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Psychological adjustment of bullied children: Attributions vs. Actions

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Thanks to…

My colleagues on the ESRC project:
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Supervised students conducting research in this area:
Jennifer Catterson (University of Strathclyde)
Aisha Javaid (University of Strathclyde)

Background

Different authors use the terms 'peer-victimisation' and 'bullying' interchangeably, and while evidence suggests that they are qualitatively different experiences (see Hunter et al., 2007) such differences are generally small in magnitude.

Approximately 25% of Primary school children report being bullied (Whitney & Smith,1993). My MRes data suggests a further 31% experience 'less serious' peer-aggression.

Background

Effects of bullying/aggression:

- Numerous negative psych-social effects.

- These persist beyond the duration of the aggression (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996), and may even endure into adult life (Schäfer et al., 2004).

Such findings suggest that many victims find it hard to cope effectively with peer-aggression.

Additionally, anti-bullying interventions vary enormously in their successes rates, and it seems reasonable to assume that there will always be bullying

So, what may be more important is helping children and young people to **successfully negotiate** bullying incidents.

"Successful negotiation"?

What do I mean by 'successful negotiation'?

1. Deployment of a strategy(s) which helps to prevent peer-aggression from recurring: *problem-focused; practical resilience.*

2. Coping with the socio-emotional implications of being a victim of bullying: *emotion-focused; psychological resilience.*

It is mainly the second aspect of negotiation which I am interested in, although the first is also touched upon.

Coping Processes

Underpinning my work has been the process theory of stress and coping developed by Richard Lazarus and his colleagues:

Person Variables
(e.g. age, gender)

Situation Variables
(e.g. duration/frequency of victimisation)

Background variables are the beginning of the stress process, and influence the interpretations we place upon events.

Coping Processes

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Person Variables
(e.g. age, gender)

Situation Variables
(e.g. duration/frequency of victimisation)

Appraisals
(e.g. threat, challenge, control)
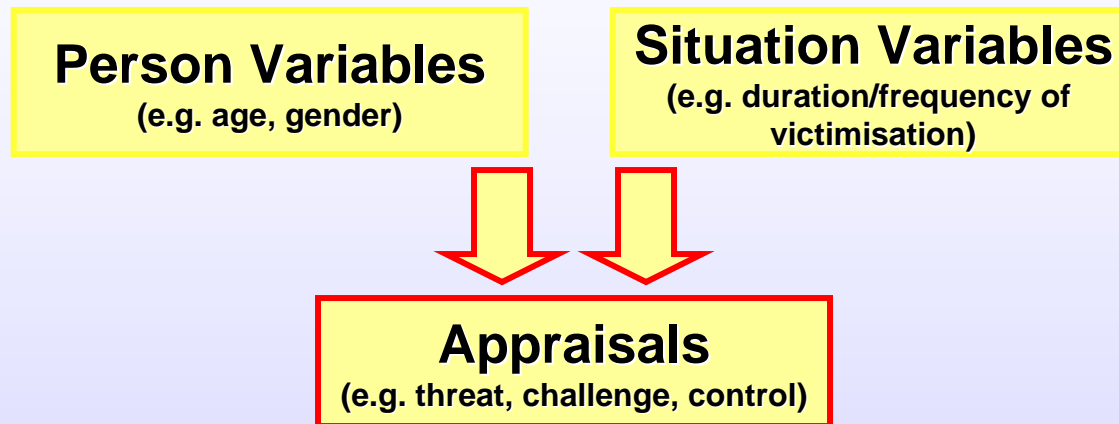
Appraisals are the interpretations that individuals make relating to a specific experience. These are conceptually similar to, and overlap with, other cognitive attributions.

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Coping Strategy Use
(Emotion- and problem-focused)

Specific situational appraisals influence the choice of coping strategy, and coping strategies can be either emotion-focused or problem-focused.

Coping Processes

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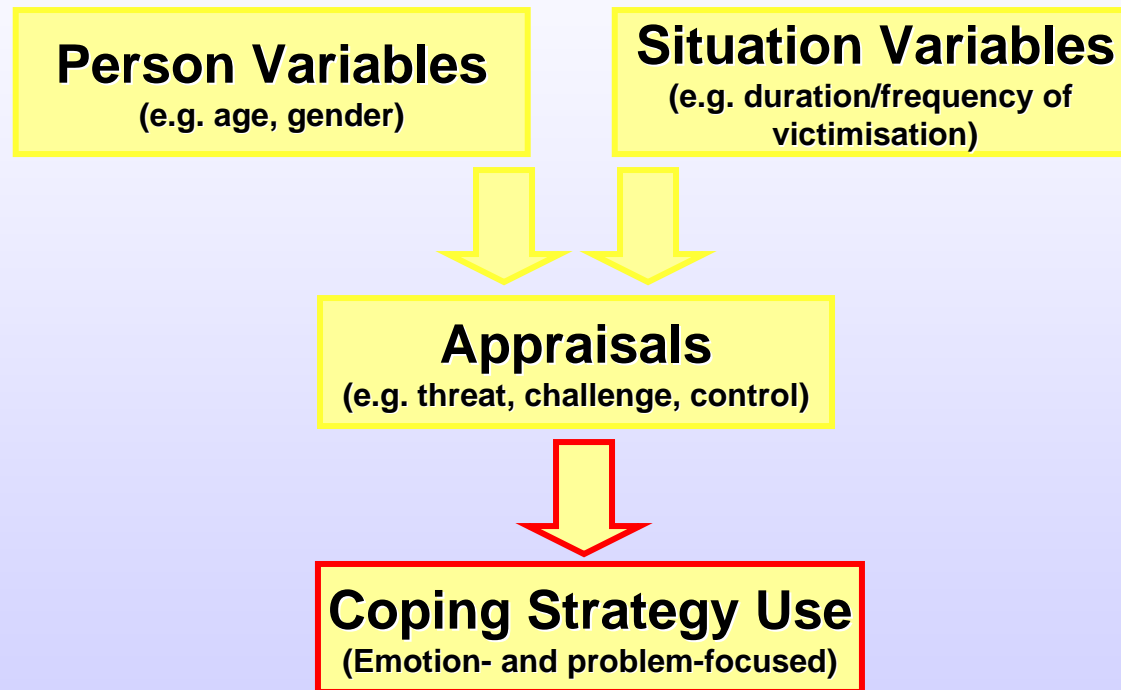
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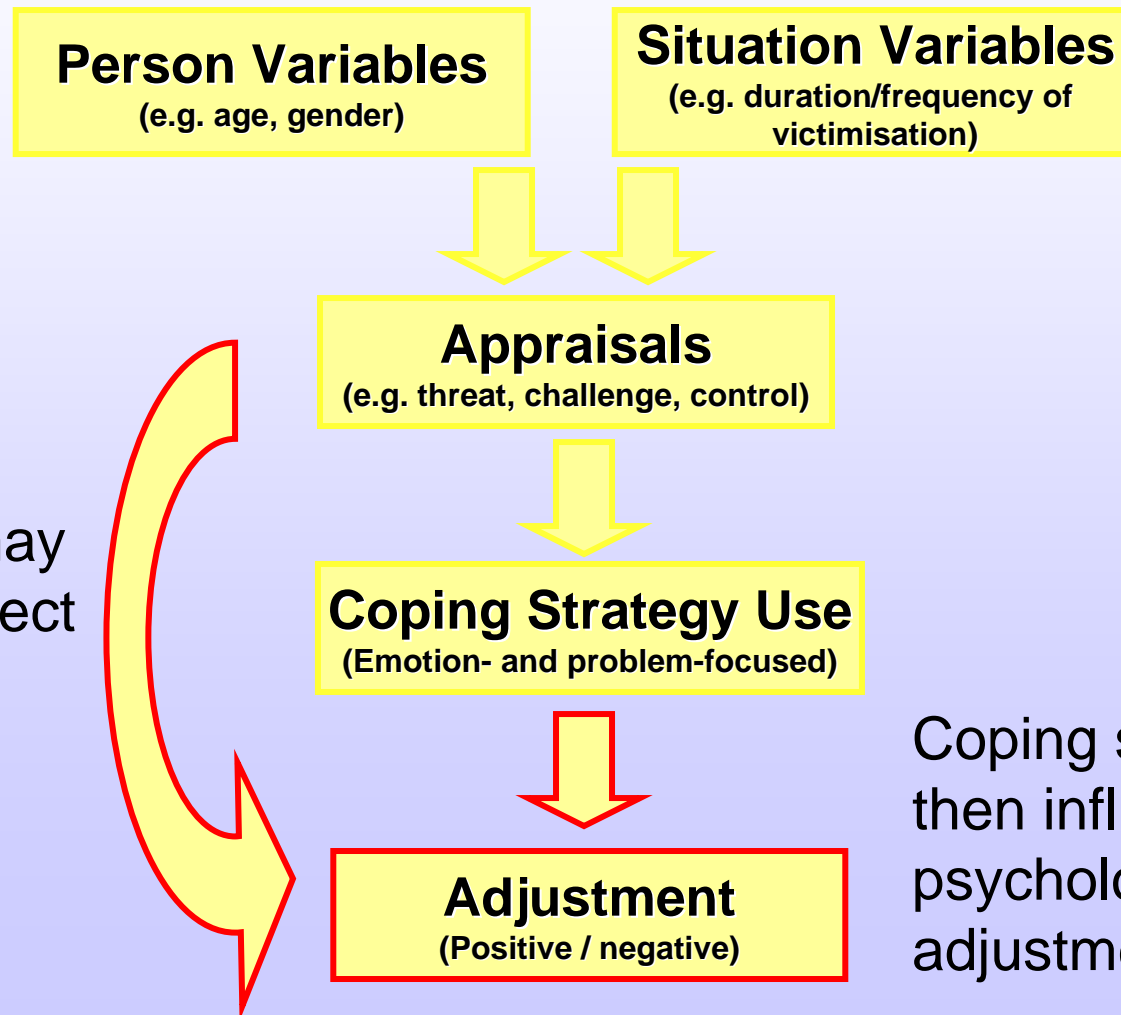
Appraisals may also have direct effects on adjustment.

Coping Strategy Use
(Emotion- and problem-focused)

Adjustment
(Positive / negative)

Coping strategies then influence psychological adjustment.

Coping and Victimisation

- Plenty of research looking at coping strategies (e.g. Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Miller et al., 2000; Olafsen & Viemerö, 2000; Sharp, 1995; etc etc).

Much less relating to appraisals within the aggression context.

- Rose & Abramson (1992): childhood emotional abuse is more likely to induce negative attributional styles than other types of life events because hopelessness inducing cognitions are directly supplied to the child by the abuser e.g. "you're stupid" (internal, stable, global).

- Work in other areas of children and young people's lives suggests appraisals have important effects on adjustment (Jouriles et al., 2000; Grych et al., 2003; Thies & Walsh, 1999) and it is already clear that peer-aggression/victimisation can lead to depression (see esp. Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Study 1A. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment

Data from 331 victimised school pupils aged 8 to 13 years old (mean = 10.40, SD = 1.66).

All completed measures of:

- peer-victimisation – sum of the types experienced during preceding two weeks * frequency

- control and threat appraisal (Hunter et al., 2004)

- coping strategy use – individual, bullying-specific coping strategies were assessed: "Told someone"; "Stood up to them, told them to stop"; "Wished you could change something (how you felt, what happened)"; "Hit them"; "Stayed away from them"; "Ignored them, so they would stop"; "Did something to take your mind off the bullying"

- depressive symptoms (Birleson, 1981)

Study 1A. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment

Hierarchical Regression, predicting Depressive Symptoms :

Step 1. Gender, Age, Victimisation.

- F-change$_{3,234}$ = 15.31, $p <$ .000, R$^2_{change}$ = .164.

- Victimisation a significant predictor, final β = .17, $p =$ .005.

- Gender also a significant predictor, final standardized beta (β) = .13, $p =$ .024. Girls significantly higher depressive symptoms.

Step 2. Threat and control appraisals.

- F-change$_{2,232}$ = 27.23, $p <$ .000, R$^2_{change}$ = .159.

- Threat was a significant predictor, final β = .26, $p <$ .000.

- Control was a significant predictor, final β was -.17, $p =$ .017.

Study 1A. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment

Hierarchical regression, predicting Depressive Symptoms :

Step 3. Coping Strategies.

- F-change$_{7,225}$ = 2.33, p = .026, R$^2_{change}$ = .046.

- Only one coping strategy was a significant individual predictor: "Stood up to them, told them to stop", final $ß$ = -.13, p = .03.

Cross-Sectional Conclusions.

- As important as the degree of victimisation *per se* appears to be how victims appraise the aggressive incident(s).

- Taken as a whole, coping strategies play a relatively small role in predicting depressive symptoms. Only the non-aggressive, assertive coping strategy was a significant individual predictor.

Study 1B. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment

Data from 243 victimised school pupils, same cohort as above.

All completed measures of:

- <u>As before</u> - peer-victimisation, control and threat appraisal (Hunter et al., 2004), coping strategy use.

- <u>Depression</u> (Birleson, 1981) – completed twice: first, one year prior to all the other measures, then again six months after completion of all other measures.
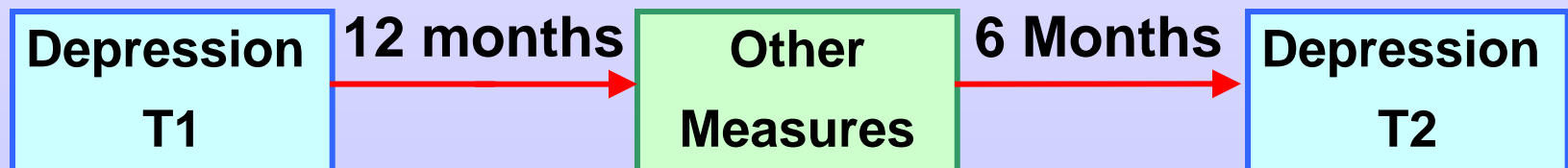
| Depression T1 | → 12 months → | Other Measures | → 6 Months → | Depression T2 |

Study 1B. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment

Hierarchical Regression, predicting Depressive Symptoms :

Step 1. Gender, Age, Victimisation, Depressive Symptoms at Pre-Test).

- F-change$_{4,203}$ = 11.07, p < .000, R^2_{change} = .179.

- Depressive symptoms at pre-test were a significant predictor of final depressive symptoms, final β = .25, p < .000.

- Victimisation **not** a significant predictor, final β = .03, p = .657.

Step 2. Threat and control appraisals.

- F-change$_{2,201}$ = 9.22, p < .000, R^2_{change} = .069.

- Threat marginally significant predictor, final β = .15, p = .063.

- Control was a significant predictor, final β was -.17, p = .023.

Study 1B. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment

Hierarchical regression, predicting Depressive Symptoms :

Step 3. Coping Strategies.

- F-change$_{7,194}$ = 1.79, p = .091, R^2_{change} = .046.

- Two coping strategies were significant individual predictors: "Stood up to them, told them to stop", final β = -.14, p = .039; and, "Hit them", final β = .16, p = .019.

Longitudinal Conclusions.

- Degree of victimisation doesn't predict depressive symptoms six months later, if earlier levels of depression are included.

- Appraisals again account for more variance in depressive symptoms than do coping strategies.

- Coping strategies play a smaller role in predicting depressive incidents. The non-aggressive, assertive coping strategy was a significant individual predictor, as was the aggressive strategy.

Study 1. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment – Overall Conclusions

Effects of aggression:

- Modest concurrent association, but no effect six months later (if previous levels of depressive symptoms are taken into consideration).

Effects of appraisals (threat and control):

- Quite a large concurrent association, most so for threat.

- Smaller prospective effects, though both still predict depressive symptoms.

Effects of coping strategies:

- Quite small concurrent and prospective effects. Both significant predictors are problem-focused.

- Assertive strategy had positive concurrent and prospective effects.

- Aggressive strategy had long-term detrimental effect.

Investigated role of social identity among victims of bullying.

- Social identity functions as a means of constructing and maintaining a positive self-image.

- Ethnic identity has been consistently correlated with self-esteem among children and adolescents from minority ethnic groups (DuBois et al., 2002; Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Wong et al., 2003).

- Thus, group identification may act as a coping resource for challenges to identity, and may achieve this by influencing coping process variables.

Study 2. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment: Minority and Majority differences?

Data from 925 school pupils aged 8 to 12 years old (mean = 9.81, SD = 0.91). Minority n = 580; Majority n = 345.

All completed measures of:

- <u>bullying</u> – classified as having experience isolated aggression or as bullied (Hunter et al., 2004)

- <u>control and threat appraisal</u> (Hunter et al., 2004)

- <u>coping strategy use</u> – SRCM (Causey & Dubow, 1992), assessing: "Internalising", "Externalising", "Seeking Social Support", "Distancing", and "Self-reliance / Problem Solving"

- <u>depression</u> (CDI-S, Kovacs, 1985)

- <u>strength of primary identity</u> – measure developed here, based on the work of Barrett (2007).

Results – SEM analyses

Final model, showing *unmediated* standardized paths
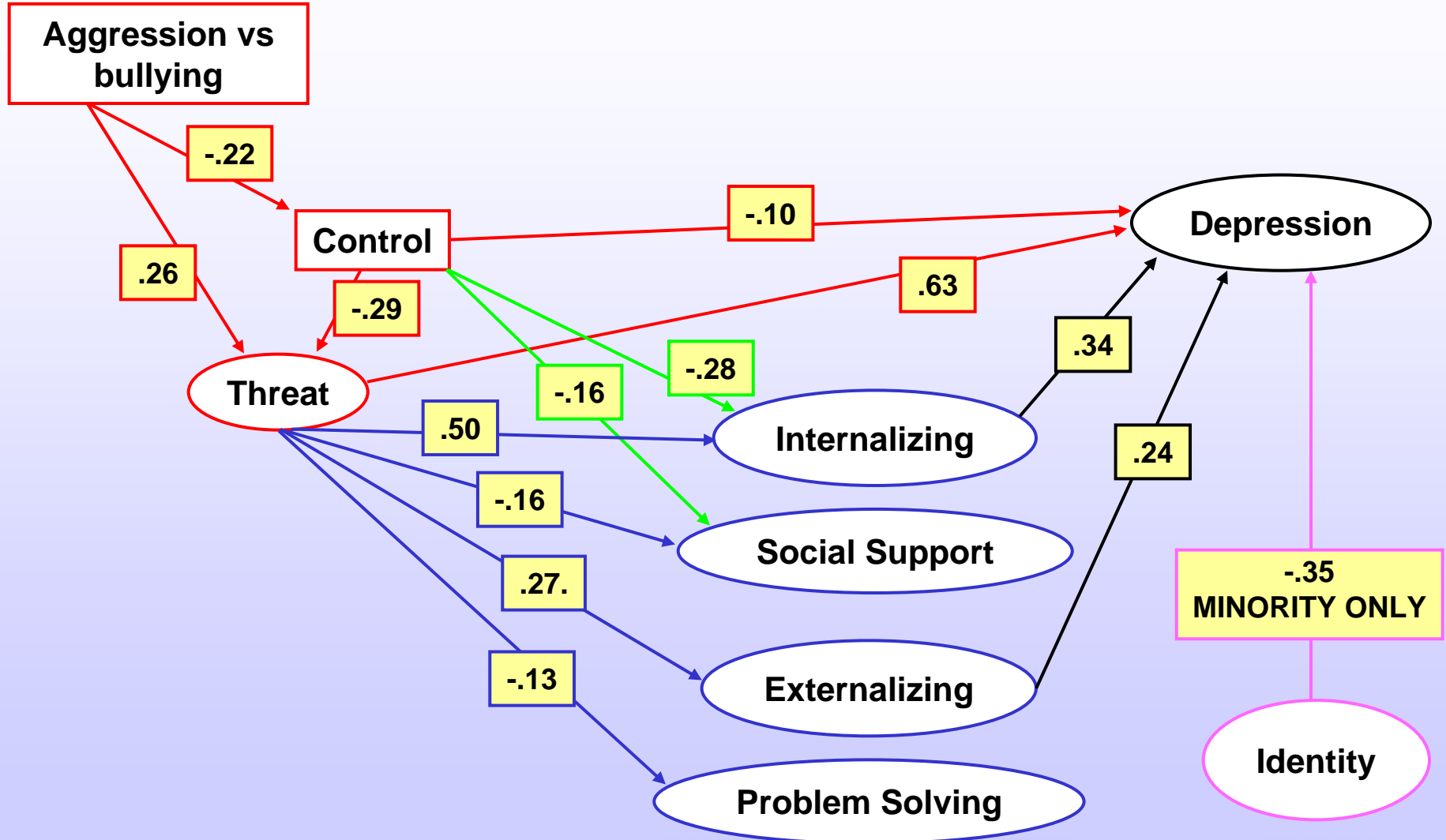
Study 2. Appraisals, Coping Strategies and Adjustment: Minority and Majority differences?

Conclusions:

- Appraisals have direct effects on adjustment.

- Effects of appraisals may be partially mediated through coping strategies.

- Cultural/religious identity can act as a coping resource, but only does so for minority ethnic and religious groups. This operates outside the 'traditional' coping route.

Catterson & Hunter – Loneliness & Appraisals

Extending analysis of influence of appraisals to further appraisals, and different outcomes:

- Loneliness taken as measure of adjustment.

- Threat and control assessed.

- Appraisals of self-blame also assessed – see Gordon Harold's work with children living with parental conflict.

Catterson & Hunter – Loneliness & Appraisals

N = 110 P5 and P7, aged 8 to 12 years old with a mean age of 10.08 (SD= 1.04). Completed:

- degree of peer-victimisation (Owens et al., 2005)

- loneliness (Asher et al., 1984)

- threat (Hunter et al., 2004)

- control and self-blame developed here. Pupils were asked "How do you feel about what happens to you?" followed by six statements referring to control (e.g. "If other kids pick on me, I am able to stop them") and seven statements relating to self-blame (e.g. "It's usually my fault when I get called names"). Measures showed moderate to good reliability (control, ∞ = .68; self-blame, ∞ = .62).

Catterson & Hunter – Loneliness & Appraisals

Hierarchical regression analyses:

- Victimisation predicted Loneliness (ß = .39, $p < 0.001$; accounted for 15% of variance).

- Control and threat accounted for an additional 25% of variance in Loneliness: Final ßs: Threat = .27, $p < 0.05$; Control = -.26, $p < 0.01$; Self-Blame = .09, n.s.

→ So, victimisation influences loneliness. When this effect is controlled for, there is still a large effect of appraisals. However, only Threat and Control were significant individual predictors.

- Self-blame was **not** related to loneliness.

Javaid & Hunter – Adjustment & Appraisals

Further examination of control appraisals as mediators of the effects of victimisation upon adjustment:

- Depressive Symptoms taken as measure of adjustment.

- Two types of victimisation-specific control examined as mediators: Internal and Unknown.

- Attachment also examined

Javaid & Hunter – Adjustment & Appraisals

N = 272 S1, S2, S3, aged 11 to 14 years old. Completed:

- <u>degree of peer-victimisation</u> (Hunter et al., 2004)

- <u>depressive symptoms</u> (CESD-C: Radloff, 1977)

- <u>Attachment</u> (Muris et al., 2001): Secure, Insecure, or Avoidant

<u>Control measures developed for this study:</u>

- *Internal control*: extent to which victim themselves is responsible for dealing with aggression ("*When other kids are aggressive toward me, it is up to me to make sure it doesn't happen again*"), $\infty = .66$

- *Unknown Control*: extent to which no control can be attributed ("*Many times when other kids are aggressive toward me, I can't figure out why*"), $\infty = .68$

Javaid & Hunter – Adjustment & Appraisals

Regression based mediational analyses conducted, using only victims of peer-aggression:

- Attachment (secure vs. insecure/avoidant) and victimisation both significant predictors of depressive symptoms (together accounting for 37% of the variance).

- Of the two types of control, only Internal control was significantly predicted by victimisation. It was not, however, a mediator of the effects of victimisation on depressive symptoms.

- When attachment and victimisation were controlled for in a hierarchical regression, the control appraisals accounted for an additional 4% of variance in depressive symptoms: Final ßs: Internal Control = .01, *n.s.*; Unknown Control = .19*, p* < 0.05.

Overall Conclusions

- Lazarus's process model of stress and coping is useful when trying to understand adjustment among victims of peer-aggression and bullying.

- Appraisals account for unique variance in depressive symptoms, even after controlling for previous depression and levels of victimisation. Contradictory evidence relating to role as mediator of effects of victimisation

- Threat and control also associated with loneliness. Remains unclear what other appraisals are important for victimised students.

- Coping strategies are less often associated with adjustment, but may partially mediate effects of appraisals.

→ "Stood up to them, told them to stop" seems to be the best coping strategy – benefits for e.g., personal confidence, social standing?

Implications

- Importance of addressing young people's cognitions relating to peer-aggression and bullying:

→ Challenging the degree of threat present

→ Helping to establish some control and reduce helplessness

- Helping young people to be assertive rather than aggressive, perhaps by reducing threat, increasing control (cf. Hunter et al., 2006)

- Developing a strong sense of ethnic identity among children and young people from minority communities

Thanks for listening!

Any questions or comments?