

Beyond the Individual: The Impact of Ethnic Context and Classroom Behavioral Norms on Victims' Adjustment

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With a sample of 1,630 sixth-grade students from 77 classrooms, the authors used hierarchical linear modeling to examine how ethnicity within context and classroom social disorder influenced the association between peer victimization and social-psychological adjustment (loneliness and social anxiety). Victimized students in classrooms where many classmates shared their ethnicity reported feeling the most loneliness and social anxiety. Additionally, classroom-level social disorder served as a moderator such that the association between victimization and anxiety was stronger in classrooms with low social disorder. Both findings were interpreted as evidence that problem behavior deviating from what is perceived as normative in a particular context heightens maladjustment. The authors discuss implications for studying ethnicity and classroom behavioral norms as context variables in peer relations.

A comprehensive account of the role of peer relationships in social development requires recognition of the connection between the developing individual and his or her social contexts (Boyce et al., 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Moreno, 1934). Peer groups represent social contexts that influence individual development, and peer groups are nested within other social contexts, such as classrooms and schools, that also influence development (see Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998, for a review). Person–context fit theoretical models go one step further by providing a framework for understanding how adjustment is dependent on the interaction between characteristics of individuals and their contexts (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998). According to one model, the goodness-of-fit concept, consonance between individuals and their social contexts (i.e., goodness of fit) is expected to promote positive adjustment, whereas dissonance between individuals and their social contexts (i.e., poorness of fit) is expected to result in negative adjustment (Lerner & Lerner, 1983; Thomas & Chess, 1977). A central posit of this person–context fit model is that the presence of specific characteristics of individuals alone (e.g., negative mood or aggressiveness) does not necessarily result in maladaptive adjustment because their effects are always dependent on characteristics of the social context. By emphasizing both characteristics of the person and the social context, the goodness-of-fit model has been successful in specifying under what conditions

temperamental, attitudinal, motivational, and behavioral characteristics of individuals result in inter- and intrapersonal maladjustment in infancy, childhood, and adolescence (see Eccles et al., 1993; Lerner & Lerner, 1994; Thomas & Chess, 1977, for reviews).

Recognizing the contextual specificity of peer social processes, a number of studies have examined how interpersonal adjustment during childhood and adolescence is influenced by the interaction between the behaviors of individuals and the characteristics of the peer group to which they belong. Wright, Giammarino, and Parad (1986) documented that the social standing of aggressive boys and shy/withdrawn boys attending summer camp depended on the degree to which their behavior was similar to or different from what was perceived as normative for their peer group (i.e., campers sharing a cottage). Peer norms were defined as average counselor ratings of cottage residents on aggression and withdrawal. Wright et al. found that aggressive boys were most rejected when their cottage was low in perceived aggressiveness and that withdrawn boys were most rejected when their cottage was low in behaviors associated with social withdrawal. The authors labeled those highly rejected boys as *social misfits*—individuals whose own behavior deviated from what was normative for their group.

The negative interpersonal consequences of being a social misfit have been replicated in other social contexts such as laboratory playgroups (Boivin, Dodge, & Coie, 1995) and naturalistic classrooms that could be characterized in terms of high and low levels of aggression and social withdrawal (Stormshak et al., 1999). For example, in a large sample of first-grade students drawn from over 100 classrooms, Stormshak et al. (1999) found that being aggressive in first grade predicted peer rejection only in classrooms where the average level of aggression was low (i.e., aggression deviated from the local peer norms). These studies suggest that the determinants of peer status are not invariant across contexts but that they depend on the prevailing peer context norms.

Although not cast within a person–context dissimilarity or social misfit framework, there are other examples in the peer relations literature where deviation from what was normative in that context resulted in greater intrapersonal maladjustment. In these

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studies, self-reports of negative peer relationships were dependent on the norms of the peer context. For example, Leadbeater, Hogg, and Woods (2003) reported that first-grade children with emotional problems were more likely to report being harassed by their peers only when they resided in classrooms that were high in social competence. Examining the school as a social context, Anderman (2002) found that students reported experiencing greater peer rejection when they attended schools in which perceived school belonging was high, compared with students attending schools where perceived belonging was relatively low. It may seem counterintuitive to think of positive social contexts, such as classrooms where many children are socially competent or schools where most students feel that they belong, as being risk factors for maladjustment. However, both sets of findings are compatible with a person–context dissimilarity analysis. Social context interacts with individual characteristics to predict adjustment, such that deviation from what is perceived as normative in that context (the ostracized student in a classroom with many socially competent peers, the alienated student in a school where peers get along well) can exacerbate adjustment problems.

In the research reported here, we also examined the role of person–context (mis)fit in predicting psychological adjustment resulting from negative peer relations. Specifically, we focused on the classroom contextual conditions under which peer victimization is associated with the greatest maladjustment. A growing literature has documented that being a victim of peer harassment is associated with many adjustment problems, including low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, and social anxiety (see Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Missing from that literature, however, is a systematic study of how contextual factors such as group behavioral norms and group composition interact with victimization experiences to predict adjustment. In this study, we introduced contextual variables, such as ethnic majority–minority status and classroom social disorder, that have rarely been studied in the peer victimization literature. With these variables, we tested the hypotheses that victims of peer harassment would feel especially lonely and socially anxious under specific circumstances as prescribed by the person–context fit theory: (a) when their ethnic group is in the numerical majority in their classroom and (b) when they reside in classrooms that are low in social disorder. As described below, findings in support of each of these hypotheses bolster the theoretical notion that negative effects result from a mismatch between individuals and their social contexts.

Unlike most of the studies reviewed above that focused on elementary school students, we examined peer victimization, adjustment, and social context in a sample of early adolescents who had recently transitioned to middle school. The onset of adolescence instigates major shifts in the importance of the peer group, as well as heightened concern about finding one's niche, fitting in, and peer approval in general (Eccles et al., 1993). Ethnicity also takes on added significance in larger and typically more diverse middle schools as adolescents attempt to define their identities in relation to affiliation with similar others (see, e.g., Hamm, 2000; Shrum, Cheek, & Hunter, 1988). Moreover, the numerous transitions that take place during early adolescence represent potential periods of developmental risk because they may be characterized by a mismatch between developing adolescents and their new social contexts (Eccles et al., 1993; Talwar, Nitz, & Lerner, 1990). For example, sixth-grade students who have transitioned into mid-

dle school are typically exposed to a larger school setting and a more heterogeneous group of peers than they have experienced in the past (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Talwar et al., 1990). In light of these developmental concerns, early adolescents who are victims of peer harassment might be particularly susceptible to adjustment difficulties that result from person–context dissimilarity.

Peer Victimization and the Social Context of Ethnicity

What is known about the relationship between ethnicity as a social context variable and peer victimization? There is no clear evidence that ethnicity per se is a risk factor for peer harassment. Rather, in several studies, students' ethnicity has been found to interact with the ethnic composition of their school or classroom to predict increased victimization (see, e.g., Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). In these studies, students who were members of the numerical-minority ethnic groups in their school or classroom were most likely to have reputations as victims. Numerical-minority status implies an imbalance of power, which is a known antecedent of peer victimization (Olweus, 1994). Consistent with person–context fit models, these studies suggest that individuals' ethnic representation within context may be more important than their specific ethnic group in predicting their experiences with peer harassment.

Ethnicity within context has also been found to moderate the association between victimization and maladjustment in a manner consistent with the person–context dissimilarity model. Graham and Juvonen (2002) found that African American youth who were both victims and members of the numerical-majority ethnic group in their school reported more loneliness and lower self-esteem than victims who were members of the numerical-minority groups. That finding was attributed to the misfit status of these victimized African American students. That is, African American students were not expected to be perceived as victims given both their numerical-majority status (their group held the numerical balance of power) and the perception of their ethnic group as aggressive (relatively few African Americans were judged to be victims).

Graham and Juvonen's (2002) study provides preliminary support for the moderating role of person–peer context (dis)similarity on the association between peer harassment and maladjustment. However, because the phenomenon was examined in one school only, it is impossible to separate the role of ethnicity from its majority–minority status in that context. Stronger tests of the moderating role of person–context similarity on the association between victimization and adjustment need to include many contexts that vary in terms of both their ethnic composition and behavioral norms.

The Present Study

The present study evaluated the social-contextual risk factors that moderate the association between peer victimization and both loneliness and social anxiety, two psychological adjustment variables that are known to be associated with peer victimization (see, e.g., Boivin & Hymel, 1997; Crick & Bigbee, 1998). As part of a longitudinal study of peer harassment in middle school, we recruited approximately 2,000 sixth-grade students from 99 classrooms and 11 middle schools. Those students self-identified as either Latina/o, African American, Asian American, Caucasian, or

biracial/multiracial. Through the use of hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2000), we were able to test the effects of person–context dissimilarity across two different social dimensions on self-reported loneliness and social anxiety in adolescence.

Our first hypothesis concerned the role of ethnic majority–minority status as a moderator of the association between victimization and adjustment. To assess the effects of ethnic majority–minority status, we created a variable, labeled *percentage same ethnicity*, that measures the proportion of the other participating students in a given individual’s classroom who share his or her ethnicity. That index allowed us to examine the effects of being in a classroom with mostly same-ethnicity classmates (numerical-majority status) in contrast to being in a numerical minority. Because our sample contained multiple ethnic groups and many classrooms that varied in their ethnic composition, we also created a classroom-level ethnic diversity measure that takes into account both the number of different ethnic groups in a classroom and the relative proportion of each ethnic group within that classroom. Controlling for classroom-level diversity permitted us to examine the role of percentage same ethnicity independent of one’s specific ethnic group and the representation of that group at the classroom level. On the basis of Graham and Juvonen’s (2002) findings, described earlier, and controlling for classroom-level ethnic diversity, we predicted that individuals who were perceived as victims by their peers would report feeling lonelier and more socially anxious than nonvictims, especially when they were in classrooms with a larger percentage of classmates who shared their ethnicity (i.e., the ethnic majority group). This finding would demonstrate the negative intrapersonal consequences of the misfit status of victimized adolescents who are in the numerical ethnic majority within their peer contexts.

Our second hypothesis concerned the moderating effects of classroom-level social disorder on the association between victimization and adjustment. We evaluated the effects of average level of classroom social disorder, a measure that was based on teacher ratings of disruption, aggression, and victimization of participating class members. As a main effect, we expected that more classroom disorder would be associated with more loneliness and social anxiety among classroom members. When the local norms legitimize disruption and peer abuse, the mental health of many classroom members is likely to be compromised (see, e.g., Leadbeater et al., 2003). More pertinent to our focus, we hypothesized a moderating effect of classroom social disorder on the association between victimization and adjustment. We predicted that victimization would be associated with more loneliness and social anxiety in classrooms with low levels of social disorder. That would be consistent with previous research on person–context dissimilarity (see, e.g., Stormshak et al., 1999) and the hypothesis that victims in classrooms with low levels of social disorder deviate from what is perceived as normative behavior in the classroom. Paradoxically, this may mean that classroom environments that are most protective for the majority of students (i.e., where bullying is rare) may be most risky for the few who do experience bullying.

In summary, the goal of the present study was to examine the social-contextual elements that moderate the influence of victimization on psychological adjustment. We focused on ethnic majority–minority status as an important individual-level variable and on social disorder as an important classroom-level variable.

Both were predicted to moderate the effects of peer victimization on adjustment. Consistent with a person–context dissimilarity analysis, being a member of the ethnic majority group and residing in classrooms with low social disorder were hypothesized to exacerbate the effects of peer victimization on loneliness and social anxiety.

Method

Participants

Participants were 1,630 sixth-grade students—746 boys (46%) and 884 girls (mean age = 11.57 years, $SD = 0.39$)—drawn from a larger sample of 2,003 sixth-grade students. The selection criteria for inclusion in this study are described below. Participants comprised two cohorts of students recruited from 99 classrooms in 11 Los Angeles, California, middle schools. Data for Cohort 1 ($n = 1,135$) were collected during the fall of 2000. Data for Cohort 2 ($n = 495$) were collected 1 year later.

The schools were all public schools serving an ethnically diverse population. As determined by self-report, the ethnic breakdown of the total sample was 751 Latina/o (46% of the sample; predominantly Mexican and Mexican American), 467 African American (29% of the sample), 144 Asian (9%; predominantly of East Asian origin), 156 Caucasian (9%), and 112 of other origin (7%). Individuals in the *other* category were predominantly biracial or multiracial. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls within each ethnicity. The 11 middle schools were selected from similar low-socioeconomic-status, working-class, urban communities. All schools qualified for federal compensatory educational funds that are provided when a large number of students from low-income backgrounds attend a given school.

Procedure

Students from sixth-grade classrooms whose homeroom teachers expressed interest in the study took home letters and consent forms that explained the study. Only students who returned a signed consent form granting written permission were allowed to participate. To increase return rate, a raffle was conducted on the day of the data collection for all students who returned their signed consent forms, with or without parental permission to participate. Across the 11 participating schools, 75% of the 3,511 distributed consent forms were returned. Of those students who returned a signed consent form, 91% of their parents granted permission for them to participate.

Students and teachers completed written questionnaires during a single testing session in a classroom setting. Because all of the participating schools organized their sixth-grade students into teams or clusters, students spent several periods a day with the same classmates and a small number of teachers. This helped to ensure that students knew one another well enough to complete the peer nomination procedures and that teachers knew students well enough to complete the ratings of their students’ social behavior. As an additional step to maximize familiarity, the fall data collection did not begin until students had been in school for at least 2 months.

During the administration of the questionnaire, all instructions and questionnaire items were read aloud by a graduate research assistant while students followed along and recorded their own responses. A second research assistant circulated around the classroom to help individual students if they had questions or needed clarifications.

Measures

Independent Variables Describing Individuals

Demographic characteristics. Sex was dummy coded, with boys coded as 1 and girls coded as 0. Because our interests lay in the effects of

ethnicity in context, as opposed to differences between particular ethnic groups, individual ethnicity was dummy coded to create three control variables, using Caucasian students as the reference group. For one variable, African Americans were coded as 1, and Caucasians were coded as 0. For the second variable, Latinas/os were coded as 1, and Caucasians were coded as 0. For the third variable, Asians were coded as 1, and Caucasians were coded as 0.

Peer-reported victimization. Peer nominations were used to determine which students were perceived as victims by their classmates. Participants were presented with a roster that contained the names of all of the other students in their class arranged alphabetically and by sex. Using this roster, participants were asked to nominate up to four of their classmates for each of three items. The first item described physical victimization (“gets pushed around”). The second item described verbal victimization (“gets put down or made fun of by others”). The third item depicted indirect or relational victimization (“other kids spread nasty rumors about them”). Both same- and other-sex nominations were allowed. The number of nominations each child received across items was summed. These values were then standardized within classroom to control for differences in class size. Nominations on the three types of victimization were correlated: $r = .70$ between physical and verbal victimization, $r = .47$ between physical and relational victimization, and $r = .55$ between relational and verbal victimization (all $ps < .001$). Cronbach’s alpha for the peer-reported victimization measure based on these three indices was .80.

Percentage same ethnicity. An index was computed for each student based on the percentage of participants in his or her class that reported the same ethnicity as that student. For each individual, we identified the number of other participating classmates who shared his or her ethnicity and divided that number by the total number of students (less 1) in the class.

Independent Variables Describing Classroom Characteristics

Ethnic diversity. The ethnic diversity of each class was computed using the following formula (Simpson, 1949):

$$D_C = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^g p_i^2,$$

where D_C is the ethnic diversity of a given classroom and p is the proportion of students in the classroom who are in ethnic group i . Finally, p_i^2 is summed across g groups in a classroom. Referred to as Simpson’s index of diversity, this measure gives the probability that any two students randomly selected in a classroom are from different ethnic groups. Possible values range from 0 to ~ 1.00 , with values closer to 1.00 indicating greater diversity. The measure accounts for both the number of different ethnic groups that are represented in a given classroom and the relative proportion of each ethnic group within that classroom. For example, if two classrooms contain the same number of ethnic groups, ethnic diversity is greater in the classroom with the more even distribution of numbers of individuals per ethnic group. To illustrate how both number of groups and their relative proportion contribute to the ethnic diversity index, consider these examples: In a classroom with two ethnic groups that are represented equally (e.g., African Americans and Latinas/os each represent 50% of the class), ethnic diversity = .500; in a classroom where 75% are African American and 25% Latina/o, ethnic diversity = .375; and in a classroom where three ethnic groups are represented fairly equally (e.g., 40% Latina/o, 30% African American, 30% Caucasian), ethnic diversity = .660.

The average ethnic diversity score across participating classrooms was .47 ($SD = .22$). Values for individual classrooms ranged from 0 (three classes that were entirely ethnically homogeneous) to .77 (one class). Ethnic diversity scores in classes did not entirely mirror the ethnic diversity of their schools, and classes within the same school varied in their levels

of ethnic diversity. It was important to control for classroom-level ethnic diversity in the analyses of the moderating role of percentage same ethnicity, our individual-level ethnicity variable, because classroom-level diversity places constraints on the range of possible percentage-same-ethnicity scores (e.g., in very diverse classrooms, the range of same-ethnicity scores is lower).

Social disorder. We computed a classroom-level (aggregated) score of social disorder based on teacher ratings of the extent to which participants from his or her class were disruptive, aggressive, and victimized by peers. Homeroom teachers rated the social behavior of every participant in their classes on a shortened version of the Interpersonal Competence Scale (Cairns, Leung, Gest, & Cairns, 1995). This instrument contains three main subscales that assess aggression, popularity, and academic functioning. The reliability and predictive validity of these subscales have been demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Cairns et al., 1995). In this study, we used three items from the aggression subscale (i.e., “starts fights,” “argues,” “gets in trouble”) and one item that assessed peer victimization (i.e., “picked on”) to measure an individual’s status on the social disorder measure ($\alpha = .85$ for these four items). Each item was presented as a 7-point Likert-type scale. To form the classroom index of social disorder, we averaged students’ scores within each classroom. Higher scores indicate greater social disorder within the classroom.

Dependent Variables: Self-Reported Psychological Adjustment

Social anxiety. We used a 9-item modified version of the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (La Greca & Lopez, 1998) to measure discomfort in social settings. Students responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *all the time*) to items such as “I worry about what others think of me” and “I’m afraid to invite others to do things with me because they might say no.” Scores on the 9 items were averaged ($\alpha = .82$ for this sample).

Loneliness. A 16-item scale developed by Asher and Wheeler (1985) was used to measure loneliness. Students responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not true at all*, 5 = *always true*) to items such as “I feel alone” and “I have nobody to talk to.” Scores on the 16 items were averaged ($\alpha = .85$ for this sample).

Inclusion Criteria

One thousand six hundred thirty students contributed to the data for the 77 classrooms. This represents a subset of the sample of the larger study, excluding classrooms that had less than a 50% participation rate ($n = 19$) or were missing all teacher data (i.e., the teachers did not complete the teacher rating forms for their students, $n = 3$). Within the final 77 participating classrooms, the proportion of students from each class who participated ranged from 51% to 96% ($M = 69\%$, $SD = 11\%$).

For the individual-level variables, we excluded students from the larger sample derived from participating classrooms that did not provide an ethnicity or reported *other* ethnicity ($n = 112$). This was done because we were unable to assign a percentage-same-ethnicity score to those individuals. Additionally, we excluded any participant who did not have complete data on all of the individual-level independent variables and dependent variables ($n = 7$). Thus, of the 1,630 participants who contributed to the classroom-level data for 77 classrooms, 1,511 (93%) were included in the individual-level analyses.

To assess whether classroom participation was associated with either the behavioral classroom-level moderator or the psychological adjustment variables, we compared the average classroom social disorder, loneliness, and social anxiety scores of classrooms with high participation to those with low participation by dividing the sample of 77 participating classrooms into two groups using a median split. Classrooms above the median in terms of percentage of classroom participation for the 77 classrooms

(i.e., greater than 66% participation in a given classroom) were labeled *high-participation classrooms*, and classrooms at or below 66% participation were labeled *low-participation classrooms*. Separate *t* tests comparing high- and low-participation classrooms on average levels of classroom social disorder, loneliness, and social anxiety revealed no mean differences between the two groups. On the basis of the information we have from participants about the classrooms in this study, these results suggest that classroom participation is not reliably associated with classroom levels of any of our behavioral or psychological adjustment variables of interest.¹

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the dependent variables, individual-level independent variables, and classroom-level independent variables. Values for the dependent and individual-level independent variables are based on the final sample of 1,511, and values for the classroom-level variables are based on the total sample of 1,630 in the 77 classrooms. The correlation between the two dependent variables, loneliness and social anxiety, was .50 ($p < .05$), suggesting that these are overlapping but still distinct adjustment outcomes. Across the 77 classrooms, the correlation between the two classroom-level independent variables, ethnic diversity and social disorder, was not statistically significant ($r = .06$).

Results

Analysis Strategy

We used HLM to test our hypotheses concerning both individual- and classroom-level effects. That analysis strategy offers many benefits in light of our research questions. The first benefit of HLM is that it controls for dependencies in the data that result from participants sharing the same classroom context. HLM allows for individual-level predictors to be tested while controlling for variability associated with the classroom. Ignoring the nested structure of classroom-based data may result in standard errors that are smaller than they should be (Lee, 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). An additional benefit of HLM is that it allows for examination of whether the associations between individual-level vari-

ables and dependent variables vary across classrooms. In our study, we were interested in whether the associations between victimization and adjustment differed as a function of social disorder.

Separately for each dependent variable, we followed the three-step procedure for conducting an HLM analysis described by Lee (2000). First, we examined the proportion of variance in each dependent variable that lay between students (within classrooms) as well as the proportion of variance that lay between classrooms. Given that the dependent variables were measures of psychological adjustment, we expected to find a substantially greater proportion of variance between individuals than between classrooms. In the second step, we estimated our individual-level model, also called the Level 1 model. In this step, we evaluated the effects of various individual characteristics that were associated with adjustment, controlling for the nested structure of the data. In the third and final step, we expanded on the second step by adding ethnic diversity and social disorder to the Level 2 model to evaluate whether these characteristics explained the variance associated with the classroom—either as main effects influencing adjustment or as moderators of the association between victimization and adjustment.

Step 1: Tests of Within- and Between-Class Variability of Loneliness and Social Anxiety

For loneliness, the variance between students within classrooms (sigma squared) was .411, and the variance between classrooms (tau) was .021. The chi-square test statistic of between-classroom variability revealed that statistically significant variability existed between classrooms in students' average loneliness scores, $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511) = 153.95, p < .05$. The intraclass correlation (i.e., the percentage of variance between classrooms) was .05, indicating that 5% of the variability in adolescents' loneliness scores lay between classrooms.

Additionally, as suggested by Raudenbush and Bryk (2002), we calculated the plausible values range for average classroom loneliness scores by determining the range of means within which 95% of classroom means would be expected to fall. This provided a useful way to understand the magnitude of variation among classrooms in their mean loneliness levels. Moreover, by comparing the range of values found in the three-step procedure we followed, we were able to evaluate the reduction in the range of between-classroom values after including individual- and classroom-level predictors. Given a value of 1.81 as the estimated mean of the classroom loneliness scores and a value of tau equal to .021, the expected means ranged from 1.53 to 2.09, using the formula $1.81 \pm 1.96(.021)^{1/2}$. This indicated that there was variability in the average classroom loneliness score. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to assume that all classrooms had the same average loneliness score.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable name	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Dependent variable (<i>N</i> = 1,511)		
Loneliness	1.82	0.66
Social anxiety	2.24	0.84
Individual-level independent variables (<i>N</i> = 1,511)		
Sex (%)		
Male	46	—
Female	54	—
Ethnicity (%)		
African American	31	—
Asian	9	—
Caucasian	10	—
Latina/o	50	—
Peer-nominated victimization (standardized)	0.00	0.98
Percentage same ethnicity (% of classmates who share a given individual's ethnicity)	0.53	0.29
Classroom-level independent variables (<i>N</i> = 77 classrooms)		
Ethnic diversity	0.47	0.22
Social disorder	2.38	0.52

Note. Range of scores for loneliness and social anxiety is 1–5; range for percentage same ethnicity is 0–1; range for ethnic diversity is 0 ~ 1; range for social disorder is 1–7.

¹ We conducted identical analyses using the entire sample of 2,003 students who contributed data to the original 99 classrooms. High-participation classrooms had greater than 63% (the median) participation, and low-participation classrooms had 63% or less participation. The results were identical. No differences emerged on classroom social disorder, loneliness, or social anxiety for the two groups.

For social anxiety, the variance between students within classrooms (sigma squared) was .680, and the variance between classrooms (tau) was .032. The average social anxiety level varied between classrooms, $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511) = 147.31, p < .05$. The intraclass correlation was .05, indicating that 5% of the variability in social anxiety scores lay between classrooms. The plausible values for average classroom social anxiety scores ranged from 1.88 to 2.58, indicating that classroom social anxiety scores ranged widely even though most of the variability lay between individuals and not classrooms. The values of tau and the range in expected loneliness and social anxiety scores based on the analyses conducted in Step 1 are presented in the top third of Table 2.

Step 2: The Individual-Level HLM Model

From the first analyses, we knew that most of the variance in loneliness and social anxiety lay between students but that some also lay between classrooms. Next, we tested the hypothesized individual-level predictors of loneliness and social anxiety while controlling for classroom-level variance. The individual-level predictors were sex, ethnicity, victimization, percentage same ethnicity, and the interaction of each with victimization. Each variable was centered around its grand mean (i.e., the means for all adolescents in the sample). In accordance with the method prescribed by Aiken and West (1991), interactions were computed based on grand-mean-centered variables. We modeled victimization as a random parameter but constrained the between-classroom variance to zero for all other individual predictors. This was done for two reasons. At the conceptual level, we allowed victimization to vary across classrooms because we intended to focus on the effects of victimization in this article. Moreover, preliminary analyses revealed that between-classroom variability was not statistically significant for the other predictor variables.

The left columns of Table 3 show the results of the analysis for loneliness, and the right columns display the findings for social anxiety. Reported are the beta coefficients for variables included in the model, their corresponding standard errors, and tests of their significance at $p < .05$. The general pattern of findings was similar for both adjustment outcomes. Among the demographic variables,

Table 3
Beta Coefficients and Standard Errors for Level 1 Models Predicting Loneliness and Social Anxiety

Variable	Loneliness		Social anxiety	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	1.82*	.02	2.23*	.03
Sex	-.05	.03	-.20*	.04
African American	-.03	.06	-.07	.08
Latina/o	.08	.06	.10	.08
Asian	.28*	.08	.28*	.10
Victimization	.19*	.02	.15*	.02
Percentage same ethnicity	.29*	.07	.16	.09
Victimization × Sex	-.03	.04	.01	.05
Victimization × African American	-.16*	.06	-.12	.07
Victimization × Latina/o	-.21*	.06	-.19*	.07
Victimization × Asian	-.17*	.07	-.11	.09
Victimization × Percentage Same Ethnicity	.15*	.07	.26*	.09
Between-class variance: $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511)$				
Intercept	125.34*		137.39*	
Victimization slope	102.85*		78.05	

Note. For all predictors except victimization, the error variance was fixed. The demographic variables were dummy coded in the following way: Sex, 0 = girls, 1 = boys; African American, 0 = Caucasians, 1 = African Americans; Latina/o, 0 = Caucasians, 1 = Latinas/os; Asian, 0 = Caucasians, 1 = Asians.
* $p < .05$.

Asian adolescents were more lonely and more socially anxious compared with Caucasian adolescents ($\beta_s = .28$ for both outcomes), and victimization was less predictive of loneliness and anxiety for Latinas/os than it was for Caucasians ($\beta_s = -.21$ and $-.19$ for the Victimization × Latina/o interactions). Victimization was also less predictive of loneliness for African American and Asian adolescents than it was for Caucasian adolescents ($\beta_s = -.16$ and $-.17$ for the Victimization × African American and Victimization × Asian interactions, respectively).

Table 2
Between-Classroom Variance (τ) Components and Expected Range of Values for Intercept and Slope Estimates Based on Step 1, Step 2, and Step 3 HLM Analyses

Analysis	Loneliness			Social anxiety		
	τ	Coefficient estimate	Expected range of values	τ	Coefficient estimate	Expected range of values
Step 1						
Intercept	.02148*	1.81	1.54–2.09	.03217*	2.23	1.88–2.58
Step 2						
Intercept	.01377*	1.82	1.59–2.05	.02592*	2.23	1.91–2.55
Slope	.00921*	0.186	–0.01–0.37	.00395	0.146	0.02–0.27
Step 3						
Intercept	.00727*	1.81	1.65–1.97	.02241*	2.22	1.93–2.51
Slope	.00960*	0.188	0–0.38	.00234	0.149	0.06–0.24

Note. Under the normality assumption, 95% of the values for a given intercept or slope estimate are expected to fall within the range specified for each value of τ . HLM = hierarchical linear modeling.
* $p < .05$.

After controlling for these and other demographic characteristics, we found the following hypothesized effects. Being victimized predicted more loneliness ($\beta = .19$) and social anxiety ($\beta = .15$). Of particular importance is the statistically significant interaction between victimization and percentage same ethnicity for both dependent variables, indicating that the ethnicity context variable moderated the effect of victimization on both loneliness ($\beta = .15$) and social anxiety ($\beta = .26$). Consistent with our hypothesis, the slope was steeper for adolescents with reputations as victims when a greater proportion of classmates shared their ethnicity. Those interactions were further interpreted with the classroom-level analyses (Step 3) that controlled for classroom-level ethnic diversity and social disorder.

For both outcomes, statistically significant variability between classrooms remained: For loneliness, $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511) = 125.34$, $p < .05$, and for social anxiety, $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511) = 137.39$, $p < .05$. Though slightly smaller than the model presented in Step 1, with no Level 1 predictors, the expected range of plausible values for average classroom loneliness (range = 1.59 to 2.05) and social anxiety (range = 1.91 to 2.55) remains large. See Table 2 for the values of tau and expected range of means for loneliness and social anxiety.

As we did for the intercepts, we also evaluated whether statistically significant between-classroom variability existed in the slopes describing the association between victimization and our two outcome variables. The variability of the classroom-specific victimization–loneliness slopes was significant, $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511) = 102.85$, $p < .05$, and the plausible value range for the victimization–loneliness slopes was $-.01$ to $.37$. The between-classroom variability for the victimization–social anxiety slopes was not significant, $\chi^2(76, N = 1,511) = 78.05$, $p = .41$, and the plausible range of values for the slope effect was $.02$ to $.27$ (see Table 2). Given the range in values between classrooms for each of these dependent variables and for the slopes describing the association between victimization and psychological adjustment, it was important to control for their effects using classroom-level predictor variables, as we now report in Step 3.

Step 3: The Classroom-Level HLM Model

The classroom-level HLM model yielded more specific information about the differences between classrooms due to differing levels of ethnic diversity² and social disorder.³ As with the individual-level predictors, both variables were grand-mean centered. The results of the final HLM models for loneliness and social anxiety that included both individual- and classroom-level effects are presented in Table 4. Because the effects of the classroom-level analyses were different for the two dependent variables, we present the findings separately.

Loneliness

Almost all of the original individual-level effects that were statistically significant in the individual-level analyses conducted without specific classroom-level predictor variables remained statistically significant in the final two-level model predicting loneliness. Specifically, as can be seen in the lower portion of Table 4, Asian adolescents were more lonely compared with Caucasian adolescents, and victimization was less predictive of loneliness for

Table 4
Beta and Gamma Coefficients and Standard Errors for Full Hierarchical Linear Models Predicting Loneliness and Social Anxiety

Variable	Loneliness		Social anxiety	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	1.81*	.02	2.22*	.03
Diversity modeled on intercept	-.64*	.12	-.53*	.17
Social disorder modeled on intercept	.09*	.04	.07	.05
Victimization	.19*	.02	.15*	.02
Diversity modeled on slope	.17	.13	.38*	.15
Social disorder modeled on slope	-.02	.04	-.09*	.04
Sex	-.05	.03	-.20*	.04
African American	-.07	.06	-.10	.08
Latina/o	.03	.06	.05	.08
Asian	.22*	.07	.24*	.10
Percentage same ethnicity	.00	.09	-.08	.12
Victimization \times Sex	-.04	.04	.02	.05
Victimization \times African American	-.15*	.06	-.07	.07
Victimization \times Latina/o	-.19*	.06	-.14	.07
Victimization \times Asian	-.15*	.07	-.10	.09
Victimization \times Percentage Same Ethnicity	.24*	.09	.40*	.11
Between-class variance: $\chi^2(74, N = 1,511)$				
Intercept	97.67*		126.88*	
Victimization slope	101.79*		71.61	

Note. For all predictors except victimization, the error variance was fixed. The demographic variables were dummy coded in the following way: Sex, 0 = girls, 1 = boys; African American, 0 = Caucasians, 1 = African Americans; Latina/o, 0 = Caucasians, 1 = Latinas/os; Asian, 0 = Caucasians, 1 = Asians.

* $p < .05$.

African Americans, Latinas/os, and Asians than it was for Caucasian adolescents. After controlling for these and other demographic characteristics, we found the following hypothesized effects. Peer victimization predicted more loneliness. As in the Level 1 analysis, percentage same ethnicity moderated the effect of victimization on loneliness ($\beta = .24$, $t = 2.67$). That interaction is depicted in the

² We also performed the same analyses with the addition of the quadratic term for ethnic diversity (the square of the grand-mean-centered value of ethnic diversity) to allow for the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between classroom ethnic diversity and adjustment. The quadratic term was never statistically significant, and its inclusion did not change any of the effects found for other variables. For these reasons, we have omitted it from the final analyses and results that are reported here.

³ As described in the Method section, we used the mean teacher-rated scores of individual students' disruption, aggression, and victimization to represent the social disorder of classrooms. We also tested the same models presented in the Results section using median levels of social disorder. Stormshak et al. (1999) used median levels rather than mean levels of aggression both to control for outliers and because they believed median scores were better representations of classroom norms. We found no differences when we used medians in place of means.

top panel of Figure 1. The values presented reflect the loneliness rating for individuals who were (a) either high (1 SD above the mean) or low (−1 SD below the mean) on victimization, (b) were in classrooms with either a high or low percentage of individuals

who shared their same ethnicity (± 1 SD above or below the mean), and (c) were at the mean on all other variables. As hypothesized, when controlling for classroom ethnic diversity, the slope describing the association between victimization and loneliness was

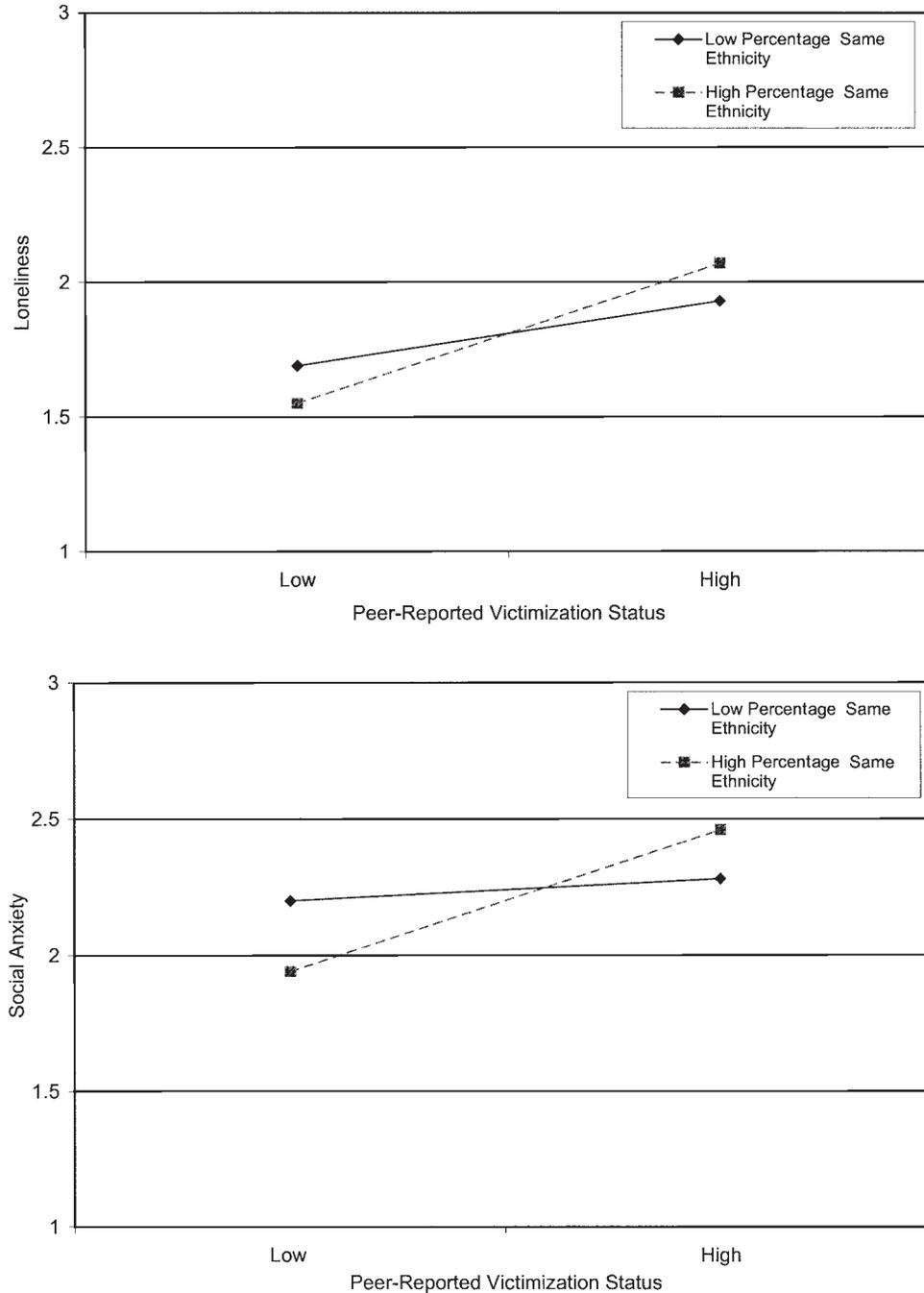


Figure 1. The moderating role of the percentage of classmates who shared an individual’s same ethnicity on the association between that individual’s victimization and psychological adjustment. The top panel shows the effects for loneliness, and the bottom panel shows the effects for social anxiety. The values presented reflect the psychological adjustment scores for individuals who were either high (1 SD above the mean) or low (−1 SD below the mean) on victimization, were in classrooms with either a high or low percentage of individuals who shared the same ethnicity (± 1 SD above or below the mean), and were at the mean on all other variables.

steeper when adolescents were in classrooms where many of their classmates shared their ethnicity.

One way to evaluate the statistically significant moderating effect of percentage same ethnicity on the victimization–loneliness slope is to consider the different values of loneliness that would be expected for victimized students in each of two conditions, that is, many same-ethnicity peers and few same-ethnicity peers. The difference in loneliness values for students with high versus low victimization scores in classrooms with many same-ethnicity peers is .52, compared with .24, which is the difference for students in classrooms with few same-ethnicity peers. A value of .52 is equal to over three quarters of a standard deviation of loneliness ($SD = 0.66$) for the entire sample, indicating that differences in percentage of same-ethnicity peers in one's classroom had a strong effect on the association between victimization and loneliness.

As indicated by the statistically significant intercepts in the top portion of Table 4, both of the classroom contextual factors were found to predict loneliness above and beyond students' individual characteristics. Students in classes with greater ethnic diversity reported less loneliness (as indicated by the negative value of the gamma coefficient for classroom diversity, $\gamma = -.64$). Conversely, students in classrooms with more social disorder showed higher levels of loneliness ($\gamma = .09$). Including these classroom-level variables in addition to the student-level variables accounted for 66% of the between-class variance in loneliness. However, the chi-square statistic remained statistically significant, indicating that some variability still remained in average levels of loneliness between classrooms, $\chi^2(74, N = 1,511) = 97.67, p < .05$.

A second way to evaluate the reduction in between-classroom variability is to once again examine the magnitude of the effects of between-classroom variance by comparing the new values of tau with the values of tau before our classroom-level variables of social disorder and ethnic diversity were included in the models. As displayed in Table 2, with the addition of classroom social disorder and ethnic diversity, the expected range of plausible values for loneliness is now smaller (1.65–1.97) than the range reported in the Step 2 analyses (1.59–2.05).

Neither of the classroom-level variables predicted the slope between an individual's victimization and loneliness, and significant variability remained, $\chi^2(74, N = 1,511) = 101.79, p < .05$. Therefore, our hypothesis that low social disorder would exacerbate the victimization–loneliness association was not supported. Moreover, the plausible value range for the victimization–loneliness slope is from 0 to .38, which is very similar to the range reported in the Step 2 analyses before the effects of classroom social disorder and ethnic diversity on the slope were modeled (see Table 2).

Social Anxiety

The two columns on the far right of Table 4 show that most of the original individual-level effects that were statistically significant in the Level 1 analyses remained significant in the final two-level model predicting social anxiety. As can be seen in the lower portion of these columns, boys were less anxious than girls, and Asian adolescents were more anxious compared with Caucasian adolescents. Beyond these effects, victimization predicted

more social anxiety. Additionally, percentage same ethnicity moderated the effect of victimization on social anxiety ($\beta = .40, t = 3.71$). Similar to the findings for loneliness, the bottom panel of Figure 1 shows that the slope describing the association between victimization and social anxiety is steeper for adolescents who shared their classroom with a larger percentage of same-ethnicity classmates. The difference in social anxiety values for students with high versus low victimization scores in classrooms with many same-ethnicity peers is .52, compared with .08, which is the difference for students in classrooms with few same-ethnicity peers. A value of .52 is equal to over one half of a standard deviation of social anxiety ($SD = 0.84$) for the entire sample.

Classroom ethnic diversity predicted social anxiety above and beyond students' individual characteristics. Specifically, students in classes with greater ethnic diversity showed lower levels of social anxiety ($\gamma = -.53$ for the diversity intercept). Including the classroom-level variables in addition to the individual-level variables accounted for 30% of the between-class variance. However, the chi-square statistic remained statistically significant, $\chi^2(74, N = 1,511) = 126.88, p < .05$, indicating that some variability still remained in the average levels of social anxiety between classrooms. With the addition of classroom social disorder and ethnic diversity, the range in values for classroom social anxiety is now 1.93 to 2.51, suggesting that other variables in addition to these two explain why classroom-levels of social anxiety differed (see Table 2).

The slope between victimization and social anxiety was moderated by both classroom ethnic diversity ($\gamma = .38, t = 2.56$) and social disorder ($\gamma = -.09, t = -2.04$). The top panel of Figure 2 displays the moderating role of ethnic diversity, and the bottom panel shows the moderating role of social disorder. Both moderators are plotted at high (1 SD above the mean) and low ($-1 SD$ below the mean) values.

Because classroom ethnic diversity was included primarily as a control variable, we did not have specific hypotheses about its moderating effect. As shown in the top panel of Figure 2, the statistically significant interaction revealed that the association between victimization and social anxiety was stronger (a steeper slope) when the average level of classroom diversity was high rather than low. The difference in social anxiety values for students with high versus low victimization scores in classrooms with high ethnic diversity is .46, compared with .14, which is the difference for students in classrooms with low ethnic diversity. A value of .46 is equal to over one half of a standard deviation of social anxiety ($SD = 0.84$) for the entire sample.

We hypothesized a moderating role of classroom disorder on the victimization–anxiety association. The bottom panel of Figure 2 depicts that moderation. The victimization–anxiety slope was steeper in classrooms with low social disorder compared with high disorder. Consistent with the person–context dissimilarity concept, victims compared with nonvictims were especially anxious when their behavior deviated from the norm for their group. The difference in social anxiety values for students with high versus low victimization scores in classrooms with low social disorder is .38, compared with .20, which is the difference for students in classrooms with high levels of social disorder. A value of .38 is equal to almost one half of a standard deviation of social anxiety ($SD = 0.84$) for the entire sample.

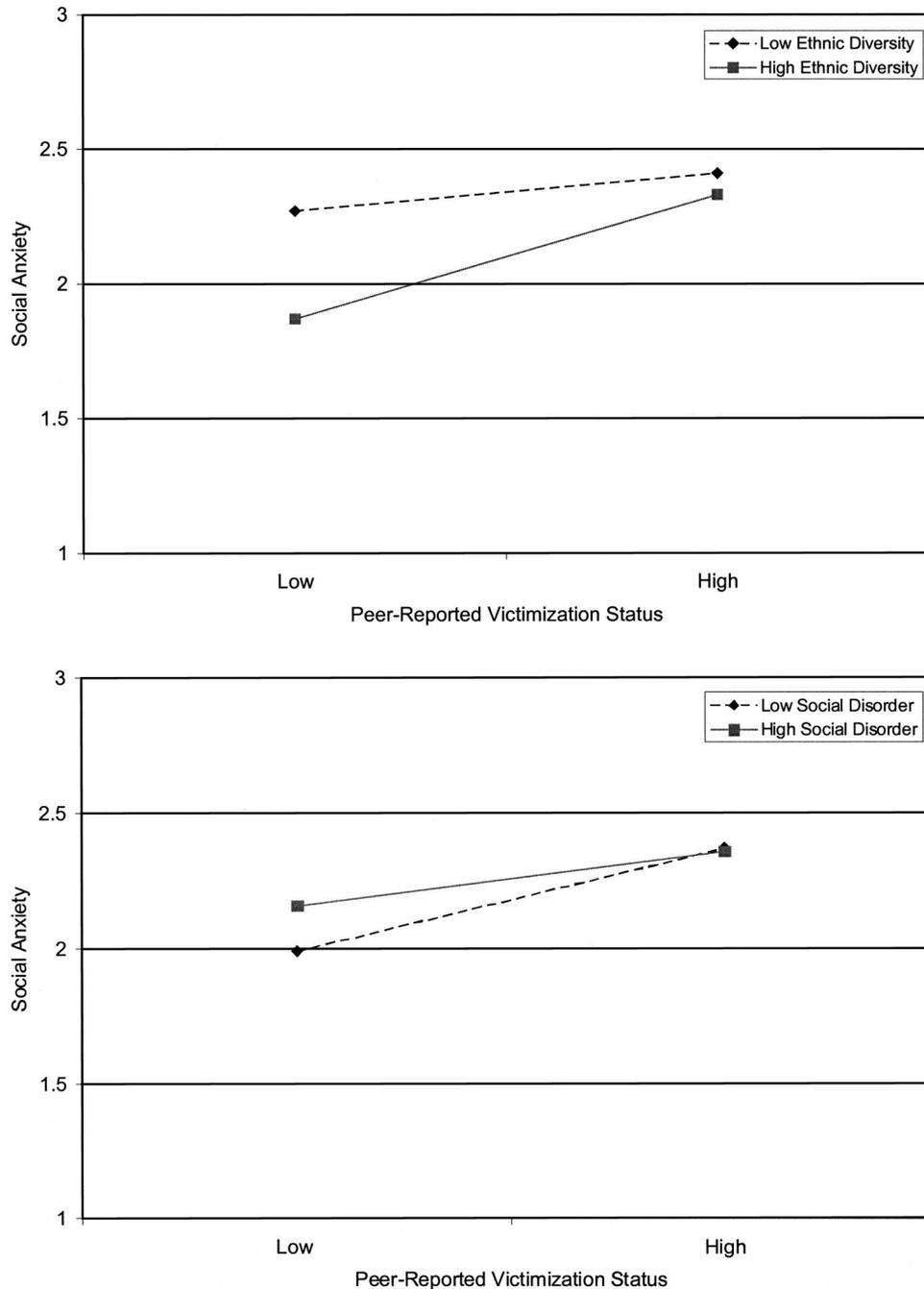


Figure 2. The intercept and slope effects of classroom ethnic diversity (top panel) and social disorder (bottom panel) on the association between an individual’s level of victimization and his or her social anxiety. The values presented reflect the social anxiety scores for individuals who were either high (1 SD above the mean) or low (–1 SD below the mean) on victimization, were in classrooms that were either high or low in ethnic diversity (± 1 SD above or below the mean, top panel) or were in classrooms that were either high or low on social disorder (± 1 SD above or below the mean, bottom panel), and were at the mean on all other variables.

Together, the addition of these variables accounted for 41% of the between-class variability in the slope between victimization and social anxiety; the remaining variability on the slopes between classes was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(74, N = 1,511) =$

71.61, $p > .50$. After variability due to classroom social disorder and ethnic diversity has been accounted for, the plausible value range for victimization–social anxiety slopes is now from .06 to .24 (see Table 2). This range suggests that some remaining vari-

ability existed between classrooms in the magnitude of the victimization–social anxiety slopes.⁴

Discussion

In the present study, we demonstrated that social-contextual characteristics of classroom settings moderate the association between victimization and psychological maladjustment. Consistent with prior research but with the added methodological strength of controlling for students nested within classrooms, we found that peer-reported victimization predicts stronger feelings of both loneliness and social anxiety. More pertinent to our hypotheses, we also found that individual characteristics interact with the social context to predict adjustment. Those who were perceived as victims and shared the classroom with many same-ethnicity peers reported feeling more loneliness and social anxiety. Additionally, victimization was a stronger predictor of social anxiety when adolescents were in classrooms characterized by low social disorder. Thus, even a positive classroom characteristic such as orderliness can be a risk factor for some youth depending on the (mis)match between person and context. On the whole, our findings are consistent with person–context fit models because they show that maladjustment is heightened when one’s problem behavior deviates from what is perceived as normative in a given social context.

In addition to providing new insights into the role of ethnicity, to which we return later, our findings make several contributions to understanding how peers’ social contexts interact with individual characteristics to influence adolescents’ social-psychological adjustment. First, we simultaneously tested the influence on adjustment of two classroom-level social characteristics that were not correlated with one another. Other studies examining predictive influences of peer-group characteristics have focused exclusively on interrelated behavioral characteristics such as aggression, withdrawal, and prosocial behaviors (Boivin et al., 1995; Stormshak et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1986). By including ethnic diversity and social disorder, we accounted for a substantial percentage of the between-classroom variance that existed in the adjustment variables (i.e., 66% for loneliness and 30% for social anxiety) and in the slope describing the relationship between victimization and social anxiety (i.e., 41%). In the only other study we know of that utilized HLM to examine individual and contextual effects on psychological adjustment (i.e., depression), Anderman (2002) accounted for 27% of the between-school variance in adolescents’ self-reported depression by including school context factors, such as students’ average feelings of school belonging, along with school size, urbanicity, busing practices, and grade configuration. We may have accounted for more between-group variance in our study because social anxiety and loneliness may be more tied to social context variables than depression, because classrooms have more powerful effects on psychological adjustment than do schools, and/or because our context variables are more directly related to psychological adjustment.

A second contribution made by the present study concerns information that was obtained about differences in the consequences of poor person–context fit for loneliness versus anxiety. The most striking difference is that classroom-level variables were found to affect only the association between victimization and social anxiety and not that between victimization and loneliness.

These results suggest that the association between victimization and loneliness may be less contextually dependent than the association between victimization and social anxiety. This difference is not surprising because socially anxious individuals seek to avoid social situations for fear of being evaluated negatively by others and because successfully avoiding social interactions requires attending to one’s social surroundings (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Social surroundings include the different peers and social configurations an adolescent might encounter. For example, in a typical school day, a sixth-grade student may need to find a place to sit during the lunch period among all sixth-grade students, and/or he or she may have to choose a partner for a class assignment from all of his or her classmates. Thus, adolescents’ social anxiety is likely influenced not only by their experiences with peers but also by their perceptions of a given social context that they share with others. In fact, Vernberg, Abwender, Ewell, and Beery (1992) argued that certain situations (e.g., being in a new or unfamiliar setting) provoke greater differences in anxiety from adolescents than do others.

The possibility that the victimization–social anxiety association is more contextually dependent than the victimization–loneliness association may inform the conclusions drawn from a recent meta-analysis of the psychosocial correlates of victimization (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Hawker and Boulton (2000) concluded that the victimization–loneliness association is stronger than the victimization–social anxiety association. However, their finding was drawn primarily from studies examining only individual-level predictors. If the effects that peer victimization has on social anxiety are more contextually dependent, then Hawker and Boulton’s conclusion that victimization is less strongly related to social anxiety may have resulted from differences in the populations and/or the social contexts in which the association was studied. More studies on the association between victimization and maladjustment are probably not needed if those variables are to be examined only at the level of the individual. Instead, researchers should begin to examine how aspects of peer social contexts interact with different individual characteristics to predict different types of psychological adjustment. This will help specify whether person–context fit matters more for certain indices of adjustment than others.

⁴ Both peer rejection and having a mutual friendship are important predictors of adjustment, as well as moderators of the association between victimization and adjustment (see, e.g., Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). To examine whether the contextual variables of interest in this study would continue to predict adjustment once we controlled for these variables, we conducted identical analyses to those in Step 3, including rejection and friendship status, as well as their interactions with victimization, as additional predictors. We found that the moderating effects of classroom ethnic context and behavior reported here were also found when we controlled for these additional variables. Furthermore, for both social anxiety and loneliness, whether or not a participant had a mutual friend was a statistically significant predictor in the final model, but rejection and the interactions of Friendship Status \times Victimization and Rejection \times Victimization were not statistically significant. We chose to report the models presented in Step 3, rather than the models including these additional predictors, because the former are more parsimonious.

Although we found evidence for the moderating roles of different classroom characteristics, it is probably too simplistic to be asking whether classroom-level ethnic diversity and social disorder either buffer or exacerbate the negative effects of peer victimization. The interactions of person and social context characteristics that were documented for social anxiety reflect a more complex pattern. As both panels of Figure 2 show, the adolescents who reported the least amount of social anxiety were those who were not perceived as victims and were in classrooms with low levels of social disorder and/or high levels of ethnic diversity. This interactive effect is similar to what Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) termed a “protective but reactive” attribute. They defined such attributes as those “that generally confer advantages but less so when stress levels are high than low” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 547). Thus, greater ethnic diversity and low classroom disorder protect against social anxiety but not when youth have reputations as victims. We believe that researchers should consider additional person–context fit effects beyond those that simply buffer or exacerbate. In so doing, the extent to which the interactive effect found in this study is particular to the process (classroom influences on individual relationships) or to the particular variables examined (ethnic diversity and social disorder) can be tested.

Ethnicity in Context

Some of our most novel and intriguing findings are those having to do with ethnicity. Our sample provided us with the opportunity to study how ethnicity within context, as opposed to ethnicity per se, influences adjustment. We made the distinction between ways in which all students in the same classroom are more similar to each other than to students in another classroom (diversity) and ways in which they also differ from each other based on their individual characteristics (ethnicity and percentage same ethnicity). For example, two students who share the same ethnicity experience the same classroom context more similarly than two people in the same classroom whose ethnicity differs. However, all four of these students from the same classroom may be more similar to one another in some ways than they are to students from a different classroom. Taking into account classroom-level variance allows us to have more confidence in our finding that victims whose group is the ethnic majority in a particular context may be at risk for greater maladjustment. Previous studies that have examined the role of ethnicity in determining peer victimization experiences have failed to disentangle the effects of ethnic group membership, ethnic group membership within context, and the ethnic context (see, e.g., Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Hanish & Guerra, 2000a, 2000b). We doubt that it is fruitful to try to explain ethnic differences per se in the experience of adjustment difficulties (e.g., are Asian Americans in this sample more socially anxious than Caucasians?) given so much within-ethnic group variability and the role of social context.

Why is it that ethnic majority status was related to more adjustment problems for victims in this research? That is, what processes might mediate the relations between ethnic context and negative appraisals among victims? One possible process relates to the ways that victims think about the reasons for their harassment. Previous research has shown that self-blaming attributions for victimization that are stable and uncontrollable are predictive of poorer adjustment and less effective coping (Graham & Juvonen,

1998; Janoff-Bulman, 1979). It might be that deviation from the norm (being a victim and a member of the group that holds the numerical balance of power) promotes attributions for failure to the self (“It must be me”) and discourages attributions to external factors that protect self-esteem (“It could be them”). Greater diversity with multiple ethnic groups that share the balance of power creates enough attributional ambiguity to ward off self-blaming tendencies.

If vulnerability to self-blame for nonnormative behavior is a general process, then it might also partly explain why social anxiety was higher among victims compared with nonvictims in classrooms with low social disorder. Being a target of others’ harassment in contexts where there is relatively less antisocial behavior among peers reduces the likelihood of attributions to the situation (“This is a rowdy classroom where lots of kids get picked on”). A useful goal for future research will be to examine how causal explanations for social predicaments vary as a function of classroom contextual factors such as those examined here. Such research will begin to explain how person–context dissimilarity predicts maladjustment.

Limitations

In this study, we defined the social context as a classroom. We believed classrooms to be the most relevant social context because we focused on sixth graders’ social experiences with their peers (i.e., classmates). Specifically, we relied on peer nominations of classmates’ victimization reputations. When assessed in this way (typically in a classroom or school setting), a person’s victimization status reflects his or her social standing in relation to the other members of a specific social context. We also relied on the classroom content in determining percentage same ethnicity and diversity, both of which varied across classrooms within the same school. Attending to classroom-level factors may be most appropriate for certain populations, such as ours, where students spend the majority of the school day with the same classmates. However, for older adolescent populations, it may be more prudent to examine smaller contexts such as peer networks or larger contexts such as schools (see, e.g., Anderman, 2002; Ma, 2001; Sabongui, Bukowski, & Newcomb, 1998). Identifying the most relevant social contexts for testing person–context fit processes at different age groups is an important goal for future research.

This is not to suggest that one social context takes precedence over another at different points in development. Rather, we recognize that many contexts influence individuals’ social experiences with peers. For example, our study does not account for the effects of more distal social contexts, such as neighborhoods, cultures, and the point in history in which these adolescents were studied (Boyce et al., 1998). Ignoring such contexts may have specific implications for conclusions about the ethnic context effects. Our intent has been to describe how social contexts influence individuals of all ethnic groups. However, we recognize that although African Americans, Latinas/os, or Asians may hold the majority status in a given classroom, their minority status within North American society may also be influential in determining the effects of negative social experiences.

A Final Note

Our research revealed positive effects of ethnic diversity on social adjustment when measured at both the individual and classroom levels. We highlighted the benefits of more diversity as a way of lessening the negative consequences of being a victim of peer harassment. No doubt there are many other psychological benefits of multiethnic school environments, just as there are some contexts in which being a part of the ethnic majority group has self-protective functions.

For some readers, our conclusions may seem obvious. However, a careful look at the developmental literature reveals very little systematic research on the social consequences of ethnic diversity since the early studies on school desegregation that followed *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. That research, which yielded inconsistent and largely disappointing findings, all but disappeared after 1980, with little evidence that increased ethnic contact in desegregated schools enhances the self-views and social adjustment of ethnic minority youth (Schofield, 1991). Ironically, one of the lasting legacies of desegregation research has been that African American children and adolescents report higher self-esteem when they attend segregated rather than integrated schools (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). The 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the known benefits of ethnic diversity on college campuses that have shaped the affirmative action debate (Milem, 2003), and the changing ethnic landscape revealed by Census 2000 (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002) are powerful signals that developmental psychologists should revisit the legacy of school desegregation research. The time therefore seems especially ripe for new programs of research that examine how ethnic diversity can promote healthy social development in children and adolescents.

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