

Emotional Distress, the Victim Schema, and Peer Victimization in Childhood

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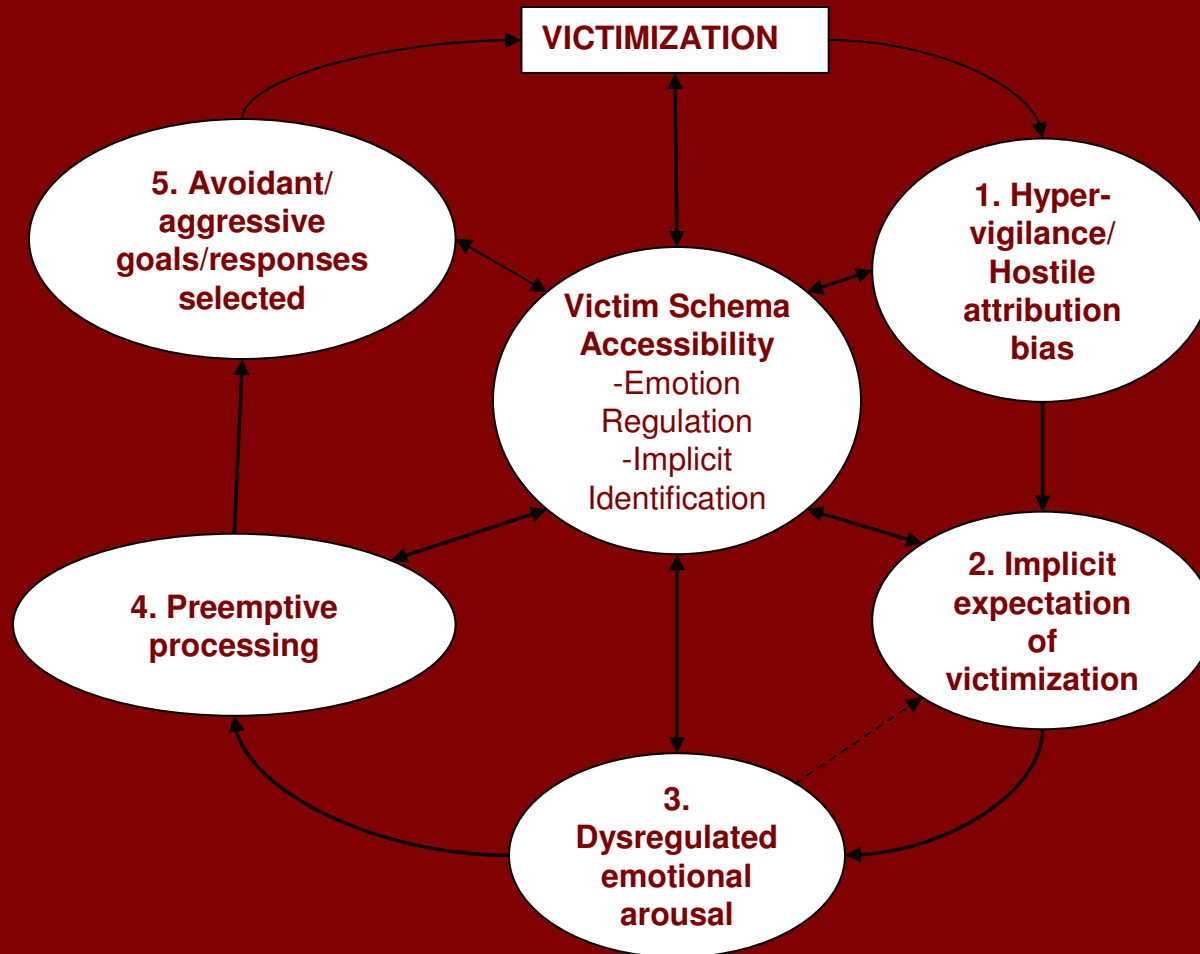
Peer Victimization – Overview

- Peer victimization is a serious problem of childhood
 - Has been linked to several negative outcomes, including:
 - Internalizing and Externalizing disorders
 - Social withdrawal
 - Decreased academic performance
 - Increased suicidal ideation
 - Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Hodges & Perry, 1999
- Approximately 10% of children experience chronic and stable peer harassment
 - Stability coefficients range from .80 for two months to .41 for one year
- Has been documented across cultures
 - Similar behavioral predictors have been demonstrated in US, European, and Asian children (Schwartz et al., 2001; 2002)
- Victimization varies by form (overt/relational) and response styles (passive/aggressive)

Victim Schema Model

- Two parts to the Victim Schema:
 - The core components of the victim schema
 - The schematically-driven “in the moment” cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to threat
- Greater accessibility of the core components leads to more schematic responses to threat
- Both accessibility of the core components and “in the moment” responses put children at risk for being victimized in the presence of threat
- Only the accessibility of the core components is independently predictive of long-term risk for victimization
 - “In the moment” responses are *manifestations* of the victim schema’s core components
 - Response to threat will change with changes in victim schema accessibility
 - The more accessible the victim schema becomes, the more likely children are to use victim-congruent responses to threat

Victim Schema Model



Victim Schema Model – Core Components

- **Implicit Self-Identification with Victimization**
 - Frequent experience with a social role can lead to role being internalized (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000)
 - Children who experience frequent victimization develop implicit self-identities as victims
 - Leads children to expect victimization in response to threat
 - Children who are more frequently victimized show a greater implicit identification with victimization (Rosen et al., 2007)
- **Emotion Regulation**
 - Managing negative emotions a fundamental skill in social interactions
 - Emotional negativity, poor regulation of emotions linked with many social difficulties, including victimization (Hanish et al., 2004)
 - Children with poor emotion regulation more likely to be targeted as victims
 - Poor emotion regulation more likely to be victims in conflicts

Victim Schema Model - “In the moment” mechanisms

- Hostile Attribution Bias/Expectation of Victimization
 - Information more likely to be encoded if congruent with easily accessible schemas
 - Identify selves as victims, thus expect threat from peers, expect to be victimized when threatened
 - Studies have shown host. att. bias in victims (Schwartz et al., 1998)
 - Anticipation of conflict leads to greater involvement in conflict, more victimization
- Emotional Distress/Preemptive Processing
 - Expectation of victimization creates negative emotion
 - Poor emotion regulation skills indicate arousal likely to be stronger, more debilitating
 - Strong negative arousal interferes with social processing of threat (Rosen et al., 2007, Schippel et al., 2003)
 - Inability to process threat and regulate arousal leads children to use emotionally reactive strategies rather than assertive problem solving

Hypotheses

- 1) Accessibility of the victim schema will be directly associated with greater peer victimization at baseline.
- 2) Accessibility of the victim schema will be indirectly associated with greater peer victimization at baseline through the “in the moment” indicators
- 3) Accessibility of the victim schema will directly predict greater peer victimization at follow-up. The “in the moment” indicators will not be independently related to follow-up victimization.

Participants

- 212 children initially recruited at baseline
 - 193 children completed baseline and follow-up
 - 13 of the 193 children did not provide useable victim narratives, thus only 180 were retained
- Children recruited for “study of children’s friendships” to avoid priming
 - Victims not specifically recruited, community sample dimensionally classified
- Children recruited through school flyers, newspapers, previous study
- Children recruited across two years (Wave 1 & Wave 2), all procedures identical for both waves
- 95 boys and 85 girls ages 9-13 (M = 10.82)
- Children recruited in 4th-8th grade
 - Pellegrini & Long (2001) report victimization most frequent in 5th-7th (around transition to middle school)
 - Grade requirements expanded to allow for pre- peri- and post-middle school transition, as well as to bolster sample size
- Ethnicity consistent with demographics, SES higher than would be expected
 - 99% of sample had at least 1 parent with some college education, 84% had at least 1 parent graduate college
- No differences on study variables based on any demographic category

Procedures/Measures

Time 1:

- Emotion regulation measures
 - CBCL (parent)
 - ERC (parent)
 - RPAQ (child)
- Implicit self-identification measures
 - Victim self-concept IAT (child)
- Preemptive processing
 - Emotional Stroop (child)
- Victim emotional distress
 - Victim narrative task (child)
- Hostile attribution bias
 - Ambiguous vignettes (child)
- Peer victimization
 - PPSS (parent and child)

Time 2:

- Peer victimization
 - PPSS (parent and child)

Emotion Regulation Measures

- Hessler & Katz (2007) describe emotion regulation as a “uniform skill”
 - Children who demonstrate more dysregulated (internalizing & externalizing) behavior demonstrate more physiological dysregulation
- Parent- and child- report of child’s dysregulated behavior used to assess ER
- Composite created from multiple informants, multiple indicators:
- Emotion Regulation Checklist (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997)
 - 24-item parent-report questionnaire, Lability/Negativity scale and Emotion Regulation scale (alphas = .70-88)
- Child Behavioral Checklist (Achenbach, 1991)
 - 113 item parent-report questionnaire, Only Internalizing and Externalizing scales used (alphas = .84-.88)
 - Emotion regulation deficits linked to int. and ext. (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Hessler & Katz, 2007))
- Reactive-Proactive Aggression scale (Raine et al., 2001)
 - 23 item child-report questionnaire, Reactive and Proactive Agg. Scales (alphas = .80), Only RA scale used for ER composite
- All indicators (except proactive aggression) correlated $r(180) > .40$ with at least 1 *non-shared respondent* indicator
- EFA to establish ER composite
 - ERC-Lability, ERC-Emot. Reg., CBCL-Int., CBCL-Ext., & RPAQ-Reactive entered
 - ML estimation used to assess model fit
- One factor extracted explaining 56.06% of the variance
 - All factor loadings $> .40$
 - $\chi^2(4, N = 180) = 8.96, p > .05; \chi^2/df = 2.24; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .08$
- All indicators retained in multi-informant Emotion Regulation Composite

Implicit Self-Identification Measure: IAT

- Self-concept Implicit Associations Test (IAT; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000)
 - Procedure for measuring strength of automatic association between victimization and implicit self-concept
- Participants asked to sort words into two groups
 - 2 groups of words:
 - “Me” vs. “Not Me” (i.e. human vs. dog)
 - “Victim” vs. “Not Victim” words (i.e. victim vs. friend)
- Words combined into a single group and presented twice
 - “Me and Victim vs. Not Me and Not Victim” (Victim-congruent)
 - “Me and Not Victim vs. Not Me and Victim” (Victim-incongruent)
- Reaction times analyzed using Greenwald’s “D” procedure (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003)
 - Individual block reaction times divided by participant’s standard deviation across blocks
- Higher difference score indicates faster responses to victim-congruent trial relative to victim-incongruent trial
 - Greater implicit self-identification with victimization

Preemptive Processing: The Emotional Stroop Task

- Emotional Stroop Task –Procedure for measuring preemptive processing of emotionally salient words (Newman & McKinney, 2002; Rosen et al., 2007)
 - Measure administered first due to sensitivity to priming
- Interference task
 - Words presented one-at-a-time on a computer in color, participants asked to name the *color* of the word
 - Reaction time for each individual word measured
 - 4 groups of words used:
 - 1) Negative social (victimization) words; 2)Positive social word 3) Negative control words; 4)Positive control words
 - Construct *avoidance* of socially threatening content
- Two scores produced:
 - Reaction time latency score: Mean of difference scores between NS and other scales
 - Victims should respond *faster* to negative social words, despite greater emotional salience, due to construct avoidance of victimization
 - Error score: Total errors across all scales
 - Victims should make more errors across all trials due to greater emotion arousal (Rieder & Cicchetti, 1989)

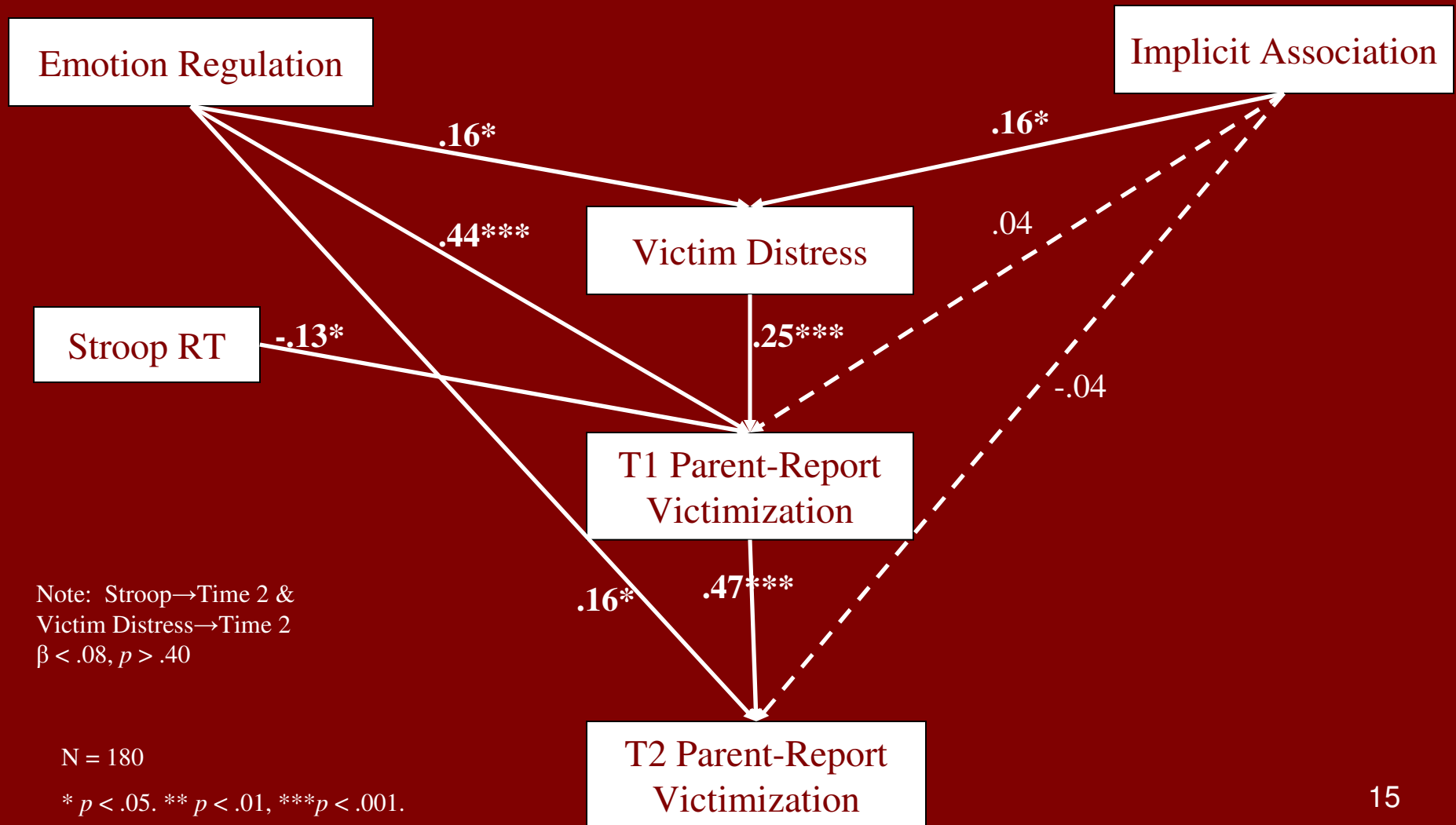
Emotional Distress: The Victim Narrative

- Narratives were used as a proxy for actual victimization encounters
 - Previous research has indicated that victims are likely to display more distress (Bollmer et al., 2006; Georgesen et al., 1999)
- Participants were asked to provide a 2 minute oral narrative of a real-life peer victimization experience
- Narratives were rated by five independent raters for emotional distress expressed during the narrative
 - ICC (4) = .75 across raters
 - More distress during the narrative reflects greater expression of distress during victimization experiences (Baumeister et al., 1990)

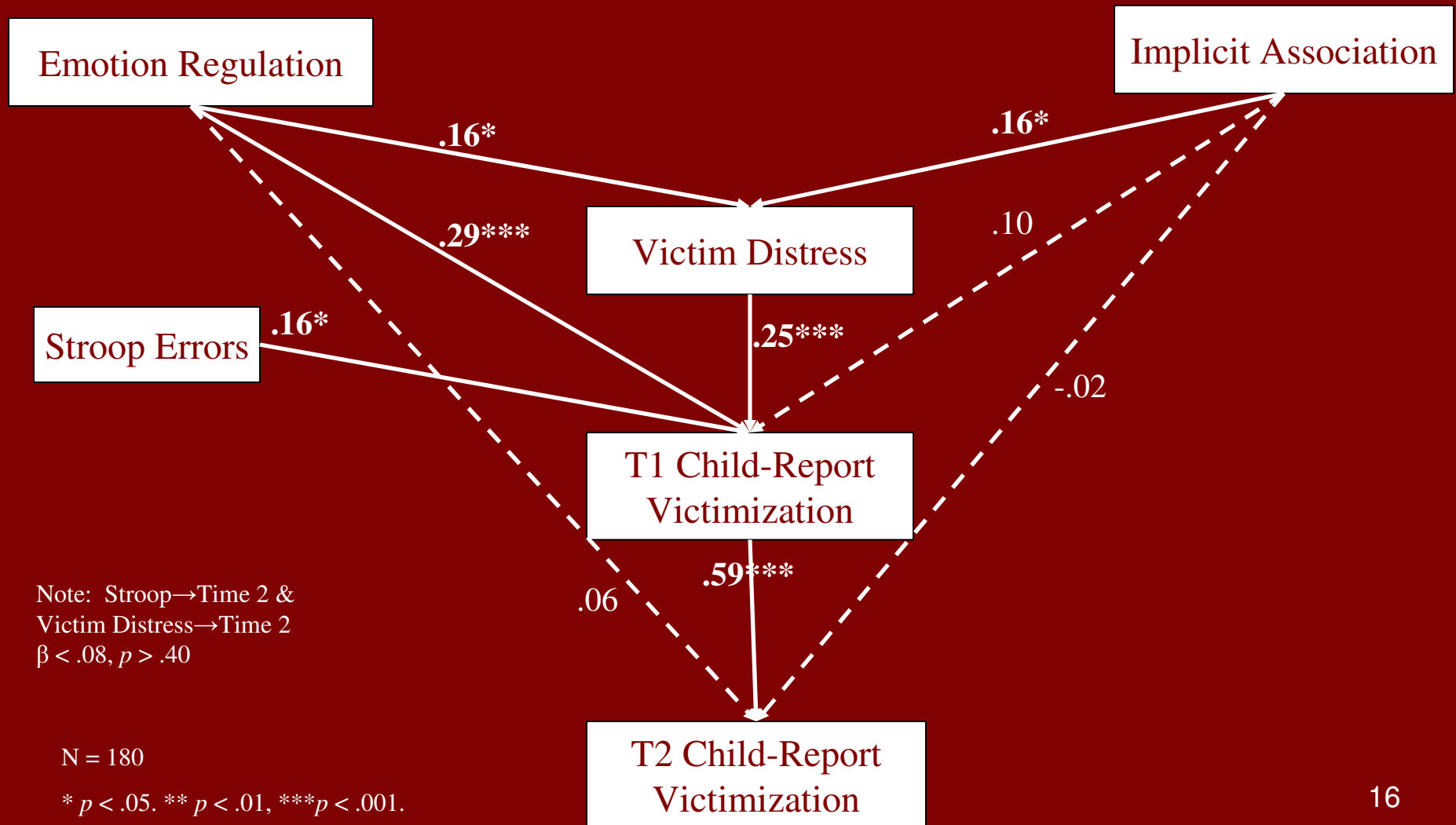
Victimization: The Perception of Peer Support Scale

- Frequency of victimization by peers assessed using parent- and child-report questionnaires
 - Questionnaires selected over peer sociometrics for numerous reasons:
 - Dimensionally assessing *frequency* of victimization, rather than discrete victim status
 - Timing of data collection (summer vacation) and use of laboratory procedures (IAT, Stroop, Narratives) made sociometrics impractical for assessment of victimization
- Perception of Peer Support Scale (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002)
 - 11 item scale of overt and relational victimization experiences
 - Developed as a child-report measure
 - Parallel parent-report measure developed and validated in earlier studies (Bollmer et al.; 2006; Rosen et al., 2007)
 - 3 items dropped due to response invariance
- Measure repeated at follow-up session (Time 2)
 - Child- and parent-report form reliability at both time points (alphas = .87-.93)
- EFA to assess factor structure (parent/child, overt/relational) strongly supported the 2-factor parent/child model
 - **2 factor: $\chi^2(103, N = 180) = 134.30, p < .05; \chi^2/df = 1.30; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .04$**
 - 1 factor: $\chi^2(104, N = 180) = 631.40, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 6.07; CFI = .67; RMSEA = .17$
 - Parent- and child-report responses all loaded $> .40$ on separate factors
- Two factors extracted explaining 71.07% of the variance

Effects of Victim Schema Accessibility on Parent Reported Victimization



Effects of Victim Schema Accessibility on Child Reported Victimization



Victim Schema and Victimization

- Results supported the proposed model of victim schema accessibility, victim-relevant cognitions and emotions, and victimization
- Concurrent victimization:
 - Schema core components (ER, implicit self-identification) lead to more emotional distress expressed during victimization, which is associated with greater victimization
 - Preemptive processing also associated with greater victimization
- Victimization over time:
 - Schema core components (ER, implicit self-identification) but *not* “in the moment” indicators predicted greater victimization over time
 - ER *incrementally* predictive of parent-reported victimization
 - Results support model of victim schema accessibility predicting victimization through effects on emotional and cognitive processing

Emotions and Victimization

- ER emerged as a powerful predictor of concurrent and future victimization
- Inability to regulate emotions disrupts children's ability to handle social conflict
 - Children with ER difficulties are less able to control negative emotional arousal and experience more disrupted social-cognition
 - Emotional distress interferes with ability to efficiently process threat and develop response strategies (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000)
 - Increases likelihood of emotionally driven goal selection, decreases ability to use effective problem solving strategies (Murphy & Eisenberg, 2000)
 - Increases use of emotionally driven response strategies (submission/aggression) associated with greater victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2000)
- Emotional outbursts reward aggressors
 - Increase the likelihood of being selected as future targets (Patterson et al., 1967)
 - Reduce social status, increase peer rejection and disliking by other children (Eisenberg et al., 1993, 2000, 2001)
 - Social liking and high-quality friendships are often a buffer against victimization (Smith et al., 2001)

Cognitive Processing and Victimization

- Implicit self-identification with victimization indirectly associated with concurrent victimization through emotional distress
 - Children who expect victimization may be more likely to experience distress in response to threat
 - Assume negative and distressing outcome, experience more negative emotion as a result
- Preemptive processing associated with concurrent victimization but not victimization over time
 - Chronically victimized children avoid attending to social threat and make cognitive errors
 - Inability to accurately and efficiently process social threat impairs ability to generate effective response strategies
 - Increases likelihood of ineffective response strategies that put child at greater risk for victimization
 - Preemptive processing not associated with ER
 - ER composite assessed emotionally reactive *behavior* rather than cognitive processing

Parent-Report vs. Child-Report

- Distinct constructs, but similar pattern of associations and predictions
- Greater stability of child self-report than parent-report of victimization
 - *Not* due to consistent in-classroom environment, as majority of participants ($N = 97$) assessed over summer
- Stability in children's self-report may be an indication of schematic stability
 - Children who identify themselves as victims may be more likely to interpret future interactions as victimizing
 - Consistent with model of schemas as cognitive guides for interpreting interaction
 - Children with accessible schemas may have been more likely to report high levels of victimization regardless of amount of victimization at time of report
 - Self-perceptions and self-identification are key parts of the schema
 - More accessible schema related to greater perceptions of self as a victim
- Incremental effect of ER on T2 victimization for parent-report but not child self-report
 - Likely due to greater stability, as similar effect emerged when stability of child self-report constrained

Limitations

- Study needs to be replicated over a longer time-interval
 - High stability of victimization over short interval may have masked some effects
- Current design did not allow for testing of reciprocal effects of victim schema accessibility over time
 - Multiple data collection points needed to assess directions of effects between victim schema accessibility and victimization
- Larger sample size needed to assess for gender differences in victimization
 - May be particularly important for assessing differences between overt vs. relational victimization
- Measures in the study not sensitive to differences in victim reactivity

Implications

- Victim schema model helps explain the chronicity and stability of victimization across settings and time
 - Reciprocal development of pattern of social cognitions and socioemotions and victimization
 - Identification as victim and ER difficulties put child at risk of being targeted for harassment and victimized in conflict
 - Victimization reinforces victim schema accessibility by confirming expectations, increasing emotional arousal in presence of threat, and reinforcing identification with victimization
- Need to consider ER and cognitive biases in intervention development
 - Not enough to just treat with social skills training
 - Need to change children's cognitive reactions and expectations
 - Importance of emotion recognition and regulation skills
 - Interventions need to focus on “keeping cool” in the presence of threat