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Parents' beliefs about emotion and children's subsequent coping strategies as influences on children's level of peer victimization

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**Parents' Beliefs about Emotion and Children's Subsequent
Coping Strategies as Influences on
Children's Level of Peer Victimization**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors Studies in
Psychology

By

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Table of Contents

| | | |
|------|---|-------|
| I. | Abstract..... | p. 4 |
| II. | Introduction..... | p. 5 |
| | a. Peer Victimization..... | p. 5 |
| | b. Children's Coping Strategies | p. 5 |
| | c. Parents' Beliefs About Emotion | p. 8 |
| | d. The Present Study..... | p. 9 |
| III. | Method..... | p. 10 |
| | a. Participants..... | p. 10 |
| | b. Measures..... | p. 11 |
| | i. Peer Victimization | |
| | ii. Parents' Beliefs About Emotion Scale (Halberstadt et al., 2008) | |
| | iii. Self Report Coping Scale (Causey and Dubow, 1992) | |
| | c. Procedures..... | p. 13 |
| IV. | Results..... | p.13 |
| | a. Preliminary Analyses..... | p. 13 |
| | b. Primary Analyses..... | p. 15 |
| V. | Discussion..... | p. 16 |
| | a. Limitations..... | p. 20 |
| | b. Summary..... | p.21 |
| VI. | References..... | p. 23 |
| VII. | Tables..... | p. 26 |
| | a. Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations..... | p. 26 |
| | b. Table 2. Bivariate Correlations (criterion variables)..... | p. 27 |
| | c. Table 3. Bivariate Correlations (predictor variables)..... | p. 28 |
| | d. Table 4. Bivariate Correlations (all variables)..... | p. 29 |
| | e. Table 5. Regression Analyses (Parent Victimization)..... | p. 30 |
| | f. Table 6. Regression Analyses (Teacher Victimization)..... | p. 31 |
| | g. Table 7. Regression Analyses (Child Victimization)..... | p. 32 |

Abstract

The current study examined the relation between parents' emotion socialization beliefs and the strategies children use to cope with peer victimization. It was hypothesized that parents' beliefs about emotions would predict how their children cope with instances of school bullying. Children's coping strategies, in turn, were expected to predict their actual level of peer victimization. Children's level of peer victimization was measured via reports from children, peers, and teachers.

Parents' Beliefs about Emotion and Children's Subsequent Coping Strategies as
Influences on Children's Level of Peer Victimization

Peer victimization is a problem many elementary school children face on a daily basis; at least ten percent are bullied persistently (Hanish, 2000). Peer victimization has been defined as involving continued exposure to peer interactions that a) convey harmful intent, b) produce harmful effects, and c) are sanctioned by peer groups in which nonintervention is the norm (Elledge, Cavell, Ogle, Malcolm, Newgent, & Faith, 2010). Peer victimization has been shown to put children's healthy development at risk (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). The experience of peer victimization can often lead to a variety of adjustment problems, such as childhood depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Research has also focused on why certain children are more vulnerable to peer victimization. Among many theories, a child's manner of coping with peer victimization is thought to be an important factor in whether he or she chronically bullied (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). Coping strategies have repeatedly been found to influence children's level of peer victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner 2002; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). The present study will examine the degree to which children's manner of coping with peer victimization and their actual level of peer victimization are predicted by parents' beliefs about emotions.

Children's Coping

Folkman and Maskowitz (2004) defined coping as the thoughts and behaviors an individual uses to manage internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful. Silver and Wortman (1980) defined coping as "any and all responses made

by an individual who encounters a potentially harmful outcome.” The coping strategies children implement could increase or decrease their level of victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Harper (2006) studied the relation between children’s coping strategies and beliefs about why victimization takes place. Results indicated that children who were frequently bullied placed the blame internally on character issues, not behavioral ones. Other researchers also find that victims tend to believe the cause of their bullying is an aspect of their personality that is not easily changed or remedied (Graham, 2005). Children with healthier self-beliefs, such as acknowledging that the cause was internal but not stable or that the cause is purely external, were victimized less frequently (Harper 2006). These findings strongly suggest that children’s coping strategies are an important aspect of the victimization process.

Roth and Cohen (1986) defined two types of coping strategies: approach and avoidant. Approach is defined as “behavioral, cognitive, or emotional activities oriented toward a stressor (e.g., seeking information).” Positive functioning is associated with individuals who use this coping strategy. In opposition, avoidance coping strategies are defined as “behavioral, cognitive, or emotional activities oriented away from a stressor in order to avoid it (e.g. ignoring the stressor).” Negative functioning is associated with individuals who use this strategy, rather than approach. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner employed these categories in their 2002 study that evaluated children’s coping strategies as a moderator of the effects of peer victimization. As defined in their study, approach strategies include problem-solving approaches to prevent the victimization from recurring, or actively seeking support or advice from teachers, parents, or peers. Conversely, avoidant coping strategies are indirect, internally focused attempts to manage

stress through cognitive or emotional distancing strategies (Harper 2006). Within these two overarching types, five general subscales have been identified: problem solving, support seeking, internalizing, externalizing, and avoidant, also referred to as distancing (Causey & Dubow, 1992).

Problem solving (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002) is an approach strategy that involves the child trying to change the situation, trying to understand what caused the situation, or deciding on a way to deal with the problem (Causey & Dubow, 2002). In past studies, this strategy has resulted in varying predictions of peer victimization. Andreou (2001) found that problem solving was not correlated with peer victimization. However, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) reported mixed findings. Problem solving was found to be associated with lower reported peer victimization, but only if it was consistent with social norms and was not used by repeatedly victimized children. For those children it proved to be isolating and often resulted in increased victimization. Support seeking is another approach coping strategy identified by Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002). Children using this strategy are likely to ask parents, teachers, or peers for advice, or discuss how the victimization made them feel (Causey & Dubow, 1992). This strategy proved to be adaptive for girls, as it is consistent with social norms, but was less adaptive for victimized boys (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Internalizing is an avoidant strategy that is characterized by directing efforts inward in maladaptive ways, such as worrying or feeling sorry for oneself (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Externalizing is another avoidant strategy manifested by directing coping efforts at other people or objects (Causey & Dubow, 1992), both avoidant strategies have been

repeatedly linked with higher levels of peer victimization (Andreou, 2001; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002))

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2006) found that the strategies children use to cope with school bullying are significantly related to their level of peer victimization. It appears that children who employ approach strategies are less frequently victimized and children who rely on avoidant strategies that rarely remedy the problem experience more frequent victimization. Avoidance strategies have also been found to be correlated to adolescents' likelihood of being diagnosed with depression (Ebata & Moos, 1989). Further, Compas (1987) found that children are more likely to employ avoidant strategies in situations appraised as being uncontrollable, and conversely, approach strategies in controllable situations. The same study found that children designated interpersonal problems as less controllable than academic stressors. Therefore, all children are more likely to use avoidant strategies in most peer victimization situations, especially encounters they view as highly uncontrollable, putting them at higher risk of repeated victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

Parents' Beliefs about Emotion

Parent emotion socialization refers to efforts by parent figures to guide the development of children's emotional capabilities (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007). These socialization efforts include teaching children how to label and interpret emotions, when emotion expression is appropriate, and how to manage emotional arousal (Lewis & Michalson, 1983). These socialization efforts have been found to be guided by parents' beliefs about emotion, which refers to "an organized set of feelings and thoughts about one's own emotion and one's child's emotions" (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, p.

244). Gottman et al. identified two types of parent emotion philosophies: (1) emotion-coaching philosophies, and (2) emotion-dismissing philosophies. Parents falling into the former category are defined as having comfort with emotion and a positive view about their children's emotions, believing that emotionally-laden events are opportunities for intimacy and teaching. Five components of the emotion-coaching philosophy were defined: (a) parents said they were aware of low intensity emotions in their children and themselves; (b) often used a child's experience of negative emotion as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching; (c) endorsed their child's emotion, negative or positive; (d) collaborated with the child to label the emotion; and (e) problem solved with the child exploring goals and strategies regarding the situation that produced the negative emotion. Parents falling in the emotion-dismissing category do not value emotion and dismiss the notion that emotions have potential as opportunities for children's learning. These parents believe that negative emotions are harmful to the child and are something to ignore or get rid of as soon as possible, as they are not important. Such parents encourage children to get rid of the emotion without exploration and believe that doing so will do little damage (Gottman et al., 1996). Parents who adopt an emotion-coaching philosophy have been found to have children who are more likely to be emotionally regulated and socially competent, whereas non-supportive emotion-dismissing responses were associated with emotion dysregulation and behavioral problems (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Gottman et al., 1996).

The Present Study

The current study examines the relation between parents' emotion socialization beliefs and the strategies their children use to cope with peer victimization. Assessment

of parents' beliefs about emotion follows the model outlined by Gottman et al. (1996). In the Parents' Beliefs about Emotion scale (Halberstadt et al., 2008), emotion-dismissing is assessed with two subscales: contempt and all emotions are dangerous. Subscales that assess beliefs that positive emotions are valuable and that negative emotions are valuable make up the emotion-coaching category. It is hypothesized that parents' beliefs about emotions will predict how their children cope with instances of school bullying. Children's coping strategies, in turn, are expected to predict their actual level of peer victimization, as reported by parents, teachers, and child (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Children whose parents tend to dismiss emotions (emotion-dismissing philosophy) and not view them as teaching opportunities are expected to use more avoidant coping strategies (i.e., internalizing or externalizing); conversely, children whose parents endorse an emotion-coaching philosophy are expected to use more approach coping strategies (i.e., problem solving or support seeking). Similarly, children's use of avoidant coping is expected to predict greater levels of peer victimization, whereas approach coping is expected to predict less victimization.

Methods

Participants

Participants included 139 (73 females, 66 males) fourth-grade students from 7 Springdale elementary schools. The race/ethnicity distribution of the sample was as follows: Caucasian, 43%; Hispanic, 33%; biracial, 11%; Pacific Islander, 4%; African-American, 3%; other, 6%.

Measures

Parents' beliefs about emotions. Seven subscales from the Parents' Beliefs about Emotions Scale were administered, which is widely used to measure parents' beliefs about the value of children's emotions (Halberstadt et al., 2008). These scales are: children can learn on their own (e.g., "Children can learn to manage their emotions without help from parents"), contempt (e.g., "Making fun of children's feelings is sometimes a good way to get them to change their behavior"), guidance (e.g., "It's the parents' job to teach children how to handle negative feelings"), negative emotions are valuable (e.g., "It is useful for children to feel sad sometimes"), positive emotions are valuable (e.g., "Joy is an important emotion to feel"), all emotions are dangerous (e.g., "When children are too loving, others take advantage of them"), and emotions just are (e.g., "Feeling all emotions is a part of life, like breathing"). For the purposes of this study, four of the previously described subscales were used, including: positive emotions are valuable, negative emotions are valuable, all emotions are dangerous, and contempt. These four scales were chosen for this study as they evinced the highest level of correlation within their respective categories and all demonstrated high reliabilities. Reliability (Cronbach's alphas) for these subscales was between .72 and .89. I had planned to employ Gottman et al.'s (1996) dichotomous categories for parents' beliefs about emotion (emotion-coaching and emotion-dismissing); however, the scales were not highly correlated, so the four subscales were kept separate in the analyses.

Children's coping. Children completed a modified version of Causey and Dubow's (1992) Self Report Coping Scale. This scale asks children to indicate how often (0 = *Never*, 1 = *Hardly ever*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Most of the time*, 4 = *Always*) they

would use each of 20 coping strategies if one of their classmates was teasing them or leaving them out of activities on purpose. Coping strategies fall in five domains: seek social support, self-reliance/problem solving, distancing, internalizing, and externalizing. Due to time constraints as part of the larger study, only the four items from each domain that loaded highest on the factor were administered. Thus, while Causey and Dubow's (1992) original scale had 34 items, the scale used in this study had only 20 items. Also, scores from the distancing subscale were not used as it was found that this subscale did not correlate as expected with either type of coping. Thus, coping scores were based on the following combinations: adaptive coping combined seeking social support and problem solving scores and maladaptive coping combined internalizing and externalizing coping scores. Reliability estimates for each subscale ranged from .63 and .78

Peer victimization. Data regarding children's level of peer victimization were gathered from parent, teacher, and child reports. Parents completed the three-item *Parent Victimization Scale*, which asked parents to indicate the extent to which their child experienced physical, verbal, and relational aggression (e.g., "Is (4th grader) hit, pushed, or kicked by other children at school?) (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Always*) . Teachers were given a parallel scale and asked to indicate the level of each type of victimization experienced by their students on a five-point scale (0 = *Never*, 4 = *Always*). Nine items were drawn from the *School Experiences Questionnaire* (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004) to assess child's self-report of physical, verbal, and relational victimization. The nine items consisted of three items for each of the three types of victimization. Four filler items assessing peers' prosocial overtures were also included. Children rated items on a three-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *A Lot*). Subscales were formed by

averaging the responses within each subscale. A composite victimization score was computed by averaging across the three victimization subscales (physical, verbal, and relational), and reliabilities across the three measures were between .75 and .87.

Procedures

Data were collected as part of a larger project examining correlates of peer victimization. Parent consent and child assent were obtained for child participation in the larger study. Separate parent consent was obtained for participation in the parent-phase of this study. Children completed all self-report questionnaires in a group setting (e.g., classroom, school cafeteria) overseen by trained graduate and undergraduate research assistants. To minimize discussion, children were adequately spaced, instructed to keep their answers covered, and allowed to work on distracter activities (e.g., mazes) between each set of questions.

Parents indicated on their consent forms whether they wished to complete measures via internet survey, group-administered pencil-and-paper administration, paper-and-pencil mail-in assessment, or telephone interview. Group-administered pencil-and-paper administration occurred at children's elementary schools or in a university laboratory setting. Parents received a \$20 gift card for participating. Teachers completed their questionnaire at the time of child assessment.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Mean scores and standard deviations for child, parent, and teacher ratings of victimization are presented in Table 1.

Bivariate correlations across criterion variables are presented in Table 2.

Correlations between parent and teacher or parent and child reports of victimization were not significant; however, teacher and child reports were significantly correlated ($r = .21$). Therefore, analyses predicting peer victimization were run separately for child, teacher, and parent report scores.

Bivariate correlations among predictor variables are presented in Table 3.

Consistent with my hypotheses, parents' belief that all emotions are dangerous was significantly correlated with children's maladaptive coping (.19). However, all other correlations between parents' beliefs about emotions and child coping were not significant.

Bivariate correlations among predictor and criterion variables are presented in Table 4. Unexpectedly, parents' belief that all emotions are dangerous was significantly negatively correlated with parent-reported peer victimization (-.35). However, this belief was not significantly correlated with teacher (-.08) or child (.08) reports of victimization. Similarly, parents' contempt for emotions was significantly negatively correlated with parent-rated peer victimization (-.21) but was not related to teacher (-.03) or self (-.07) ratings of victimization. In line with my hypotheses, parents' belief that negative emotions are valuable was significantly negatively correlated with child-reported peer victimization (-.20). However, there was no relation with parent (.17) or teacher (.07) reports of victimization. The only other significant correlation involved children's use of maladaptive coping; it was negatively correlated with parent-reported victimization (-.18) but significantly positively correlated with child reports (.24).

Primary Analyses

Hierarchical, linear regression analyses were used to examine the degree to which parents' beliefs about emotions and children's coping with peer victimization predicted their level of peer victimization. It was hypothesized that parents' beliefs about emotions would predict children's peer victimization experiences. It was also hypothesized that children's coping with peer victimization would mediate the relation between parents' emotion beliefs and children's level of peer victimization. All analyses controlled for children's gender and race/ethnicity (Hispanic = 1, non-Hispanic = 0, given the large representation of children who were either Hispanic or Caucasian non-Hispanic). Variables were entered in the following order: 1) gender and race/ethnicity, 2) four parent beliefs subscale scores, 3) children's coping with peer victimization (adaptive and maladaptive indices). Three separate analyses were run, one for each measure of peer victimization (parent, teacher, child), Tables 5-7 summarize the results of these analyses.

Race/ethnicity was a significant predictor of parent-reported peer victimization (see Table 5), accounting for 18% additional variance, but this effect was not found when predicting teacher- or child-reported victimization (see Tables 6 & 7). Race/ethnicity was inversely related to parent reports of victimization ($\beta = -.319, t(125)=-3.31, p = .001$), indicating that parents of Hispanic children rated their child as less victimized by peers than parents of non-Hispanic children.

In all three regression analyses, parents' beliefs about emotion failed to predict children's level of peer victimization. Therefore, there was no need to test for mediation. However, children's coping was significantly related to parent and child reports of victimization. It was expected that maladaptive coping would predict higher levels of

victimization, whereas adaptive coping would predict lower levels of victimization. In contrast to these expectations, children's use of adaptive coping was positively related to parent reports of victimization ($\beta = .201, t(119) = 2.46, p = .015$), an effect that was not demonstrated in the bivariate analyses. Similarly, children's use of maladaptive coping was inversely related to parent-reported victimization, but the effect did not reach conventional levels of significance ($\beta = -.149, t(119) = -1.82, p = .071$).

Neither parents' beliefs about emotions nor child coping predicted teacher reports of peer victimization (see Table 6).

Maladaptive coping was positively related to child-rated peer victimization ($\beta = .191, t(121) = 2.143, p < .05$), whereas adaptive coping did not evince a significant relation with victimization.

Discussion

This study was the first to examine the degree to which parents' beliefs about emotions predict children's coping with peer victimization and their level of peer victimization. Also tested was a possible mediating role of child coping strategies. A key finding was that parents' beliefs about emotions failed to predict children's level of peer victimization when controlling for child gender and race/ethnicity. As such, there was no need to test for the mediating role of children's strategies for coping with peer victimization.

Bivariate analyses revealed that the hypothesized relation between parents' emotion-coaching beliefs and children's adaptive coping, as well as the relation between parents' emotion-dismissing beliefs and children's maladaptive coping, were not found. Instead, the only significant finding was a positive relation between parents' belief that

all emotions are dangerous and children's maladaptive coping. This relation is consistent with previous findings by Gottman et al., (1996), but it does not encompass the entire pattern of expected relations between emotion socialization beliefs and child coping. For example, parents' contempt-related beliefs were unrelated to child maladaptive coping and adaptive coping did not correlate with any of the parents' beliefs subscales. This failure to find a stronger pattern of association suggests that other variables are likely to have a greater influence on children's development of adaptive coping skills than parents' beliefs about emotions. Parents' beliefs about emotions appear to be more important in hurting the development of children's coping, given that emotion-dismissing beliefs were correlated with maladaptive coping. Future research should explore the role of parents' emotion socialization beliefs alongside other possible predictors of children's adaptive coping. This is warranted because adaptive coping strategies are important to children's development, and understanding how these strategies are formed could benefit the prevention of peer victimization.

The finding that parent, teacher, and child reports of peer victimization were not significantly correlated is interesting because it possibly suggests a lack of communication between parent and child, or between parent and teacher about peer victimization. Teacher and child reports were significantly correlated, suggesting that teachers are more aware of children's level of peer victimization compared to parents. Other researchers have looked at the overlap among different informants' reports of peer victimization in elementary school children. For example, Cullerton-Sen and Crick (2005) found a significant correlation between teacher and child reports, a finding mirrored by Malti, Perren, and Buchmann (2010). Thus the current findings are

consistent with past evidence for a significant correlation between child- and teacher-reported victimization.

There were three significant correlations between the predictor variables and parent-reported peer victimization that were unexpected and not consistent with correlations involving teacher or child reports of victimization. First, parents' beliefs that all emotions are dangerous and their contempt for emotion were negatively correlated with parent-reported victimization, indicating that children are considered to be less victimized by parents when those parents have rather dismissive beliefs about emotions. This finding was unexpected and could indicate a different phenomenon. Past research in this area has not used parent reports of peer victimization, which makes it difficult to interpret the meaning of these findings. It is possible that parents who hold these negative beliefs about emotions may be ignoring their children's emotions, and are therefore unaware of any evidence that indicates their child is experiencing peer victimization. Another possible explanation is that their children are less likely to express any emotion to the parent because they have learned it is not valuable to do so. Therefore, the parent would not be aware of peer victimization if it were taking place.

I also found that children's maladaptive coping had a significant negative correlation with parent-reported peer victimization. This is particularly interesting because it contradicts the hypothesis that maladaptive strategies would predict greater levels of victimization. It is also inconsistent with the significant positive correlation between children's maladaptive coping and child reports of peer victimization. One explanation for this finding is that children prone to using maladaptive coping strategies are less likely to seek support from parents and thus parents are less aware of instances of

victimization. Instead, children using maladaptive coping strategies might be more likely to internalize the problem by worrying, isolating, or crying by themselves, or to externalize by yelling, cursing, or taking it out on others (Causey and Dubow, 1992). Because the cause of these behaviors might not be apparent, parents whose children evince these behaviors do not have the information to relate them to peer victimization. Therefore, parents with children who are low on maladaptive coping are likely to have more information on their children's experience of peer victimization than parents whose children rated high on maladaptive coping, leading the latter category of parents to report lower instances of peer victimization for their children.

Another unanticipated finding was the significant positive relation between adaptive coping and parent-reported peer victimization that emerged from the regression analyses. This contradicts the hypothesis that adaptive coping would predict lower levels of peer victimization, but this finding was not mirrored in analyses of teacher- or child-reported victimization. Again, this finding could reflect poor communication between parents and children and not an accurate indication of children's actual level of peer victimization. For example, if children employ support seeking, which is an adaptive coping strategy, it could lead parents to report that their child is experiencing more victimization than a parent whose child does not seek parents' support in the same situation.

For teacher-reported victimization, there were no significant correlations with any predictor variables. The failure to predict teacher ratings of peer victimization merits further exploration. Other researchers have found evidence for factors that are

significantly associated with teachers' assessment of students' level of peer victimization, such as anxiety and depression (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner 2002).

Parents' belief that negative emotions are valuable was negatively related to child reports of peer victimization, which is consistent with the hypothesis that children whose parents believe emotions are valuable will not be as victimized as children whose parents believe emotions are dangerous or not valuable. Perhaps the former group is more likely to express emotions to supportive adults and to have their emotions validated, potentially leading to less victimization. Child reports of victimization were also positively related to maladaptive coping. This finding is consistent with previous research and with the hypothesis that internalizing and externalizing coping strategies will lead to greater instances of peer victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). There was not, however, a significant relation between adaptive coping and child-rated peer victimization.

Gender did not play a significant role in predicting parent, teacher, or child reports of peer victimization. However, I did find that parents of Hispanic children were significantly less likely to report that their children were experiencing peer victimization than parents of non-Hispanic children. Given that children's status as Hispanic or non-Hispanic did not predict child- or teacher-reported victimization, it is possible that Hispanic parents are less aware of their children's level of victimization or not view it as a significant concern, relative to non-Hispanic parents.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the current investigation that are worth noting. Primarily, the correlational nature of the current investigation poses problems about

inferring causality; because these data were correlational, causation cannot be determined. Thus, I can know if there is a relation between children's maladaptive coping and their level of peer victimization, but I cannot determine whether maladaptive coping leads to more victimization or if the experience of peer victimization leads to more maladaptive coping.

Another limitation is the study sample, as it may pose problems in external validity. Only two race/ethnic groups were well represented in the sample, so these findings cannot be generalized to African-American or Asian students.

A third limitation involves measurement of the variables in question. Specifically, parent and teacher reports of peer victimization consisted of only three items, thus not allowing for much specificity. Future research should use more in-depth surveys that allow the parents and teachers to provide a richer, more representative description of children's experiences with peer victimization.

Summary

Although only partial support of the hypotheses was found, there were significant findings that warrant further attention. First, the distinct pattern of findings involving parent-reported peer victimization deserves more in-depth research. Parent reports are not frequently used in studies assessing peer victimization, but the current findings argue for including such measures in future research. It appears that parents could play a key role in the development of children's strategies for coping with peer victimization. The significant correlation between parents' belief that all emotions are dangerous and maladaptive coping was expected (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002), but the overall pattern of relations between parents' beliefs about emotions and children's coping was

not as strong as anticipated. Further research is warranted to uncover other, possible precursors to children's development of their strategies for coping with peer victimization.

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Table 1.

Means and standard deviations for all variables

| Variable | Mean | SD | N |
|--------------------------------------|--------|------|-----|
| Parent-reported victimization | .7348 | .63 | 137 |
| Teacher-reported victimization | .8621 | .69 | 139 |
| Child-reported victimization | .7894 | .62 | 139 |
| PBAE*-Contempt | 1.8156 | .86 | 135 |
| PBAE- Positive Emotions are Valuable | 5.7939 | .35 | 134 |
| PBAE- Negative Emotions are Valuable | 4.2101 | .83 | 133 |
| PBAE- All Emotions are Dangerous | 3.4008 | 1.12 | 133 |
| Adaptive Coping | 2.0363 | .84 | 139 |
| Maladaptive Coping | .9580 | .85 | 139 |

**note: PBAE = Parents' Beliefs about Emotion*