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The relationship between peer-victimisation, 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 & Pozzoii, 2009; Reintjes et al., 2011; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

The impact of peer-victimisation can be examined using the transactional model of stress (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. Flashphohler et al., 2009; Terranova, 2009).

Therefore, the aim of this systematic review is to synthesise 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.

RESULTS

Figure 2: Study Characteristics

Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram

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 contextual 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.