PERSONALITY AND SELF-COMPASSION OF FORMER VICTIMS OF BULLYING

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Abstract

Prior literature has established a link between one's personality and his or her likelihood of being victimized. However, personality has been narrowly defined and has this relationship has been primarily studied with children. This study seeks to replicate the findings regarding the association between personality and victimization in a college sample, and examines the potential mediating role of self-compassion. Two hundred eighty-seven students (ages 18-19) at a southwestern university completed an online questionnaire, including measures of their history of victimization in middle or high school, along with the Big Five personality inventory, and a self-compassion scale. Surprisingly, there was no association between extraversion or agreeableness and experiences of victimization. On the other hand, neuroticism and conscientiousness were significantly related to victimization. Furthermore, as expected, self-compassion mediated the link between conscientiousness and victimization. Implications for intervention are discussed.

Personality and self-compassion of former victims of bullying

Bullying among school children appears to be a worldwide epidemic that if not stopped will continue to affect the psychological and physical well-being of our children (Eslea et al., 2003). Scholars have devoted systematic research to bullying and victimization since the 1970s (Olweus, 1995), and some research has investigated the link between victimization and personality. While most studies highlight specific individual differences that characterize the victim, the role of personality in victimization may depend on other processes (e.g., self-esteem) that contribute to the complex phenomenon. Self-compassion is a concept that is becoming increasingly popular in Western literature and may account for the association between personality and victimization. Its implications for social relations and positive well-being suggest strong reason to study self-compassion in the context of victimization. Therefore, both personality and self-compassion should be studied in a variety of ways in order to better understand the epidemic that has affected so many.

In order to better understand the role of personality and self-compassion in experiences of victimization, a definition of bullying and a brief review of the known types that occur are presented. Then, research that has explored the relationship between personality and victimization is reviewed, including specific personality dispositions that have been found to consistently characterize victims. Next, support for investigating the role of self-compassion in victimization experiences follows these descriptions. This idea is important to consider because it may determine the impact of personality on victimization by buffering the negative personality traits that may lead to occurrences of victimization.

Scholars have used many definitions of bullying throughout the ages, but one has done a good job of combining all existing definitions of victimizing behavior into a comprehensive

description. Victimization in this study refers to a "hostile behavior that can be physical or psychological, and is usually sustained or repeated within an imbalanced power relationship" (Coleyshaw, 2010, p. 3). Therefore, a victim denotes one who reports experiencing such repeated hostile behavior.

It is important to emphasize that two major types of bullying occur (Card & Little, 2006). Social aggression is a more indirect form of aggression, and includes instances of gossiping and spreading rumors. This form of aggression is more common in girls than boys (Olweus, 1995). A more direct type of aggression is overt aggression, which involves hitting, kicking, or other physical acts of violence towards a peer. Male bullies tend to demonstrate this type of aggression more often than female aggressors (Olweus, 1995).

Prevalence of Victimization

The literature does not entirely agree on whether bullying is more common in middle or high school. Part of the literature demonstrates that middle school children report more incidences of bullying than do high school children (Eslea, et al., 2003; Nansel et al., 2001; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995; Seals & Young, 2003; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). However, some studies have also discovered the reverse to be true (Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Olweus, 1993; Parault, Davis, & Pellegrini, 2007). Despite the discrepancy of bullying across age groups, these studies still recognize that bullying occurs across all ages and contexts.

One age group that prior studies seem to have overlooked concerns post-high school students at universities (Funder, 2004; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Coleyshaw (2010) wrote about this gap in the literature and suggests, "how bullying is recognized and responded to depends on whose interests the research serves," (p. 383) which cautions scholars in analyzing

prior data on bullying due to potential biases. Upon discerning the nature and effects of bullying, university students are overlooked partly because they report less prevalence of bullying than in other contexts (National Union of Students [NUS], 2008), or perhaps bullying is just not among the socially acceptable behaviors in the university context (Coleyshaw, 2010). The small number of studies that do address this age group tend to take a cross-sectional approach to examine retrospective reports of bullying that occurred during earlier periods in those students' lives. For example, Newman, Holden, and Delville (2005) conducted a study of university students asking about bullying experiences before and during high school. Their results showed that students who felt isolated experienced more damage from the bullying incidents than those who felt less isolated. This cross-sectional study draws important conclusions for anti-bullying school programs to focus on the prevention of feelings of isolation in the students who are victimized. Thus, college students' accounts of prior victimization experiences bestow information that proves valuable to administrators of environments with younger populations.

Victimization and Personality

An important area of research that examines the individual perspective is the relationship between victimization and one's personality. As previously noted, many scientists have studied these associations in children and adolescents as they experience harassment (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006), and claim that personality characteristics are very important in the experiences and outcomes of victims (Olweus, 1995). Consider this excerpt by Olweus (1993) describing a typical victim as

> more anxious and insecure than students in general…often cautious, sensitive, and quiet. Also, victims suffer from low self-esteem, and they have a negative view of themselves

and their situation. They often look upon themselves as failures and feel stupid, ashamed, and unattractive. The victims are lonely and abandoned at school. As a rule, they do not have a single good friend in their class (p. 32).

This description gives a comprehensive view of what a victimized child may seem like to others. Other reports of classification of victims follow a similar thread. For example, a general consensus in the literature is that victims tend to have low self-esteem (Drake, 2003; Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys, & Kardeliene, 2008; O'Moore & Kirkman, 2001).

Studies have also taken a more selective approach to characterizing victims and have singled out unique personality traits that victims may possess. The broad Big Five personality dimensions of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John & Srivastava, 1999) have been widely used in personality research (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006).

Two studies in particular demonstrate consistent results for the relationship of personality to peer relations. Newcomb, et al. (1993) found that low sociability (which is likely to be related to low extraversion) is associated with rejected peer status. Also, Jensen-Campbell et al. (2002) confirm that agreeableness and extraversion are the most significant predictors of successful childhood peer relations across time. Thus, the link between personality and victimization is evident, especially among individuals who lack extraversion and agreeableness.

A third personality trait that should receive considerable attention is conscientiousness. Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm (2007) found that in their sample of fifth through eighth graders, those who scored high in conscientiousness tended to experience less victimization. Contrary to this study, Coyne, Seigne, and Randall (2000) found that older victims (ages 18-50) in the

workplace tended to have higher conscientiousness. Here we have one study reporting a negative relationship between conscientiousness and victimization, but yet another reporting a positive association between the same variables. These two studies incorporated different methods of identifying victims and measuring personality, which may have led to differing results. However, both approaches to measuring conscientiousness ask similarly-worded questions, so it is not likely that this contributes to the discrepancy. An interesting thought to consider is the idea that the conscientiousness trait may differ from the virtue (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Therefore, studies on conscientiousness may be conceptualizing it in a different way.

The last two personality components produce contrasting associations with victimization. First, neuroticism is very strongly and positively related to victimization (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Persson, Hogh, Hansen, Nordander, Ohlsson, Osterberg, & Orbaek, 2009; Watson & Clark, 1984). On the other hand, openness to experience is not significantly related to victimization (Jensen-Campbell, et al., 2002). Therefore, those who report they were victimized are likely to also score higher on neuroticism measures, but their levels of openness will vary.

Additional Processes

It was mentioned before that the role of personality on bullying may depend on other individual differences. We now refer to these as additional processes involved in this relationship. Past research has indicated the importance of accounting for self-esteem when conducting studies on the associations between personality traits and various outcomes. "Personality…may be correlated with self-esteem, and thus any associations of personality with peer relations may be due to the correlation of self-esteem with both agreeableness and positive

peer relations" (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002, p. 228). Furthermore, factors including the role of the individual play a part in the development of self (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). In other words, self-esteem may play a role in the personality development of an individual.

One other additional process regards the "bully-victim" or "provocative victim." This type of victim is likely to act aggressively in addition to experiencing victimization and quite possibly because of that victimization (Powell & Ladd, 2010). This is in contrast with the more traditional type of victim, the "passive victim," which fits the description of Olweus (1993) and others as previously outlined. Thus, it is important to control for aggression when testing any analyses involving victimization because the individual's aggressive acts are just as likely to explain results gathered from reports of victimization.

Self-esteem and the provocative victim constitute two major processes to keep in mind when conducting bullying studies. Additionally, there is a third process that may play an even bigger role by actually buffering (and not just influencing) negative personality traits that may promote vulnerability to victimization. Studies on personality and victimization all provide valuable information on typical characteristics of victims and give thorough descriptions of personality characteristics that victims tend to possess. They also speculate about reasons for the correlation between personality and victimization, but do not provide empirical explanations for the original question: why are personality traits associated with victimization experiences? That is, why might one's personality determine whether or not he or she is a victim of harassment? Self-compassion may have implications for the question at hand.

Self-compassion is a Buddhist concept that is becoming very popular in Western literature and concerns one's ability to love his or herself at all times, not just when things are going well for him or her (Neff, 2003). It means taking an objective view towards one's failures

and negative qualities. Broken down, self-compassion includes three components and their opposites for a total of six measurable constituents. The three positive qualities of self-compassion include self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity, whereas their opposites are self-judgment, over identification, and isolation, respectively. Self-kindness and self-judgment are probably the easiest to grasp, one being loving towards oneself in all situations and the other being very harsh, critical, and judgmental of his or her qualities or personal experiences. Mindfulness is yet another Buddhist concept that is the goal of *zazen*, or seated meditation, in Zen Buddhism. It involves taking in all of one's surroundings with an objective and rational eye. Mindfulness can also be thought of as not acting on one's thoughts, but simply observing them. Its opposite, over identification, is ruminating over one's worries and constantly stressing about one particular problem, no matter its real importance. The final component of self-compassion is common humanity, which is the feeling that one is part of a larger world of human beings, who have also experienced trials similar to one's own. Contrary to this concept is the feeling of isolation, or feeling alone in one's problems – that nobody else in the world could understand how you feel or what you are going through. As can be derived from these descriptions, someone who is very high in self-compassion possesses high levels of the positive components and low levels of their opposites. These six components make up the construct self-compassion, and can be viewed as a way to conceptualize the term.

As mentioned before, few studies have demonstrated empirical evidence for the relationship between personality traits and victimization experiences. Jensen-Campbell, et al. (2002) speculate about this relationship while specifying the agreeableness trait: "it seems likely that the importance of agreeableness for successful peer relations lies more in its association with specific social-interactional & social-cognitive processes that warrant attention in future

research" (p. 244). It is very likely that self-compassion serves as this social-cognitive process. As it has been described above, it involves rational thinking (cognitive process) and social behavior (e.g., rumination). Furthermore, it is significantly related to four of the Big Five personality traits (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2006): agreeableness, neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness.

Self-compassion also has important connections to victimization. It is probable that self-compassionate individuals are not only kind to themselves, but kind to others as well. This benevolence may serve as a buffer against being victimized. Additionally, Olweus (1993) states that victims usually do not have any close friends and appear to be lonely at school. Such loneliness is one of the negative components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003). Thus, self-compassion is likely to be related to victimization, although this relationship has not been studied.

Present Study

We have shown that the connections between personality and victimization are strongly supported in the literature. However, researchers have called for an undiscovered "social-cognitive or social-interactional process" to explain this relationship (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002, p. 244). It may be the case that self-compassion serves as this social process due to its empirical relationships with personality traits and its hypothesized relationship with victimization experiences. Consequently, we hypothesize that personality variables will be significantly related to self-compassion, which will in turn, promote fewer reports of victimization.

The present study examined college students who reported a history of victimization in their middle or high school years and try to determine whether they exhibit any differences with

students who report they were not victims of bullying. Given the mixed review of the prevalence of bullying, we allowed our sample to self-select which school-age they reported experiencing bullying in their past. Our methods are similar to those of Newman et al. (2005) since we ask our college-aged participants to report about bullying experiences from their past schooling years. As for the additional processes identified, the fact that some victims may also tend to be bullies themselves has important implications for the current study. Therefore, the current study will control for aggression when testing models to determine whether it has in fact interfered with any victimization analyses. Also, we will use Jensen-Campbell et al.'s (2002) suggested conservative approach to testing hypotheses and control for self-esteem when conducting tests on one's personality.

Given the previous data, we hypothesize that students who report having been victims of harassment in middle or high school would score lower on extraversion and agreeableness. Our study should help clarify the blurred association between victimization and conscientiousness by determining whether the link remains even after a few years have gone by since the student's middle and high school experience. We predict that we will find a negative association between conscientiousness and victimization since the age of our sample is closer to the age of the participants in which such a relationship was found (as opposed to the study of older participants with a positive link). Finally, a second goal of this study aims to examine whether self-compassion may mediate the relationship between personality traits and victimization experiences.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 287 (124 men, 122 women) 18- and 19-year old ($M = 18.34$, $SD = .47$) students at a Southwestern university. The students were 83.6% heterosexual, 1% gay or lesbian, and 1.4% bisexual. Fifty-seven percent were White, 19.2% Hispanic or Latino, 2.1% Asian, 2.1% Black or African American, and 5.9% identified with another or unspecified ethnicity category.

Measures

Participants were recruited from the university's Psychology 101 subject pool and were given class credit for completing the study. All questionnaires were online through surveymonkey.com, and participants were required to attend a short debriefing session with the Principal Investigator and another Research Assistant. At this meeting, participants received their credit slips and were informed of the motives for the study.

Personal demographic questionnaire. This short questionnaire gathered basic information regarding participants' age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

*Big-five inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991).*This 44-item questionnaire measured five major dimensions of personality. Participants responded to the prompt: "I see myself as someone who…" for each of the dimensions: extraversion ("…is talkative"), neuroticism ("…is depressed, blue"), openness to experience ("…is original, comes up with new ideas"), agreeableness ("…is helpful and unselfish with others"), and conscientiousness ("…does a thorough job"). Upon reverse-coding negative responses (e.g., for neuroticism, "…is relaxed, handles stress well"), averages of each of the five scales were computed to measure those personality traits. Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 2 = *disagree a little*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree,* 4 = *agree a little*, and 5 = *agree strongly*). Reliabilities of

shorter versions of this scale have been found to range from .75 to .90 and average above .80

(Rammstedt & John, 2007). As for validity, these items substantially converged and diverged

with other measures of the Big Five as well as peer ratings (Rammstedt & John, 2007).

Harassment experiences questionnaire. Adapted from Little, Jones, Henrich, and

Hawley's (2003) version of the questionnaire to incorporate past tense, this 36-item

questionnaire measured both bullying and victimization. Items included six types of

bullying/victimization: overt ("I pushed others around"), reactive overt ("When others made me

mad or upset, I hit or kicked them"), instrumental overt ("To get what I wanted, I said mean

things to others or called them names"), relational ("I spread rumors about others"), reactive

relational ("When others made me mad or upset, I spread rumors about them"), and instrumental

relational ("To get what I wanted, I tried to make my friends ignore others or stop talking to

them"). The same questions were adapted to measure victimization experiences. Here is a sample

item demonstrating how this was done: "To get what they wanted, kids tried to make their

friends ignore me or stop talking to me." Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *never,* 2

= *rarely,* 3 = *sometimes,* 4 = *often, and* 5 = *always).* Three items measured each type of bullying

or victimization, and averages were taken of those three to get the total measure of that type.

Composite scores for bullying and victimization were computed by taking the mean of the total

scores for the six types of bullying or victimization. Little et al. (2003) reported reliabilities for

the six bullying measures as $.62 \leq r \leq .84$.

Self-compassion scale (SCS; Neff, 2003b). This 26-item self-report measure assessed the

emotional positivity of one's self-attitude and contains six subscales: self-kindness, self-

judgment, awareness of a common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification.

Sample items include, "I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering," "I try to see my

failings as part of the human condition," and "when something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings." Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale (1 = a*lmost never,* 5 = *almost always*) in terms of how often they behave in the stated manner. Following re-keying of reverse-scored items, item ratings were summed to produce a total self-compassion score, with higher scores indicating higher level of self-compassion. In her original study, Neff (2003) reported the internal consistency as 0.92. Ying (2009) described the alpha reliability of the subscales as between 0.74 and 0.84. As for validity, Neff (2003) demonstrated that Buddhist practitioners scored higher than college students on overall self-compassion. In addition, Neff and Vonk (2009) found that self-compassion scores were correlated in expected directions with scores on measures of depression and anxiety (negatively) and life satisfaction (positively).

Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). Ten items assessed the individual's current self-esteem level. Sample items include, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself," "I am able to do things as well as most people," and "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure." Participants responded on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *disagree*, and 4 = *strongly disagree*). After reverse-scoring negatively worded items, responses were totaled to compute the overall self-esteem score. A high score indicates high self-esteem. As one of the most widely used measures of global self-esteem (Byrne, 1996), Sinclair et al. (2010) computed a reliability rating of 91% for self-esteem across participants.

<div align="center">Analysis plan</div>

Preliminary tests were done on 38 students from the same university using only the demographics questionnaire, Big Five Inventory, and Harassment Experiences Questionnaire.

Data was collected from a total of 376 participants. Some cases were omitted from analyses for being under the age of 18 (three). Next, we decided to narrow the age range of the responses in order to be sure that the time that had elapsed since the participants' experiences of bullying was similar across participants. Therefore, we eliminated all those above the age of 19.

Also, we knew that there were some duplicates because some participants told the experimenter at the debriefing session that they filled out the survey twice because of confusion with timing instructions. Despite keeping the surveys anonymous, we were able to find some of the duplicate responses because we asked the participants to report the initials of their closest friends. By alphabetizing initials and comparing other responses, we successfully identified two duplicated surveys. Since the survey program kept track of time of submission, we deleted the first submission for all duplicates. This brought our sample size to a total of 287 participants.

Results

Given the mixed prior research of the prevalence of victimization, we allowed participants to choose which period to report from and then asked them to indicate which one they chose. Of the 287 participants, 56 (22.6%) reported about middle school bullying, while 192 (77.4%) reported about such incidences that occurred during high school. Because of the drastic difference in sample sizes for these two groups, we did not separate participants when conducting further analyzes. Since the group is defined by which period they chose to report bullying, we did not expect any differences in results to be attributed to this distinction. However, we tested for these differences anyway, and did not separate the groups because of their similar reports.

As shown in Table 1, participants scored about average on almost all of the measures. The mean extraversion score was 3.43 ($SD = .73$), conscientiousness was reported 3.36 on average ($SD = .59$), agreeableness was on average 3.86 ($SD = .57$), the mean neuroticism score was 2.79 ($SD = .71$), and the average openness score was 3.57 ($SD = .59$). As for victimization experiences in middle or high school, most participants reported around 1.58 ($SD = .62$), indicating that they personally experienced victimization rarely to never. Finally, participants' average self-compassion scores were 3.02 ($SD = .61$), which was in between almost never and almost always.

Table 2 indicates that all personality traits measured, except for extraversion and openness to experience, were related to self-compassion. In addition, two of the five dispositions (conscientiousness and neuroticism) were related to victimization, and self-compassion was related to victimization ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$). Extraversion was not significantly related to self-compassion ($r = .09$, $p = .17$), and the relationship between openness to experience and self-compassion was also insignificant ($r = -.01$, $p = .92$). However, significant associations emerged between self-compassion and agreeableness ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), conscientiousness ($r = .25$, $p < .01$), and neuroticism ($r = -.56$, $p < .01$). Because aspects of the Big Five were associated with self-compassion as well as victimization, our criteria to test a self-compassion as a mediator of personality and victimization was met (Baron & Kenny, 1986). However, before conducting these tests, we need to determine that the personality variables are related to victimization experiences as well.

Only two of the three personality variables that correlated with self-compassion also significantly related to victimization (see Table 2). Agreeableness was not significantly related to victimization ($r = -.12$, $p = .051$). However, conscientiousness was linked to victimization ($r = -$

.16, $p < .01$), and the association between neuroticism and victimization was strong ($r = .36$, $p <$ .01). Therefore, we are able to test for mediation between conscientiousness and victimization. We conduct another test for self-compassion mediating the relationship between neuroticism and victimization so as to examine the maximum number of personality traits in the model.

Model 1

To establish mediation, the proposed model was tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria (see Figure 1). First, the predictor variable (conscientiousness) was significantly associated with the criterion variable (victimization) ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$). Second, the predictor was also related to the mediator (self-compassion) ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$), and the mediator was significantly associated with the criterion ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .01$). Finally, mediation is shown because the association between the predictor and criterion is no longer significant when controlling for the influence of the mediator ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .14$). Sobel's test (1982) revealed that the drop in the beta weight from -.16 to -.09 was significant ($z = -3.20$, $p < .01$), indicating full mediation by self-compassion in the association between conscientiousness and victimization.

It is important to remember that when conducting tests involving personality, self-esteem is likely to play a role in the outcome. Therefore, we conducted follow-up analyses to control for self-esteem in this model to be sure that it does not account for the associations in Model 1. Again using Baron and Kenny's criteria, we tested the effect of self-esteem on our model. Self-esteem was associated with victimization ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .01$). However, results showed that self-compassion still mediated the association between conscientiousness and victimization ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .45$) when controlling for self-esteem. Therefore, this shows that the model is confirmed when controlling for self-esteem, and self-esteem does not explain why self-compassion mediates conscientiousness and victimization.

The final test we conducted was to determine whether the students who reported being victimized were simultaneously bullies to others. We introduced aggression as a controlled variable in our original mediation model and found that the model still fit the data. The adjusted conscientiousness beta is -.04 (p = .45). Therefore, the relationship between conscientiousness and victimization was not accounted for by experiences of aggression (see Figure 1).

Model 2

Next, we replaced conscientiousness with neuroticism and ran tests for the mediation model. Following Baron and Kenny's criteria, neuroticism and victimization were significantly related (β = .37, p < .01), and neuroticism was also significantly associated with self-compassion (β = -.56, p < .01). Finally, when controlling for self-compassion, the relationship between neuroticism and victimization is still significant (β = .29, p < .01). This indicates that while self-compassion reduces the strength of the correlation between neuroticism and victimization, it does not fully explain the link.

Discussion

Despite the mixed literature review of prevalence of bullying in middle versus high school, a vast majority of our sample chose to report about harassment experiences in their high school years. We did compare mean scores for personality traits, self-compassion levels, and victimization experiences between those who reported about middle versus high school. There were no significant differences between mean scores on these variables.

The sample had average levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness, with moderately lower levels of neuroticism. Also, our participants reported remembering very few instances of general victimization in either schooling period. Finally, the mean self-compassion scores for our sample were about average.

Agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism were related to self-compassion, consistent with past literature (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2006). In contrast, extraversion was not associated with self-compassion in our sample. As for victimization experiences, only conscientiousness and neuroticism were associated with victimization out of all five personality traits. However, Newcomb et al. (1993) found that low sociability is related to rejected peer status. Also, Jensen-Campbell et al. (2002) confirm that agreeableness and extraversion are the most significant predictors of successful childhood peer relations. This did not hold true for our sample.

We offer a few potential explanations for why we found no significance in the relationship between extraversion and either victimization or self-compassion. Since the Big Five provides subgroups within the five major traits, perhaps separating agreeableness and extraversion (activity, assertiveness) into their subgroups may reveal significance measures in relation to victimization. If there is still no significance, there may be an alternative explanation. It may be the case that college students strive to be extraverted and agreeable because they are in a new environment and want to make as many friends as possible. After all, there are major differences between convenience samples of college students and the general population (Sears, 1986). One final explanation is that characteristics of bullies decrease with age (Olweus, 1993). Therefore, it is likely that characteristics of victims follow a similar trend. Even though we attempted to examine the age group that was most recent to the episode(s) of victimization (18-19 year olds), enough time may still have elapsed since the occurrence(s), and the current characteristics may have decreased since that time. Future studies are needed to focus on the complex relationship of the personality trait of extraversion with victimization.

In addition, the expected relationship between agreeableness and victimization was not confirmed. Even though previous studies have found significant associations between agreeableness and victimization, one longitudinal study found no relationship between agreeableness and high social status in fraternities or sororities (Anderson et al., 2001). Therefore, it seems that the link between agreeableness and victimization is significant when examined across time, but disappears when studying just one period. This helps to explain why the current study did not support a link between agreeableness and victimization.

Self-compassion and victimization were strongly negatively related. Since we also found significant correlations between the personality traits and self-compassion as well as between certain traits and victimization, we were able to continue testing for mediation. Specifically, the relationship between neuroticism and victimization was not mediated by self-compassion. Although self-compassion reduced its strength, this relationship is likely too strong for full mediation by self-compassion. However, self-compassion did mediate the relationship between conscientiousness and victimization. This means that self-compassion is a decisive factor in whether a person is victimized, regardless of their type of personality, which is more likely to be fixed. Further, the mediation model was still significant when controlling for any influence of self-esteem. Finally, participants' simultaneous reports of experiencing aggression did not significantly impact the mediation model either. This shows that the link between conscientiousness and past victimization is accounted for by self-compassion, beyond the influence of self-esteem or concurrent experiences of aggressive behavior.

An interesting note to mention about this study is that the questionnaire that assessed victimization experiences also asked questions about one's participation in bullying other students. However, we did not examine the relationship between bullying and the rest of the

study variables for the sake of maintaining a strong focus for the paper. The only thing we did use the bullying questions for was to control for aggression while testing the mediation models.

The relationship between self-compassion and aggression should be examined in a similar framework as the current study. Individuals who have bullied others have not demonstrated kindness to others and may be less likely to show kindness towards his or her own self throughout life. However, this is only likely to be true if the mindset and personality of the bully remain fairly consistent since the bullying incidents. Assuming that the temperament of the individual has not changed drastically since the incident of bullying, it is likely that an individual who reports having been a bully also scores fairly low on self-compassion. Additionally, bullies often feel lonely and lack close friendships (Mash & Wolfe, 2007 in Walden & Beran, 2010), and loneliness is a component of low self-compassion (isolation). Loneliness has also been shown to be related to victimization (Storch et al., 2004). Furthermore, self-compassion is positively related to best and first close friendship quality (Harris & Demir, in preparation). Therefore, bullies are likely to be low in self-compassion because they possess both loneliness and low friendship quality. After reviewing these connections, self-compassion's relationship to bullying experiences becomes hard to disregard, and potential for future discoveries involving self-compassion and aggression become evident.

Another area for future study is in classifying the "provocative victim," as identified in Parault, Davis, and Pelligrini (2007). These and many other scholars assert that there are two types of victims with very different profiles (Card & Little, 2006; Olweus, 1993). We characterized victims as being the passive type, while controlling for potential aggressive characteristics of that victim. We believe this control has accounted for our lack of exploring

both types of victims, but think it would be interesting to conduct a study that actually separates provocative and passive, given there is enough variability in the victimization scores.

However, one area for future research is separating the types of victimization that these individuals experienced. It is important to note that this is distinct from the two types of victims discussed above. Research has indicted a difference between overt and social aggression (or victimization) as well as subtypes within those areas (Card & Little, 2006). The victimization questionnaire used in this study asked questions regarding all six types: overt, relational overt, proactive overt, reactive, reactive relational, and proactive relational. Future publications should distinguish between these types when running tests on mediation and correlations with personality traits.

Another area that could be developed further concerns gender effects on reports of victimization. It is well established in the literature that females tend to display relational aggression more than males. Also, males are known to exhibit more physical aggression than females (Card & Little, 2006; Connolly & O'Moore, 2003; Olweus, 1995; Olweus, 1993). Our sample consisted of a very even number of males compared to females, so we could pull apart the genders and test separately for each gender. However, we would like to note that both males ($M = 1.49$, $SD = .51$) and females ($M = 1.67$, $SD = .72$) reported similar levels of victimization. Therefore, we tested the models for the group as a whole.

We understand that the cross-sectional design of our study may be considered a limitation. However, we believe it adds important information to literature that addresses only what the victims' personality traits are like at the time of victimization. Some studies have conducted longitudinal evaluations of the victims and should be considered while interpreting our findings (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002; Scaglione & Scaglione, 2006; Smokowski &

Kopasz, 2005). However, few of these studies examine individuals of college-age. Storch et al.

(2004) did examine college students' history of bullying, but used different surveys, including a

teasing questionnaire that only asks about the students' experience being the victim of teasing.

Our study includes questions not only about being victimized, but also about bullying others, and

taps into the six types of bullying. While other studies have taken a parallel cross-sectional

approach in measuring similar variables (McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, & Swinson,

2003; Newman et al., 2005; Storch et al., 2004), we believe our unique methods contribute to the

literature on personality and victimization.

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this study is that it cannot predict which variables will

directly impact other variables. Therefore, the relationships we found in the correlations and

regressions can be reversed and may also exist due to an unknown third variable. However, other

studies give us confidence in our results (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000) because of their

predictions of workplace victims as being conscientiousness, as well as their belief in

personality's ability to predict victim status (Bowling, Beehr, Bennett, & Watson, 2010).

One important suggestion for future research concerns the relationship between bullying

and personality variables and the role of self-compassion in that relationship. Studies have shown

that interventions increase people's levels of self-compassion over time (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop,

& Cordova, 2005). If these interventions are implemented in middle schools, they may reduce

bullying episodes among students with vulnerable personality traits. Therefore, we hope this

study will serve as an initial finding that encourages the experimentation of a bullying

intervention program aimed at increasing self-compassion.

Finally, one more area of research that should receive attention is the link between

victimization experiences and negative outcomes later in life. This is important to mention

because the current study has the potential to initially validate or replicate any claims made about what victims tend to be like a few years later. While our study cannot claim that the victimization experiences caused any personality traits to develop, it can demonstrate which dispositions victims are likely to possess.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics on Personality Traits, Victimization Scores, and Self-Compassion Levels

	Mean			Standard Deviation		
	Total Sample	MS	HS	Total Sample	MS	HS
Extraversion	3.43	3.27	3.47	.73	.85	.70
Conscientiousness	3.36	3.91	3.85	.59	.60	.55
Agreeableness	3.86	3.31	3.37	.57	.63	.59
Neuroticism	2.79	2.76	2.79	.71	.74	.69
Openness	3.57	3.58	3.56	.59	.60	.58
Victimization	1.58	1.63	1.56	.62	.60	.64
Self-compassion	3.02	2.85	3.07	.61	.62	.59

Note. Total *N*s range from 252–264. Middle school (MS) group *N* = 56 (22.6%); High school (HS) group *N* = 192 (77.4%).

Table 2

Correlations between Big Five Personality Traits, Self-Compassion, and Reported Victimization

Experiences

	Self-Compassion	Victimization
Extraversion	.09	-.01
Agreeableness	.34**	-.12
Conscientiousness	.25**	-.16**
Neuroticism	-.56**	.37**
Openness	-.01	.01
Self-Compassion	1	-.30**
Victimization	-.30**	1

*Note: *p < .05, **p < .01.*

Figure 1. Mediation of Self-Compassion between Conscientiousness and Victimization when controlling for Self-Esteem and Aggression.

-.16**(-.09)/ -.16**(-.04)/-.16**(-.04)

| Conscientiousnes | → | Victimization |

.25**/ .24**/ .25**

Self-Compassion

-.30**/ -.19*/ -.30**
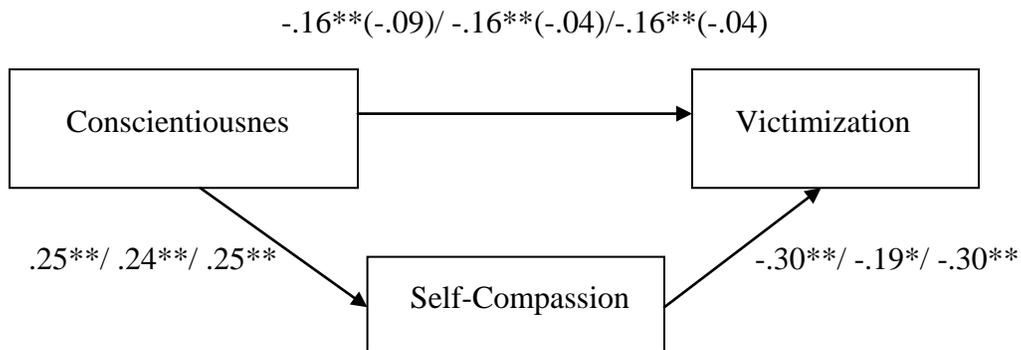
Note: Standardized Beta coefficients are presented. Full mediation of self-consciousness is present, such that the association between conscientiousness and victimization is no longer significant when introducing self-compassion as seen in the first set of Betas presented, controlling for self-esteem (second set of Betas following the first slash), and separately controlling for aggression (third set of Betas following the second slash).

$N = 250$; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.