The Role of Primary Appraisals in the Relationship between Peer Victimization and Psychological Wellbeing in Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review

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**Introduction**

- Peer victimisation is a common experience in school for many children and young people. It includes physical, verbal, and indirect aggression where the perpetrator intends to cause harm to the victim.
- Research indicates that peer victimisation has both an immediate and long-term relationship with poor psychological wellbeing and adjustment (Wolf & Lereya, 2015; Reijntjes et al., 2011; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009).
- Peer victimisation is clearly a stressful experience for victims, and therefore can be explored using models of stress, such as Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) Transactional Model of Stress. As shown in Figure 1, the Transactional Model of Stress proposes that following an interaction an individual goes through a process of appraisal, which involves evaluating the relevance and importance of an interaction for their own wellbeing.

**Appraisals**

- **Primary appraisal:** An evaluation of the nature of the experience in the context of personal goals.
- **Secondary appraisal:** An evaluation of the coping resources available to the individual.

Lazarus (1998) argued that primary appraisals determine the intensity and type of emotional reaction. However, the study of the role of primary appraisals in this relationship has attracted relatively little research attention.

Therefore, the aim of this systematic review is to examine studies that have explored the relationship between peer victimization, primary appraisal and psychological wellbeing in children and adolescents.

**Method**

- Literature searching for the systematic review took place from March to May 2015. Figure 2 outlines the search terms, selection criteria, and search engines used.

**Results**

As shown in Figure 3 and in Table 1, seven papers were included in the final systematic review. The quality ratings of the studies ranged from 7 to 9.5.

**About the Studies**

- Four studies were conducted in the UK, 2 in the US, and 1 in Italy. Sample sizes ranged from 110 to 1,429. The age of participants ranged from 10 to 16 and all the studies had a roughly equal proportion of boys and girls. All the surveys employed a cohort survey design.
- The relationship between peer victimisation and primary appraisals
  - Four of the seven papers analysed the direct relationship between peer victimisation and primary appraisals.
- The relationship between peer victimisation and adjustment
  - Five of the seven papers explored the direct relationship between peer victimisation and adjustment.
  - One paper found a direct significant relationship between peer victimisation and psychological wellbeing and adjustment, however Gianotta et al., (2012) found peer victimisation predicted externalising, but not internalising problems.
  - Experiences of peer victimisation were found to be significantly related to loneliness and depressive symptomology.
  - The nature of the peer victimisation was found to play a role, with discriminatory and non-discriminatory victimisation being related to depressive symptomology (Hunter et al., 2010) and physical, verbal and indirect victimisation significantly predicting anger and sadness (Anderson & Hunter, 2012).
- The relationship between peer victimisation, primary appraisals, and adjustment
  - Five of the seven papers analysed the relationship between peer victimisation, primary appraisal, and adjustment.
  - Control appraisals were found to partially mediate the relationship between peer victimisation and adjustment in two of the studies (Catterton & Hunter, 2010; Hunter et al., 2010).
  - Two of the studies (Hunter et al., 2010; Gianotta et al., 2012) found threat appraisals fully mediated or partially mediated the relationship between peer-victimisation and adjustment.
  - Taylor et al. (2013) found threat appraisals significantly predicted aggressive behaviour depression but found no significant relationships between threat appraisals and depression.
  - Finally, threat appraisals, in the form of perceived power imbalance and perceived peer group power imbalance predicted depressive symptoms but only in girls.

**Discussion**

Across the studies, peer victimisation, primary appraisal and adjustment were measured in different ways, making direct comparison difficult. However, primary appraisals, in the form of threat and control appraisals, have been found to play a role in the relationship between peer victimisation and adjustment. This relationship was found to be dependent on different types of peer victimisation, such as verbal and physical aggression, and different measures of primary appraisal. These findings indicate a possible mechanism for how peer victimisation relates to adjustment and future research should explore this relationship further using more diverse measures of primary appraisal.

**References**