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# Coping With Verbal and Social Bullying in Middle School

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Becoming a victim of verbal and social bullying in middle school can lead to illness, psychological stress, and maladjustment. The coping strategies that students utilize when they are bullied may influence the likelihood and severity of these negative effects. In this study, we examined the predictions made by students in two middle schools about the ways that they would cope with becoming a victim of verbal and social bullying. We also analyzed influences for coping strategies and student willingness to seek help with bullying at school. The results show that middle school students generally expect that they will utilize adaptive approach strategies in trying to solve the problem or obtain support from others, but those who had been victimized in the last month were more likely than those not involved in bullying, to predict that they would engage in maladaptive avoidance coping strategies if victimized in the future. Willingness to seek help was found to be enhanced by approach coping strategies, less aggressive attitudes, and lower perceptions of school bullying. Policy implications for efforts to encourage approach coping strategies in middle school students through educational interventions and school counseling are discussed.

**Keywords:** Coping, Bullying, School Climate, Middle School

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## Introduction

Peer aggression and its harmful effects upon school children who are victimized is a problem of an international concern (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Kim, Leventhal, Koh, & Boyce, 2009; Sapouna, 2008; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014). When peer aggression takes place repeatedly over time and is characterized by an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim it may be categorized as a form of bullying (Olweus, 1993). Studies of children in many European countries and in America have consistently found that bullying victimization can have a negative impact on school functioning, physical self-perception, and academic achievement (Boulton, Smith, & Cowie, 2010; Dyer & Teggart, 2007; Puhl & Luedicke, 2012). Somatic effects such as headaches and stomach aches are also common among victims (Due et al., 2005). Becoming a victim can make a child vulnerable to psychological distress, depression, irritability, anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of helplessness (Peskin, Tortolero, Markham, Addy, & Baumler, 2007; West & Salmon, 2000).

During an incident of peer aggression, and in its aftermath, adolescents will draw upon self-appraisals, situational influences, and their understanding of the social environment to make decisions about how to cope with the problem (Lazarus, 2006). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1987), children employ coping strategies when faced with a variety of different stressors, and this can have beneficial or detrimental effects, depending on the strategy employed and its effectiveness. When coping strategies are adaptive, the negative effects of victimization can be reduced (Hampel, Manhal, & Hayer, 2009). Maladaptive coping, on the other hand, can result in psychological maladjustment, passive avoidance, rumination and resignation, substance abuse, and decreased academic achievement (Crosnoe, 2011; Hampel et al., 2009).

Prior evidence suggests that students anticipate that they will cope with being a victim of bullying in adaptive ways, such as asking a friend for advice, seeking help from an adult, or reporting the incident to a teacher (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006; Kristensen and Smith, 2003; Paul, Smith & Blumberg, 2012; Tennenbaum, Varjas, Meyers & Parris, 2011). However, since bullying is characterized by repeated acts of aggression against a victim that has inferior power to the aggressor, adaptive coping to real bullying victimization may be more difficult for students to carry out than they expect. In this study, we asked students to predict how they would cope with future bullying victimization, and we explored whether recent victims of bullying were more or less likely to predict that they would cope with future victimization in an adaptive or a maladaptive way. We also considered the ways that expected coping strategies, and recent victimization, are related to student willingness to seek help with bullying at school.

### *Background*

Causey & Dubow (1992) created two scales for classifying coping behaviours, using Roth and Cohen's (1986) approach strategies and avoidance strategies. Children who utilize approach strategies either rely upon themselves to solve problems or call upon social support from friends, family or teachers. Those who cope by engaging in avoidance are classified as distancing (e.g. acting as if nothing occurred), internalizing (e.g. keeping their emotions to themselves) or externalizing (e.g. taking their emotions out on others). Approach strategies are considered adaptive and they have been linked to positive functioning;

avoidance strategies are considered maladaptive and they have been associated with poor social adjustment (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), although event circumstances and actor dispositions are important factors in the availability and choice of coping strategies (Lazarus, 2006; Moos, 1984).

Adolescents typically report that when they are bullied they are most likely to adopt approach or problem-focused coping strategies. Kristensen and Smith (2003) found problem solving and seeking support to be the most common responses to bullying among a sample of Danish children. In a survey of London students aged 11 to 13, Paul, Smith & Blumberg (2012) observed that seeking help and advice was the most highly endorsed response when asked about how they cope with being a victim. In group interviews with public elementary school and middle school students in the Southeastern United States, Tennenbaum, Varjas, Meyers & Parris (2011) found that both boys and girls commonly sought to solve their problems with bullying, and this often involved asking for help from adults; however, the subjects in this study had low expectations for the success of these efforts. Similarly, in Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita's (2006) comparison of Japanese and British students, seeking help from others was the advice students most commonly offered to victims, but students reported that they had many fears about actually going through with it. This internal conflict can be seen in other research as well. In one study of 408 children in Greece between the ages of 9 and 12, Andreou (2001) found that boys who were victimized were likely to seek support from their peers, instead of adults, but they were also likely to externalize their responses. Neither of these tendencies was found among the girls in the study. In another sample of 9 and 10 year old students, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) found that those who sought help from their peers suffered from greater rejection, possibly because of their already low peer preference. Victimized boys also suffered from lower peer preference when they sought help from an adult for problems with bullying.

The decision to seek support from peers or from an adult may be impacted by the presence of avoidance coping strategies. In Hunter & Boyle's (2004) study of Scottish children between the ages of 9 and 14, those who suffered from longer periods of bullying (over 4 weeks) were more likely to engage in avoidance; and other research has shown that children who reported that they had been both victims and bullies were more likely to say that they externalize their response when they are victimized (Andreou, 2001; Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Due to the complexity of emotional responses, adolescents may cope with bullying in a variety of ways simultaneously, and this has been observed in qualitative research (deLara, 2008; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). In studies of undergraduate students (Carver et al., 1989) and older adults (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), evidence has suggested that the level of control an individual has over a situation influences the coping strategies they employ and that when problems matter more to a person, they are more likely to vent their emotions, engage in denial and seek support (Carver et al., 1989). Individuals' other actions and experiences, such as bullying other people, may also change the nature of their coping when they are victimized themselves. For example, Camodeca et al., (2002) found that bullies stood out among their peers as less likely to endorse assertiveness as an effective response to bullying, and more likely to endorse retaliation.

In summary, existing evidence indicates that students have favourable attitudes toward the idea of seeking support, telling an adult, and reporting to school personnel when they are victimized, but they also perceive real and difficult challenges facing them when they do so. They may expect that adults will not know how to respond, that coming forward will make them look weak, or that they will be victimized more in retaliation. These fears raise logical doubts about student predictions for how they would cope with future hypothetical bullying situations. In the current study, we examined the expectations middle school students would have for themselves if they were to be verbally or socially bullied in the future. We then tested for differences in the expected coping strategies of those who have recently been victimized and others, and finally, we explored the associations between these variables and students' willingness to seek help with bullying at school.

## Methods

### *Sample*

Data were collected from 159 children in grades six through eight, aged 11 to 14, in two parochial elementary schools in the North-eastern region of the United States. Each school was comprised of about 300 students in grades Pre-kindergarten through eight. The project was part of a larger anti-bullying program needs assessment that was conducted on a complimentary basis for both schools. At the time, the schools were in the early stages of developing new anti-bullying curricula and policies.

Letters and passive consent forms were sent home to students in grades five through eight. Parents who did not want their children to participate were asked to indicate this on the form and return it to the school. Nearly all (92.9%) of the students in grades six through eight in the two schools participated, with 52% of the sample coming from one of the two schools. After a two-week period, the students who had consent to participate were brought by their teachers to a computer lab in their schools where they were to complete a questionnaire using online software. The students were then greeted by a member of the research team and told about the nature of the study and their ability to choose whether or not they wanted to take the survey. Less than 5% of the students with parental consent chose not to participate by clicking an option to refuse at the beginning of the survey. These students were permitted to stay and work on another computer activity. The participants completed the questionnaires in about 15 to 25 minutes.

Among those surveyed, 37.1% of the students were in the sixth grade; 32.7% were in the seventh; and 30.2% were in the eighth; the mean age was 12.83 and the standard deviation was .87. The students were enabled to identify as members of multiple races, and their racial distribution was mixed, with 39.6% describing themselves as White, 36.5% as Asian, 7.5% as Black or African American, and 1.9% as American Indian or Alaska Native. Among the respondents, 27% selected "other" (either alone, or in addition to another race). Most of the open-ended "other" responses were "Hispanic" or the names of Central or South American nations. In response to a separate question, 10.1% of the sample identified as Hispanic or Latino. No data on socioeconomic status was gathered, but both schools were located in middle class areas and both charged tuition consistent with other small faith-based private schools.

### *Measures*

#### *Self Report Coping Measure*

Causey & Dubow's (1992) *Self-report Coping Measure* (SRCM) was modified for this study to capture the ways that the students would cope with being a victim of verbal bullying and social bullying, as was done in Kristensen & Smith (2003). For this study, the students responded to the 34-item questionnaire two times, once to measure the ways that they would cope with verbal bullying and once for social bullying. Verbal bullying was defined on the questionnaire as a situation in which "other children call me mean and hurtful names or make fun of me in other ways." Social bullying was defined as "other children keep me out of things on purpose, exclude me from their group of friends or completely ignore me."

*The Self Report Coping Measure* is comprised of two domains, referred to as approach or problem-focused coping and avoidance or emotion-focused coping. Approach coping consists of two separate sub-domains, self-reliance or problem (e.g. I try to think of different ways to solve it), and seeking social support solving (e.g. I talk to somebody about how it made me feel). Avoidance coping consists of sub-domains referred to as distancing (e.g. I go off by myself), internalizing (e.g. I become so upset that I can't talk to anyone) and externalizing (e.g. I take it out on others because I feel sad or angry). The sub-domain scores were calculated by averaging the responses, on a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). As seen in Table 1, the Cronbach's Alpha reliability statistics ranged between .72 and .90 for verbal bullying and .78 and .92 for social bullying. These statistics are in line with Causey and Dubow's (1992) study of coping behaviours with a peer argument ("When I have an argument or a fight with a friend..."), which ranged from .66 to .84.

**Table I. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics for the SRCM**

| | Coping with Verbal Bullying | Coping with Social Bullying | Causey & Dubow (1992) Coping with Peer Argument |
|---|---|---|---|
| Seeking Social Support | .90 | .92 | .84 |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | .76 | .85 | .84 |
| Distancing | .79 | .83 | .69 |
| Internalizing | .79 | .84 | .66 |
| Externalizing | .72 | .78 | .68 |

*Bully and Victim Status*

Questions from the *School Climate Bullying Survey* (SCBS) (Cornell & Sheras, 2003) for students in grades 6 through 12 were used to categorize the students as victims, bullies, bully/victims, and students not involved in bullying. The survey utilizes the following definition of bullying: "Bullying is defined as the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not bullying* when two students who are about the same in strength or power have a fight or argument." Using this definition, students who reported having been bullied at school in the past month at least "once or twice" were counted as victims. Those who said they had bullied others at least "once or twice" were counted as bullies. Respondents who reported having been both a victim and a bully at least "once or twice" were identified as bully/victims. Students who responded "Never" to both questions were labelled as "not involved."

The SCBS also contains three scales which measure aggressive attitudes, perceptions of school bullying and willingness to seek help with bullying. Each is based on a series of items from a 21-item questionnaire (Cornell & Sheras, 2003) in which respondents were asked to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements on these topics on a 4-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The responses were summed and averaged to compute the scores for the three scales, with higher scores indicating greater levels of agreement.

### *Analysis*

We calculated the mean scores for the SRCM for each student in the total sample for verbal and social bullying and ranked them. We also examined the differences in the mean scores for males and females and for students who had been bullies, victims, bully-victims, and not involved in bullying, in the last month. Finally, we conducted ordinary least squares regression analyses to find predictors of student willingness to seek help with bullying among the following independent variables: expected ways of coping with verbal bullying, expected ways of coping with social bullying, bullying status in the last month, demographic characteristics, aggressive attitudes, and perceptions of bullying at school. In the regression analyses, Adjusted $R^2$ statistics were calculated to determine the effect sizes. The analysis was conducted using SPSS version 16.0.

## Results

Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for the SRCM for verbal and social bullying for the full sample and by gender. The mean for self-reliance and problem solving was a 3.15 for verbal bullying and a 3.01 for social bullying; both of these means were significantly greater than the means for seeking social support (*$p<.01$ for coping with verbal bullying and $p<.05$ for social bullying*). Seeking social support ranked second with 2.93 for verbal bullying and 2.79 for social bullying. Distancing ranked third with 2.88 for verbal bullying and 2.78 for social bullying; both of these means were significantly greater than the means for internalizing *($p<.001$)*. Internalizing ranked fourth with 2.24 for verbal bullying and 2.15 for social bullying; both of these means were significantly greater than the means for externalizing ($p<.001$). Finally, externalizing ranked last with 1.87 for verbal bullying and 1.77 for social bullying.

Differences in coping strategies with verbal and social bullying were observed by gender and bully-victim status. The results for gender are shown in Table 2. Males and females showed statistical differences on one of the five coping strategies for verbal bullying and one for social bullying (see Table 2). Females were found to be more likely than males to say they would internalize when verbally or socially bullied. For verbal bullying, the difference was significant at the $p<.05$ level. For social bullying, the difference was significant at the $p<.01$ level.

**Table II. Means and Standard Deviations for the SRCM for the Full Sample and by Gender**

| | Full Sample | Male | Female | t-values |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Coping with Verbal Bullying** | | | | |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | 3.15** (.69) | 3.21 (.96) | 3.09 (.74) | -1.01 |
| Seeking Social Support | 2.93 (.94) | 2.89 (.92) | 2.96 (.96) | .43 |
| Distancing | 2.88*** (.80) | 2.85 (.79) | 2.91 (.81) | .40 |
| Internalizing | 2.24*** (.77) | 2.12 (.70) | 2.38 (.84) | 1.98a |
| Externalizing | 1.87 (.82) | 1.99 (.84) | 1.74 (.78) | -1.88 |
| **Coping with Social Bullying** | | | | |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | 3.01* (.69) | 3.05 (.73) | 2.95 (.86) | - .77 |
| Seeking Social Support | 2.79 (1.05) | 2.67 (1.00) | 2.93 (1.11) | 1.53 |
| Distancing | 2.78*** (.82) | 2.68 (.88) | 2.89 (.75) | 1.54 |
| Internalizing | 2.15*** (.85) | 1.97 (.70) | 2.36 (.95) | 2.89$^{aa}$ |
| Externalizing | 1.77 (.81) | 1.81 (.80) | 1.73 (.83) | - .62 |

*Note*. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 for differences between the scale mean and the next highest scale mean, t-values not shown.
$^{a}$p<.05, $^{aa}$p<.01, $^{aaa}$p<.001 for differences by gender.

**Table III. Self-report Coping Mean Scores by Involvement in Bullying in the Last Month**

| | Victim | Bully | Bully-Victim | Not Involved | F-Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Coping with Verbal Bullying** | | | | | |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | 3.22 | 3.21 | 3.12 | 3.14 | .14 |
| Seeking Social Support | 2.76 | 2.84 | 2.84 | 3.07 | .92 |
| Distancing | 3.11 | 3.04 | 2.89 | 2.76 | 1.34 |
| Internalizing | 2.61$^{aa}$ | 2.12 | 2.71$^{aa}$ | 1.80 | 20.80*** |
| Externalizing | 1.99 | 1.67 | 2.17$^{a}$ | 1.64 | 4.53** |
| **Coping with Social Bullying** | | | | | |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | 2.92 | 2.72 | 3.01 | 3.09 | .82 |
| Seeking Social Support | 2.83 | 2.27 | 2.68 | 2.95 | 1.72 |
| Distancing | 3.05 | 2.77 | 2.82 | 2.78 | 1.37 |
| Internalizing | 2.51$^{aa}$ | 1.90 | 2.57$^{aa}$ | 1.77 | 12.54*** |
| Externalizing | 1.83 | 1.67 | 1.97 | 1.61 | .13 |

*Note*. *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; $^{a}$significantly greater than those not involved (p<.01); $^{aa}$significantly greater than those not involved (p<.001)

In Table 3, the self-report coping mean scores were compared across bully and victim statuses. The subsample of valid responses for this analysis was 150, with 15.1% reporting that in the last month they had been a victim (and not a bully), 7.5% a bully (and not a victim), 30.2% a bully-victim, and 41.5% not involved. For both verbal bullying and social bullying, victims were found to be significantly more likely to say they would internalize, than those not involved in a bullying incident in the prior month as a bully or a victim *(p<.001)*. For verbal bullying, bully-victims were also found to be significantly more likely to externalize than those not involved *(p<.01)*. No significant differences were found across the bully and victim statuses for the approach coping strategies or for distancing.

In the final analysis, student coping strategies, bullying status, and school climate measures were regressed on student willingness to seek help with bullying at school. In Table 4, the Cronbach Alpha statistics, means and standard deviations for the scales on willingness to seek help, aggressive attitudes, and perceptions of school bullying are displayed. Table 5 contains ordinary least squares regression coefficients for the effects of expected coping strategies, bullying status, gender and grade, and two of the school climate measures on student willingness to seek help from an adult. The distributions for all variables were within the +/-2 (for skewness) and +/-7 (for kurtosis) recommended thresholds of normality (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Cases with missing data on these variables (13 in Models 1 and 2 and 14 in Models 3 and 4) were excluded. As expected, Model 1 shows that students who said they would seek social support if they were verbally bullied were significantly more willing to seek help ($p<.001$). Students who said they would be more likely to externalize were significantly less willing ($p<.05$) to seek help. None of the other variables in the equation (bullying status, gender, and grade) were significant, but the model explained 31% of the variation (*Adjusted* $R^2=.31$) in student willingness to seek help. Model 2 included an interaction term between bully and victim and also student aggressive attitudes and student perceptions of school bullying. A higher level of aggressive attitudes ($p<.001$) and a higher level of perception that school bullying is prevalent ($p<.01$) both significantly reduced student willingness to seek help but the interaction term was not significant, and in this model the effect of the externalizing coping strategy was suppressed. Model 2 explained 43% (*Adjusted* $R^2=.43$) of the variation.

**Table IV. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics for Student Perceptions of Willingness to Seek Help, Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying, and Aggressive Attitudes**

| | Cronbach's Alpha | Mean (SD) |
|---|---|---|
| Willingness to Seek Help | .82 | 3.22 (.50) |
| Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying | .67 | 2.05 (.76) |
| Aggressive Attitudes | .75 | 1.45 (.42) |

In Models 3 and 4, the same analysis was conducted for coping strategies with social bullying. Both models show significantly positive effects for self-reliance/problem solving and seeking social support for social bullying on student willingness to seek help. Model 3 also shows negative effects on student willingness to seek help for both those more likely to internalize ($p<.05$) and externalize ($p<.05$). Model 3 explained 30% (*Adjusted* $R^2=.30$) of the variation. In Model 5, the avoidance strategies (internalizing and externalizing) are suppressed by the negative effect of aggressive attitudes ($p<.001$), perceptions of school bullying ($p<.01$). Model 4 explained 41% (*Adjusted* $R^2=.41$) of the variation.

**Table V. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Coefficients for the Effects of Verbal and Social Bullying Coping Strategies, Bullying Status in the Last Month, Demographic Characteristics and Attitudes on Student Willingness to Seek Help**

| | Model 1 N=146 | Model 2 N=146 | Model 3 N=145 | Model 4 N=145 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Coping With Verbal Bullying** | | | | |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | 11 | .10 | | |
| Seeking Social Support | .19*** | .14** | | |
| Distancing | -.004 | -.05 | | |
| Internalizing | -.10 | -.06 | | |
| Externalizing | -.11* | .04 | | |
| **Coping With Social Bullying** | | | | |
| Self-reliance/Problem Solving | | | .12* | .13* |
| Seeking Social Support | | | .15*** | .04* |
| Distancing | | | -.001 | -.03 |
| Internalizing | | | -.11* | -.06 |
| Externalizing | | | -.10* | .02 |
| **Bullying Status in the last month** | | | | |
| Victim | -.13 | -.15 | -.18 | -.15 |
| Bully | .06 | .07 | .10 | .14 |
| Interaction (Bully X Victim) | | .03 | | -.03 |
| **Demographic** | | | | |
| Female | -.08 | -.10 | -.07 | -.11 |
| Grade in School | -.01 | -.05 | -.34 | -.08 |
| **Attitudes** | | | | |
| Aggressive Attitudes | | -.42*** | | -.33*** |
| Perceptions of School Bullying | | -.15** | | -.14** |
| | | | | |
| Constant | 2.90 | 3.99 | 3.06 | 3.97 |
| Adjusted R2 | .31*** | .43*** | .30*** | .41*** |

*Note.* *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

## Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to explore the expected coping strategies of adolescents when they are victimized by verbal and social bullying. Similar to prior studies on coping with bullying (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006; Kristensen and Smith, 2003; Paul, Smith & Blumberg, 2012; Tennenbaum, Varjas, Meyers & Parris, 2011), we found that students believed they would rely upon themselves to solve a problem (an approach strategy), more commonly than any other response. This may be explained by prior research which has concluded that middle school aged students tend not to expect positive results to come from seeking help (Athanasiadas & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2010; Tennenbaum, Varjas, Meyers & Parris, 2011) or it may also be the case that students find the adaptive strategy of self-reliance to be a more favourable response to predict for themselves, regardless of their feelings; or they may be acting on an inclination to say what they think they are expected to do in that situation, rather than what they would actually do.

For the avoidance strategies, we found that in the full sample, distancing was more common than internalizing and internalizing was more common than externalizing. Recent victims and bully-victims of both verbal and social bullying were more likely to say they would engage with internalizing behaviours, and that recent bully-victims were more likely to report that they would engage with externalizing behaviours when verbally bullied. These results indicate that students with recent experiences of victimization are more likely to believe that they will cope in maladaptive ways if victimized in the future by internalizing or externalizing. Alternatively, they may be a sign that students who anticipate internalizing and externalizing behaviours for themselves are more likely to be victimized. When responding to a similar question about the direction of causality between bullying victimization and its socio-emotional correlates in victims, such as lower self-worth and lower feelings of acceptance, Boulton, Smith, and Cowie (2010) concluded that causation of this kind may be bidirectional.

As in Andreou (2001) and Kristensen & Smith (2003), we found that females were more likely than males to predict that they would internalize when bullied. This difference may be due to the varying nature of bullying among males and females. For example, males are more likely to be involved in physical bullying and females are more likely to be involved in indirect forms of bullying such as rumour spreading and exclusion (Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010; Catanzaro, 2011; Esbensen & Carson, 2009). Males are also more likely than females to report that they have been bullies and bully-victims (Smith, Madsen, & Moody, 1999) and females are more likely to report that they have been bullied (Smith et al., 1999).

We also examined student willingness to seek help with bullying at school, and its relationship to coping strategies, bullying status in the last month, and attitudes that students have about themselves and their school. These factors explained between 30 and 43 per cent of the variance in the SCBS measure for willingness to seek help. As expected, students who said they were likely to respond to becoming a victim of bullying by seeking social support were more willing to report incidents of bullying in all of the statistical models. Students who said they would rely upon themselves if socially bullied were also more likely to report incidents, and those who said they would internalize or externalize were less likely to. A negative influence on student willingness to seek help with bullying was noted among students that have more aggressive attitudes and those that perceive school bullying to be more prevalent. More aggressive students have a greater chance of being labelled as a bully (McConville & Cornell 2003), and this may be a reason why they are less likely to come forward. If adults in the school expect they are more likely to be an aggressor, they may find that coming forward to make a report can bring trouble upon them. Identifying these students and improving their attitudes may thus be beneficial for both reducing aggression and creating a more open atmosphere for reporting (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; McConville & Cornell 2003).

Reducing school negativity may also foster a greater willingness to seek help with bullying, and a greater propensity to adopt approach strategies when victimization occurs. Negative school perceptions among students have indicated an increased likelihood of involvement in substance abuse, truancy, bullying, and fighting; and student perceptions of low misconduct and high adult supervision have been linked to lower levels of violence in school (Totura et al., 2009). Students' negative attitudes and feelings towards school, as well as their sense of security and belonging with the school community, all contribute to the likelihood of their involvement in bullying (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Laufer & Harel, 2003; Smith & Shu, 2000).

## Conclusion

The current study's findings must be interpreted with caution due to the low sample size and the fact that student predictions about how they would respond to bullying may be very different from how they would actually respond. Additional research is also needed to determine if the differences between predicted coping strategies found here are present in other settings. The main findings of this research are that middle school students predict adaptive coping strategies for themselves if they are verbally or socially bullied, but that their predictions vary by both gender and recent victimization status; and that students who expect to engage in more adaptive coping strategies are more willing to report bullying at school. Future educational interventions may benefit, therefore, from introducing realistic forms of conflict into their design. It may also be advisable for school counsellors to use the real experiences of students as teaching moments when they treat victimized students in one-on-one sessions to encourage the use of approach strategies in the future. These efforts may enhance existing recommendations for school personnel to discuss with students the likely efficacy of hypothetical coping strategies (Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey 2001). Or once students are victimized, school counsellors may need to provide them guidance about how they can learn from their past coping responses to prepare for the future.

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