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The moderation of culturally normative coping strategies on Taiwanese adolescent peer victimization and psychological distress

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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to investigate the moderation effects of coping strategies on the association between perceived peer victimization and psychological distress including loneliness and depression. Applying the person-context fit developmental model, this research hypothesized that adaptive coping strategies, which are normative in Taiwan's culture (i.e., social support seeking), would buffer the link between peer victimization and psychological distress (i.e., depression and loneliness) in comparison with the culturally non-normative coping (i.e., problem-solving strategies). We also expected maladaptive coping strategies (i.e., internalizing strategies) would exacerbate the link between peer victimization and psychological distress. A latent interaction model was conducted with a sample of 730 Taiwanese adolescents attending one middle school. The results indicated that both support seeking strategies and problem-solving strategies buffered Taiwanese adolescents from loneliness and depression. Internalizing coping strategies placed Taiwanese adolescents at great risk of depression and loneliness. Support seeking strategies that are aligned with interdependent cultural contexts appeared to have greater protective effects than the culturally non-normative problem-solving strategies for adolescents who perceived high levels of victimization. The implications for prevention and intervention were discussed.

Peer victimization is recognized as a world-wide problem with international prevalence rates ranging between 9 and 54% (Undheim & Sund, 2010). The problem of peer victimization seriously impacts mental health during adolescence and is associated with impaired psychological well-being and physical health such as increased depressive symptoms, anxiety, and loneliness (Herge, La Greca, & Chan, 2016; Smith & Brain, 2000; Stapinski, Araya, Heron, Montgomery, & Stallard, 2015). One line of research conceptualizes coping strategies as a moderator which can protect or exacerbate adjustment depending on whether the specific strategies are adaptive or maladaptive (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008). Problem-focused coping and social support seeking strategies are defined as adaptive and are positively associated with adjustment whereas coping strategies that avoid the problem (e.g., crying) are conceptualized as maladaptive, exacerbating the maladjustment following the stressors (Hampel, Manhal, & Hayer, 2009).

However, the conceptualization of adaptive coping that implies invariant effects of coping strategies across contexts is problematic. The person-context fit model suggests that the effects of coping may depend on the fit between the strategies being used and the normative strategies in a given context (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998). That said, the dissonance between adolescents' coping and the culturally normative coping is expected to yield negative effects on adjustment. The current literature on coping strategies mostly

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assesses samples from Western societies with the majority of participants being White adolescents. It is unclear if coping strategies that are found adaptive in the literature have similar effects for adolescents residing in a different cultural context (e.g., Taiwanese culture). Built on the person-context fit model, we examined the moderation effect of coping strategies between psychological distress and peer victimization using a Taiwanese adolescent sample. We proposed that the use of coping strategies documented as normative in Taiwan's culture would buffer adolescents from psychological distress; coping strategies that are not normative in Taiwan's culture, regardless of if it is considered adaptive in Western societies, would exacerbate the relation between peer victimization and psychological distress.

1. Adolescent coping strategies in response to peer victimization

The ability to adapt to stressful situations, such as peer victimization, is a prominent aspect of human development. Coping is the process within which individuals use different strategies to regulate or direct their behaviors in response to a source of stress. Coping is conceptualized as purposeful, goal-directed efforts aimed at managing one's own behaviors when encountering a stressful event that exceeds personal resources (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Compas, Jaser, Dunn, & Rodriguez, 2012; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In the peer victimization literature, the most widely assessed coping construct is the approach versus avoidance coping dimension (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Ma & Bellmore, 2016). Approach coping is defined as positive behaviors or strategies that aim to actively treat or deal with stress through generating a positive solution, changing the stressful event, or seeking support from friends (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Common coping strategies built upon this approach-avoidance dimension include two approach strategies: first, problem-solving coping—when an individual enacts a course of behaviors to alter or directly confront the stressful event; second, seeking social support coping—when an individual utilizes social connection to deal with stress by asking for advice or assistance from another person, often a friend or a teacher (Causey & Dubow, 1992).

The other coping dimension is conceptualized as the avoidance coping dimension, which refers to behavioral, cognitive, and emotional strategies that do not directly treat the source of stress. Typical avoidance coping entails denying a situation, ignoring it, or ruminating on the distress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Common strategies identified under this dimension included three strategies: distancing coping—when an individual forces themselves not to think about the stressor; internalizing coping—when an individual blames themselves for causing the harassment or continues to ruminate about the details of the harassment; externalizing coping—when individual take out negative emotions on others or objects (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Research examining the direct association between coping strategies and psychological adjustment suggested that problem-focused coping and seeking social support strategies were negatively associated with adolescent depression and loneliness (Hampel et al., 2009; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). In contrast, internalizing coping and externalizing coping strategies were associated with adolescent depressive symptoms, loneliness, and anxiety (Ben-Zur, 2005; Causey & Dubow, 1992; Compas et al., 2012).

Coping research typically conceptualizes four associations between coping, stress, and adjustment: coping as moderator, mediator, mechanism, and reciprocal process associations (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008). The research examining coping as a moderator, given its robustness to examination with cross-sectional data, is most fruitful and resulted in two general trends in the literature (Aldwin, 2007; Grant et al., 2006). First, positive coping strategies such as problem-solving strategies and support-seeking strategies have been found to buffer adolescents from depression following the interpersonal distress (Hampel et al., 2009; Singh & Bussey, 2011; Sugimura, Rudolph, & Agoston, 2014). In contrast, maladaptive coping such as rumination, internalizing coping (e.g., crying), and externalizing coping (e.g., getting mad) mostly placed adolescents at further risk of exacerbated depression (Compas et al., 2001; Endler & Parker, 1990; McWilliams, Cox, & Enns, 2003; Rohde, Lewinsohn, Tilson, & Seeley, 1990).

1.1. Person-context fit model

The aforementioned coping research implies that some coping strategies are inherently adaptive during adolescence, which may be a problematic conceptualization given that research also showed that the effects of coping strategies are context-dependent. For example, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) found the effects of social support seeking strategies on adolescent victims to be gender-specific. Specifically, support-seeking protected girl victims, but not boy victims, from depression. The authors contended that this is because seeking social support may be gender-atypical behavior for boys. This notion highlights the importance of person-context fit and implies that coping strategies that fit the norm of a given context may be more conducive to adolescents' adjustment.

The person-context fit theoretical model provides a framework for understanding how adjustment is dependent on the behaviors and characteristics of an individual and their context (Magnusson & Stattin, 1998). According to the goodness-of-fit concept, consonance between individuals and their social context will yield positive adjustment, whereas dissonance between individuals' behaviors and the normative behaviors of their context will yield negative adjustment (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004; Kindermann & Valsiner, 1995; Lerner & Lerner, 1983). Research indicates that adolescents experience negative interpersonal consequences and negative social adjustment when he/she is a social misfit of their group—when individuals' behaviors are different from what was normative for their group (e.g., Stormshak et al., 1999). Bellmore et al. (2004) found that adolescent victims reported more anxiety and loneliness in classrooms where fewer peers were victimized—the perceived non-normative experiences compared to peers led adolescents to feel lonelier. This result echoed Stormshak et al.'s (1999) findings that showed the aggressive behaviors of first-graders predicted peer rejection only in classrooms where low levels of aggression was reported. These studies suggest that the determinants of adolescent adjustment are not invariant across contexts, but they depend on what behavior is normative in the context.

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