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Bullying and Social Anxiety in Chinese Children: Moderating Roles of Trait Resilience and Psychological *Suzhi*

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ABSTRACT

Research examining the relationship between bullying victimization and social anxiety has mainly been conducted in Western countries, and little is known about the mechanisms underlying this relationship. This study explores the correlation between bullying victimization and social anxiety in a Chinese context and determines the moderating roles of psychological *suzhi* (a mental quality characterized by being steady, essential and implicit that affects adaptive, developmental, and creative behavior) and trait resilience among victims of bullying. Data were obtained from a stratified sample of 1903 children in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. All participants completed measures of bullying victimization, social anxiety, trait resilience, and psychological *suzhi*. The results indicated that, after controlling for grade, residential area, and parental marital status, bullying victimization positively predicted children's social anxiety. In addition, multi-group analysis suggested that the association in girls was stronger relative to that observed in boys. Regarding underlying processes, trait resilience moderated the effect of bullying victimization on social anxiety only in girls. Further assessment of the latent interaction effects indicated that the protective effect of trait resilience was stronger for girls experiencing high, relative to low, levels of bullying victimization, and psychological *suzhi* buffered against the detrimental effects of bullying on children's social anxiety. Most notably, unlike the moderating effect of resilience, the buffering effect of psychological *suzhi* against social anxiety was most prominent when bullying victimization was low. Findings underscore the importance of enhancing trait resilience and psychological *suzhi* in interventions designed to reduce children's social anxiety.

1. Introduction

Children's behavior and social experience, particularly with respect to peer relationships, have received increasing attention from researchers because of their critical role in the socialization process (Yuan, Shao, Liang, & Bian, 2014). Bullying, which reflects dysfunctional peer relationships, can be defined as intentionally aggressive acts that are carried out repeatedly and involve a certain imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). Bullying can take many forms, including direct physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, and biting) and verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling and teasing in a hurtful way), or relational bullying (e.g., social exclusion and gossiping).

In China, school bullying has been a serious problem and has shown an escalating trend in recent years (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Its pronounced effects on children's physical and mental health and safety has aroused widespread

public concern in China. A field survey by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China found that, among 104,834 students across China's 22 provinces, the incidence of campus bullying was 33.36%, while 28.66% and 4.7% of participants reported being bullied sometimes and frequently, respectively (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Moreover, the prevalence of peer victimization increased throughout elementary school (Olweus, 1993). The consequences of bullying can be severe and profound (Wu, Zhang, Su, & Hu, 2015). A recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies showed that children who were bullied had an increased risk of internalizing problems including loneliness, depression, and social anxiety (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010).

Social anxiety consists of three components: (a) the experience of distress, discomfort, fear, or anxiety in social situations (social distress); (b) deliberate avoidance of social situations (social avoidance); and (c) fear of receiving negative evaluations from others (Watson & Friend, 1969). Social anxiety has particularly negative consequences in elementary school, as it impedes the development of social skills, which is vital for the development of children of this age (Alkozei, Cooper, & Creswell, 2014; Liu, Coplan, Ooi, Chen, & Li, 2015; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006).

Given the harmful effects of social anxiety, factors that aid in its reduction should be identified. However, existing research examining this issue has been conducted predominantly in Western countries; few empirical studies have examined the factors that reduce social anxiety in Chinese children (Liu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2016). Moreover, although bullying victimization is well-known risk factor for social anxiety, less is known about the mechanisms underlying this relationship. Additionally, the effect size of the association between bullying and social anxiety is weak to moderate, indicating individual variation (Sugimura & Rudolph, 2012). Therefore, individual characteristics that reduce social anxiety in children who have experienced negative events such as bullying should be identified to develop interventions for them.

Trait resilience and psychological *suzhi*, which were conceived in Western countries and China, respectively, are both individual-level protective factors. Empirical research has shown that these two variables can buffer the negative effects of stressful events on mental health (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2015; Sapouna & Wolke, 2013; Wang, 2013). Therefore, they could reduce the negative effects of school bullying. Trait resilience refers to individuals' ability to recover from stressful events, while psychological *suzhi* has broader effects, including both positive coping capacity and mental qualities observed under nonstressful circumstances. In this study, we explored and compared the roles of trait resilience and psychological *suzhi* in a large cohort of children in China.

1.1. Association between bullying victimization and social anxiety

Early peer interaction forms the basis of future social communication, as children and adolescents often rely on personal peer experience when evaluating themselves and others. According to social information processing theory, as children internalize the experience of being bullied, they may begin to infer the presence of hostile intent in various events in their lives, even when none exists. In addition, they could gradually form negative self-evaluations (Zhang et al., 2009). Bullying involves the victim's unwilling participation in threatening and dangerous interactions, which could reinforce negative self-evaluations and lead to the avoidance of social interaction, resulting in social anxiety (Kearney, 2001).

Numerous studies have shown that bullying victimization was associated with various psychosocial consequences, particularly those involving internalizing problems (for reviews, see Espelage & Holt, 2001). For instance, several Chinese studies examining the relationship between bullying victimization and internalizing problems have indicated that child victimization increases the risk of social anxiety (Dong, 2015; Zhang et al., 2009). These findings are similar to a majority of Western studies such as Reijntjes et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. A meta-analysis of 65 studies (55 Western studies and 10 Eastern studies, but only 3 of the latter included social anxiety) conducted by Wu et al. (2015) examined the relationship between bullying victimization and children's emotional maladjustment symptoms. They found that bullying victimization is positively correlated with children's social anxiety. Furthermore, cultural backgrounds influenced this link, making it more robust in Western cultures; this is possibly due to the differing attitudes toward bullying victimization in those countries. Based on this, we infer that cultural differences might also influence the relationship between bullying victimization and children's social anxiety.

Wu et al. (2015) also found that the correlation was stronger for girls than for boys, which is at odds with the results of Reijntjes et al.'s meta-analysis. However, to our knowledge, no Chinese research has examined the moderating effects of sex on the relationship between bullying victimization and children's social anxiety. In fact, there is little research on this relationship overall in China. Therefore, research examining the relationship between bullying victimization and social anxiety in large nationally representative samples is needed.

1.2. The buffering role of trait resilience

Bullying victimization is generally harmful to children's psychological health; however, some children who are bullied do not experience these effects (Luthar, 1993). One reason could be trait resilience. This is a personal trait that allows individuals to readily recover from stressful events (Connor & Davidson, 2003). According to the diathesis-stress model, although there is no difference between vulnerable and resilient individuals during adversity, the relationship between adverse events and subsequent mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety, might be altered by trait resilience (Hu et al., 2015). A growing body of empirical research has shown that children with high levels of resilience exhibited fewer negative outcomes after experiencing adversity (Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014; Sapouna & Wolke,2013). For example, Ye et al. (2016) found that resilience was a protective factor against depressive symptoms and mitigated the effects of peer victimization on Chinese migrant children's depressive symptoms. Therefore, we can infer that trait resilience, as a moderator, could attenuate the adverse effects of victimization on social anxiety.