Avoidant coping as a mediator between appearance-related victimization and self-esteem in young Australian adolescents

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Peer victimization, especially appearance-related bullying, is a highly stressful experience for a young person and is associated with significant negative outcomes. Perhaps, the most common consequence of peer victimization in adolescence is lowered self-esteem. Evidence supports the role of low self-esteem as a non-specific risk factor and high self-esteem as a protective factor in the development of mental disorders and social problems in adolescence. Moreover, the literature indicates a robust negative relationship between avoidant coping (i.e. distracting oneself, wishing the situation would go away) and psychological well-being. In this paper, we test a mediational model of the associations between appearance-related victimization, avoidance coping and self-esteem in young Australian adolescents. Boys (N = 194) and girls (N = 185) with a mean age of 11 years completed measures assessing self-esteem, appearance-related victimization and styles of coping. The results showed that avoidant coping partially mediates the association between appearance-related bullying problems and self-esteem among young adolescents. This finding provides a specific target for psychosocial interventions in schools.

Peer victimization has a negative impact on self-esteem (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1993; Olweus, 1993; O’Moore, Kirkham, & Smith, 1997). As an index of emotional adjustment, global self-esteem is particularly relevant to psychological well-being, and is considered a good predictor of psychosocial outcomes (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Low self-regard in children has also been found to promote peer victimization while high self-regard serves as a protective factor against peer victimization, even if children display behavioural vulnerabilities (Egan & Perry, 1998). What is not well understood is how the mechanism operates that links victimization and adjustment outcomes such as self-esteem. The present study examined relationships between appearance-related peer victimization and students’ self-reported self-esteem. This was done by considering the mediating role of styles of...
coping with stress. While the relationships revealed in this manner do not allow for causal inferences, it is hoped that the present results will offer tentative indications as to the possible mediating role of coping, which would then allow for subsequent testing.

**Self-esteem**
It has been suggested that internalizing problems result in young people who incorporate the negative feedback inherent in verbal bullying into their view of self (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Others suggest that repetitive teasing increases self-focus and self-consciousness (Bollmer, Harris, Milich, & Georgesen, 2003). These propositions fit with Rosenberg’s (1979) theory of self-concept, which specifies that self-esteem, derives in part, from reflected appraisals (seeing oneself through others’ eyes) and social comparisons (comparing oneself with others). Cooley (1902) labelled these reflected self-appraisals as the ‘looking glass self’. Similarly, Mead (1934) observed that the opinions of significant others (i.e. the ‘generalized other’) were pooled in constructing the self. In line with this, there is evidence that approval from peers in the more public arena is a more powerful predictor of global self-esteem than support from close friends (Harter, 1990).

**Appearance victimization**
Appearance-related victimization, which typically involves criticisms directed at weight, height, physical attractiveness (i.e. facial features) and body shape are reported as one of the most prevalent forms of bullying among young people (Mooney, Cresser, & Blatchford, 1991; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). In a retrospective autobiographical study, most of the incidents recounted by victims focused on physical appearance (Kowalski, 2000). In one British study, school students listed insults such as fatty, fatso, rubber nose, skinny ribs and pipsqueak as the most disliked names (Crozier & Dimmock, 1999). In another study, physical appearance, namely being fat, was identified as the most prevalent form of verbal bullying among young people (Shapiro et al., 1991). Reports of having been teased about weight or shape have been found to predict increases in bulimic tendencies among adolescent girls (Wertheim, Koerner, & Paxton, 2001). This personalized form of bullying may also pose a particular problem to self-esteem, since appearance (weight, attractiveness, size and body shape) is not easily changed, and reframing the issue may be difficult for young people.

**Coping**
Attempts to maintain self-esteem may lead to a variety of coping processes. Coping, or the cognitive and behavioural actions taken during the course of a stressful situation, can be viewed in terms of two dimensions – approach and avoidant coping (Ebata & Moos, 1991). Approach coping styles tend to focus on identifying the source of the stressful problem, seeking social support from others, working hard to achieve and solve the problem, working to improve relationships, seeking spiritual support or professional help. In contrast, avoidant coping styles tend to involve avoiding, ignoring, worrying, accepting undeserved blame, keeping the problem inside or distracting oneself from the problem. Avoidant coping strategies may also include emotional outbursts in an effort to reduce tension and an overall inability to cope.

Findings clearly indicate that approach coping strategies, such as problem-solving, are related to better functioning when compared with avoidant strategies, such as
distraction (Endler & Parker, 1990). Australian studies of adolescent coping have shown that use of strategies, such as self-blame, worry, keep to self and wishful thinking are linked with a number of adverse outcomes in adolescents, including depression (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1999). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that young people who are least able to cope use more avoidant strategies, including crying, worrying and withdrawing (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004), and are also likely to feel less good about themselves and their circumstances (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002).

Broader research on coping suggests that avoidant styles of coping are associated with less favourable adjustment outcomes, including poor adaptation and more mental health problems (Ebata & Moos, 1991; Gomez, 1998; Hoffman, Levey-Shiff, Sohlberg, & Zariski, 1992). In a longitudinal study of different types of coping styles, all forms of avoidant coping used in adolescence were linked with higher levels of depressive symptoms, even at follow-up two years later (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000). As a whole, these studies indicate that avoidant coping is perhaps the most consistent predictor of maladaptation and reduced well-being. Accordingly, we hypothesized that avoidant coping serves to partially mediate the relationship between appearance-related victimization problems and self-esteem in young adolescents.

**Method**

**Participants**

A sample of 194 boys and 185 girls aged between 10 and 13 years (mean age 11 years) from several co-educational schools in Melbourne, Australia completed assessments of peer victimization, coping and self-esteem. Schools were located in the second largest metropolitan region of Melbourne, representing a diverse population. The four most common languages other than English spoken at home included Greek (11%), Italian (7%), Vietnamese (5%) and Cantonese (4%).

**Measures**

**Appearance-related victimization**

Four items tapped victim experiences targeting weight (i.e. being too fat or too thin), height, facial features and body shape. Ratings on a five-point Likert type scale (1 = never, 2 = once or twice, 3 = 3 - 10 times, 4 = 11 - 20 times and 5 = more than 20 times) indicated how often participants received each of the insults from peers. A clear time frame was given, representing the academic year. Averaged items yielded a single victim score – with higher scores indicating higher levels of victimization (α = .62).

**Coping style**

Coping style was assessed via the Coping Scale for Children – Short Form (CSC-SF: Lodge, 2006), which provides scores on 16 different dimensions of coping. Items rated on a three-point scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = a lot) were scored to yield two styles of coping – approach and avoidant. Approach coping style (10 items, α = .69) focuses directly on the stressful problem (e.g. problem-solving and seeking support). Avoidant coping (6 items, α = .70) involves efforts directed away from the problem and tends to concern the management of attention (e.g. worry, wishful thinking and tension-reduction strategies, such as crying and screaming).
Self-esteem

A seven-item subscale (α = .82) from the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory (WAI; Weinberger, Feldman, & Ford, 1989) was used as an indication of an individual’s perception of his or her value. Participants rated each statement on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree). Averaged scale scores ranged from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. The WAI items avoid referring to age-specific contexts or behaviours and have been validated for use on both clinical and non-clinical samples of youth (ages 10–17) (Weinberger et al., 1989).

Results

Relations among self-esteem, victimization, and coping

In line with other studies on peer harassment (i.e. Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992), 75% of study participants reported having been the target of appearance-related bullying at least occasionally during the school year. Descriptive data for each self-reported measure are presented in Table 1. Sex and year level differences were absent (p > .05). Correlational analyses were computed to investigate the relations among self-esteem, appearance-related victimization and styles of coping (approach and avoidant). There were three findings of note. First, self-esteem was negatively associated with appearance-related victimization and avoidant coping, and positively associated with approach coping. Second, the pattern of correlations was similar for boys and girls. Third, the relationships among the predictor variables were low to moderate, ranging (in absolute values) from .03 to .41. Thus, there are no problems of multicollinearity in using these predictors in the regression analyses.

Preliminary analyses

According to the criteria set forth by Baron and Kenny (1986), only coping styles significantly related to appearance victimization problems may serve as potential mediators between appearance-related victimization and adolescent self-esteem. A regression analysis, with appearance victimization as the dependent variable and coping styles (approach and avoidant) as criterion variables, indicated that only avoidant coping was related to appearance-related victimization problems (t = 5.87, df = 2,376,

**Table 1. Variable correlations, means, and standard deviations for boys and girls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Girls means (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-esteem</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–.26**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>–.39***</td>
<td>3.65 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Appearance victimization</td>
<td>–.32**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–.03</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>1.66 (0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Approach-coping style</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>–.05</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.22 (0.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Avoidant-coping style</td>
<td>–.41***</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.77 (0.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys means (SD)</td>
<td>3.62 (.72)</td>
<td>1.64 (.70)</td>
<td>2.22 (.30)</td>
<td>1.71 (.40)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Correlations, means, and standard deviations (SD) above the diagonal are for girls (N = 185) and correlations, means, and standard deviations (SD) below the diagonal are for boys (N = 194).

**p < .01.**
Thus, for subsequent advanced analyses, approach coping was no longer considered.

Path models
In a procedure recommended by Asher (1983), we conducted path analysis based on simultaneous regression analyses. Data analysed separately by sex revealed that the results for boys and girls were the same, thus we present the path analyses for the combined sample. The results appear in Table 2.

Table 2. Simultaneous regression models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adj. R²</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1: Avoidant coping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance victimization</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>33.86***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2: Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance victimization</td>
<td>−0.29</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−0.29***</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>35.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3: Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidant coping</td>
<td>−0.68</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>−0.40***</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>70.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4: Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance victimization</td>
<td>−0.20</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−0.20***</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>44.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidant-coping style</td>
<td>−0.59</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>−0.34***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001.

The first regression, in which we regressed avoidant coping onto appearance-related victimization, indicated that appearance-related victimization problems was associated with the use of avoidant coping ($F[1, 377] = 33.86, p < .001$). That is, greater occurrence of appearance victimization problems was associated with greater use of avoidant coping among young adolescents. Next, the relationship between appearance-related victimization and self-esteem was significant ($F[1, 377] = 35.34, p < .001$). As expected, greater occurrence of appearance-related victimization was associated with lower self-esteem. Third, avoidant coping was negatively associated with self-esteem ($F[1, 377] = 70.46, p < .001$), whereby greater use of avoidant coping was associated with low self-esteem. The final regression analysis, which included both appearance-related victimization and avoidant coping in the model, predicted 19% of the total variance in adolescent self-esteem. In this analysis, the relationship between appearance-related victimization and self-esteem was reduced when avoidant coping was simultaneously included in the model. That is, there was an indirect path between appearance-related victimization and self-esteem, via avoidant coping.

A common method for testing the significance of the mediated (or indirect) effect is Sobel’s test of mediation (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001). This test allows us to determine whether the effect of the predictor (appearance victimization) on the outcome (self-esteem) is significantly reduced upon the addition of the mediator (avoidant coping) into the model. Results of the Sobel test confirmed that avoidant coping partially mediated the relationship between appearance victimization and self-esteem ($z = −4.88, p < .001$). These associations are presented in Figure 1, with both the standardized regression coefficients, and in parentheses, the partial regression coefficients.
Discussion

A mediational model was tested to determine if avoidant coping mediated the relationship between appearance-related victimization and adolescent self-esteem. Our results suggest that avoidant coping may constitute an important mediating mechanism by which appearance-related victimization problems are associated with decreased self-esteem in young adolescents. However, one limitation of this study is the use of a cross-sectional research design, which limits our ability to draw causal inferences from the findings. Prospective designs would contribute to a better understanding of the causal relations among measures of appearance-related victimization, mediating coping variables and self-esteem outcomes.

One of the main developmental outcomes of adolescence is the establishment of a positive sense of identity (Harter, 1990). At least, the three key theoretical principles – reflected appraisals, social comparisons and self-attributions – underlie the process of self-concept formation (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1979). Accordingly, feedback from significant others (i.e. peers) in the form of appearance-related bullying was hypothesized to negatively influence levels of self-esteem. The results of this study support this conjecture and imply that appearance-related victimization from peers is a salient issue during early adolescence that poses a particular problem to self-esteem. This is certainly compatible with previous work, which identifies appearance as most closely tied to over-all self-worth (Harter, 1990; Shapka & Keating, 2005).

The absence of gender differences in the current study may be attributable to several factors explained within the literature. Levels of psychological well-being rather than gender, for example, have been found to establish clearer differences in the use of coping strategies (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000), while the victim findings are consistent with studies on verbal aggression (Boulton & Flemington, 1997; Smith et al., 1999). In their meta-analysis, Sahlstein and Allen (2002) found that as age increased, gender differences in self-esteem also increased. Thus, one possibility is that in early adolescence, few gender differences are evident in global self-esteem, though, domain-specific differences in self-concepts are likely (Marsh, 1990).

Young people who are frequently bullied by peers about their appearance (weight, attractiveness, size and body shape) may be more likely to deem these characteristics as fundamentally unchangeable or outside their control, thereby making it more likely that they use avoidant when compared with approach forms of coping. In agreement with this proposition, coping has been found to moderate relationships associated with victimization in young female adults (aged 18–22 years), wherein avoidant styles of coping increased the risk for negative outcomes (Scarpa, Haden, & Hurley, 2006).
The consequences of developing avoidant coping styles may lead to feelings of helplessness, depression, anxiousness and substance abuse or delinquent behaviours (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000). Recent research identifies young people who engage in the use of avoidant coping styles as most ‘at risk’ for psychosocial maladjustment (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2004). Longitudinal studies indicate that coping is associated with changes in mood (Felton & Revenson, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Stanton & Snider, 1993). Certainly, our findings of a relationship between avoidant coping and self-esteem are congruent with these results. However, this does not rule out the possibility of a bidirectional process, wherein low self-esteem leads to avoidant forms of coping, which in turn may increase the young person’s vulnerability to peer victimization – such pathways merit consideration, especially given longitudinal work that identifies relatively low self-esteem as a risk factor for victimization by others (Egan & Perry, 1998).

Self-esteem is influenced by social interaction and the individual’s experiences with the environment (Fox, 1992). Coping however, is potentially amenable to change, and as such, offers clear avenues for intervention. Cognitive-behaviour interventions, for example, can directly teach coping skills. In general, coping skill programmes for adolescents have focused on increasing approach coping strategies to help young people cope more effectively with school and life problems (i.e. Cowen, Wyman, Work, & Iker, 1995; Kendall & Braswell, 1993). However, recent intervention studies in Australia have found that teaching young people to reduce their use of avoidant strategies rather than the promotion of approach coping may be more important (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2004).

For young people who are experiencing appearance-related victimization, clinicians can first help the young person become aware of how they are coping with their stress and how their use of avoidant coping serves a function (e.g. to distract and emotional release). Second, clinicians can facilitate the choice of healthier forms of coping within the modality that the young person is utilizing. For example, those young people using alcohol to reduce tension and distract themselves from concerns could be encouraged to replace this with an avoidant strategy whose consequences are less unhealthy, such as going to a movie or eating out with friends. Such approaches may initiate a shift to a more effective style, which may in turn promote self-esteem.

The development of approach coping also merits some attention. Problem-solving training, for example, is a successful intervention strategy for problems such as depression (e.g. Nezu, Nezu, & Perri, 1989). Other programmes teach adolescents problem-solving or approach-coping strategies that are applicable to general life problems (i.e. Cowen et al., 1995; Frydenberg & Brandon, 2002; Kendall & Braswell, 1993). In addition, the utility of incorporating techniques to reduce the use of avoidant strategies into larger school-based efforts that teach young people to cope more effectively with school and life problems warrants examination.

In conclusion, this study has the same limitations as all correlational analysis. While other equally valid models might exist, the results of this study enrich the understanding of factors that may be central to the aetiology of adolescent self-esteem and identify a specific target for intervention work. Given the significant effects of avoidant coping on self-esteem, this study suggests that this mediating variable may serve as an intervention tool to increase self-esteem in young people. The results imply that clinicians can help young people who are victims of appearance victimization to increase their self-esteem by reducing their reliance on avoidant coping strategies. Furthermore, given that
relatively low self-esteem is a risk factor for victimization by others (Egan & Perry, 1998), increasing self-esteem via changes in coping may also contribute to overcoming the vicious cycle of peer victimization.

References


Lewis, R., & Frydenberg, E. (2004). Thriving, surviving, or going under: Which coping strategies relate to which outcomes? In E. Frydenberg (Ed.), *Thriving, surviving, or going under: Coping with everyday lives* (pp. 3–24). USA: Information Age Publishing.


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