



Adolescent vulnerability and the distress of rejection: Associations of adjustment problems and gender with control, emotions, and coping



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ABSTRACT

We examined adjustment problems as risks for patterns of emotions, appraisals, and coping with rejection, and explored whether these processes could account for sex (boy/girl) differences in coping. Young adolescents ($N = 669$, grades 6–8) completed questionnaires, which assessed responses to peer rejection threat with two short scenarios. Using structural equation modeling to test a multivariate process model, adolescents with heightened social anxiety had the most maladaptive responses to rejection threat, including elevated emotional reactions, more self-blame, and coping using more social isolation, rumination and opposition. Adolescents reporting more depressive symptoms felt less control and anticipated using less adaptive coping (less support seeking, distraction, and negotiation), whereas aggressive adolescents responded with more anger and coped via opposition. Moreover, as anticipated, sex differences in coping, symptoms, emotions, and appraisals were found. However, coping differences between boys and girls were mostly nonsignificant after accounting for symptoms, aggression, emotional reactions, and appraisals.

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Several theoretical frameworks suggest that acute or chronic stress and inadequate coping responses are players in escalating symptoms of mental health problems among children and adolescents. However, these same theories and research studies also suggest that symptoms of emotional and behavioral adjustment problems, such as depression, social anxiety and aggression, can explain why children or adolescents respond to stress with differing emotional intensity, cognitive appraisals and coping responses (Conway, Hammen, & Brennan, 2012; Rudolph & Asher, 2000; Sontag & Graber, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015). Longitudinal studies are often the best way to examine the unfolding and bidirectional associations between stress experiences, coping responses, and symptoms over time. However, the stress-coping process itself is complex and multidimensional, including reacting with multiple emotions and having a range of different appraisals of stress, which can co-occur with or influence many different ways of coping with stress. To complicate matters further, much of this process may be stressor-dependent, meaning that some stressors may constrain or pull for certain responses more than others. Thus, because it is a challenge to assess such a complex stress and coping process, while also controlling the stressor context and

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examining associations with individual characteristics or other explanatory variables, cross-sectional research can still be very useful for testing these processes. Our general purpose in the current cross-sectional study of a large group of young adolescents was to examine depressive symptoms, social anxiety symptoms and aggressive behavior history as risk factors for heightened emotional reactions to, and maladaptive control-related appraisals of, threats of peer rejection. We also examined how symptoms, aggressive behavior, emotions and appraisals were associated with adolescents' anticipated use of a range of different responses that are common ways of coping with peer rejection. Finally, we examined whether symptoms, behaviors, emotions and appraisals could explain differences between boys and girls in how they anticipate they would cope with rejection threat.

Adjustment problems, emotions, and stress appraisals

Few studies have examined associations between adolescents' emotions in response to peer relationship stress, stress appraisals and symptoms of mental health problems. In terms of depression, we located two previous studies that examined the effects of depressed symptomology on dealing with relationship stress. In one study, adolescents who reported more depressive symptoms experienced heightened sadness and were “less inclined to endorse behavioral and cognitive coping strategies typically associated with mood improvement (e.g., behavioral distraction, positive reappraisal)” (Reijntjes, Stegge, & Terwogt, 2006, p. 89). In a second study, withdrawn adolescents were more likely to use emotion-focused than problem-solving coping responses, but aggressive behavior, popularity and participant sex had to be considered to identify some coping differences (Bowker, Bukowski, Hymel, & Sippola, 2000). Thus, heightened symptoms of depression were associated with an elevated response of sadness when rejection occurred and with less adaptive or positive coping.

Social anxiety symptoms have also been linked to individual differences in appraisals and coping in response to peer problems. For example, youth with more anxiety symptoms tend to report that they experience more stressful events and they appraise these stressors as more distress-provoking (Allen, Rapee, & Sandberg, 2008). Moreover, such youth are particularly likely to respond to negative social situations with more negative affect (Miers, Blöte, Bögels, & Westenberg, 2008) and to cope in more maladaptive ways (Garnefski, Kraaij, & van Etten, 2005). However, it is rare to examine depressive and social anxiety symptoms as different and unique correlates of stress-coping processes, and we could locate no study that has examined this in adolescents. Given that depressive and social anxiety symptoms are often comorbid (Epkins & Heckler, 2011; Rapee & Spence, 2004), we do not know whether the associations of adolescent depression with emotion, stress appraisals and coping are unique to depression or because of comorbid symptoms of social anxiety (and vice versa). To address this gap, we considered both depressive and social anxiety symptoms in order to isolate which uniquely accounts for each of a range of emotional reactions, appraisals and coping responses to the stress of peer rejection.

Regarding aggressive behavior, research testing social information processing theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994) suggests that aggressive behavior history may also be associated with adolescents' appraisals and coping responses. This research has shown that aggressive youth, relative to those lower in aggression, tend to have hostile attributional biases, whereby they are more likely to attribute hostility as a cause for others' behaviors and they tend to respond with aggression and/or other oppositional behaviors (Guerra, Asher, & DeRosier, 2004). It is also argued in social information processing theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994), and in stress and coping theory (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), that the biased beliefs about controllability and attributions for the cause of the stressor found among aggressive youth play a role in coping responses, as do their tendencies to react with more anger.

Can these processes account for sex differences in coping with rejection threat?

Starting during middle childhood, but certainly by early adolescence, boys and girls have been found to show moderately, or even greatly, different profiles of adaptive and maladaptive coping, emotional reactivity, and symptomology (Kort-Butler, 2009; Rudolph, 2002). Hence, it is possible that the kinds of adjustment problems that put adolescents at risk for poor coping will differ between boys and girls, and that the kinds of appraisals that underlie maladaptive coping or the nature of maladaptive coping itself may differ between the sexes. If so, differences in the kinds of coping that boys and girls use to deal with the stress of peer rejection may be the result of underlying differences in symptomology, emotions, and appraisals – suggesting that when these processes are taken into consideration, they may fully account for sex differences in coping.

Regarding coping, some studies have found that boys (or men) tend to be more approach-oriented or use more problem-solving strategies than girls (or women), whereas girls or women report more reliance on avoidance or emotion-focused coping responses than boys or men (Hampel & Petermann, 2006). Moreover, adolescent girls tended to report more use of support seeking to cope with stress than boys. However, a meta-analysis of sex and coping among adults did not support this conclusion, in fact, it found that problem-focused coping was actually more frequent in women than men (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). This finding extends to studies of peer stress. In one study of adolescents living in the Netherlands, no difference in coping with peer rejection was found (Reijntjes et al., 2006). In contrast, in a study of US adolescents, girls were more likely than boys to respond passively when faced with peer difficulties than boys (Dodge & Feldman, 1990). Thus, it should be emphasized, that, although girls may appraise stressful events, especially interpersonal events, as more emotionally distressing, it is not yet clear whether girls and boys differ systematically in the ways they cope with peer rejection during early adolescence.

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