

Rumination, co-rumination and peer victimization in Romanian adolescents

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Abstract: The first aim of this present study is to find the differences in peer victimization based on the levels of rumination, co-rumination and age in Romanian adolescents. The second aim is to verify the predictive power of rumination, co-rumination and age on peer victimization. The sample consisted of 216 participants with ages between 11 and 19 years old. Each participant completed a set of three questionnaires, for rumination, co-rumination and peer victimization. Age was also reported and taken into account. The results show that there is a difference in peer victimization based on rumination while age decreases the chances of being victimized. No support was found for the difference based on co-rumination. Also, rumination and age act as significant predictors for peer victimization. Implications for parents, teachers and school counselors are discussed.

Keywords: Peer victimization, rumination, co-rumination, adolescence

1. Introduction

Child and adolescent victimization are problems that demand more and more attention as the level of school violence is growing in both the United States and Europe. Unfortunately, in Romania, peer victimization is not considered a top priority for psychologists, even though the number of incidences occurring in schools is growing every year. Between 2011 and 2013 there were 2.907 bullying cases, with 45.72 % involving physical violence, 22.86 % verbal abuse, 15.24 % emotional abuse and 14.28 % relational abuse (Asociația Telefonul Copilului, 2013).

The lack of local studies may be caused by the variations in the definition of peer victimization, especially in the way different acts are considered to be victimization. Initially, only direct actions, like physical or verbal aggression were taken into account. In 1992, Björkvist et. al (apud. Smith et. al, 2002), extended the number of actions that could be considered victimization by adding indirect aggression (social exclusion, gossip, spreading rumors etc.). Whitney & Smith (1993, apud Smith et al., 2002) operationalized the concept by taking into account the difference in power between the victim and the aggressor. The victim must not have ways of defending himself/herself.

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In other words, if two equally powered adolescents are fighting, there is no victimization. It appears only if one of them is weaker than the other. Another way of defining peer victimization is "as hurtful behaviors perpetrated by peers, including experiences of peer harassment and aggression (e.g., hitting, teasing, ignoring, and threatening), as well as bullying, which involves all of the same negative behaviors as peer harassment and aggression, but with a pattern that is repetitious, intentionally hurtful, and involves a power differential between bully and victim" (Rueger, Malecki & Deemaray, 2011, p. 444).

During adolescence, the causes of peer victimization may vary. Usually, the factors that determine the implication in the victimization process (as victim or aggressor) come from different areas. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's model (1979), Hong & Espelage (2012) proposed the following risk factors: age (students from the middle years are more exposed than the others), gender (boys are more keen to direct victimization and girls to indirect victimization), race, sexual orientation, health, depression/anxiety, learning abilities and social status of the family.

Psychologists discriminate between a few types of peer victimization, the most important being: overt victimization (physical harm, threatening, etc.), direct victimization (violence, theft, lying, jokes and blackmail), indirect victimization (social isolation, exclusion and spreading rumors), relational victimization (the destruction of the victim's relationships with others, especially friendship and acceptance) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vern-berg, 2001, van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003, Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000, Bjorkqvist, 1994; Rivers & Smith, 1994, apud. Klomek et al., 2008).

While direct, physical victimization results in the harming of others, a combination of physical and relational victimization is far more pervasive. The victim suffers because of the violent behavior from his/her peers, but his/her relationships with the colleagues are also damaged. This is threatening, especially during adolescence when many new social contacts are developed and are necessary for the adolescent psychological well-being (Sullivan, Farrell & Kliewer, 2006).

In order to develop methods of prevention for peer victimization, researchers have advanced different models and theories. One of them is presented by Jeong & Lee (2013). They modified the school environment in order to obtain a more secure place for students. Unfortunately, changes such as security cameras, uniformed guards, metal detectors and the education of the perpetrators have proven to be inefficient, the acts of peer victimization growing during the implementation period.

Hodges et al. (1999) (apud. Bollmer et al, 2005) proposed friendship as a prevention method for peer victimization. In the research that followed, adolescents who had a "best friend" were less exposed to being victimized.

Also, the strength of the relationship was more important than the number of friends one had (Hodges et al., 1999, apud. Bollmer, 2005). The same results were found by Crawford & Manassis (2010) and Boulton et al. (1999).

Finally, age is an important risk factor when it comes to being victimized. In the United States, older students reported lesser risks of being victimized by their peers (Jeong & Lee, 2013) while in Germany the number of aggressors grew with age (4.3 % in the fifth grade, 10.8 % in the tenth grade) (Scheithauer et al., 2006). There are four factors that support the findings: younger students have a greater number of older peers that can victimize them, they don't know yet that being aggressive is not good, they are not assertive enough to prevent victimization and they use different definitions for victimization (Smith, Madsen & Moody, 1999).

Rumination

Stressful activities have become, unfortunately, more common nowadays, and once they appear there is a greater chance for the individual to get involved in ruminative thoughts (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). According to the Response Style Theory, rumination is the tendency to overthink the symptoms, causes and consequences of distress instead of concentrating on solutions to overcome it (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky, 2008) and it was linked with higher depression and anxiety scores in numerous studies (Abela, Brozina & Haigh, 2002). Moreover, it can create additional stressful experiences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) and interpersonal conflict (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999), ruminators having underdeveloped problem-solving abilities and negative perceptions of self-control and self-esteem (Lyubomirsky et al., 1999).

The majority of studies that explore peer victimization on adolescents come from the United States. Saphero et al. (2013) took into account previous data saying that rumination determines greater levels of victimization and exclusion anxiety. He tried to verify the effects of rumination on peer victimization, depression, and anxiety. The results showed that rumination was positively linked with peer victimization. Child abuse, age and gender are not better predictors of peer victimization and rumination is a better predictor of peer victimization than it is of depression and anxiety.

The explanation given by the authors is that ruminators are more sensitive to rejection and other stressful events, such as victimization. Also, their lack of adaptive behaviors interferes with their ability to solve problems. Therefore, a vicious circle is created, which results in higher levels of victimization. The process could be explained using the theoretical framework provided by the Response Style Theory. Individuals with higher levels of rumination feel more isolated than those who ruminate less (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999). According to the Response Style Theory, ruminators have a tendency to ruin their social support and exaggerate negative thinking. When

they have problems, they ask for family and friend's support and reassurance (Joiner, 2000), but at the same time they are unable to find solutions on their own (they have underdeveloped problem-solving abilities). Firstly, the constant need for help and support and, secondly, the inability to overcome problems and to implement solutions have the effect of both destroying the support network and creating more plausible causes for interpersonal conflict (Joiner & Metalsky, 2001). Therefore, ruminators experience more conflicts than those who do not ruminate (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999).

Some of these results were also found in one of the few European studies on the relationship between rumination and peer victimization during adolescence. The findings of a Turkish study consist of a positive correlation between rumination and victimization and a negative correlation between rumination and problem-solving abilities (Erdur Baker, 2009).

Co-rumination

Co-rumination is a more recent concept, first described by Rose in 2002. Defined as the extensive discussion of problems while speculating about them and the concentration on negative emotions, it was first introduced in order to offer a better explanation of depression in adolescence. This concept is based on the assumption that self-disclosure (sharing thoughts and feelings) has a positive influence on the quality of a relationship, while rumination is the cause of depression and anxiety. It can be seen as a bridge between the positive relationships and emotions as well as the negative ones. Also, rumination acts as a predictor both for a stronger friendship and for the rise of depression and anxiety.

In a longitudinal study that followed, 608 students from the third, fifth, seventh and ninth grades were investigated for their co-ruminative responses. Co-rumination was positively linked with self-reported friendship, and the author notes that the relations between co-rumination and friendship might be explained by self-disclosure.

Rose, Carlson & Waller (2007) added further evidence that co-rumination is a good predictor of friendship, but also for depression and anxiety. The authors studied the influence that co-rumination has on adolescents, also taking into account age and gender. The participants were taken from different grades, from the third to the ninth. The results show that co-rumination has effects on the quality of friendship but also on depression. Also, friendship, depression and anxiety act as predictors for co-rumination, but only when the relationship is very strong.

When studying the relation between romance and co-rumination, Starr & Davila (2009) found that adolescents who are involved in romantic relationships co-ruminate more in comparison with the ones that are not. There is also evidence that, on one hand, co-rumination with friends is positively linked with co-rumination with mothers (Waller & Rose, 2013). On the other

hand, the two types of relationships are different and that only co-rumination with a friend can have negative results.

The present study

Little research was made on the importance of the victim's characteristics in the prevention of school victimization, for both risk and protective factors. Past studies proved that security measures failed to show any results, so a new approach is necessary. We propose co-rumination as a mean to reduce peer victimization for students who co-ruminate with same sex friends, while also studying the importance of rumination and age.

Our first aim was to explore the differences in the level of victimization based on the levels of rumination, co-rumination and age. Our second aim was to verify the predictive power of rumination, co-rumination and age on the level of peer victimization.

We formulated the following hypotheses: 1) There is a difference in the peer victimization level of high ruminating students and the peer victimization level of low ruminating students. We expected that the participants who scored lower on a rumination scale could be significantly less victimized than those who scored higher. 2) The peer victimization level is different for the students who co-ruminate with a same sex friend from those who do not. We expected that participants who co-ruminate more would report suffering significantly fewer peer victimization acts than those who co-ruminate less. 3) The level of peer victimization gets lower with age. The participants between 11 and 13 years old would be significantly more victimized in comparison with those between 17 and 19 years old. 4) There is an interaction effect of rumination, co-rumination and age on peer victimization. 5) Rumination, co-rumination and age can predict the level of peer victimization.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The research sample consisted of 220 participants, 127 girls and 93 boys. 125 of them were aged between 11 and 13 (fifth and sixth-grade students) and 95 of them were aged between 17 and 19 (eleventh and twelfth-grade students). Four participants from the first condition were eliminated for not completing one or more of the questionnaires. Therefore, the research was conducted on 121 participants with ages between 11 and 13 years old and 95 aged between 17 and 19 years old.

2.2 Measures

Children's response style questionnaire is a scale that can identify one's response style. It was adapted for children and adolescents from the Response Style Questionnaire (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). It consists of 25 items, grouped into three subscales: rumination (13 items, ex.: "When I am sad, I think about how alone I feel", "When I am sad, I think I'm ruining everything."), distraction

(7 items, ex.: "When I am sad, I spend a lot of time on my schoolwork") and problem solving (5 items, ex.: "When I am sad, I ask a friend, parent, or teacher to help me solve my problem"). Each scale measures the way the respondents act when they are sad: concentrating on causes and consequences (rumination), doing other activities (distraction) and searching solutions for their situation (problem-solving). For this research, only the rumination scale was used. The 13 items were rated on a Likert-type scale, with answers from 1 (never) to 4 (always). Good internal consistency was reported both by different researches - Cronbach's Alpha = 0.84 (Abela, Vanderbilt, & Rochon, 2004) and by the current one - Cronbach's Alpha = 0.773. Based on the results, we performed a median split, resulting in 118 of the participants with a low ruminations level and 98 of the participants with a high rumination level.

Co-rumination Questionnaire assesses the way people co-ruminate with same-sex friends. It consists of 27 items, rated in a Likert-type scale, from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (really true). Some of the items are: "We spend most of our time together talking about problems that my friend or I have", "When I have a problem, my friend always tries really hard to keep me talking about it". A satisfactory internal consistency was found in the literature - Cronbach's Alfa = 0.96 -0.97 (Rose, 2002; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). The current research reported Cronbach's Alfa = 0.949. Based on the results, we performed a median split, resulting in 116 of the participants with a low co-ruminations level and 100 of the participants with a high rumination level.

Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale is a self-reported scale that assesses the level of victimization one is suffering, based on four factors: physical victimization, verbal victimization, attack on property and social manipulation. Each factor consists of four items rated on a Likert-like scale, rated from 0 (never) to 2 (more than once). The final score is computed by summing each individual item. Examples for each factor could be: the physical victimization scale- "Punched me", "Kicked me"; the verbal victimization scale - "Swore at me"; the attack on property scale- "Took something of mine without permission"; the social manipulation scale - "Made other people not talk to me". The current research only took the victimization score into account. Internal consistency for each factor varied in other research from 0.73 to 0.85 (Mynard, H., & Joseph, S., 2000). This current research reported Cronbach's Alpha = 0.960.

2.3 Procedure

The instruments were applied in group form, in the classroom. Each participant was informed about the confidentiality of the responses. Each paper was anonymously completed. Researchers assured the participants that results would not be used for their own or their school's evaluation. For a better understanding, before the procedure each questionnaire was read out loud in the classroom. The order of completion was CRSQ, CRQ, MP-VS.

3. Results

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics and the correlation coefficients for all scales. Age is negatively associated with peer victimization ($r = -.30, p < 0.01$) while rumination is positively associated with peer victimization ($r = .152, p < 0.05$). Co-rumination does not significantly correlate with peer victimization ($r = -.11, p > 0.05$). Also, rumination does not correlate with age ($r = 0.12, p > 0.05$) but positively correlates with co-rumination ($r = -0.21, p < 0.01$). Age positively correlates with co-rumination ($r = .18, p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation and correlations for the study's variables.

	Mean	St.Dev.	1	2	3	4
1. R	1,4537	,49901				
2. C-R	1,4630	,49978	,217**			
3. A	1,4398	,49752	,129	,187**		
4. PV	9,4444	7,07348	,152*	-,110	-,304**	

Note. R - Rumination, C-R - Co-rumination, A - Age, PV - Peer victimization, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Hypotheses 1 - 4

An Independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare peer victimization in low rumination and high rumination conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores of low ruminating participants and high ruminating participants; $t = -2.24, p = 0.026^*$. These results suggest that the participants who ruminate more ($M = 10.62, SD = 7.21$) are more exposed to peer victimization than the lower ruminating ones ($M = 8.46, SD = 6.28$) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Independent Sample T-tests comparing peer victimization level between high and low ruminating students. PV – Peer Victimization, R – Rumination, * $p < 0.05$

	R	N	M	SD	SE	t	df	p
PV	low	118	8,4661	6,82715	,62849	-2,242	214	,026*
	high	98	10,6224	7,21898	,72923			

The same statistical approach was used for the second and third hypotheses. There was no significant difference in the scores of low co-

ruminating participants and high co-ruminating participants; $t = 1.62$, $p = 0.1$, $p > 0.05$. These results suggest that participants who co-ruminate more with a same-sex friend ($M = 8.61$, $SD = 6.75$) are as exposed to peer victimization as those who do not co-ruminate or co-ruminate less ($M = 10.16$, $SD = 6.76$) (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Independent Sample T-tests comparing peer victimization level between high and low co-ruminating students. PV – Peer Victimization, C-R – Co-rumination*

C-R		<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
PV	low	116	10,1638	7,28661	,67654	1,626	214	,108
	high	100	8,6100	6,75830	,67583			

Based on an Independent-sample t-test comparing the peer victimization level of participants aged between 11 and 13 years old and participants with ages between 17 and 19 years old, there was a significant difference in the scores of the two groups; $t = 4,67$, $p = 0,001$. Older participants reported a lower level of peer victimization ($M = 7.02$, $SD = 5.25$) than the younger ones ($M = 11.34$, $SD = 7.72$) (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Independent Sample T-tests comparing peer victimization level between age groups. PV – Peer Victimization, A – Age, ** $p < 0.01$*

	<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
V	11-13	121	11,3471	7,72734	,70249	4,673	214	,000**
	17-19	95	7,0211	5,25515	,53917			

We also examined the hypothesis that peer victimization levels would differ based on the interactions of each of the two different independent variables. Running a Two-Way ANOVA, the following results were discovered: the effect of rumination and co-rumination was not significant ($f = 2.35$, $p = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$), as well as the effect of the rumination and age ($f = 0.42$, $p = 0.51$, $p > 0.05$) and the effect of age and co-rumination ($f = 0.02$, $p = 0.96$, $p > 0.05$) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Results of the Two-Way Anova evaluating the interaction effects of rumination and co-rumination, rumination and age, age and co-rumination on peer victimization.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
R	333,494	1	333,494	6,955	,009
C-R	251,467	1	251,467	5,244	,023
R* C-R	112,863	1	112,863	2,354	,126
Error	10165,410	212	47,950		
R	414,365	1	414,365	9,403	,002
A	1124,672	1	1124,672	25,523	,000
R * A	18,637	1	18,637	,423	,516
Error	9341,775	212	44,065		
A	896,987	1	896,987	19,543	,000
C-R	31,068	1	31,068	,677	,412
A* C-R	,094	1	,094	,002	,964
Error	9730,247	212	45,897		

Hypothesis 5

In order to verify the efficiency of an explanatory model for peer victimization based on rumination, co-rumination and age, we used the method of multiple linear regression. The results show that a model containing all three predictors explain a total of 12.6 % of the peer victimization and is significant ($R^2_{adjusted} = 0.126$, $p < 0.01$). Taking into account the coefficients, only rumination ($\beta = 0.214$, $p = 0.01$) and age ($\beta = -0.314$, $p < 0.01$) are significant, while co-rumination ($\beta = -0.097$, $p = 0.143$) does not have a significant contribution to the model. Age contributes the most, but its effect is a negative one, meaning that older adolescents report lower levels of peer victimization. Rumination has a positive contribution (ruminators tend to be more victimized), but the effect size for rumination is lower than the one for age ($r_{sp\ rumination} = 0.208$, $r_{sp\ age} = -0.307$).

Table 6. *Multiple Regression Analysis: Effect of Rumination, Co-Rumination and Age on Peer Victimization*

Predictors	B	Beta	Sig.	Part
rumination	3,030	,214	,001	,208
co-rumination	-1,378	-,097	,143	-,094
age	-4,459	-,314	,000	-,307

4. Discussions

The first aim of this research was to study the differences in the level of peer victimization based on rumination, co-rumination and age. We also took into consideration the interaction effects of the independent variables on the dependent one. Rumination, defined as centering on symptoms, causes and consequences of distress instead of on solutions (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky, 2008), was found to have a significant main effect on peer victimization for the studied population (adolescents with ages between 11 and 19 years old). Previous studies show that individuals who ruminate are more involved in interpersonal conflicts (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999), but their participants were adults and peer victimization was not the only type of conflict that was tested. Our results show that the level of peer victimization suffered by low ruminating adolescents is significantly lower in comparison with the one of high ruminating adolescents. In other words, adolescents who ruminate are more victimized by their peers.

An explanation for this is offered by the Response Style Theory (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Ruminators also need the help of others; they ask for it and people around them offer to help. Still, they are counter-productive in the relationships with their peers and family members. This is caused by their perceived lack of understanding and reduced emotional support. The distortion of what they feel and what is really happening is responsible for the tensions between them and their peers. Based on the theoretical support, we can assume that a vicious circle is created that adolescents find difficult to overcome. Rumination determines a higher level of victimization; the victims cannot concentrate on solutions and thus the victimization is perpetuated and may even intensify.

An explanation for this is offered by the Response Style Theory (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). A ruminative response style is characterized by a constant rethinking of past events and, at the same time, by a lack of problem-solving abilities. When high ruminating adolescents are in a state of distress and ruminate on that, their solutions for the problems get weaker (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). As a result their problems, including peer victimization, are prolonged and even exacerbated by their inability to

implement the best solutions. At the same time, they seek the support of their friends and families as well as their help to improve the situation, but the apparent lack of any solution from their part only conducts to the development of new conflicts and thus, a constant state of peer victimization.

Therefore, it is important for parents, teachers and especially school counselors to help the adolescents that are constant victims of peer aggression to develop more problem-solving abilities instead of overthinking the causes and consequences. Rumination might act as a cause for more victimization, depression and anxiety, thus they develop a response style based on distraction and, more important, find solutions that would be healthier for the individual.

Wanting to find a protective factor against peer victimization we tested the effects that co-rumination has on the process of victimization. Co-ruminating with a same-sex friend was found to have positive effects for adolescents, some of them being the strengthening of friendship and the increasing of social support (Rose, 2002). Friendship was described as a way of protection against victimization, and a sum of researchers found support for this hypothesis (Bollmer et al., 2005; Crawford & Manassis, 2011).

We found no difference between the scores of the participants that co-ruminate more and the scores of participants that do not co-ruminate. Based on the results, we concluded that co-rumination, as a way of strengthening friendship, does not help when protection against victimization is needed. Still, we don't want to minimize either the importance of friendship against victimization or the importance of co-rumination when it comes to creating a strong relationship, the research only indicating that dyadic co-rumination interactions are not enough to protect the adolescents against victimization.

We also expected growing up prevents adolescents from being victimized. This hypothesis was confirmed, as the participants between 17 and 19 years of age reported suffering significantly fewer acts of victimization than those between 11 and 13 years of age. The results confirm other findings from the United States of America (Jeong & Lee, 2013) and Germany (Scheithauer et al., 2006). The model developed by Smith, Madsen & Moody (1999) may provide a viable explanation for this. Younger adolescents are more exposed to peer victimization because in schools there are a greater number of older students that can victimize them. While 11 or 13 years old students are possibly the youngest students from their schools, there are no older students for the 17 and 19 year old ones. Also, older students are more assertive and know that aggression is not the best way to solve their problems. Teaching younger students to act more responsibly and assertively could be another way of keeping them safer from peer victimization.

There were no interaction effects between rumination, co-rumination and age. Co-rumination was not a buffer between rumination and victimization

or age and victimization, while the interaction between rumination and age does not increase or decrease the level of victimization.

The second aim of the study was to verify if rumination, co-rumination and age act as predictors for the level of peer victimization. The results confirm previous findings showing that rumination is positively linked with peer victimization and a good predictor of it (Shapero et al., 2013). Our research found that rumination predicts higher levels of peer victimization on the Romanian adolescent population, but the effects are weak, which means that other variables are also involved. We tested the model with co-rumination and age too. Co-rumination was not a significant predictor for peer victimization, while age completes our comparative approach. It acts as a predictor for peer victimization, but the effects are negative, meaning that peer victimization decreases with age.

In conclusion, this current study indicates that, for the Romanian adolescent population, rumination is a predictor for peer victimization, and high ruminating adolescents tend to be more victimized. Co-rumination with a same-sex friend does not act as a protective factor, but age decreases peer victimization. Still, there is no interaction between rumination and age.

Limitations and future research directions

Some limitations should be noted. Firstly, victimization was measured on a self-reported scale. More comprehensive research (with victims, aggressors, teachers and parents as participants) could be more suited for the goals. Secondly, the majority of the participants came from stable environments, which might have reduced the risk of victimization. Finally, some results could be explained by a reduced number of participants. For a better understanding of the situation, more risk and protective factors should be taken into account, as well as using the assessments of the victims, aggressors and teachers.

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