Humor as a Potential Coping Mechanism When Peer Victimization Occurs

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Introduction

Peer victimization refers to physical, verbal, or psychological abuse of victims by perpetrators who intend to cause them harm (Olweus, 1993).

Peer victimization is a widely studied risk factor for psychopathology in early adolescence (10-14), however not all early adolescents who experience peer victimization develop psychological problems.

Studies have shown that some adolescents report using humor to cope with peer victimization; there is also some research linking humor to positive psychological outcomes. (Fox, Hunter & Jones, 2015; Markovic & Bowker 2015; Sulkowski, Bauman, Dinner, Nixon, & Davis, 2014).

The current study considers, for the first time, whether humor moderates the concurrent and longitudinal associations between peer victimization and depression and loneliness. Gender is also explored as a moderator due to the fact that adolescent girls are found to experience internalizing problems such as depression and loneliness more than adolescent boys.

Hypotheses

Peer victimization will be positively associated with depression and loneliness at both time points (T1, T2).

Humor will moderate the associations between peer victimization and internalizing problems such that the associations will be weaker for adolescents who use humor as a coping mechanism than those who do not.

Gender will be another moderator such that peer victimization will be associated with positive (or less negative) psychological outcomes for adolescent girls high in humor, and negative psychological outcomes for adolescent girls who use low humor or no humor at all.

Methods

N = 268 young adolescents (6th grade)
M_{age} = 11.84 years
58% Caucasian, 19% African American, 16% Other/Biracial, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 4% did not report
Data was collected at two time-points (T1: Winter, T2: Spring)

Measures

Peer nomination items were used to assess:
Peer Victimization (Times 1 & 2): *"Someone who gets hit or pushed around by other kids", "Someone who other kids say mean things about or gossip about" "Someone who gets picked on or bullied by other kids"*
Humor (Times 1 & 2): *"A person with a good sense of humor"*

Self-reports were used to assess:
Depression (Times 1 & 2): Children's Depression Inventory: Short Version; 10 items; e.g., choose among the options: *"I am sad once in awhile", "I am sad many times",* and *"I am sad all the time".*
Loneliness (Times 1 & 2): Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire; 16 items; 5-point Likert scale, e.g., *"I feel alone".*

Table 1: Victimization Predicting Loneliness and Depression at Time 1 with Humor and Gender as Moderators

		Model 1: Loneliness T1		Model 2: Depression T1	
		B	β	B	β
Step 1	Vic T1	0.06	0.08	0.40	0.11
Step 2	Humor	-0.07	-0.12	0.00	-0.01
	Sex	-0.19	0.10	0.00	0.00
Step 3	Vic T1 x Humor T1	0.11	0.10	0.06	0.12
	Vic T1 x Sex	0.56	0.17	-0.02	-0.01
	Humor T2 x Sex	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.05
Step 4	Humor T1 x Sex x Vic T1	**2.79**	**0.75**	**0.80**	**0.47**

Table 2: Victimization Predicting Loneliness and Depression at Time 2 with Humor and Gender as Moderators

		Model 1: Loneliness T2		Model 2: Depression T2	
		B	β	B	β
Step 1	Vic T1	0.05	0.08	-0.01	-0.03
Step 2	Humor	0.01	0.02	-0.01	-0.02
	Sex	0.02	0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Step 3	Vic T1 x Humor T1	-0.04	0.15	**-0.08**	**-0.17**
	Vic T1 x Sex	**0.40**	**-0.01**	**0.23**	**0.17**
	Humor T2 x Sex	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.05
Step 4	Humor T1 x Sex x Vic T1	0.56	0.17	**0.57**	**0.35**

Results

Concurrent Analyses (Table 1)
Hierarchal linear regression analyses revealed a interaction involving peer victimization, humor, and sex when predicting T1 depression and loneliness. Simple slope analyses revealed that peer victimization was a positive predictor of T1 depression and loneliness for girls high in humor (depression: β= 1.21, *p*= 0.01, loneliness: β= 4.51, *p*= 0.001) but a negative predictor for girls low in humor (depression: β= -0.49, *p*= 0.05, loneliness: β = -1.16, *p* = 0.02). Results were not significant for boys high in humor or boys low in humor.

Longitudinal Analyses (Table 2)
When predicting T2 depression, a significant interaction involving peer victimization, humor, and sex emerged, with simple slope analyses revealing that T1 victimization was predictive of decreasing depression for boys high in humor (β= -0.16, *p*= 0.01), but predictive of increasing depression for girls high in humor (β= 0.87, *p*= 0.02)

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing literature on peer victimization by demonstrating that humor moderates the associations between peer victimization and psychological outcomes.

However, findings differed significantly for boys and girls. Unexpectedly, it was found that humor may act as a psychological *risk factor* for girls. In contrast, we found some evidence suggesting that humor may act as a potential *protective factor* for boys.

Additional research is needed to further explain these results, but it is possible that girls who are high in humor use it as a defense mechanism, and do not actually deal with the victimization when it occurs. Thus causing them to develop feelings of depression and loneliness. Boys on the other hand, may be successful in using humor as a coping mechanism and as a result deflect the victimization when it occurs, lowering their chances of developing depression or loneliness.

These findings could potentially serve as a resource for clinicians and educators by encouraging *effective* coping mechanisms for all early adolescents, but specifically early adolescent girls.

Future studies should investigate other factors that may explain why girls high in humor have higher risks for depression and loneliness when peer victimization occurs.