Relations between Violence Exposure, Threat Appraisal, and Coping among Typologies of Victimized Adolescents

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RELATIONS BETWEEN VIOLENCE EXPOSURE, THREAT APPRAISAL, AND COPING AMONG TYPOLOGIES OF VICTIMIZED ADOLESCENTS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

RELATIONS BETWEEN VIOLENCE EXPOSURE, THREAT APPRAISAL, AND COPING AMONG TYPOLOGIES OF VICTIMIZED ADOLESCENTS

By Katherine A. Taylor, B. S.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

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According to the transactional theory of stress and coping, threat appraisals influence coping and adjustment. Previous research has shown that threat appraisals mediate relations between violence exposure and adjustment, but few studies have examined links between threat appraisals and coping. The current study examined relations between violence exposure, threat appraisals, and coping among typologies of victimized adolescents. The sample included 159 predominately African American adolescents (M = 12.1). Path analyses were used to test whether threats of negative evaluation by self and others mediated relations between violence exposure and avoidance and positive reframing coping, respectively. Results did not indicate mediation or differential relations between study constructs for victim typologies. Significant direct effects were found between violence exposure and negative self-evaluation and positive reframing, such that greater violence exposure was
associated with a greater likelihood of self-blaming and positive reframing. These findings have implications for youth violence prevention and intervention efforts.
Children and adolescents are exposed to different types of violence, occurring across multiple contexts (i.e., neighborhood, school, and home) with two broad forms including community violence exposure and peer victimization. Community violence exposure includes both direct (i.e., victimization) and indirect (i.e., witnessing) subtypes of violence. Peer victimization is a separate, but related form of violence exposure that encompasses being the target of physical, verbal, and relational/social aggression. Prevalence rates for these forms of youth violence exposure are particularly high in adolescence, with lifetime prevalence rates ranging as high as 80%. For urban adolescents, community violence exposure can be especially salient as evidenced by the disproportionately high occurrence of crime and violence in inner-cities. Adolescence represents a significant period to study community- and peer-based violence exposure due to marked developmental shifts such as increased time spent with peers and also out of the direct supervision of adults, the increased importance and intimacy of peer relationships, and broader exploration of different environmental settings (e.g., Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001).

Both forms of violence exposure (i.e., exposure to community violence and peer victimization) are linked to a similar set of negative outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, negative school adjustment, and social difficulties (e.g., Graham, Bellmore, & Juvonen, 2003; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995; 1999; Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Sullivan, Farrell, Kliwer, Vulin-Reynolds, & Valois, 2007). Researchers also highlight that specific subtypes within each construct of community violence exposure (i.e., direct victimization and witnessing violence) and peer victimization (i.e., physical, verbal,
and relational/social) are strongly correlated (e.g., Mrug & Windle, 2009; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliwer, 2006). In addition, studies indicate that more global constructs of peer victimization and community violence exposure are highly related, and that many youth who are exposed to high levels of peer-based violence are also exposed to violence in the community (e.g., Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Based on this evidence, some researchers advocate for the use of more global assessments of violence exposure and have cautioned against examining the effects of one form of violence in isolation. This is because it may overestimate the influence of a single form of violence on negative adjustment and fail to identify youth who experience high levels of violence across contexts and may be most at-risk for adjustment difficulties (e.g., Finkelhor, Ormorod, & Turner, 2007).

There is general agreement in the literature that subsets of youth who are exposed to high levels of violence may be most at-risk for negative adjustment (Finkelhor et al., 2007). More specifically, the peer victimization literature pinpoints two major subgroups of youth who typically experience high levels of negative adjustment, those who are victimized and aggressive (i.e., aggressive victims) and those who are victimized and passive (i.e., passive victims). Passive victims are described as submissive and withdrawn and as demonstrating greater loneliness, anxiety, and depression and lower self-esteem than their non-victimized peers (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Schwartz, 2000). Aggressive victims, on the other hand, generally demonstrate higher levels of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and emotional distress and are also more at-risk for a variety of adjustment problems, including low academic achievement, peer rejection, and internalizing and externalizing problems than either non-victimized peers or passive victims (Graham et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2000). As previously mentioned, research examining multiple forms of violence exposure indicated that
youth’s reports of peer victimization are highly correlated to experiences of community violence exposure (Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2007; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Nevertheless, relatively few researchers have examined typologies of youth based on experiences of violence exposure and peer victimization among urban youth living in inner-city contexts.

Although the prevalence and outcomes of youth violence exposure have been well-documented in previous research, it is imperative to better understand the specific mechanisms underlying associations between violence exposure and negative adjustment in order to better inform youth violence prevention programs. For example, the way adolescents respond to stress has important implications for understanding the link between violence exposure and adjustment. In particular, individuals’ threat appraisals have been identified as a mechanism linking violence exposure to negative adjustment (e.g., Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008) yet have been largely understudied in the violence exposure literature. Threat appraisals represent an individual’s perception of the ways a stressful situation may threaten his or her well-being and are an important part of the stress and coping process as they are said to drive coping efforts and influence adjustment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The majority of research on threat appraisals has been conducted with children of divorce. For instance, Sandler, Kim-Bae, and Mackinnon (2000) found that children’s threat appraisals were associated with internalizing problems, such that greater perceptions of threat to self, others, or materials were associated with greater depression and anxiety. Researchers have also examined the relation between personality characteristics and perceptions of threat and have found that children who demonstrate high negative emotionality and poor self-regulation perceive greater threat, suggesting that children who are emotionally distressed
and impulsive may attend more to negative cues in times of stress (Lengua & Long, 2002). Although research on threat appraisals has extended beyond children of divorce, few studies to date have examined youth’s threat appraisals in response to community violence stressors. One exception is a study of predominately African American youth living in an urban area in which Kliwerer and Sullivan (2008) adapted this research to assess youth’s specific appraisals in relation to community violence stressors. These authors found that youth’s appraisals of threat (e.g., concerns about self-blame, others’ negative evaluations, safety, and material and relationship loss) mediated the relation between youth-reported community violence exposure and symptoms of internalized distress. While this study supported the notion that threat appraisals are an important underlying mechanism in relations between community violence exposure and individual adjustment, it did not examine coping in response to violence exposure or threat appraisals.

Researchers conceptualize coping in several different ways, yet despite differing descriptions show that coping plays an important role in individual adjustment. Typically, researchers define coping in one of two ways, as either problem-focused versus emotion-focused or approach versus avoidance. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping according to its function, classifying it as emotion-focused if directed at managing negative emotions, or problem-focused if directed at changing the situation. Ebata and Moos (1994) classified coping strategies according to the individual’s engagement with the stressor, and considered coping approach-oriented if aimed at directly handling the problem or avoidant if involving indirect strategies to handle the problem. For the most part, coping researchers (e.g., Ebata & Moos, 1994) have found that individuals who rely more on emotion-focused or avoidant coping strategies are more at-risk for maladaptive outcomes than individuals who
use more problem-focused or approach coping. Likewise, Brady, Gorman-Smith, Henry, and Tolan (2008) examined the coping behaviors of youth exposed to community violence and found that violence exposure was associated with negative adjustment only in youth who coped in maladaptive ways (e.g., avoided the problem). Findings also suggested that adaptive coping (e.g., proactive attempts to manage the problem) may protect youth from the negative consequences of community violence exposure. Although there is evidence that youth who cope with violence exposure in more indirect and avoidant ways are at-risk for negative adjustment, the threat appraisals that drive these coping behaviors are less well-understood. Thus, threat appraisals and coping are both important and related dimensions of the stress and coping process and must be examined together to better understand how at-risk youth respond and adjust to violence exposure.

The present study seeks to address limitations in previous research by examining the relations between threat appraisals and coping in response to violence exposure. This study expands upon existing research by examining these relations among typologies of passive and aggressive victims who experience high levels of peer victimization and community violence. Moreover, in order to better understand the mechanisms underlying the association between violence exposure and negative adjustment the current study investigates the cognitive and behavioral response styles of subgroups of highly exposed, aggressive youth and highly exposed, non-aggressive youth within a sample of urban, predominately African American adolescents.

**Review of the Literature**

In the following sections, literature on relations between violence exposure, threat appraisals, and coping processes for children and adolescents is reviewed. First, a brief
overview of the developmental period of adolescence is presented with a focus on changes in
social, cognitive, and emotional development and in peer relationships that occur within this
timeframe. Next, research on violence exposure including direct victimization and witnessing
violence is reviewed and typologies of passive and aggressive victimization described.
Finally, research on relations between stressors including violence exposure, threat
appraisals, and coping is discussed along with the current study goals.

**Adolescent Development**

Adolescence is a key developmental period marked by multiple biological, social,
cognitive, and emotional changes. Second to infancy, adolescence is the timeframe in which
individuals undergo the most rapid physical growth and change. Puberty, a hallmark of
adolescence, is a key process in the transition between childhood and adulthood. By the end
of puberty, adolescents typically experience hormonal changes as well as physical changes,
including growth in height and weight and the development of primary and secondary sex
characteristics (Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Adolescents must not only
grapple with the physiological changes associated with puberty but also the accompanying
social, cognitive, and emotional changes (Archibald et al., 2003). One influential shift in
cognitive development is that from concrete to formal operational thought which enables
adolescents to understand abstractions and has important implications for emotional
development and interpersonal understanding in social relationships. According to Piaget’s
(1972) theory of cognitive development, middle childhood is characterized by concrete
operational thought, thinking that is fixed on what is rational and practical and limited in
understanding of abstraction. As children mature their thinking shifts to formal operational
thought which allows them to utilize tools like hypothetical deductive thinking to
systematically consider a range of possible solutions to a problem situation (Piaget, 1972). Subsequently, adolescents are more capable of future-oriented thought, which influences emotional and social development. Thus, the thought of some future event may trigger certain emotions and cognitions in adolescents and may also contribute to the use of more proactive and sophisticated coping and problem-solving skills (Maccoby, 1988).

Adolescence also marks significant developments in social cognition. In his theory of social cognition, Selman (1980) posits that a key part of social cognition involves the ability to take the perspective of others. Adolescents are better able to do this than children; they are better able to consider others’ perspectives as well as the perspective of whole groups in addition to their own (Selman & Byrne, 1974). Hence, adolescents are better able to think about their own and others’ cognitions; in fact, they have a heightened consciousness to their own and others’ thoughts, feelings, and values (Rosenblum & Lewis, 2003). Accordingly, adolescents may spend more time analyzing their own thoughts, feelings, and values and wondering about others’ psychological processes in general and in relation to themselves (Maccoby, 1988).

The growth in emotional and cognitive competence experienced in adolescence occurs within a social context and another important task during adolescence is balancing autonomy or individual development with relatedness in the context of friendships, romantic relationships, and adult-adolescent relationships. Adolescents become increasingly able and motivated to make their own decisions and to rely on themselves (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003), and experience a continuation and transformation of relationships with others as they become more independent. For example, the importance of the parent-adolescent
relationship does not disintegrate, but at the same time there is a shift towards increased time spent with peers relative to parents.

Peer relationships also undergo important changes during adolescence. Youth begin to spend more time with similar-aged peers and these relationships take on increased importance - friendships become more intimate, adolescents are more conscious of what others are thinking and more sensitive to how they are being evaluated by others. In middle childhood, relationships with friends and peers mostly revolve around shared activities; however, as children transition into adolescence, friendships become more intimate and are typically characterized by mutual trust and shared thoughts and feelings (Maccoby, 1988). With the increasing capability to take the perspective of others, adolescents are better able to understand the viewpoints of their friends and peers and thus can be a key source of emotional support to their friends.

Yet, with this increase in social awareness comes increased vulnerability, in that adolescents may have heightened sensitivity to how they are being evaluated by their peers. According to the notion of the “imaginary audience” adolescents are prone to believing that they are being watched and evaluated by other people, particularly their peers (Vartanian, 2000). Subsequently, adolescents may be more concerned about making a good impression and conforming to peer group norms and expectations. Moreover, another characteristic of adolescent thinking is the notion of the “personal fable;” in other words, adolescents believe that they and their experiences are uniquely different from everyone else and that no one could understand what they are going through in day to day life experiences (Vartanian, 2000). It follows that some adolescents may be vulnerable to feelings of self-consciousness and isolation. Overall, peer relationships are pivotal during adolescence in that they may
provide supportive contexts for development, but may also place adolescents at-risk for negative adjustment. On one hand, adolescents may rely on peers for companionship, encouragement, instrumental help, and advice and on the other be more susceptible to peer pressure and negative peer interactions (Laursen & Collins, 2009).

**Youth Violence Exposure**

Unfortunately, violence exposure occurs frequently in childhood and adolescence. In this section, literature is reviewed on two broad types of violence exposure: peer victimization and community violence exposure. First, several subtypes of peer victimization are described along with the negative consequences of this form of violence exposure. Next, literature is reviewed on typologies of youth who experience peer victimization, specifically passive victims and aggressive victims. Subsequently, research on community violence exposure is presented including its subtypes of direct victimization and witnessing violence. Finally, literature on the potential benefits of conceptualizing and studying violence exposure as a more global phenomenon is discussed.

**Peer victimization.** Negative peer interactions in adolescence occur frequently in the form of peer victimization which involves being the target of peers’ aggressive behavior (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Researchers estimate that anywhere from 40% to 80% of school-aged children and adolescents have experienced peer victimization at least once in their lifetime with about 15% experiencing ongoing victimization from peers (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Rates of peer victimization vary considerably across individual studies depending in part on the ways in which peer victimization is assessed (i.e., timeframe considered, reporter(s), and subtypes of victimization included) (e.g., Prinstein et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). A child or adolescent who is
victimized by peers may experience an array of distressful and hurtful situations. For example, victimized adolescents may walk up to a group of peers only to have them roll their eyes and walk away, walk through the school hallway and hear their peers spreading an embarrassing rumor about them, be teased about their appearance, or be threatened with or experience bodily harm at the hand of their peers.

Researchers suggest that peer victimization peaks during adolescence, specifically between sixth and eighth grade (Nansel et al., 2001), and that adolescence may represent a timeframe when this type of violence is particularly salient for several reasons. First, the growing importance of the peer group, desire to attain and maintain status with peers, increased time spent with peers and greater level of intimacy in peer relationships may result in higher levels of peer victimization as youth vie for status and recognition and disclose personal information in more intimate contexts (Prinstein et al., 2001). In addition, advances in cognitive competency, such as the increased capacity for future-oriented thought, greater ability to make attributions for others’ actions, and the greater understanding of sarcasm, may contribute to increases in the sophistication and hurtfulness of peer victimization (Underwood, 2003).

Peer victimization places youth at risk for a range of psychological, social, and school adjustment problems. In a meta-analytic review of cross-sectional studies published between 1978 and 1997, Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that peer victimization was positively associated with depression and other measures of psychosocial maladjustment, including low self-esteem and high anxiety. Peer victimization is also related to drug use and externalizing behaviors such as aggression and delinquency among adolescents (e.g., Graham et al., 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006). In addition, several studies demonstrate that
victimization by peers is positively associated with multiple indicators of poor school adjustment, including lower school liking (Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman, 2008), lower academic performance, and more negative perceptions of school climate (Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2003).

Although several subtypes of peer victimization exist, namely physical, verbal, and relational/social, all constitute behaviors directed toward others that are intended to be hurtful and potentially harmful. First, physical victimization involves being the target of physical harm or threats to inflict physical harm. Youth victimized by this form of violence may experience hurtful behaviors ranging from threats of being beat up to being assaulted with a weapon. Next, verbal victimization involves being a target of direct verbal attacks intended to harm an individual’s status (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Examples of verbal victimization include being called names or teased about appearance. Finally, relational or social victimization involves being targeted by behaviors or threats (i.e. rumor-spreading, gossiping, social exclusion) that are intended to damage adolescents’ social relationships and standing with peers (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Underwood, 2003).

Research indicates that physical and relational subtypes of victimization make unique contributions to adjustment difficulties, yet both are highly correlated and lead to shared negative outcomes (e.g., Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006). For example, among a sample of predominately European American elementary school youth, Crick and Bigbee (1998) found that both of these subtypes of peer victimization predicted a key construct related to psychosocial adjustment, specifically, peer rejection. Similarly, Prinstein et al. (2001) highlighted that both overt and relational victimization predicted internalized emotional distress across gender in a sample of ethnically diverse high
school students. Moreover, Sullivan and colleagues (2006) found that physical and relational victimization was positively associated with externalizing behaviors among urban predominantly African American adolescents. Thus, while it is important to understand how specific subtypes of peer victimization may add to the prediction of negative adjustment, it is also worthwhile to consider how experiencing a combination of peer victimization experiences (e.g., physical, relational, and verbal) may place youth at increased risk for negative adjustment. For instance, Crick and Bigbee (1998) identified 52 out of 383 children who experienced rejection by their peers (i.e. those receiving low peer-reported social preference scores) and were particularly maladjusted; of these 52 children approximately 65% were identified as overt victims or aggressors or both. However, the percentage of rejected youth who were victimized or aggressive rose to 82% when relational victimization and aggression was considered. Likewise, Prinstein et al. (2001) found that youth who were both relational and physical victims had the highest levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms when compared to non-victims or youth who were victims of only one subtype of aggression.

Some researchers suggest that although physical and relational victimization put youth at risk for similar negative outcomes, each subtype may be experienced differently by boys and girls. For example, several researchers assert that girls are more involved in and more hurt by relational versus physical victimization, whereas the opposite pattern may exist for boys (e.g., Galen & Underwood, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). However, research testing hypotheses regarding differential frequencies of physical and relational victimization for boys and girls reveal mixed findings (e.g., Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006). Some studies, especially those focusing on elementary
school students, show higher frequencies of relational victimization for girls and physical victimization for boys (e.g., Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Others employing adolescent samples revealed similar frequencies of relational victimization across gender but higher rates of physical victimization for boys (e.g., Prinstein et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006) or similar frequencies of relational and physical victimization across gender (e.g., Craig, 1998). Overall, these mixed findings make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about gender differences in exposure to specific subtypes of peer victimization.

Similarly, mixed findings have been reported regarding changes in victimization with age. For instance, Smith, Shu Shu, and Madsen (2001) reviewed several studies which indicated a decrease in the rates of general victimization for boys and girls. Other studies have suggested that developmental changes in victimization depend on the form it takes (i.e., relational or overt) (Craig, Pepler, Connolly, & Henderson, 2001; Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006). Specifically, that physical forms decrease and relational forms increase as children mature and experience emotional, social, and cognitive changes, such as increased expressive language, better understanding of social norms, greater self-regulation, increased perspective-taking, and more complex peer interactions. These shifts may be most apparent in the transition between early childhood and adolescence. For instance, with a sample of adolescents in grades five through eight Craig and colleagues (2001) assessed age differences in physical, verbal, and relational victimization and found that children did not demonstrate significant differences in victimization by grade level.

Based on the strong correlations between subtypes of peer victimization and their common links to adjustment difficulties, many researchers utilize composite measures of peer victimization (i.e., combining relational, verbal, and physical subtypes) and document
negative associations between these more global constructs and youth adjustment (e.g., 
Graham et al., 2003; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 
2007; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Paul & Cillessen, 
2003). For example, Paul and Cillessen (2003) conducted a longitudinal study that included 
predominately Caucasian sixth graders and found that youth who were victims of multiple 
subtypes of peer victimization were less sociable and exhibited more disruptive and anxious-
withdrawn behavior, and more beliefs that their peers perceived them negatively than non-
victims over a one-year period. In addition, Graham and colleagues (2003) found positive 
relations between a composite measure of peer victimization (i.e., relational, verbal, physical, 
and direct) and several indicators of negative adjustment in a study of the effects of self- and 
peer-perceived victimization among Latino and African American urban adolescents. More 
specifically, youth who identified themselves and were identified by peers as victims 
experienced more anxiety, loneliness, depression, physical symptoms, and academic 
problems that non-victims. Finally, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Ladd (2001) also support the use 
of composite measures of peer victimization based on findings that different subtypes of 
victimization experiences have a cumulative effect on negative adjustment. These authors 
also underscore that youth who experience several forms of peer victimization may be at the 
highest risk for negative adjustment.

**Typologies of victimized youth.** In studies of peer victimization, there is general 
agreement that specific subsets of children and adolescents who experience ongoing 
victimization by their peers and are at higher risk for negative adjustment (Perry, Kusel, & 
Perry, 1988). For the most part, victims have been classified into one of two subgroups based 
on how they typically respond to being victimized: passive victims and aggressive victims.
Several studies have found that the behavioral and cognitive attributes of the individuals within these subgroups differ from each other as well as their similar-aged non-victimized/non-aggressive peers. These characteristic attributes and behaviors will be described in detail, for passive and aggressive victims, respectively.

**Passive victims.** Passive victims are typically described as individuals who experience high levels of victimization by their peers, but display low levels of aggression (Schwartz, 2000; Toblin, Schwartz, Gorman, & Abou-ezzeddine, 2005). By and large, this group of adolescents has been characterized as more submissive, more withdrawn, and less assertive than their same-age non-victimized peers (Schwartz, 2000; Toblin et al., 2005). However, beyond this, findings about the attributes and behaviors of passive victims have been mixed. On one hand, in ethnically diverse samples of young adolescents, researchers have characterized passive victims as a disliked group of individuals who experienced greater loneliness and depression, more social anxiety, and lower levels of self-esteem than aggressors, aggressive victims, and socially well-adjusted non-victims (Graham et al., 2006). On the contrary, research with younger samples of Caucasian youth in rural areas documented that passive victims do not experience higher levels of depression and anxiety than their aggressive and aggressive/victimized counterparts and are not rejected from all peer groups. In fact, within these samples some researchers have found that passive victims have friends in several different groups (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999) and that they are seen by peers and teachers as being cooperative and getting along well with others (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993). These findings have led some researchers to conclude that passive victims are not disliked by most of their peers and in the absence of bullies may be indistinguishable from other children and adolescents who are non-aggressive and non-
victimized (Pellegrini et al., 1999). Still, several studies have found that passive victims’ level of adjustment and social preference fall somewhere in between youth with the most and least adjustment difficulties (Schwartz, 2000; Toblin et al., 2005). In other words, passive victims are less well-adjusted and less liked by their peers than non-victimized/non-aggressive individuals, but are generally better-adjusted and less rejected than aggressive victims.

Nonetheless, the majority of research on passive victims’ thought processes and cognitive attribution style portrays them as relatively disliked and poorly adjusted. For example, Parkhurst and Asher (1992) examined differences between subgroups of seventh and eighth graders and differentiated adolescents on two separate criterion, social status (i.e., whether they were rejected, neglected, average, controversial, or popular among peers) and level of aggression (i.e., whether they were perceived as submissive or aggressive by their peers). Students falling into the submissive-rejected group were described as easy to push around and highly disliked by peers, closely resembling conceptualizations of passive victims as victimized and rejected by peers (Graham et al., 2006; Toblin et al., 2005). Additionally, compared to their non-victimized/non-aggressive counterparts, this subgroup of students reported being significantly lonelier and experienced more concerns about being humiliated or rejected during free times at school (i.e., after lunch and between classes) (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). In a related study, Graham et al. (2006) examined the differences in sixth graders’ appraisals of hypothetical peer harassment scenarios among subgroups of victimized and aggressive students. Results indicated that passive victims experienced more loneliness, depressive symptoms, and social anxiety, and had lower self-esteem than socially well-adjusted adolescents. In addition, passive victims’ responses to hypothetical victimization
situations were likely to include self-blame focused on stable, internal, uncontrollable characteristics of the self. In other words, passive victims were more likely to think that it was something about their character that led them to be harassed by their peers, suggesting that passive victims may have a greater tendency to evaluate themselves negatively when experiencing victimization by peers.

**Aggressive victims.** Aggressive victims are a second subgroup of youth frequently identified in the peer victimization literature. Aggressive victims were first identified by Olweus (1978) in his studies of Swedish adolescent boys and at that time Olweus referred to these individuals as “provocative” victims. Unlike the typical notion of victims as submissive, “provocative” victims demonstrate a more aggressive behavioral style. Olweus (1978) initially described these individuals as anxious, easily angered, provoking conflict by irritating and teasing others, and fighting back when attacked. Since this initial conception, researchers have further described aggressive victims and pinpointed them as a subgroup in need of further attention.

Not only is peer-based violence associated with negative outcomes for victimized yet passive youth, but also for aggressive youth. It is important to briefly note the detrimental effects of aggression for youth which are well-documented in the literature and include internalizing behaviors, negative school adjustment, externalizing behaviors, and negative peer interactions (e.g., Dodge & Coie, 1987; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Pepler & Craig, 2005; Prinstein et al., 2001). For example, in a review of 148 studies of child and adolescent peer aggression, Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little (2008) found that aggression was positively associated with externalizing symptoms, specifically, emotion dysregulation, ADHD-type symptoms, and conduct problems. Prinstein and
colleagues (2001) found similar results in a sample of 566 ethnically diverse high school students; adolescents who were identified as aggressors (i.e., who scored one standard deviation higher on measures of both overt and relational aggression) demonstrated higher levels of conduct problems than all other adolescents. Additionally, within an ethnically diverse sample of 11 to 14 year-olds, Donnellan and colleagues (2005) found negative concurrent associations between aggression (i.e. non-physical and physical) and self-esteem.

It is also relevant to address that peer-based aggression has been conceptualized a number of ways including physical and non-physical aggression (e.g., Farrell, Kung, White, & Valois, 2000), reactive and proactive aggression (e.g., Dodge & Coie, 1987), and direct (physical or verbal) and indirect (many forms of relational and social) aggression (Card et al., 2008). Yet, studies have found strong positive correlations between these subtypes of aggression, indicating that children and adolescents who exhibit high levels of one subtype of aggression are more likely to exhibit similarly high levels of another. For instance, Card and colleagues (2008) found direct and indirect forms of aggression to be highly correlated. Likewise, employing two large samples of urban and rural middle school students, respectively, Farrell et al. (2000) found that constructs of physical and non-physical aggression were highly correlated. With regard to studies focusing on aggressive victims, for example, many use composite measures of aggression including composites of direct aggression (e.g., Schwartz, 2000) or both indirect and direct aggression (e.g., Graham et al., 2006; Toblin et al., 2005). Using composite measures of aggression, a number of studies found that aggressive victims are at high risk for a variety of adjustment problems, including peer rejection (e.g., Perry et al., 1988; Schwartz, 2000; Toblin et al., 2005), low academic achievement (e.g., Graham et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2000; Toblin et al., 2005), symptoms of
internalized distress (e.g., Schwartz, 2000; Toblin et al., 2005), and externalizing behavior problems (e.g., Olweus, 1978).

In addition to describing the adjustment of aggressive victims, researchers have also described the individual characteristics of this subgroup in order to better understand this high-risk group. In a study of subtypes of aggressors and victims, Schwartz (2000) categorized older elementary school children into subgroups based on peer reports of verbal and physical victimization and aggression and examined the characteristics of each subgroup based on teacher-reported behavior. In a related study, Toblin et al. (2005) measured subgroup membership based on peers’ perceptions of verbal, physical, and relational victimization and aggression and described a similar profile of social-cognitive and behavioral attributes for aggressive victims. According to both studies, aggressive victims made up the smallest group of victimized or aggressive individuals and demonstrated fewer assertive and prosocial behaviors and more impulsive behavior, difficulty regulating emotions, and hyperactivity than other children not classified into this typology. Additionally, the majority of studies on aggressive victims have found boys to be over-represented in this typology, making examinations of gender differences in subgroups of victims (i.e., passive victims and aggressive victims) difficult (e.g., Schwartz, 2000).

With these characteristics in mind, several researchers suggest that aggressive victims may closely resemble reactive aggressors, who employ aggression as an angry or fearful response to some outside provocation (Larkins & Frydenberg, 2004; Toblin et al., 2005). Similar to aggressive victims, reactive aggressors have been characterized as impulsive and hyperactive, highly rejected, and likely to attribute hostility to others in provocation situations (Larkins & Frydenberg, 2004; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). These speculations...
led Salmivalli and Nieminen (2002) to examine the connection between bully-victim problems and proactive and reactive aggression. Out of all subgroups, bully-victims demonstrated the highest levels of proactive and reactive aggression, yet, within the bully-victim group individuals were perceived as displaying more reactive aggression than proactive aggression. Overall, the authors concluded that bully-victims may possess characteristics of both proactive and reactive aggressors, including a tendency to attribute hostile intent to peers in ambiguous situations. In other words, characteristically, aggressive victims may interpret others actions toward them as more negative with more intent to harm than other individuals.

Studies have also found that aggressive victims’ perceptions and attributions have similarities to those of both passive victims and aggressors. For instance, Graham and colleagues (2006) examined middle school students’ interpretations of the causes of hypothetical situations of victimization and found that aggressive victims frequently attributed being victimized to uncontrollable, stable, internal characteristics (characterological self-blame), but endorsed these less frequently than passive victims. Additionally, aggressive victims interpreted victimization scenarios to be caused by controllable behaviors (behavioral self-blame), which were more frequently endorsed by aggressors. In the same study, the authors also found that like passive victims, aggressive victims’ perceived the school environment as being unsafe and similar to aggressors they also perceived it as unfair. Hence, based on the above findings, aggressive victims negatively evaluate themselves in victimization situations and interpret these situations as posing threats to their sense of fairness and personal safety.
Research on the attribution and response style of aggressive victims is closely tied to research on coping styles, and several researchers have speculated about the coping behaviors of aggressive victims. In general, research suggests that aggressive children have nonproductive coping styles (Larkins & Frydenberg, 2004; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Barker, 2006). More specifically, individuals who are aggressive and victimized tend to use more aggressive coping as opposed to problem-focused coping (e.g. problem solving) in response to provocation. Indeed research has indicated that children with hostile attribution biases have deficits in problem-solving abilities and are more likely to endorse aggressive strategies in ambiguous encounters with peers (Dodge, 1980). It has also been suggested that aggressive children with attention problems may use avoidance coping to handle threatening situations rather than trying to solve problems directly (Larkins & Frydenberg, 2004). By examining the goals and self-efficacy perceptions of preadolescent children, Erdley and Asher (1996) found that aggressive-rejected children who attributed hostile intent to peers in ambiguous situations placed more importance on retaliating, dominating, and self-protecting, and less importance on resolving the problem peacefully and getting along with the other person. In addition, these children indicated that they felt better able to accomplish goals relating to aggressive behavior and less able to resolve things peacefully. In sum, research on aggressive and victimized youth suggests that aggressive victims may be more likely to employ aggressive or avoidance coping strategies instead of problem-focused coping strategies when experiencing stressors such as peer victimization.

Community violence exposure. A substantial number of adolescents not only experience peer-based violence, but are also vulnerable to community violence exposure (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, Felton, & Earls, 2001). Similar to peer victimization, research
suggests that exposure to community violence is increasingly prevalent and detrimental for adolescents, which may in part be due to certain developmental changes occurring during this timeframe. Because adolescents typically spend more time with peers relative to parents and other adults, they may experience more behavioral freedom and thus increased ability to explore new settings and activities (Mrug & Windle, 2009). Thus, this expanded exploration may place youth at greater risk of being directly or indirectly exposed to violence, while other emotional and cognitive changes occurring in adolescence may make youth more vulnerable to its disruptive effects on development. For instance, with the increased ability to analyze one’s own thoughts and think about future possibilities adolescents may be more apt to ruminate about violence they have experienced and become emotionally distressed and fearful at the thought of future risks (Maccoby, 1988).

The literature delineates two forms of community-based violence exposure, direct (i.e. victimization) and indirect (i.e. witnessing). Whereas witnessing violence refers to seeing or hearing about violent acts, victimization involves being the target of intentional acts initiated to inflict harm (Buka et al., 2001). Risks of witnessing or being victimized in the context of community violence may be particularly relevant for low-income urban youth, as high rates of crime and violence exist in a number of inner-city neighborhoods and communities. Several studies document that adolescents living in inner-cities are frequent victims and witnesses of a variety of forms of community violence, including physical assaults, shootings, stabbings, physical threats, and robberies (Kliewer, Lepore, Oskin, & Johnson, 1998; Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008; Schwab-Stone et al., 1999). For example, adolescent witnesses may hear the sound of gunshots outside of their family’s home or may even see the casualties of shootings in their neighborhoods. At the same time, victimization
by community violence could entail coming home from school to a house that has been 
broken into and personal possessions stolen or being chased on the way home from a 
neighbor’s house.

Prevalence rates for witnessing violence indicate that approximately 25% of youth 
living in an urban area have witnessed a murder, between 20% and 70% have witnessed a 
shooting, and 10% and 50% have witnessed stabbings (Buka et al., 2001). Prevalence rates 
for community-based victimization indicate that anywhere from 20% to 70% of inner-city 
youth have been victims of at least one violent act (Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & 
Vestal, 2003). Similarly, Kliwer and Sullivan (2008) reported prevalence rates among 358 
primarily low-income African American adolescents for witnessing violence ranging from 
under 10% for severe items such as “seen a knife attack” to over 80% for “heard gunfire near 
home.” The percentages of youth who directly experienced community-based violence 
ranged from under 10% for items such as “house broken into when home” to over 50% for 
items including “slapped, hit, or punched.”

Some researchers examine witnessing violence and victimization as separate 
constructs (e.g., Mrug & Windle, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2007), however, others acknowledge 
that youth living in areas characterized by high levels of community violence likely 
experience both forms of exposure. Studies examining these two subtypes of violence 
exposure separately have also found youth’s reports of victimization and witnessing violence 
to be highly correlated (Mrug & Windle, 2009; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Thus, adolescents 
may experience and witness multiple forms of violence simultaneously with each 
contributing cumulatively to negative outcomes. Hence, a number of studies conceptualize 
violence exposure as a composite of both witnessing and victimization with such measures
indicating that between 50% and 90% of youth living in urban contexts are exposed to community violence (e.g., Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tuira, & Baltes, 2009).

Overall, researchers link community violence exposure to two broad categories of psychopathology among youth: internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety, and somatization) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggressive or antisocial behavior). Theoretical models explain underlying mechanisms that may account for relations between community violence exposure and negative adjustment. For example, researchers posit that youth who are chronically exposed to violence may have intrusive thoughts or disturbing mental images about violence they have witnessed or experienced and, as a result, be at heightened risk for internalizing problems (Kliwerer et al., 1998). Following the tenets of social cognitive theories, researchers also suggest that community violence exposure may contribute to youth’s externalizing behavior by providing models for aggressive behavior and normalizing aggression, such that youth may imitate this behavior and see aggression as an effective problem-solving method (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004; Fowler et al., 2009; Mrug & Windle, 2009; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000).

Researchers examining witnessing violence and victimization separately pinpoint several common negative consequences for each subtype of violence exposure on adolescent well-being, including symptoms of PTSD, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and poor school adjustment (e.g., Mrug & Windle, 2009; Ruchkin, Henrich, Jones, Vermeiren, & Schwab-Stone, 2007; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). For example, in a large ethnically diverse sample of middle and high school students, Ruchkin and colleagues (2007) found positive associations between both witnessing and experiencing violence and symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and antisocial behavior. Furthermore, both
witnessing violence and victimization mediated relations between self-restraint and drug use and aggression among urban early adolescents (Sullivan et al., 2007). Finally, among 603 predominately African American adolescents, Mrug and Windle (2009) found links between lower school connectedness and both victimization and witnessing violence.

Similar to research examining witnessing and victimization as separate constructs, studies using composite measures also detail a host of negative outcomes associated with community violence exposure, including symptoms of PTSD, internalized distress, externalizing behavior problems, and difficulties at school (e.g., Fowler et al., 2009; Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995; 1999). For instance, in a predominately African American adolescent sample, Kliewer et al. (1998) found that community violence exposure was positively associated with symptoms of PTSD. This finding is consistent with results of a recent meta-analysis in which community violence exposure was found to strongly influence symptoms of PTSD, such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, and avoidance (Fowler et al., 2009). Kliewer and Sullivan (2008) also documented longitudinal associations between a composite measure of community violence exposure and youth’s reports of internalizing symptoms over a one year period in a sample of 358 predominantly African American youth. These findings were supported by Schwab-Stone and colleagues (1999) who found community violence exposure predicted internalizing and externalizing symptoms two years later in a large sample of inner-city adolescents. Moreover, Schwab-Stone et al. (1995) also found a strong association between community violence exposure and poor school achievement, as measured by grades and grade repetition. Thus, previous research using composite measures of community violence exposure suggests that it is a traumatic stressor that places youth at risk for several adjustment difficulties.
**Youth victimized by multiple forms of violence.** As demonstrated in the above review, researchers tend to examine peer victimization and community violence exposure separately, delineating several different subtypes of violence within each form and investigating the unique impact of these specific subtypes of violence on individual adjustment. Nonetheless, some studies have found that in many cases adolescents who experience one form of violence exposure may also be exposed to several other forms of violence. For instance, it may be the case that adolescents who experience victimization by peers at school are simultaneously exposed to violence in their neighborhoods or communities. Subsequently, some researchers highlight the merits of studying more global constructs of violence exposure including multiple types of exposure for several reasons, including the shared negative outcomes of different forms of violence exposure and the notion that the severity of exposure versus the form of exposure is more indicative of adjustment difficulties.

Subtypes of peer victimization and community-based violence exposure are risk factors for many common negative outcomes that span individual, school, and peer domains. Composite assessments of peer victimization and community-based violence exposure are associated with a broad range of internalizing symptoms, including depression, anxiety, and somatization (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2007). In addition, both forms of violence exposure have also been associated with negatively biased cognitions, specifically, hostile attribution biases and negative views about the self (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004; Graham et al., 2006; Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995). Researchers have also linked both community violence exposure and peer victimization to externalized behavior problems, such as aggression and substance use (Brady, et al., 2008; Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Schwab-Stone et
Furthermore, children and adolescents who experience peer- or community-based violence are also at-risk for negative school adjustment, in that they may have low academic competence and negative perceptions of school climate and safety (Graham et al., 2003; Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995). Lastly, researchers underscore that peer relationships are negatively impacted by exposure to community violence and victimization by peers. Subsequently, youth exposed to both of these forms of violence may be at greater risk for peer rejection and low social competence (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000).

Researchers also note that the severity in terms of overall amount versus the specific type(s) of victimization may have a greater influence on individual adjustment (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2007; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Nylund et al., 2007). In particular, individuals who are chronically exposed to multiple forms of violence may be the most at-risk for maladjustment (Finkelhor et al., 2007). This notion has led researchers to pay special attention to those youth who are victimized by multiple subtypes of one form of violence exposure, for example, physical, verbal, and relational subtypes of peer victimization. However, youth can also be witness to and experience community violence that extends beyond peer groups to encompass a broader range of individuals in neighborhood and community contexts. In fact, some researchers suggest that studies of youth victimization should examine an even broader range of victimization experiences when identifying high-risk youth (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2007). In summary, some researchers advocate for an examination of violence exposure as a composite of multiple forms of witnessed and direct experiences and contend that studies of a single form of victimization may over-estimate the influence of that form of victimization on
adjustment and/or neglect to pinpoint subgroups of youth who are exposed to multiple forms of violence and at high risk for negative adjustment (Finkelhor et al., 2007).

Research models that support the examination of victimization as a more global construct have included composites of several diverse forms of victimization (e.g., sexual victimization, physical assault, property damage, maltreatment, peer victimization and witnessing violence) (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2007). For example, Finkelhor and colleagues (2007) utilized a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents to assess how “poly-victimization,” or the experience of multiple episodes of four or more types of victimization over a one year period, influenced trauma symptoms. Results indicated that almost all children and adolescents had experienced multiple forms of victimization. Poly-victimization strongly predicted trauma symptoms, and when accounted for, the effect of a single form of victimization was greatly reduced or in some cases eliminated. In addition, individuals who were poly-victims (i.e., youth victimized by more than three forms of violence in a single year) had significantly higher anxiety and depression symptoms than individuals who were chronically victimized by one form of violence or individuals who were victims of one instance of violence. Based on these results, the authors suggested that experiencing multiple forms of violence may be a stronger predictor of negative adjustment than experiencing one form of violence. Thus, creating typologies of youth exposed to multiple forms of violence may be a valuable way in which to identify youth at risk for negative adjustment.

Holt et al. (2007) also expanded on research identifying typologies of bullied youth by examining profiles of 689 urban 5th graders living in a high crime area to explore their experiences of multiple types of victimization (i.e., physical and verbal peer violence,
conventional crime, sexual violence, child maltreatment, and witnessing violence). Three clusters of victimized youth were identified including those who experienced minimal victimization, those who experienced primarily peer victimization, and those who experienced multiple victimizations. Those who experienced multiple forms of victimization experienced the highest levels of peer victimization, sexual victimization, and victimization by conventional crime (e.g. property damage) and also reported the most psychological distress. Based on youths’ report of past month aggression and victimization, the authors also found that 43% of multiply victimized youth were also categorized as bully-victims as opposed to 14% of youth who experienced minimal victimization or primarily one form of victimization. In sum, it may be that youth who are aggressive and victimized experience multiple forms of violence across contexts.

Nonetheless, researchers who study multiple forms of violence exposure caution against assuming that all forms of violence are equal. For example, sexual victimization may be very different and more traumatizing than less severe forms of violence exposure. Subsequently, when examining multiple forms of violence it is necessary to consider forms that are related and that have similar outcomes (Finkelhor et al., 2007). In several studies of peer-based and community-based violence exposure researchers have found such a relation between urban adolescents’ reports of peer victimization and community violence exposure. In particular, a study of community violence exposure by Schwartz and Proctor (2000) found that youth’s reports of community-based violence exposure were highly correlated with peer victimization and rejection, suggesting that inner-city youth may experience these multiple risks. Likewise, community- and peer-based violence both are linked to a similar set of internalizing and externalizing adjustment outcomes. Given the simultaneous occurrence of
these two forms of violence and similarities in their impact on individual well-being, some researchers (i.e., Schwartz & Proctor, 2000) advocate for the examination of these two forms of violence exposure in conjunction, while excluding other more severe forms of violence exposure (e.g. domestic violence and sexual victimization). Although few studies have examined typologies of youth based on composite measures of exposure to community violence and peer victimization, exploration of the cognitive and behavioral processes of such youth may contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and impact of violence exposure among adolescents.

**Stress, Appraisal, and Coping**

This section reviews literature on stress and coping processes and is relevant as youth violence exposure is often studied within a stress and coping framework. First, theories of stress and coping are described including trait-oriented approaches and the transactional model of stress. Next, coping strategies and threat appraisals will be described, specifically their relation to each other, their association with certain individual factors, and their role in adjustment. Finally, research is presented that highlights relations between youth violence exposure, threat appraisals, and adjustment difficulties.

Theories of stress and coping are extensive and varied. One approach to the study of stress and coping is the trait-oriented approach, which largely assumes that coping is dispositional; in other words, coping behaviors are a function of the person and remain stable across different situations. According to such approaches, individuals cope in characteristic ways, either by approaching the situation or avoiding the situation (Terry, 1994). Nevertheless, this theory is most likely an oversimplified explanation of coping processes, because it fails to take into account how the situation influences individual perceptions and
responses to stress. Another framework that is widely used in the study of stress and stress responses is the transactional theory of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Unlike trait-oriented approaches, the transactional model highlights the role of the context, recognizing that the interaction between the person and his or her environment influences individual coping processes. Therefore, this model posits that individual coping behaviors, or the cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stress, are a response to both the psychological and environmental demands associated with a specific stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hence, individuals cope with stress differently across situations depending on individual perceptions of the situation and features of the environment, such as the availability of resources or the degree of control they have over the situation (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

Coping and coping strategies are defined in many ways. Previous conceptualizations of coping focused largely on the outcome associated with a particular strategy. Thus, coping strategies were categorized as either adaptive or maladaptive, based on their association with positive or negative outcomes, respectively (Folkman et al., 1986). However, researchers argue that these conceptualizations confound coping and outcomes (Folkman et al., 1986) and neglect the interaction between the person and the situation. Stated another way, what is an adaptive strategy for some individuals may be maladaptive for others and what is an adaptive strategy in one situation may not be in others. In light of this, coping researchers derived alternate conceptualizations of coping to better reflect the interaction between the person and the environment, with three major conceptualizations being: (a) approach (active) versus avoidant, (b) primary control versus secondary control and (c) emotion-focused versus problem-focused.
Researchers have defined coping in several ways, mainly according to their level of engagement with a stressor or their function. Researchers (e.g., Ebata & Moos, 1994) who define coping strategies as either approach or avoidant emphasize the individual’s engagement with a stressor, in that approach coping includes active strategies that aim to directly handle the problem situation whereas avoidant coping strategies involve indirect methods of handling the problem, such as not thinking about it. Lazarus and Folkman (1984), on the other hand, delineate two primary forms of coping according to their function: (a) emotion-focused coping, which seeks to manage the negative emotions associated with a stressful situation, and (b) problem-focused coping, which seeks to modify the stressful situation. Other researchers have used confirmatory factor analyses to make further distinctions among coping categories. For instance, some research (e.g., Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000) shows that coping strategies fall into three categories: primary control engagement coping (i.e., efforts to directly alter the situation or the emotions associated with the stressor), secondary control engagement coping (i.e., efforts to adapt to stressful conditions), and disengagement coping (i.e., efforts to avoid the situation or the emotions associated with the stressor). Nonetheless, other researchers (e.g., Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roosa, 1996) assert that a four-factor model of coping, consisting of active coping (i.e., direct problem-focused and direct emotion-focused strategies), support-seeking, distraction, and avoidance, best reflects the complexity of children’s dispositional and situational coping strategies.

Threat appraisals represent another important dimension of the stress and coping process outlined by Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model that is defined as an individual’s evaluation of how a specific event will potentially harm his or her well-being.
Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlighted the importance of threat appraisals because they represent the meaning that individuals attach to stressful encounters, drive coping efforts, and play a role in individual adjustment. In summary, threat appraisals are important because they help clarify: (a) the reasons why events are stressful, and (b) the cognitive processes that contribute to adjustment difficulties.

Research on stress, threat appraisals, and coping supports the notion that threat appraisals have a strong influence on coping strategies. In a study of the relations between adults’ threat appraisals and coping behaviors in response to a variety of stressors, Folkman and colleagues (1986) found that these two processes were strongly related. More specifically, higher threats to self-esteem were associated with greater use of problem-focused coping (i.e., confrontation, problem-solving) and emotion-focused coping (i.e., self-control). However, when individuals perceived greater threats to their physical health they reported using more emotion-focused strategies, such as support-seeking and avoidance (Folkman et al., 1986). Researchers have also found support for this notion in studies of children of divorce. For instance, in a study of the relations between temperament, threat appraisals, coping, and psychological adjustment among preadolescents from families of divorce, Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, and Curran (1999) found that children who perceived greater threats in times of stress reported using both active and avoidant (i.e., cognitive avoidance and avoidant actions) coping strategies to handle stress. These findings imply that individuals who perceive greater threat may have a greater need to cope, and therefore use a variety of strategies to manage stress.

Research on stress and coping has also expanded to assess the role of temperament and personality in relation to children’s appraisals of threat. Furthermore, researchers have
identified important relations between threat appraisals and certain personality characteristics, including attribution styles, emotionality, and impulsivity. Among children of divorce, Sandler et al. (2000) found that youth who reported not knowing why a stressful event happened reported higher perceptions of threat when such an event occurred. Similarly, research on pre-adolescents’ responses to everyday stressors indicated that youth who have a tendency to attribute the cause of stress to other individuals also report higher perceptions of threat in relation to stress (Kliweber, Fearnow, & Walton, 1997). In other words, individuals with an external locus of control or a tendency to blame stressful events on outside causes may perceive more threat in stressful situations. Additionally, previous research with children of divorce also indicated that children who are more emotionally distressed perceive greater threat in times of stress, leading the authors to suggest that children who are high in negative emotionality may attend more to negative cues when evaluating stressful encounters. In a related study, Lengua and Long (2002) also examined temperamental factors in association with threat appraisals and found that children with poor self-regulation reported perceiving greater levels of threat in response to stress than other children. Taken together, these studies suggest that individuals who perceive less control or responsibility for an event, who are more emotionally distressed, or who have poor self-regulation skills may perceive greater threats to their well-being in times of stress.

Previous research also examined the role of personality in coping behaviors, identifying several of the aforementioned characteristics as important influences on coping in addition to threat appraisals. Findings from a study done by Lengua and Long (2002) with children of divorce indicated that children with higher negative emotionality (i.e., high irritability and fearfulness) reported using more avoidant coping strategies to deal with a
variety of stressors. In this same study, children who were more impulsive reported using less active coping (i.e., cognitive decision making, direct problem-solving, positive cognitive restructuring, and seeking understanding) to deal with stress, whereas children who had better self-control used more active coping to deal with stress. Moreover, these findings suggest that individuals who are more impulsive and more emotionally distressed may use fewer active (i.e., problem-focused) strategies and more avoidant strategies to cope with stress. On the other hand, individuals who are better able to regulate their emotions and impulses may use problem-focused coping strategies more frequently. In sum, the majority of researchers agree that it is essential to consider the dual roles of the individual’s disposition and the situation in accounts of stress and coping, bearing in mind the effect that individual characteristics and environmental features have on an individual’s threat appraisals and coping behaviors.

As mentioned previously, threat appraisals reflect concerns about threats to self-esteem, values, or goals and represent an important part of the stress and coping process (Folkman et al., 1986). Moreover, research shows that threat appraisals are influenced by several temperament and personality characteristics, are associated with coping, and also linked to adjustment. The majority of research linking threat appraisals to adjustment focuses on children of divorce and the stressors associated with this experience (Sheets, Sandler, & West, 1996). For example, research with children of divorce assessed children’s threat appraisals including concerns about negative self-evaluation, negative evaluation by others, rejection, criticism of others, harm to others, and material loss (Sandler et al., 2000). In this study, these threat appraisals were associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety among children.
Some researchers expanded on work related to children of divorce by assessing threat appraisals related to violence exposure and their relation to adjustment difficulties (e.g., Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008; Hunter & Boyle, 2004). In this effort, the Threat Appraisals of Negative Events Scale (Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008) was used to assess youth’s concerns related to community violence exposure. Threat appraisals assessed by this scale included: (a) negative self-evaluation – concerns about self-blame, (b) negative evaluation by others – concerns about being looked down upon by others, (c) harm to others – concerns that others would be harmed as a result of the stressor, (d) physical harm to self – concerns about being hurt as a result of the stressor, (e) material loss – worries about the loss of objects or activities, and (f) loss of relationships – concerns about losing important relationships as a result of experiencing the violence-related stressor. For this study, after youth completed semi-structured interviews in which they relived a stressful event related to violence exposure, they were asked to think about that stressful event and indicate how much they were concerned about each of the threats described above. Results indicated that threat appraisals were related to both violence exposure and internalizing adjustment difficulties (Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008).

In the violence exposure literature, researchers acknowledge the importance of examining dimensions outlined within Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) model of stress and coping, including emotions, threat appraisals, and coping; however, most studies have only studied parts of the process and have not thoroughly examined the interrelations between violence exposure, threat appraisals, and coping strategies. For example, some studies have focused on coping behaviors solely, examining how children and youth cope with peer victimization. For instance, Roecker-Phelps (2001) investigated children’s coping in
response to physical and relational victimization among a sample of 491 European American elementary school children. In a comparison of highly victimized children (i.e., those in the top quartile for relational and physical victimization) and a matched sample of non-victimized children, this author found that highly victimized children used more emotion-focused coping (e.g., crying about the problem) and less problem-solving coping in response to peer victimization, across gender and grade level.

Other studies examined two dimensions of the stress and coping process. Kochenderfer-Ladd (2004) explored relations between emotions and coping, investigating responses to hypothetical scenarios involving peer victimization among an ethnically diverse sample of elementary-aged children. Study findings revealed that anger was the most common and intense emotion reported across youth, and that children who felt angry used less conflict resolution and more revenge-seeking behavior to cope with victimization experiences. In another study, Hunter and Boyle (2004) investigated youth’s threat appraisals and coping behaviors in response to bullying among 459 Scottish youth aged 9 to 14. A qualitative analysis indicated that youth specified several threat appraisals in response to being victimized by bullies, including concerns about losing confidence, being physically hurt, losing friends, and experiencing more bullying. In addition, children who experienced more frequent bullying also reported using more cognitive (i.e., wishful thinking) and behavioral avoidance strategies to cope with these victimization experiences. Although these studies provide insight into the thoughts and behaviors of youth who are victimized by their peers, overall, the research in this area does not provide a complete picture of relations between threat appraisals and coping strategies used by youth in response to various forms of violence exposure.
Overall, relatively little research has examined coping processes of youth exposed to community violence, through either witnessing violence or direct victimization. Similar to the peer victimization literature, the research on community violence exposure and coping processes has only looked at parts of this overall process. As an example, Brady and colleagues (2008) examined coping in response to community violence exposure and found that effective coping mitigated the negative effects of youths’ violence exposure. However, youth’s specific thoughts and emotions in relation to community violence exposure are less well understood. Numerous studies in this area focus on documenting relations between violence exposure and youth adjustment difficulties. Yet, fewer studies have examined underlying processes that may partially account for these relations with examples of efforts in this area focusing on the mediating roles of posttraumatic stress (Kliewer et al., 1998), hostile attribution biases (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004), threat appraisals (Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008), and coping (Brady et al., 2008) on relations between violence exposure and psychopathology.

Previous research on violence exposure has indicated that, in general, youth who are exposed to high levels of violence also may develop hostile attribution biases and more favorable attitudes towards aggression. Therefore, youth who are exposed to high levels of violence may infer that the world and others are dangerous, leading them to respond aggressively to threats (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Youth who make these assumptions in stressful situations may manage stressful demands less adaptively. As Kliewer and Sullivan (2008) demonstrated, youth who are exposed to community violence may perceive stressful situations as threatening to their well-being in several different ways. In particular, youth were concerned that violence exposure would
result in a loss of important objects, a loss of important relationships, self-harm, harm to other people, being negatively viewed by other people, and thinking bad about the self. These concerns accounted for the relation between violence exposure and adjustment, indicating that youth’s specific concerns in regard to violence exposure have important implications for youth adjustment difficulties.

**Statement of the Problem**

A large body of literature highlights the high prevalence of youth violence exposure including peer victimization and exposure to community violence as well as its negative consequences for individual well-being. Adolescence is an important timeframe in which to study violence exposure and its effects due to key development changes that place adolescents at greater risk for such exposure in peer, neighborhood, and community contexts (e.g., Mrug & Windle, 2009; Prinstein et al., 2001). Although many researchers examine singular types of violence exposure (i.e., peer victimization or community violence exposure) and even subtypes of violence exposure within these types (e.g., physical versus relational victimization by peers), others highlight youth’s common experience of these forms of violence exposure (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2003; Schwab-Stone et al., 1998; Sullivan et al., 2006). In fact, some researchers advocate for assessing youth violence exposure more globally and highlight the relevance of this for youth violence prevention efforts (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2007).

Studies also document that typologies of victimized youth exist who may react and be impacted differently by violence exposure, specifically individuals who are passive victims versus aggressive victims (e.g., Schwartz, 2000). Although researchers have not extended the conceptualization of these typologies to assess multiple forms of violence exposure, this step
may help to pinpoint youth who are most at-risk for negative adjustment. In identifying such subgroups of individuals, it is important to consider cognitive and behavioral processes that may contribute to negative adjustment in response to violence exposure. For example, coping processes are important mechanisms that may underlie these associations, but to date research on violence exposure has not examined relations between these stressors, coping strategies, and other key dimensions the coping process, namely threat appraisals. A better understanding of relations between specific threat appraisals and coping strategies in response to multiple forms of youth violence exposure for passive versus aggressive victims may guide prevention efforts in targeting those threat appraisals and coping strategies that are risk factors for negative adjustment among specific subgroups of youth.

The present study sought to achieve the above objectives and addresses several limitations in the literature on youth violence exposure. First and more generally, few studies have examined composite measures of violence exposure across several contexts among urban adolescents. While there is certainly merit in investigating peer victimization and community violence exposure separately, the reality is that adolescents, especially those living in urban areas, likely experience both forms of violence exposure. This conclusion is supported by studies that document strong associations between peer- and community-based violence exposure among youth (e.g., Schwartz & Proctor, 2000). Thus, the current study assessed youth violence exposure as a composite of peer victimization and community violence exposure. Another limitation is that prior research has not typically formed typologies of aggressive and passive victims based on multiple forms of violence exposure and this is also addressed in the present effort. Although age and gender differences have
been documented in the previous literature, they were not examined in the current study due to sample size constraints.

Finally, the current effort sought to address the limitation that few studies of youth violence exposure examine relations between more than one dimension of stress and coping processes. In separate studies of violence exposure, researchers found that maladaptive coping placed youth at increased risk for negative adjustment (Brady et al., 2008) and that appraisals of threat in response to community violence exposure predicted adjustment difficulties (Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008). The present study aimed to address relations between youth violence exposure, threat appraisals, and coping strategies to better understand the similarities and differences in cognitive and behavioral processes for passive and aggressive victims of violence exposure.

**Hypotheses**

The present study investigated relations between threat appraisal and coping and specifically tested the following hypotheses:

1) There will be a stronger positive association between the composite measure of violence exposure (i.e., peer victimization and exposure to community violence) and avoidance coping for passive versus aggressive victims and a stronger negative association between the composite measure of violence exposure and positive reframing coping for aggressive versus passive victims.

2) There will be a stronger positive association between the composite measure of violence exposure and negative self-evaluation for passive versus aggressive victims and a stronger positive association between the composite measure of violence exposure and negative evaluation by others for aggressive versus passive victims.
3) Significant direct effects will be found between the composite measure of violence exposure and coping strategies including positive reframing (negative association) and avoidance coping (positive association) for all subgroups of adolescents (i.e., non-aggressive non-victims, aggressive victims, and passive victims).

4) Significant direct effects will be found between the composite measure of violence exposure and threat appraisals of negative evaluation by others for all three subgroups of adolescents.

5) Significant direct effects will be found between the composite measure of violence exposure and the threat appraisal of negative self-evaluation for aggressive victims and passive victims.

6) Significant direct effects will be found between the threat appraisal of negative self-evaluation and avoidant coping (positive association) and between the threat appraisal of negative evaluation by others and positive reframing coping (negative associations) for all three subgroups of adolescents.

7) For passive victims, as compared to aggressive victims, threat appraisals of negative self-evaluation will mediate relations between the composite violence exposure measure and avoidance coping.

8) For aggressive victims, as compared to passive victims and nonaggressive non-victims, appraisals of negative evaluation by others will mediate relations between the composite measure of violence exposure and positive reframing coping.
Method

Setting

The present study used data from the first wave of Project COPE, a four-year longitudinal study funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA). Project COPE examined relations between violence- and poverty-related stressors, coping processes, and adjustment. Two cohorts of adolescents and their maternal caregivers were interviewed annually, starting when the adolescent was either in the 5th or 8th grade. Participants were recruited from Richmond, Virginia. According to state police statistics, in 2003 Richmond had the highest violent crime rate among five nearby localities (Virginia Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2003). Furthermore, based on FBI crime statistics from 2003 Richmond was ranked the ninth most dangerous city among 350 cities with populations of more than 75,000 (Nolan, 2004). Based on U.S. Census data from 2000, a third of Richmond’s children live in poverty.

Recruitment took place in neighborhoods that, based on police statistics and census data, had high violence and/or poverty rates (e.g., neighborhoods with low income housing and high crime rates). Participants were recruited by flyers posted door to door in eligible neighborhoods, community agencies, and community events. To be considered eligible, families must have received a flyer about the study, spoke English, and had a female caregiver as well as a child in either the fifth or eighth grade in the home. Of those families that were eligible, 63% opted to participate in the study.

Participants

Data on participants in the present study were drawn from Wave 1 of the larger longitudinal study. The final sample included 159 adolescents, comprising two cohorts of
fifth graders \((n = 82)\) and eighth graders \((n = 77)\). The total sample included 75 boys and 84 girls, who ranged in age from 9 to 16 \((M = 12.12, SD = 1.64)\). Approximately 93.1% of youth were African American, 2.5% White, 2.5% American Indian, and 1.9% other.

According to maternal caregiver reports the family structure of adolescents was somewhat varied, with 38.4% of maternal caregivers having never married, 28.3% married, 25.8% separated or divorced (14.5% separated; 11.3% divorced), 5.0% cohabitating, and 2.5% widowed. The household income of families was represented by a wide range of weekly earnings, from less than $100 per week (6.9%) to more than $900 per week (10.7%). Specifically, the median household income for the sample fell between $300 and $400 per week, with a third of the sample (38.9%) indicating earnings of $300 or less per week and 21.7% earning a weekly income of $500 or more. Additionally, the level of education of caregiver’s in the sample was varied, such that 7.5% held a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree, 13.2% had an associate’s degree or completed vocational training, 20.8% had pursued, but not completed some form of education beyond high school, 30.2% had completed high school or received a general education diploma, and 27.7% had not completed high school.

**Procedure**

The Institutional Review Board at Virginia Commonwealth University approved all study procedures. Eligible families identified during recruitment were scheduled for interviews, which took place in the Fall of 2003 and Spring of 2004 for both cohorts of youth. Interviews were mainly conducted in the participants’ homes (unless they requested an alternate location) by a pair of interviewers trained in how to respond to caregiver or youth distress. Interviewers reviewed the consent and assent forms with maternal caregivers
and youth, obtained active consent from caregivers and active assent from adolescents. Caregivers were given a copy of the signed consent form. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and in separate rooms for caregivers and adolescents. Before beginning the youth interview, interviewers obtained additional assent from adolescents. The interviewers read all questions aloud, using visual aids to show response options and collect data from youth. A small portion of the interview was not read aloud and adolescents who had passed a reading screening test completed a survey booklet comprising more sensitive scales (e.g., drug use and coping behavior) without interviewer assistance.

Following assessments of youth adjustment and exposure to community violence, adolescents were administered the Social Competence Interview (SCI; Ewart, Jorgensen, Suchday, Chen, & Matthews, 2002). The SCI asks individuals to recall a recent stressful event and prompts them to re-experience it by asking a series of semi-structured questions related to the stressor. For the present study, youth were asked to choose a stressful event related to witnessing or experiencing violence. Before beginning the SCI, youth were given a list of eight categories of types of violence to guide them in choosing a stressful situation: (1) relational victimization by peers, (2) physical victimization by peers, (3) drugs, (4) guns, (5) threats or physical assault, (6) accidents or breaking and entering (7) knives, muggings, beatings, and wounding, and (8) other scary situations. Youth were asked to rank them in order from most to least stressful and then identify a particular recent stressful situation that pertained to the category they identified as most stressful. The interviewer then prompted the adolescent to re-experience the event, asking them a series of questions about their thoughts and feelings during the stressful event. At the end of the interview, adolescents were asked to provide an ideal ending to the stressful scenario and generate ways in which they could
achieve that ending. Immediately following the SCI students were asked to complete the Threat Appraisals of Negative Events Scale (Kliwer & Sullivan, 2008), which assessed their specific concerns during that particular stressful event and will be described further in the next section. The SCI was audiotaped and took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. In total, caregiver and youth interviews took approximately 2.5 hours to complete and families received $50 gift cards in appreciation for their time and effort.

Measures

For the present study measures were used that assess five domains, including peer victimization, community violence exposure, aggression, threat appraisal, and coping.

Peer victimization. Victimization by peers was measured using the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (Farrell, Kung, White, & Valois, 2000; Miller-Johnson, Sullivan, Simon, & MVPP, 2004; Sullivan et al., 2006), a self-report measure comprised of seven subscales that assess the frequency of problem behaviors such as, aggression, drug use, and victimization. Participants indicated how frequently they have engaged in these behaviors in the last 30 days, using a six-point response scale, where 0 = Never, 1 = 1-2 times, 3 = 3-5 times, 4 = 6-9 times, 5 = 10-19 times, and 6 = 20 or more times. To measure peer victimization, two subscales were used, Overt Victimization and Relational Victimization. These subscales are partially based on the Social Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ-S) developed by Crick and Grotpeter (1996), a self-report measure of physical and relational victimization. The Overt Victimization subscale consists of eight items that assess physical and verbal victimization by peers and includes such items as, “How many times have you been hit by another kid?” and “How many times have you been yelled at or called mean names by another kid?” The Relational Victimization subscale consists of six items, such as
“How many times has someone spread a false rumor about you?” For the current study, Cronbach alphas for Overt Victimization and Relational Victimization were .77 and .75, respectively.

**Community violence exposure.** Youth’s exposure to community violence was assessed using the Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (Richters & Saltzman, 1990). The 40-item survey measures how frequently youth have witnessed, experienced, or heard about 20 different types of violence (e.g., beatings, muggings, robbery, drug use, and assault). Two subscales, Witnessing (21 items) (e.g., “How many times have you seen someone else getting beaten up or mugged?”) and Victimization (10 items) (e.g., “How many times have you yourself been chased by gangs or older kids?”) were used to assess youth’s reports of seeing violence or experiencing it first-hand, respectively. Youth were asked to indicate how often they have witnessed or experienced violence on a scale of 1 (*Never*) to 4 (*Almost every day*). The subscales were combined to assess overall exposure. The validity of the measure has been demonstrated by previous research findings relating the Witnessing and Victimization subscales to several indicators of negative adjustment (Kliewer et al., 1998). Satisfactory test-retest reliability has also been established, with coefficients ranging from .83 to .90 (DuRant, Caldenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Richters & Martinez, 1993). For the current study the Cronbach alpha for the combined subscales was .78.

**Aggression.** Youth aggression was assessed using three subscales from the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (Farrell et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006), Physical Aggression, Relational Aggression, and Non-Physical Aggression. Participants were asked to indicate how often they had engaged in several aggressive behaviors over the past 30 days, using a response scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*20 or more times*). The Physical Aggression
subscale (e.g., “Shoved or pushed another kid,” “Threatened to hit or physically harm another kid”) includes seven items, derived from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Youth Risk Behavior survey (Kolbe, Kann, & Collins, 1993). The Relational Aggression subscale contains six items (e.g., “Spread a false rumor about someone”) and is based on a relational aggression measure developed by Crick and Groth (1995). The Non-Physical Aggression subscale includes five items (e.g., “Picked on someone,” “Put someone down to their face”). Cronbach alphas for the current study were as follows: Physical Aggression, .82, Relational Aggression, .77, and Non-Physical Aggression, .82.

**Threat appraisal.** The Threat Appraisals of Negative Events Scale (Kliwer & Sullivan, 2008) was used to assess youth’s threat appraisals in relation to the event they discussed during the SCI. The questionnaire contains six 4-item subscales, including (a) Physical Harm to Self, (b) Negative Evaluation by Others, (c) Negative Self-Evaluation, (d) Material loss, (e) Loss of Relationship and (f) Harm to Others. Following the SCI, adolescents were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*A lot*), how much they felt or were concerned about a list of 24 statements during the stressful event discussed in the SCI. (a) Physical Harm to Self (e.g., “How much did you think you might get injured?”) assesses adolescents’ level of concern about being physically injured. (b) Negative Evaluation by Others (e.g., “How much did you think that you would lose the respect of others?”) measures concerns about being looked down upon by others. (c) Negative Self-Evaluation (e.g., “How much did you think that it was your fault or you were to blame?”) assesses threats of feeling bad about the self. (d) Material Loss (e.g., “How much did you think that you might not get to do something you wanted to do?”) measures worries about the loss of objects or activities. On the other hand, (e) Relationship Loss (e.g., “How much did
you think that someone important to you wouldn’t be there to talk to you?”) measures worries about losing a relationship. Lastly, (f) Harm to Others (e.g., “How much did you think that someone other than yourself might get their feelings hurt?”) assesses youth’s concerns about other people experiencing physical or emotional harm.

The survey has been validated in previous research examining relations between violence exposure and adjustment in urban African American adolescent samples, with all six subscales uniquely contributing to internalizing problems after controlling for violence exposure (Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008). For the current study, two subscales, Negative Evaluation by Others and Negative Self-Evaluation, were used with alphas of .76 and .74, respectively.

Coping. Adolescent’s coping strategies were assessed using the revised version of the Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist (CCSC-R; Ayers & Sandler, 1999). The 54-item CCSC-R is a self-report inventory consisting of 5 scales (i.e., Problem-Focused Coping, Avoidance Coping, Distraction, Support Seeking, and Positive Reframing) that measure how children and adolescents generally cope with stress. For the present study, youth were asked to think about violence they had experienced, seen, or heard about in the past year and indicate how much they felt or did each coping response when exposed to violence, using a response scale that ranged from 1 (Didn’t do this at all) to 4 (Did this a lot). The present study included two higher order scales, Positive-Reframing and Avoidance Coping. The Positive Reframing scale measures children’s internal efforts to think about a stressful situation in a more positive way and subsumes the following three subscales: Optimistic Thinking (e.g., Tell yourself that in the long run, things would work out for the best), Positive Thinking (e.g., Remind yourself that overall things are pretty good for you), and
Control (e.g., “Tell yourself that you could handle this problem). The Avoidance Coping scale assesses youth’s efforts to handle stress by avoiding the stressor and consists of three subscales, Avoidant Actions (e.g., “Avoid it by going somewhere else”), Repression (e.g., “Not think about it”), and Wishful Thinking, (e.g., “Wish that things were better”). Ayers, Sandler, West, and Roosa (1996) demonstrated the construct validity of the CCSC-R by conducting confirmatory factor analysis in two separate ethnically diverse samples of 9 to 13 year olds. The CCSC-R has shown adequate test-retest reliability (over a span of one week), with coefficients ranging from .49 to .73 for the individual scales (Ayers & Sandler, 1999). For the current study, the Cronbach alphas were as follows: Positive Reframing, .90 and Avoidance Coping, .85.

Results

Data Analysis

Descriptive and correlational analyses were performed using SPSS version 17.0. First descriptive statistics were calculated, including the mean, standard deviation, and observed range for all study measures for the total sample. The skewness and kurtosis for all other variables was examined to assess normality of the scale score distributions and any scales that were not normally distributed were log transformed. To form the composite violence exposure measure, scales assessing peer victimization and community violence exposure were transformed into Z-scores and the mean value of these measures calculated for each participant.

Descriptive statistics for the composite measure of victimization and the aggression measure (including physical, non-physical, and relational aggression) were used to classify adolescents into subgroups of aggressive non-victims, passive non-victims, passive victims,
and aggressive victims. For the purpose of identifying subgroups of victimized youth, a composite measure of victimization was created by transforming peer victimization and community victimization scales into Z-scores and calculating the mean value for each participant. Next, adolescents were classified into subgroups of nonaggressive non-victims, passive victims, and aggressive victims. Previous studies identifying typologies of peer victimized youth have mostly used peer nomination procedures to measure aggression and victimization and have categorized youth with extreme scores ranging from 0.5 to 1.0 standard deviation from the mean into victim subgroups (e.g., Graham et al., 2003; Schwartz, 2000, Toblin et al., 2005). The present study used a procedure for classifying groups similar to that used by Kliewer, Dibble, Goodman, & Sullivan (in press) in that distributions of victimization and aggression were created based on quartiles. Adolescents in the top quartile of victimization and the bottom two quartiles on aggression were classified as passive victims. Adolescents in the top quartile of victimization and the top two quartiles of aggression were classified as aggressive victims. Lastly, those in the bottom two quartiles of both victimization and aggression were categorized as nonaggressive non-victims. All other adolescents were not included in further analyses.

Correlations were calculated for the entire sample and separately for each victim typology among measures of violence exposure, threat appraisal, and coping. In order to test hypotheses about differences in the strength of associations between violence exposure and threat appraisals for passive and aggressive victims, comparisons between dependent correlations (Cohen & Cohen, 1988) were used. Comparisons between dependent correlations were also used to determine if the strength of the correlations among violence exposure and coping were different for passive and aggressive victims.
In order to test the remaining hypotheses, path analyses mediation models were conducted using manifest variables in M-Plus 5.21 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). According to Baron and Kenny (1986) the criteria for testing mediation include significant relations between (a) the predictor and the outcome, (b) the predictor and the mediator, and (c) the mediator and the outcome. Thus, the first mediating model examined these relations among violence exposure (predictor), negative self-evaluation (mediator), and avoidant coping (outcome). A separate mediating model was run to test paths among violence exposure (predictor), negative evaluation by others (mediator), and positive reframing (outcome).

Using the model indirect function in M-Plus 5.21 (MacKinnon, 2008), direct, indirect, and total effects were calculated for each mediating model. A grouping variable was created where 0 = nonaggressive non-victims, 1 = aggressive victims, and 2 = passive victims to conduct multiple group analyses. First, a constrained model was run where paths were set to be equivalent across these three groups. This model was compared to an unconstrained model where paths were allowed to vary by typology group (i.e., nonaggressive non-victim, aggressive victim, and passive victim). Because the multiple-group unconstrained models were fully saturated, chi-square difference tests between the constrained and unconstrained models were calculated to determine which model best fit the data across typology group.

**Preliminary Analyses**

Prior to calculating descriptive statistics, the Social Competence Interview (SCI) was reviewed for each participant and those participants who did not talk about an event specifically related to violence (e.g., peer victimization and community violence exposure) were excluded from further analyses. The skewness and kurtosis for all study variables was examined to assess normality. Generally, skewness and kurtosis values should be as close to
zero as possible to ensure normality (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Based on this assumption and Kline’s (2005) criteria that variables with skewness and kurtosis values with an absolute value greater than three are skewed or kurtotic, the peer victimization and aggression variables were positively skewed. To correct the skewness, the variables were log transformed and multiplied by 10 for reporting purposes prior to creating composite measures.

For the purpose of identifying subgroups of victimized youth, a composite measure of victimization was created by transforming peer victimization and community victimization scales into Z-scores and calculating the mean value for each participant. Next, adolescents were classified into subgroups of nonaggressive non-victims, passive victims, and aggressive victims. Distributions of victimization and aggression were created based on quartiles. Adolescents in the top quartile of victimization and the bottom two quartiles on aggression were classified as passive victims. Adolescents in the top quartile of victimization and the top two quartiles of aggression were classified as aggressive victims. Lastly, those in the bottom two quartiles of both victimization and aggression were categorized as nonaggressive non-victims. All other adolescents were not included in further analyses. This resulted in the identification of 27 aggressive victims (17.0% of the sample), 32 passive victims (20.1% of the sample), and 100 nonaggressive non-victims (62.9% of the sample). See Table 1 for a summary of demographic characteristics for the total sample and for each typology of victimized youth (i.e., aggressive victims, passive victims, and nonaggressive non-victims).
Prevalence rates for violence exposure were calculated for the total sample and separately for each typology. Of the entire sample ($N = 159$), 81.8% of adolescents reported having experienced some form of peer victimization in the past month and 40.9% reported having been a victim of community violence in the past month. A large percentage of youth (81.1%) also reported having witnessed violence in the community in the past month. Lastly, 84.3% of youth reported that they had perpetrated an aggressive act in the past month.

Next, descriptive statistics, including the means, standard deviations, and observed ranges were examined for all study variables and are reported in Table 2 for the total sample and Table 3 for victim typologies.
Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Study Variables for the Total Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Exposure</td>
<td>.03 (.88)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>2.52 (3.41)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Self-Evaluation</td>
<td>5.75 (2.32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Evaluation by Others</td>
<td>6.54 (2.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reframing</td>
<td>32.71 (8.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>32.45 (7.45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N’s ranged from 154 to 159 due to missing data.*

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Study Variables for Typologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Aggressive Victims</th>
<th>Passive Victims</th>
<th>Nonaggressive Non-victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Max</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Exposure</td>
<td>1.05 (.81)</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>8.69 (4.23)</td>
<td>4.33</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Self-Evaluation</td>
<td>6.84 (2.51)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Evaluation by Others</td>
<td>7.44 (3.39)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reframing</td>
<td>31.64 (6.86)</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>32.19 (5.49)</td>
<td>21.67</td>
<td>42.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes. For aggressive victims N’s ranged from 25 to 27, for passive victims N’s ranged from 31 to 32, and for nonaggressive non-victims N’s ranged from 98 to 100 due to missing data.*

Correlations were also calculated for the entire sample and separately for each victim typology among measures of violence exposure, threat appraisal, and coping (See Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7). A Bonferroni correction with a familywise Type I error rate of \( p < .05 \) was applied and a per-test significance rate of \( p < .005 \) was established. Correlation analyses revealed a significant relation between violence exposure and threat of negative self-evaluation \( (r = .29, p < .001) \) for the total sample, suggesting as youth who are exposed to
more violence are more likely to report evaluating themselves negatively when experiencing a violence-related stressor. Both threat appraisals, negative self-evaluation and negative evaluation by others, were significantly positively correlated \((r = .55, p < .001)\) as were the coping strategies, positive reframing and avoidance \((r = .70, p < .001)\). However, all other correlations were not significant.

Table 4

*Intercorrelations among Study Variables for the Total Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Composite Violence Exposure</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Threat of Negative Self-Evaluation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat of Negative Evaluation by Others</td>
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<td>.55*</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Reframing Coping</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance Coping</td>
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<td>-.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.70*</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* \( *p < 0.005.\)

The coping strategies remained positively correlated when calculated for aggressive victims \((r = .39, p < .001)\), passive victims \((r = .75, p < .001)\), and nonaggressive non-victims \((r = .73, p < .001)\). There was also a significant positive correlation between the threat appraisals for aggressive victims \((r = .51, p < .001)\), and nonaggressive non-victims \((r = .64, p < .001)\), but not for passive victims. All other hypothesized correlations were not significant when examined separately by typology. Study hypothesis 1 called for comparisons of dependent correlations to test whether there would be a stronger positive association between violence exposure and avoidance coping for passive versus aggressive victims and a stronger negative association between violence exposure and positive reframing for aggressive versus passive victims. Study hypothesis 2 stated that there would be a stronger positive association between violence exposure and negative self-evaluation for passive versus aggressive victims and a stronger positive association between violence exposure and
exposure and negative evaluation by others for aggressive versus passive victims, and also called for comparisons of dependent correlations. However, correlation analyses did not reveal significant relations in order to test hypotheses about differences in the strength of associations between violence exposure and coping or violence exposure and threat appraisals for passive and aggressive victims.

Table 5

*Intercorrelations among Study Variables for Aggressive Victims*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Composite Violence Exposure</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Threat of Negative Self-Evaluation</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Threat of Negative Evaluation by Others</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive Reframing Coping</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Avoidance Coping</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p* < 0.005.

Table 6

*Intercorrelations among Study Variables for Passive Victims*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Composite Violence Exposure</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Threat of Negative Self-Evaluation</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Threat of Negative Evaluation by Others</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive Reframing Coping</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Avoidance Coping</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.75*</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p* < 0.005.

Table 7

*Intercorrelations among Study Variables for Nonaggressive Non-victims*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Threat of Negative Self-Evaluation</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Threat of Negative Evaluation by Others</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.64*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive Reframing Coping</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Avoidance Coping</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.73*</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p* < 0.005.
In order to test the remaining hypotheses 3 through 8, path analyses were conducted. Specifically, two mediational models were specified. Both models controlled for age and gender. Model 1 included violence exposure (predictor), negative self-evaluation (mediator), and avoidant coping (outcome). Model 2 included violence exposure (predictor), negative evaluation by others (mediator), and positive reframing (outcome). For each mediation model, a constrained model, where paths were set to be equivalent across typology group (i.e., nonaggressive non-victim, aggressive victim, and passive victim) was compared to an unconstrained model, where the paths were allowed to vary by typology group to determine which model fit the data best.

**Direct Effects**

In order to examine the direct effects outlined in hypotheses 3 through 6, the unconstrained models were used. In considering direct effects between the predictor and outcomes (hypothesis 3), hypothesized relations between violence exposure and positive reframing were not supported in that significant relations were found but in the opposite direction than expected and only for the nonaggressive non-victims ($\beta = .21, p = .04$). Contrary to anticipated findings, significant relations were not found between violence exposure and avoidance coping for any subgroup of adolescents (aggressive victims, $\beta = .15, p = .27$; passive victims, $\beta = -.02, p = .92$; nonaggressive non-victims, $\beta = .11, p = .32$). Direct effects between the predictor and mediators outlined in hypothesis 4 were not found. No significant relations were found between violence exposure and threats of negative evaluation by others for aggressive victims ($\beta = -.18, p = .35$), passive victims ($\beta = .09, p = .62$), or nonaggressive non-victims ($\beta = .15, p = .15$). Similarly, hypothesized relations between violence exposure and threat appraisals of negative self-evaluation (hypothesis 5),
were not significant for aggressive victims ($\beta = .01, p = .94$) or passive victims ($\beta = .29, p = .07$). Lastly, contrary to hypotheses that there would be significant direct effects from the study mediators to outcomes, there were no significant direct effects found between negative self-evaluation and avoidant coping (aggressive victims, $\beta = .16, p = .29$; passive victims, $\beta = -.12, p = .50$; nonaggressive non-victims, $\beta = -.03, p = .79$). Similarly, the relation between negative evaluation by others and positive reframing coping was not significant for any typology of youth (aggressive victims, $\beta = .05, p = .77$; passive victims, $\beta = .01, p = .96$; nonaggressive non-victims, $\beta = .10, p = .31$).

**Mediation Analyses**

In order to test the remaining hypotheses (7 and 8) regarding mediational models, path analyses were conducted. All models included gender and age as controls. Based on Baron and Kenny’s (1986) criteria for testing mediation, the first mediating model tested relations between (a) the predictor (violence exposure) and the outcome (avoidance coping), (b) the predictor (violence exposure) and the mediator (negative self-evaluation), and (c) the mediator (negative self-evaluation) and the outcome (avoidance coping) (see Figure 1). A second mediating model was run separately and tested relations between (a) the predictor (violence exposure) and the outcome (positive reframing coping), (b) the predictor (violence exposure) and the mediator (negative evaluation by others), and (c) the mediator (negative evaluation by others) and the outcome (positive reframing coping) (see Figure 2). The model indirect function (MacKinnon, 2008) was used to test the indirect effects for each mediating model. For each mediation model, a constrained model, where paths were set to be equivalent across typology group was compared to an unconstrained model, where the paths were allowed to vary by typology group. Because the multiple-group unconstrained models
were fully saturated, chi-square difference tests between the constrained and unconstrained models were calculated to determine which model best fit the data across typology group. According to MacKinnon (2008) the chi-squared difference test is one measure of how well a model fits the predicted and observed covariance matrix and a significant chi-square test indicates relatively poor model fit in comparison to the alternative model.

For the first model, including violence exposure, negative self-evaluation, and avoidance the unconstrained and constrained models were compared and the constrained model favored based on a non-significant chi-square difference test \( \chi^2 (6) = 3.82, p = 0.70 \).

Next, the unconstrained and constrained models for the second model, including violence exposure, negative evaluation by others, and positive reframing were compared and the constrained model favored based on a non-significant difference test \( \chi^2 (6) = 4.66, p = 0.59 \).

Thus, results from the constrained models are presented below for Model 1 (violence exposure, negative self-evaluation, and avoidance) and Model 2 (violence exposure, negative evaluation by others, and positive reframing), respectively. See Table 8 for a comparison of fit indices for each constrained and unconstrained model.

Table 8

Comparisons of the Unconstrained and Constrained Models Depicting Relations between Violence Exposure, Threat Appraisals, and Coping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>( X^2 )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>BIC</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconstrained model</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3046.20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constrained model</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3019.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconstrained model</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3132.88</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constrained model</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3107.13</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Model 1 (violence exposure, negative self-evaluation, and avoidance). Since there was not a significant difference in model fit when paths were allowed to vary by typology, path coefficients will be presented from the constrained model for the nonaggressive non-victims, as they were the largest group (see Table 9). For the violence exposure, negative self-evaluation, and avoidance model, significant direct effects were not found between violence exposure and avoidance, as predicted (β = .08, p = .22). Significant paths were found between violence exposure and negative self-evaluation in the hypothesized direction (β = .18, p < .05). Hence, higher levels of violence exposure were related to an increased threat of negative self-evaluation. There was not, however, a significant direct effect of negative self-evaluation and avoidance coping (β = .02, p = .81). Thus, the indirect effect of violence exposure on avoidance coping via negative self-evaluation was not significant (β = .00, p = .81). Overall, contrary to hypothesis 7 threats of negative self-evaluation did not mediate relations between violence exposure and avoidance.
Figure 1. Path model representing relations between violence exposure, threat of negative self-evaluation and avoidance coping

Note. *p < 0.05.

Table 9

Standardized Path Coefficients for Model 1 Direct, Indirect and Total Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1 (violence exposure, negative self-evaluation, avoidance)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect of violence exposure on avoidance</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect of violence exposure on negative self-evaluation</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect of negative self-evaluation on avoidance</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via negative self-evaluation</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < 0.05.

Model 2 (violence exposure, negative evaluation by others, and positive reframing). Because there was not a significant difference in the chi-square statistic between the constrained and unconstrained multiple group models, the constrained model was found to best fit the data. Again, path coefficients will be presented using the constrained model for the nonaggressive non-victims, as they were the largest group (see Table 10). For the model including violence exposure, negative evaluation by others, and positive reframing, direct effects between violence exposure and positive reframing were significant in the opposite
direction as predicted ($\beta = .16, p = .03$), such that higher levels of violence exposure were related to higher levels of positive reframing coping. Significant paths were not found between violence exposure and negative evaluation by others ($\beta = .09, p = .28$). Likewise, there was not a significant direct effect of negative evaluation by others on positive reframing ($\beta = .05, p = .41$). The indirect effect of violence exposure on positive reframing via negative evaluation by others was not significant ($\beta = .01, p = .51$). Consequently, contrary to hypothesis 8 threats of negative self-evaluation did not mediate relations between violence exposure and avoidance.

Figure 2. Path model representing relations between violence exposure, threat of negative evaluation by others and positive reframing

Note. *$p < 0.05$. 
Table 10

*Standardized Path Coefficients for Model 2 Direct, Indirect and Total Effects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 2 (violence exposure, negative evaluation by others, positive reframing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect of violence exposure on positive reframing</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect of violence exposure on negative evaluation by others</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect of negative evaluation by others on positive reframing</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via negative evaluation by others</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p* < 0.05.

**Discussion**

The present study examined relations among violence exposure, threat appraisal, and coping strategies, specifically hypothesizing that threat appraisals would mediate relations between violence exposure and coping. According to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping, threat appraisals are a significant dimension of the stress and coping process as they represent the meaning individuals attach to experiencing a stressful event and drive coping behaviors. Thus, the current study contributes to the limited body of literature on youth’s threat appraisals, as it examines associations between threat appraisals and coping strategies among adolescents victimized by multiple forms of violence. In the following sections, findings will be explained along with study limitations and future implications.

One goal of the current study was to examine the differential strength in relations between violence exposure and coping for passive versus aggressive victims. Expected patterns that positive associations between violence exposure and avoidance coping would be stronger for passive versus aggressive victims and that negative associations between violence exposure and positive reframing would be stronger for aggressive versus passive victims were not found. The lack of findings for passive victims is in contrast to previous
research that supports the notion that passive victims are more inclined to demonstrate passive coping behaviors, such as avoidance and ignoring (e.g., Mahady Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). Although relatively little is known about aggressive victims’ coping responses, some studies suggest that these youth typically demonstrate more aggressive coping styles (e.g. Mahady et al., 2000). Based on previous characterizations of aggressive victims as exhibiting higher levels of impulsive behavior, reactive aggression, and emotional dysregulation than non-victims or passive victims (Schwartz, 2000), it was predicted that these adolescents would score lower on positive reframing because of the cognitive and emotional control required to focus on the positive aspects of a situation or think optimistically about the future. One possible explanation for the lack of findings may be differences in hot and cool phases of processing. Positive reframing strategies involve thinking about the stressor and its consequences in a positive way (Ayers & Sandler, 1999).

Given that aggressive victims may struggle with impulsivity and emotion regulation, it may be that they have difficulty enacting positive coping strategies during the actual stressful situation, but are better able to use positive reframing strategies outside of the context of the immediate event.

Hypotheses that there would be a stronger positive association between violence exposure and negative self-evaluation for passive victims compared to aggressive victims and a stronger positive association between violence exposure and negative evaluation by others for aggressive victims versus passive victims were also not supported. One potential explanation for these non-significant findings is that youth may be likely to perceive several different threats in relation to complex stressors, such as violence exposure, which may require using a larger variety of coping strategies to overcome stressful demands (Lazarus,
Thus, a composite measure of threat may more accurately reflect the complexity of these experiences and has been supported in prior research (e.g., Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008).

Additionally, previous research has suggested that individuals may employ a greater variety of strategies when coping with severe stressors (Lengua et al., 1999). The composite measure of violence exposure included witnessing community violence and peer- and community-based victimization. A significant range of severity exists in these subtypes of violence exposure (i.e., witnessing community violence, community-based victimization, and peer-based victimization) and the individual items assessing these subtypes. For instance, certain instances of peer victimization, such as “being left out on purpose by other kids when it was time to do an activity” may have been perceived as less severe as events involving community violence exposure, such as “being at home when someone has broken into or tried to force their way into your home” (victimization) or “seeing someone trying to force their way into somebody else’s house or apartment” (witnessing). Thus, there may be important differences in subtypes of violence exposure and, consequently, significant variation in the threat appraisals and coping strategies used by passive and aggressive victims in response to these specific forms of exposure. In the current study, these differences may have been masked by examining composite measures of violence exposure.

Another study goal was to examine direct paths between violence exposure, youths’ threat appraisals, and coping in two separate models and to test for potential differences in the strength of these relations based on victimization typologies. For the first model, the associations between the following paths were explored: a) violence exposure and negative self-evaluation, b) violence exposure and avoidance coping, and c) negative self-evaluation and avoidance coping. Only the relation between violence exposure and negative self-
evaluation was significant. Although it was hypothesized that this relation would be stronger for passive versus aggressive victims, no differences in the strength of these relations were found across the three typologies of youth. Overall, higher frequencies of violence exposure were associated with a greater likelihood of self-blame during violence-related stressful events. This finding is supported by research showing negative associations between violence exposure and self-worth or self-esteem among adolescents (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995).

The remaining direct paths were not significant. The non-significant finding between violence exposure and avoidance coping was unexpected given previous research showing that adolescents often use avoidant actions, repression, and/or wishful thinking to cope with instances of victimization by peers (e.g., Hunter & Boyle, 2004) and community violence exposure (e.g., Overstreet, 2000). Additionally, the hypothesis that there would be a significant relation between negative self-evaluation and avoidance coping was not supported. Previous research has shown mixed findings regarding such a relation. For example, in a review of the youth victimization literature, Zakriski and colleagues (1997) suggested that youth who self-blame may, on one hand, be more apt to use problem-focused coping to change behaviors that contribute to victimization; on the other hand, they may feel that they are being victimized because of certain unchangeable aspects of who they are and be more inclined to avoid the stressful situation altogether.

The second model explored associations between the following paths: a) violence exposure and negative evaluation by others, b) violence exposure and positive reframing coping, and c) negative evaluation by others and positive reframing coping. Significant direct effects were only found between violence exposure and positive reframing, but were not in
the expected direction. It was hypothesized that as violence exposure increased, the use of positive reframing coping would decrease, but, the opposite pattern emerged. This finding that violence exposure was positively associated with positive reframing is supported by a prior study examining coping among African American adolescents. Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997) found that boys’ stress levels were positively associated with a generally positive attitude and suggested that in dealing with prevalent stressors youth may be less likely to personalize them and more apt to perceive them as a challenge. More generally, research on Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping has also found that individuals are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies, such as positive reframing, and less likely to use problem-focused strategies in response to stressful situations in which the individual has little control (Lazarus, 1993). Therefore, youth who experience high levels of stress or experience stressors that they have little power to change, such as witnessing or experiencing community-based violence, may focus coping attempts on changing thoughts and emotions about an event as opposed to trying to change features of their environment.

All other direct effects were not significant. It was hypothesized that violence exposure would be positively associated with concerns about negative evaluations by others. This prediction was based on research showing that some victimized youth may perceive unfair treatment and worry about being humiliated by their peers (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). Nevertheless, this threat appraisal may be more salient for instances of victimization, than for witnessing violence, as victimization involves a direct personal assault. This suggests that there may be important differences in how youth appraise situations involving witnessing violence versus victimization. A recent study by Reid-Quinones and colleagues (2011)
examined adolescents’ responses to stressful situations involving witnessing and victimization and found that victimization was associated with threats of negative evaluation by others, but that witnessing violence posed more threats to the safety of others. Additionally, no significant associations were found between negative evaluations by others and positive reframing coping. It was expected that attention to these hostile cues would be negatively associated with positive or optimistic thinking; however as mentioned above it may be that youth are better able to positively restructure these negative appraisals outside the context of stressful events.

A final goal of the study was to test whether threat appraisals mediated the relation between violence exposure and coping. Contrary to hypotheses, mediation criteria established by Baron and Kenny (1986) were not met for either model. According to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping, threat appraisals occur in response to specific stressors and drive coping behaviors. Based on this theory, it was predicted that youth’s specific threat appraisals in response to violence-related stressors would be a significant mechanism underlying the relation between violence exposure and coping. Aside from the abovementioned methodological explanations, there are other possible reasons for the lack of mediation. Although there is evidence to suggest that threat appraisals are more differentiated for adolescents than for children (Ayers et al., 1996), some researchers posit that the total threat appraised by youth is more influential than the specific types of threat. Previous studies (e.g., Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008) of children’s and adolescents’ threat appraisals primarily measure threat as a composite of specific appraisals, hypothesizing that threat appraisals cumulatively, as opposed to uniquely contribute to youth outcomes.
Limitations

It is important to note limitations in the present study. First, the present study relied solely on adolescents’ reports of violence exposure and coping, which is problematic as youth may not always be accurate reporters of their own behavior. Additionally, the present study assessed retrospective reports of violence exposure, threat appraisals, and coping which may be particularly prone to response bias. Threat appraisals, in particular, were assessed in relation to violence-related events that could have occurred up to one year prior to the interview. Therefore, adolescents’ recall of their specific concerns during the stressful event may have been biased by memory effects.

Additional limitations pertain to the typologies of youth victims. First, there were only a small number of adolescents in each victim typology (i.e., passive and aggressive victims). Although the number of adolescents in each typology was comparable to previous studies of typologies of victimized adolescents (e.g., Schwartz, 2000), the small sample sizes may have made it difficult to detect meaningful differences between relations among study constructs for passive, aggressive, and nonaggressive non-victims. However, it is worthwhile to note that there were trends showing different patterns of relations among violence exposure and threat appraisals for passive and aggressive victims. For aggressive victims there was a negative association between violence exposure and negative evaluation by others and for passive victims there was a positive association between violence exposure and negative self-evaluation that approached significance. These trends suggest that as violence exposure increases aggressive victims are less likely to consider others’ evaluations of them, whereas passive victims are more likely to think negatively about themselves, subsequently highlighting the need for future research in this area.
Additionally, there are certain limitations associated with using quartile distributions as a method for classifying youth into typologies: a) classifications depend on the victimization scores of individuals as well as the variation in sample scores, b) it may falsely classify some youth as victims and fail to classify other youth who are very similar to victims, and c) it may delineate typologies comprising highly heterogeneous individuals (Nylund et al., 2007). Thus, researchers have argued that more data-driven methods, such as latent class analysis are better at identifying meaningful groups than arbitrary cutoffs. Latent class analysis examines individuals’ response patterns for multiple variables and uses an iterative process to classify youth with similar response patterns into latent groups. Therefore, it does not exclude any individuals from analyses and categorizes youth based on observed response patterns to several variables and along several dimensions of a variable (Giang & Graham, 2008).

Additional limitations pertain to the measures and methodology. First, the coping measure used in the present study, assessed how youth coped with violence-related stressors in the past month as opposed to how they coped with a particular situation involving witnessing or experiencing violence. Thus, the coping strategies examined in the present study were not necessarily direct responses to the situations in which youth made certain threat appraisals. Thus, testing relations in the direction from a specific construct to a more global one (unlike other relations which involved linking a global construct to a more specific one or a global construct to another global construct), may explain the lack of significant associations between threat appraisals and coping. Additionally, this coping measure, the revised version of the Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist (CCSC-R; Ayers & Sandler, 1999), was originally developed and validated among children from families of
divorce and mostly assessed in relation to stressors associated with divorce (Ayers & Sandler, 1999). Thus, the coping strategies assessed may not be as relevant for violence-related stressors or within a sample of primarily African American youth living in inner-city neighborhoods. In fact, a recent study testing the psychometric properties of the CCSC with urban African American adolescents found that when youth’s coping strategies in response to common inner-city stressors were submitted for factor analysis the original four-factor structure of the CCSC was not replicated (Gaylord-Harden, Gipson, Mance, & Grant, 2008).

**Implications and Future Research**

The current study has important implications and offers several possibilities for future research. Coping is an important aspect of many youth violence prevention programs, with many efforts focused on teaching adaptive coping behaviors. It is important to understand how youth typically cope with witnessing or experiencing violence, especially for youth who experience high levels of victimization (i.e., aggressive and passive victims). The positive association between youth violence exposure and positive reframing coping found in the present study suggests that this is may be a coping strategy that youth are familiar with and typically use. This line of research has important implications for clinicians as well. By understanding what thought processes drive certain coping strategies, practitioners could better target the cognitions that contribute to adaptive or maladaptive coping mechanisms. Since firm conclusions were not drawn from the current study about relations between particular threat appraisals and coping strategies for typologies of victims, additional research is needed in this effort.

Very few studies have examined youth’s specific threat appraisals in response to violence-related stressors and even fewer have examined how youth’s threat appraisals and
coping strategies in response to violence influence youth adjustment. Thus, more complex models including indicators of adjustment may provide more insight into how appraisals and coping behaviors contribute to positive or negative outcomes for youth exposed to high levels of violence. Likewise, future research should examine a wider variety of appraisals and coping strategies. For instance, in a recent study of youth’s attributions and coping in response to peer victimization, Visconti, Sechler, and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2011) found that adolescents’ negative attributions for victimization (i.e., thinking they deserved it or thinking they were not cool) were positively related to support-seeking coping. Thus, it is possible that there are important links between the related construct of threat appraisals and coping strategies, which would be revealed by examining a wider variety of coping strategies.

Further, as the current study could not examine age or gender differences due to sample size limitations, future studies should test whether these relations differ based on gender and age as previous research (e.g., Roecker-Phelps, 2001) has indicated that these factors impact youth’s coping behaviors. Additionally, the sample in the current study predominately comprised African American adolescents from low-income, urban neighborhoods. Therefore, future research should examine the generalizability of the current study’s findings to African American youth in different contexts or to adolescents from different ethnic/racial or socio-economic backgrounds.

Another direction for future research would be to examine additional factors influencing youth’s appraisal and coping processes, such as perceived social support and level of control. Previous research has shown that support from family, friends, and teachers may buffer youth from negative outcomes associated with violence exposure (Burgess et al., 2006). Youth’s perceptions of control over a stressor also influence threat appraisals and
coping. As mentioned above, future research should specifically address whether youth who perceive a stressor as uncontrollable and unchangeable use more avoidance or problem-focused coping. Overall, future research could examine more complex models of stress and coping to better understand these relations and their impact on adjustment for adolescents.

The present study did not find support for expected relations between violence exposure, threat appraisals, and coping, which may have been due to meaningful differences among subtypes of violence exposure. Hence, future research should examine relations between threat appraisals and coping in response to specific subtypes of violence, namely peer victimization (i.e., relational, physical, and verbal) and community violence exposure (i.e., witnessing and victimization). A final direction for future research would be to use more data-driven methods, such as latent class analysis, to define typologies of youth to determine if there are meaningful differences in these relations among typologies of victimized youth.
References
References


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