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# BPS Developmental Section Conference 2009



University of  
**Strathclyde**  
Law, Arts and  
Social Sciences

## **A longitudinal investigation of threat as a mediator of the effect of peer-victimisation upon depressive symptoms.**

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# Background: Peer-victimisation

Peer-victimisation (and bullying) is associated with numerous indices of children and young people's wellbeing, e.g., depression, anxiety, self-esteem, loneliness, self-harm, suicidal ideation, conduct problems, psychosomatic problems etc...

(WEB CLIP)

To inform intervention policy and practice, there is a pressing concern for research to clarify the *processes* underpinning these effects



# Why Depression?

Models of stress and coping propose that cognitive appraisals can mediate the relationship between stressor and adjustment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Threat appraisals are self-referential, context-specific cognitive *interpretations* of potentially negative outcomes (see Hunter & Boyle, 2004)

Threat appraisals overlap with depressogenic attributional *styles* (internal, stable, global attributions, negative inferences for negative events); the latter already shown to mediate the effects of peer-harassment upon depressive symptoms among 9- to 11-year-olds (Mezulis et al., 2006)



## Cross-sectional data

Characterological self-blame also mediates the relationship between victimization and internalizing symptoms (specifically, loneliness and social phobia) for preadolescent children (Graham & Juvonen, 1998)

Perceived control partially mediates effect of peer-victimisation upon loneliness (Catterson & Hunter, under review)

Perceived control and threat partially mediate effect of *non-discriminatory* peer-victimisation upon depression. Threat also partially mediates the effect of *discriminatory* peer-victimisation upon depression, though smaller portion of effect (Hunter, Durkin, Heim, Howe, & Bergin, under revision)



# Hypotheses

Higher levels of peer-victimisation will predict higher levels of depressive symptomatology

Changes in levels of peer-victimisation will predict changes in levels of perceived threat

Changes in perceived threat will (partially?) mediate the effect of victimisation upon depressive symptomatology



# Method

**Participants:** 349 pupils (47.9% male), aged 8- to 10-years-old (mean = 8.95, SD = 0.29) at Time 1

**Measures:** Peer-victimisation, threat appraisal (both Hunter et al., 2004), and depressive symptomatology (Birleson, 1981)

**Procedure:** All measures completed in schools, on two separate occasions (18 months apart)





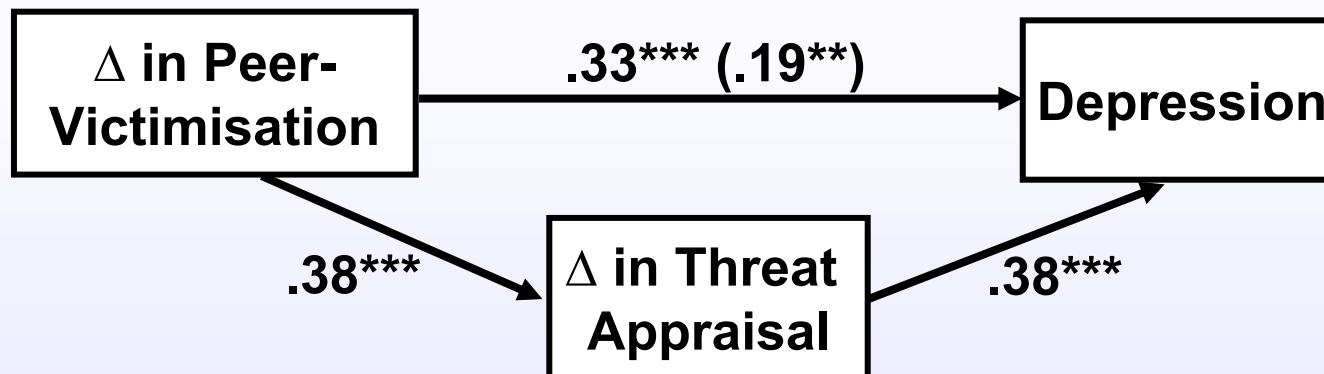
# Results

Unstandardised residual change scores were calculated for change in levels of (i) victimisation and (ii) threat appraisal

Regression analyses (controlling for gender, age, and depressive symptoms at T1) indicated that:

- *Change in victimisation* accounted for 10.4% of the variance in final *depression*,  $\beta = .33^{***}$
- *Change in victimisation* accounted for 13.7% of the variance in *threat change*,  $\beta = .38^{***}$
- When both *change in victimisation* and *change in threat* were included as predictors of final *depression*, both were significant predictors ( $\beta = .19^{**}$  &  $.38^{***}$  respectively).

## Results (cont.)



The reduction in the standardised beta for the prediction for depression by change in victimisation indicates possible partial mediation

The Sobel test confirmed the significance of the indirect effect ( $Sobel = 3.01, p = .003$ ). In fact, 43% of the effect of change in peer-victimisation upon depressive symptomatology was via change in threat appraisals



## Discussion

Link between *changes in victimisation* and *changes in appraisals* supports context-sensitivity of appraisals. Perhaps context-specific appraisals predict changes in depressogenic attributional styles (c.f. Crick & Dodge, 1994)?

These results highlight the importance of tackling perceptions that children hold regarding the situation in which they find themselves, and the social and psychological consequences it may have for them.

→ Important role for peer-counsellors?



# Future

Need to reduce shared-method variance (use peer-reports, parent-reports, teacher-reports, observations etc)

Examine link between appraisals and attributional style

Introduce more complexity/subtlety, i.e., examine more types of appraisal (control, blame, challenge etc), different types of victimisation (direct, verbal, relational, cyber), different outcomes (externalising, self-esteem, academic, etc)

## Acknowledgments:

We would like to thank all schools and pupils who took the time to participate in this research

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