

Forgiveness and friendship protect adolescent victims of bullying from emotional maladjustment

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Abstract

Background: Adolescent victims of bullying often present high levels of maladjustment, such as depression, anxiety, and the inability to manage anger. Both forgiveness and friendship have been found to be moderating agents for the debilitating psychological effects seen in the victims of bullying. Our aim was to explore the roles of forgiveness and friendship in the psychological adjustment of victimised youths. **Method:** The sample was composed of 2,105 adolescents (age range 13-20) recruited from central and southern Italy. We collected information on bullying, forgiveness, friendship, depression, anxiety and anger. **Results:** We found that more victimisation and not having a best friend had an additive effect on maladjustment. Moreover, adolescents who scored lower in forgiveness were more likely to be depressed and angry. **Discussion:** Our data provide confirmation that forgiveness is a protective factor for Italian adolescents, as is friendship, although they do not operate as interactive protective factors. Given that forgiveness is so significantly associated with wellbeing and the fact that it can be taught and enhanced in both clinical and school settings, it would be worthwhile to include work on forgiveness in prevention and treatment programmes.

Keywords: depression, anxiety, anger, forgiveness, friendship.

Resumen

El perdón y la amistad protegen a los adolescentes víctimas de acoso escolar de la inadaptación emocional. Antecedentes: los adolescentes víctimas de acoso escolar presentan a menudo niveles altos de depresión y de ansiedad y problemas en el manejo de la ira. Se ha observado que tanto el perdón como la amistad funcionan como moderadores de los efectos psicológicos del acoso. Nuestro objetivo fue explorar las funciones del perdón y la amistad en la adaptación de jóvenes víctimas de acoso escolar. **Método:** se han utilizado datos sobre el acoso, el perdón, la amistad, la depresión y la ira de una muestra de 2.015 adolescentes, de entre 13 y 20 años, de centros de educación de Italia centro-meridional. **Resultados:** se encuentra que el perdón y no tener un amigo afectan a la inadaptación de forma aditiva. Además, los adolescentes con puntuaciones bajas en perdón tienden a deprimirse y enfadarse. **Conclusiones:** nuestros datos confirman que tanto el perdón como la amistad funcionan como factores de protección para los adolescentes italianos, aunque no de forma interactiva. Dada la importancia del perdón para el bienestar y puesto que se puede enseñar y potenciar en escuelas y fuera de ellas, conviene incluir el perdón en programas de prevención y tratamiento.

Palabras clave: depresión, ansiedad, ira, perdón, amistad.

Adolescent victims of bullying often present high levels of psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and the inability to manage anger (van Rensburg & Robenheimer, 2015). In particular, bullied adolescents are prone to chronic depression (Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin, 2012). Other frequent negative consequences include anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, poor academic achievement and school dropout (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Radliff, Wang, & Swearer, 2015). Furthermore, the social distress that bullying creates for its victims is linked to their expression of anger. Significant correlations have been found between victimisation by bullies, anger and delinquency (Sigfusdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2010).

Bullying is a worldwide problem, connected to moral development and values education (Kohlberg, 1984; Paciello et al.,

2017; Pallini, Bove, & Laghi, 2011); it is known to be particularly rampant in Italian adolescents (Menesini & Nocentini, 2015). One of the first surveys on bullying in Italian schools was published a little over 20 years ago (Genta, Menesini, Fonzi, Costabile, & Smith, 1996), revealing the widespread presence of bully-victim problems, with similar rates in different areas of the country. Fonzi et al. (1999) suggested that bullying is tolerated in Italy more than in other nations. One possible reason is the fact that the Italian juvenile justice is considered quite lenient and very distant from the punitive attitude seen by many authors as typical of the Anglo-Saxon countries (Lemert, 1988; Nelken, 2005).

Despite these speculations, it has been argued that things have changed recently in Italy: Vieno et al. (2015) conducted a survey of 13,174 Italian middle and secondary school students (11- to 15-year-olds; 50.3% girls) and found significant and consistent decreases in the prevalence of bullying behaviours between 2002 and 2010. One reason for this, at least for the years 2007-2010, may be the national preventive anti-bullying campaign launched by the Italian Ministry of Education in 2007 (Vieno et al., 2015).

Forgiveness as a Possible Protective Factor

Although it is surely difficult to forgive a bully, it has been suggested that it is important for victims of school bullies to learn to forgive. Forgiveness is a process in which a person modifies angry and vengeful emotions, cognitions and attitudes regarding an offender. The main components of typical definitions of forgiveness include a decrease in negative emotions toward the offender, a decrease in motivation to take revenge or to avoid the offender, an increase in benevolent motivations (Berry & Worthington, 2001; McCullough, 2000). It has been found that the disposition to forgive is negatively correlated with anger (Barcaccia, Pallini, Milioni, & Vecchio, 2018; Reed & Enright, 2006) and that individual acts of forgiveness are linked to the reduction of anger (Huang & Enright, 2000). Moreover, providing adolescents with advice to forgive a bully leads to significantly

lower levels of anger for the victim than advice to either exact revenge or avoid the bully (Watson, Rapee, & Todorov, 2015). Furthermore, it has been found that adolescent victims of cyberbullying with high forgiveness reported significantly lower levels of cyberbullying behaviours when compared to those with low forgiveness (Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018).

Anger is the most common emotional reactions to victimisation; for this reason, forgiveness-based interventions both in schools and in clinical settings represent effective interventions aimed at anger management (Watson et al., 2015). Flanagan, Vanden Hoek, Ranter and Reich (2012) found that forgiveness is positively correlated with self-esteem, and also with effective coping strategies such as conflict resolution and support seeking, and negatively associated with social anxiety and revenge seeking.

Table 1 is a summary of previous studies on forgiveness by victims of school bullies. As shown, the findings suggest

Table 1
Summary of studies findings on bullying and forgiveness

Author & Date	Sample size & age	Measure of forgiveness	Measure of bullying	Summary of findings
Barcaccia et al., 2018	319 adolescents, 47.8% boys, 14-22 years	TRIM-18 (McCullough et al., 1998)	Florence Bullying/Victimisation Scale (FBVS) (Palladino et al., 2015)	Avoidance and revenge significant predictors of total behaviour-problem scores. Lower scores for these two forms of negative motivation (<i>un-forgiveness</i>) toward the bully are linked to psychological wellbeing
Flanagan et al., 2012	616 early adolescents, 54% boys, 10-14 years	A modified version (questionnaire format) of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children (EFI-C) (Subkoviak et al., 1995)	Modified version of the Swearer Bully Survey-Youth Version (Swearer, et al., 2001)	Forgiveness positively associated with conflict resolution, advice and support seeking strategies, self-esteem; negatively associated with social anxiety and revenge seeking. Bullying behaviour positively correlated with vengeful strategies, and negatively correlated with conflict resolution and advice/support seeking
Sansone et al., 2014	301 adults, 26% boys; 18 to 92 years	Forgiveness Scale. (Idler, 1999)	Participants' histories of being bullied through a Single prompt: "When you were growing up, were you ever a victim of bullying?"	No statistically significant relationship between having been bullied in childhood and general willingness to forgive others in adulthood. The experience of having been bullied does not appear to impinge on one's general ability to forgive in adulthood
Van Rensburg & Robenheimer, 2015	355 students, (48%) boys, 14-16 years	Forgiveness Questionnaire (FQ; Mullet et al. 2003); Forgiveness of Self and Forgiveness of Others scale (FSFO; Mager et al. 1992) (modified for adolescents)	School Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ—Wolke et al. 2001) is divided into four sections: Direct Aggression Received (DAR), Verbal and Relational Aggression Received (VRAR), Direct Aggression Given (DAG) and Verbal and Relational Aggression Given (VRAG)	Mediating effect of forgiveness on the associations between bullying, victimisation and psychopathology: Strong relationships between bullying behaviour and both externalising psychopathology, and the tendency to <i>not</i> forgive others. Bullies: have high levels of externalising psychopathology (aggression and delinquent behaviour). Victimisation associated: with internalising psychopathology (depression, anxiety, somatic complaints and withdrawal). Adolescents who are more prone to forgive, reported low levels of mental health problems
Walters & Kim-Spoon, 2014	127 adolescents, 56% boys; 12-18 years & their primary caregivers	Transgression-Related Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18, McCullough et al., 2006).	Modified version of the Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale (MPVS; Mynard & Joseph, 2000).	Only in the specific context of verbal victimisation, benevolence motivations were correlated to internalising symptomatology
Watson et al., 2015	184 early & middle adolescents, 56% boys, 11-15 years	Vignettes depicting bullying with forgiveness as one of the possible responses	Vignettes depicting different verbal and physical bullying scenarios	Advice to forgive linked to significantly less anger than either advice to avoid or exact revenge. Participants were most likely to follow the advice to engage in avoidance than other advice

that forgiveness is an asset to adolescent victims of bullying. Nevertheless, other potentially adaptive traits and coping processes may be needed. In the real world, forgiveness – or not forgiving and holding a grudge – occur in a social context. Consequently, its effects must occur within a wider array of risk and protective factors. We undertook the present study to explore the possible facilitative role of forgiveness in conjunction with the contextual variable of friendship bonds, which has been found to have considerable buffering effect on the consequences of victimisation by school bullies, as detailed later.

Friendship as a Contextual Protective Factor

Positive peer relationships, and friendships in particular, have been found to be moderating agents for the debilitating psychological effects seen in the victims of bullying. Recent reports reveal that having fewer friends increases the likelihood of an adolescent being subjected to victimisation by bullies. In one study, nearly half the adolescents who self-identified as victims of bullying were found to lack mutually beneficial peer relationships (Kochel, Ladd, Bagwell, & Yabko, 2015). Bukowski, Buhrmester, and Underwood (2011) observed that adolescents who are bullies typically target youth who do not have friends and are socially withdrawn, making them unlikely to retaliate.

The *friendship protection hypothesis* states that peer relationships serve as a protective factor against bullying because friends will intervene to protect the victims (Kendrick et al., 2012). Kendrick et al. (2012) found that higher levels of perceived support from peers and higher friendship quality correlated with lower levels of victimisation. Reavis, Donohue, and Upchurch (2015) demonstrated that if children face negative peer experiences when no one intervenes on their behalf, they develop more depression and anger, resulting in an overall negative mood (Reavis et al., 2015).

Pickering (2007) found that forgiveness in children is linked to acceptance by peers in general and to reciprocal friendships. This may be because the peers welcome the opportunity to end an unpleasant conflict situation, either within their social circle or at the school. On the other hand, while school bullies often receive, unfortunately, peer support when they misbehave (Poyhonen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012), children and adolescents who wish to forgive may not find the same level of peer support. Indeed, any act of forgiveness in a somehow hostile social setting would require courage and, possibly, the support of friends and other peers. Thus, Pickering's observations (2007) suggest that forgiveness and friendship may operate as interacting protective factors. It is also very possible, of course, that forgiveness and friendship are two separate protective factors whose effects are simply additive.

Hypotheses of the present study

We expected, first of all, that victimisation by school bullies would be correlated positively with anger (trait and state), depression and anxiety, and correlated negatively with appropriate anger control. Second, we expected forgiveness to be a negative predictor of maladjustment (in terms of anger, depression and anxiety) and a positive predictor of anger control. Third, we hypothesised that those participants who indicated that they have at a best friend would be better adjusted than those without friends. Finally, we

expected forgiveness and friendship to contribute both additively and interactively to the negative prediction of maladjustment and the positive prediction of anger control. More specifically, we expected a stronger effect for participants high in forgivingness who also had a best friend when compared to participants who were highly forgiving without having a best friend, or vice-versa. Our last set of hypotheses pertained to interactions with victimisation. We expected both forgiveness and friendship status to be particularly potent buffer against maladjustment for victims of school bullies.

Method

Participants

Participants were 2,105 adolescents ($N = 979$ boys; 1126 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 15.9$ years at time of recruitment; $SD = 1.86$; age range 13–20). Their school levels included middle and secondary school. Middle school: year 2, $n = 125$; year 3, $n = 134$. Secondary school: year 1, $n = 468$; year 2, $n = 400$; year 3, $n = 320$; year 4, $n = 294$; year 5, $n = 364$. 96.6% were of Italian nationality. Parents' educational levels were as follows: elementary school, 2.6% fathers, 1.5% mothers; middle school, 23.2%, 18.6%; secondary school, 44.6%, 46.1%; bachelor's or master's degree, 18.0%, 23.3%; postgraduate specialisation school or PhD, 11.4%, 10.1%, missing data 0.2%, 0.4%.

The participants' parental occupations varied substantially, with the majority of paternal occupation titles encompassing 8.9% freelance (5.7% maternal), 13.3% employee-teacher (23.5% maternal), and 13.1% workman (21.0% housewife).

Instruments

Questionnaires were back-translated, or translated into Italian and then translated again into English by a third party translator, to confirm content validity.

Victimisation by bullies. We employed the *Florence Bullying-Victimisation Scale* (FBVS) to evaluate the level of victimisation by bullies among adolescent participants. The FBVS is a reliable fourteen-item scale, which asks participants to rate the amount of physical (4 items), verbal (3 items) and indirect-relational (3 items) bullying they have experienced over the past year (Palladino, Nocentini, & Menesini, 2012). Each participant rated the frequency of victimisation on a five-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Once or twice*, 3 = *One or two times a month*, 4 = *Once a week*, 5 = *Several times a week*) (Palladino et al., 2012).

Depression. The *Children's Depression Inventory* (CDI) scale was used to measure the participants' level of depressive symptoms. Respondents are prompted to characterise their feelings and behaviours over the preceding two weeks by asking participants to choose one of three response statements (Kovacs, 1982).

Anxiety. We employed the *State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-Y* (STAI-Y) to measure the participants' trait anxiety. The trait anxiety questions prompt responses to statements about feelings of calmness and security, asking respondents to indicate the applicability of each statement by picking one of four choices between *not at all*, *not very much*, *somewhat* and *very much so* (Julian, 2011).

Anger. The *State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory 2 C/A* (STAXI-2 C/A) (Brunner & Spielberger, 2009) measures emotions

and behaviours involving anger. The first section pertains to state anger, the second section pertains to trait anger and the third section measures anger control.

Forgiveness. The *Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory- 18* (TRIM-18; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998) measures forgiving and unforgiving motivations toward the offender after a particular identified transgression. The TRIM-18 has three subscales, Avoidance Motivation, Revenge Motivations, and Benevolence Motivations, with a total of 18 items, each rated on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). For the purpose of our study, we only considered Forgiveness, i.e. the Benevolence Motivations subscale.

Friendship. We used two self-report questions, one of which was similar to the prompt used in many classic studies on friendship (“Do you have a best friend?”). The second question in our analyses was eliminated from the analyses, to avoid problems of multicollinearity.

Procedure

All participants were recruited from middle and secondary schools selected to reflect the diversity of the population of Central and Southern Italy. Permission was obtained from the headmasters and the institutional school committees of the various participating schools. Accordingly, we obtained informed consent from parents of underage students. Pupils over 18 years of age were given informed consent forms. The response rate was 91%. Senior thesis students administered the questionnaires. Participants were tested over the course of two months. Respondents completed all five questionnaires in one session at their respective middle or high schools. The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology at Sapienza University of Rome.

Data analysis

The inter-correlations among the variables used in the regression analyses are displayed in Table 2. We computed moderated regression analyses with the adjustment measures (depression, anxiety, and the three anger scales) as dependent variables. Victimization, forgiveness and friendship were used as predictors. All the analyses were conducted controlling for

Table 2
Correlations of variables used in multiple regression analysis (n = 2105)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Forgiveness	1						
2. Victimization	.00	1					
3. Depression	-.09***	.35***	1				
4. Anxiety	-.03	.28***	.77***	1			
5. State Anger	-.04	.26***	.45***	.41***	1		
6. Trait Anger	-.09***	.14***	.36***	.38***	.29***	1	
7. Anger Control	.18***	-.04	-.20***	-.18***	-.14***	-.20***	1
<i>M</i>	14.71	17.52	39.46	45.62	13.01	19.82	10.96
<i>SD</i>	6.03	4.89	7.08	10.34	3.60	3.62	2.53
α	.82	.84	.71	.90	.84	.88	.72

Note: * $p < .05$, two-tailed; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed; *** $p < .001$, two-tailed

participants’ gender, which was entered as covariate. Table 3 is a summary of the multiple-regression results.

Results

Depression

As shown in Table 3, each of the hypothesised risk and protective factors emerged as significant predictors of depression; victimisation was the strongest predictor of the three. The only interaction term that made a significant contribution to the prediction was the triple interaction Victimization × Friendship status × Forgiveness, $F(1,2096) = 3.86, \Delta R^2 = .002, p = .049$. Simple slopes analyses revealed that interaction between Victimization and Friendship was significant for participants with high scores in Forgiveness, $F(1,2096) = 5.25, B = .23, p = .022$, but not for participants with low scores in Forgiveness, $F(1,2096) = 0.11, B = -.03, p = .743$. Having a best friend is likely to reduce the effect of victimisation on depression scores in more forgiving participants, compared to less forgiving participants.

Anxiety

Both Victimization and Friendship status were significant predictors of anxiety scores. There were no significant findings either for the main effect of forgiveness or for any of the interactions. More victimised participants having no best friends were more likely to report higher anxiety than less victimised participants having a best friend.

Anger

State anger. The main effect of Victimization was significant, whereas the main effect of Forgiveness was only marginally significant. No interaction effect was significant, and the main effect of Friendship status was also not significant.

Trait anger. There were two significant main effects, for Forgiveness and Victimization, as well as a significant interaction for Victimization × Friendship Status. Simple slopes analyses indicated that victimisation has a stronger negative effect on trait anger in participants with no best friends, $B = .23, SE = .03, p < .001$, compared to participants having a best friend, $B = .07, SE = .01, p < .001$.

Anger Control. The only significant finding was for Forgiveness, which was positively with Anger Control. Victimization was only marginally significant; less victimised participants tended to have more anger control than more victimised participants.

Discussion

We had expected that the protective factors of forgiveness and friendship would act interactively to predict maladjustment. Moreover, we expected that both forgiveness and friendship status to be particularly potent buffer against maladjustment for victims of school bullies. In particular, we expected a particularly strong effect for participants high in forgiveness who also had a best friend. However, the results were much more consistent with the additive model of risk and protection. Along these lines, as discussed in a classic article by Ladd and Burgess (2001), positive relational factors very often act in such an additive way to protect

Table 3
Multiple regression summary

Outcome: Depression	B	SE	t	R ²	F	p
Constant	37.47	.20	185.70	.21	68.43	<.001
Victimisation	.50	.03	17.86***			<.001
Friendship	2.22	.36	6.22***			<.001
Forgiveness	-.07	.02	-3.15**			.002
Victimisation × Friendship	.10	.07	1.41			.158
Victimisation × Forgiveness	<.01	<.01	.70			.483
Friendship × Forgiveness	-.03	.06	-.49			.626
Triple interaction	.02	.01	1.96*			.049
Gender	3.68	.28	13.28***			<.001
Outcome: Anxiety	B	SE	t	R ²	F	p
Constant	41.96	.30	140.73	.19	62.12	<.001
Victimisation	.59	.04	14.23***			<.001
Friendship	2.36	.53	4.47***			<.001
Forgiveness	-.04	.03	-1.10			.272
Victimisation × Friendship	.08	.10	.72			.471
Victimisation × Forgiveness	.01	.01	.89			.372
Friendship × Forgiveness	.01	.09	.13			.896
Triple interaction	<.01	.02	.28			.780
Gender	6.81	.41	16.62***			<.001
Outcome: State Anger	B	SE	t	R ²	F	p
Constant	12.58	.11	113.56	.08	22.87	<.001
Victimisation	.19	.01	12.21***			<.001
Friendship	.22	.20	1.13			.258
Forgiveness	-.02	.01	-1.85			.065
Victimisation × Friendship	<.01	.04	<-.01			.998
Victimisation × Forgiveness	<.01	<.01	.57			.569
Friendship × Forgiveness	-.03	.03	-.94			.343
Triple interaction	.01	.01	1.20			.229
Gender	.80	.15	5.25***			<.001
Outcome: Trait Anger	B	SE	t	R ²	F	p
Constant	19.15	.11	170.66	.07	18.32	<.001
Victimisation	.11	.02	6.73***			<.001
Friendship	-.29	.20	-1.47			.141
Forgiveness	-.04	.01	-3.60***			<.001
Victimisation × Friendship	.16	.04	4.01***			<.001
Victimisation × Forgiveness	<.01	<.01	-.03			.979
Friendship × Forgiveness	-.02	.03	-.71			.475
Triple interaction	.01	.01	1.14			.254
Gender	1.21	.15	7.83***			<.001
Outcome: Anger control	B	SE	t	R ²	F	p
Constant	11.22	.08	141.21	.04	11.73	<.001
Victimisation	-.02	.01	-1.79			.073
Friendship	-.21	.14	-1.50			.133
Forgiveness	.07	.01	8.16***			<.001
Victimisation × Friendship	.03	.03	.97			.133
Victimisation × Forgiveness	<.01	<.01	-.16			.875
Friendship × Forgiveness	<.01	.02	.02			.982
Triple interaction	<.01	<.01	-.45			.653
Gender	-.50	.11	-4.54***			<.001

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

against relational risk factors: positive relationship factors act to reduce the effects of relationship risks, which include victimisation by school bullies, *regardless of the exact manner in which they operate*. On one hand, being a forgiving person may help cement friendships, on the other hand, friends may also moderate impulsive desires to be unforgiving.

There is considerable debate as to whether it is important to have a friend at all, even if the friend might not provide a good model of prosocial behaviour and social support (Schneider, 2016). Without minimising the negative effects of having an undesirable friend, our data provide some indication that simply having a best friend is helpful for victims of bullies. One important reason for this, mentioned previously, is that bullies are known to avoid targeting as victims any peers whom they perceive as having friends who would defend them.

Our findings about the protective functions of friendship are strong and corroborate those of many other studies (Fox & Boulton, 2006; Schneider, 2016). We found only one significant interaction between friendship status and victimisation by bullies, with regard to trait anger, suggesting that the protective effects of friendship for victimisation by bullies may depend on the outcome considered. In any case, issues with anger are indeed important determinants of maladjustment.

Among our criterion variables, forgiveness was most strongly correlated with appropriate anger management. Our data provide confirmation that forgiveness is in fact a protective factor for Italian adolescents. There were significant main effects for forgiveness with regard to depression and trait anger, which are important indicators of maladjustment. Moreover, among the many possible protective factors that have been discussed in the literature on child and adolescent psychopathology, forgiveness is arguably one of the few that can be taught and enhanced in both

clinical and school programmes (Enright, Knutson, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007). Therefore, being amenable to change and so significant for the wellbeing of both children and adolescents, it would be worthwhile to include work on forgiveness in prevention and treatment programmes.

A decided strength of our study is the statistical power that probably enabled us to discover the additive effects of the two protective factors under consideration. Another strength is the sampling of diverse and ample communities in both Central and Southern Italy. Nevertheless, our results should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First of all, the cross-sectional design of this study precludes any causal inference. Moreover, we relied on a single item to assess friendship, while multiple-item measures could have allowed to capture more of the explored variable. Thus, our exploration of friendship is limited to the important construct of the existence of friendships, not the quality of friendship or the nature of the interactions between the friends. Secondly, our measures of psychopathology, although they do measure an array of important components of maladjustment, do not tap multiple sources of information.

Future studies could investigate the quality of children's and adolescents' friendships more extensively and explore how friendship can buffer some of the adverse effects of victimisation by bullies. Finally, forgiveness, an important way of relieving anger and suffering, could be better investigated with regard to its effective role in emotional regulation.

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