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Peer Victimization and Mental Health During Early Adolescence

In this article, the authors describe recent re-search on peer victimization and its mental health consequences during early adolescence. They begin with a working definition of peer victim-ization that distinguishes it from lethal school violence and from simple conflict between peers. They then present a psychosocial profile of youth who are chronic victims of harassment, with a particular focus on their mental health chal-lenges. To aid the understanding of the plight of victims, the authors contrast their profiles with those of bullies and with those of adolescents who have characteristics of both bullies and victims. Some unanswered questions in the peer victim-ization literature are then considered, such as whether there are gender and ethnic differences in the experience of victimization and the stability of victim status. The article concludes with a dis-cussion of implications for both school-wide and targeted interventions to reduce victimization and with suggestions to teachers for concrete actions they can take to promote a safer environment for their students.

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PEER VICTIMIZATION IS A MAJOR school stres-sor that can challenge students' mental and physical health. We define peer victimization—also commonly labeled *harassment* or *bullying*—as physical, verbal, or psychological abuse of victims by perpetrators who intend to cause them harm (Olweus, 1993). The critical features that distinguish victimization from simple conflict be-tween peers are the intention to cause harm and an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim. Hitting, name calling, intimidating ges-tures, racial slurs, spreading of rumors, and social

exclusion by powerful others are all examples of behaviors that constitute peer victimization. Note that our definition does not include the more lethal sorts of peer-directed hostilities such as those seen in the widely publicized school shootings. Although some of those shootings may have been precipitated by a history of peer abuse, they remain rare events. Our definition and focus here is on more typical and widespread types of peer harassment that affect the lives of many youth. It is estimated that 40 percent to 80 percent of school age children experience bullying at some point during their school careers (e.g., Sanders & Phye, 2004).

Not only is peer victimization quite prevalent, it also is associated with a host of adjustment difficulties (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Students who are chronic victims of school bullying often are rejected by their peers and they feel depressed, anxious, and lonely. Recent research suggests that victimized youth also have elevated levels of physical symptoms, including somatic complaints, frequent visits to the nurse, and absenteeism (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005). It is not difficult to imagine the chronic victim who becomes so anxious about going to school that she or he tries to avoid it at all costs. Acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, the American Medical Association has designated school bullying a public health concern.

In this article, we focus on the experience of peer victimization during early adolescence. Given heightened concern about finding their niche, fitting in, and peer approval in general, early adolescents who are targets of peer victimization might be particularly vulnerable to adjustment difficulties. We begin with a discussion of the distinct psychosocial profiles of adolescents who are targets of victimization. Next we consider some unanswered questions in the peer victimization literature such as gender and ethnic differences in the experience of harassment and the stability of victim status. In the third section, we turn to implications of research on victimization for interventions at both the school and individual level and we conclude with specific recommendations to teachers for handling victimization incidents.

Profiles of Adolescents Involved in School Bullying

What is it like to be a victim of peer harassment during early adolescence? What is it like to be a bully? Are there some youth who have characteristics of both victims and bullies? In our research, we have been studying the similarities and differences between sixth-grade students who have reputations as victims, as bullies, or both bully and victim (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). We focus on extreme groups—that is, the 5–10 percent of students in any given classroom who have one of these reputations—and we contrast their experiences with a normative group of classmates who do not have negative social reputations. Self-report data were gathered from all students on psychological adjustment (e.g., depression, self-esteem), their causal appraisals of experiences with harassment, and their perception of the school climate (e.g., its fairness and safety). We also gathered peer data on social adjustment—that is, the degree to which students were disliked by their peers and perceived as popular (i.e., *cool*). Finally, in this multi-informant program of research, homeroom teachers rated students on academic engagement and students' grades were collected from school records.

Table 1 shows a conceptual representation of differences between victims, bullies, bully-victims, and the normative group on the sets of variables and constructs that we have studied. Turning to the first column, it is evident that early adolescents with reputations as victims have many of the psychological and social adjustment problems that have been documented in previous research. Compared to the normative group, victims are more depressed, anxious, and lonely, and they report low self-esteem. More unique to our program of research is a possible explanation for these mental health challenges. We have found that victims have a tendency to blame themselves for their experiences with harassment; they are more likely to believe that "it is something about *me*, things will always be that way, and there is nothing that I can do to change it." Self-blame and accompanying negative affect make it more

Table 1
Psychological profiles of early adolescents

	Victim	Bully	Bully-Victim	Socially Adjusted
Psychological Adjustment				
Depression	High	Low	High	Low
Social Anxiety	High	Low	High	—
Loneliness	High	Low	High	Low
Self-Esteem	Low	High	Low	High
Attributions				
Self Blame	High	Low	High	—
Perceptions of School Climate				
Unsafe	High	Low	High	Low
Unfair	Low	High	High	Low
Social Adjustment				
Disliked	High	Low	High*	Low
Cool	Low	High	—	—
Academic Achievement				
GPA	Low	Low	Low*	High
School Engagement	Low	Low	Low*	High

Note. These profiles are based on standardized scores to allow relative comparisons between groups. Dashes indicate scores at or very close to 0 and asterisks indicate especially strong scores (adapted from Juvonen et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2006).

difficult to cope with challenging social experiences (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Victims also perceive their schools as unsafe, which might be expected in light of their other self-perceived vulnerabilities. Yet they do not perceive the school rules as unfair in the sense that they do not feel mistreated by teachers or administrators.

Let us now contrast the mental life, perceptions of school climate, and social status of victims with that of bullies. Compared to victims and the normative group, bullies appear to have healthy mental lives. They are no more depressed, anxious, or lonely than the normative group and they have high self-esteem. These findings may be at odds with a widely held belief in our society that people who aggress against others must act that way because they think poorly of themselves. But in fact, there is very little indication in either the child or adult literature that aggressive youth suffer from low self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Bullies also are least likely to blame themselves for peer

conflict. That finding is consistent with a large literature in developmental psychology indicating that many aggressive youth have a tendency (bias?) to blame peer difficulties on the hostile intentions of others rather than their own characteristics or behavior (see Coie & Dodge, 1998). Consistent with low self-blame, bullies are more likely to believe that they are treated unfairly at school, yet they do not perceive the environment as unsafe.

Also noteworthy in Table 1 is that bullies, compared to victims, enjoy high social status, which may partly explain their positive self-views. Bullies are not as rejected as victims and they are perceived as especially cool, where coolness captures both popularity and possession of traits that are admired by early adolescents. Other researchers have reported similar positive relationships between aggression and high social status during adolescence (e.g., Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & van Acker, 2000). As early adolescents exercise their need for autonomy and indepen-

dence, it seems that bullies enjoy a new found popularity as more adjusted peers attempt to imitate their anti-social tendencies.

In the third column are the profiles for youth who have reputations as both victims and bullies. Are they more similar to victims, to bullies, or do they comprise a distinct subgroup with their own unique characteristics? As Table 1 shows, bully-victims are unique and they appear to have the worst of both worlds. They report psychological maladjustment as high as that of victims, yet they do not enjoy any of the social benefits of their reputations as bullies because they are overwhelmingly rejected by their peers. In some cases bully-victims may turn inward and feel bad about themselves; in other cases they turn outward and aggress against their perpetrators. But with few friends, bully-victims have little social support to ward off potential retaliation. Like victims, bully-victims felt unsafe at school; but like bullies, they also judged the school rules as unfair, suggesting that bully-victims suffer from multiple risks. They were also doing more poorly in school than any of the other groups. Considering all of the adjustment outcomes examined here, we agree with other recent analyses concluding that bully-victims may be the most troubled and vulnerable of the behavioral subgroups (e.g., Unnever, 2005). We return to these psychosocial profiles in a later section in which we discuss targeted intervention approaches for students with particular adjustment difficulties.

Some Unanswered Questions About Peer Victimization

Are There Gender Differences in the Experience of Peer Victimization?

The gender question emerges in discussions of different types of peer victimization (as opposed to different victim subgroups). At least three types can be distinguished: physical (e.g., hitting, pushing), verbal (e.g., name calling, racial slurs), and psychological. This third type, often called relational, indirect, or social victimization, usually involves social ostracism or attempts to damage the reputation of the victim. Some research has suggested that girls are more likely to be both perpetrator and target of the relational type (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Because a whole popular culture has emerged around relationally aggressive girls (so-called, *queen bees*, *alpha girls*) and their victims, it is important to put these gender findings in proper perspective. First, in some studies, physical, verbal, and relational victimization tend to be correlated, suggesting that the victim of relational harassment is also the victim of physical and verbal harassment (e.g., Bellmore & Cillessen, 2006; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Second, if relational victimization is more prevalent in girls than boys (and the results are mixed), then this gender difference is most likely confined to middle childhood and early adolescence (see review in Archer & Coyne, 2005). By middle adolescence, relational victimization becomes the norm for both genders as it becomes less socially accepted for individuals to physically aggress against peers. In surveys of high school students, for example, both boys and girls report that they engage in more emotionally abusive behavior, such as ridicule and ostracism, than physical abuse (Harris, 2004). Relational victimization is a particularly invidious type of peer abuse because it inflicts psychological pain and is often difficult for others to detect. However, it is probably a less gendered subtype than previously thought.

Are There Ethnic Differences in the Experience of Peer Victimization?

As American public schools become more ethnically diverse, one can ask whether some ethnic groups are more vulnerable to peer victimization than others. We do not believe that there is any persuasive evidence that ethnicity *per se* is a risk factor for victimization. A more critical variable is whether one's ethnic group is the numerical majority or minority in a particular school context. Recall that for victimization to occur there must be an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim. Being a member of the minority group can lead to more victimization because one's group is less powerful

in the numerical sense (e.g., Graham & Juvonen, 2002). But consider what it must be like to be a victim *and* a member of the numerical majority ethnic group. We documented that victims who are majority group members suffer the most negative mental health outcomes (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004). We reasoned that students who are victims when their ethnic group holds the numerical balance of power feel especially bad because they deviate from the normative perception of their group as dominant and powerful. Deviation from the norm can then result in more self-blame ("it must be *me*").

If there are risks associated with being a member of the minority or majority ethnic group, then this has implications for the kinds of ethnic configurations that limit both the amount and impact of victimization. It could be, for example, that the best configuration is an ethnically diverse context where no one group holds the numerical balance of power. Consistent with this hypothesis, we documented that greater ethnic diversity at both the classroom and school level was related to less perceived vulnerability among sixth-grade students (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). We propose that the power relations are more balanced in ethnically diverse schools with multiple ethnic groups. This shared power may reduce incidents of harassment that, in turn, affect perceptions of vulnerability. Thus it is not so much ethnicity *per se* as it is the ethnic composition of classroom and schools that shapes the experience of victimization.

Once a Victim Always a Victim?

Given the numerous psychosocial and academic problems associated with being a victim of peer harassment, it is important to establish the stability of victimization and whether there are carryover effects of earlier bullying experiences. The data are inconclusive on these issues. Some findings suggest that victim status is moderately stable across a one-year school period (Boulton & Smith, 1994). However, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) found that there was

considerable turnover in kindergartners who reported being victimized from fall to spring. With early adolescents, we found that only about a third of students who had reputations as victims in the fall of sixth grade maintained that reputation at the end of the school year (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000). New approaches that utilize numerous time points and track students across longer time spans promise to yield greater understanding of the trajectories of both stable and unstable victims (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). In future work, it will also be important to consider stability across school transitions (e.g., moving from elementary to middle school). Because peer experiences are so context dependent, moving from one school setting to another may provide valuable opportunities for students to redefine themselves among their peers (e.g., Kinney, 1993). In other words, there are a host of situational factors that affect the likelihood of a student continuing to be bullied.

Implications for Intervention

One of the key questions for researchers and practitioners concerned with peer victimization is the linking of research findings to interventions. How can bullying problems be prevented? Is it better to take a whole-school approach or target particular individuals? If targeted, should an intervention focus on victims, bullies, bully-victims, or all three groups? In the following sections we highlight some of the implications of a whole-school versus targeted approach to intervention.

School-Wide Interventions

A school-wide (primary prevention) approach targets all students, their parents, and adults within the school, including administrators, teachers, and staff. Such programs operate under the assumption that bullying is a systemic social problem and that finding a solution is the collective responsibility of everyone in the school. Systemic prevention requires changing the culture of the whole school. Most school-wide

programs are based on the approach prescribed in the Bullying Prevention Program developed by Dan Olweus in Norway (Olweus, 1993). This approach requires increased awareness of the nature of the problem, heightened monitoring, and systematic and consistent responses to incidents of bullying.

How the program is implemented is specific to each program stakeholder. For example, students are asked to create their own rules about peer victimization and they are provided with information about strategies for dealing with victimization and opportunities for classroom discussions about their experiences. Teachers and school staff receive training that includes strategies for preventing problems associated with peer harassment. They are also asked to provide increased monitoring of students' behaviors and to provide consequences for students who engage in aggressive behavior. Parents are provided with information about the school's policies and practices. Common to all program participants is knowledge of the school's rules about victimization including what behaviors constitute victimization and what consequences students and staff will face if they engage in those behaviors.

Initial evaluations of the program in Norway revealed decreases in self-reported bullying and victimization, decreases in teachers' and students' reports of other students' bullying and victimization, reductions in antisocial behavior, and increases in students' perceptions of a positive school climate (Olweus, 1993). This initial success led to the implementation and evaluation of the program in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, where decreases in self-reported bullying/victimization were found after use of the program (Limber, 2004). Currently, efforts are being directed at adapting the program to more specifically reflect the structure and practices of American schools.

Targeted Intervention

Our framework for examining psychosocial profiles (see Table 1) has useful implications for interventions that are targeted toward particular individuals with specific adjustment problems. For victims, our findings highlight the need to alleviate mental health problems (e.g., depression, low self-esteem) perhaps by altering maladaptive thoughts about the causes of their plight. Recall that victims were more likely to blame themselves for their harassment experiences ("it must be *me*"). What more adaptive attribution might replace personal self-blame? In some cases change efforts might target behaviors (e.g., "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time"). The goal would be to help victimized youth to recognize that there are responses in their repertoire to prevent future encounters with harassing peers. External attributions also can be adaptive because they protect self-esteem (Weiner, 1986). Knowing that others are also victims or that there are some aggressive youth who randomly single out unsuspecting targets can help lessen the tendency to self-blame (see Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). The notion of altering dysfunctional causal thoughts to produce changes in behavior has produced a rich empirical literature on attribution therapy in educational and clinical settings. There is no reason the guiding assumption of that research cannot be applied to alleviating the plight of victims of harassment.

Bullies, in contrast, probably do not need interventions designed to bolster their self-esteem or other mental health indicators. We think there is now enough evidence to conclude, as did Baumeister et al. (1996) in adult research, that aggressive early adolescents do not suffer from low self-esteem. Where they appear to be more vulnerable is in their perceptions of others, in particular their low threshold for assuming that other people act with hostile intent. Some of the known strategies for helping those youth to better handle peer conflict might therefore be useful. For example, teaching aggressive students to recognize when provocations are accidental rather than intended has proven to be an effective intervention (Hudley & Graham, 1993). As a general social cognitive skill, learning to more accurately infer others' intentions might foster improved relations between bullies and school authority figures as well as raise their threshold for questioning the fairness of school rules.

For bully-victims, there appear to be multiple risks and multiple pathways to adjustment problems. Such youth would therefore benefit from both intervention strategies suggested above. Because they are so rejected by peers, bully-victims might also profit from learning self-presentation strategies that help them manage the impressions that others have of them. We know from other research that mastering the skills of strategic account giving (e.g., knowing when to apologize or express remorse) can improve the behavior of aggressive youth who are also disengaged from school (Graham, Taylor, & Dolland, 2003).

The school-wide and targeted approaches, although complementary, represent different schools of thought, each associated with their own advantages and disadvantages. Fidelity and sustainability, two important components of good interventions, are likely to be differentially achieved in the whole school versus targeted approaches. Fidelity, or the consistency with which all of the components of the intervention are implemented, is probably easier to both monitor and achieve in targeted approaches because there are fewer people, both adults (trainers) and children, to keep track of. With multiple activities at multiple levels involving multiple stakeholders, it is more difficult to monitor treatment fidelity in the school-wide programs. On the other hand, sustainability may be easier to achieve in the school programs. Systemic changes in peer, classroom, school, and community are needed to build the foundation for long-term prevention of bullying. Targeted interventions, typically imported from the outside and implemented by researchers or school staff working with those researchers, usually are too short-lived to achieve that kind of support base.

Suggestions for Teachers

In addition to whole-school and targeted interventions, there are also steps that teachers can take on a daily basis to promote a safe and positive school context for all students. These steps require no extra training and are neither time nor labor intensive. Yet they can help to nurture a student body that is more ready and able to learn.

First, teachers should never ignore a bullying incident. Because most bullying in secondary school occurs in *unowned spaces* like hallways and restrooms where adult supervision is minimal (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999), it is very important that teachers respond to all bullying incidents that they witness. A response by a teacher communicates to the perpetrators that their actions are not acceptable and helps victims feel less powerless about their predicament. This is especially important because adolescents often perceive school staff as unresponsive to students' experiences of bullying (Harris, 2004).

Second, when possible, use witnessed bullying incidents as *teachable moments*. By teachable moments we mean situations that open the door for conversations with students about difficult topics—for example, why many youth play bystander roles and are unwilling to come to the aid of victims, how social ostracism can be a particularly painful form of peer abuse, and why bullies are so popular during the adolescent years. At times, engaging in such difficult dialogues may be a more useful teacher response than quick and harsh punishment of perpetrators in order to send a message that bullying will not be tolerated.

Third, we encourage teachers to set an example with their own behavior. Although we focus on the experiences of students in this article, peer harassment also occurs among educators and between educators and students. It is critically important that adults in school settings refrain from targeting each other and from targeting students.

Fourth, outside help should be requested when needed. Because teachers do not have the training to deal with students who have serious problems either as perpetrators or victims of peer victimization, teachers should request professional assistance when it is needed. This may include informing the principal, a school counselor, or the school psychologist. Although peer victimization in American schools affects the lives of many youth, teachers should always be sensitive to that five to ten percent of students who are at serious risk for long-term adjustment difficulties.

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