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Child Abuse & Neglect

Emotion recognition abilities and empathy of victims of bullying[☆]

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Bullying behaviour is a common experience for a significant minority of children and adolescents. Bullying is the systematic abuse of power among peers or siblings (Sharp & Smith, 1994, p. 2; Wolke & Samara, 2004), with adverse effects on mental health in a significant number of victims (Stassen Berger, 2007). Physical bullying is characterised by observable, externalised behaviours including being hit or beaten up, physical threats, blackmail, and nasty tricks. In contrast, relational forms of victimisation include more subtle indirect forms of behaviour including friendship withdrawal, untrue rumours, and social exclusion. Crick and colleagues argued that physical and relational behaviours loaded onto separate factors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), while some argue that there is some overlap between physical, and relational forms of bullying (e.g., Archer & Coyne, 2005). Therefore, it is increasingly important to consider the possible overlap between physical and relational bullying.

The Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) offers a detailed six-stage model of how children process and interpret cues in social situations to arrive at competent behaviour (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). Previous SIP research has concentrated on the biases and deficits that aggressors use in social situations, and has not considered in detail the SIP styles of victims. In particular, little is known about the role of emotions and emotion recognition within a SIP framework. This has several implications both for victimisation and bullying perpetration. Being able to perceive and attribute emotions correctly is important for a child's social and cognitive development (e.g., Nowicki & Duke, 1994). How children become involved in various physical and relational bullying roles may be related to how well they are able to interpret the emotional states of their peers. Previous associations between victimisation and poor social skills (e.g., Fox & Boulton, 2005) have been reported, but it remains unknown whether this is related to problems recognising and interpreting emotional information (Stassen

Berger, 2007). The manipulation of social relationships (i.e., relational victimisation) is dependent on the ability of the bully perpetrator to successfully identify the social and emotional weaknesses of specific individuals (e.g., Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). In contrast, physical victimisation may rely more on identifying that the potential victim is physically weaker and has few friends who could support him (Wolke & Stanford, 1999).

The empathic styles of bullies and victims may also differ, and there is controversy about whether bullies are socially skilled cool manipulators who are unable to empathise with others (Dautenhahn, Woods, & Kaouri, 2007), or just deficient in their social skills (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). The SIP model emphasises social deficits, however effective bullying, and in particular relational bullying requires sophisticated social and emotional skills to manipulate the victim, and the peer group network into accepting their behaviour (Sutton, 2001). This would suggest that relational bullies do not differ from others in their perception of emotions, but rather in how to use them, by cognitively minimising or distorting the amount of distress felt by the victim (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001).

The present study tested whether victims, in general, have poorer emotion recognition abilities compared to bullies and neutral children (not involved in bullying perpetration or victimisation). Specifically, it was expected that relational victims and "overlap" victims (victims of physical and relational bullying acts) would have poorer emotion recognition abilities compared to physical victims, as competent emotion recognition skills are more important for relational bullying that is centred on the manipulation of close relationships. Secondly, it was hypothesised that bullies would have the lowest levels of empathy compared to victims and neutrals.

Method

Participants

Overall, 373 primary school children from 11 schools in Hertfordshire, UK participated in the study, aged 9–11 years ($M = 9.94$, $SD = 0.45$). Of the 373 children, 200 children had full datasets (i.e., bullying nominations, DANVA and Empathy Questionnaire). Sixteen schools were approached via telephone to take part in the study (69% overall participation). The average school size was 192 (range: 100–240 pupils). A total of 9% of children came from ethnic minority groups. If a school was interested in taking part, information letters and parental consent letters were distributed to the relevant teachers. Overall parental consent for their child's participation in the study was 97%.

Instruments

Bullying nominations. Using a time frame of the previous 6 months, children were asked to indicate up to 6 children in their class they believed physically bullied other children, and up to 6 children they thought were physically victimised (hit/beaten up, belongings stolen, threats, blackmail, nasty tricks). The same procedure was used to assess relational bullying (getting called nasty names, being deliberately left out of games, withdrawal of friendship, and nasty rumour spreading). Each child in the class was represented by a unique number and recorded. The accuracy of recording compared to names was double checked and exceeded 98%. The description of physical and relational bullying behaviours was adapted from Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt (2000).

Children were classified into physical bullying and relational bullying roles: physical bullies (nominated by 3 or more children in the class as being involved in physically bullying others, but did not receive any peer nominations for being victimised); physical victims (nominated by 3 or more children in the class as being physically victimised and received no peer nominations for physically bullying others); physical bully/victims (nominated on 3 or more occasions by peers as both physically bullying others and being physical victims); physical neutrals who neither physically bullied others nor became physical victims (received no, or less than 3 peer nominations for physically bullying others or being victimised). For relational bullying the same classification system was employed. All peer nominations were standardised by class to account for differences in class size. Involvement in both physical and relational bullying was determined: physical bully only, relational bully only, physical and relational bully, physical victim only, relational victim only, physical and relational victim.

DANVA (Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy) (Nowicki, 2005). The child facial expression test is a computerised test consisting of 24 photographs (12 male, 12 female, and mixed ethnicity) equally distributed between high and low intensity expressions of four emotions; happy, sad, angry and fearful. Happy, sad, angry, and fearful response options appeared on the screen below each photo. Each photo appeared on the computer screen for two seconds. Tests have shown the DANVA to have high internal consistency (current sample alpha = .61 indicating moderate internal consistency), and that it is reliable over time (test–re-test reliabilities between .70 and .80 over 6–8 week periods). Construct validity support is also evident from results of over 200 studies with age ranges from 3 to 80 years (Nowicki, 2005).

Bryant index of empathy measurement for children and adolescents. Empathy styles were measured using Bryant (1982) 22-item empathy index (example items "When I see someone who is feeling upset, I think about why he might be feeling like that", "Seeing someone who is crying makes me feel like crying"). The index focuses specifically on affective components of the empathic process. The response format was changed from the original two-stage (yes vs. no responses) format that