996) identified three main social risk factors for being bullied: a) having few friends, b) having friends who are unable to offer protection from bullies, and c) being rejected by peers. Hodges, Malone, and Perry (1997) found that the number of friends children have moderates the relation between individual risk factors (e.g., internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, physical weakness) and peer victimization, such that the fewer friends children have, the stronger the relation between individual risk factors and being bullied. Similarly, the relation between behavioral risk and victimization is also stronger for children who have been rejected by their peers than for those who have not (Hodges et al., 1997).

Children victimized by peers consistently report lower global self-esteem and tend to score lower on measures of perceived personal competency (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Bullied children also tend to see themselves as less popular than their non-victimized peers (Andreou, 2001). Andreou (2001) found that victims scored significantly lower than their peers on all dimensions of Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC: Harter, 1985), which assesses, in addition to global self-worth,

perceived scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. This study looks specifically at two subscales of the SPPC and whether children's perception of themselves in specific domains moderates the relation between social status and level of victimization. The two domains of interest are athletic competence and physical appearance, with the assumption that the former is more important for boys and the latter more important for girls. Both domains are highly valued by society and both are strongly related to overall ratings of self-worth for boys (Harter, 1985).

Success in physical activities, including sports, is not only valued by societies with a strong sports culture, such as here in the United States, but it is also valued by the children of that society (Wall et al., 1990). Children who excel at sports are likely to enjoy a significantly higher rate of peer acceptance (Weiss & Duncan, 1992), and Chase and Dummer (1992) found that being good at sports is considered, by both genders, the most important factor in determining male popularity. Success at sports is considerably less important for determining popularity in girls (Chase & Dummer, 1992; Williams & White, 1983). Conversely, those children who perform poorly at sports are often at the bottom of the social ladder, placing them at an increased risk for being victimized. As mentioned previously, physical weakness has been linked to peer victimization (Olweus 1978, 1993; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), but little is known about the relation between athletic competence and peer victimization. Andreou (2001), in her study of fourth to sixth grade children, found that children with higher levels of victimization were more likely to reports lower scores on the SPPC athletic competence subscale.

Similar to athletic ability, physical appearance is also a characteristic that is highly valued by today's society, especially for women. According to both girls and boys, being pretty is the most important determinant of female popularity; girls rated male handsomeness as the most important factor for male popularity with females, with being good at sports the second most important determinant (Chase & Dummer, 1992). In a related study, Krantz, Friedberg, and Andrews (1984) found that children viewed as more attractive than their average peer held a higher social status. Krantz and his colleagues also found that children's self-rated attractiveness was significantly related to their level of popularity, as well as their level of peer victimization. Children who report higher levels of victimization also score significantly lower on the SPPC subscale of physical attractiveness (Björkqvist, Ekman, & Lagerspetz, 1982; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Andreou, 2001). In a recent study by Lunde, Frisén, and Hwang (2006), victimized girls tended to believe that other children were generally critical of the girls' physical appearance, whereas victimized boys did not show this tendency.

The proposed research will look at how perceived self-competence in the aspects of athletic ability and physical attractiveness moderates the relation between the social status of children and their level of victimization.

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