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## Exploring the victimization–early substance misuse relationship: In search of moderating and mediating effects

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### ABSTRACT

This study was designed to address two research questions. The first research question asked whether physical abuse victimization at the hands of parents/guardians, bullying victimization at the hands of peers, and the abuse x bullying interaction encouraged early involvement in substance misuse. The second research question inquired as to whether the victimization–substance misuse relationship was mediated by variables proposed by various theories and research studies—specifically, cognitive impulsivity, negative affect, and low self-esteem. A moderated mediation hypothesis was tested in a group of 865 (417 boys, 448 girls) schoolchildren from the Illinois Study of Bullying and Sexual Violence who were 10 to 15 years of age at the time of initial contact. A path analysis performed with three waves of data revealed that physical abuse and bullying victimization predicted substance misuse with mediation by cognitive impulsivity, but there was no evidence of moderation. On the basis of these results, it was concluded that victimization, whether through parental physical abuse or peer bullying, increases cognitive impulsivity, and that cognitive impulsivity, in turn, encourages early involvement in substance misuse. The practical implications of these results are that interventions designed to counter cognitive impulsivity and encourage cognitive control may be effective in preventing children traumatized by physical abuse and bullying from entering the early stages of a drug or substance using lifestyle.

### 1. Introduction

Cause and effect are complicated when it comes to understanding adolescent use and misuse of substances. The causes of substance misuse are manifold and the effects can differ depending on the age at which the individual starts using. Alcohol and drug use commencing in late childhood or early adolescence can be considered antecedents of future substance-related problems. There is clear and convincing evidence that early alcohol use predicts the severity of future alcohol abuse and dependence problems (Dawson, Goldstein, Chou, Ruan, & Grant, 2008; Pitkanen, Lyyra, & Pulkkinen, 2005). The risk of developing a dependence on drugs is also much greater when an individual starts using these substances at an early age (Anthony & Petronis, 1995; Chen, Storr, & Anthony, 2009). Data from the 2012 National Survey of Drug Use and Health (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics & Quality et al., 2013), for instance, showed that individuals who began using marijuana before age 15 were six times more likely to be classified as having an illicit drug abuse or dependency problem in adulthood than persons who started smoking marijuana at age 18 or older. Whether early substance use is a cause of subsequent substance-related problems or simply a marker of heightened future risk (King & Chassin, 2007), the notion that early substance use and misuse are important from both a theoretical and practical standpoint is irrefutable.

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### 1.1. Victimization and substance misuse

Victimization has been found to be a reliable antecedent to substance use and misuse, with studies showing that childhood trauma is common in the backgrounds of adult substance abusers (Dunn, Ryan, Paolo, & Van Fleet, 1995; Medrano, Zule, Hatch, & Desmond, 1999). A review of the literature leads to the conclusion that whether victimization is defined as physical abuse, psychological/emotional maltreatment, sexual assault, parental neglect, or bullying, there is a clear connection between victimization and the subsequent misuse of alcohol and other drugs (Gutierrez and Van Puymbroeck, 2006; Hong et al., 2014; Oshri, Carlson, Kwon, Zeichner, & Wickrama, 2017). Unfortunately, the vast majority of studies on this topic are cross-sectional in nature. Still, when longitudinal studies have been conducted their results have largely confirmed findings from the less methodologically rigorous cross-sectional studies. Lo, Kim, and Church (2008), for instance, identified a prospective relationship between physical and sexual abuse, on the one hand, and marijuana and polydrug use, on the other hand, whereas Tharp-Taylor, Haviland, and D'Amico (2009) determined that mental and physical bullying victimization predicted alcohol, tobacco, inhalant, and marijuana use in middle school children.

### 1.2. Mediating the victimization–substance misuse relationship

Researchers and theorists searching for a mediating mechanism to explain the victimization–substance misuse relationship usually focus on one of two variables: negative affect or low self-esteem. Stein, Leslie, and Nyamathi (2002), for instance, identified a moderately strong relationship between child abuse, depression, low self-esteem, and substance abuse in a group of homeless women. Depression or negative affect was likewise found to mediate the relationship between bullying victimization and substance misuse in a national sample of 1495 tenth graders (Luk, Wang, & Simons-Morton, 2010). In a more recent study from Luk et al. (2016), it was discerned that bullying victimization correlated with low self-esteem, depression, and alcohol-related problems in a college sample of 419 drinkers. In each of these studies, however, the data were cross-sectional in nature.

Topper, Castellanos-Ryan, Mackie, and Conrod (2011) examined the indirect effect of drinking coping style on the prospective relationship between bullying victimization and alcohol-related problems. This study produced significant direct and indirect effects, with the indirect effect running from victimization, to drinking coping beliefs, to alcohol-related problems. Two variables in particular are viewed by several theories as major mediators of the victimization–substance misuse relationship: namely, negative affect and low self-esteem. Negative affect is featured in the self-mediation hypothesis (Khantzian, 1997) and Agnew's (1992) general strain theory where it serves as an incentive for drug use via self-medication and a link between general strain and antisocial behavior, respectively. Low self-esteem is the linking variable in the Adlerian-based theory of substance abuse development proposed by Steffenhagen and Burns (1987), where it is believed to mediate between a person's reaction to the social environment and tendency to misuse substances. Because it is questionable that negative affect and low self-esteem satisfy the main criteria for effective mediation (i.e., sufficiently malleable to be predicted by some variables yet sufficiently stable to predict other variables: Bandura, 1986) they may be unsuitable as mediators of the victimization–substance misuse relationship.

Cognitive impulsivity or reactive criminal thinking is viewed by criminal lifestyle theory as one of the principal variables that mediates the relationship between negative environmental events and antisocial outcomes, and thus a prime candidate for mediating the victimization–substance misuse relationship. Cognitive impulsivity was the term used in the current investigation because it is the putative antecedent to reactive (impulsive, irresponsible) criminal thinking (Walters, 2017), but unlike reactive criminal thinking, it does not presume current involvement in criminal activity. This is important because of the youthfulness (10–15 years of age) of the current sample. Prior research indicates that various forms of child maltreatment (Walters, 2018a) and bullying (Walters & Espelage, 2017) are indirectly linked to delinquency via the mediating effect of cognitive impulsivity. The current study sought to determine whether cognitive impulsivity was more capable of mediating the victimization–substance misuse relationship than negative affect or low self-esteem based on its status as a social cognitive variable with sufficient malleability and stability to support mediation (Walters, 2017).

### 1.3. The current study

The current study was designed to: (1) investigate the effect of physical abuse and bullying victimization on early substance misuse, and (2) ascertain whether cognitive impulsivity, negative affect, or low self-esteem mediated the connections between physical abuse and bullying and early substance misuse. To address these research questions, two hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis claimed that physical abuse victimization, bullying victimization, and the abuse x substance interaction would correlate significantly with future substance misuse in a group of middle school children. The second hypothesis predicted, based on criminal lifestyle theory, that cognitive impulsivity would mediate the relationship between victimization and early substance misuse, whereas negative affect and low self-esteem would not. Several potentially important risk and protective factors were controlled in this study, to include, family support, family structure (one- versus two-parent home), and neighborhood violence or disorder. These variables were controlled for the purpose of ruling them out as viable alternative explanations for the results given research showing that they correlate with both victimization and substance misuse (Goldstick et al., 2016; McLaughlin, Campbell, & McColgan, 2016; Moore, Rothwell, & Segrott, 2010; Wilson, Rack, Shi, & Norris, 2008).

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