Reviewer’s report

Title: Attentional Avoidance in Peer Victimized Individuals with and without Psychiatric Disorders

Version: 1 Date: 05 Oct 2018

Reviewer: Alexandra Irwin

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the manuscript "Attentional Avoidance in Peer-Victimized Individuals with and without Psychiatric Disorders". The goal of this study was to address inconsistencies in previous research on attentional biases in individuals with psychiatric disorders. The authors sought to examine the role of adverse childhood experiences, namely peer victimization, in attentional biases for individuals with and without psychiatric disorders. There were several important areas of strength in the paper. The introduction presented inconsistencies in the literature that supported the need to better understand the relationship between peer attentional biases, victimization, and psychiatric disorders. A strength of the design is the use of Emotional Stroop as well as the dot probe task to assess various components of attentional biases (e.g., Attentional Bias, Orienting and Disengaging Indices), which were clearly explained in the methods section. In general, the results are clearly stated and situated within existing literature, with plausible explanations offered for inconsistent findings. Finally, the conclusion that attentional biases are linked to psychopathology but that the quality may vary by exposure to adverse life experiences was reasonable and interesting. Some questions and suggestions follow.

Background

* Page 4, lines 10-12: The authors may wish to provide additional theoretical support for the claim that attentional biases are most likely relevant to the development and maintenance of psychiatric disorders (i.e., Why/how do these biases affect their development and maintenance?) before they present research findings.

  e.g., Rosen, Milich, and Harris's (2007) model "Towards a social cognitive understanding of the development, process, and maintenance of chronic peer victimization" as cited in Rosen, Milich, and Harris (2007) "Victims of their own cognitions: Implicit social cognitions, emotional distress, and peer victimization".

* As part of the rationale, it would be helpful to include a few sentences about the broader implications of these attentional biases, i.e., what is the impact of the biases on individuals' everyday interactions, etc.?

* Pages 4-5: Some of the literature, particularly in the introduction in which research on attentional biases in various psychiatric disorders is presented, is about 20-30 years old
and could be updated (e.g., Mattia, Heimberg, & Hope, 1993; Mansell, Clark, Ehlers, & Chen, 1999; Martin, Horder, & Jones, 1992; Oppen, & Van Den Hout, 1994.)

* Pages 4-5: The authors first provide evidence for attentional biases in individuals with anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, and trauma-related disorders, and then provide evidence for biases in individual with depression, personality disorders, and schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders. Given that the current clinical sample is comprised largely of individuals with mood disorders (i.e., depressive disorder and bipolar disorder comprise 60%), with anxiety disorders representing the second smallest group (6.6%, 2 individuals, just larger than obsessive-compulsive disorder at 3.3%, 1 individual), it may make more sense to present evidence with regards to attentional biases in depression before those pertaining to anxiety.

* Page 5, lines 39-41. It may be helpful to include an example or two to illustrate the statement that "this association [between trait anxiety and psychopathology and attentional biases] is moderated by parameters within the design."

* Pages 5-6. In their review of the research, the authors describe studies that examined the extent to which adverse childhood experiences in general affected attentional biases. It would be helpful to also include studies that looked specifically at peer victimization and attention biases (e.g., Rosen, Milich, & Harris; Sulak, 2018).

Method

* Page 9. More detail about the adjectives used in the Emotional Stroop task, including a list of Stroop stimuli, and justification for using these (i.e., not related to psychopathology or victimization, interpersonal threat) would be helpful. The authors provide some detail in the discussion on page 21 (i.e., negative, neutral, and positive adjectives were used rather than disorder- or fear-related) and it would help to also include this in the Methods section.

* Page 10, lines 2-4: The authors describe that participants completed the FBS, which included 22 questions about specific victimization situations, to which participants responded whether or not they experienced each.

  o Were there just 2 response options, "Yes" and "No", and how was the total calculated to yield 44 (e.g., 2 points for "Yes", 0 points for "No")?

  o Further, the authors note on p. 14 that the median of the scale was 11. What was the interquartile range? A score of 11 out of 44 seems quite low and the overall SD of 8.21 seems quite high; is this typical?

  o Finally, is a median-split typically used for this measure? The authors may wish to reference previous studies that used the FBS.
* I found myself wondering about the authors' justification for using the FBS as a measure of relational peer victimization. Based on how it is described, response options are "Yes" and "No" rather than a Likert-type scale or option of "Sometimes" or "Often." Endorsing an item on the FBS (e.g., "I have been laughed at in the presence of other children") pertains to ever having had that experience rather than the severity or chronicity of these experiences. That is, being laughed at in the presence of other children is not the same as being laughed at every day between the ages of 9 and 14 years. In another study that assessed retrospective recall of victimization experiences (Espelage, Hong, & Medane, 2016), authors included a similar scale, the IUVS, to assess self-reported victimization before college that offers several response options (e.g., never, rarely, sometimes, often, and almost always; Espelage & Holt, 2001), as well as an Adult Retrospective Version of the JVQ to assess several experiences, including child maltreatment, peer and siblings victimization, sexual assault, and exposure to domestic violence, and provided six response choices (i.e., no, once, 2 times, 3 times, 4 times, 5 or more ties). The authors may wish to address that meaningful differences have been found in youth who have experienced one instance of victimization as compared to chronic, or persistent victimization (e.g., Li & Craig, 2014), for instance in their emotional experiences (e.g., shame), attributions of helplessness, and behaviours (e.g., Irwin et al., 2018; Schacter, White, & Juvonen, 2015).

* Page 10: It would be helpful to include further psychometric properties of all measures included in the study.

* Page 11, lines 10-24: Authors may wish to rephrase the sentence "Additionally, participants were asked to complete...and trait anxiety were assessed" to "Additionally, participants were asked to complete an assessment battery including a socio-demographic questionnaire as well as well-established questionnaires for child maltreatment, symptoms of depression, general psychopathology and psychological distress, and trait anxiety."

* For clarity, although hypotheses are stated on page 7, it would be helpful to restate hypotheses prior to the results section as predictions relate to the specific tasks (i.e., Emotional Stroop and Dot-probe) and indices yielded by the Dot-probe task (i.e., Orienting and Disengaging). It would also be helpful to revisit these specific hypotheses in the discussion.

Results

* Clarifying the hypotheses in the Introduction and Method will help to justify the analyses, in particular given that many analyses were conducted.

* Why did the authors choose to dichotomize reaction time? Multiple regression with a continuous measure of reaction time may be more appropriate.

* Were there gender differences?
Discussion

* Some discussion of the size of effects as they pertain to results would be helpful.

* Page 21, line 4: As an additional limitation, the authors may wish to note that diagnostic status is considered as a single, categorical variable. It is noteworthy also that depression comprises 60% of the clinical sample in light of differences found in previous studies between the performance of depressed versus anxious individuals, for example.

* Page 21, line 31: The authors may wish to rephrase the following sentence for clarity: "Admittedly, it may be speculated that the present stimuli provide a social evaluation connotation that may be rather related to emotional forms of child maltreatment than to psychopathology per-se".

* Page 21, line 39. The authors offer as an explanation for their null effects the utilized stimuli set. Again, a list of Stroop stimuli would be helpful to see. Could the authors also suggest how future studies might improve upon this?

Conclusion

* Page 22, lines 42-45: Given that the authors present information about children experiencing peer victimization and that the current sample is comprised of adults, it would be helpful to clarify that there are long-term outcomes that follow children into their adult lives and relationships.

* Page 23, line 7: It is understated that "peer victimized subjects may be more vulnerable to the development of psychopathology". The authors may wish to reference research which strongly links peer victimization with short- and long-term consequences, including mental health as well academic and social functioning (e.g., Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

* The implications could be expanded upon. For instance, how can our understanding of about the presence and nature of attentional biases in various populations help minimize the negative effects caused by these biases?

Formatting and minor comments

* Page 3, line 31: The authors may wish to consider rephrasing "Heightened response times" to "quicker" or "faster" response times.

* Page 4, line 48: Typo: "panic disorders" should read "panic disorders"

* Page 9, line 49: The authors may wish to rephrase the sentence "Stimuli were shown throughout until the participants' response with an intertrial of 200ms."
* Page 15, line 17: The authors may wish to use the term "marginally" rather than "virtually".

* Page 15, line 25: Typo: "significanct" should read "significant"

* Page 19, line 12: "&" in the text should read "and"

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

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If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I recommend additional statistical review

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