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A developmental investigation of the relationship between appraisals and Peer Self-Esteem in children experiencing peer-aggression

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Background

Transactional models of stress and coping emphasize the role played by cognitive appraisals in determining psychological adjustment (Lazarus, 1999). This proposition has been supported by research examining young people's adjustment in relation to family conflict and break-up (Grych et al., 1992). Furthermore, this literature suggests that there is a change in the relationship between appraisals and adjustment at around 10 years of age: specificity of appraisal type (e.g. threat, blame) becomes relevant to outcome after 10 years, whereas before 10 there are either no effects of appraisal on adjustment or a diffuse effect of 'negative' appraisals more generally (Jouriles et al., 2000). However, it is currently unclear whether this developmental progression can be generalized from familial- to social-stressors experienced by children and young people. The current study therefore evaluates the model within the context of a commonly experienced social childhood stressor: peer-aggression.

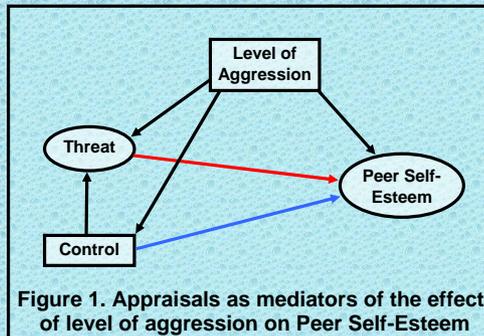
Methodology

925 children from 9 British primary schools indicated, from a list, the ways in which other children had been 'nasty or unpleasant' to them in the previous 2 weeks, and how often these things had happened (Hunter et al., 2004). All children ($N = 563$) who provided full demographic information and who reported non-recurring aggression (peer-aggression) or repeated aggression (peer-victimization) were included. 237 children were aged 8 or 9 years ($M = 8.83$, $SD = 0.38$; 55.3% male); 326 were aged 10 to 12 years ($M = 10.41$, $SD = 0.52$; 55.2% male). Children also completed questionnaires assessing: a) peer self-esteem (DuBois et al., 1996); b) what they thought would happen when other children are nasty (to check situational appraisal of threat and control, Hunter et al., 2004).

Analyses

Structural equation models were used to assess whether cognitive appraisals acted as statistical mediators of the effect of Level of Aggression (peer-aggression vs. peer-victimization) on Peer Self-Esteem. The model in Figure 1 was first assessed with neither the red path from Threat to Peer Self-Esteem nor the blue path from Control to Peer Self-Esteem included.

The extent to which each mediated the effects of level of aggression was then tested by adding each of the colored paths individually. A decrease in the path from level of aggression to Peer Self-Esteem is indicative of mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The model was then tested with both colored paths included.



Results

Threat partially mediated the effects of Level of Aggression among the younger children, but fully mediated the effects of Level of Aggression for the older children. Control was unrelated to Peer Self-Esteem. In both groups, higher levels of perceived Threat were associated with lower Peer Self-Esteem. More frequent aggression led to lower levels of perceived Control and higher levels of Threat, and higher levels of Control were associated with lower levels of Threat. Finally, there was a non-significant trend toward path weights increasing in strength as pupils got older.

Figure 1 Paths Included	Aggression to Peer SE standardized path coefficient for young (and old) groups
Neither colored path (ie unmediated)	-.25*** (-.16*)
Threat to Peer SE (red)	-.16* (+.04)
Control to Peer SE (blue)	-.21* (-.08)
Both colored paths	-.15* (+.03)

Discussion

As predicted, cognitive appraisals statistically mediated the effects of level of aggression on peer self-esteem. However, the specificity of the relation between appraisal-type and adjustment was indicated by the finding that Threat, and not Control, acted as a mediator. These results support the theoretical perspective developed in family-conflict research, and extends it to encompass a social stressor experienced by children. We also tentatively suggest that the relationships that exist between stressor, appraisals, and adjustment indices become stronger as children develop, though future research should examine this over a broader age range than that used here.

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