DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 095 PS 025 227

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TITLE Realistic Control Perceptions, Age, and Gender as Moderators of the Relationship between Victimization and Hope in Children.
PUB DATE Apr 97
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (62nd, Washington, DC, April 3-6, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Blacks; Childhood Attitudes; Children; Realism; *Self Determination; *Sex Differences; Urban Areas; *Victims of Crime; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Hope; Witnesses to Violence

ABSTRACT

This study examined age, gender, and subjects' realistic perceptions of control as potential moderators of the effect of community violence exposure (victimization and witnessing) on children's hopes for the future. Home interviews were conducted with 99 children ages 8 to 12 years living in high violence areas of a large southeastern city. Ninety-nine percent of the sample was African American. A significant three-way interaction between victimization, realistic perceptions of control about controllable events, and age indicated that, although all younger children experienced a decline in hope as victimization increased, those who were able to accurately assess the controllability of controllable events experienced a much smaller drop in hope. A similar decline was found for older realistic children. However, older children who were unable to assess accurately the controllability of controllable events experienced a small increase in hope as victimization increased. (MDM)

Realistic Control Perceptions, Age, and Gender as Moderators of the Relationship between Victimization and Hope in Children

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Oskin, D. L. (1997, April). Realistic control perceptions, age, and gender as moderators of the relationship between victimization and hope in children. Poster session presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, D.C.

Author's Note

Many thanks to Wendy Kliewer, Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University, for allowing this study to be conducted as part of her larger cross-sectional study on violence exposure and coping in children.

Abstract

The present study investigated realistic perceptions of control, age, and gender as potential moderators of the effect of community violence exposure (victimization and witnessing) on children's hope. Home interviews were conducted with 99 8 to 12 year old children (99% African-American) living in high violence areas of a large southeastern city. Hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that the model accounted for nearly 30% (R^2 = 0.29) of the variance in hope. A significant three-way interaction involving victimization, realistic control perceptions about controllable events, and age was plotted. Specifically, although all younger children experienced a decline in hope as victimization increased, those who were able to accurately assess the controllability of controllable events experienced a much lesser drop in hope. A similar decline was found for older realistic children. However, older children who were unable to accurately assess the controllability of controllable events experienced a small *increase* in hope as victimization increased. Possible explanations for this surprising finding are discussed.

Introduction

Hope has been conceptualized as a stable cognitive mindset that develops over time, as children experience success at meeting challenges and in conquering obstacles to their goals (Snyder et al, 1994). It is composed of two factors: pathways and agency. Pathways refer to the child's belief in his/her own ability to generate the paths or strategies necessary to succeed in meeting his/her goals, while agency refers to the child's belief that s/he has the energy and determination to meet those goals. A high-hope mindset is produced by past successes and is characterized by the expectation of future positive experiences.

Many children today, however, are growing up in environments plagued by chronic community violence. Research has found that children who grow up in violent communities have shorter life expectancies and are likely to experience additional stressful life events (Osofsky, 1995). These stressful and violent experiences could affect children's ability to produce successes, both in the present and for their expectations for the future. In fact, these children have been found to develop a less positive view of the future (Osofsky, 1995). Does hope *develop* in children growing up under such adverse conditions? Theoretically, Snyder's model suggests that the development of hope would be impaired under conditions where successes were minimized.

Snyder and his colleagues (1994) found that children who were high in hope had a greater internal locus of control. Control has been widely studied, and its mediating and moderating effects on the stress → adjustment relationship in children and adolescents are well established (Wannon, 1990; Cowen et al., 1991; Kliewer & Sandler, 1992). In addition, the effectiveness of various coping strategies have been found to be related to the *controllability* of the stressful situation (Kliewer & Sandler, 1992). In controllable situations, it's more adaptive to appraise the situation as a challenge and to use problem-focused coping strategies. However, in uncontrollable situations, redefining the situation as less threatening is more adaptive (Folkman, 1984; Kliewer & Sandler, 1992). Wannon (1990) found that high-risk urban 4th to 6th graders who had more realistic perceptions of control (about both controllable and uncontrollable events) were more resilient and showed higher teacher-rated adjustment, social problem-solving skills, empathy, and internal locus of control.

The present study examined the moderating effects of children's ability to realistically assess the controllability of events on the relationship between their violence exposure and hope. The possible moderating effects of age and gender were also examined.

Method

Ninety-nine children (40 boys, 59 girls) living in moderate to high violence areas (based on police statistics) of a large southeastern city were interviewed individually in their homes by trained interviewers, who read all questions and response options aloud to each child from a prepared script. The children were from 8 to 12 years old ($\underline{M}$ = 10.7, $\underline{SD}$ = 1.3), and ranged from first to eighth grades (74.2% were in the fourth to sixth grades). Ninety-five percent were African-American, and most were poor: median income ranged from $5,000 to $10,000.

Children's violence exposure was measured across 17 different types of violent events, using Richters and Saltzman's (1990) Survey of Exposure to Community Violence (Self-Report Version). Victimization and witnessing events were assessed separately. Total violence exposure, as indexed by this measure, has been correlated with child-rated distress, the Child Depression Inventory, and child-rated fear at school. One-week test-retest reliability has been

calculated at 0.81 (Richters & Martinez,1993). Higher scores indicate a higher lifetime frequency of community violence exposure.

Children's realistic perceptions of control were assessed using Wannon's (1990) 18-item Realistic Control Measure, which includes subscales for Controllable and Uncontrollable Events. High scores on the Controllable Events subscale indicated that children were able to accurately identify and assess the controllability of typically controllable events; likewise, high scores on the Uncontrollable Events subscale meant that children were able to accurately identify and assess the controllability of typically uncontrollable events. Higher scores indicate more realistic assessments of event controllability. This measure has been shown to accurately differentiate stress-affected from stress-resilient children in urban populations (Cowen et al., 1991). Internal consistency reliabilities were calculated on the current sample (Total Scale, $\alpha = 0.54$; Controllable Events subscale, $\alpha = 0.74$; Uncontrollable Events subscale, $\alpha = 0.76$).

Snyder et al.'s (1994) Children's Hope Scale is a 12-item measure, with two subscales for Agency and Pathways beliefs. One-month test-retest reliability has been calculated at $r(359) = .71$, $p < .001$ and $r(89) = .73$, $p < .001$ in a separate sample. Internal consistency reliabilities were calculated on the current sample (Total scale, $\alpha = 0.68$; Agency subscale, $\alpha = 0.68$; Pathways subscale, $\alpha = 0.38$). The Total scale and Pathways subscale reliabilities were raised slightly by eliminating one item ("I can think of many ways to get the things that are most important to me") which was negatively correlated to the rest of the scale (Revised 11-item scale, $\alpha = 0.71$; Pathways subscale, $\alpha = 0.49$). Higher scores indicate higher levels of hope.

Results

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed examining the effects of violence exposure, realistic perceptions of control, age, and gender, and their interactions, on hope (the revised 11-item Children's Hope scale). Four regressions were run in order to clearly identify any differential impacts of victimization vs. witnessing community violence, and of realistic perceptions of the controllability of controllable vs. uncontrollable events (see Tables 1 and 2).

Of the four models, only the model examining victimization and controllable events reached significance. A significant three-way interaction between victimization, realistic perceptions of control about controllable events, and age (see Figure 1) indicated that although all younger children experienced a decline in hope as victimization increased, the slope of the loss of hope differed depending on the child's ability to accurately assess controllable events as controllable. Younger children who could not correctly make this judgment experienced a very steep decline; while a buffering effect was evident in the much shallower slope for those whose assessments of controllability were more accurate. A similarly shallow-sloped decline was found for older realistic children. However, older children who were unable to accurately assess the controllability of controllable events actually experienced a small *increase* in hope as victimization increased.

The relationship between realistic control perceptions, violence exposure, and hope were further examined through partial correlations in a subset of 30 older children who were only moderately realistic about the controllability of events in their environment, and thus not able to reliably differentiate between what is and is not within their control. In other words, their assessments of controllability about typically controllable and uncontrollable events were not related to the actual controllability of these events. Since it appeared that these children were less affected by their environment than others, no relationship between violence exposure and hope was expected. Partial correlations (controlling for age and gender) indicated that hope in these children was unaffected by violence exposure (see Tables 3 and 4). Neither victimization

nor witnessing were significantly related to hope (although it is likely that some of the correlations failed to reach significance due to sample size). The significant negative relationship between victimization and hope, present among children overall, disappeared. While the association between victimization and hope among older children in general was not significant, it remained negative. Note, however, that older children who were only moderately realistic in their perceptions of control evidenced a *positive* victimization → hope relationship, similar to those older children (graphed in Figure 1) who were even less able to accurately assess the controllability of events.

Discussion

The negative relationship found between victimization and hope for younger children was expected: as levels of victimization increased, hope decreased. Children who were highly realistic in their perceptions of control about controllable events were buffered from some of the negative effects of victimization on hope; in contrast to those children who were unrealistic in their assessments of controllable events, who experienced a much steeper decline in hope as victimization increased.

However, the positive relationship between victimization and hope found in older unrealistic children was completely unexpected. How do these children differ from the other three groups of children (younger children, and older realistic children), who all suffered losses of hope with increased victimization? Analyses comparing them with all other children examining possible differences between them on several demographic and adjustment variables, the frequencies of specific victimization and witnessing events, and the recency of these events were performed. No systematic or interpretable distinctions were discovered. Further analyses on subsets of children with deficits in realistic perceptions of control (the moderately realistic children reported earlier) suggested that difficulty in assessing the controllability of events may act to *reverse* the negative effects of victimization on hope.

Could an inability to accurately assess the controllability of events suggest that these children may not be as aware of these events as others? To the contrary, the older children who showed increased hope with increased victimization reported having witnessed significantly more community violence (approximately twice as much as that reported by other children). It's possible that these children, while aware of the violence around them, deny or blunt its emotional impact on them. It could be that they exist in this fashion with regard to many other variables in their environment as well, recognizing them but remaining removed or detached from their effects. The fact that these children are all poorly able to accurately assess the controllability of the events around them could be the cause or the result of this detachment.

In summary, this study's findings, especially those concerning realistic perceptions of control, need to be replicated in other samples. Further research is needed to discover more about the processes and mechanisms which increase hope in children who have suffered high levels of victimization by community violence.

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Table 1. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting children's hope from lifetime frequency of victimization by community violence, realistic perceptions of control (about controllable and uncontrollable) events, age, and gender.

	Victimization & Controllable Events				Victimization & Uncontrollable Events			
Variables Entered	βeta In	βeta Final	F cha	R^2	βeta In	βeta Final	F cha	R^2
Step 1			2.18 +	.09			1.63	.07
Gender	0.04	0.12			0.03	0.04		
Age	0.10	0.04			0.13	0.14		
Victimization	-0.24 *	-0.46 ***			-0.23 *	-0.41 **		
Realistic Control	0.15	0.35 **			0.00	0.05		
Step 2			1.57	.18			1.82	.18
Victimization x Gender	0.31 *	0.36 **			0.20	0.14		
Victimization x Age	0.11	0.29 +			0.13	0.16		
Victimization x Control	0.00	0.08			-0.26 *	-0.18		
Control x Gender	-0.22	-0.32 *			-0.06	-0.21		
Control x Age	-0.08	-0.12			0.02	-0.00		
Gender x Age	0.13	0.16			0.07	0.03		
Step 3			2.91 *	.29			1.27	.22
Victimization x Control x Gender		-0.27				-0.20		
Victimization x Control x Age		-0.28 *				0.27 *		
Victimization x Gender x Age		-0.15				0.02		
Control x Gender x Age		0.05				0.06		
	Final Model: $F(14,80) = 2.274$, $p < .02$				Final Model: $F(14,80) = 1.65$, $p < .09$)			

Notes: Power $(1 - \beta) = 0.90$.

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting children's hope from lifetime frequency of witnessing community violence, realistic perceptions of control (about controllable and uncontrollable) events, age, and gender.

	Witnessing & Controllable Events				Witnessing & Uncontrollable Events			
Variables Entered	βeta In	βeta Final	F cha	R^2	βeta In	βeta Final	F cha	R^2
Step 1			1.22	.05			0.75	.03
Gender	0.09	0.19			0.08	0.04		
Age	0.07	0.03			0.10	0.09		
Witnessing	0.12	0.31 *			0.12	0.32 *		
Realistic Control	0.14	0.17			-0.02	0.00		
Step 2			1.23	.12			1.34	.11
Witnessing x Gender	-0.24 +	-0.17			-0.27 +	-0.33 *		
Witnessing x Age	-0.15	-0.18			-0.11	-0.23		
Witnessing x Control	0.10	0.06			-0.18	-0.13		
Control x Gender	-0.06	-0.04			-0.04	-0.09		
Control x Age	0.10	0.20			-0.04	-0.15		
Gender x Age	0.15	0.09			0.10	0.10		
Step 3			1.09	.17			0.38	.13
Witnessing x Control x Gender		0.05				-0.13		
Witnessing x Control x Age		-0.19 +				0.09		
Witnessing x Gender x Age		0.02				0.18		
Control x Gender x Age		-0.17				0.15		
	Final Model: $F(14,83) = 1.194$, $p < .30$				Final Model: $F(14,83) = 0.877$, $p < .59$			

Notes: Power $(1 - \beta) = 0.90$.

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Partial bivariate correlations between violence exposure and hope, after controlling for age and gender.

Sample	Victimization → Hope	Witnessing → Hope
All Children	partial $r(91) = -0.23$, $p < 0.03$ *	partial $r(91) = 0.11$, $p < 0.28$
All Younger Children	partial $r(37) = -0.29$, $p < 0.78$	partial $r(37) = 0.28$, $p < 0.09$ +
All Older Children	partial $r(50) = -0.18$, $p < 0.20$	partial $r(50) = 0.01$, $p < 0.96$
All Moderately Realistic Children	partial $r(52) = -0.08$, $p < 0.30$	partial $r(52) = 0.16$, $p < 0.12$
Younger Moderately Realistic Children	partial $r(26) = -0.27$, $p < 0.16$	partial $r(26) = 0.17$, $p < 0.40$
Older Moderately Realistic Children	partial $r(25) = 0.20$, $p < 0.31$	partial $r(25) = 0.27$, $p < 0.17$

Notes: + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Partial bivariate correlations between victimization and hope by realistic control level, after controlling for age and gender.

Subset	All	Older	Younger
All	$r(91) = -0.23$ $p < 0.03$	$r(46) = -0.09$ $p < 0.56$	$r(41) = -0.38$ $p < 0.02$
Very High Realism	$r(21) = -0.12$ $p < 0.60$	$r(9) = -0.10$ $p < 0.78$	$r(8) = -0.48$ $p < 0.16$
High Realism	$r(21) = -0.59$ $p < 0.00$	$r(9) = -0.72$ $p < 0.02$	$r(8) = -0.55$ $p < 0.10$
Low Realism	$r(20) = -0.00$ $p < 1.00$	$r(9) = -0.25$ $p < 0.45$	$r(7) = +0.10$ $p < 0.80$
Very Low Realism	$r(17) = +0.04$ $p < 0.88$	$r(7) = +0.42$ $p < 0.27$	$r(6) = -0.40$ $p < 0.33$

Notes: Subsets (rows) are quartiles of total sample. Very High = 75th–100th percentile; High = 50th–75th percentile; Low = 25th–50th percentile; Very Low = 0th–25th percentile. Age divisions (columns) are median splits within each subset.

Figure 1. Graphs of the interaction between victimization by community violence, realistic perceptions of control about controllable events, and age predicting children's hope. Higher values reflect higher levels of hope.