



## Children's attributions for peer victimization: A social comparison approach



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 9 January 2012

Received in revised form 25 April 2013

Accepted 19 June 2013

Available online 17 August 2013

#### Keywords:

Peer victimization

Attributions

Social comparisons

### ABSTRACT

A social comparison framework was used to examine the relations between children's attributions for victimization and adjustment. In Study One, 192 nine-to ten-year-old children were asked why someone may pick on them. Results revealed attributions reflecting five causes of victimization that could be reliably sorted by direction of social comparison: (a) jealous peer (downward), (b) mutual antipathy (horizontal), (c) being different from each other (horizontal), (d) personal behavior (upward) and (e) being uncool (upward). Children's responses were used to create an attribution measure that was administered to 206 eight-to eleven-year-old children. Results were consistent with the social comparison hypothesis such that peer jealousy was uniquely associated with lower levels of loneliness and greater acceptance whereas personal behavior and not being uncool were correlated with greater loneliness and lower perceived acceptance and self-esteem. Findings supported the usefulness of a social comparison framework for understanding associations among attributions and adjustment.

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Decades of mounting empirical evidence have established that peer victimization is a significant problem worthy of the attention of both research and intervention efforts. Researchers estimate that approximately 10 to 20% of school-age children experience persistent, severe, and unprovoked peer aggression (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2010; Smith, 1999). Furthermore, peer victimization has been linked to serious forms of maladjustment, including psychological dysfunction (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation, see Bonanno & Hymel, 2010; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2010), school problems (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997), social difficulties (i.e., peer rejection; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988), and internalizing problems (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Despite these potential outcomes, some children appear surprisingly resilient to victimization. In this study, we examine possible cognitive factors, specifically causal attributions, that may account for such differences.

One factor that may play a role in the variation in victimized children's risk for associated maladjustment is how they process information in their social environment. Specifically, it has been posited that peers serve as an important context for seeking out information about social norms as well as for constructing belief structures about the causes (e.g., attributions) for the quality of interactions they have with others, particularly when such interactions are unpleasant. Consistent with this, researchers and developmental theorists have delineated numerous paradigms for understanding the attributions people make regarding the causes of stressful situations. Several of these paradigms have been successfully applied to children's peer relationships broadly

(e.g., Crick & Ladd, 1993) and to peer victimization more specifically (e.g., Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Prinstein, Cheah, & Guyer, 2005). These studies offer support for the proposition that children's attributions play a role in the link between peer difficulties (e.g., peer rejection and victimization) and subsequent behavioral and psychological adjustment (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Prinstein et al., 2005).

Although previous work has provided a fundamental understanding of attribution dimensions (i.e., locus of control, stability, and controllability), less is known about children's specific beliefs about why they are victimized. For example, children may blame characteristics of themselves (internal locus of control) for a myriad of reasons ranging from engaging in specific types of behaviors (e.g., acting mean, shy, annoying) to having some socially-undesirable characteristic (e.g., not being particularly athletic, smart or good looking). Indeed, children may even consider that possessing socially desirable attributes (e.g., being too smart or pretty) may provoke the aggression of jealous peers. Thus, although all of these attributions reflect internal causes for victimization, variation in their content may have important implications for victimization-related maladjustment. Consequently, we posit an alternative attribution paradigm that may shed light on the nuanced associations between internal (e.g., self-blame) attributions and children's wellbeing.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) offers a promising framework for examining the associations between children's attributions for peer victimization and psychoemotional adjustment. Specifically, this theory postulates that humans have an innate tendency to compare themselves with others across multiple domains, and that such comparisons influence how individuals evaluate themselves (i.e., their self-

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concept and self-esteem). Although the basic tenets of this theory have been debated and revised over the past several decades (see Wood, 1989 for review), an extensive body of literature provides evidence of its usefulness for understanding social phenomena. For example, researchers (e.g., Frey & Ruble, 1985; Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebel, 1980) have successfully extended this theory beyond traditional social psychology borders to investigate children's broader development and social interactions, and have found that children compare themselves to their peers across various domains (e.g., appearance, social and academic competencies, athleticism) to evaluate their own abilities and determine how they fit in with their peers. Extending social comparison theory to the study of victimization, the premise of this investigation is that children use social comparisons when attributing cause to their peer harassment and that, in turn, the nature of such comparisons account for individual variation in their experiences of psychoemotional distress.

Social comparisons as attributions are unique from children's general evaluations of themselves in reference to their peers. Most notably, Festinger's original theory described the actor's environment as relatively static or "inactive" and Guiot (1978) further suggested that social comparisons are made in a "rather non-problematic environment" (p. 30). However, when social comparisons are made in the context of peer victimization, children are considering themselves in relation to others as they attempt to find meaning in nonambiguous, hostile, and distressful social situations. Moreover, it may be the social nature of victimization that motivates children to consider their own social standing relative to peers to understand their peer harassment. Thus, based on the assumption that children need to have experienced victimization in order to be intrinsically motivated to determine the cause of their harassment, children who reported they have never been victimized physically, verbally, relationally, or in general (i.e., "picked on") were excluded from this study.

In general, researchers have found that causal attributions are associated with children's emotional adjustment, including global self-esteem and internalizing emotions (Crick & Ladd, 1993; Gladstone & Kaslow, 1995; Panak & Garber, 1992) as well as how individuals think and feel about themselves within relevant social contexts (Collins, 1996; Frey & Ruble, 1985). Further, the degree to which children develop positive or negative perceptions of themselves likely depends on the direction (e.g., downward, upward, horizontal) of the comparison. For example, attributing peer harassment to positive or highly valued characteristics of oneself that may contribute to peer jealousy would be indicative of downward comparisons. Downward comparisons, also referred to as superiority beliefs, are commonly associated with greater self-esteem (Campbell, 1986). In contrast, attributing victimization to having undesirable or unvalued characteristics indicates upward social comparisons, or inferiority beliefs, which may contribute to perceptions that one holds a low social status among peers. Upward comparisons are linked with negative emotions and lower self-esteem (Wills, 1981).

In comparison to downward and upward social comparisons, horizontal comparisons reflect perceptions that one is neither superior nor inferior. For example, children making horizontal social comparisons may believe harassment is due to *mutual* enmity; that is, some children may have a history of not liking one another and provoking each other (or being caught up in a bully–victim relationship from which the victim cannot escape). Although we are unaware of research conducted on horizontal social comparisons, it is possible that, within the context of peer victimization, making such attributions may buffer children from psychological maladjustment, especially if the horizontal attributions reflect a modicum of social standing or power (e.g., attitudes and behaviors that are under one's volition).

Although prior research on social comparisons has focused primarily on its influence on self-esteem, we were also interested in examining its role in the emergence of other socially relevant outcomes such as loneliness and perceived peer acceptance. As mentioned above,

peer victimization has been significantly linked to a variety of adjustment difficulties, spanning emotional, social, and social-cognitive domains. As such, forms of adjustment were selected for the current study to reflect the breadth of these outcomes, namely, feelings of loneliness, peer acceptance, and social self-esteem. Consistent with this, research has shown that children who are victimized by peers are lonelier (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), less accepted (Boulton & Smith, 2011; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2010), and report lower levels of self-esteem (Boulton, Smith, & Cowie, 2010) than age-mates who have not had such experiences.

Although our sample may be biased toward adjustment problems due to the selection criterion of experiencing victimization, variations in loneliness, perceived peer acceptance, and social self-esteem were nevertheless hypothesized to relate to differences in their attributions for such experiences. Specifically, based on social comparison theory, it was expected that some attributions would be linked with more positive outcomes than others. For example, attributions reflecting downward social comparisons (i.e., superiority attributions) were expected to attenuate children's adjustment problems whereas upward comparisons (i.e., inferiority attributions) were expected to exacerbate them. However, consistent with the low social status typical of victimized children (see Perry et al., 1988), downward social comparisons were not expected to be as common as upward comparisons in this selected sample. Thus, we expected that children would report more upward comparison attributions (i.e., inferiority beliefs) that would reflect negative beliefs or views about oneself, or areas of deficiencies. Moreover, upward comparison attributions were expected to be associated with greater emotional distress (i.e., greater loneliness) and negative cognitive self-views (i.e., low perceived acceptance and self-esteem).

In contrast to downward and upward attributions, the influence of horizontal comparisons on victimized children's adjustment was more difficult to hypothesize. For example, if such attributions (e.g., because we don't like each other) reflect a perceived social equality that offers children a sense of personal control in the victimizing situation, then these attributions may buffer children from poor social adjustment. However, it may also be a tacit assumption of perpetrators' feelings (e.g., kids bully those they don't like) and one's own sentiments toward someone who hurts them (e.g., "I don't like him either!"). Thus, making such attributions may reflect a state of affairs beyond their control, and may be especially detrimental to the one who is on the receiving end of the victimization. Support for the latter can be culled from Card and Hodges (2007) findings showing that, within the context of mutually antipathetic peer relationships, victimization is associated with significant emotional distress. In this case, horizontal attributions would predict poorer adjustment outcomes similar to those hypothesized for upward comparison attributions. Both scenarios were examined.

To address these hypotheses, we conducted two studies utilizing a sample of children in middle to late childhood (ages 8 to 12). We focused on middle childhood because studies suggest that peer victimization may be more stable during this period than at younger ages (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2003); thus, children will have had more experience with victimization and increased opportunity to consider the causes of their own harassment. In addition, the cognitive maturity of children at this age makes them more capable of reflecting on, and communicating, specific causes of victimization compared to younger samples. This latter reason is particularly important given that the aim of the first study was to develop an attribution measure based on children's own reasoning about why they may be picked on. Specifically, in Study One, fourth grade children were asked explicitly, in an open-ended context, to indicate why someone would pick on them, and their responses were then sorted categorically (based on common themes) and according to the direction of social comparison that could be inferred (i.e., downward, upward, or horizontal). In turn, children's responses were used to develop a new attribution measure that was evaluated and utilized in Study Two. The second study was conducted a year later to test and validate the new quantitative

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