

Can Healthier Contexts Be Harmful? A New Perspective on the Plight of Victims of Bullying

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ABSTRACT—*With rising awareness of the negative effects of school bullying on victims' psychosocial adjustment, schools worldwide are intervening more to try to reduce bullying among their students. However, even when these interventions succeed (i.e., lead to average decreases in bullying), some children continue to experience victimization. Recent studies suggest that their situation is particularly concerning: The adjustment difficulties commonly experienced by victims of bullying may be exacerbated in social contexts in which less victimization occurs, the proportion of victims has decreased, or an antibullying program is being implemented. The possibility that improved social contexts harm some individuals has been referred to as the healthy context paradox. Although strict evidence of this paradox is pending, in this article, we discuss plausible explanations for it, such as causal attributions for the bullying and opportunities for friendship, as well as possible implications for antibullying interventions.*

KEYWORDS—bullying; victimization; classroom; internalizing problems; healthy context paradox

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Forty years of research on school bullying—defined as deliberate, repeated aggression against a peer in a more vulnerable position—have made two things clear: First, bullying can have serious consequences for the psychosocial adjustment of its victims (Arseneault, 2018), so schools have a moral responsibility to act to prevent and reduce bullying among their students. Second, the initiation, maintenance, and outcomes of bullying behavior not only depend on the individual characteristics of the perpetrators of bullying and their targets, but are affected by features of the social context (Saarento, Garandau, & Salmivalli, 2015; Saarento & Salmivalli, 2015). Numerous school-based programs have been developed to prevent bullying (Gaffney, Tofi, & Farrington, 2018). Because promoting antibullying norms among all students is considered effective in reducing bullying (Salmivalli, 2010), many current approaches aim to improve the social environment rather than merely focus on the individuals involved directly in incidents of bullying.

Interventions are deemed successful when they lead to average decreases in a school or classroom in rates of victimization. However, not all children respond equally to antibullying efforts (Garandau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014), and some experience persistent victimization despite participating in successful antibullying programs (Kaufman, Kretschmer, Huitsing, & Veenstra, 2018). The fact that some victimized children do not benefit from positive changes in their environment is very concerning. However, recent findings suggest that their situation might be even more problematic: Could improved school contexts actually worsen the plight of victimized children by increasing their adjustment difficulties (Garandau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2018; Gini, Holt, Pozzoli, & Marino, 2019; Huitsing et al., 2018; Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2012; Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2007)? In this article, we aim to raise awareness of the possibility of a *healthy context paradox*, as it has been referred to recently (Huitsing et al., 2018; Salmivalli, 2018). We also discuss alternative explanations for the findings which suggest that the psychosocial problems experienced by victims of bullying may be worse in safer or healthier school environments.

ARE HEALTHY CONTEXTUAL FEATURES HARMFUL FOR VICTIMS OF BULLYING?

Among children, the most common consequences of being bullied by peers are increased internalizing problems (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010) and somatic complaints (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013), lower self-esteem (Overbeek, Zeevalkink, Vermulst, & Scholte, 2010), higher self-blaming tendencies (Schacter & Juvonen, 2015), and lower status among peers (Kochel, Ladd, & Rudolph, 2012). However, in classrooms or schools with less victimization (i.e., environments with a smaller number of victims or victims with lower average victimization scores), these negative experiences appear to be more severe. In a study of 10- to 12-year-olds, victims suffered from lower self-esteem than their nonvictimized peers and had even lower self-esteem in classrooms that had lower levels of peer-reported victimization (Huitsing et al., 2012). In addition, the children's depression was higher in classrooms in which bullying was focused on a few targets (Huitsing et al., 2012). Similarly, adolescents who reported higher victimization experienced somatic problems more often when they were in classrooms with lower levels of self-reported victimization (Gini et al., 2019). In a study on the peer status of victims of bullying, early adolescents (mean age of 13.4 years) were even more disliked in classrooms in which the average of adolescents' self-reported victimization scores was lower (Sentse et al., 2007). These concurrent findings show that young victims feel worse and are more disliked in environments with fewer victims or less victimization overall.

Recent longitudinal studies suggest a pattern similar to that of these cross-sectional studies. One study examined the psychological and social adjustment of children who were victimized across 1 school year (termed *stable victims*) as a function of changes in the proportion of victims in their classroom (Garandeau et al., 2018). The stable victims felt more depressed and more socially anxious, and were more disliked by their peers in classrooms in which the proportion of victims had decreased in 1 year than in classrooms in which it had increased or remained the same. These effects were observed regardless of whether the classrooms were implementing an antibullying program.

The effects of self-reported victimization on characterological self-blame, defined as a tendency for individuals to perceive the causes of their plight as internal, stable, and uncontrollable (Graham & Juvonen, 1998), varied depending on the mean level of victimization in the school (Schacter & Juvonen, 2015). Sixth-grade students who reported frequent victimization showed greater increases in characterological self-blame from fall to spring in schools with lower levels of victimization. Furthermore, in a study that used daily reports, seeing others being victimized may have protected children exposed to harassment by peers (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005): Witnessing the victimization of other peers prevented these children from feeling more humiliation and anger.

Beyond the harmful effects on children who are victimized persistently of lower levels of victimization in a classroom or school, implementing an antibullying program can worsen the maladjustment of children who remain victimized across 1 year or become victimized (Huitsing et al., 2018): Stable and new victims had more symptoms of depression and lower self-esteem after 1 year when they attended a school that implemented a successful antibullying program than stable and new victims at other schools. Taken together, these findings indicate that paradoxically, environments where bullying is being reduced or discouraged may harm the victims. We need more research to determine whether such efforts really increase maladjustment among a few students and if so, what mechanisms might account for it.

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR A HEALTHY CONTEXT PARADOX

To our knowledge, the mechanisms accounting for a healthy context paradox have not been examined directly. Nevertheless, the literature suggests several possible explanations (see also Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004; Garandeau et al., 2018; Huitsing et al., 2018; Juvonen, Schacter, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2016). While the healthy context paradox refers to the moderating effect of context on the association between victimization and adjustment, the mechanisms hypothesized to account for the effect are the factors that mediate the effects of the context on adjustment for children who are victimized; therefore, it refers to moderated mediation (i.e., the indirect effect of context on adjustment via the hypothesized mechanisms being moderated by victimization).

First, these environmental characteristics (e.g., average victimization, centralization of victimization, decreases in victimization, implementation of an antibullying intervention) may affect victims' psychological well-being because they influence the causal attributions victims make about their situation. Evidence suggests that targets of bullying are more likely to engage in self-blaming attributions when their environment features less victimization (Schacter & Juvonen, 2015). Also, when children remain victimized in a school that is openly taking action against bullying by implementing a successful program, they may be less likely to blame external factors and more likely to feel responsible for their victimization. In turn, self-blaming attributions partly mediated the association between being victimized and experiencing maladjustment (Chen & Graham, 2012; Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009). Such attributions also moderated the association between victimization and internalizing problems, so victimized children experienced stronger increases in internalizing problems when they engaged more in self-blaming attributions (Perren, Ettekal, & Ladd, 2013).

Causal attributions are not the only cognitive processes that could account for a healthy context paradox. According to social

comparison theory, individuals have a natural tendency to compare themselves to their peers (Festinger, 1954) and the type of social comparisons they make can influence their self-perceptions and well-being (Wills, 1981). Specifically, people feel better when they engage in downward comparisons, that is, when they compare themselves to peers in a less enviable condition (Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988), and they feel worse when they engage in upward comparisons, that is, when they compare themselves to peers in a more favorable position (Gibbons, 1986). When victimized children find themselves in a social context where bullying is rare and few others are targeted, they are more likely to compare themselves to nonvictimized peers, who tend to be happier and more popular. These upward comparisons may exacerbate their anxiety and symptoms of depression.

Contexts of lower or decreasing victimization may also worsen victims' mental health problems by influencing their social relationships, especially their opportunities for forming friendships. Victims should be less likely to form friendships in such contexts, as they tend to be friends with other victims (e.g., Ellis & Zabatany, 2007; Huitsing, Snijders, Van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014; Lodder, Scholte, Cillessen, & Giletta, 2016), and nonvictims often refrain from befriending their victimized peers (e.g., Sentse, Dijkstra, Salmivalli, & Cillessen, 2013; Sijtsema, Rambaran, & Ojanen, 2013). For young victims of bullying, having friends may be an important buffer against increases in internalizing problems (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007). Having friends might also moderate the effect of victimization on internalizing symptoms by reducing the likelihood that victims blame themselves for the bullying they are subjected to, although this moderating effect of having friends on the link between being victimized and engaging in self-blaming attributions needs to be tested. The quality of the friendship may be a key factor to consider. Indeed, one study (Schacter, White, Chang, & Juvonen, 2015) found a negative correlation between characterological self-blame and having supportive friendships, but no significant correlation between characterological self-blame and the number of reciprocal friends. These correlations apply to an entire sample of early adolescents, not to victimized students in particular.

Social environments characterized by lower or decreasing victimization may also increase the probability that the friends of victimized children are not being victimized themselves. In turn, this can influence victims' well-being. In one study, victimized children were less likely to endorse characterological self-blame (Schacter & Juvonen, 2018) and to experience symptoms of depression (Brendgen et al., 2013; Schacter & Juvonen, 2018) when their friends were also the targets of bullying behavior.

In addition to the effects of seemingly positive contexts on mental health, these contexts may have a direct negative influence on victims' peer status for several reasons. Students who are frequently victimized may have lower social preference in classrooms with lower average rates of victimization (Sentse

et al., 2007) because they have fewer friends in these classrooms (see Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Moreover, beyond its impact on victims' attributions concerning their plight, the context may influence the causal attributions that classmates (or grademates) make for the victimization. When victims are the only ones being bullied in their classrooms, their peers may be more likely to infer that the negative treatment is deserved. As a result of a well-known cognitive bias called *belief in a just world* (Lerner, 1970), individuals tend to believe that people generally get what they deserve; in other words, good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. This bias may operate more easily in contexts where only a few people are exposed to negative treatment from others, which could explain why victims are more disliked in such groups.

Finally, empirical evidence suggests that similarity breeds attraction—a phenomenon referred to as the *similarity effect* (see Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008)—and the extent to which individuals are liked in a group depends on how similar they are to the rest of the group (Chang, 2004; Sentse et al., 2007; Stormshak et al., 1988). Having an attribute, behavior, or experience that deviates from the group norm, or being a *social misfit*, is costly in terms of likeability (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986). Children who are victimized in an environment with fewer victims, or where victimization is decreasing, are dissimilar to most of their peers, which could hinder liking or increase disliking of these children.

However, based on current evidence, we cannot completely rule out at least two alternative explanations for the findings that suggest a *healthy context paradox*. First, students who are victimized in low-victimization contexts (or remain victimized despite decreases in victimization or the implementation of an antibullying intervention) may be victimized more intensely than students who are victimized in other contexts, which could explain their stronger maladjustment. In one study (Garandeanu et al., 2018), changes in frequency of victimization between two time points did not differ significantly between stable victims in classrooms where the proportion of victims had decreased and stable victims in other classrooms. However, this possible explanation should be tested further in studies examining the healthy context paradox.

Second, students who are victimized in low-victimization contexts might have individual characteristics that explain why they are targeted even in a relatively healthy context. In other words, healthier contexts would not increase the psychosocial difficulties of victimized children, but victims who are very maladjusted would become or remain victimized even in contexts where others are not. As shown in another study (Kaufman et al., 2018), children with particularly high levels of internalizing problems, peer rejection, and difficult relationships with their parents were more likely to experience persistent victimization, even when a successful antibullying program was implemented in their schools. Moreover, students with specific risk factors

may be more likely to be victimized even in low-victimization contexts, and this may further increase their maladjustment. Researchers should consider testing these effects and their direction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION

A growing number of studies support the notion of a healthy context paradox. Victimized students seem to be suffering more when they are in situations in which no one or few others share their plight, and when visible efforts are made to address bullying. Findings supporting this phenomenon have been seen in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, with self-reported and peer-reported victimization, and in studies that used the classroom as the unit of analysis; one study (Schacter & Juvonen, 2015) also used schools as the unit of analysis. Yet confirmation of the adverse effects of healthier school contexts on victims' adjustment needs further study.

The next step in research on this topic is to design a longitudinal study that tests the hypothesized mechanisms of the healthy context paradox (increases in victims' self-blaming attributions, classmates' tendencies to blame victims, upward social comparisons, and decreases in number of friends and victimization levels of friends), while excluding alternative explanations. Researchers have not examined the direct effects of the quality of the context on the social comparisons victims make, the causal attributions all classmates make for the victimization, and victims' number of friends. More research is also needed on how self-blaming attributions relate to victims' number of friends or the quality of their friendships.

If further research confirms the healthy context paradox, it will inform the design of antibullying strategies, particularly decisions on where to focus antibullying efforts and how to measure the effectiveness of interventions. Antibullying efforts should feature actions that are preventive and universal (i.e., targeted at all students at the same time), but even when these strategies decrease levels of bullying, they might also exacerbate the pain of some victims. Therefore, identifying students who are bullied by their peers persistently and intervening directly in these cases to ensure that the bullying stops are essential. Also, interventions should focus on changing the causal attributions of both victimized students and other classmates.

This could be done by communicating three messages: First, victims are not to blame for the negative behavior of others. The individuals responsible for bullying are the perpetrators, regardless of the characteristics of the victims (e.g., internalizing problems, low self-esteem). Second, perpetrators of bullying are motivated by a desire to be popular and dominant (e.g., Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009), and those who follow ringleader bullies probably do so to maintain or gain a higher status by affiliating with popular bullies (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010). Acknowledging this should help clarify that the causes of the bullying do not lie in

the victims themselves. Third, letting victims know that others have faced or still face bullying in other classrooms or schools might help in some cases, but could also backfire since victims are more anxious on days when they and others are being bullied than on days when they alone report being bullied (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). The key element to consider is probably victims' perception of the uncontrollability of their situation. Therefore, adults should focus on enhancing victims' feelings of control by teaching them coping strategies, such as requesting help from school staff or responding to bullies in a way that makes their mean comments fall flat. Furthermore, when evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, we should not be satisfied by a decrease in the overall prevalence of victimized students since this may be accompanied by increases in suffering among those few who are victimized despite the intervention. When assessing the impact of antibullying interventions, we should test how remaining victims are adjusting (see Juvonen et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we described the possibility of a healthy context paradox and its possible explanations and implications for intervention in relation to peer victimization in school contexts. Our goal was not to discourage attempts at reducing bullying and improving school social environments. Rather, we aimed to draw attention to the possibility that social contexts considered positive or healthy could be harmful for some vulnerable individuals. To test the healthy context paradox, researchers should focus on determining whether children who remain or become victimized in healthier contexts differ initially from children who remain or become victimized in more negative contexts. They should also test the assumed mediators of the harmful effects of these healthier contexts on adjustment for victims of bullying. This would require testing whether the effects of context on changes in the adjustment of stable victims are explained by changes in their self-blaming attributions, social comparisons, and number of friends, as well as in the level of victimization of their friends or their classmates' tendencies to blame the victims. School professionals should continue to prevent and stop bullying as much as possible, but should also pay attention and provide extra help to victimized students who do not benefit from improvements to their environments.

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