



Students' Reasons for Why They Were Targeted for In-School Victimization and Bullying

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Abstract

The efficacy of youth violence prevention policies, programs, and practices partly depends on understanding the reasons for why students are targeted for victimization. However, what is known about why some students are targeted for victimization over others is limited to researcher-generated reasons and therefore may risk ecological validity. This study used a qualitative open-coding content analyses to make sense of 8531 students' open-ended responses about the reasons why they were targeted for victimization at school. Results identified 35 commonly reported reasons, many of which are underrepresented in previous literature. Students primarily reported reasons related to relational dynamics, physical characteristics, non-physical personal characteristics, and characteristics external to themselves. These results portray reasons for being targeted as a social phenomenon with both individual and contextual components. Implications for theory, research, and practitioners are discussed.

Keywords Violence prevention · Victimization · Bullying · Attributions · Adolescents

Introduction

In the USA, estimates suggest that nearly one in three students experience some form of victimization while at school (Robers et al. 2013), and thus are at greater risk for an array of deleterious outcomes (Fisher et al. 2016; Gardella et al. 2017; Nakamoto and Schwartz 2010; Reijntjes et al. 2010, 2011). Students perceive a variety of reasons for why they are targeted for these victimization experiences, and prevention efforts that better reflect these reasons are more likely to fit the experiences of students and thus produce positive outcomes (Nation et al. 2003). For example, many school-based violence prevention efforts address harassment of those targeted for their race and sexuality (Hong and Espelage 2012; Whitted and Dupper 2005), but few address body weight (Hong and Espelage

2012). Although race and sexuality are important reasons for why someone might be targeted for victimization, if weight is neglected but proves to be a prevalent reason for being targeted, then the relevance of school-based prevention efforts may increase by addressing body weight.

Extant evidence of why students are targeted for victimization has utilized researcher-generated lists of items from which students may choose reasons for why they are targeted (e.g., Hoover et al. 1992), researcher-based vignettes about which students might indicate reasons for being targeted (e.g., Batanova et al. 2014; Chen and Graham 2012), or focus on general—rather than specific—reasons for why they are targeted (e.g., Thornberg et al. 2012). In effect, this literature likely operates on an insufficiently specified conceptual foundation generated from researchers' projections of what they believe are reasons for why students are targeted for victimization. This study aims to identify and explore students' perceived reasons for why they are targeted for victimization. It analyzes open-ended written responses from a large student sample to identify reasons students ascribe to why they were targeted for victimization experiences.

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Defining Victimization

In-school victimization refers to experiencing actions intended to harm that can take various forms including direct physical,

verbal, and sexual aggression, and also indirect social or relational harmful behaviors. Bullying is a conceptually narrower term that is used in two closely related ways. Bullying is sometimes used to represent aggression (e.g., “a bully”) and other times used to understand victimization (e.g., “I’ve been bullied”). This study does not focus on reasons for why someone aggresses, but on those reasons for why students believe they are singled out to experience victimization. Bullying in this case is defined as those victimization incidents that are experienced repeatedly, and in relationships marked by imbalances in power (Ttofi et al. 2012). Given that student-aged participants may not be aware of this more nuanced conceptual scope, the current study utilizes victimization as a term inclusive of—but not limited to—bullying. Moreover, this study limited victimization experiences to those that happened at school, and thus victimization that occurred through other modalities (e.g., online or cyber, through technology, written) was included only if they clearly were experienced at school.

Students’ Reasons for Being Targeted for Victimization

A broad class of individual-environment youth violence theoretical models clarify that numerous characteristics of both individuals and environments contribute to the likelihood for being targeted (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd et al. 2009). This literature has largely debunked theories that contend that the reasons an individual might be targeted for victimization may be accounted for entirely at the individual level (e.g., Gumpel et al. 2014; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003). In contrast, evidence suggests that being targeted may represent acute manifestations of broader relational, cultural, structural, and socio-economic interlocking systems of oppression for individuals (Bucchianeri et al. 2013; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; Wendell 1990; Thornberg 2011) possibly meant to maintain a dominant and hegemonic moral order (Davies 2011). Put differently, these approaches suggest that elements of individual-level characteristics (e.g., race, class, gender, ability) interact with contextual oppressive forces (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, ableism) to bring about unique reasons for being targeted for victimization (Bucchianeri et al. 2013; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1990; Gumpel et al. 2014). That is, being targeted for victimization occurs within a relational context within which a number of these interchanging systems of oppression may manifest. Thus, students’ perceptions of the reasons for being targeted for victimization are expected to reflect both individual-, relational-, and structural-level phenomena.

Perceived reasons for being targeted for victimization often operate in concert with perceived causes for aggressive behaviors when it comes to explaining why bullying occurs. In contrast to reasons for being targeted for victimization, students attribute numerous reasons for aggression/bullying to occur, including as a reaction to deviance, social positioning,

revengeful activities, personal amusement, and thoughtless actions (Thornberg 2010). For example, a student may engage in aggressive behavior to attain a socially dominant position, but select a particular student to victimize because that student represents a racial or sexual minority group at their school. This study aims to identify these particular reasons for why some students believe they are targeted for victimization in a bullying literature that largely elides reasons for being targeted or treats reasons for being targeted and reasons for the victimization occurring as the same thing. The efficacy of victimization and bullying prevention efforts will likely benefit from clearer theoretical specification of reasons related to being targeted so that it can clearly address both types of reasons related to victimization. This clearer specification has potential, in turn, to contribute to a larger social science literature on bullying and victimization.

Literature Review on Students’ Perceptions of Reasons for Being Targeted

Quantitative Research A small number of quantitative studies have examined students’ perceived reasons for why they were targeted for victimization. Most studies provide lists of reasons to which study participants respond. Evidence suggests that students frequently select intrapersonal reasons to explain why they were targeted, but also, to a lesser extent, interpersonal reasons. For example, in one of the most comprehensive examinations of reasons to date, researchers presented 207 middle and high school students with twenty-six possible reasons for why they might have been targeted for victimization (Hoover et al. 1992). Although exact frequencies for the reasons were not reported, males most often selected that they were targeted because they were “physically weak,” “short tempered,” and the “clothes I wore,” whereas females most often selected that they were targeted because of their “facial appearance,” they “cried” or were “too emotional,” were “overweight,” or they earned “too good of grades” (Hoover et al. 1992). Males also more frequently selected two interpersonal reasons: “didn’t fit in,” and “who my friends were.” The authors implied that victimization may have functioned as a mechanism to maintain social homogenization, and thus undesirable traits were targeted for victimization, but this hypothesis was not clearly tested. However, these results and associated interpretations reflected reasons imposed on the sample by the researchers. Thus, the degree to which they reflect actual reasons why students were targeted for victimization remains unclear.

Evidence from another set of quantitative studies used hypothetical victimization vignettes to assess how students understood reasons for why they might be targeted. Although exact frequencies or reasons were not reported, results suggested that many students blamed their being targeted on intrapersonal reasons. For example, some students selected the

researcher-generated interpretation of the vignette, “If I were a cooler kid, I wouldn’t get picked on,” or “I should have been more careful” (Batanova et al. 2014; Chen and Graham 2012; Graham and Juvonen 1998). However, possible reasons provided for students to select were designed to represent characteristics of psychological attribution theory, including locus (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable) of the reason. The degree to which this theory accurately and comprehensively represents students’ reasons for being targeted remains unclear because it was designed for and has often been used to describe reasons for victimization itself occurring.

In summary, these quantitative studies tend to assess approaches and results complementary to the present study’s aims. However, in all cases, they utilize researcher-generated reasons that offer approximations of the reasons students might perceive for why they were targeted for victimization.

Qualitative Research Very few qualitative studies have examined the reasons students ascribe for why they were targeted for victimization (Patton et al. 2015); instead, most focus on reasons for why victimization or bullying actions occur. This group of studies often used open-ended self-report methods to identify personal reasons for being targeted for victimization. For instance, self-reports from a broad sample of Finnish students indicated that individual differences were frequently cited as reasons for being targeted (Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008). The authors use summative terms like differences, strangeness, and isolationist to represent these differences, but detailed accounts of what these summative terms represented were not reported. Similar qualitative studies of broad samples of students conducted in the USA, Finland, and Sweden found that individual differences or perceived deficiencies in victims were frequent explanations for being targeted (Frísen et al. 2008; Swearer and Cary 2003; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003). They coded open-ended survey prompts to ask about students’ experiences of victimization. One of these studies provided clearer specification of these differences from data collected in 2003. The authors (Frísen et al. 2008) coded all reported reasons for being targeted into one of eight categories: appearance, behavior, clothes, personal differences, lonely or socially insecure, background characteristics, personality, and other unspecified differences. Examples of each response were provided, but the frequency or proportions of which they were represented in the data are unclear.

A study conducted with students from a broad Midwestern sample from the USA assessed open-ended responses for why victims were bullied or why bullies victimized others (Swearer and Cary 2003). It did not include a coding method to arrive at summative codes or numerical reports of particular responses to assess the degree to which the codes were represented (Swearer and Cary 2003). Nevertheless, results indicated that victims were

bullied because they earned good grades, were weak, overweight, different, or wore certain clothes. Bully-victims suggested that they also used these reasons to bully other students.

Parallel themes were found in in-depth interviews with Australian students ages 11 to 13, who indicated that characteristics of victims—both positive and negative—were frequent causes of victimization (Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck 2010). Findings suggested that victims lacked social appeal, their emotionality contributed to why they were targeted, and that even positive characteristics served as reasons that led to being targeted for victimization. No additional clarification about specific reasons was provided. Additional qualitative focus groups with students aged 11–17 in the UK revealed that students’ appearance, disability, and sexual orientation contributed to being targeted (Hopkins et al. 2013).

In contrast, much qualitative work conflates reasons for bullying or victimization with reasons for being targeted for bullying or victimization. For example, a mixed-methods study analyzed questionnaire data from 176 Swedish teenagers who reported why they thought bullying takes place at their school (Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). Thematic coding generated three main categories of reasons for bullying: bully/aggressor, social context-based, and victim reasons. Within bully reasons, four sub-categories were identified: psychosocial problems, social positioning, emotionally driven, and thoughtlessness (and an additional miscellaneous category capture those that did not fit these four sub-types). Social contextual categories for why bullying took place included group pressure, the school social environment, and peer conflicts. Victim reasons included not fitting in and being different. In the last case, the authors suggest that not fitting in or being different causes bullying to occur, in the same way that peer conflicts or psychosocial problems might cause bullying to occur. Rather, being different and not fitting in are reasons for individuals being targeted for victimization. Given this lack of distinction, the authors were not able to offer clear implications for practitioners’ prevention efforts that focused on reasons for being targeted and reasons for being victimized. Instead, like much of similar research, they encouraged practitioners to engage in discussions about intolerance, stigma, and dehumanization—all reasons that conflate these two ways of thinking about reasons.

Taken together, this literature indicates that students are picked out for victimization because of their individual differences, strangeness, being alone or lonely, appearance, behavior, clothes, background characteristics, personality, academics, strength, weight, disability, sexual orientation, or because an aggressor sought to improve their social status. However, there are multiple shortcomings to this literature with direct implications for prevention. First, the degree to which these results reflect students’ perceived reasons for why they were victimized, as opposed to researchers’ interpretations, remains unclear because methods are often not reported, or thematic analyses are conducted such that they may trade conceptual parsimony (i.e., researcher-generated

codes that collapse a lot of data into a few codes) for face validity. There are two ways to address this limitation that are not represented in the literature. Studies may provide greater detailed description of the types of specific reasons for victimization represented by reported representative codes (e.g., what kinds of personality characteristics did students report as reasons, as opposed to just reporting personality characteristics) and also report numbers to gauge relative frequency of particular types of victimization. This kind of information could be useful to interpret if a particular reason appears more important to more students, rather than a reflection of a researcher's projected interest.

Second, students' ascribed reasons for why they were targeted for victimization in school are often generalized or hypothetical. For instance, studies typically have included questions that address bullying in general, not for specific reasons (e.g., Frisen et al. 2008; Thornberg et al. 2012), or have asked students to consider vignettes or hypothetical situations in which they experienced victimization (e.g., Batanova et al. 2014). Although understanding students' reasons in general or hypothetical situations is valuable, both general conceptions and the situations presented in these situations do not reflect the nuanced and varied experiences that students likely experience. Additionally, much of the existing qualitative research on students' reasons for why they are targeted for victimization has been conducted outside of the USA, resulting in a limited understanding of whether US students' reasons for being targeted follow a similar pattern. And finally, all cases used small samples typically localized to singular schools or small groups of students. A list of specific reasons for being targeted for victimization will allow for the development of more targeted prevention efforts.

The Present Study

This study addresses the limitations of prior literature to identify the range of reasons students report for why they were targeted for victimization. This study asked a large and diverse sample of students to reflect on their victimization experiences and why they were targeted and then analyzed their responses for any reasons that emerged. This approach contrasts with vignette approaches which use researcher-generated prompts to understand how students might understand why they were targeted, while not coercing them to recount real victimization experiences they may not want to relate. This study was guided by the following research question: What reasons do students ascribe for why they were targeted for victimization?

Method

Sample

The data used in this study came from a larger study that surveyed 64,992 students from 115 high schools across 27

school districts from across a southeastern US state. At the end of the survey, respondents were presented with an optional open-ended prompt to which 12,998 replied in some way. After "no" or similar variations thereof were removed from the dataset, a remaining 8531 responses were included for analysis. Students provided a mean of 113 open-ended responses ($SD = 65$) per school (range was 1 to 436 responses). Approximately 60% of schools were from rural and suburban regions, 13% from towns, and 24% from urban regions. Students of the sample were 71.5% Caucasian, 19.6% African American, 5.5% Latino/Hispanic, 2.3% Asian, and 1.0% Native American high school students in grades 9–12. Given the sensitive nature of information revealed in these data, state department review board actors stripped this data of more specific demographic information to protect minors before providing the data to researchers. This was particularly important because many participants voluntarily reported the names of peer and teacher aggressors, the names of their schools and neighborhoods, and intimate information including personal identity, emotive, sexual, political, racist or other hate-related attitudes, and familial information. As a result, demographic information on the respondents is unavailable, precluding any subgroup analyses or comparison of the characteristics of students who responded to the open-ended question to those who did not.

Procedure

The data used in this study were from a 2013–2014 survey of public high school students as a part of a state educational agency's efforts to support school improvement via school climate from 2013 to 2017. The survey was developed and administered by a private non-academic state sub-contractor and de-identified data were released to university partners to conduct analyses and provide technical assistance to schools. Public school districts were given the opportunity to opt into this federally funded initiative; only students from districts that opted in to this initiative participated in this survey. Participating schools administered the surveys through an online survey system at school. The present study utilized data from open-ended responses to a prompt that followed the quantitative portion of the survey. The prompt was: "If you have ever been bullied or harassed at school, please tell us a little bit about the incident and why you think you were targeted."

Coding and Data Analysis

Given the stated limitations of the evidence and theories produced from the aforementioned extant research on students' reasons for why they were targeted for victimization, an open-coding content analysis approach was employed to discern students' concerns through careful and reflective methods of verification (Strauss 1987). The practice of open-coding

content analysis is a systematic, rigorous, and primarily inductive exploratory method that aims to make primarily idiographic contributions to theory based on identifying latent patterns, structures, and categories in data that reflect students' perceptions. It focused on proximal conceptual representation of student data as opposed to methods that identify more distal themes across many codes.

Before coding any responses, we removed responses that consisted of only the word “no”; in total, 8531 responses remained after this deletion. Four coders participated in the process of coding the remaining responses using an open-coding approach that was designed to minimize personal bias in the coding process. This process used four open-coding guidelines: asking the data specific and consistent sets of questions, analyzing the data in its minutiae, recording theoretical notes in process, and never assuming analytic relevance of a particular variable (Strauss 1987). Before coding, all coders read through 300 random responses to become familiar with how the content answered the core research question. After doing so, the coders met to discuss what they had found and what reasons appeared most in the data. Based on this discussion, the coders developed an initial set of codes that inductively emerged from the data. This initial set of codes was clustered into victimization types, strategies to reduce or avoid victimization, consequences of victimization, if an adult was a perpetrator, and reasons for being targeted for victimization. Given the focus of this study, the four coders read through an additional random 100 responses to test the coding scheme only on reasons for being targeted for victimization. The coders noted any ways to improve the coding structure and then reconvened. During this meeting, the coders assessed the extent to which they had coded responses similarly and reassessed the accuracy of the codes to students' reports. Any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was met about how to code in ways that minimized researcher bias. In particular, the researchers were concerned with imposing interpretive biases on unclear student responses. For example, “I have some people picking on me right now because I like to talk to my bus driver, so I sit right behind her” represents an unclear reason someone was targeted in which the coders may have interpreted reasons as “demeanor,” “relation to bully,” or other unclear reasons. However, after careful discussion, the coders coded this response as “other conditions,” because inferences could not be made in clear ways as to categorize a particular reason for being targeted. After adapting the coding scheme, the coders tested the new scheme on a new set of responses; iterations of this process continued until the changes to the coding scheme were no longer needed.

After establishing this coding scheme, the four coders then coded all of the students' responses using the working set of codes and corresponding agreed-upon definitions. Each coder's assigned set of responses overlapped with one other coder's set to ensure that their coding remained

reliable throughout the coding process. The coders met weekly to discuss their progress, check for coding discrepancies, and clarify coding issues as needed. All coding was conducted using DiscoverText, a web-based software used for text-based analytics (discovertext.com). The four coders assessed the reliability of the included items using a random 10% of the responses and found it to be adequate (average $\kappa = .88$). After coding all 8531 responses, we identified all the codes that addressed students' reasons and totaled the number of times that each code was used. Because students attributed multiple reasons, the total number of codes was greater than the sample size.

Results

Despite eliminating thousands of “no” responses prior to coding, 2070 students provided variations to “no” that we dropped from the data set. In addition, 1044 students indicated that they were victimized, but did not provide any reasons for why they were targeted (e.g., “i have but it wasn't serious”). Among the remaining responses, the length and depth of students' responses varied greatly. Table 1 provides a list of general quotations from students to demonstrate some of the range and qualities of responses included in the dataset. Students' responses about why they believe they were victimized fell into five general categories: relational dynamics ($n = 1078$), physical characteristics ($n = 1749$), non-physical personal characteristics ($n = 1392$), external characteristics ($n = 1146$), and other reasons ($n = 2881$). Within each of these five broad categories, there were additional, specific reasons that students made. Table 2 provides a list of these reasons along with the total number of responses that indicated each reason and a brief exemplary quotation. This range of reported reasons offers a more varied and detailed list of reasons for being targeted for victimization than extant literature, increasing what appears to be the most comprehensive list by 27 (approximately a 296% increase) additional reasons for why they were targeted. In addition, at least 35% of student responses with attributions included multiple clear reasons within a single response ($M = 1.52$ attributions per response; $SD = 0.87$). In the results that follow, we provide a narrative overview of the specific reasons why students reported they were targeted for victimization associated with categories of codes along with numerical reports for each code (see Table 2).

Relational

Students commonly provided reasons for why they were targeted for victimization experiences to several different relational dynamics, including their sexual or dating history, peer group, relationship to the aggressor, family, being new, and age or grade. These factors were placed in this category

Table 1 Exemplar raw data responses

Response
“I have been bullied a lot in my past but it has died down a lot as me and my peers have matured. I have been targeted because I AM different and I am not afraid to admit it. I am proud to be wierd. I have strange religious beleifs and voice my opinions openly. I am not a bully, and I do not harass others though. People just see me as an easy target because I don’t look good and my family does not have a lot of money. I can handle these things though.”
“I have been bullied several times for many different reasons however the latest was because of my weight, my friends, the fact that I pay attention and do well in my classes, and my clothes outside of school.”
“haha people are always going to bully they are never going to stop. you guys send all these people to aventws and is doesn’t get anything done, no one cares or pay attention. you guys GIVE ideas to the bullies instead of stopping them”
“Um. Yeah.”
“I have been picked on a couple of times because of my race a lot of times people like making racist jokes and I usually do not mind just some are taken too far teachers need to start paying attention to that because some hear it and do not even say anything about it”
“this one girl lied and said i had sex with her and everybody made fun of me for it”
“You do not have to be a specific target to get bullied. You can get bullied by anyone just because you are different. I get picked on for being different, fat, a ‘snob’ because I avoid the popular kids, I care about my studies, my dad is a teacher and almost any other fault people can find me.”

because they were inherently defined in context of relationships. For example, among the reasons that indicated sexual or dating history, many students reported that reasons associated with previous intimate relationships contributed as reasons for why they were targeted for victimization. Examples of these reasons included being a part of an unresolved conflict and being someone with atypical dating histories. Others reported that they were victimized because of previous sexual behaviors, false rumors about their sexual or dating history, or had pejorative terms related to sexual behaviors used against them. In these cases, specific reasons referred to dating someone of lower perceived social status (e.g., someone “weird”), real or fabricated sexual histories with many people, or engaging in non-traditional sexual behaviors. It appeared that some students perceived a lack of tolerance and awareness about non-traditional sexual behaviors as part of the reasons for why they were targeted for victimization.

Students also reported that both peer group membership and refusal to join a peer group (e.g., gangs) were reasons for why they were targeted for victimization. That is, students were victimized because others in their peer group were targets of victimization, or victimized because they did not want to be a part of another group who may have felt rejected. Students’ relations with aggressors were also cited as reasons for being targeted. For example, students wrote about how victimization was frequent and accepted among close friends,

and thus expected norms about these relationships may have been reasons for being targeted.

Relationships with significant others, siblings, or other family members also were mentioned as contributors to being targeted for victimization. Of these relationships, current and former significant others (e.g., present boyfriend of victim’s previous girlfriend, or a previous partner) tended to be most cited as reasons for being targeted. For example, some students were targeted because they were the previous partner of the aggressor’s current partner. Students’ families were also a stated reason for their victimization; students’ last name (e.g., their length, racial/ethnic ties, etc.), family history, and the social positions of family members were all reasons why students experienced victimization. For example, students reported that if others knew their family had a history associated with poverty, deviance, or problems they were more likely to be targets for being picked-on. Some students also stated that they were victimized for either being new to the school or because of their current age or grade level. For example, students reasoned that because they were new and did not know other people, they were easy targets of victimization by groups of peers. There was little variation regarding age or grade; younger students tended to be victimized by older aggressors, although more specific clarification of these reasons were unclear. Age or grade level, in and of itself, was not perceived as a reason, but was a reason when in relation to the age or grade of another, older (or younger) student or students.

Body/Physical

Students also ascribed reasons for being targeted for victimization to their personal body or physical characteristics, including weight, general appearance, dress, other physical attributes, attractiveness, height, size, hair, disease or disability, and strength or athleticism. These reasons were included in this category if they explicitly referenced a physical or body feature of the student was targeted. Students most commonly cited obesity, skinniness, and weight as reasons for why they were targeted for victimization. The vast majority of students who mentioned height said they were teased for being too short, although a few students were targeted because they were tall. Other body size-related issues included being small and weak, the size of specific body parts, and other non-descript responses about one’s size.

Students’ general appearance was also a frequent reason given for being targeted for victimization. Although many of these responses were non-specific about the student’s appearance, a few provided more specific reasoning. Some said that they looked unkempt, dressed too brightly, or dressed preppy and that those features explained why they were targeted for victimization. Similarly, the way students dressed was also a salient reason for being targeted. Students reported being victimized because their clothes were associated with different levels of wealth or

Table 2 Reported reasons for being targeted for victimization with examples

Individual person-ascribed reasons			Other external-ascribed reasons	
Relational Sexual or dating history (414) “I was dating a girls ex-boyfriend...”	Body/physical Weight (551) “because of my weight...”	Non-physical Race or ethnicity (383) “I’m harased cause I’m black...”	External-to-self Aggressor’s issues (857) “one girl who felt insecure about her weight, and she targeted...”	Other Not victimized (2070) “No i have not been bullied...”
Peer group (281) “Because of my social group...”	General appearance (266) “What I look like...”	Sexual orientation (361) “was bullied for being a bisexual teenage boy...”	Unhelpful staff (192) “the teachers do nothing about it...”	No reason given (1044) “yes they were jealous”
Relation to bully (181) “My friend is weird and messes with me...”	Dress (203) “my style in cloths...”	Demeanor (306) “I am a shy person...”	Universality (122) “yes everyone picks on me...”	Other conditions (616) “because I only spoke the truth...”
Family (94) “we are targeted as ‘doctors kids’...”	Attractiveness (145) “Because I’m Pretty...”	Cognitive ability (158) “called me dumb...”	Rumors (104) “rumors about me that were all lies...”	Unsure (252) “I have no idea why they started it...”
Being new (69) “I was the new kid...”	Height (127) “I’m 6 foot 2...”	Religion (159) “because of my religion...”	Context-specific (104) “my lockr is right next to hers...”	Unspecific (236) “I am just different...”
Age or grade (39) “I’m younger than people in my grade...”	Other size (119) “I was little...”	Socioeconomic status (84) “do not have a financially stable background...”	Treatment by adults (6) “teachers pet...”	
	Hair (101) “because I am a redhead...”	Voice (74) “people laugh at it because its ‘so quiet’...”		
	Illness or disability (77) “i have a limp...”	Political affiliation (7) “because I am not a republican...”		
	Strength or athleticism (46) “for being ‘weak’...”			
	Other physical attributes (181) “a have bigger lips Than Most people...”			

particular affinity groups or identities. More specifically, some students indicated that they were particularly targeted for victimization because they dressed in ways that looked poor or could not afford some of the clothes and accessories that their peers had. Others suggested that they were targeted because they dressed in dark clothing or clothing that indicated their preferences for particular religions or politics.

Students also cited their level of attractiveness as a reason for why they were targeted for victimization, both for being too attractive or not attractive enough. Some students reported being targeted because of qualities associated with their hair including being red, thick and curly, or because of other socio-cultural constructions attached to the appearance of their hair. For example, a male student with longer hair reported that other students “challenge (his) sexuality” and give him “bad nicknames” because of the features of his hair.

Students who reported reasons for being targeted associated with illness or disability ascribed these reasons for victimization

to skin conditions, mental and/or physical disabilities, or a serious illness. Students also reported that strength or athleticism—reasons also associated with physical abilities—contributed to why they were targeted for victimization. Approximately half of these students indicated that they were weak or lacked strength and athleticism. In contrast, others were targeted because they were particularly strong or athletic.

Finally, students made other attributions for why they were targeted related to their body or physical characteristics that were not captured by the original coding process. The majority of these students mentioned a physical feature associated with sexual victimization. Female respondents mentioned being targeted because of their “breasts” or “butt.” Similarly, male students reported that they were targeted because of the size of their penis. Other themes were being targeted for wearing glasses and having braces. Some students shared the sentiment that “people thought I was a nerd.” Students mentioned several specific body parts. Most common in this category

was the nose, but the forehead, eyes, teeth, ears, lips, and legs were also mentioned.

Non-Physical Personal Characteristics

Students also attributed being targeted for victimization experiences to personal characteristics that were not physical. Reasons listed as non-physical characteristics were those personal reasons that were not foremost relationally based or had physical or bodily manifestations. They reported race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, demeanor, ability, religion, socio-economic status, voice, and political preferences as the most common reasons within this category. Multiple races and ethnicities were mentioned, including Asian, Hispanic, Black, Arabic/Middle Eastern, and White. Beyond these categories, some students reported nationality-specific reasons. Although race and ethnicity are closely related to skin color, a physical characteristic, students most commonly referenced their race and/or ethnicity rather than their skin color, so we categorized these responses as non-physical personal characteristics. Sexual orientation and gender expression were also reasons for being targeted. However, many of these responses were non-descript, referring simply to pejorative names the student was called. Respondents also frequently indicated that their demeanor contributed to being targeted, including their personal moral stances, how visibly or loudly they expressed themselves, and for other related behaviors.

Additionally, many students noted that their level of cognitive ability contributed to being targeted. Students reported speech or language abilities, learning or academic abilities, other aptitudes, or a confluence of multiple abilities as reasons for being targeted. Less frequently, characteristics associated with money and socio-economic status were given as reasons for being targeted. These often included extremes—either coming from a poor or wealthy background. Finally, some students reported that they were victimized for their voice, including “talking different” or having a high-pitched voice (e.g., some male students were called “gay” because the pitch of their voice was high). Students also reported that their political views contributed to being targeted. In some places being “too liberal” was a reason to be targeted, and in others being too “catholic conservative” served as a reason.

External Factors

Students also made a variety of attributions to external and contextual reasons for being targeted that were not perceived as foremost emergent from some personal feature or characteristic, but instead from characteristics of other individuals or the environment more broadly. Reasons in this category included characteristics of the aggressor, unhelpful staff, universality, rumors, specific contextual circumstances, and treatment by adults. Within this category

of reasons, students most commonly attributed their reasons for being targeted to characteristics of the aggressor. Students reported that aggressors had a variety of negative personality characteristics that contributed to their victimization such as being mean, jealous, vindictive, and immature. The ways in which these reasons directly explained why a particular student might be targeted was unclear and therefore did not warrant nuanced investigation. That is, a mean aggressor might target any student, but an aggressor’s “meanness” does not clarify why a particular student was targeted. However, these characteristics were often paired with other reasons for being specifically targeted. Several other students cited more generalized problems at school, where they characterized the student body as a whole, or the school faculty or staff as racist, homophobic, or biased in other ways. Students tended to report three reasons for how unhelpful faculty or staff contributed to them being targeted for victimization. First, some students felt they were targeted more often in front of unresponsive adults. Second, when students asked faculty and staff members for help, the school adults were unhelpful and thus they were targeted more often than those with helpful adults. Third, direct treatment by adults contributed to their targeting, such as when adults favored or victimized their students they were more likely to be targeted.

Multiple students indicated that victimization was a universal feature within their schools and some others identified subgroups as particular targets for victimization, including sexual minority students, unpopular students, and various racial/ethnic groups. Other students reported that they were targeted in context-specific ways such that their victimization commonly happened in places such as certain classrooms, busses, at lunch, in the locker rooms, at sporting events, and in hallways. Reasons also seemed to transcend contexts; some students reported that rumors spread about them (often about sexuality, sexual behavior, or having said things that they did not say) contributed to them being targeted all over school.

Other Reasons

Many codes occurred too infrequently to warrant distinguishing and were therefore captured under an “other reasons” code. Following review of these codes, four broad categories emerged for why students were targeted: personal interests, behavioral histories, affiliations, and witnessing or intervening on behalf of other victimized students. For example, some students were targeted because of their esoteric hobbies, because they always tended to get in trouble, because they were a girl who affiliated with a football team, and because they stepped up to a bully harming someone else. In all of these instances, particular students were targeted but their reasons were so unique we did not include them in another category. Additionally, many students reported that they were unsure of the reasons for why they were

targeted for victimization. Finally, some students provided un-specific answers; some said only that they were different and others simply did not provide enough details to make a clear coding decision.

Discussion

Much of what we know about why students are targeted for victimization relies on lists of researcher-generated reasons for being targeted, small samples, or the use of hypothetical vignettes that approximate reasons that researchers might expect to contribute to being targeted for victimization. This study sought to understand students' reported reasons as a way to address these limitations and contribute to germane research, theory, and practice paying particular attention to prevention efforts. It is the first of such studies to use a large sample, offering considerably more possibilities for identifying a wider array of meaningful reasons for why students were targeted for victimization. Overall, we identified 35 commonly reported reasons for why students were targeted for victimization (see Table 2), and provided both conceptual and numerical detail that has not been reported in extant literature. These results offer clear concepts that practitioners can use to help develop targeted prevention efforts.

In some cases, these results corroborated previous findings about reasons for being targeted for victimization. For example, the themes found by Hoover et al. (1992) such as "physically weak," "short tempered," the "clothes I wore," "facial appearance," they "cried" or were "too emotional," were "overweight," or they earned "too good of grades" were categorized in the current study as *strength or athleticism*, *demeanor*, *dress*, *other physical attributes*, *demeanor*, *weight*, and *cognitive ability* respectively. In almost all other cases, previously identified reasons for being targeted presented in the literature review were represented in some of the reasons found in this study. However, those reasons like "I should have been more careful" (Batanova et al. 2014; Chen and Graham 2012; Graham and Juvonen 1998) were difficult to conceptually trace to our categories, because they were generated by researchers and also because they were too broad to trace to just one reason found in this study.

In addition to corroborating previous results, this study offered further conceptual and numerical detail. For example, extant literature has identified that students were targeted for victimization for being overweight (e.g., Hoover et al. 1992). This study is the first to identify a variety of additional weight issues to be associated with being targeted—including skinniness—and that it is one of the most frequently reported reasons for victimization. Given the frequency and nuance of weight-related issues for being targeted, prevention programs that do not address these issues may be made more relevant and effective by including weight issues.

In other cases, this study identified particular reasons for being targeted for victimization that have not been or are not commonly reported in the literature. For instance, sexual or dating history was reported as a highly common reason for being targeted and our results further specified that unresolved conflict, having atypical dating history (e.g., numerous partners, both male and female partners, etc.), and specific sexual behaviors are among many detailed reasons why students experienced victimization. In cases like these, this study captures students' reports that were not represented in any literature that used researcher-generated survey instruments or previously conducted relevant research.

In yet other cases, these results provide clearer specification of previous results. For example, Frisen et al. (2008) identified the reasons "background," "behavior," and "social status." The present study's results indicate that, for example, individual differences including family or political affiliation might characterize "background" reasons, "behaviors" related to demeanor or voice were identified, and this study identified other possible indicators of or proximal predictors of "social status" including socioeconomic status, athleticism, or attractiveness (Vannatta, Gartstein, Zeller, & Noll, 2009). Taken together, these results offer a set of more nuanced reasons than previously identified.

These results also detail how being targeted for victimization is likely tied with broader social-cultural and contextually embedded phenomena including structural inequality and other forms of oppression. For example, racism, sexism, heterosexism, cultural body images, and socioeconomic standing appear to map directly on to the students' reported reasons of race, sexual orientation, body image, and socioeconomic status, respectively. These reports may represent some of the acute ways in which macro-social problems manifest in the social lives of students at school. However, students provided broader social-cultural and contextually embedded rationales in exceedingly few cases. Thus, these cultural-level labels were not included as a part of our coding scheme because they were not reported, yet are useful for reaffirming these connections in a literature that largely emphasizes micro-social investigation over macro-social investigations associated with student victimization (Thornberg 2011; Volk et al. 2017). Future research might specifically investigate students' contextually embedded rationales.

Details also indicate that school-level contextual influences are likely also relevant. Results suggest that students in some schools might be targeted more than others because of the universality of violence at that school. Similarly, if a school's culture lacks appreciation for diversity in sexual or dating history, family, being new, weight, illness or disability, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and political affiliation, students at that school may more likely to be targeted for victimization. Between-school-level analyses were not sensible for these analyses given wide ranging numbers of self-

report responses across schools. Moreover, relational-level influences also seem to influence the likelihood of being targeted because students reported multiple relational reasons including sexual or dating history, peer group, and relation to bully among other relevant attributions. Together, these results provide clearer conceptual specification of theoretical and conceptual work that suggests students' reasons are drawn from a combination of both social environmental factors such as schools, teachers, parenting practices, and peer culture, and also individual-level factors such as social behaviors, emotional reactivity, social cognitions, and psychosocial vulnerability (Kochenderfer-Ladd et al. 2009).

These results address other shortcomings of germane literature. Researchers who have used qualitative methods to understand why individuals were targeted have largely identified reasons from samples in countries other than the USA. Accordingly, the reported reasons risk face validity including cultural relevance. Some reasons including political affiliation, religion, race, and sexual orientation may be particularly shaped by region-specific cultural and political factors. That is, students in this sample from a Southern state were targeted because they were a “Republican” in an urban metropolitan school, or because they were “progressive” in a rural school. These patterns were not reported in previous literature and likely indicate that some reasons for why students are targeted for victimization are region specific.

This study also attempted to maintain sharp conceptual distinctions between reasons for aggression and reasons for being targeted. For example, the authors made choices to focus on reasons for being targeted when making sense of aggressors' issues. Almost all students' reports of aggressors' issues focused on characteristics of aggressors including being mean, jealous, vindictive, and immature. These characteristics alone do not clearly explain why particular students were targeted for victimization even though many students reported them in such a way as to see them as part of why they were targeted. Instead, our study noted how many of these characteristics were co-reported with other reasons, suggesting that often a combination of particular personal reasons and an interaction with aggressors with particular characteristics explains why an individual was targeted for victimization. These reports included things like an aggressor feeling insecure that their previous partner was now dating the victim. Here, a combination of the aggressor's insecurity and the victim's relation to the bully jointly led to targeting a particular individual. This common combination corroborates previous results (Swearer and Cary 2003) that suggest both features of victims and aggressors are crucial for understanding why particular students are targeted for victimization.

Future study of these types of relational dynamics may benefit from conducting distinct analyses on separate parts of a bullying incident to identify patterns between both types of reasons. These parts could include victims' perceptions for

why they were targeted, aggressors' perceptions for why they targeted a particular student, victims' perceptions for why the victimization happened, and aggressors' perceptions of why the incident happened. The perceptions of other bystanders or involved parties could be useful to consider in relation to these results. By understanding the distinct and combined contributions of these parts, this body of research might be able to identify why some reasons for victimization or being targeted for victimization are associated with victimization in some incidents and not in others. More broadly, the combination of this inter-related parts of a bullying incident may be useful to theorizing about bullying and victimization within a relational frame of reference, given that bullying and victimization occur within peer group relationships.

Finally, this study provides additional commentary on those results that were difficult to categorize. *Other conditions* was a highly coded category and commonly captured those codes that were difficult to interpret in ways that clearly reflected a student's experience. Part of this may be explained by some students' lack of clearly understanding the prompt, understanding reasons for why they were targeted, or communicating why they were targeted. Therefore, a significant number of reasons why students are targeted for victimization may be missing from this literature. These reasons may also belong to a sub-group of students with unique characteristics linked to cognitive appraisal or communication abilities, cultural differences, mistrust of researchers and authorities, or for other reasons. Methodologically, in-depth interviews may have been helpful to clarify many less specific reasons like this code, but an interview would have served a different purpose from this study that focused on identifying the wide array of reasons students think they are targeted. *Other conditions* also often represented exceedingly specific instances that were not useful to categorize into other categories. These instances could benefit from greater in-depth interviews in future research.

Taken together, this study is among the first to provide an array of conceptual characteristics that nuance our understanding of reasons for being targeted for victimization that can also serve as a foundation for relevant future research. Future research may integrate these nuances into more specific experimental and data collection designs (e.g., over-sampling specific racial or minority groups for more nuanced understanding of their experiences).

Implications for Theory

The findings of this inductive exploratory study offer implications for theory about reasons for why some students are targeted. First, results indicate ample evidence for the existence of reasons for being targeted for victimization that may be conceptually distinct from reasons for victimization. For example, a student's attractiveness may explain why a particular student might be targeted for victimization (as opposed to another student), but

not necessarily why the aggressor decides to engage in victimization. Evidence of this distinction is important for a body of research that largely elides this distinction.

Second, an overwhelming number of students reported multiple concurrently held attributions for being targeted. For example, a student reported, “I have been bullied several times for many different reasons however the latest was because of my weight, my friends, the fact that I pay attention and do well in my classes, and my clothes outside of school.” In this case, the relative salience of each attribution is unclear and the degree to which multiple attributions might interact to lead to being targeted is also unclear. The utility of subsequent theorizing may partly depend on clarifying the relations among multiple concurrently held attributions.

Third, reasons do not appear to be universally salient reasons for a student to be targeted. That is, our results indicate, for example, that attractiveness (as a reason for being targeted), varies by space (e.g., in band class...), personality (e.g., “I don’t care [about my looks], I like my humor...”), and circumstance (e.g., “when we stopped having uniforms...”) among other contexts. Thus, these results provide evidence that reasons for being targeted vary by a number of dimensions that require further investigation.

Two closely related theories might be helpful for building theory related to reasons for being targeted. First, per intersectionality theory (Collins 2000; Cho et al. 2013), people who experience multiple concurrent forms of oppression interpret and internalize these forms as unique combinations of these reasons. This theory is particularly relevant to this study given the large number of students who reported multiple concurrent reasons for being targeted. For example, logic drawn from intersectionality theory would suggest that a student who reports *diseased and disabled* and *socioeconomic status* as reasons would likely have a qualitatively distinct experience from someone who reports *diseased and disabled* and *being new* at school. Rather than understanding these reasons as distinct contributions to one’s attributions, intersectionality posits that these attributions are linked to interlocking systems and must be analyzed as such (Cho et al. 2013). Moreover, this theory stresses that these forms have measurable features at a minimum of three levels: the individual, in groups, and at a societal level (Cho et al. 2013). Future victimization theorizing about reasons for being targeted might attempt measurement at all three levels. For example, if race or ethnicity functions as a reason for being targeted for an individual, then concurrent investigation of racial and ethnic dynamics at the group and societal levels may be appropriate. In-depth qualitative investigation may be an appropriate means for understanding how these features operate, in concert, to lead to being targeted for a specific reason identified in studies like this one. Put differently, this study identified political identification as a reason for being targeted. Subsequent research that theorizes why students are

targeted for victimization might focus on how phenomena at all three levels contribute to being targeted for political reasons in a given school context.

Second, psychological attribution theory may offer means for greater precision in this line of investigation. This theory identifies specific core causal explanatory mechanisms including locus, stability, and controllability that link reasons for victimization occurring with different subsequent psychological and behavioral consequences (Batanova et al. 2014; Graham and Juvonen 2001; Weiner 1985). This theory may be useful for identifying more precise aspects of reasons for being targeted that are more salient for predicting the likelihood of victimization or bullying occurring again. However, subsequent research must first contend with how these causal explanatory mechanisms that explain why victimization might occur again conceptually map on to reasons for why an individual is targeted for victimization.

For example, the degree to which attractiveness is amenable to change may have implications for categorizing attractiveness as stable or controllable. As indicated earlier, attractiveness appears relevant in some settings but not in others. Again, intersectional theory recommendations for measurement at three levels may be relevant for understanding how these three core causal explanatory mechanisms operate. Theorizing might explore how group and societal dynamics construct each mechanism. Attractiveness at a societal level might explore how attractiveness is socially constructed in relation to locus, stability, and controllability. It may be that in the USA, there is a stronger emphasis on associating attractiveness with commodified external attributes—those features that may be purchased to alter external appearance. In other countries, attractiveness may be constructed with a relatively less strong emphasis on commodified features and more associated with internal and stable characteristics like personality or character traits. In addition, such theorizing may benefit from integrating insights from both of these theories while also contending with the aforementioned observations about results in this study. Taken together, as a whole, the results from this study may inform a growing literature that theorizes reasons for why individuals are targeted for victimization. Conceptual features from this study combined with those from intersectional and psychological attribution theory research may offer one way to further this research.

Separately, subsequent research may explore how this area of theorizing may interact with other areas that contribute to explaining why victimization occurs. For example, future research may explore how reasons for being targeted and reason for victimization occurring interact. This interaction may be specified more precisely by exploring how perceived locus, stability, and controllability for both sets of reasons interact in relation to the actual victimization experience that occurs. In turn, this body of research may have implications for broader victimization and bullying literature on antecedents of

victimization that constructs victimization as an inherently relational dynamic.

Implications for Practitioners

Understanding Reasons for Being Targeted These findings identified reasons for being targeted for victimization and have direct implications for school psychologists, teachers, counselors, administrators, and other staff working to reduce student victimization at school. For example, school psychologists or counselors may survey students to assess the degree to which these issues are a problem at their schools and develop corollary programming to address these concerns. Given that these are issues tendered by students, programming may benefit from youth voice approaches that center youths' perspectives and experiences in the program development process (Rudduck 2007). These approaches may be especially effective for addressing the detailed nuances associated with issues reported in the results section of this paper.

Moreover, further analysis of particular reasons may be useful for directly informing practitioners' sense-making about specific student incidents of violence and victimization. However, as previously discussed, the reasons reported in these results likely interact with a number of reasons for being targeted, reasons for victimization that differ by actor, and contextual factors. Indeed, victimization is often viewed as a socially constructed process, in which incidents include behaviors, corollary interpretations, and subsequent responses between actors that are all influenced by context (Thornberg 2011; Volk et al. 2017). One purpose of a social construction lens is to identify what parts of a socially constructed process is amenable to human intervention. School psychologists or other practitioners may use these results to inform discussions with students about what components of their victimization experiences are subject to their control to change—components associated with both reasons for being targeted (from these results) and reasons for the victimization happening (from extant literature). However, future research on specific ways in which these reasons function within socially constructed processes is needed to provide more directed recommendations to reduce violence and victimization at schools.

Practitioners may also use survey results from their students about these issues to improve their school climate. School climate refers to the characters and quality of social life at schools that emerge from collective behaviors, values, norms, and expectations at school (Cohen, Espelage, Temlow, Berkowitz & Comer, 2015). The efficacy of school climate improvement plans depends on their data-driven and democratically informed processes (Cohen et al. 2015), and surveys that account for the issues identified in these results may better reflect issues in students' social lives at school. For example, results from a survey of items informed by results in this study might indicate that sexual and dating history issues are a problem at a practitioner's school. This practitioner could use a

youth participatory action research approach (Fine 2012), for example, to better understand the nuances of students' experiences with dating and develop school climate improvement planning accordingly.

In particular, school psychologists may be uniquely positioned to advance effective school-wide violence prevention because of their expertise with psychology and education (National Association for School Psychologists, 2010, 2012; UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools, n.d.). As they develop and implement effective violence prevention and intervention programming, they may tailor strategies to address those reasons for being targeted that are commonly reported. That is, they might include social awareness and social skills in their violence prevention programming specifically designed to navigate, for instance, weight and dating and sexual relationships (if their observations mirror those of this study). Moreover, as they counsel and support victims of violence, they might incorporate the larger number of reasons reported in this study as a part of their awareness they bring to their practice. Future study into the ways in which attributions for why someone was targeted for victimization interact with attributions for the victimization may also be useful for school psychologists' counseling of students' social awareness and skills.

Finally, state and local education agencies may consider modifying their bullying prevention policies and programming to incorporate these findings. Although many programs already address race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, it may be useful to also address common reasons like weight and dating history. Moreover, these results clearly demonstrate justification for considering broader school and peer group dynamics in addition to individual bullies and victims when preventing some students for being targeted for bullying. That is, the universality of bullying appears to be a reason for being targeted, along with myriad social reasons that are relevant to almost all students at some time including social relationships and age or grade. Thus, states and districts might consider the antecedents to bullying, like those identified in this study, in their policies and prevention programming.

Prevention Programming Understanding reasons for being targeted for victimization may have important implications for prevention efforts. A review-of-reviews found that the *comprehensiveness* and *sociocultural relevance* of interventions were crucial to prevention success (Nation et al., 2011). *Comprehensiveness* refers to the array of means to address relevant moderators or mediators of a target problem. The 35 reported reasons and corresponding nuances for being targeted in this study—of which many are absent from or underreported in relevant research—offer a clear scope of topics for which prevention efforts might use to more comprehensively address this problem than what previous research provides. For example, prevention efforts might seek to develop greater awareness, tolerance, and skills for navigating

intimate relationships, body characteristics, and diverse abilities. *Sociocultural relevance* suggests that effective prevention efforts address the needs of students in ways that are culturally comprehensible. This refers to both the presence of useful topics but also not neglecting particularly meaningful topics as defined and communicated by sociocultural structures. Evidence of students' reasons like those presented here are particularly relevant because they identify meaningful topics that do not appear to be reflected in evidence produced by researcher-driven results.

Limitations

Interpretations should be made within the goals of this study, to identify possible reasons for why some students are targeted for victimization. The data were collected in self-reported and open-ended format as the most ideal, effective, and ethical means to collect this information. These results should not be interpreted as what might be observed or interpreted beyond individual self-perceptions. Methods like triangulation with aggressors and bystanders to identify what reasons for being targeted complement these results, but are conceptually adjacent to our aims to produce a list of reasons why students believe they were targeted for victimization. We believe that research that uses methods that foreground youths' perspectives are useful for bullying and victimization literature.

Second, individual responses should not be interpreted as comprehensive statements of all of the reasons why a student was targeted for victimization. The responses in our data likely reflect only those reasons that were most salient to a student in a given moment of filling out our survey. We surveyed thousands of students to account for this limitation so that we might develop a more comprehensive list of reasons for being targeted.

Third, despite all attempts to produce a meaningful systematic coding structure representative of and grounded in the data, the coding structure used in this study was developed by a team of adults affiliated with a university, representative of multiple ethnicities and socio-economic classes. Given this positionality and despite our best efforts, we cannot entirely rule out that our biases may have shaped our coding structure and associated decisions. The labels we ascribed to reasons represented our best attempts to provide succinct labels to similar reported reasons. We tried to ensure that the higher-level category levels (e.g., non-physical personal characteristics) closely reflect student reports, but we employed distinctions between personal and external factors in ways that were consistent with ecological approaches commonly used in social science that distinguish between individual-level and external-level factors.

Fourth, although the results in this study support the importance for considering minority characteristics including race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, we were not able to oversample for particular groups given the state department of

educations' priorities to protect students' identities and extremely sensitive nature of the data. Future theory development may utilize observed features from these results to design studies to explore how students with particular sets of minority characteristics experience reasons for being targeted.

Fifth, direct interpretation of these results should be limited to focusing on psychological reasons for being targeted. This study was not designed to study other components that comprise antecedents to victimization including those factors that help explain how participants might define themselves in relation to others or about their long-term identity and developmental trajectories in relation to the likelihood of being victimized. Instead, this study focuses on results most closely associated with psychological reasons for being targeted and references proximal psychological and sociological theories to situate these results in a broader developing victimization and bullying literature that clarify that characteristics of both individuals and their environments are important for explaining victimization and bullying.

Sixth, our sample focused on a sample from the USA. The degree to which these results translate to samples from other countries remains unclear. Previous qualitative results about reasons students were targeted from Finland (Fr sen et al. 2008; Hamarus and Kaikkonen 2008), Sweden (Ter sahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011), Australia (Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck 2010), and the UK (Hopkins et al. 2013) suggest consistency with many of our results. This may suggest that our results are transferrable. For example, results from the UK found that appearance, disabilities, and sexual orientation all contributed to the likelihood of being targeted. Direct analogues for each of these reasons were reported by participants in this study. Given that a dearth of evidence exists about some of our findings and that intersectional and attributional theories indicate that contextual factors impact reasons, the degree to which all factors translate to samples outside of the USA remains unclear. That is national attitudes on politics, religion, or sexual orientation—for example—may be particularly difficult to translate universally to international contexts given likely variation within and across nations.

Conclusions

Taken as a whole, students' reported reasons for being targeted for victimization offer more theoretically precise specification about reasons for being targeted for victimization to a literature that has largely used researcher-driven data collection methods. Factors such as voice, politics, dating history, and demeanor, among others are largely underrepresented in the existing researcher-driven literature but were reported by students when they were given freedom to share their experiences about why they were targeted for

victimization. This clearer specification is useful for prevention initiatives because it offers issues to focus prevention efforts on those that have not been previously observed, and is useful for improving the efficacy of prevention efforts that partly depend on reflecting the array of reasons that students actually experience rather than limited to those reasons that come from researchers' perceptions of reasons that students likely experience. This study presents contemporary reasons of why students believe they were targeted for victimized paying particular attention to relaying nuanced facets of individual and contextual complexity in which students understand their experiences. Future research and prevention efforts must address this complexity as it fundamentally orients efforts to better fit more students' experiences for why they were targeted for victimization.

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