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# The relationship between peer-victimization, cognitive appraisals, and adjustment:

## A systematic review

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### INTRODUCTION

- Peer-victimisation is a frequent experience for many children and adolescents, and one which has both an immediate and long-term relationship with poor adjustment (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Reijntjes et al., 2011; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).
- The impact of peer-victimisation can be examined using the transactional model of stress (TMS) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
- Outcomes to a stressful situation are said to occur following a process of primary and secondary cognitive appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
- In the context of their own personal goals and values, primary appraisals involve an evaluation of the importance of the experience to the individual.
- Primary appraisal can result in the situation being evaluated as potentially threatening, harmful or involving the risk of loss, or potentially challenging but with the possibility for personal growth (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
- Secondary appraisals involve an evaluation of the resources the individual has available, and to what extent these resources may be useful, in managing the situation.
- Drawing upon the socio-ecological framework of bullying (Espelage, 2014; Swearer & Hymel, 2015) these resources can be from an individual level (i.e. self-efficacy), or from the relationship level, (i.e. perceived social support from friends, parents and teachers).

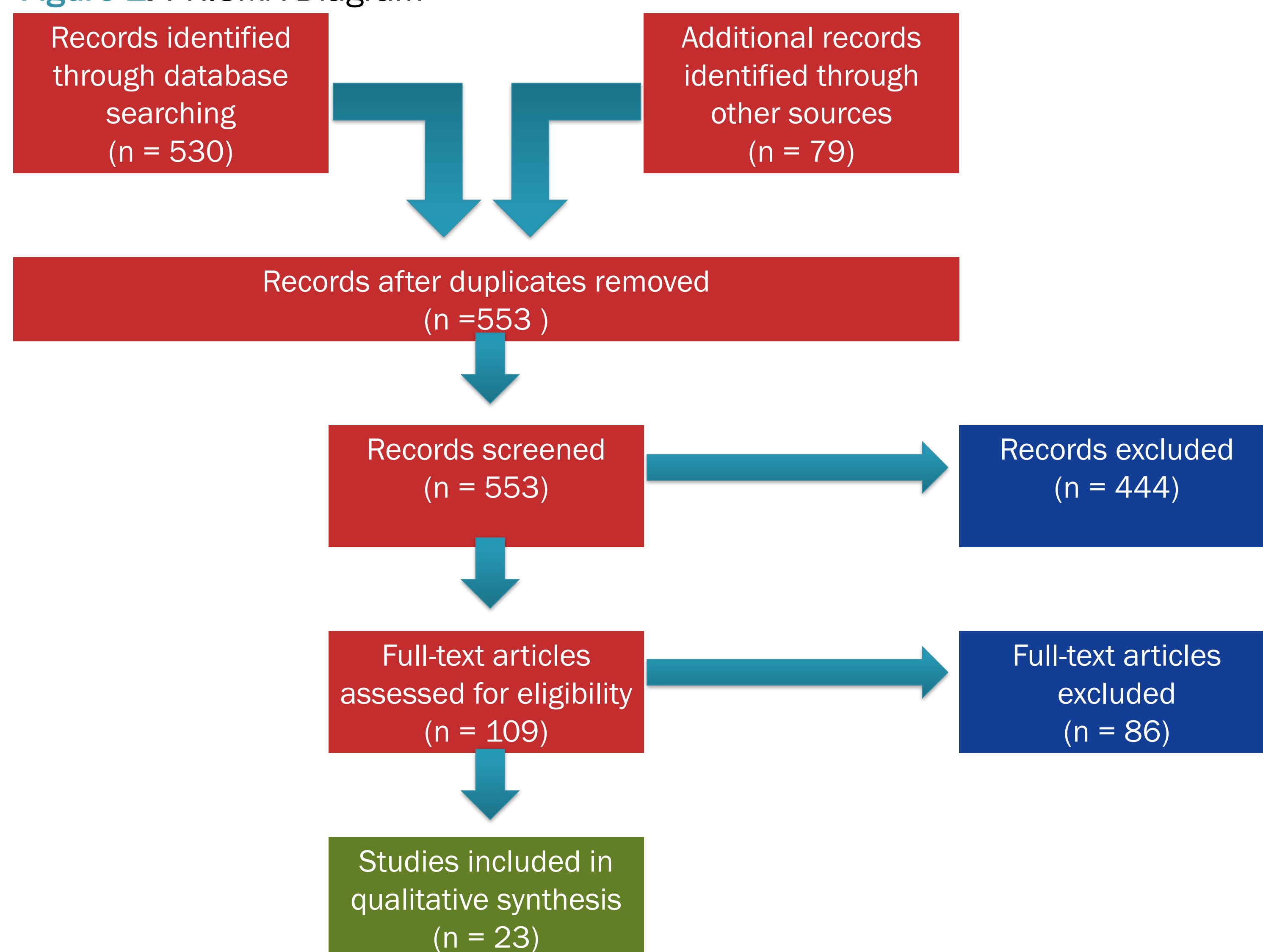
### Aim of the current study

- Previous research has demonstrated that cognitive appraisals play a role in the relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment (i.e. Flashpohler et al., 2009; Terranova, 2009).
- Therefore, the aim of this systematic review is to synthesize this literature and examine the extent to which primary appraisals mediate, and secondary appraisals moderate, the relationship between peer-victimization and adjustment.

### METHOD

- A comprehensive search of databases (including PsychArticles, PsychInfo, and Web of Science) was undertaken.
- Search terms referred to peer-victimisation (e.g. bullying), appraisal (e.g. threat appraisal), and adjustment (e.g. depression).
- To be included in the review, papers needed to be written in English, be published in a peer-reviewed journal, include measures of all three variables of interest, and include a child/ adolescent sample (<18 years old).
- This review followed the PRISMA reporting guidelines for systematic reviews (PRISMA group, 2009), see Figure 1.

Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram



- The methodological quality of the included papers was evaluated using an adapted version of the Munn et al., (2014) checklist for prevalence studies.
- The criteria included eight questions assessing sampling procedures, method, and analysis in each study.
- The total quality appraisal scores on the included studies ranged from 5.5 to 8.
- All studies, irrespective of quality score were included in the analysis.
- The characteristics of the 23 included studies are outlined in figure 2.

### RESULTS

Figure 2: Study Characteristics



#### SAMPLE

- Included papers were published between 1999 and 2016.
- Sample sizes ranged from 90 to 2,790 participants, aged 8 to 19 years old.
- The majority of papers (N=21) recruited participants through schools.
- Longitudinal designs were used in three studies, the remaining 20 studies employed cross-sectional designs.



#### MEASURES OF APPRAISAL:

- Five studies included a measure of primary appraisal; all papers measured threat, three papers measured control, and two papers measured blame.
- Three forms of secondary appraisal were measured; global perceived social support (N=4), domain specific social support (i.e. teacher/ friend) (N=12), and self-efficacy (N=2).
- No papers included a measure of both primary and secondary appraisal.



#### ANALYSIS

- Primary appraisals were tested as mediating variables in all five studies.
- The two studies that measured self-efficacy, tested this as a mediating variable.
- Global social support was tested as a moderator in one paper, as a mediator in one paper and as a moderator and mediator in one paper.
- Domain specific social support was tested as a moderator in 11 papers and as a mediator in one paper.

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- ✓ Threat and control appraisals were found to partially mediate the relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment.
- ✗ Blame appraisals did not mediate this relationship.
- ✓ Aspects of self-efficacy and global perceived social support mediated the relationship.
- ✓ Perceived social support from particular individuals (i.e. teachers, friends) moderated the relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment.
- ✗ The moderating role of perceived social support from friends was not consistently found to be protective.
- ✓ Findings suggest that the role of appraisals may be dependent on the gender of the victim, and the type of victimisation experienced.

### DISCUSSION

- The TMS proposes that the outcome to a situation is dependent on appraisal processes. The consistent findings that threat and control appraisals, and global social support and aspects of self-efficacy, partially mediate the relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment, supports this theoretical argument.
- The role of domain specific social support highlights the protective nature of perceived support from parents and teachers, supporting the importance of secondary appraisals posited by the TMS.
- Findings on the role of perceived support from friends were inconsistent and the role of such forms of support warrants further investigation.
- The findings of the review demonstrate the utility of the TMS in aiding our understanding of the relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment. Integrating the transactional model of stress and the socio-ecological framework of bullying would facilitate a more multi-dimensional understanding of the process through which, and the context within which, peer-victimisation predicts adjustment.
- The majority of the studies included in this review, employed cross-sectional designs, impeding our ability to draw causal inferences. Future research should make greater use of longitudinal designs.
- Specifically, future research should examine how continued peer-victimisation affects the appraisal processes, and subsequently adjustment. In addition, gender differences and the role of different types of victimisation should be examined.
- Such research would facilitate a greater understanding of the complex relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment.