In Search for Contextual Cues: How do Social Environments Shape Experiences of Bullying?

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The emotional plight of the targeted

Variability in bullying-related distress

- Attributed to individual differences: emotion regulation, rejection sensitivity, etc.

- Role of social context (group composition, relationships) less well understood
Bullying Experiences → Why am I targeted? → Emotional Distress

Social Context: School ethnic composition
Ethnic Diversity is related to greater sense of safety among African-American and Latino youth

Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, *Psychological Science*, 2006
Safety in numbers when bullied?

- Peer groups become increasingly ethnically segregated across grades
  
  - Same-ethnic peers salient reference group

Question:

- Does the plight of the bullied vary depending on the size of her/his ethnic group?
Social Anxiety

Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, Juvonen, Developmental Psychology, 2004
No Safety in Numbers?

- Presence of many same-ethnic classmates **intensifies** bullying-related distress

- How do targets of bullying construe their plight?

  Bullied $\rightarrow$ “Why me?” $\rightarrow$ Distress

**Characterological self-blame:**

- “Why is this happening **only to me** and not to other kids?”
- “Why do I **always** get into these situations?”
Can self-blame account for the variations in the intensity of emotional reactions?
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Graham, Bellmore, Nishina & Juvonen, 2009

MINORITY

"Others are prejudiced"

MAJORITY

"It must be me."

Bullied → Self Blame → Distress

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Bullied → Self Blame → Distress

.07

.24*

.21*

.32*

.11*

.16*
Can self-blame account for continued plight?

- Which of the youth bullied in the fall continue to get targeted by the spring of 6th grade?

- Does self-blame function similarly to depression -- as both a consequence and risk factor of victimization?
Who continues to be bullied across the first year in middle school?

Conclusions

1. Contextual factors → interpretations of peer mistreatment

2. Blaming oneself is detrimental

3. To alleviate distress and reduce the duration of bullying, need to change targets’ attributions
Best known contextual protective factor

- **One friend** (type of friend matters)
  - lowers the risk of being bullied
  - ameliorates the bullying-related distress

Two further insights:
1. Time spent with a friends on days when cyberbullied
2. Connecting with an unknown peer after social exclusion
Targets of Cyberbullying: Time spent with Friends & Daily level Distress

n=136 high school students
Daily reports across 5 days

Espinoza, under review
Recovery from experimentally induced exclusion (Cyberball)

Sample:
Adolescents, 12.5 yr, n=51
Young Adults, 18.5 yr, n=72

Gross, Developmental Psychology, 2010
Self-Esteem Recovery

- Task condition
  - Non-social game play
  - Social interaction

- Age group
  - Adolescents
  - Young adults

- Recovery of Self-esteem
Bullying Problems in Context

1. Context or situational factors matter in how distressed and lonely targets feel.

2. By examining such contextual variations, further insights are gained on how to alleviate distress.

3. Based on research summarized here, two possible antidotes identified:
   - Realization it’s not “just me” who gets targeted.
   - Even a neutral social interaction can help re-establish sense of connection.
References


