

YOOLIM SHIN *The Catholic University of Korea*

YEJEAN LEE\* *The Catholic University of Korea*

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## Moderating Effects of Coping Strategies on Link between Peer Victimization and Internalizing Problems in Preadolescents

*The present research investigated gender-specific response strategies for dealing with peer victimization of preadolescents. Furthermore, coping strategies were explored as moderators of the link between peer victimization and internalizing problems. The participants were 466 preadolescents. Peer victimization, coping strategies, and internalizing problems were assessed through self-report questionnaires. Results showed that girls had significantly higher scores on help seeking, avoidant strategies, and ruminative strategies than boys. In addition, use of avoidant coping and seeking help minimized the effects of peer victimization on internalizing problems in girls. Ruminative coping exacerbated the influence of peer victimization on internalizing problems for both boys and girls.*

Children who are frequently victimized are at increased risks of emotional and social maladjustment (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Peer victimization has been associated with internalizing problems (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). Recent studies on elementary school children and adolescents have found a positive association between peer victimization and social avoidance (Grills & Ollendick,

2002; Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004). A number of studies have found a positive relationship between peer victimization and social anxiety. Victimized children have reported social anxiety which was a response to repeated exposure to peer aggression (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004). This social anxiety would limit victims' experience with positive relationships with peers, therefore victimized children experience elevated levels of loneliness (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004).

Although preadolescents who are targets of bullies experience loneliness and social anxiety, peer victimization does not affect all preadolescents in the same manner. Hoover, Oliver, and Hazler (1992) found that 75% reported being bullied during school, while fewer than 15% stated that they felt severely affected. Therefore, individual factors may reduce or enhance the probability of maladjustment when they are confronted by peer victimization.

The present study investigated coping strategies that may influence individual differences in effects of peer victimization on internalizing maladjustment. Two specific issues were analyzed. Firstly, the notion of gender-specific coping strategies was explored. Secondly, we investigated whether coping strategies moderate the relation between peer victimization and internalizing problems. We focused on loneliness and social anxiety as these are two serious consequences associated with peer harassment.

Coping has been defined as a conscious effort to regulate emotion, cognition, behaviors, physiology,

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Associate professor, Department of Child & Family Studies, The Catholic University of Korea (yoolim@catholic.ac.kr)

\*Doctoral student, Department of Child & Family Studies, The Catholic University of Korea

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and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances (Compas, Conner-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). The use of adaptive coping strategies has been reported to be an important factor for child adjustment. Children's use of constructive coping strategies was linked to fewer internalizing symptoms such as loneliness (Kim, 2005; Min, 2002).

Previous literature related to stress and coping have suggested the two broad categories of problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It has been suggested that problem-focused coping is associated with better adjustment compared to emotion-focused coping. For example, Compas *et al.*, (2001) found that emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies were associated with internalizing symptoms. Problem-focused coping strategies were more often associated with decreased internalizing problems (Kim, 2005; Min, 2002). Causey and Dubow (1992) investigated the association between children's coping strategies and peer arguments. They suggested that seeking social support was associated with positive self-esteem, whereas internalizing coping was positively related to social anxiety.

Previous literature indicates that coping strategies that directly address the source of the stressor such as attempting to alter the situation or seeking additional information, were likely to be associated with positive outcomes than avoiding the stressor (Park & Jung, 2001). Moreover, research has shown that asking friends or adults for help decrease in adjustment problems (Sim, 2001).

Peer victimization provides a context in which to study coping strategies. Children are frequently confronted with a variety of stressful peer experiences including verbal and physical aggression and social exclusion (Hartup, 1983). Although peer victimization serves as an important domain for exploring how preadolescents deal with negative events, a few studies have investigated coping strategies in relation to peer victimization. A limited number of studies have examined individual differences in coping responses to peer victimization. For example, Bijttebier and Vertommen (1998) examined bully/victim status and coping strategies.

For boys, peer victimization was positively related to social support and internalizing strategies, while for girls, peer victimization was positively associated with internalizing strategies. Shin and Chung (2002) presented that bullies used more social support-seeking and aggressive coping than victims, whereas victims used more evasive coping than bullies.

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) explored coping strategies as moderators between peer victimization and adjustment outcomes. They established that distancing buffered victimized children from maladjustment. More importantly, they found that while seeking social support mitigated social problems for victimized girls, it led to lower social acceptance for victimized boys. Sandstrom (2004) indicated that coping with rejection experiences influenced adjustment. Aggressive and ruminative coping strategies were positively associated with internalizing problems, while denial coping moderated the association between sociometric status and adjustment. Reijntjes, Stegge, Terwogt, Kamphuis, and Telch (2006) have also stated that in response to peer rejection, depressed children reported less frequent behavioral and cognitive coping strategies.

Gender differences in relation to internalizing symptoms begin to emerge in early adolescence (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994). Girls show relatively higher levels of social anxiety than boys (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Compared with boys, girls tend to be more distressed and hurt feelings in response to negative peer experiences (Sandstrom, Cillessen, & Eisenhower, 2003).

Furthermore, peer related literature reveals that girls are more likely to have connection-oriented goals than boys. For example, Ford (1982) revealed that girls valued social goals (e.g., having friends, helping others) more than boys. In contrast, boys tend to endorse more agentic and status-oriented goals (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Compared with girls, boys are more likely to adopt goals promoting their self-interest, which could also lead to revenge seeking (Rose & Asher, 1999).

Because girls use socialization to establish relationships (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987), they are more likely to ask friends or adults for help than

boys (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). Rose and Rudolph (2006) revealed that girls are more likely than boys to discuss their worries with friends, revisiting problems and focusing on negative feelings, which may exacerbate distress. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997) also stated that relative to boys, girls are more likely to ask friends or adults for help. In contrast, boys are more likely to fight back or vent their feelings (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992), as externalizing coping behavior is more socially acceptable for boys. For girls, antagonistic and coercive strategies have been associated with peer rejection (Chung & Asher, 1996).

Based on the previous literature, the first objective of this study was to examine gender differences in coping strategies for dealing with peer victimization in preadolescents. The second objective was to investigate maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies that may moderate the association between peer victimization and internalizing problems. Moderation models were examined separately according to gender.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 466 fifth and sixth grade preadolescents (241 boys, 225 girls). They ranged in age from 11 to 12, and were recruited from two elementary schools in Bucheon City. Six 5th and seven 6th grade classes participated in the study. Class sizes ranged from 40 to 43 students. The children came from middle-class socioeconomic families. Mother's education was distributed as follows; high school graduate, 39.5%, college graduate, 28.0%, graduate work, 2.1%. Father's education was distributed as follows; high school graduate, 33.8%, college graduate, 36.9%, graduate work, 1.7%. The total was not 100% because some children did not answer the item.

### *Measures*

*Peer victimization* A self-report questionnaire, developed for a Korean setting by Schwartz, Farver, Chang, and Lee-Shin (2002), was used to assess

children's experience with peer victimization. This questionnaire included 5 items on a 4-point Likert scale (e.g., "How often do others bully or pick on you?"). Participants were asked to report how frequently they had been harassed at school. Internal consistency was for victimization in the present study was .788.

*Internalizing problems* Children's scores on loneliness and social anxiety were averaged to obtain a measure of overall internalizing problems.

#### 1) Loneliness

Asher and Wheeler's (1985) Loneliness Scale was administered to assess children's feelings of loneliness (e.g., "I have nobody to play with at school."). Sixteen items were put on a five-point scale in terms of how true each question was for the individual. This measure demonstrated good internal consistency in this sample (Cronbach's alpha = .938).

#### 2) Social Anxiety

Parkhurst and Asher's (1992) Interpersonal Concern Scale was used to assess children's social anxiety (e.g., "How often are you concerned with whether other kids will think you are weird?"). Children responded to 7 items on a 4-point Likert Scale according to how much the items were true for an individual. The Cronbach's alpha in this sample was .887.

### *Coping Strategies*

The Survey of Coping with Rejection Experiences (Sandstrom, 2004) was used to assess coping strategies. This measure describes two specific peer victimization experiences; "being harassed by schoolmates" and "being excluded from a group activity". This is a four-point scale self-reported questionnaire that consists of 27 items. Children were asked to rate how frequently they used each coping strategy in dealing with similar experiences. Factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed four factors; help seeking (e.g., "Get help from another kid."), avoidant coping (e.g., "Just try to forget it."), aggressive coping (e.g., "Act angry or argue."), and ruminative coping, (e.g., "Worry about it").

Cronbach's alpha values were .694 for help seeking, .709 for avoidant coping, .804 for aggressive coping, and .639 for ruminative coping.

#### Procedure and Data Analysis

All measures were group administered to the children during their home room period. The trained research assistants conducted the administration in about 45 minutes. The research assistants read instructions and each of items of the measures, and reminded the children of the confidentiality of this project. The collected data were analyzed using Pearson correlations, t-test, and regression.

## RESULTS

### Correlations between All Variables

In line with our expected gender disparities, correlations were computed separately for boys and girls. Correlations between the variables are presented in Table 1. Significant positive correlations were found between peer victimization, loneliness, and social anxiety, indicating that boys and girls who reported more victimization, suffered higher levels of loneliness and social anxiety. In addition, for girls, peer victimization correlated negatively with help seeking. For boys, peer victimization positively correlated with ruminative coping. Moreover, seeking help was negatively correlated with loneliness in girls, whereas avoidant and ruminative coping were positively correlated with loneliness in boys. Avoidant and ruminative strategies were

associated with social avoidance for both boys and girls. Seeking help was associated with social avoidance in boys, while this association was not significant for girls. Because loneliness and social anxiety were highly correlated, they were combined to form a composite variable of internalizing problems.

### Gender Differences in Coping Strategies

In order to establish gender differences in coping strategies, a series of t-tests were conducted. Table 2 shows that compared to boys, girls had significantly higher scores on help seeking, avoidant strategies, and ruminative strategies. However, there was no significant gender difference in aggressive coping.

### Moderating effects of coping strategies

To examine whether coping strategies moderated the association between peer victimization and internalizing problems, hierarchical linear regressions were conducted separately for boys and girls. The analyses consisted of three steps. Peer victimization was

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Coping Strategies by Gender

Coping strategies	Boys (N = 241)	Girls (N = 225)	t-score
	M(SD)	M(SD)	
Seeking Help	2.198(.744)	2.451(.834)	-2.530*
Avoidant Coping	2.517(.773)	2.688(.681)	-2.530*
Aggressive Coping	2.076(.723)	2.110(.762)	-.527
Ruminative Coping	1.782(.729)	1.987(.775)	-2.118*

\* $p < .05$ .

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations

(N = 466)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Peer Victimization		-.199*	-.059	.012	.006	.632***	.517***
2. Seeking Help	-.093		.346***	.153*	.323***	-.196**	-.034
3. Avoidant Coping	.101	.372***		-.165*	.378***	.069	.190**
4. Aggressive Coping	-.013	.199***	.052		.053	-.072	.027
5. Ruminative Coping	.153*	.275***	.356***	.245***		.240***	.283***
6. Loneliness	.479***	.021	.227***	.056	.429***		.516***
7. Social Anxiety	.396***	.143*	.343***	.154*	.495***	.536***	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Note. Correlations for boys are presented below the diagonal and those for girls above the diagonal.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing Problems for Boys ( $N = 241$ )

Step	Predictors	$\beta$	$R^2$	Adj- $R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
1	Peer Victimization	.402***	.255	.252	
	Seeking Help	-.135	.480	.469	.217
2	Avoidant Coping	.143*			
	Ruminative Coping	.353***			
	Aggressive Coping	.006			
3	Peer Victimization $\times$ Seeking Help	-1.108**	.543	.525	.056
	Peer Victimization $\times$ Avoidant	.253			
	Peer Victimization $\times$ Ruminative	1.397***			
	Peer Victimization $\times$ Aggressive	.313			

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing Problems for Girls ( $N = 225$ )

Step	Predictors	$\beta$	$R^2$	Adj- $R^2$	$R^2$
1	Peer Victimization	.511***	.426	.423	
	Seeking Help	-.184**	.526	.513	.090
2	Avoidant Coping	.026			
	Ruminative Coping	.310***			
	Aggressive Coping	-.090			
3	Peer Victimization $\times$ Seeking Help	-.857**	.589	.568	.055
	Peer Victimization $\times$ Avoidant	.539*			
	Peer Victimization $\times$ Ruminative	1.243***			
	Peer Victimization $\times$ Aggressive	.414			

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

entered in the first step, coping strategies were entered in the second step, and the interaction terms were entered in the third step.

The results of hierarchical regression analyses for boys are presented in Table 3, 4.

There were significant interactions between peer victimization and seeking help ( $\beta = -1.108$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and peer victimization and ruminative coping ( $\beta = 1.397$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in predicting internalizing maladjustment.

Interaction effects were examined according to procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991). The relationship between peer victimization and internalizing problem was determined for children with high (1 SD above the mean) and low (1 SD below the mean) levels of help seeking and ruminative coping, respectively. Regression lines for

high and low help seeking are plotted in Figure 1. The simple slope of peer victimization was significant at high levels ( $\beta = .521$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and at low levels ( $\beta = .329$ ,  $p < .01$ ) of help seeking. However, the magnitude of association between peer victimization and internalizing problems was greater for high levels of help seeking compared to low levels of help seeking.

Regression lines for high and low ruminative coping are plotted in Figure 1. Peer victimization was positively associated with internalizing problems, with high and low levels of ruminative coping. However, the magnitude of the association was greater for boys with high levels of ruminative coping ( $\beta = .473$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than for boys with low levels of ruminative coping ( $\beta = .343$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Taken together, these findings indicate that use of help seeking and

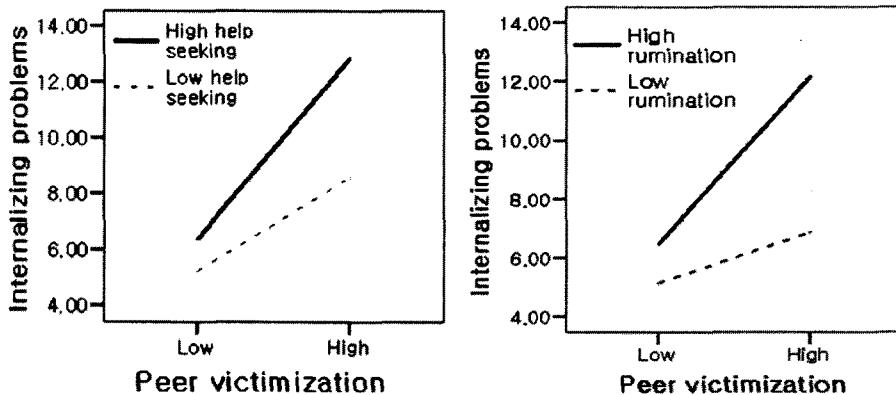


Figure 1. Interactions of Peer Victimization and Coping On Boys' Internalizing Problems

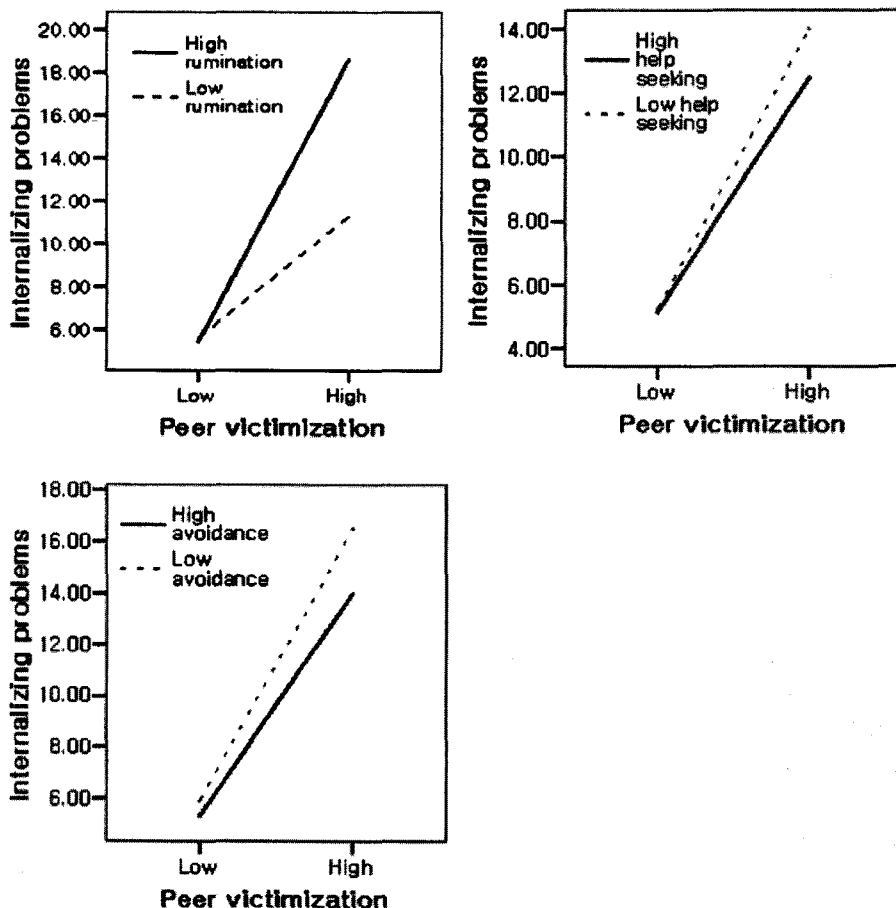


Figure 2. Interactions of Peer Victimization and Coping On Girls' Internalizing Problems

ruminative coping exacerbate the negative influence of peer victimization on internalizing problems for boys.

The results of the hierarchical regression analyses for girls are presented in Table 3. The significant

interactions are depicted in Figure 2, using the same method described above. Compared with boys, peer victimization and help seeking interacted in different ways in predicting internalizing problems for girls ( $\beta = -.857, p < .01$ ). Although peer victimization was

significantly associated with internalizing problems, the association was stronger at low levels of help seeking ( $\beta=.564$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than high levels of help seeking ( $\beta=.514$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Avoidant coping also significantly moderates the association between peer victimization and internalizing problems ( $\beta=.539$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Peer victimization was positively associated with internalizing problems at two levels of avoidance coping. However, the degree of association varied as function of levels. As shown in Figure 2, peer victimization had the stronger effects at low levels of avoidant coping ( $\beta=.649$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than high levels of avoidant coping ( $\beta=.464$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Furthermore, ruminative coping moderated the association of peer victimization and internalizing maladjustment ( $\beta= 1.243$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Peer victimization was positively linked with internalizing problems at two levels of ruminative coping. However, peer victimization had stronger effects at high levels of ruminative coping ( $\beta=.649$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than low levels of ruminative coping ( $\beta=.464$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Taken together, these findings indicate that the use of avoidant coping and help seeking acted as a buffer against the negative effects of peer victimization in girls.

## DISCUSSION

This study has provided evidence of gender-specific coping responses in peer harassment. Girls were found to use more help seeking than boys, which is consistent with evidence from Western model studies (e.g., Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). Gender differential goals in social situations may influence coping strategy selection. Girls are socialized to focus on connectedness goals, such as intimacy and nurturance (Chung & Asher, 1996). Furthermore, girls tend to value the importance of self-disclosure and exercise emotional expression in their interactions with friends (Parker & Asher, 1993). Therefore, girls are more inclined to discuss their problems with others and try to address their difficulties. In comparison, boys are expected to handle peer harassment alone. Sandstrom (2004)

states that seeking help may not be socially acceptable for boys, where for example, a student would be regarded as effeminate if he communicated his problem to a teacher.

Consistent with previous literatures (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Sandstrom, 2004), girls showed a higher tendency of avoidance in response to peer victimization than boys. This reflects greater sensitivity of girls to interpersonal stressors and preference for conflict avoidance rather than confrontation.

For boys, the norms of preadolescent male peer group may preclude the use of more passive and avoidant strategies. Boys are usually harassed by more powerful boys, therefore they feel the need to take tougher and more confrontational stance when responding to attackers (e.g., Sandstrom, 2004).

In line with previous findings, the current investigation confirmed the fact that girls reported higher levels of ruminative coping than boys. Girls may be more likely to internalize negative victimization experiences due to their greater emotional investment in peer relations (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Furthermore, girls would interpret victimization as negative evaluation about themselves.

Another objective of the present study was to explore whether different copying strategies moderate the relation between peer victimization and internalizing problems. Results for girls indicated that higher help seeking appears to be a protective factor against internalizing problems, whereas for boys who reported high levels of victimization, lower help seeking functions as a protective factor against internalizing problems. It may the case that victimized girls and boys receive different types of responses when they seek support from significant others. For instance, Altermatt, Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, and Greulich (2002) found that girls are more likely than boys to receive help from classmates when requested, whereas boys are more likely than girls to be viewed negatively based on similar requests. Therefore, help seeking would be rewarding for girls, which may lead to positive adjustment.

In contrast, boys would not be expected to obtain

benefits from seeking help, as asking for help may be interpreted negatively. For example, Chung and Asher (1996) have suggested that boys who sought out adults for help tended to experience peer rejection. Seeking help may be seen as an indicator of low social abilities in boys (Newman & Goldin, 1990), which may lead to adjustment problems.

Avoidant coping moderated the relationship between peer victimization and internalizing problem for girls, but not for boys. Boys who use avoidant coping were withdrawn and anxious. Accordingly, they may not be able to cope with peer harassment assertively, and as a result may feel helpless and anxious. Sandstrom (2004) suggested that reliance on avoidant coping prevents victimized girls by diffusing their emotions and providing a safe space in which to plan an appropriate response. Our findings are compatible with such an explanation. For victimized girls, avoidant coping may provide some protective benefits by minimizing negative impacts of peer aggression.

Another proposed explanation for these findings is related to the types of victimization that boys and girls experience. Girls tend to be exposed to verbal aggression, whereas boys are more exposed to physical aggression (Olweus, 1991). Similarly, Crick and Grotpeter (1996) suggested that boys are more likely than girls to be victimized physically. Therefore, the strategies children use to react to peer harassment are likely to be gender-specific. For instance, girls may not need to defend themselves by fighting back, as avoiding victimization may be sufficient to cope with peer aggression.

Moreover, there is evidence that avoidance is better than approach if the situation is uncontrollable, whereas approach is better if there is potential control (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Our findings also showed that the percentage of variance in internalizing problems explained by coping strategies was relatively small, which may be due to peer victimization being perceived as unavoidable stress for girls. This is indicative of greater female tendency to expect problems to be unsolvable and to doubt their own abilities to solve conflicts (Calvete & Cardenoso, 2005). Thus, avoidant coping may enable victimized girls to distance themselves from hurtful

experience, which in turn would minimize internalizing problems.

However, avoidant coping may be effective in the short-term (Roth & Cohen, 1986). It may make girls withdraw from usual activities and relationships, which may result in more internalizing symptoms. Moreover, avoidant coping may prevent girls from acquiring the necessary social skills and knowledge required for coping effectively with difficult interpersonal situations. Accordingly, this behavioral trend would be less effective in coping with ongoing stress. A longitudinal study is required to explore moderating effects over time of avoidant coping strategies among victimized girls.

Ruminative coping was related to increased risks for internalizing problems for boys and girls. Ruminative coping involves dwelling on past and negative circumstances and focusing attention on the emotional aspects of a situation. The coping and emotional adjustment literature cited in this study indicates that focusing on one's own problem is maladaptive. Children who responded to peer victimization by internally rehearsing the experience, isolating themselves, and worrying reported higher levels of internalizing symptoms. Victimized preadolescents who display ruminative coping respond by focusing internally toward negative feelings and thinking constantly about the peer victimization situation, which ultimately results in internalizing problems. These children feel overwhelmed or helpless because they tend to perceive themselves as having limited control over their victimization experiences. Rumination as a strategy for responding to bullying may exacerbate harassment because it conveys poor confidence in handling victimization.

In this study, we have focused on coping strategies as predictors of internalizing problems. However, it is plausible that the relationship between ruminative coping and internalizing problem may be bidirectional. Children who are highly lonely and anxious would consider a more ruminative coping response. That is, use of ruminative coping would be an indicator of internalizing symptoms. Further investigation is required on this sequence issue.

The present study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the ecological validity of coping in response



to peer victimization is a limitation. These findings were elicited from children's anticipated response to hypothetical peer victimization events, which may not be similar with actual peer victimization events in a school setting. Secondly, because the present study included a relatively small sample, caution should be exercised in generalization of results. Replication is needed with higher risks and larger samples of preadolescents to achieve better statistical confidence. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design used in this study makes it difficult to conclude that coping strategies lead to internalizing symptoms. Accordingly, there is a need for further research using longitudinal designs. Finally, we relied on self-reports, which may result on confounding of shared method variance. Future research need to include objective reports of others including teachers and peers.

The findings support to the application of a stress and coping framework to the context of peer victimization and underscore importance of coping strategies in peer harassment. The coping skills of children could be developed by parents and other mentors, therefore environmental support are need for the victimized children.

Identifying moderators is important for the development of interventions in reducing negative outcomes associated with peer victimization. Teaching preadolescents to use more effective coping strategies may at least help prevent adjustment problems caused by peer harassment. Because moderating effects of coping strategies were shown to be gender-specific, intervention initiatives need to be designed with this fact in mind.

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