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Research article

Ecological momentary assessment of contextual variables, satisfaction, and emotional and behavioral states of adolescents by level of victimization

Magallón-Neri E.^{a,b,c,*}, Kirchner T.^{a,b,c}, Fornis M.^{a,b,c}, Calderón C.^{a,b}, Planellas I.^a^a Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychobiology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Barcelona, Spain^b Research Group: GEIMAC (2014SGR1139 – 2017SGR1681), Spain^c Institute of Neurosciences: IR3C, Faculty of Psychology, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The harmful effects of victimization on mental health have been demonstrated in several age groups, cultures, and populations, but there is wide variability in the resulting psychopathology. Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) allows the expression of an emotional state to be recorded at any given time and linked to a situation or context.

This study aimed to analyze the contextual variables (where, with whom, and what), momentary satisfaction, and perception of momentary emotional and behavioral symptoms in a cohort of adolescents by the level of victimization, using EMA. We explored the everyday symptom profiles and the contexts in which events took place among 100 adolescents over a one-week period. Sociodemographic data were collected and assessment was done using the EMA (as a smartphone application) and the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (to assess childhood and adolescent victimization). In this study, regarding contextual variables, the group with the highest level of victimization (top 10%) showed a significant relationship with being away from home and being with friends other than classmates, and not being with parents or relatives. There was also an unexpectedly higher frequency of sporting engagement in this group. A relationship existed between emotional and behavioral problems and higher levels of victimization. In conclusion, the different groups of victimized subjects present a relatively high level of satisfaction in relation to the daily contexts and show low levels of emotional and behavioral symptomatology.

1. Introduction

The harmful effects of victimization on mental health have been demonstrated in all age groups, countries, and cultures (Cheng, Cao, Liu, & Chen, 2010; Ellonen & Salmi, 2011; Fowler et al., 2009; Gustafsson, Nilsson, & Göran-Svedin, 2009; Norman et al., 2012; Pereda, Guilera, & Abad, 2014; Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013). However, there is marked variability in the resulting psychopathologic states (Walz, Nauta, & Rot, 2014). When referring to anxiety symptoms, authors have indicated that they may occur at both predictable and unpredictable times, and may be linked to specific situations, raising doubts about the suitability of measuring symptoms in laboratory settings or by retrospective self-report measures. In this setting, ecological momentary assessment (EMA) may be a better option by allowing the expression of the emotional state to be recorded at any given time, and in specific

* Corresponding author at: University of Barcelona, Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychobiology, Section Personality, Assessment and Psychological Treatment, Institute of Neurosciences (IR3c), Pg. Vall d'Hebron, 171, 08035, Barcelona, Spain.

E-mail address: emagallonneri@ub.edu (E. Magallón-Neri).

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contexts (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008). Thus, the EMA can give insights into symptom variability and the associations between daily affect, behaviors, and situational cues (Walz et al., 2014). Ebner-Priemer, Eid, Kleindienst, Starnow, and Trull (2009) have reported that the EMA is adequate when used to analyze moods, thoughts, symptoms, or behaviors that change over time.

In adolescents, the EMA has been used to assess and predict the following: health needs (Helgeson, Lopez, & Kamarck, 2009; Schnall et al., 2013), mental status (Garcia et al., 2014), physical or sedentary activities and their psychosocial correlates (Rusby, Westling, Crowley, & Light, 2013; Rusby, Westling, Crowley, & Light, 2014), overweight related to interpersonal problems (Ranzenhofer et al., 2014), emotional instability (Aldinger et al., 2014), comorbid drug use and psychiatric disorders (Benarous et al., 2016; Comulada, Lightfoot, Swendeman, Grella, & Wu, 2015), stress associated with traumatic events (Walsh, Basu, & Monk, 2015), and anxiety (Walz et al., 2014) or depression related to use of social media (Bickham, Hswen, & Rich, 2015). Concerning the contextual variables analyzed through the EMA, Comulada, Swendeman, and Wu (2016) reported that being with close friends, at friend's houses, or adopting "hanging out" as the primary activity, as well as being with other alcohol or drug users, were the most frequent contextual factors linked to drug use. Also, when analyzing the adolescent behavior of escalating rule breaking and substance use, Rusby et al. (2013) found that being "out and about" increased over the school year, whereas adult supervision decreased, showing an increase in exposure to potentially risky situations.

In the context of adolescent victimization, the EMA has been used to explore the associations between peer victimization and non-suicidal self-injury (Brackman, 2015); peer victimization and negative affect in children with and without attention deficit and hyperactivity (Fogelman, Walerius, Rosen, & Leaberry, 2016); peer victimization, rejection sensitivity, and negative affect (Waller, 2015); the role of providing support and cognitive therapy for dysfunctional beliefs in pregnant adolescents after sexual abuse (Walsh et al., 2015); and the microcontextual factors that explain the association between daily peer victimization and well-being in teens (Nishina, 2012). The literature on victimization emphasizes high psychopathology in adolescents who have experienced victimization (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Ford, Elhai, Connor, & Frueh, 2010; Ford, Wasser, & Connor, 2011). However, there is only limited information about the related contextual variables, momentary satisfaction, and emotional and behavioral states.

In previous study of adolescents in community settings (Magallón-Neri, Kirchner, Forns, Calderón, & Planellas, 2016), we have analyzed the feasibility of using the EMA as a measure of daily dynamics and contextual variables (i.e., what were teens doing when the smartphone rang, where, with whom), momentary satisfaction, and emotional and behavioral states. The EMA method that we designed provides a sufficiently accurate measure of the daily psychological symptoms experienced by community adolescents in their natural context. The metric quality of the EMA design used here is described in Measures section. In the current paper, we seek to expand on our previous research (Magallón-Neri et al., 2016), by analyzing the momentary responses of adolescents with different degrees of interpersonal victimization in terms of contextual variables, the degree of satisfaction they experience in these contexts, and the level of emotional and behavioral problems they report. Specifically, we had three objectives.

First, we aimed to analyze three contextual variables (where teens were, with whom, and what they were doing) according to different levels of interpersonal victimization. According to Finkelhor (2007) interpersonal victimization refers to special negative life experiences or harms that individuals undergo because of the actions of other humans that violate social norms. These negative life experiences stand apart from other life events. The EMA literature provides little information about specific contextual data according to interpersonal victimization levels. We hypothesized that contextual variables would show significant differences according to the victimization level (organized into four classes: Non-victim group, Victims under mean, Victims above mean, and Poly-victim). This was because each level of interpersonal victimization implies an increase in the frequency of offenses that can affect adolescents' mood, their friendships or relationships, and the activities they undertake. Other authors have pointed out the relationship between risk behaviors and contextual variables (Comulada et al., 2016; Rusby et al., 2013, 2014).

Second, we aimed to analyze the momentary satisfaction linked to spaces, people, and activities according to interpersonal victimization level. Momentary satisfaction refers to the degree of reported satisfaction linked to a space, people and activities assessed at a particular moment. These contextual variables are experienced as pleasant or very pleasant almost 70% of the time (Magallón-Neri et al., 2016), but the relationship between momentary satisfaction and victimization level has not been analyzed in depth. We hypothesized that momentary satisfaction would decrease as victimization increased, because of the marked emotional discomfort experienced linked to interpersonal victimization (Ford et al., 2010, 2011; Forns et al., 2015; Fowler et al., 2009; Kirchner, Forns, Soler, & Planellas, 2014).

Third, we analyzed the perception adolescents have of their momentary emotional and behavioral symptoms at random times in daily life, by victimization level. We assumed that teens who experienced more victimization would express more emotional or behavioral distress in their EMA responses, because prior experience of victimization would significantly imbalance their emotions (Forns et al., 2015; Kirchner et al., 2014; Soler, Forns, Kirchner, & Segura, 2014).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We enrolled a convenience sample of 100 students (61.0% girls) with 2256 momentary inputs from two state schools (secondary compulsory education) in the area of Barcelona, Spain. Participants were aged 12–18 years (mean, 14.66; standard deviation [SD], 1.64). The social backgrounds were as follow: 77.6% of their fathers and 70.1% of their mothers were working, 18.8% of their fathers and 26.4% of their mothers were unemployed, and 3.5% of their fathers and 3.4% of their mothers were pensioners.

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