Depressive symptoms, friend distress, and self-blame: Risk factors for adolescent peer victimization

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Abstract

Past research indicates that depressed adolescents experience increased risk for peer victimization. Less is known about the conditions under which depressive symptoms predict social vulnerability and the mechanism underlying such links. The current study considers a) characteristic self-blaming attributions as a social cognitive mechanism accounting for links between depressive symptoms and victimization across the first two years of middle school and b) the potential moderating role of friends’ level of depressive symptoms. Relying on an ethnically diverse sample of 5374 adolescents, multilevel moderated mediation analyses indicated that maladaptive attributions accounted for links between 6th grade depressive symptoms and increases in 7th grade victimization. Moreover, this mediational pathway was strongest for students whose friends also experienced heightened depressive symptoms at the beginning of middle school. These results highlight the roles of both intra- and inter-personal risk factors in predicting social cognitive biases and future victimization risk during the middle school years.

1. Self-blame: mechanism linking depressive symptoms and victimization?

Although a number of studies have established that depressive symptoms increase the risk of victimization (see Reijntjes et al., 2010 for meta-analysis), it is unclear why this is the case. Considering the emotional and behavioral profile of an adolescent experiencing depressive symptoms offers some insight, insofar as an adolescent’s depressive symptoms may generate negative peer reactions (Hammen, 2005). Youth with depressive symptoms (even at a sub-clinical level) tend to be socially withdrawn or isolated and frequently manifest increased emotional sensitivity (e.g., crying easily; Aalto-Setälä, Marttunen, Tuulio-Henriksson, Poikolainen, & Lönnqvist, 2002; Hodges et al., 1997). Given that bullies tend to seek out submissive targets that they can successfully dominate (Juvonen & Galván, 2009; Juvonen & Graham, 2014), the behaviors and reactions of depressed youth likely signal emotional vulnerability that increase the risk of peer victimization (Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). However, it is unclear the extent to which these behavioral risk factors independently contribute to victimization risk. For example, one study examining predictors of continued victimization across the 6th grade school year found that lack of friends, low friend support, and helpless responding were all correlated with victimization, but they did not predict future victimization risk over and above depressive symptoms (Schacter, White, Chang, & Juvonen, 2015).

When considering unique risk factors for future victimization, it is important not only to examine behavioral correlates of depression,
but also to consider social cognitive risk factors associated with emotional distress (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Maladaptive cognitions may offer a useful target for psychosocial interventions. Indeed, changing problematic thought patterns is often a central component of evidence-based treatments for depression in children (e.g., Weisz et al., 2012), and targeting cognitive distortions has been shown to be effective not only focusing on behaviors that place youth at risk for victimization (e.g., Trip et al., 2015). Particularly, causal attributions for negative social experiences are well-suited for intervention (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Wilson & Linville, 1985), inasmuch as victims are likely to try to understand why they are targeted by their peers (Weiner, 1985, 1995). Moreover, it has been well-documented that individuals with depressive symptoms are likely to blame themselves for negative experiences (Garber, Keiley, & Martin, 2002; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979). Specifically, characterological self-blaming attributions that implicate nonmodifiable and unavoidable internal causes for negative events have been associated with depression among young adults (Janoff-Bulman, 1979).

Within the peer relations research, characterological self-blame has also been associated with peer victimization. Most of this research has examined maladaptive attributions as a consequence of vicimization experiences (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Schacter & Juvonen, 2015), and some researchers have tested its mediational role in predicting the distress of bullied adolescents (Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009; Graham & Juvonen, 1998). However, there is also evidence suggesting that adolescents who attribute their social plight to internal and uncontrollable causes at the beginning of middle school are more likely to perceive themselves as being victimized by peers (Garber, Keiley, & Martin, 2002; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979). Specifically, characterological self-blaming attributions that implicate nonmodifiable and unavoidable internal causes for negative events have been associated with depression among young adults (Janoff-Bulman, 1979).

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