The role of emotion regulation for coping with school-based peer-victimisation in late childhood

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ABSTRACT

The current research examined the role of two emotion regulation processes, cognitive reappraisal and emotion suppression, on maladaptive victimisation coping following school-based peer-victimisation in late childhood ($n = 443$). The relationship between emotion regulation and maladaptive coping was also tested for serial mediation effects, linking peer-victimisation and school loneliness. Results showed that poor emotion regulation in children was positively associated with maladaptive peer-victimisation coping. Moreover, the relationship between cognitive reappraisal and maladaptive coping was found to mediate the relationship between peer-victimisation experiences and school loneliness. These findings have implications for the development of school-based peer-victimisation intervention strategies that focus on improving children's emotional competencies.

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1. Introduction

Recent figures suggest that peer-victimisation is a major issue within the United Kingdom, such that 1 in 4 children under the age of 11 actively seek support for problems pertaining to bullying (NSPCC, 2015). The severity of this situation is further exacerbated when considering the potential adjustment issues associated with peer-victimisation, including elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Hansen, Steenberg, Palic, & Elklit, 2012). However, whilst it is clear that peer-victimisation can have a strong negative impact on a child, not all children are affected in the same manner (Ttofi, Bowes, Farrington, & Lösel, 2014). Specifically, the coping strategies that victimised children may employ have been found to mediate the relationship between peer-victimisation and maladaptive outcomes (for review see Hansen et al., 2012). In particular, using internalising (e.g., self-blame and rumination) as a coping strategy is associated with a wide range of poor outcomes following peer-victimisation (Harper, 2012; Houbre, Tarquinio, & Lanfranchi, 2010). It is less clear, however, why some children choose to use this maladaptive form of coping following peer-victimisation. It is important to understand the factors that may influence a child's propensity to utilise maladaptive coping strategies, particularly when considering the impact for the development of future prevention and intervention strategies that tackle peer-victimisation. Children's regulation of emotions represents one possible explanatory individual difference, but is yet to be explored within peer-victimisation coping literature.

The present study therefore examined (a) the relationship between emotion regulation and maladaptive peer-victimisation coping and (b) the indirect effect of peer-victimisation on school loneliness via emotion regulation and maladaptive coping (serial mediation).

1.1. Coping with peer-victimisation

Coping is a mechanism by which an individual attempts to solve, minimise, or tolerate a stressor (Snyder, 1999). Regarding peer-victimisation specifically, coping strategies have broadly been categorised as adaptive/effective or maladaptive/ineffective. For example, social support, whether it is received from friends, family, or teachers, has been shown to reduce future victimisation (Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004). In addition, children who use problem-solving strategies, such as conflict resolution, are less likely to experience future victimisation (Flanagan et al., 2013). Contrastingly, coping strategies such as retaliation and internalising are associated with continued victimisation and poor outcomes (Harper, 2012; Houbre et al., 2010). Frequently peer-victimised children commonly use maladaptive internalising coping, which includes strategies such as self-blame and rumination (Andreou, 2001). It has been found that victimised children who use internalising coping responses are at a greater risk of poor psychosocial adjustment, including loneliness, depression, and low self-worth (Harper, 2012; Houbre et al., 2010). Due to the double-risk associated with using internalising coping (i.e., increased likelihood of continued victimisation and poor adjustment

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the current study examined internalising as a measure of maladaptive coping.

Despite the wealth of knowledge on *how* children cope with peer-victimisation, there is less research on *which* children use a particular victimisation coping strategy, especially those that are deemed maladaptive. A child's emotions and emotional state is one individual difference that has received increasing attention in the field of peer-victimisation coping literature. Research has found that, as expected, victimised children are more likely to display negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger (Hunter & Borg, 2006; Mahady-Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). These negative emotions can in turn predict coping response patterns; for example, children who experience fear are more likely to seek social support whereas children who experience anger are more likely to retaliate (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000). However, whilst there is evidence to suggest emotions play a role in the coping response, the processes behind the display of emotions, often known as emotion regulation, is frequently ignored in peer-victimisation coping literature. Cole, Martin, and Dennis (2004) argue that it is important to distinguish between emotional display and emotion regulation, and that the relationship between the two may not be linear. The regulation of emotion is particularly pertinent in late childhood (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), and thus the current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the role of emotion regulation on a child's propensity to use maladaptive coping strategies following peer-victimisation.

1.2. Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation is the complex process responsible for initiating, inhibiting, or modulating one's emotions in response to a particular situation (Gross, 1998). The ability to regulate one's emotions is particularly important during later childhood where children make huge developmental changes in regards to cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Steinberg, 2005). However, despite this developmental period marking a critical turning point for many children, emotion regulation research is predominantly focused on infancy and early childhood (for review see Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006). Moreover, many studies examining emotion regulation in children have been criticised for lacking a clear theoretical framework (Gullone, Hughes, King, & Tonge, 2010). In response to the raised theoretical concerns, the current study draws upon Gross' (1998) process orientated model. This model stipulates two sub-types of emotion regulation processes: (1) cognitive reappraisal and (2) emotion suppression. Cognitive reappraisal is a cognitive change process whereby the individual attempts to modify their thoughts to alter the emotional response (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). It is also an antecedent-focused response, activating before the full emotional response kicks in. In contrast, suppression is a behaviourally orientated tactic in which emotion-expressed behaviour is decreased when emotionally aroused (Gross, 2013). This is a response-focused process, and is activated when the emotion is already underway (Gross & John, 2003). The utilisation of these two regulation processes can have alternative outcomes and non-significant correlations between the processes are reported suggesting that they are distinct (Gross & John, 2003); thus it is important to examine them concurrently. In relation to socio-emotional outcomes, the use of suppression and reappraisal are both associated with depressive symptoms, with children who display *high* levels of emotion suppression and/or *low* levels of cognitive reappraisal more likely to experience symptoms of depression (Gullone & Taffe, 2012) than those children who are able to regulate their emotions.

Although previous peer-victimisation research has explored the role of a child's emotional state on their coping following victimisation (e.g., Hunter & Borg, 2006; Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000), the regulatory processes that underlie the display of these emotional responses has not yet been examined. The current study therefore examined the role of
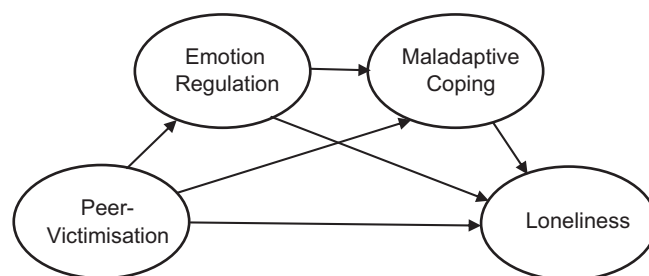

Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual model.

two emotion regulation processes (cognitive reappraisal and emotion suppression) as predictors of maladaptive coping, which in turn was predicted to mediate the relationship between peer-victimisation and school loneliness (as an indicator of a socioemotional outcome). The proposed model can be seen in Fig. 1 whereby the authors propose that that there will be an indirect effect via emotion dysregulation, maladaptive coping, or via both emotion regulation *and* maladaptive coping.

Following the proposed conceptual framework, it was anticipated that poor emotion regulation strategies would predict maladaptive coping. The relationship between emotion regulation and maladaptive coping would then serve as serial mediators for the relationship between peer-victimisation and school loneliness. Due to the multi-faceted nature of peer-victimisation (Mynard & Joseph, 2000), four types of peer-victimisation experiences were examined: social, verbal, physical, and attack on property. In addition, owing to limited emotion regulation research in late childhood populations, the sample was drawn from children aged between 9 and 11 years. The hypotheses therefore read as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Both emotion regulation processes, suppression and cognitive reappraisal, will predict maladaptive coping. High levels of emotion suppression will *increase* the propensity to use maladaptive coping, whereas high levels of cognitive reappraisal will *decrease* the propensity to use maladaptive coping.

Hypothesis 2. Poor emotion regulation and maladaptive coping will act as serial and parallel mediators for the relationship between peer-victimisation and school loneliness.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected from 443 children (58% girls, 1 child identifying as transgender; $M_{age} = 9.79$ years, $SD_{age} = 0.64$) during the first term of the UK school academic year. Participants were recruited from 8 primary schools across the East Midlands, U.K. and were either in Year 5 ($n = 184$) or Year 6 ($n = 259$). The majority of children were of a White British background.

Parental consent was obtained via an opt-out and opt-in procedure, dependent on the schools preferred method. Seven of the eight schools chose to use the opt-out procedure. The overall response rate was 97.7%, and 85.5% within classrooms.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Peer-victimisation

The 16-item Multidimensional Peer-Victimisation Scale (Mynard & Joseph, 2000) measured 4 types of victimisation experiences: (1) social (e.g., "Tried to make my friends turn against me; $\alpha = 0.80$), (2) verbal (e.g., "Called me names"; $\alpha = 0.78$), (3) physical (e.g., "Punched me"; $\alpha = 0.80$) and (4) attack on property (e.g., "Deliberately damaged