



Adolescent bullying and personality: A cross-cultural approach

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have suggested that heritable personality traits may predispose individuals to be willing to engage in the behavior. In particular, previous research has demonstrated a link between bullying perpetration and low levels of the HEXACO personality factor Honesty-Humility, which is a measure of an individual's willingness to exploit others. However, to date, evidence for the importance of low Honesty-Humility (versus low Agreeableness or Emotionality) has been drawn from North American or European samples. The present study attempts to address this gap by comparing data from 440 Chinese adolescents and 350 Canadian adolescents who completed the HEXACO-PR-I personality inventory along with a bullying questionnaire. We predicted that the personality factor Honesty-Humility would be a stronger predictor Chinese and Canadian adolescents' bullying perpetration than would anger (low A) or low empathy, emotional concern, and anxiety (low E). Results of hierarchical linear regressions confirmed that Honesty-Humility, as well as Conscientiousness, were significantly, negatively related to bullying perpetration in both samples. This suggests a cross-cultural profile of bullies as exploitative and impulsive, although Chinese bullies exhibited a more complex relationship with personality that included low Agreeableness and high extraversion. Implications of these results for the adaptive theory of bullying are discussed.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, bullies are conceptualized as individuals whose personal and social development has gone awry (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Walden & Beran, 2010). Bullying¹ behaviour is generally assumed to be maladaptive and the result of a deficiency in social skills and social information processing (Berger, 2007). However, given its ubiquitous prevalence across cultures, it may be more reasonable to suggest that bullying can at times result from normative development (Koh & Wong, 2015; Shakoor et al., 2012; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999; Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, 2012). The evolutionary theory of bullying posits that it is implemented as an adaptive strategy to gain access to physical, social and sexual resources (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). For a behaviour to be adaptive, it must positively contribute to ancestral reproductive success, and there must be evidence of its potential heritability (Volk et al., 2012). Consistent with this perspective, bullying is related to increased dating and sexual motives and behaviors (Koh & Wong, 2015; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Volk, Dane, Marini, & Vaillancourt, 2015; Dane, Marini, Volk, & Vaillancourt, 2017) as well as increased popularity (e.g., Kolbert &

Crothers, 2003; Reijntjes et al., 2013; Sentse, Veenstra, Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2015).

With regards to its heritability, in a sample of 1100 families with 10-year-old twins, it was determined that genetic factors were partially responsible for bullying and victimization occurrence, with heritability coefficients of .61 and .73 respectively (Ball et al., 2008). Though heritable, complex human behaviors such as bullying are almost invariably polygenic (Henderson, 1982). Thus, there are likely a variety of genes that make an individual more apt to engage in bullying behaviour. These genotypes may be expressed as personality or temperament traits that could predispose adolescents towards bullying (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012; Lewis & Bates, 2014).

1.1. Personality and bullying

Research has shown that while the relationship between personality and environments is bidirectional (Eysenck, 2006), our genes may predispose us to develop certain temperaments (Goldsmith, Lemery, Buss, & Campos, 1999), levels of aggressiveness (DiLalla, 2002) and personality traits related to aggression (Ashton & Lee, 2007). From an

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¹ From here on, we use the term bully and bullying to refer to "pure" bullies who are only bullies, not to bully-victims (see Volk et al., 2014 for a review of the differences between the two).

adaptive perspective, these personality traits may then predispose individuals to use aggressive behavior to pursue adaptive goals (Hawley, 1999; Mealey, 1995). The relationship between bullying and personality has been measured using a variety of different models of personality, and has been related to many personality constructs. For example, Olweus (1993) suggested that bullies are typically highly impulsive, lacking empathy, and tolerant of violence. Relatedly, Barry et al. (2000) suggested a link between bullying and traits related to being callous and unemotional, including a lack of guilt and empathy, poor affect, and a tendency to use others for personal gain. Furthermore, studies have implicated psychoticism (aggressive interpersonal conflict) as a personality trait that increases the likelihood of bullying (e.g., Connolly & O'Moore, 2003).

Researchers have also previously utilized the Big Five personality model to examine bullying behaviour. Tani, Greenman, Schneider, and Fregoso (2003) found that bullies, in their sample of Italian and Canadian children, were lower in Agreeableness and higher in Extraversion than non-bully peers. Lower levels of Big Five Agreeableness may reflect a preoccupation with one's own interests rather than the welfare of others, and higher levels of Extraversion in adolescents who bully may reflect a desire to gain social status and popularity (Duffy, Penn, Nesdale, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2017). These same personality traits were related to bullying in a meta-analysis that also reported an association between bullying and higher Neuroticism (emotional instability), lower Conscientiousness (lack of diligence/organization), and lower Openness to Experience (close-mindedness; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015).

In recent years, researchers studying antisociality have started successfully utilizing a more contemporary model of personality called the HEXACO. The HEXACO model of personality differs from the Big Five model in terms of redefining Agreeableness and Neuroticism, and adding a sixth factor, Honesty-Humility (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Agreeableness in the HEXACO is defined by levels of patience, forgiveness, and tolerance for being exploited at the high end of the trait pole, and holding grudges, stubbornness, being critical and feeling anger at the lower end. Honesty-Humility is defined by tendencies to seek fair outcomes, have a humble opinion of oneself, and to avoid exploiting others at the higher end, and flattery, deception, inflated self-importance, and greed at the lower end. Emotionality is only very broadly related to Neuroticism, and is characterized by feelings of fear, anxiety, sentimentality, and dependence at the higher end of the trait and feeling detached from others, lacking fear of unpleasant stimuli, lacking empathy, and have little need to share their feelings with others at the lower end (Ashton & Lee, 2007).

The explicit evolutionary underpinnings and cross-cultural validity of the HEXACO model make it an ideal choice for studying bullying through the lens of adaptiveness, as it clearly differentiates between tendencies to be predatory (H), reactive (A), and low in emotionality (E; Ashton & Lee, 2005; Book et al., 2016). Given bullying's proactive, goal-oriented nature (Volk et al., 2014), it would make sense for it to be primarily associated with predatory (H) rather than reactive (A) or Emotionality (E) tendencies. A number of studies thus far have found just such significant relationships between bullying and HEXACO personality traits (e.g., Farrell, Della Cioppa, Volk, & Book, 2014). The Honesty-Humility factor was the primary predictor of bullying perpetration over and above all the other HEXACO factors and two additional measures of aggression, while Agreeableness and Emotionality were only significant univariate predictors of bullying in a sample of Canadian youth (Book et al., 2012). Honesty-Humility also had the strongest correlation with instrumental aggression, but not reactive aggression, with which Agreeableness had the highest correlation. Farrell, Provenzano, Dane, Marini, and Volk (2017) further demonstrated that Canadian youth who are low in Honesty-Humility may be more likely to engage in bullying behaviour if they also experience low levels of maternal parental knowledge. Additionally, Smith (2016) American data showed that there are significant relationships between the HEXACO

factors Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness and cyberbullying perpetration. Smith (2016) reinforced the importance of Honesty-Humility in predicting bullying as an exploitative behavior, but also suggested that cyberbullies' impulsivity and recklessness, indicated by low Conscientiousness, were important predictors of their behavior.

Overall, the data on HEXACO scores and bullying highlight the importance of thinking about certain personality traits as having the potential to predispose individuals to engage in bullying. Bullying appears to be heritable (Ball et al., 2008) and at the multivariate level it is associated with both adaptive outcomes (e.g., Reijntjes et al., 2013; Volk et al., 2016) and heritable exploitative (but not angry or low-Emotionality) personality traits (Book et al., 2012), thereby fitting the criteria of a potential evolutionary adaptation (Volk et al., 2014). If bullying is thus at least in part a general human adaptation, Honesty-Humility should be an important trait in predicting bullying in cross-cultural settings.

1.2. Bullying in China

Unfortunately, all of the aforementioned studies on bullying and personality relied on data from Western adolescents. Thus, while there is evidence that bullying and personality traits are significantly correlated, this evidence is based on data from Western, individualistic cultures that may not reflect the personality traits or relationships found in other cultures (Strohmeier, Yanagida, & Toda, 2016). In particular, collectivist societies value interdependence and cohesion/harmony among individuals, with individuals showing long-term loyalty towards those in their group and expecting protection from their group in return (Franke, Hofstede, & Bond, 1991; Hofstede, 1980; Huang, Hong, & Espelage, 2013). This desire to maintain harmony within the group may play a large role in dictating behaviour in a collectivist society (Franke et al., 1991). As such, researchers suggest that bullying in a collectivist context is a collective behaviour with the aim of maintaining group conformity (Cheng, Chen, Ho, & Cheng, 2011; Chui & Chan, 2015). Consequently, individualistic characteristics associated with low levels of Honesty-Humility that increase the likelihood of bullying in Western contexts, such as greed, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a lack of humility, and a sense of entitlement to an elevated social status, may not relate to bullying in the same way in China.

Compared to Western adolescents, Chinese adolescents tend to report equal levels of victimization, but lower levels of bullying perpetration, suggesting that relatively fewer bullies engage in the same amount of bullying as do larger numbers of bullies in Western samples (Ji, Zhang, & Jones, 2016; Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001; Xu, 2008; Zhang, Chen, & Chen, 2016). Huang et al. (2013) suggested that there are a variety of immediate and distal ecological factors contributing to the rise of bullying in China. First Qiao, Xing, Ji, and Zhang (2009) suggest that increased levels of divorce in China leave children of divorced families especially vulnerable to peer pressure due to lower levels of self-confidence, thus leaving them more likely to assist in bullying, or imitate bullying behaviour. Second, China's One-Child Policy has led to an abundance of children being raised without siblings to socialize with, who may be more likely to be over-protected by their parents (Chen, 2001). Finally, with academic achievement being prioritized in China, behavioral problems are often overlooked in schools – so much so, that up to 46.1% of bullies go without reprimanding (Chen, 2001). Thus, in light of these ecological factors that may be unique to China, do personality factors play the same role in bullying as in Western cultures?

As in Western samples, bullying in China is positively associated with being younger, being a boy, and engaging in general antisocial behavior (Chan & Wong, 2015). Wei, Williams, and Chen, J.-K., and Chang, H.-Y. (2010) found that middle-school bullies in Taichung City, Taiwan, tended to have higher levels of depressive symptoms and delinquency, and lower levels of support from teachers. With regards to

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