

Victims of their own cognitions: Implicit social cognitions, emotional distress, and peer victimization

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Abstract

This study investigated the relation between victimization and victimization-related distress and implicit social–cognitive processing. Eighty-seven 9–13 year old children completed measures of victimization experience and social cognitive processing tasks, including the emotional Stroop task and the self-concept Implicit Association Test (IAT). Participants also related narratives of personal victimization experiences. Results showed that children who experienced more frequent victimization and expressed more distress when discussing their victimization demonstrated increased implicit association of themselves as victims and greater use of emotionally dysregulated preemptive processing. This study represents the first evidence of a relation between distinct implicit processing patterns and chronic peer victimization among children.

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1. Introduction

Max stared at the ground, his heart beating fast as the other kids stammered and stumbled to name foods that started with the same letter as their name. Max hated playing “the name game.” Everyone was going to laugh at him. He was going to say something stupid, and all the other kids would laugh. He would forget and say a food that started with the wrong letter; or they would make fun of him and call him “macaroni Max” or “meatball Max.” Everyone was already laughing at him. Chris had already made fun of his big ears, and all the kids had laughed. Max tried to will himself smaller, tried to sink into the ground to avoid the humiliation. He pushed his chin to his chest and wrapped blades of grass around his sweaty fingers.

The above paragraph, although fictional, presents an all-too-real portrait of the peer interactions of some children. Chronically teased, bullied, and harassed, these children may come to expect victimization, to identify themselves as victims, and to become distressed in even the most innocuous of peer environments. Peer victimization is a serious problem of childhood that has been shown to lead to depression, social withdrawal, lowered self-esteem, school avoidance, and increased suicidal ideation (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a,b), and has been cited in a recent American Psychological Association resolution as a major public health concern (American Psychological Association, 2004). The last 25 years have seen a tremendous upsurge in research on victimization, as studies have

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documented factors contributing to victimization, behavioral patterns of chronic victims, distinctions between different types of victimization and victim response patterns, and outcomes of victimization (e.g., Juvonen & Graham, 2001). However, there has been a dearth of research examining the cognitive and emotional processing patterns of chronic victims. The present study aims to provide an initial examination of the implicit cognitive and emotional processing styles of children with differing histories of experiencing victimization at the hands of their peers.

1.1. Theoretical model

Rosen, Milich, and Harris (2007) proposed a model suggesting that victimization experiences interact with children's social-cognitive and socioemotional processing through development of an easily accessible "victim schema" (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001). Relational schemas have been defined as "cognitive structures representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness" that develop out of repeated patterns of interaction and that serve as guides for the individual's expectations, cognitions, emotion, and behavior (Baldwin, 1992, p. 461). Baldwin (1992) states that schemas become more accessible through more frequent activation, and that more easily accessible schemas (i.e. victimization) will be more likely to activate in response to ambiguous situations (e.g., ambiguous threats), as ambiguous interactions are interpreted as being congruent with more accessible schemas.

These schemas are relied upon as guides for social interactions, as described in Crick and Dodge's (1994) reformulated social-information-processing model of children's social behavior. Crick and Dodge (1994) outlined how implicit cognitive and emotional mechanisms can inform and guide children's "on-line" social processing by influencing selective attention and encoding, attributions, and emotional arousal. Additionally, several researchers have suggested that emotional arousal may inhibit accurate information-processing (Costanzo & Dix, 1983; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000), by overriding or restricting the typical mechanisms used in social-information-processing. Rosen et al.'s (2007) victim schema model thus integrates elements of Crick and Dodge's (1994) reformulated social-information-processing model of aggression and Baldwin's (1992) relational schema theory to propose several distinct mechanisms by which accessibility of the victim schema interacts with children's social-information-processing to put children at risk for victimization.

Rosen et al.'s (2007) model proposed that an easily accessible victim schema would inform and guide children's on-line social processing in ways that would increase the children's risks of being victimized by peers (Crick & Dodge, 1994). First, the model proposes that children with more easily accessible victim schemas will likely be hypervigilant for threatening cues and more likely to attend to threatening than non-threatening cues in social interactions, as individuals often attend to and incorporate environmental information that is congruent with more easily accessible social schemas (Baldwin, 1992; Baldwin & Dandeneau, 2005; Crick & Dodge, 1994). Second, the model proposes that this attentional bias will likely influence children's patterns of attributions of peer behavior, as children who more selectively attend to hostile and threatening social cues will be more apt to attribute peer behaviors to hostile intent.

This perception of threat is proposed to lead to activation of the victim schema for children with easily accessible victim schemas through an implicit self-association of oneself with victimization in conflict interactions and a subsequent expectation of victimization in response to threatening social cues. Children who frequently experienced victimization in conflict situations will be more likely to have developed an association of threat with victimization (Baldwin, 1992; Greenwald et al., 2002; Rosen et al., 2007). Activation of the victim schema is proposed to produce a dyscontrolled emotional arousal due to an expectation of victimization that may inhibit children's ability to flexibly process social-information and generate response behaviors. Rather, a victimization schema will lead children to engage in rigidly schematic "preemptive" processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Rosen et al., 2007). Finally, the activated victim schema and subsequent dyscontrolled arousal are proposed to direct goal setting and response generation toward behaviors aimed at reducing arousal by avoiding or eliminating threat, leading children to engage in response behaviors that contribute to their risk of victimization (e.g., submission, inappropriate aggression; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001).

1.2. The present study

Numerous studies have examined the attribution styles of children who are frequently involved in conflict with peers, supporting the notion that children who have more experience with aggression as either aggressors or victims are more likely to attribute hostile intent to behaviors of others than are children who have less substantial experience with

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