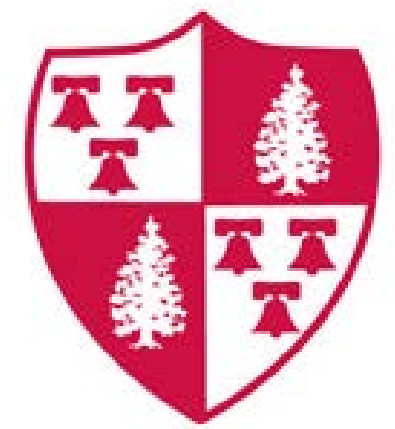# Hostile Intent Cognitions as a Moderator of Negative Life Events and Aggression in School-Aged Children

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Introduction

- Negative life events (**NLE**) have been associated with increased aggression in youth (Herts, McLaughlin, & Hatzenbuehler, 2012).

- However, hostile perceptions of ambiguous events have also been linked with aggression in youth. For example, children with high levels of aggressive behavior tend to perceive ambiguous situations as overly hostile (e.g., hostile attribution bias) as well as exhibit patterns of thinking characterized by hostility toward others, known as hostile intent (**HI**; Schniering & Rapee, 2002).

- Aligned with vulnerability-stress approaches to other psychological difficulties, it has been proposed that HI exacerbates relations between stress and aggression in youth (Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000).

- To our knowledge, however, no studies have examined whether HI moderates relations between NLE and aggression over time in children.

Aims

To examine whether a) HI is associated with aggression symptoms in youth and b) HI moderates relations between NLE and aggression over time

Methods

Participants: Children (53% males) from five suburban elementary schools participated in 4th/5th grade (T1; N = 189, ages 8-11) and 5th/6th grade (T2; N = 138, ages 9-12)

Measures (all self-report questionnaires completed at school):

Children's Automatic Thoughts Scale (CATS)

a) 40 items, including subscale assessing hostile intent cognitions (e.g., I have the right to take revenge on people if they deserve it)

b) 4-point scale, from *not at all* to *all the time*
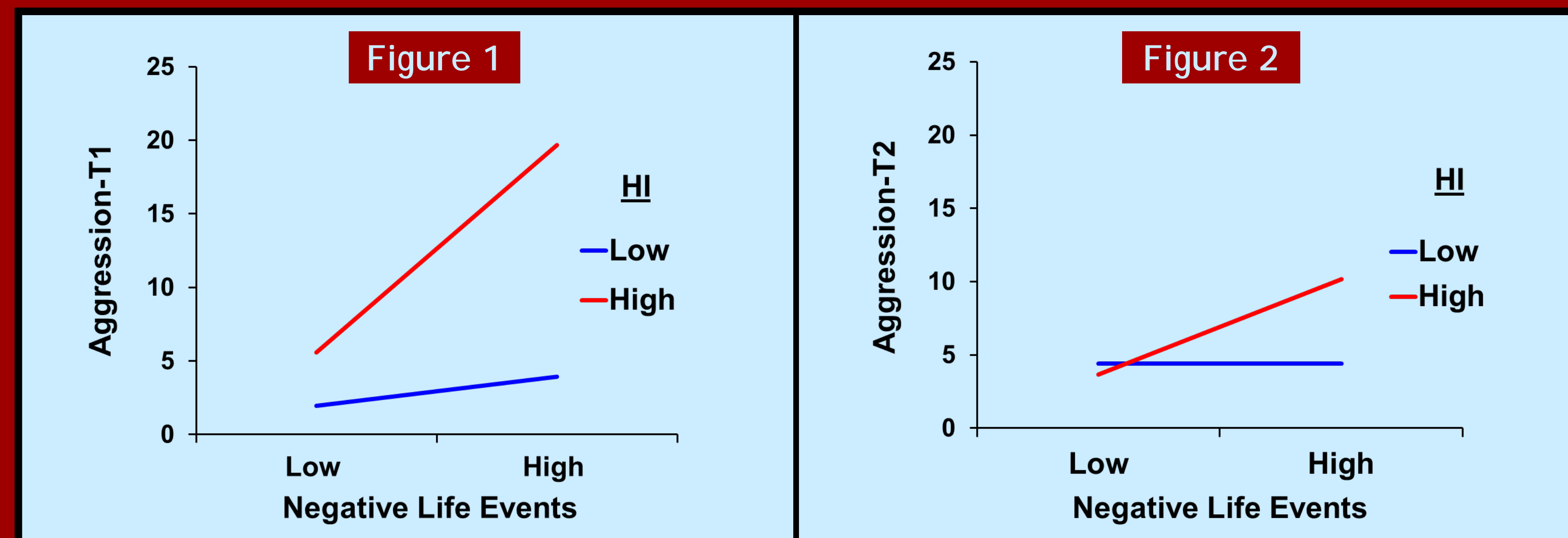
Life Events Checklist (LEC)

a) Assesses presence of 46 events in past year (e.g., parent divorced)

b) Youth rate events as *good* or *bad*

c) NLEs = total number of *bad* events

Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (PBFS)

a) 18-item scale assessing frequency of overt/verbal aggression over past 30 days (e.g., you threatened someone with a weapon)

b) Students report frequency of each behavior on scale ranging from 0 to 9+ times

Results

- Two regression analyses were conducted using PROCESS in SPSS (Field, 2013). NLE at T1 and HI at T1 were included in both analyses in predicting aggression at T1 and T2.

- **T1 Analyses:** NLE (b = .75, p < .001) and HI (b = .60, p < .001) were significant (R^2 = .38 F = 21.70, p < .001). An interaction between NLE and HI was also significant (b = .30, p < .001). NLE was related to aggression in the context of high HI (b = 1.17, p < .001; see Figure 1).

- **T2 Analyses:** NLE (b = .44, p < .05) and HI (b = .17, p < .05) were significant (R^2 = 0.12, F = 3.35, p < . 05). An interaction between NLE and HI was also significant (b = .32, p < .05). NLE was related to aggression in the context of high HI (b = .87, p < .05; see Figure 2). Findings were not maintained after controlling for aggression at T1.

Figure 1 — Aggression-T1 vs Negative Life Events (HI: Low, High)

Figure 2 — Aggression-T2 vs Negative Life Events (HI: Low, High)

Discussion

- Findings suggest thoughts characterized by HI may moderate relations between stress and aggression in children, with low HI buffering the effects of stress.

- Further research should investigate the utility of prevention programs for aggression which target these automatic thoughts in children who have experienced stress.

References

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