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Peer-social attributional predictors of socio-emotional adjustment in early adolescence: a two-year longitudinal study

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Abstract

A two-year prospective study ($n = 82$) examined the extent to which adolescents' attributional style for peer-related events predicts socio-emotional adjustment. Peer-social attributions were assessed using rating scales on three dimensions (locus, stability, and globality). Three attributional composites were derived: two generality scales measured the extent to which positive and negative events were attributed to stable and/or global factors, while the locus composite indicated the relative absence of a self-serving bias. Outcome measures at both time points were loneliness, victimisation, and depression. Controlling for Time 1 adjustment, longitudinal analyses revealed no significant predictive relations between the attributional variables and Time 2 adjustment variables. However, a post hoc analysis revealed that a combined generality composite (i.e. attribution of both positive and negative events to stable/global factors) predicted depression and loneliness despite not being concurrently associated with these variables. This finding raises the possibility that attributional style in this domain may have unique associations with emotional adjustment.

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1. Introduction

Attribution theorists argue that attributional tendencies contribute significantly to emotional adjustment (Seligman, 1990). Meta-analytic reviews have concluded that negative attributional style is associated with depression in children and adolescents (e.g. Gladstone & Kaslow, 1995).

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However, nearly all studies on which this conclusion is based assess general attributional style with one of two instruments (such as the CASQ; Seligman et al., 1984) that employ a restrictive method of assessing attributions (forced format) and which have poor internal consistency. Intermediate measures assess attributional style in specific event domains and were developed from concerns about the cross-situational consistency of measures (Hessling, Anderson, & Russell, 2002). Intermediate measures may be preferable because subjects' attributions may be more consistent within than across domains (Robins & Hayes, 1995).

Such reasoning is also consistent with an important refinement to the hopelessness theory, the specific vulnerability hypothesis, suggesting that depressogenic attributional styles may be specific to particular event domains (Abramson, Alloy, & Metalsky, 1995). For example, some people will make depressogenic attributions only after negative interpersonal events, whereas others may do so only after adverse achievement outcomes. It has been argued that distinguishing between domains may be critical in testing attributional models in all age groups (Turner & Cole, 1994).

The peer-social domain is of importance during late childhood and early adolescence (e.g. Coleman, 1978). Maladaptive attributional tendencies have been found to be associated with low acceptance by peers (Ames, Ames, & Garrison, 1977), peer-rejected sociometric status (Toner & Munro, 1996), high levels of loneliness and social anxiety (Crick & Ladd, 1993), and helpless responses to failure on a social task (Goetz & Dweck, 1980). The only prospective study assessing peer-specific attributional style found that stress-specific attributions mediated the relationship between general attributional style and depression for children who perceived an increase in rejection by their peers (Panak & Garber, 1992).

As there may be domain specificity in attributional styles, it is warranted to investigate the predictive value of adolescents' attributional tendencies in the peer-social domain. As yet, only a few other investigations involving adolescents have specifically assessed attributional style for peer-related events and their relationship to socio-emotional adjustment. In examining the correlates of loneliness among adolescents, Inderbitzen-Pisaruk, Clark, and Solano (1992) designed a measure of attributional style that differentiated between attributions for interpersonal and non-interpersonal situations. Three significant factors were found to be associated with loneliness: self-rated social skills, self-esteem, and attributions of interpersonal situations to stable causes.

Likewise, Graham and Juvonen (1998) found that characterological self-blame was significantly associated with loneliness and social anxiety. They also found that self-perceived victimisation was associated with characterological self-blame as well as loneliness, social anxiety, and low self-worth. Finally, it has been found that self-perceptions of interpersonal competence interact with the occurrence of negative interpersonal events in predicting depressive symptoms as well as general symptoms of maladjustment (Hammen et al., 1995).

2. Primary aims and hypotheses of the present study

This prospective study aimed at determining the influence of attributional tendencies for peer-related events on self-reported symptoms of depression and two aspects of adjustment closely related to the peer domain, namely, loneliness and self-perceived victimisation. The links between adolescents' peer-social attributional tendencies in their first year of high school (Time 1) and emotional adjustment two years later (Time 2) were examined. Attributional style was defined by

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