How children's victimization relates to distorted versus sensitive social cognition: Perception, mood, and need fulfillment in response to Cyberball inclusion and exclusion

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study examined whether victimization is associated with negatively distorted social cognition (bias), or with a specific increased sensitivity to social negative cues, by assessing the perception of social exclusion and the consequences for psychological well-being (moods and fundamental needs). Both self-reported and peer-reported victimization of 564 participants (M_{age} = 9.9 years, SD = 1.04; 49.1% girls) were measured, and social exclusion was manipulated through inclusion versus exclusion in a virtual ball-tossing game (Cyberball). Children's perceptions and psychological well-being were in general more negative after exclusion than after inclusion. Moreover, self-reported—but not peer-reported—victimization was associated with the perception of being excluded more and receiving the ball less, as well as more negative moods and less fulfillment of fundamental needs, regardless of being excluded or included during the Cyberball game. In contrast, peer-reported victimization was associated with more negative mood and lower need fulfillment in the exclusion condition only. Together, these results suggest that children who themselves indicate being victimized have negatively distorted social cognition, whereas children who are being victimized according to their peers experience increased sensitivity to negative social situations. The results stress the importance of distinguishing between self-

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reported and peer-reported victimization and have implications for interventions aimed at victimized children's social cognition.

Introduction

The experience of victimization through bullying—being intentionally attacked, humiliated, and/or excluded by a relatively powerful person repeatedly and over time (Olweus, 2010)—can have detrimental consequences for children's physical and mental health (e.g., Ttofi & Farrington, 2008). Peer victimization, for example, is associated with the development of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Ladd, 2006), school disengagement and low school achievement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006), and poor physical health (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). Understanding how victimization may be associated with a more negative way of seeing and experiencing social situations could help to explain the poor health outcomes associated with victimization. Moreover, it could benefit the further development and improvement of bullying prevention and intervention programs aimed at improving victimized children's well-being and mental health. Therefore, the current study examined how children's victimization is associated with their perceptions and emotional responses in experimentally manipulated social situations.

Because victimization has been linked to altered social information processing and a hostile attribution bias more specifically (e.g., Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2007; Perren, Ettekal, & Ladd, 2013; Schwartz et al., 1998), the current study examined the association between victimization and information processing. We know that victimization is associated with negatively interpreting others' intentions in ambiguous situations. However, we do not know whether victimization is also associated with general negative interpretation and experience tendencies in social situations. The current study, therefore, examined whether victimization is associated with a general negativity bias in which all social situations are interpreted and experienced more negatively or, rather, with a specific increased sensitivity to a negative social event in which only negative social situations are experienced negatively.

In examining this question, we distinguished between self-reported and peer-reported victimization because there generally is only low to moderate correspondence between these two indicators of victimization and they are differentially associated with negative outcomes (Scholte, Burk, & Overbeek, 2013). Moreover, we examined this question in a late childhood sample because a meta-analysis has shown that the association between a hostile bias and aggressive behavior is strongest among 8- to 12-year-olds (de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002), demonstrating the impact of hostile bias in this age group.

Victimization and negative processing of social information

A process that may contribute to the poor well-being and problematic behavior associated with victimization is a tendency to negatively interpret social information. According to the social information processing model (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994), a sequence of information-processing steps determine behavioral responses to social situations. Previous social experiences such as being involved in conflict situations can affect expectations and response options in a child's "database", which in turn can result in an altered perception and interpretation of future social situations. Many studies based on the social information processing model have focused on the second step of the model: the interpretation of cues. Children's attributions of others' intent in hypothetical ambiguous situations in particular have been studied extensively in the light of the social information processing model (e.g., see the meta-analysis by de Castro et al., 2002). The tendency to interpret others' intentions as malicious is often referred to as a "hostile attribution bias".

In line with the social information processing model (Crick & Dodge, 1994), it can be expected that victims' repeated experience with harassment may lead to the expectation and easily accessible