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# How Adolescents Cope with Bullying at School: Exploring Differences Between Pure Victim and Bully-Victim Roles

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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate the use of specific coping strategies by bullied adolescents, taking account of the distinction between pure victims and bully-victims, as well as gender-specific patterns. Participants were 967 adolescents aged 11–16 years, who responded to self-report questionnaires on school bullying victimization, cognitive coping, and situational coping. Adolescents in the pure victim, bully-victim, and noninvolved groups did not differ in their use of approach coping. However, pure victims and bully-victims used more avoidance coping than noninvolved adolescents. Compared with the latter, pure victims reported greater use of avoidance coping strategies such as internalizing and self-blame, while female pure victims also reported greater use of rumination. Both male and female bully-victims were characterized by higher use of blaming others and self-blame strategies, compared with the noninvolved group. In addition, rumination, catastrophizing, cognitive distancing, and externalizing scores were higher for male bully-victims than for either noninvolved participants or pure bullies. Identifying these differing coping strategies may be useful in developing more effective counselling strategies for the victims of bullying.

**Keywords** School bullying · Peer victimization · Coping · Cognitive emotion regulation · Adolescence

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## Introduction

### School Bullying as a Stressor

School bullying is a widespread and pervasive problem in high school that affects about one third of adolescents internationally (Zych et al., 2017). In general, *bullying* refers to intentional and repeated aggressive behaviors or harms characterized by an abuse of power between a perpetrator and a weaker victim (Olweus, 1994, 2006; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Rigby, 2004). Although prevalence rates differ widely between studies, approximately 10–20% of adolescents have been victims of school bullying (Craig et al., 2009; Tsitsika et al., 2014). Furthermore, the majority of studies report higher rates of victimization for boys than for girls during adolescence (Craig et al., 2009; Guy et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Tsitsika et al., 2014). People who experience victimization was identified as pure *victims* and or *bully-victims* (i.e., those who are both bullies and victims) (e.g., van Dijk et al., 2017; Yang & Kim, 2017). Whereas victims are generally described as being submissive and passive, bully-victims, also labeled provocative or aggressive victims, are characterized as exhibiting aggressive and hostile

behavior (Schwartz et al., 2001). Thus, the prevalence of bullying involvement has been estimated at 13–20% for pure victims, 5–7% for bully-victims, (Guy et al., 2019), with significantly more males identified as bully-victims than as victims (Guy et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, peer victimization has systematically been associated with poor mental health, and psychosocial difficulties (for a review, see Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Moore et al., 2017; van Geel et al., 2014), including in adulthood (Özdemir & Stattin, 2011; Sigurdson et al., 2014). Such negative outcomes may be understood as responses to chronic exposure to the stress of peer victimization (Newman et al., 2005). From a stress perspective, being bullied can be seen as a severe and chronic stressor, especially during adolescence when peer relations become progressively more crucial (Östberg et al., 2018).

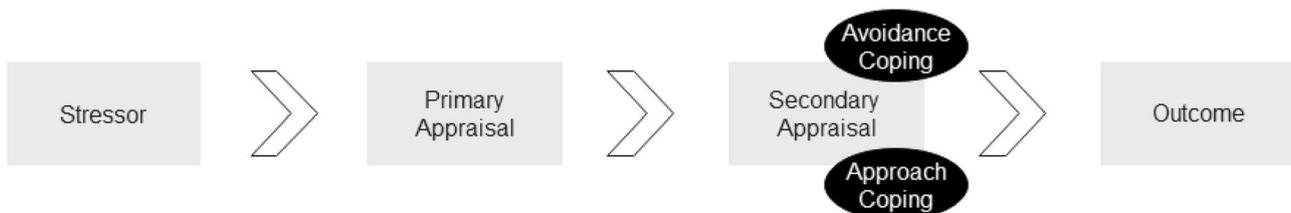
### Lazarus' Transactional Model of Stress

Lazarus's transactional stress and coping model (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is the conceptual framework that is usually applied to understand the relationships among stress, coping, and health (Biggs et al., 2017). Based on transactional model of stress, two processes occur in response to a stressor (see Fig. 1): (1) a primary appraisal that the person understands the susceptibility and severity to stressors (i.e., appraisal of threat, challenge, or loss) and (2) a secondary appraisal which is to examine the resources and options of individual compatibility with stressors (i.e., appraisal of how to respond). This secondary appraisal process provides a global assessment of the individual's coping resources and ability to manage the stressful situation. Coping strategies are defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Thus, *coping* characterizes an individual's action-oriented and intrapsychic efforts to manage environmental stress (i.e., directly manage the stressor) and the resulting emotions (i.e., regulate emotions arising as a consequence of the stressful encounter), by minimizing, mastering, or tolerating environmental and internal demands (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus, 2006).

According to the transactional perspective (Lazarus & Launier, 1978), coping with a stressful event such as bullying is an iterative and interactive process (i.e., to occur in a person-environment transaction or interaction), and depends on the nature of the stressful circumstances (i.e., is context dependent). In that respect, coping may be viewed as either as a stable personal characteristic (i.e., relatively stable coping styles—dispositional approach) or as a process or a state (i.e., coping strategies at a certain time point or in certain situations—situational approach). In this sense, situation-specific coping measures should be preferred, which is not necessarily the case in studies on school bullying. As, being bullied by one's peers in childhood is an inherently stressful experience, situational approach of coping may prove useful in understanding the processes that underpin victims' coping efforts (Hansen et al., 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

### School Bullying and Coping Strategies

Stress and coping researchers have identified an extensive range of coping strategies, such as escape, relaxation, and social support-seeking, including in an adolescent sample (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Despite this variety of coping strategies, these are usually regrouped in two dimensions of coping efforts, such as *avoidance* (minimization of the emotional impact of the stressful event) versus *approach* coping (cognitive and/or behavioral apprehension of the stressful event) (for a review, see Causey & Dubow, 1992; Compas et al., 2001; Roth & Cohen, 1986). In this way, active *problem solving* and *social support seeking* are the two main approach coping strategies (Roth & Cohen, 1986)—i.e., coping modalities that respond to the problem directly. By contrast, *avoidance* strategies involve a conscious effort to stay away from the negative stressor and escape the threatening stimuli (Ebata & Moos, 1991; Roth & Cohen, 1986). According to Roth and Cohen (1986), avoidance coping includes three main strategies: *cognitive distancing* (ignoring or minimizing the stressor, resisting thoughts about the negative experience), *internalization* (keeping negative emotions inside and avoiding the disclosure of these feelings to others), and *externalization* (outwardly projecting negative emotions, such as anger, onto



**Fig. 1** Transactional model of stress and coping

other people or objects) (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Ebata & Moos, 1991). It essentially consists of emotion-focused coping, which can temporarily reduce stress, but is nevertheless regarded as less efficient, as this strategy can interfere with the resolution of the problem (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Thus, approach strategies, regarded as beneficial or adaptive strategies (Roth & Cohen, 1986), are associated with positive outcomes (Lazarus, 2006; Rutherford & Endler, 1999), whereas avoidance strategies are associated with more emotional and behavioral difficulties (Doron et al., 2015; Herman-Stabl et al., 1995; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Gender differences in strategies for coping with stressful events have also been identified, with males socialized to use more instrumental problem-solving strategies and females socialized to use more emotional or passive coping strategies or to seek social support (e.g., Matud, 2004).

In a context of school bullying, a large body of research suggests that young people who have not been bullied use different coping strategies (e.g., active coping, social support seeking) from those who have (Craig et al., 2007; Hansen et al., 2012; Hunter & Boyle, 2004). Smith et al. (2001) found that the most common coping strategies reported by victims were ignoring the bullies, walking away, telling them to stop, and standing up for themselves. However, qualitative and quantitative research on victims' coping during adolescence has yielded inconsistent findings. For example, while qualitative research has shown that social support seeking is a very frequently approach coping strategy used by victims, especially girls (Evans et al., 2017; Tenenbaum et al., 2011), some authors adopting a quantitative approach have found that social support seeking (approach strategy) was a protective coping strategy in peer victimization (Machmutow et al., 2012; Skrzypiec et al., 2011), especially among girls (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012). Avoidance strategies such as distancing (Keith, 2018; Singh & Bussey, 2011) and externalizing (Keith, 2018; Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Singh & Bussey, 2011) for their part are more frequently used by bullies, especially boys (Hunter & Boyle, 2004). Some studies, however, have failed to find a significant relationship between victimization and distancing or externalizing (Skrzypiec et al., 2011).

Researchers (Andreou, 2001; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007) have argued that although the types of coping strategies used need to be studied carefully, it is also necessary to clearly distinguish between their different cognitive and behavioral aspects. For example, placing the emphasis on avoidance coping strategies may oversimplify the coping-bullying interaction in adolescence. Coping strategies also include the cognitive emotion regulation strategies (also known as cognitive coping) that adolescent uses to manage emotional information (Thompson, 1991). Competencies to regulate negative emotions or feelings adaptively and to keep control when a stressful life event was experienced might be

also relevant (e.g., Garnefski et al., 2001). Thus, it seems appropriate to focus on both general coping styles, and specific cognitive emotion regulation strategies in the particular context of bullying.

## School Bullying and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies

In that sense, the emotion regulation model (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007) underlined the importance of individual differences in the cognitive coping strategies—i.e., cognitive emotion regulation (CER) strategies—used to regulate the negative emotions related to a stressful or negative event (Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010), such as victimization by peers (Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007). Nine CER strategies have been identified: (1) *self-blame* (blaming oneself for what has happened), (2) *blaming others*, (3) *acceptance* (accepting that the event has happened and resigning oneself), (4) *refocus on planning* (thinking about the next steps and how to manage the negative event), (5) *positive refocusing* (focusing on positive experiences), (6) *rumination* (being preoccupied by thinking about the feelings and thoughts generated by the negative situation), (7) *positive reappraisal* (assigning a positive meaning to the negative situation), (8) *putting into perspective* (minimizing the importance of the negative event), and (9) *catastrophizing* (having recurrent thoughts about the severity of the event and how it is the worst experience that could happen to someone). Garnefski and Kraaij (2007) suggested making a distinction between adaptive CER (acceptance, refocus on planning, positive refocusing, positive reappraisal, and putting into perspective), associated with emotional problems in adolescents, and maladaptive CER (self-blame, rumination, blaming others, and catastrophizing) strategies, associated with greater resilience.

To date, little research has explored the above-mentioned CER strategies in relation to bullying. Hampel et al. (2009) found that rumination was related to victimization. However, as underlined by Murray-Harvey et al. (2012), this study investigated general coping styles (trait), rather than either specific coping strategies in response to the specific context of bullying (state) or specific CER strategies, as defined by Garnefski and Kraaij (2007). Garnefski and Kraaij (2014), for their part, recently found strong positive correlations between victimization and rumination, catastrophizing and self-blame, and moderate correlations with blaming others, acceptance, and planning. These promising findings underline the potential specific associations between CER strategies and victimization, but need to be replicated with larger samples, focusing on the distinction between pure victims and bully-victims. In Arató et al. (2020)'s study of cyberbullying, pure victims scored significantly higher than non-involved participants on self-blame and rumination, while

bully-victims scored higher than pure victims on blaming others. However, as cyberbullying only partially overlaps with school bullying (Thomas et al., 2015), it is currently unclear whether these CER strategies also characterize the victims of traditional bullying.

## Considering Bullying Roles and Sex

All these findings suggest that adolescents' coping strategies are associated with specific bullying profiles, and may play an important role in these situations. Although there is a large body of research examining how young people cope with bullying, the majority of studies so far have involved samples of children, or else have indiscriminately mixed adolescents and children. As the coping strategies used in response to bullying may differ with age (Griffin Smith & Gross, 2006; Naylor et al., 2001) and adolescents exhibit reduced adaptive coping (Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), it is difficult to know whether these results are relevant to adolescence. Secondly, with respect to sex differences in coping strategy use (e.g., Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Mahady Wilton et al., 2000), CER strategy use (Garnefski et al., 2005; Skrzypiec et al., 2011; Zlomke & Hahn, 2010), and bullying involvement (Smith et al., 2019).

Finally, few studies have made a distinction between different victimization roles. To our knowledge, only two studies, both focusing on cyberbullying, have considered the distinction between pure victims and bully-victims. The first one (Völlink et al., 2013) showed that pure victims and bully-victims of cyberbullying both tend to use more emotion-focused coping (e.g., externalization of anger), and that bully-victims use less avoidance coping than either pure victims or noninvolved adolescents. By contrast, the second study did not find any differences on avoidance coping between pure victims and bully-victims of cyberbullying (Chan & Wong, 2017). However, it should be noted that the authors of this study did not use a standardized tool to evaluate coping strategies. However, again, due to the specific features of cyberbullying, it is difficult to extend these results to traditional bullying. As recent studies have indicated that coping strategies may depend on the type of bullying behavior experienced and/or exhibited by victims (Andreou, 2001; Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Mark et al., 2019; Skrzypiec et al., 2011), our study differentiated between pure victims and bully-victims as the latter tend to engage in different patterns of social adjustment and behavior than pure victims (Unnever, 2005).

Based on these observations, the aim of the present study was therefore to investigate the nature of coping strategies (avoidant-approach coping strategies and more specific CER strategies) employed by groups of noninvolved adolescents, pure victims, and bully-victims. We hypothesized that pure

victims and bully-victims use more avoidance coping strategies, especially distancing and internalization, and maladaptive CER strategies, especially self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing, than noninvolved adolescents. We also hypothesized that pure victims differ significantly from bully-victims on their use of coping strategies, both in general and according to their sex. More specifically, we expected pure victims to make more use of internalizing, rumination, catastrophizing, and self-blame, and bully-victims to make more frequent use of externalizing and blaming others. We investigated specific coping patterns in relation to victimization, controlling for age and considering potentially sex-related differences, gender differences in strategies for coping with stressful events.

## Methods

### Participants

After excluding students with three or more missing values on the questionnaires ( $n=56$ ), our sample included 967 sixth to ninth graders from ten junior high schools located in five regions of France (Burgundy Franche-Comté, Centre-Val de Loire, Grand Est, Normandy, Pays de la Loire). It comprised 328 sixth graders (33.9%), 109 seventh graders (11.3%), 390 eighth graders (40.3%), and 140 ninth graders (13.6%). There were 529 (54.7%) girls and 438 (45.3%) boys, with no significant difference in sex ratio between age groups. Participants were French adolescents ranging in age from 11 to 16 years, with a mean age of 12.49 years ( $SD=1.20$ ). There were nonsignificant differences between boys and girls,  $t(965)=1.911$ ,  $p=0.66$ . The majority (53.70%,  $n=519$ ) of the adolescents we sampled lived in urban areas, with 31.5% ( $n=305$ ) living in rural areas, and 14.8% ( $n=143$ ) in peri-urban areas.

### Measures

#### Bullying

Bullying involvement was measured using the French version of the revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Fr-rBVQ; Kubiszewski et al., 2014). Before they start answering the questions, respondents are given a definition of bullying. This self-report questionnaire assesses experiences of being victimized (7 items), and experiences of bullying others (7 items) "in the past couple of months." Various types of bullying are assessed: being bullied verbally, being ignored/excluded from a group, being bullied physically, having false rumors spread, having money and other things taken away or damaged, being threatened or forced to do things, and being bullied about one's race or color. In the

present study, one additional type, related to cyberbullying, was added for each part (victimization/aggression). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Several times a week*). Two types of overall measures were used for analyses: (1) a continuous approach yielded two mean scores (one for the victimization items, and one for the bullying perpetration items) and (2) a categorical approach resulted in participants being classified as either pure victims, pure bullies, bully-victims, or noninvolved, based on Solberg's criteria (i.e., people who had been bullied/bullied others "2 or 3 times a month" or more often were categorized as involved in bullying; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Cronbach's alpha for the Fr-rBVQ in this study was 0.68 for victimization, and 0.75 for aggression.

### Approach-Avoidance Coping

We used the French version of the Self-Report Coping Scale (SRCS; Hebert et al., 2007) to assess the use of strategies to cope with a peer conflict (situational form: social stressor version), based on the approach-avoidance conceptualization of coping. The SRCS consists of 34 items designed to assess *social support seeking* (8 items; e.g., tell a friend or family member what has happened), *problem-solving* (8 items; e.g., try to think of different ways of solving it), *distancing* (7 items; e.g., forget the whole thing), *internalizing* (7 items; e.g., go off by myself), and *externalizing* (4 items; e.g., yell to let off steam). Social support seeking and problem-solving coping were treated as approach coping strategies, and internalizing, externalizing, and distancing as avoidance strategies. For each item, participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). Overall scores were obtained by summing the scores for each subscale. A higher score indicated greater use of a given coping strategy. In our study, Cronbach's alpha was between 0.71 and 0.85.

### CER Strategies

We used the French version of the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Jermann et al., 2006) to measure cognitive strategies for handling emotionally arousing information. In our study, we assessed the use of specific CER strategies to cope with a specific event referred to as "had a peer conflict." This self-report questionnaire consists of 36 items probing nine CER strategies: *self-blame* (e.g., "I think about the mistakes I have made in this matter"); *acceptance* (e.g., "I think that I have to accept the situation"); *focus on thoughts/rumination* (e.g., "I dwell upon the feelings the situation has evoked in me"); *positive refocusing* (e.g., "I think about pleasant experiences"), *refocus on planning* (e.g., "I think about how to change the situation"); *positive reappraisal* (e.g., "I look for the positive sides to

the matter"); *putting into perspective* (e.g., "I think that it all could have been much worse"); *catastrophizing* (e.g., "I continually think how horrible the situation has been"); and *blaming others* (e.g., "I feel that basically the cause lies with others"). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Almost never*) to 5 (*Almost always*). Scores on these subscales were summed to reflect two general coping styles: *adaptive coping or elaborative processes* (positive refocusing, refocus on planning, acceptance, positive focusing, and putting into perspective), and *maladaptive coping or automatic processes* (rumination, catastrophizing, self-blaming, and blaming others), with higher scores indicating greater use of the particular coping strategy. Internal reliability coefficients in the present study ranged from 0.84 to 0.71.

### Procedure

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki for psychological research involving human subjects, and was approved by the local educational authorities for each of the 9 educational sites. Recruitment emails were sent to school supervisors at 20 secondary schools, located in the previous five regions of France. Of the 20 school supervisors, six principals never replied to the recruitment email, five indicated that they had other commitments which prevented them from participating, and nine provided their agreement to participate. Participants completed self-report questionnaires during the 2018–2020 school years. The questionnaire and methodology for this study were approved by the relevant institutional review board for each of the nine schools, and an information letter was sent to each family and each adolescent. Written parental consent and child assent were obtained. The mean participation rate was 72%. The adolescents' survey (paper-pencil questionnaire) was administered by school staff (supervised by a teacher), and they completed the questionnaire anonymously during lesson time. On average, it took 20 min to complete.

### Data Analysis

In this study, we ran nonparametric tests, as most of the data were skewed. We began by calculating descriptive statistics on bullying roles. We then used chi-square analyses to determine possible sex-related differences for each victim subgroup. Independent sample *t* tests were also computed to compare mean differences between girls and boys on their bullying characteristics and the coping strategies they adopted. Partial Pearson correlations were performed to examine relationships between bullying and specific coping strategies, controlling for age. We ran multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with bullying victimization as the

outcome variable (pure victim and bully-victims) and with coping or CER strategies as independent variables. Univariate  $F$  follow-up tests were conducted within the multivariate significant overall differences, and significant results on the univariate tests were followed with Bonferroni's comparisons to determine whether victims, bully-victims, and noninvolved students used different coping strategies. A 5% level of significance was used for all statistical tests. Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS® Statistics version 23.

## Results

### Prevalence of Bullying and Descriptive Analysis of Variables According to Sex

Before testing our research hypotheses, we calculated basic descriptive statistics of the study's focal variables. The means and standard deviations for boys' and girls' bullying and coping scores, and the  $t$  test results are shown in Table 1. Based on Olweus and Solberg's criteria, 19.0% ( $n = 184$ ) of adolescents reported being pure victims, 4.9% ( $n = 47$ ) reported being bully-victims, and 8.9% ( $n = 86$ ) reported being pure bullies. A group comparison analysis showed significant differences between the sexes with regard to bullying roles ( $\chi^2 = 38.925, p < 0.001$ ). Pure victims were more frequently girls than boys (55.4% vs. 44.6%), whereas

bully-victims were more frequently boys than girls (37% vs. 53%). Finally, 58.7% ( $n = 568$ ) of girls and 41.3% ( $n = 399$ ) of boys reported no involvement in bullying. The continuous approach revealed higher victimization and aggression scores for boys ( $t = 7.881, p < 0.01$ ) than for girls ( $t = 60.017, p < 0.001$ ). We also investigated sex-related differences in the coping variables. Girls scored higher than boys on self-blame, rumination, social support seeking, problem-solving, and internalizing. By contrast, boys scored higher than girls on positive reappraisal, blaming others, distancing, and externalizing (see Table 1 for more details).

### Relationships Between Coping Strategies and Bullying According to Sex

Correlations among the measures for boys and girls, controlling for age, are provided in Table 2. Significant positive correlations (Bonferroni-corrected) between victimization scores and maladaptive coping strategies such as self-blame, rumination, catastrophizing, and blaming others ranged from 0.17 to 0.35 ( $p < 0.001$ ). A significant sex-specific correlation was found with refocus on planning for boys ( $r = 0.17, p < 0.001$ ). Internalizing and externalizing were also positively correlated with victimization (respectively,  $r = 0.35-0.33$  and  $0.18-0.27, p < 0.001$ ). Social support seeking was positively associated with victimization, especially for boys ( $r = 0.17, p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 1** Male and female participants' mean (standard deviation) age, bullying scores and coping scores, and summary of  $t$ -tests

Variables		Mean (SD)		$t$	$p$	
		Girls	Boys			
	Age in years	12.52 (1.18)	12.45 (1.2)	1.147	<i>ns</i>	
Bullying	Victimization	10.28 (3.32)	10.69 (3.83)	1.106	**	
	Aggression	8.62 (1.15)	9.42 (2.64)	5.545	***	
CER strategies	Adaptative	Acceptance	11.57 (3.89)	11.13 (3.94)	1.814	<i>ns</i>
		Positive refocusing	10.92 (4.45)	11.43 (4.39)	1.877	<i>ns</i>
		Refocus on planning	11.74 (4.16)	12.05 (4.14)	1.570	<i>ns</i>
		Positive reappraisal	10.72 (4.05)	11.32 (4.04)	2.514	**
		Putting into perspective	11.67 (4.09)	11.72 (4.15)	.196	<i>ns</i>
		Adaptive coping (total)	56.62 (16.29)	57.66 (16.98)	1.314	<i>ns</i>
	Maladaptive	Self-blame	9.80 (3.96)	9.20 (3.63)	2.004	*
		Rumination	11.75 (4.34)	10.47 (4.15)	4.618	***
		Catastrophizing	9.25 (4.04)	9.30 (3.95)	.41	<i>ns</i>
		Blaming others	8.16 (3.41)	8.93 (3.59)	3.563	***
		Maladaptive coping (total)	38.95 (12.42)	37.89 (12.43)	1.252	<i>ns</i>
Coping strategies	Approach	Seeking social support	21.72 (7.07)	20.43 (7.40)	2.580	**
		Problem-solving	25.43 (7.07)	24.31 (7.57)	2.285	*
	Avoidance	Distancing	16.91 (5.13)	17.84 (5.40)	2.02	*
		Internalizing	18.00 (5.57)	16.18 (5.77)	4.949	***
		Externalizing	8.38 (3.70)	8.83 (3.78)	1.884	<i>ns</i>

CER cognitive emotion regulation,  $U$  Mann-Whitney  $U$  test, *ns* nonsignificant

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 2** Correlations between bullying and cognitive emotion regulation strategies for boys and girls, controlling for age (Pearson partial correlations)

Variables			Victimization		Aggression	
			Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
CER strategies	Adaptative	Acceptance	.10 <sup>t</sup> ns	.08 ns	.03 ns	.08 ns
		Putting into perspective	.01 ns	.07 ns	.01 ns	.01 ns
		Positive refocusing	-.03 ns	.08 ns	-.04 ns	.02 ns
		Refocus on planning	.02 ns	.17***	-.08 ns	.01 ns
		Positive reappraisal	.01 ns	.07 ns	-.03 ns	.03 ns
	Adaptive coping (total)	.02 ns	.11 <sup>t</sup> ns	-.03 ns	.03 ns	
	Maladaptive	Self-blame	.25***	.21***	.03 ns	.14 <sup>t</sup> ns
		Rumination	.25***	.20***	.05 ns	.12 <sup>t</sup> ns
		Catastrophizing	.17***	.24***	.07 ns	.13 <sup>t</sup> ns
		Blaming others	.19***	.17***	.19***	.17***
Maladaptive coping (total)		.27***	.25***	.10 ns	.17***	
Coping strategies	Approach	Seeking social support	.01 ns	.17***	-.11 <sup>t</sup> ns	.04 ns
		Problem-solving	.01 ns	.09	-.10 <sup>t</sup> ns	.04 ns
	Avoidance	Distancing	.02 ns	.15 <sup>t</sup> ns	.03 ns	.09 ns
		Internalizing	.35***	.33***	.03 ns	.15 <sup>t</sup> ns
		Externalizing	.18***	.27***	.18***	.27***

CER cognitive emotion regulation, ns nonsignificant

\*\*\* $p < .0011$  (Bonferroni-corrected)

<sup>t</sup>not significant after Bonferroni correction

Concerning the aggression dimension, a positive correlation was found with blaming others for both sexes ( $r = 0.19-0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and with maladaptive strategies for boys only ( $r = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Aggression was also significantly related to *externalizing* ( $r = 0.18-0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### Coping Strategies According to Sex and Bullying Role

We then investigated whether there were differences between the bullying roles in terms of coping strategies in response to peer conflict. Coping strategy means and standard deviations for pure victims, bully-victims, and noninvolved students are provided in Table 3 for girls and Table 4 for boys. The MANOVAs comparing the three bullying roles (i.e., noninvolved, pure victim, and aggressor-victim) and the five avoidance-approach coping strategies (i.e., *social support seeking*, *problem-solving*, *distancing*, *internalizing*, and *externalizing*) across sex were significant ( $F = 3.12$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , Pillai's trace = 0.06, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ , and  $F = 5.673$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , Pillai's trace = 0.14, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ , respectively, for girls and for boys). For girls, a series of ANOVAs conducted for girls revealed significant differences on avoidance coping (both internalizing and externalizing) between the pure victim and noninvolved groups. For each type of coping strategy, pure victims scored higher than their counterparts. Among the boys, internalizing and externalizing were used significantly more by pure victims than by

noninvolved adolescents. Boys classified as bully-victims reported engaging significantly more in social support seeking (approach coping), distancing, internalizing, and externalizing (avoidance coping) than those in the noninvolved group.

### Cognitive Emotion Regulation According to Sex and Bullying Role

The results of MANOVAs showed that there was a significant main effect, indicating an overall difference in the reporting of nine cognitive coping strategies between the three bullying roles ( $F = 1.985$ ,  $p = 0.039$ , Pillai's trace = 0.04, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ , and  $F = 1.710$ ,  $p = 0.033$ , Pillai's trace = 0.08, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ , respectively, for girls and for boys). Follow-up univariate ANOVAs indicated that, for girls, self-blame and rumination (maladaptive strategies) were more used by pure victims than noninvolved girls. Girls who reported being bully-victims scored also significantly higher on self-blame and blaming others than noninvolved female students. Among the boys, maladaptive strategies, such as self-blame, catastrophizing, and blaming others, were used significantly more by pure victims than noninvolved adolescents. Boys classified as bully-victims reported engaging significantly more in maladaptive CER strategies such as, self-blame, rumination, catastrophizing, and blaming others than those in the noninvolved group.

**Table 3** Means (standard deviation) for coping and CER strategies among girls according to bullying role (MANOVA and post hoc comparisons)

Variables		Noninvolved		Pure victims		Bully-victims		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Group comparisons		
		Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>			Partial $\eta^2$	Bonferroni hoc comparisons	
CER strategies	Adaptative	Acceptance	11.44	3.93	11.98	3.71	13.00	2.92	1.314	<i>ns</i>	.005	–
		Positive refocusing	10.94	4.42	10.74	4.73	11.86	6.15	.266	<i>ns</i>	.001	–
		Refocus on planning	11.72	4.29	11.97	3.72	11.63	4.17	.152	<i>ns</i>	.001	–
		Positive reappraisal	10.75	4.11	10.53	3.70	11.63	3.93	.721	<i>ns</i>	.001	–
		Putting into perspective	11.65	4.04	11.46	4.13	13.75	4.98	.310	<i>ns</i>	.005	–
	Maladaptive	Adaptive coping	56.50	16.56	56.68	15.39	61.86	19.29	.422	<i>ns</i>	.002	–
		Self-blame	9.59	4.01	10.76	3.80	12.75	4.65	5.519	**	.022	PV & BV > NI
		Rumination	11.48	4.40	12.76	3.88	13.38	5.15	4.143	**	.017	PV > NI
		Catastrophizing	9.03	3.94	9.87	4.17	11.00	4.17	2.559	<i>ns</i>	.010	–
		Blaming others	7.92	3.29	8.55	3.48	11.38	4.66	5.281	**	.021	BV > NI & PV
	Maladaptive coping (total)	38.03	12.38	41.94	11.89	48.50	17.79	6.427	**	.026	PV & BV > NI	
Coping strategies	Approach	Seeking social support	22.03	7.53	21.47	6.87	21.63	6.56	.234	<i>ns</i>	.001	–
		Problem-solving	25.65	7.03	25.30	7.41	22.86	7.22	.665	<i>ns</i>	.003	–
	Avoidance	Distancing	16.94	5.17	16.99	4.87	18.25	4.77	.260	<i>ns</i>	.001	–
		Internalizing	17.41	5.43	20.36	5.61	20.63	7.85	12.470	***	.048	PV > NI
		Externalizing	8.06	3.66	8.86	3.67	10.00	3.70	3.180	*	.012	BV > PV > NI

*CER* cognitive emotion regulation, *KW* Kruskal–Wallis analysis of variance, *PV* pure victims, *BV* bully-victims, *NI* noninvolved, *ns* nonsignificant  
 \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001

**Table 4** Means (standard deviation) for coping and CER strategies among boys according to bullying roles (MANOVA and post hoc comparisons)

Variables			Noninvolved		Pure victims		Bully-victims				Group comparisons	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p	Partial $\eta^2$	Bonferroni hoc comparisons
CER strategies	Adaptative	Acceptance	11.02	3.90	11.02	4.08	11.59	4.11	.364	ns	.002	–
		Positive refocusing	11.29	4.27	11.39	4.32	12.15	5.00	.688	ns	.004	–
		Refocus on planning	11.81	4.25	12.46	3.88	12.77	3.93	1.444	ns	.007	–
		Positive reappraisal	11.27	4.05	11.19	3.88	11.56	4.55	.114	ns	.001	–
		Putting into perspective	11.50	4.16	12.15	4.05	11.92	4.10	.846	ns	.004	–
	Maladaptive	Adaptive coping	56.87	17.17	58.22	16.23	60.00	17.21	.678	ns	.003	–
		Self-blame	8.81	3.48	9.41	4.05	10.08	3.67	3.905	*	.020	PV & BV > NI
		Rumination	10.09	4.15	10.76	4.07	12.03	4.19	4.073	**	.021	BV > NI
		Catastrophizing	8.80	3.77	10.13	4.13	11.03	3.77	8.115	***	.040	BV > PV > NI
		Blaming others	8.40	3.41	9.65	3.77	10.02	3.82	6.569	**	.033	BV > PV > NI
Coping strategies	Approach	Maladaptive coping	36.10	12.17	40.38	12.41	43.18	12.38	8.185	*	.041	PV & BV > NI
		Seeking social support	19.68	7.07	21.42	7.44	23.33	8.15	5.367	**	.027	BV > NI
		Problem-solving	24.02	7.47	24.45	7.84	26.03	8.56	1.190	ns	.006	–
	Avoidance	Distancing	17.04	5.22	17.54	5.77	19.77	5.14	4.471	*	.023	BV > NI & PV
		Internalizing	15.11	5.19	17.90	6.40	19.10	6.51	14.047	***	.068	PV & BV > NI
		Externalizing	8.06	3.33	9.13	3.59	11.97	4.69	21.734	***	.101	BV > PV > NI

CER cognitive emotion regulation, *K-W* Kruskal–Wallis analysis of variance, *PV* pure victims, *BV* bully-victims, *NI* noninvolved, *ns* nonsignificant

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Discussion

School bullying is a common stressor for adolescents that often requires personal resources and strategies to cope with the distress it causes. The purpose of the current study was to explore the relationship between bullying involvement and coping strategies, looking for sex-specific patterns. In the present sample, almost one of fifth of the adolescents (19%) reported having been victimized at school during the previous 2 months, whereas only 4.9% reported also being perpetrators (bully-victims). These prevalence rates are relatively close to those reported by Guy et al. (2019). Males were more likely to be bully-victims than girls, whereas girls were more frequently pure victims than boys. When we applied a continuum approach, boys were found to score higher on both the aggression and victimization dimensions than girls. These results are in line with the findings of previous studies, and suggest that boys are at greater risk of being bullied than girls (e.g., Chan & Wong, 2017; Guy et al., 2019).

With regard to coping strategies, in the present study, girls reported greater use of internalized cognitive coping strategies (e.g., self-blame and rumination) and approach coping strategies (e.g., social support seeking and problem-solving) than boys. Most previous studies had found that girls generally use more emotion-focused and social support

strategies than boys (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011, 2015). Some studies also indicated that women use more active coping (i.e., problem focused) than men do (Tamres et al., 2002), although there is no consensus on this finding (Hampel et al., 2009). Moreover, one previous study showed that male adolescents tend to use more CER strategies (e.g., positive reappraisal, distancing, and blaming others) than female adolescents do (Zlomke & Hahn, 2010). Based on the theory of socialization, sex-related differences in coping in adolescence can be understood as reflecting traditional gender-role internalization (Armstrong et al., 2019; Lengua & Stormshak, 2000). Moreover, researchers have found that boys perceive externalizing, talking to adults about bullying, and cognitive distancing as more effective than other forms of coping (Kristensen & Smith, 2003).

### Coping According to Sex and Bullying Roles

We postulated that avoidance coping strategies, especially internalization and distancing, are more frequent among victims than among noninvolved students. Among both girls and boys, pure victims did indeed report greater use of internalization than noninvolved adolescents, but also of externalization (unexpected result), whereas for distancing, we only found a significant sex-specific difference for male

bully-victims. First, these findings show that pure victims tend to resort to denial or to strategies that distract them from the bullying situation and the emotions it provokes. In line with a previous study among college participants, we found that victims tended to use avoidance or emotion coping strategies more frequently (Newman et al., 2011), which strengthens their negative emotional states (e.g., Chao, 2011) and sense of loss of control or ineffectiveness (Slee, 1993). Furthermore, based on the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), adolescents who are chronically bullied may feel that emotion-focused coping is the best way to cope with bullying, based on their previous experiences.

Adolescents who are bullied tend to use a variety of coping techniques falling into avoidance coping strategies, whereas approach coping styles were not related to victimization. These findings that mainly emotion-focused coping may be associated to victimization (and not the approach coping) suggest that interventions should focus on discouraging emotion-focused coping strategies in adolescence, and that by ignoring the situation or by not trying to cope actively with it, adolescents may be at greater risk of peer victimization. Nevertheless, one unexpected result should be highlighted. Our results revealed that seeking social support was a type of coping often used by male bully-victims of bullying. Seeking social support was a problem-focused coping strategies most often reported used among girls pure victims (Tenenbaum et al., 2011). This result is consistent with studies that tend to show that social support seeking no protects victimized boys (in contrary to girls; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002) due to (i) the nature of friendships for boys which are characterized less by intimacy and emotional support and (ii) the stereotypically nonmasculine nature of social support seeking (Shelley & Craig, 2010).

### **CER Strategies According to Sex and Bullying Roles**

We also expected to observe greater use by victims of maladaptive CER strategies, in particular self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing. Our findings partially confirmed this, for as expected, we identified specific coping patterns according to sex. *Self-blame* was more common among both male and female victims (pure and bully-victims) than among noninvolved adolescents. These results are in accordance with previous studies showing that gender is not associated with the use of self-blame (Parris et al., 2019). Victims of bullying tend to exaggerate the extent to which they are responsible for their situations, possibly leading to maladaptive outcomes, such as passivity. This is in accordance with previous studies showing significant correlations between (cyber)victimization and self-blame among school students (Arató et al., 2020; Chen & Chen, 2019; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014; Quintana-Orts et al., 2019; Shelley & Craig, 2010).

Victims may criticize or blame themselves for the harassment, in an attempt to understand why it is happening. The use of self-blame may also allow victims to maintain the belief that they are in control of their lives and/or make sense of what is thus an understandable event. An alternative or concomitant explanation is that victims tend to internalize their perpetrators' victim blaming (Harsey et al., 2017). Cognitive restructuring of self-blaming attributions (e.g., acceptance and commitment therapy, ACT; Hayes et al., 2006) may be an effective form of intervention, as self-blame is associated with a higher risk of posttraumatic stress disorder and revictimization for victims of violence (Mokma et al., 2016).

With regard to *ruminatio*n, among girls, higher scores were observed for pure victims, whereas among boys, it was the bully-victims who exhibited this pattern. *Rumination* characterizes the tendency to overthink the signs, causes, and consequences of distress, instead of concentrating on solutions for overcoming it (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008), and it has previously been linked to peer victimization (Arató et al., 2020; Erdur-Baker, 2009; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014; Hampel et al., 2009; Quintana-Orts et al., 2019; Shapero et al., 2013). Ruminative thoughts have been found to interfere negatively with problem-solving abilities (e.g., problem-focused coping; Donaldson & Lam, 2004) and to generate increased stress in negative interpersonal situations (Hayes et al., 2006; Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). A vicious circle then emerges, as this coping process makes the targeted student more vulnerable and may thus result in higher levels of victimization (Candel & Iacob, 2015). Our results for males can be related to those of Rey and Extremera (2012), who showed that self-blame and rumination are predictive of levels of aggression, but only for boys. The most common ruminated emotional response in victims may be anger (den Hamer & Konijn, 2016), which may manifest itself in aggressive behavior among boys (Bushman et al., 2001; Zsila et al., 2019), whereas girls are more socialized to respond in terms of avoidance and internalization of negative affects or experiences (e.g., Turton & Campbell, 2007).

Finally, a positive correlation was found between the level of victimization and the use refocus on planning (adaptive CER) among males. *Refocusing on planning* refers to thinking about what steps to take and how to handle a negative event, and was previously associated to a higher level of resilience (e.g., Min et al., 2013). It has been shown that male adolescents are more inclined than female adolescents to use refocus on planning (Öngen, 2010). As planning (approach coping) was related to a feeling of personal control over stressors (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010), this CER strategy may lead males to be more competent in managing the peer victimization, which would explain why we do not find this result when considering victimization in a categorical approach (i.e., bullying roles that characterize chronically involved adolescents).

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## Differences in Coping Strategies Between Pure Victims and Bully-Victims

Finally, we expected bully-victims to make specific use of coping strategies, compared with pure victims. We expected pure victims to report higher internalization, self-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing than bully-victims, and the latter to report greater use of externalization and blaming others than pure victims. No significant result was found concerning rumination and internalization, whereas use of blaming others and externalization were higher among bully-victims (i.e., aggressive coping strategies) than among pure victims. Results thus supported the hypothesis that bully-victims report more frequent use of externalizing strategies (e.g., blaming others) than pure victims possibly to recover a sense of control (Marsh et al., 2011). The externalization of blame may become cognitively distorted, such that aggressive behavior appears justified (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Roos et al., 2015). More specifically, based on the cognitive model of shame (Lewis, 1992), we suggest that victims who take responsibility for the harassment situation experience a sense of shame, powerlessness, and/or vulnerability that may be converted into an externalized form (i.e., use of externalization as a defense against these painful affects) such as blaming others, and may sometimes manifest itself in aggressive behavior (bully-victims). In the light of these findings, interventions based on accepting responsibility for one's own behavior (e.g., restorative approaches) and a sense of shame would appear to be a first step in mobilizing motivation for behavioral change in bully-victims (Evers et al., 2007).

We also found some specific results for males. Male bully-victims also reported higher catastrophizing (maladaptive CER) distancing strategy (avoidance coping) than male pure victims. *Catastrophizing* was a type of cognitive distortion that male victims seemed to share. They appeared to dwell on the worst possible outcome of negative events, and tended to see their future as more hopeless. This strategy may reduce their desire (or propensity) to influence the perpetrator. Male adolescent victims may tend to think that those who are bullied are *losers*, and that people cannot change (entity theory of personality; Yeager et al., 2013). This finding is in line with the above-mentioned studies, and offers a deeper understanding of gender specificity, which had not previously been investigated. In line with this finding, interventions encouraging adaptive cognitive responses (cognitive restructuring) by male bully-victims, such as maintaining an optimistic viewpoint and seeking new meanings, may facilitate the behavioral change process (Chandra et al., 2019).

Thus, like Parris et al. (2019), we found that male bully-victims also made greater use of cognitive distancing strategy (emotion-focused and avoidant coping). Previous

studies have already shown that boys, specifically, considered distancing to be more effective than other forms of coping with bullying (Shelley & Craig, 2010). *Distancing* refers to the cognitive efforts of individuals to detach themselves from themselves and to minimize the meaning of a situation, in order to avoid intense emotions or painful feelings. The use of distancing to cope with traumatic events (e.g., being chronically bullied) tends to remove anxiety and depression from emotional responses, but these may be expressed in another ways, such as hostile or aggressive behavior among bully-victims. This may confirm the portrait of bully-victims as individuals who tend to displace their feelings of shame and inadequacy by externalizing blame and expressing anger (Marsh et al., 2011; Stuewig et al., 2010). It should also be noted that the CER strategies catastrophizing and blaming others are theoretically related to anger (Martin & Dahlen, 2005), which in turn is associated with potential revenge-seeking (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). Further research should examine the cognitive restructuring role played by distancing among male bully-victims, especially since Arató et al. (2020) found the same result in a cyberbullying context. Cognitive defusion (Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008), used in ACT therapy to target problems related to secondary cognitive distortions (i.e., blaming others; Barriga & Gibbs, 1996) in reactive aggression, seems a promising technique (Oostermeijer et al., 2017).

Whereas female bullied reported utilizing rumination and self-blame in perspective in the face of stressful situation, men also reported blaming others and catastrophizing. These findings underline that bullied girls are more focus on the emotional aspects of stressful experiences, and engage in rumination, while bullied boys make higher use of external attribution of responsibility. Male bully-victims also tended to use more maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies (rumination) and avoidance coping (distancing) than male pure victims. Female bully-victims used more externalizing strategies (blaming others) than female pure victims. Results of the present study provide a first support for differential CER and coping strategies between gender.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study had several limitations. First, we used a convenience nonprobability sample design that has limitations with regard to how far results can be generalized. Additionally, data collection was cross-sectional, thus limiting our ability to establish causality among the variables and to offer insights into the development of coping strategies. Future research should therefore seek to expand the current investigation through the adoption of a longitudinal design. Second, bullying was measured on a self-report scale, with the risk of a social desirability bias. More comprehensive research (with victims, aggressors, teachers, and parents

as participants) might be more appropriate. Finally, some results could be explained by the small number of participants. In addition, analyses should be reproduced with the inclusion of other contextual and individual difference variables. Thus, the type of bullying experienced by victims and/or perpetrated by bullies (e.g., physical, verbal, or sexual) may also influence adolescents' coping skills, and therefore needs to be examined. Future research could also include qualitative data to further investigate why males/females use certain coping strategies (and no others) when they experience bullying. Coping strategies are also dependent on dispositional (e.g., self-efficacy, self-esteem, attachment) and situational (social support, life events) factors, which need to be investigated in a future study. For example, additional research is needed to identify the role of perceived social support (peer and/or adults, i.e., parents, teachers, social workers) in the relationship between coping, gender, and victimization. Researchers will also need to further examine the role of polyvictimization in bullying involvement and concomitant psychosocial skills (e.g., assertiveness, self-esteem, coping orientations) among adolescents.

## Conclusion

Our results showed that pure victims and bully-victims are characterized by specific emotion regulation and coping strategies. Bullied adolescents tend to use maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and disengagement to cope with their distress. However, these ways of coping maintain and even heighten stress or negative affects (Volkaert et al., 2020). Pure victims tend to internalize shame, and others' rejection of them is not discharged but internalized. Endorsement of self-blaming attributions puts them at increased risk of internalizing distress (Prinstein et al., 2005). Moreover, the focus on negative feelings and rumination may increase or exacerbate recall of the negative emotions/experiences, and decrease direct action to solve problems (Martin & Gillies, 2004). Both male and female bully-victims used blaming others to regulate their affective states, compared with pure victims. Male bully-victims tended to combine both internalized and externalized coping strategies (i.e., aggressive cognition) when they experienced bullying. These findings underscore the heterogeneity of bullying coping patterns during adolescence and the importance of considering sex in coping responses to peer victimization. Focusing on and encouraging adaptive (or efficient) personal coping resources may be important for promoting ways out of victimization and preventing bullying. These interventions must necessarily take into account the nature of the students, including their sex and the type of bullying they have experienced/perpetrated.

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**Availability of Data and Material** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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