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## Classroom Context and the Relations Between Social Withdrawal and Peer Victimization

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# Classroom Context and the Relations Between Social Withdrawal and Peer Victimization

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This study examined the relationship between social withdrawal (isolation and un- sociability) and peer victimization by exploring the moderating influences of gender, classroom norms of social withdrawal, individualism, and collectivism. One hundred fifty-eight adolescents ( $M_{age} = 14.11$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ; 46.3% boys) in 7th and 8th grade from Curitiba, Brazil, completed peer assessments of isolation, unsociability, peer victimization, and self-reports of classroom individualism and collectivism. Isolation and unsociability were aggregated into classroom norms. Data were analyzed using multilevel modeling. Isolation and unsociability positively predicted victimization. Unsociability was a positive predictor of victimization in low-unsociability classrooms. Isolation was negatively associated with victimization in low-isolation classes. The relationship between isolation and victimization was weaker in more collectivistic classes. The relationship between unsociability and peer victimization was strongest among boys in classes low in individualism. This study provides further support that social withdrawal has consequences for adolescents' socioemotional development which vary by classroom context.

**Keywords:** social withdrawal; peer victimization; adolescence; social norms; individual-ism and collectivism

The importance of peer interactions as a context for social, emotional, and

cognitive development cannot be overstated (e.g., Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that children who experience consistently low-quality peer interactions are at greater risk for maladjustment later in life (Rubin, Copland, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). Because of these negative consequences, many researchers interested in understanding the causes and effects of low-quality interactions have focused on negative peer interactions, such as peer victimization. However, equally important is an overall lack of peer interactions or social withdrawal. For many years, social withdrawal has been over-looked (Coplan & Rubin, 2007) and often dismissed as having little impact on adjustment (e.g., Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Recent research, however, has indicated that a lack of peer interactions is related to several indices of maladjustment (Rubin, Burgess, & Coplan, 2002), such as academic difficulties (e.g., Rubin, Chen, & Hymel, 1993), deficits in social competence (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Andersson, 2005), and internalizing symptoms (e.g., Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004). Unfortunately, these effects seem to become progressively worse during adolescence (Rubin, Coplan, Bowker, & Menzer, 2011); social withdrawal appears to be increasingly predictive of poor psychosocial adjustment outcomes, such as loneliness, low self-regard, and anxiety (Prior, Smart, Sanson, & Oberklaid, 2000). This may reflect the increasing importance, salience, and influence of peer relationships in adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009; Rubin et al., 2009). The increasing negative consequences of social withdrawal might also reflect a negative feedback loop in which social withdrawal may lead to negative social interactions which, in turn, promotes the development of negative internal attributions, which may contribute to psychological maladjustment and further reinforce social withdrawal (Wichmann, Coplan, & Daniels, 2004).

Despite the many negative consequences of social withdrawal and their increasing severity throughout adolescence, little research has explored contextual factors that may intensify or mitigate these negative consequences. To address this oversight, this study explored the influences of gender, classroom norms of social withdrawal, and individualism and collectivism on a specific consequence

of social withdrawal, peer victimization, within a sample of Brazilian adolescents. These particular contextual factors are thought to be relevant because all may influence the degree to which social withdrawal is normative in a context (i.e., for a particular gender or in a particular classroom context), and therefore the extent to which such behavior may elicit peer victimization. More specifically, gender norm expectations, the prevalence of the behavior in the classroom peer group, and the classroom culture of individualism and collectivism, which influence social values and expectations of the peer group, are likely to be relevant in children's perception and treatment of socially withdrawn children.

## **TYPES OF SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL**

Although researchers once viewed social withdrawal as a single homogenous construct, it is now acknowledged that there are different forms of social withdrawal (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan & Rubin, 2007), which even children are capable of differentiating (Gavinski Molina, Coplan, & Younger, 2003). These forms differ in behavioral expression, motivation, and impact on development (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan & Rubin, 2007). Social withdrawal is an over-arching umbrella term for children who do not partake in peer interactions, encompassing more specific forms such as shyness, isolation, and unsociability (e.g., Coplan & Rubin, 2007; Rubin & Coplan, 2004; Rubin et al., 2011). Although shyness (social withdrawal because of anxiety about social interaction) is a distinct form of social withdrawal with significant impact on development, this study focused on distinguishing between isolation and unsociability.

Isolation refers to social withdrawal in which children do not interact with peers because their peers do not want to interact with them. In this case, social withdrawal may not reflect children's own motivation but rather is determined by others. This form of social withdrawal is most clearly associated with social exclusion (Coplan & Rubin, 2007; Rubin et al., 2011). Because exclusion is a type of peer victimization, there may be a particularly strong association between isolation and peer victimization. However, although isolation can be described as social withdrawal because of social rejection, isolation is a more

chronic and pervasive condition; that is, rejection may be either context-specific or chronic, whereas children who are isolated are chronically and pervasively excluded across contexts.

Unsociability (Asendorpf, 1993) denotes social withdrawal in which children do not engage in social interactions because they do not want to interact with their peers. Unsociability may be motivated by low approach motivation and high avoidance motivation (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). There is a dearth of research investigating the consequences of this form of social withdrawal. It was originally thought to be the least harmful form of social withdrawal (Harrist, Zaia, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1997), but it now seems likely that unsociability does have consequences that have not yet been fully identified. For example, unsociable children may be at risk for exclusion or victimization because peers may perceive them to be unfriendly (Coplan et al., 2004). In fact, some researchers (see Coplan & Rubin, 2007) have proposed that the negative effects of unsociability may increase as the social and cognitive deficits associated with a chronic lack of social interaction become more pronounced, such as during adolescence.

Although peer neglect and social withdrawal may be seen as somewhat overlapping constructs, in that both refer to children who are not included in social interactions, the two should not be confounded. The former refers to children who receive very few nominations of both "liked" and "disliked" on sociometric measures (Rubin, Hymel, Lemare, & Rowden, 1989), which suggests that such children are perceived rather neutrally. In contrast, the social consequences of withdrawal (e.g., peer victimization) indicate that these children are not simply forgotten.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL AND PEER VICTIMIZATION**

As previously discussed, social withdrawal is associated with a range of negative psychological and social consequences. One consequence that is deserving of further investigation is peer victimization (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2003), which occurs when children are the targets of

social, psychological, or physical harm from their peers (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Social withdrawal may put children at risk for peer victimization for various reasons. Perhaps the most obvious contributing factor is that, because socially withdrawn children have refrained from social interactions in the past, they have not had the proper opportunity or context in which to develop social competence; in general, having poor relationships with peers is a risk factor for victimization (Nansel et al., 2001).

Social withdrawal may also be associated with peer victimization because it is blatantly juxtaposed with the behavior of other children. Because most children do (and are expected to) enjoy and want to interact with their peers, a lack of social interaction is deviant, and it is well established that behaviors viewed as deviant from the peer group put children at risk for peer victimization (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986). As the importance of peer relationships increases during adolescence, a lack of social interaction is likely to become increasingly deviant to expectations for behavior (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Therefore, the risk of victimization for socially withdrawn children is especially salient in adolescence.

It should also be noted that not only is peer victimization a consequence of social withdrawal but it may also serve to reinforce future social withdrawal; the experience of negative social interactions is likely to exacerbate or even contribute to the development of children's tendency to withdraw (e.g., Wichmann et al., 2004) to avoid future victimization. For example, in socially withdrawn children, exclusion is associated with increasing social withdrawal (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004; Oh et al., 2008). Thus, it must also be considered that the relationship between social withdrawal and peer victimization may be bidirectional; that is, children who are victimized by peers may develop socially withdrawn behavior, particularly unsociability, to avoid future victimization. However, as noted, this behavior may actually provoke future victimization.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that social withdrawal may be frequently reinforced throughout development, leading to patterns of behavior and social interaction that are well established before adolescence. However, as noted,

these dynamics (e.g., negative feedback loops and poor social competence) may become compounded during adolescence, leading to increasingly poor adjustment for socially withdrawn children. Moreover, earlier patterns of social withdrawal may become increasingly visible over time as they develop into a consistent pattern that is easily recognized by the peer group (Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990). This is likely further exacerbated by the centrality of social relationships during adolescence, which may make these dynamics more salient.

## **GENDER DIFFERENCES**

Although social withdrawal is a risk factor for peer victimization for both genders, some research has found that the effect may be stronger for boys. For example, shy behavior is associated with positive parent–child interactions for girls but more negative parent–child interactions for boys (Radke-Yarrow, Richters, & Wilson, 1988). Longitudinal research has also indicated that socially withdrawn boys tend to have lower self-worth and more behavioral problems at school (e.g., Stevenson-Hinde & Glover, 1996). It is important to note, though, that these effects concern the shy form of social withdrawal and are generally attributed to violation of gender-typed behavior; shyness violates the expectation of dominance and assertiveness in boys and appears to be consistently related to greater internalizing symptoms for boys than girls (e.g., Coplan & Rubin, 2007; Rubin & Barstead, 2014). Whether this applies to other forms of social withdrawal is unclear; however, it has been reported that the consequences of unsociability may be greater for boys in middle childhood (Coplan & Weeks, 2010).

In contrast, some evidence suggests that girls tend to value social closeness and affiliation to a greater degree in early adolescence (Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012) and therefore it is also reasonable to propose that social withdrawal may be a greater violation of gender norms for girls, particularly in the case of unsociability. Furthermore, that girls tend to place more value on social skills (Kwon, Kim, & Sheridan, 2014) may suggest that social withdrawal, which may stem from or be perceived as a deficit in social skills, may be more

problematic for girls. It should also be considered that good social skills are an important determinant of positive social status for both genders (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992); therefore, when socially withdrawn children are perceived as lacking social competence, the consequence of victimization may not favor one gender over the other.

## **CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES**

### *Group Norms*

Because contextual influences shape both individual behavior and social interactions (Rubin et al., 2009), it is likely that the relationship between social withdrawal and peer victimization varies as a function of the social context in which it occurs. In this vein, it is important to consider how the typical or normative behavior of a group influences peer relationships within the group. Group norms provide a reference point for acceptable and expected behavior within a group and a guideline for evaluating and responding to the behavior of others (Miller & Prentice, 1994). According to the misfit effect of the person–group similarity model, children who violate group norms tend to be less popular and more likely to be rejected and low in social status (Wright et al., 1986). Consistent with this model, social withdrawal may put children at risk for victimization because social withdrawal deviates from common social norms in which desire for and engagement in social interaction is normative (Rubin et al., 2009; Younger, Gentile, & Burgess, 1993). This effect is likely to operate within classrooms, such that children are at risk for victimization when their socially withdrawn behavior violates the classroom norms.

In fact, social norms at the classroom level may be particularly relevant for understanding social dynamics because across most cultures, the classroom provides the primary social context of peer interactions. Furthermore, each classroom provides a different social context; that is, there is between-classroom variability present when assessing social dynamics of youth at school. Classroom social norms take into account such variability in the classroom context. In support of this, a diverse body of literature has identified that classroom social norms modify the



consequences (i.e., acceptance, victimization, and social status) of social behaviors. Thus, like other social norms, these classroom-specific norms effectively change the meaning of social behaviors and thus change peers' evaluations and responses (e.g., Chang, 2004).

### *Culture*

Beyond classroom norms of social withdrawal, the relationships of isolation and unsociability with peer victimization may be affected by the influence of cultural values. Like social norms, cultural values provide standards of behavior and for reactions to the behaviors of others, thereby guiding social interactions (Chen, French, & Schneider, 2006). One way in which the fundamental differences between cultural values have been characterized is through the categorization of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. Individualistic cultures view the individual as a unique and autonomous agent and emphasize the importance of personal goals and achievement over the needs of the group. Such societies value assertiveness and individuality. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures, the individual is seen as inextricably interconnected with the social group and their roles within the group or collective. In these cultures, value is placed on conformity, obedience, and group harmony within the collective (Triandis, 1989).

Although social withdrawal may be in conflict with the values of individualistic societies (e.g., assertiveness), some forms, such as shyness, might serve to promote the goals of cooperation and group cohesion in collectivistic societies (Chen & French, 2008). As might be expected, some research has found that socially withdrawn behavior is responded to in a more positive way in societies traditionally considered to be collectivistic, such as China (e.g., Chen, Rubin, Li, & Li, 1999). However, some more recent research has found that socially withdrawn children in these societies are rejected by peers (e.g., Chang et al., 2005; Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005; Wei & Chen, 2009). It is possible that this conflict can be attributed to the significant within-culture heterogeneity in individualism and collectivism observed in these cultures

(Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). In particular, social withdrawal appears to elicit negative social responses specifically in urban contexts (e.g., Chang et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2005; Wei & Chen, 2009) in which socioeconomic status is generally higher, a factor that is known to be associated with greater individualism and lower collectivism (e.g., Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990); thus, in such contexts, responses to social withdrawal may be more similar to those in Western samples.

Although no research directly examining these relationships in Brazil could be located, it is reasonable to suspect that the patterns observed in China, as discussed, are likely to be observed in Brazil, which evidences significant within-culture heterogeneity in individualism and collectivism as well. Like China, Brazil has traditionally been characterized as a collectivistic nation, but more recently, the social values associated with collectivism may be declining because of rapid industrialization and the associated introduction of more individualistic attitudes. In fact, a meta-analysis has suggested that Brazilians, at least in more industrialized regions, may not be more collectivistic than Americans but may rather be characterized as individualistic. Thus, as in China, the changing economic environment in Brazil may have important implications for social values relevant to the perception and socioemotional consequences of social withdrawal (see Oyserman et al., 2002, for a review).

In acknowledgement of the potential for substantial within-culture heterogeneity, in this study, these orientations were considered at the level of the classroom. This also allows for a novel approach to conceptualizing the classroom context as a culture with unique values and social ideologies as abstract as individualism and collectivism.

Although we chose to assess individualism and collectivism as a classroom cultural value system, national-level cultural norms and ideologies must also be taken into account. In fact, although the influence of national culture on peer relations is well established (Chen et al., 2006), research on peer relationships has been largely conducted with samples from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, yet because

of these unique characteristics, the generalizability of the results should be questioned and replication sought (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Given that differences in the acceptability of social withdrawal may differ between nations, this is a particularly relevant consideration in this study. In expansion of the cultural reach of social withdrawal research, this study examined contextual differences in the relationship between social withdrawal and peer victimization in a non-WEIRD and traditionally underrepresented sample of Brazilian adolescents.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

Because social withdrawal may pose serious threats to positive development, this study sought to expand understanding of social withdrawal as a risk factor for peer victimization in several ways. First, access to a Brazilian adolescent sample allowed this study to expand knowledge on the consequences of social withdrawal to a novel and understudied population. Although social withdrawal has been studied in some non-WEIRD populations previously, including in China and in South Korea, no research could be identified exploring the consequences of social withdrawal in South American nations. In addition, although not strictly novel, the population of interest in this study was adolescents, for whom social interactions are especially relevant and influential on development. In addition, because the consequences of social withdrawal may be more severe in adolescence than during childhood (e.g., Rubin et al., 2011), this is an ideal population to assess.

Although many studies have focused on social withdrawal in general or one specific form of social withdrawal, this study differentiated between two forms of social withdrawal, isolation and unsociability, which stem from different underlying motivations and may therefore have unique relationships with peer victimization and contextual variables. In addition, because a large proportion of research on social withdrawal has focused on shyness, an important contribution of this study is the emphasis on the understudied isolation and unsociability forms of social withdrawal. Furthermore, because a large body of

research has supported that contextual factors have substantial impact on both individual behavior and social interactions, perhaps the most novel contribution this study may offer to this field of research is the analyses of how the relations between both types of social withdrawal and peer victimization may vary as a function of a wide breadth of contextual influences.

In summary, the primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationships of isolation and unsociability with peer victimization in adolescence as a function of gender, class- room norms of each type of social withdrawal, and individualism and collectivism in Brazil. It was expected that both types of social withdrawal (isolation and unsociability) would be positively associated with peer victimization. These relationships were expected to be stronger for boys than girls. It was also hypothesized that the relationship between isolation and peer victimization would be stronger in classrooms with a low prevalence (classroom norm) of isolation and that the relationship between unsociability and peer victimization would be stronger in classrooms with a low prevalence of unsociability. Collectivism and individualism at the level of the classroom were also explored as potential moderators of the relationship between each type of social withdrawal and peer victimization, but there were no a priori hypotheses.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 158 adolescents ( $M_{age} = 14.11$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) from five classrooms, with a slightly smaller proportion of boys (46.3%) relative to girls (53.7%), recruited from a school in Curitiba, Brazil. All participants were in either seventh (36.70%) or eighth (63.30%) grade. The participants were recruited from an urban school specifically chosen to be representative of a middle socioeconomic background. This was supported by a subjective socio- economic status (SES) scale completed by participants in which the sample average was 5.40 ( $SD = 1.05$ ) on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, with 83.10% of the sample rating themselves between 4 and 6 on the scale.

### *Procedures*

Local collaborators translated all measures from English to Portuguese. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Consent was obtained from the schools' principals. At the time of data collection, written assent was obtained from participants. Children without adult consent or who did not assent were given an alternative activity. All data were collected at schools during class time. The duration of data collection was approximately 60–90 minutes.

### *Measures*

**Demographic Information.** Participants self-reported their age and gender. The researchers acquired information about the grade level of the participating classes in each sample from the administrators at each school. Participants also provided a self-report of their perceived socioeconomic status (SES) via the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, which uses a 10-rung “social ladder” pictorial format. Participants respond by placing an “X” on the rung of the social ladder which they feel best represents their socioeconomic status. Responses range from 1 to 10, with higher ratings indicating higher self-perceived SES.

**Peer Assessments.** Isolation, unsociability, and peer victimization were assessed by un- limited same-sex peer nominations using the Revised Class Play checklist (RCP; Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). For each item, participants were asked to indicate all students from their class roster that fit each description of characteristics or behaviors. The RCP contains several subscales (e.g., aggression, athletic competence, depressed affect), but only the following three subscales were used in this study: isolation, unsociability, and peer victimization. Two items measured isolation: “someone who has trouble making friends” and “some- one who is left out by the other kids at school.” The internal consistency reliability of this subscale was good ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Three items were used to measure unsociability: “someone who prefers being by themselves,” “someone who is by themselves because they prefer to be,” and “someone who would rather play alone than with others.” The internal consistency reliability of this subscale was good ( $\alpha = .78$ ). Peer victimization was

assessed with two items: “others call him/her bad names” and “others try to hurt them.” The internal consistency of this subscale was fair ( $\alpha = .59$ ). To account for differences in the potential number of nominators based on the size of the peer group, corrections for same-sex peer group size were undertaken using steps outlined by Velasquez, Bukowski, and Saldarriaga (2013). For all three subscales, the corrected scores represent the mean number of nominations for each child on each respective subscale, with higher scores indicating a greater number of nominations. Peer nominations of social withdrawal as indexed by the RCP have been used in several cultures, including in Brazil (Chen et al., 2004).

***Classroom Norms of Social Withdrawal.*** Classroom norms of social withdrawal were measured by the classroom mean level of each isolation and unsociability. The items for each type of social withdrawal were the same items from the RCP (Masten et al., 1985) used to measure individual levels of isolation and unsociability as described earlier. Using these items, means were calculated for each classroom in each sample to provide an index of the prevalence, or norms, of social withdrawal. Higher scores reflect a higher prevalence of each type of social withdrawal, respectively, in the classroom group.

***Individualism and Collectivism.*** Individualistic and collectivistic orientations of classrooms were measured by a self-report measure adapted from Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand (1995). The 21-item measure contains two subscales: individualism and collectivism. Eleven items assess individualism (e.g., “my classmates compete to prove who is the best”), and 10 items assess collectivism (e.g., “my classmates feel happy when others do well”). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*really disagree*) to 5 (*really agree*), with higher scores indicating higher individualism and collectivism, respectively. Scale scores for each of the subscales represent the mean of the subscale items. Scores on each subscale were aggregated across each same-sex peer group to provide an index of the classroom culture of individualism and collectivism, with higher scores representing greater mean levels of individualism and collectivism, respectively, at the same-sex peer group level. The internal consistency was poor for

individualism ( $\alpha = .52$ ) but stronger for collectivism ( $\alpha = .79$ ) subscales. This measure has been used previously in cross-cultural studies (e.g., Triandis, 1995).

### *Statistical Analysis*

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics were analyzed for peer victimization, individual-level isolation and unsociability, and classroom-level isolation and unsociability. Correlations were conducted to assess the association between isolation and unsociability at the individual and classroom levels, and  $t$  tests were used to test for gender differences in the number of nominations for individual-level isolation, unsociability, and peer victimization.

Data were nested at the level of the same-sex peer group for two reasons. First, there were differences in the size of the same-sex peer group in that there were more girls than boys. In addition, there were also mean differences in the values of collectivism (detailed in the “Results” section). Because participants were nested in same-sex groups and analyses included both individual-level and classroom-level variables, hypotheses were assessed using multilevel modeling to address the nonindependence of the data. With peer victimization as the criterion variable, the full model consisted of two levels of predictor variables. As each variable was added to the model, the hypothesized relationships were assessed for statistical significance, reduction in prediction error, and improvement of model fit. The first level of the model consisted of the individual-level (between-subjects) variables of unsociability (first) and isolation (second). The second level of the model consisted of contextual-level (between-groups) variables added in the following order: classroom norms of unsociability, classroom norms of isolation, individualism and collectivism, and gender followed by the gender interactions.

## **RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Independent samples  $t$  tests were conducted on all of the study variables. One difference emerged in that boys

reported their classes as higher in collectivism than girls,  $t(109) = 3.95, p = .001$ . No other mean gender differences were observed. There was a strong positive correlation between individual-level isolation and unsociability,  $r(146) = .57, p = .001$ . As expected, peer victimization was positively correlated with individual-level isolation,  $r(146) = .20, p = .01$ , and unsociability,  $r(146) = .21, p = .01$ . At the classroom level, individualism and collectivism were negatively correlated,  $r(10) = -2.65, p = .05$ . In addition, classroom means of isolation and unsociability were strongly positively correlated,  $r(10) = .76, p = .05$ . Moreover, same-sex peer groups of girls had significantly higher nominations of unsociability,  $t(8) = 2.91, p = .05$ . Last, boys same-sex peer groups had higher levels of collectivism,  $t(8) = 2.70, p = .05$ .

Multilevel modeling was used for the remainder of the analyses, with peer victimization as the criterion. For the unconditional model, which included no predictors, the intraclass correlation revealed that most of the variability in peer victimization was at the between- subjects level (78.02%), but there was also a significant amount of variability at the between- groups level (21.98%),  $\chi^2(9) = 44.78, p = .001$ .

To begin hypothesis testing, individual-level unsociability was added to the model first and was found to be a significant predictor of peer victimization,  $b = 0.34, t(9) = 2.77, p = .05$ , such that greater unsociability was associated with greater peer victimization. Adding unsociability to the model led to a proportional reduction in prediction error (PRPE = 3.94%) and improved the model,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 6.91, p = .01$ . Individual-level isolation was added next and was also a significant predictor of peer victimization,  $b = 0.10, t(9) = 8.92, p = .001$ , such that greater isolation predicted greater peer victimization above and beyond the effect of unsociability. Adding isolation to the model resulted in a PRPE of 11.86% and significantly improved the model fit,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 8.02, p = .05$ . Last, there was significant variability in the associations of unsociability,  $\Delta\chi^2(9) = 26.37, p = .01$ , and isolation,  $\Delta\chi^2(9) = 21.05, p = .05$ , at the level of the same-sex peer group.



**TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics**

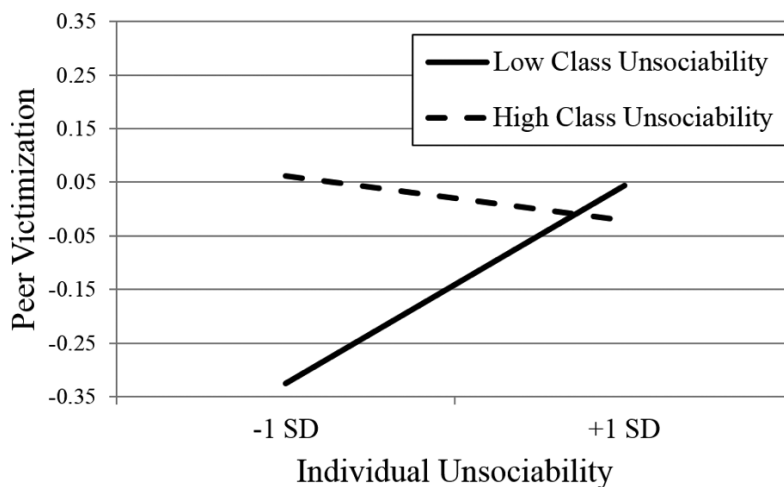
	Full Sample <i>M (SD)</i>	Boys <i>M (SD)</i>	Girls <i>M (SD)</i>	Gender Differences <i>t (df)</i>
Peer victimization	0.00 (1.03)	20.12 (0.99)	0.10 (1.05)	1.35 (146)
Individual isolation	0.00 (1.02)	20.15 (0.60)	0.13 (1.26)	1.73 (117.26)
Individual unsociability	0.00 (0.65)	20.09 (0.36)	0.08 (0.82)	1.67 (112.47)
Classroom isolation	0.00 (0.31)	20.15 (0.24)	0.14 (0.33)	1.56 (8)
Classroom unsociability	0.00 (0.17)	20.10 (0.18)	0.09 (0.09)	2.91 (8)*
Classroom individualism	3.21 (0.15)	3.23 (0.18)	3.19 (0.12)	0.47 (8)
Classroom collectivism	2.82 (0.34)	3.04 (.27)	2.60 (0.25)	2.70 (8)*

Note. *N* 5 158.

\**p* , .05.

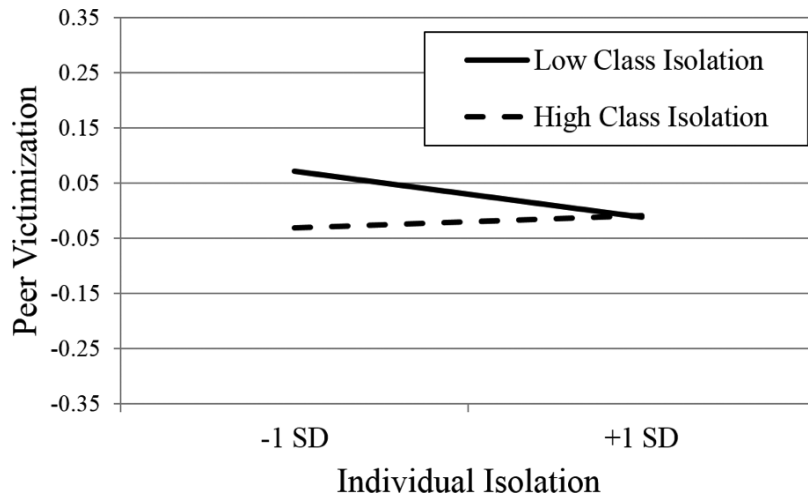
The effects of the contextual or between-groups variables were then assessed, beginning with the classroom means of each type of social withdrawal. When classroom means of unsociability and isolation were added to the second level of the model, an interaction was identified between individual-level unsociability and classroom means of unsociability,  $b = 24.27$ ,  $t(7) = 2.78$ ,  $p = .05$ , which reduced prediction error (PRPE = 32.39%) and improved the modeling of the relationship between individual-level unsociability and peer victimization,  $\Delta x^2(1) = 4.23$ ,  $p = .05$ , in that unsociability was found to be a positive predictor of peer victimization in classrooms with a low prevalence of unsociability but not in classrooms with a high prevalence (Figure 1). There was also an interaction between individual-level isolation and classroom means of isolation,  $b = .59$ ,  $t(7) = 2.90$ ,  $p = .05$ , which reduced prediction error (PRPE = 34.28%) and improved the modeling of the relationship between individual-level isolation and peer victimization,  $\Delta x^2(1) = 7.76$ ,  $p = .05$ , in that isolation was found to be a negative predictor of peer victimization only in classrooms with a low prevalence of isolation (Figure 2).

Individualism and collectivism were added to the model next, simultaneously. One effect emerged in that collectivism was a significant moderator of the association between isolation and victimization,  $b = 2.15$ ,  $t(7) = 2.99$ ,  $p = .05$ . That is, the positive relationship between individual-level isolation and peer victimization was weaker among classes higher in collectivism. This effect was associated with a reduction in prediction error (PRPE = 42.09%) and an improvement in the model fit,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.28$ ,  $p = .05$ .



**FIGURE 1.** Individual-level unsociability was a positive predictor of peer victimization nominations in classrooms with a low prevalence of unsociability but not in classrooms with a high prevalence of unsociability.

Next, the gender of the same-sex peer group was added to the associations between unsociability and isolation with peer victimization. There was a significant difference in the effect of isolation as a function of gender,  $b = 2.43$ ,  $t(6) = 6.94$ ,  $p = .05$ . To explain, isolation was more weakly associated with peer victimization for girls compared to boys. This effect was associated with a reduction in prediction error (PRPE = 97.26%) and an improvement in the model fit,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 5.06$ ,  $p = .05$ .



**FIGURE 2.** Individual-level isolation was a negative predictor of peer victimization nominations in classrooms with a low prevalence of isolation but not in classrooms with a high prevalence of isolation.

**TABLE 2. Final Model Results Including Individual Level and Group Level Effects**

Predictors	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )
Intercept/constant	0.01	0.11	0.10 (127)
Individual unsociability	0.25	0.13	1.88 (5)
<i>Group unsociability</i>	23.21	1.09	2.93 (5)*
<i>Group gender</i>	0.17	0.11	1.54 (5)
<i>Group individualism</i>	20.22	0.18	1.23 (5)
<i>Group collectivism</i>	0.62	0.32	1.95 (5)
<i>Gender by Ind. interaction</i>	0.37	0.17	2.17 (5)*
<i>Gender by Col. interaction</i>	20.22	0.38	0.58 (5)
Individual isolation	20.06	0.08	0.80 (5)
<i>Group isolation</i>	1.24	0.15	8.26 (5)*
<i>Group gender</i>	20.32	0.11	2.84 (5)*
<i>Group individualism</i>	0.11	0.18	0.60 (5)
<i>Group collectivism</i>	20.21	0.08	2.58 (5)*
<i>Gender by Ind. interaction</i>	0.08	0.20	0.41 (5)
<i>Gender by Col. interaction</i>	20.16	0.20	0.80 (5)

*Note.* Italics indicate group-level predictors. Col. 5 collectivism; Ind. 5 individualism.  
\**p* , .05.

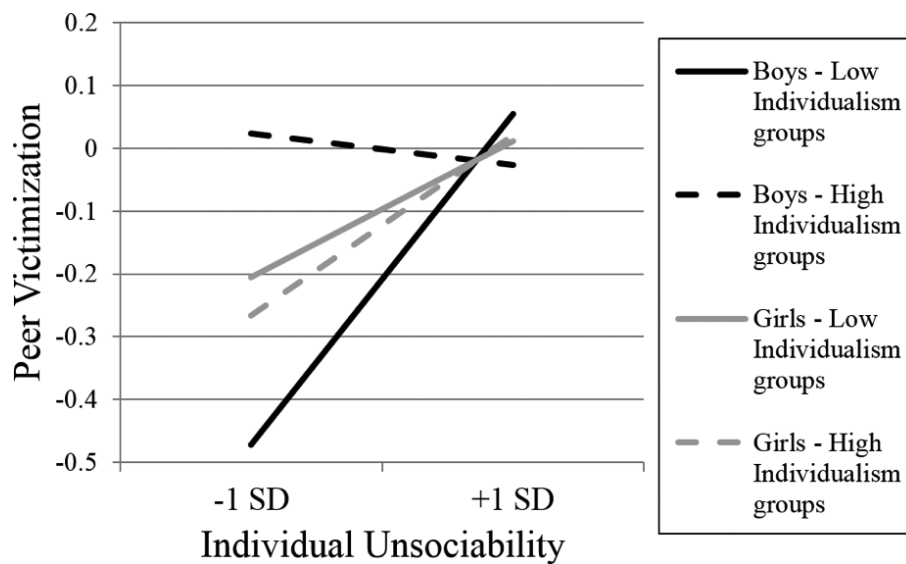
Last, the gender interaction terms were added to the model (Table 2). One significant interaction was observed in the relationship between individual-level

unsociability, gender, and individualism,  $b = 1.17$ ,  $t(5) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .05$ . This effect reduced prediction error by 59.94%, significantly improving the model,  $\Delta x^2(1) = 38.38$ ,  $p = .001$ . To explain, among boys but not girls, the relationship between individual unsociability and peer victimization was stronger in classrooms low in individualism than in classrooms high in individualism (Figure 3).

## DISCUSSION

As expected, there was a strong positive relationship between individual-level isolation and unsociability, which suggests that children may exhibit multiple forms of social withdrawal. This implies that the development of isolation and unsociability may be interrelated processes. For example, children with a tendency toward unsociability may then be isolated by their peers, which itself is a form of peer victimization (social exclusion) because they are perceived as odd or unfriendly. In addition, children who are isolated by their peers at a young age may develop unsociability because they avoid future interactions, not out of fear (as would be symptomatic of shyness) but because they do not enjoy social interactions and feel no reason to pursue them. Therefore, the relationship between unsociability and isolation may reflect a bidirectional effect.

Although more recent research has begun to assert that individualistic and collectivistic values can be simultaneously endorsed (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2007), the strong negative correlation between classroom individualism and collectivism is consistent with the traditional conceptualization of individualism and collectivism as a bipolar continuum; that is, cultures may include aspects of both individualism and collectivism, but cultures that ascribe more to one orientation can be assumed to ascribe less to the other (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). This suggests that within each classroom, there is a dominant orientation which serves to create a classroom culture of individualistic or collectivistic values.



**FIGURE 3.** The relationship between individual-level unsociability and peer victimization nominations was stronger for boys in low individualism peer groups, yet weakly negative among boys in groups high in individualism.

Interestingly, boys reported higher levels of collectivism in their classes and same-sex peer groups. It is not clear whether this is a unique characteristic of this sample or whether these findings represent stable gender differences in collectivistic values. Furthermore, given that a solely Brazilian sample was used, the possibility that this may be a cultural phenomenon that would not be present in samples from other nations should also be taken into consideration. Consistent with previous research that has demonstrated that socially withdrawn behavior predicts peer victimization (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2003), in this study, both isolation and unsociability were found to be significant predictors of peer victimization. Notably, although unsociability was once considered a more benign form of social withdrawal (Harrist et al., 1997), the current results support that, at least in adolescence, unsociability can have socially and developmentally relevant consequences.

Previous research has suggested that the consequences of social withdrawal

may be stronger for boys than girls, but this effect has been limited to shy or inhibited forms of social withdrawal (e.g., Radke-Yarrow et al., 1988; Stevenson-Hinde & Glover, 1996). In addition, alternative predictions can also be justified (a) that girls may place higher value on affiliation (Ojanen et al., 2012) and social skills (Kwon et al., 2014) may suggest that social withdrawal would be more problematic for girls and (b) that social skills are integral to positive social status (Adler et al., 1992) may suggest that social withdrawal would have similar consequences for both genders. However, the current finding, that the relationship between individual isolation and peer victimization was weaker for girls than for boys, provides some evidence that greater consequences for shyness in boys may also extend to other forms of social withdrawal. Although the common gender-role-violation explanation seems to be most applicable to shyness, it is possible that being isolated prevents boys from being able to express male-typed characteristics such as assertiveness and dominance, thus creating a gender norm violation that results in peer victimization. There was no interaction of gender and unsociability, which, in contrast to previous evidence of greater consequences for boys (Coplan & Weeks, 2010), suggests that this form of social withdrawal may not have differential consequences based on gender. This finding potentially reflects the general importance of social skills in facilitating positive peer relationships.

Classroom norms of social withdrawal emerged as a powerful moderator of the individual-level consequence of social withdrawal. First, consistent with the misfit effect (Wright et al., 1986), the relationship between individual unsociability and peer victimization was stronger in classes with a low prevalence of unsociability; in fact, the individual-level unsociability was only a positive predictor of victimization in classes with a low prevalence of unsociability. This finding provides further support for the proposition that unsociability may violate the expectation of involvement in social relations, which is assumed to be healthy and enjoyable for children (Rubin et al., 2009; Younger et al., 1993). Because of the increasing emphasis on social relations in adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009), it is possible that unsociability may become increasingly deviant as

children approach adolescence. Future research should explore whether the consequences of unsociability follow this trajectory, thus supporting this explanation, or whether a more general misfit effect of violating classroom norms (as opposed to developmental norms) is sufficient.

A congruous misfit effect was also proposed for the moderating influence of classroom norms of isolation on the relationship between individual isolation and peer victimization, but in direct conflict with this hypothesis, the relationship between isolation and peer victimization was negative in classes low in isolation (but not in classes high in isolation). Clearly, the results depose the original proposition, but an alternative explanation is not clear. One possibility is that in classes low in isolation, the very few isolated children may simply be ignored, victimized specifically by exclusion. Because of this, the more overt forms of victimization that would be more likely to be reported in response to the peer victimization items used in this study may not be occurring. Other children may form their own social circles which neither require nor motivate interaction (either positive or negative) with isolated children, thus leaving isolated children outside of regular social world of most children and reducing the risk for victimization. In fact, because of lack of social participation, they may be less at risk for more overt and recognizable forms of victimization. In classes in which isolation is more prevalent, however, the separation of isolated children may not be distinct or even possible, leading isolated children to be incorporated into the general social system of the class and thus victimized through additional means.

It is difficult to derive a clear conclusion about the finding that individual-level isolation was a weaker positive predictor of peer victimization in classrooms higher in collectivism solely from previous research on social withdrawal in cultures traditionally considered to be collectivistic because of conflicting findings regarding the presence of social consequences (e.g., Chang et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2005; Wei & Chen, 2009) and the focus on shy or reticent forms of social withdrawal. This type of social withdrawal is the form that most closely aligns with the value of reserved, respectful, and submissive behavior; of

any form of social withdrawal, shyness is the most likely to be accepted (i.e., less associated with victimization) in collectivistic cultures. Unlike shyness, isolation directly conflicts with the collectivistic goals of group cohesion and harmony and may therefore present a norm violation. Although this may be taken to suggest that violation of these cultural norms might lead to the prediction that isolated children may be at greater risk for peer victimization in classes high in collectivism, consistent with the current results, the classroom culture of collectivism may actually serve as a buffer for this misfit effect. That is, peer victimization is also likely to be less prevalent because it also violates cultural values of the classroom.

An interesting three-way interaction was identified among individual unsociability, gender, and classroom individualism. To explain, among boys but not girls, unsociability was more strongly associated with peer victimization in classes low in individualism. This effect may shed light on the interaction between two cultural values: expectations of gender-typed behavior and individualism. Unsociable children might be perceived by classmates as being “in it for themselves,” an attitude that may be seen as acceptable in highly individualistic classroom cultures, which emphasize personal achievement and competition. In less individualistic classes, though, the perception of this same attitude may lead to a greater risk for victimization if seen as threatening, merely rude and unfriendly, or socially deviant. That this effect appeared only for boys may suggest greater polarity in the valence of the interpretation of unsociability. That is, because a competition-driven, self-focused attitude may be more acceptable within male gender roles, in classroom cultures that support such behavior (i.e., more individualistic), there may be no consequences for this behavior, whereas in classroom contexts that do not support such behavior, social consequences may emerge. This proposition is supported by the lack of a positive relationship between individual unsociability and peer victimization for boys in highly individualistic classrooms. For girls, however, such an attitude is likely to be in conflict with gender role expectations regardless of the classroom context. In support, the relationship between unsociability and peer victimization



remained positive for girls regardless of the classroom context.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Because of the cross-sectional nature of this study, it was not possible to account for the bidirectional relationships between social withdrawal and peer victimization and between unsociability and isolation; future longitudinal research is needed to tease apart these relationships. It was also not possible to assess whether the observed effects change as a function of time, but the relationships will likely change as social contexts change, such as changes in social norms over the course of the school year transitions to new classroom and school environments (e.g., the transition to high school) throughout adolescence. Furthermore, research should explore whether the strength of the relationship between each type of social withdrawal and peer victimization changes in accordance with normative developmental patterns, as previously proposed for the increasing deviancy of unsociability in adolescence.

In addition, although this study did differentiate between types of social withdrawal, this study did not distinguish between physical and relational forms of peer victimization, yet unique relationships are likely. For example, isolation is by definition associated with relational victimization; however, it is not clear whether children who are being excluded (i.e., isolated) are also being victimized through other forms of relational victimization or physical victimization. Also, the specific items used to measure peer victimization may not have been as sensitive to more subtle forms of victimization, such as ignoring, so the current results may only capture social consequences of more overt peer victimization.

Similarly, although a strength of this study is that it considers the effects of isolation and unsociability, which have generally received less attention in the social withdrawal literature (particularly the latter), a more comprehensive study should also include shyness. Just as the results of this study indicate that isolation and unsociability each have unique relationships with peer victimization and contextual influences, it is likely that shyness would also have unique relationships.

The reliability of the peer victimization (a 5 .59) and individualism (a 5 .52) scales is a potential concern. Because measures originally developed with English-speaking samples were translated into Portuguese for this study, low reliability may suggest a lack of measurement invariance. Although translations were performed by local collaborators fluent in Portuguese, it is possible that the items in these scales did not translate with the intended meaning or that the concepts were not well understood or salient in this sample. Furthermore, the items may have different relevance or may have been interpreted differently by the adolescents who completed the measures than by the translators, who were all adults and researchers with some familiarity with these constructs. In the future, these concerns should be addressed through assessment of measurement invariance.

Similarly, because the sample was limited to solely Brazilian adolescents, the effects themselves must be interpreted within the bounds of the national cultural context. Although the focus of this study was the classroom-level “culture” that peer relations are highly influenced by many levels of cultural norms, attitudes, values, and customs (Chen et al., 2006) necessitates consideration of the national-level Brazilian culture. For example, according to Hofstede’s (1980) cross-national analysis, Brazil ranks among the most collectivistic cultures; consistent with the current classroom-level results, it is reasonable to assume that the relationship between social withdrawal and peer victimization may vary across nations according to the level of endorsement of collectivistic values. Moreover, because the many levels of cultural contexts are interrelated, future research regarding the interaction between cultural factors at multiple levels, such as the classroom and national levels, is needed.

### *Implications*

The results of this study contribute a considerable amount to the understanding of social withdrawal. First, this study provides further support that, despite early assumptions (e.g., Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993), social withdrawal, including isolation and unsociability, does have important

consequences for adolescents that may affect socioemotional development. Furthermore, it indicates that different forms of social withdrawal are unique not only in their motivations but also in their consequences and their sensitivity to particular contextual influences. The current effects also reveal interesting gender differences in the consequences of the isolation and unsociability types of social withdrawal, which has been largely unexplored. Perhaps even more important, this study provides evidence that understanding these relationships within a student population requires attention to the context of the classroom, including social norms and the cultural climate, in addition to individual and dyadic processes, including social norms and the cultural climate

This study may also have implications for practice, particularly for promoting the healthy development of individuals who are socially withdrawn. Understanding the specific social consequences of different forms of social withdrawal and the contextual factors that may increase the likelihood of such consequences may allow for more targeted support for socially withdrawn children. Similarly, the results of this research may have applications for prevention and interventions addressing peer victimization; applied psychologists should consider targeting social withdrawal as a risk factor, which may require different strategies than addressing other risk factors such as aggression. Similarly, these efforts must be sensitive to the different characteristics and motivations underlying different forms of social withdrawal which will likely affect not only the consequences of the behavior but also responses to prevention and intervention approaches.

Both social withdrawal and peer victimization should also be addressed with attention to the role that various aspects of the classroom context may play in the extent to which certain behaviors are risk factors for psychological and social maladjustment. Specifically, programs should take into consideration the existing social norms, the prevalence of the behavior, and social values, such as individualism and collectivism, within a group of students. In addition, because of the importance of the classroom context, this study may have unique applications to classroom-level, rather than individual-level, prevention and intervention

programs and may suggest that it is just as important to target the social norms and values of the group as a whole as to target individual behavior.

In particular, as Chang (2004) discusses, classroom norms essentially alter the meaning of social behaviors within a context and thus their social consequences. This suggests that social consequences of a behavior may be best attenuated by changing the meaning of the behavior. That is, if the meaning of the social behavior can be altered such that it is no longer considered “deviant,” then the misfit effect, and thus social consequences, should be reduced. In the context of social withdrawal, targeting social norms and values among the classroom group may effectively reduce the perception that social withdrawal is deviant. Therefore, social withdrawal is likely to be less of a risk factor for peer victimization. Without changing the meaning of the behavior, children may retain the perception of the behavior of social withdrawal as deviant; even if interventions teach children not to victimize these children, they may still be viewed as deviant and therefore the intervention may be less effective or enduring over time. Thus, evidence suggests that it is the changing of the classroom context rather than of individual behaviors that is likely to be most advantageous for reducing the consequences of social withdrawal.

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