



Does empathy predict (cyber) bullying perpetration, and how do age, gender and nationality affect this relationship?☆



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study set out to investigate which role empathy plays in traditional bullying and cyberbullying in a sample of adolescents from Greece and Spain. Furthermore, the study aimed to assess invariance of the relationship between empathy and (cyber) bullying across gender, age and nationality.

Method: The sample comprised 564 secondary education students attending grades 7 to 10 in typical coeducational schools in Spain and Greece. Participants completed structured anonymous questionnaires on traditional bullying, cyberbullying and empathy. Responses were analyzed using structural equation modeling.

Results: Both cognitive and affective empathy negatively predicted traditional bullying and cyberbullying perpetration. Mean differences were found for gender and age groups, with girls and older students scoring higher in empathy compared to boys and younger students. Also, older students scored higher in cyberbullying perpetration than younger ones. However, the effect of empathy on bullying and cyberbullying was invariant across gender, age and nationality.

Conclusions: Cognitive and affective empathy are important correlates of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying, independent of gender, age and nationality. Overall, the results provide valuable information for the development of evidence-based interventions and educational campaigns against bullying and cyberbullying in adolescence.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is defined as the aggressive intentional act by a person (or a group of people) against another person (or a group of people) who cannot easily defend themselves. It typically comprises face-to-face confrontations and physical assault, as well as indirect acts of aggression, such as gossiping and the spreading of rumors (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying is defined as bullying occurring online, such as derogation, posting libelous comments, hacking an account, exposing sensitive personal information without consent, harassment and

sending threatening messages (Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Tokunaga (2010) added to the definition of cyberbullying that it occurs repeatedly over time and sets up an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim.

Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying can take place regardless of time and space (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Victims can be attacked without being aware of the attack, and cyberbullying can be witnessed by larger audiences (Beran & Li, 2005; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Menesini & Spiel, 2012). But as in traditional bullying, cyberbullying victims suffer adverse psychological consequences, including psychopathological symptoms, suicide thoughts and attempts, social isolation, and problems in school (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009). Estimated prevalence of traditional bullying lies between 5 and 10% (Olweus, 2012; Solberg & Olweus, 2003; Smith, 2014). The estimates for cyberbullying have a wider range; results referring to cyber-aggression range from 5.3% to 31.5% (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Wong, Chan, & Cheng, 2014), while those referring to cyber-victimization vary between 2.2% to 56.2% (Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010).

One way of preventing cyberbullying is to identify the psychosocial risk factors for cyberbullying behavior and develop educational

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campaigns and intervention programs to address these (Menesini, Nocentini, & Palladino, 2012; Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, & Casas, 2012; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). Several studies have indeed investigated the factors that add to the risk of cyberbullying, together with those that offer protection and prevent this behavior (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). In Greece, for example, it was shown that empathy, social norms and moral disengagement were explanatory factors in the occurrence of cyberbullying (Lazuras, Barkoukis, Ourda, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2013). Empathy was also found in Spain to be one of the most important elements in explaining bullying and cyberbullying, together with the school climate, the level of control over personal information online, and abusive internet use (Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2013).

Empathy is a fundamental human personality trait and is thought to facilitate social interactions and interpersonal communication in at least two separate ways: first, affective empathy is spontaneous in nature and allows individuals to assimilate and display compassion in response to other people's emotional states; second, cognitive empathy requires more conscious deliberation, enables understanding of people's emotions and putting these into perspective, and may support strategic social interactions and communication (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Lamm, 2006; Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003). Both self-reported measures and neuroscientific evidence lend support to this distinction (Harari, Shamay-Tsoory, Ravid, & Levkovitz, 2010; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Nummenmaa, Hirvonen, Parkkola, & Hietanen, 2008).

Jolliffe and Farrington (2004, 2006) argued that empathy is an essential component of pro-social behavior, such as helping and altruism, and of moral development. As is typical in moral development, differences related to gender and age are to be expected (Murphy & Gilligan, 1980). Girls generally show higher empathy levels than boys, especially in self-reported evaluations (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). Empathy has furthermore been shown to increase with age (Bosacki & Wilde Astington, 1999), and to be related to a person's cultural background (Cassels, Chan, Chung, & Birch, 2010). Important for the current study, research has also shown empathy to be inversely related to anti-social behavior, aggression and bullying (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Chan & Wong, 2015; Endersen & Olweus, 2001; Smith & Thompson, 1991; Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). Two studies on cyberbullying showed that lower scores in empathy lead to higher levels of cyberbullying behavior and victimization in adolescents (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2009; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011). Separating affective and cognitive empathy, it was found that for both traditional bullying (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004) and cyberbullying (Renati, Berrone, & Zanetti, 2012) only affective empathy predicted bullying behavior. However, Ang and Goh (2010) did find both cognitive and affective empathy to be predictive of cyberbullying, especially among male adolescents.

Empathy is not the only factor that has been associated with bullying. Several studies have assessed the role of demographic factors such as age, gender and nationality. Research into the effects of demographic factors has mainly looked at prevalence rates among different groups, or in other words, at the mean differences in bullying between these groups. With respect to gender, the evidence is mixed. In traditional bullying, boys more often take on the role of aggressor than girls (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015). However, with regard to cyberbullying some studies have found few or no gender differences in perpetration or victimization (Slonje & Smith, 2008), while others suggest that cyberbullying is a “gendered phenomenon” (Li, 2007; Rodkin & Berger, 2008). The evidence for age-related differences is clear with respect to traditional bullying, in that the highest prevalence is seen between the ages of 12 and 14 (Hasekiu, 2013). With respect to cyberbullying the results are mixed. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) showed that older adolescents were more likely to engage in cyberbullying than younger ones. However, other studies did not find significant age differences (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Significant mean differences have also been reported between countries for both traditional and cyberbullying (Haddon & Livingstone, 2012; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, &

Del Rey, 2015). Of interest for the current study, comparing findings for Greece and Spain shows that Greek adolescent students reported more cyberbullying incidents than their Spanish counterparts (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2015; Garaigordobil, 2011).

Although these studies provide important information about the influence of demographic factors on cyberbullying and cyber-victimization, it has been argued that a move beyond mean differences is necessary, and that it is important to study how demographics relate to psychosocial factors that predict cyberbullying (Underwood & Rosen, 2011). Some evidence in this area already exists. Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) assessed the effects of gender on the relationship between empathy and bullying among adolescents in the UK, and found that cognitive empathy was associated with bullying behavior in neither males nor female adolescents, while affective empathy did predict bullying behavior, among both males and females who engaged frequently (vs. occasionally) in bullying acts. In a more recent study, the same authors found that low affective empathy related to traditional bullying in males, but not in females (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011). Ang and Goh (2010) assessed the interactions between gender, cognitive and affective empathy, and cyberbullying among adolescents in Singapore. They found that cognitive empathy consistently predicted cyberbullying behavior in males, and only in females if the latter also scored low in affective empathy. While some evidence already exists, further research is clearly needed, not only to more fully understand the effects of gender, but also to uncover the influence of other demographics, such as age and nationality, on the relationship between empathy and traditional and cyberbullying. Past evidence has shown mean differences, but so far there is no evidence about how these other demographic factors affect the psychosocial factors that lead to traditional bullying and cyberbullying behavior.

The present study sets out to address this gap in the literature, and aims to assess the influence of demographic factors on the association between empathy (cognitive and affective empathy) and bullying behavior, including both traditional bullying and cyberbullying. To study the influence of nationality, an international sample of adolescents from Greece and Spain was used. We expected to find mean differences in empathy, bullying and cyberbullying among the different gender, country and age (educational stage) divisions (hypothesis 1). Based on previous studies, we further expected that higher scores in cognitive empathy would be associated with lower self-reported cyberbullying perpetration (Ang & Goh, 2010), and that affective empathy would correlate negatively with both traditional bullying and cyberbullying perpetration (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006, 2011) (hypothesis 2). Finally, the relationships between empathy and both types of self-reported bullying were expected to be invariant across gender, age and nationality (hypothesis 3).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 564 students (49.5% girls) from Spain ($N = 317$) and Greece ($N = 247$), aged between 11 and 18 ($M = 14.71$; $SD = 1.65$). The Spanish sample ($M_{age} = 13.86$; $SD = 1.42$; $N = 317$; 45.9% girls; 54.1% boys) was taken from grades 1 to 4 of the Spanish secondary education (compulsory), which is equivalent to grades 7 through 10 of the secondary education system in the U.S.A. Out of the three Spanish schools in the sample, two were public (one of which located in a disadvantaged socio-economic environment, as classified by the educational authorities) and the other was private. The Greek sample ($M_{age} = 15.86$; $SD = 1.17$; $N = 247$; 51.8% girls; 48.2% boys) incorporated the equivalent grades; participants were recruited from three schools, two junior high schools (equivalent to American grades 7–9) and a senior high school (equivalent to American grade 10). All Greek schools were typical coeducational schools located in mid-level socio-economic areas (as identified by the educational authorities). The

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