Bullying Behaviour, Empathy and Social Cognition: Cool Manipulators or Social Misfits?

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Abstract

While aggressive behaviour is often characterised by deficits in social information processing, bullying, a subcategory of aggression, is generally engaged in by those who have been found to have a good understanding of how others are thinking and feeling (Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999). What is not known is if this understanding is used in the same way by different types of bullies. The current study investigated if relational bullies, those who include social relationship manipulation in their bullying, have higher cognitive empathy and social cognition skills, but lower emotional empathy, than other types of bullies and non-bullies. A sample of 187 Australian secondary and tertiary undergraduate students participated in this study. All completed the Little, Johns, Henrich and Hawley (2003) Aggression Questionnaire, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983), and responded to two vignettes. Contrary to previous research no significant difference was found between any of the bullying and non-bullying groups on empathy and social cognition. However, the relationship between aggression and empathy was found to be different for males and females, which may have implications for bullying intervention programs.

Introduction

Aggression is generally thought of as being any behaviour that is intended to hurt or harm others (Farrington, 1991). Aggression can be instrumental where deliberate aggressive actions are used to gain a degree of social control (e.g., threatening a child to obtain their lunch money). Aggression can also be reactive whereby aggressive actions are a response to provocation (e.g., hitting another child in response to be teased). While bullying has often been treated as synonymous with aggression (Little, Jones, Henrich & Hawley, 2003), the socially sophisticated nature of bullying identifies it as a distinct subcategory of aggression (Ireland & Archer, 2004). Bullying has most often been defined as involving a more physically or socially powerful person, or group, intentionally victimising others. This other is generally perceived as being weaker and is victimised repeatedly over time (Smith & Brain, 2000). Indeed, bullying is perceived as a systematic abuse of power (Smith & Sharp, 1994) that includes physical (e.g., hitting and taking belongings), verbal (e.g., teasing and threatening) and social or emotional (e.g., exclusion and isolation) bullying behaviours. It is the repetitive nature of bullying that makes it so burdensome and frightening (Rigby, 1996). Moreover, because bullying behaviour is generally directed at vulnerable people who are unable to defend themselves, this makes it particularly unpleasant. If a victim stops being vulnerable there is a tendency for the bully to move to a new victim (Simpson & Cohen, 2004).

Relational and overt bullying

Children appear to bully in ways that most damage the goals of their same-gender peer group (Crick, 1995). Hence, girls tend to use relational bullying behaviours that damage or control peer relationships such as withdrawing friendship or spreading rumours. In contrast, boys typically have goals of dominance and instrumentality, using overt aggressive behaviours such as verbal threats and physical attacks including hitting and punching. While some research shows that girls are higher than boys in relational aggression and boys higher than girls in overt forms of aggression (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), there is also contradictory evidence that there are no significant gender differences (e.g., Tiet, Wasserman, Loeber, McReynolds & Miller, 2001). Indeed some studies have found that bullies will often engage in both relational and overt bullying (e.g., Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield & Karstadt, 2000).

Generally much of the research in the area of aggression, and consequently bullying, has focused on a social skills model (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). This

model describes aggression as resulting from social information processing deficits in the areas of social perception, interpretation of social cues, goal selection, response strategy generation and response decisions. It is argued that reactively aggressive children have social information processing deficits in terms of cue encoding and interpretation, and are more likely to engage in unwarranted, hostile attribution biases (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996; Dodge & Coie, 1987). Based on this theory, Randall (1997) suggests that bullies do not process social information accurately and seem unable to make realistic judgements about the intentions of other people.

While much of the work in the area of bullying has been based on aggression research, Sutton (2001) suggests that this research has not tended to capture the social nature of bullying. Indeed, Sutton, Smith and Swettenham (1999) have shown that bullies, and in particularly relational bullies, demonstrate superior theory of mind skills when compared to their victims and their supporters. That is, these bullies demonstrated a superior ability to attribute mental states to themselves and others in order to explain and predict behaviour. Such bullies are able to understand the beliefs, desires and feelings of others, and use this understanding to their advantage. It is suggested that having a good grasp of the internal mental states of their peers, along with the ability to manipulate them, may in fact be necessary for a bully to develop and maintaining their role (Arensio & Lemerise, 2001; Sutton et al., 1999). Indeed, having superior theory of mind ability gives no indication of how this ability will be utilised; just as low theory of mind ability can lead to negative behviours, high theory of mind ability can be used negatively (Arsensio & Lemerise, 2001).

Evidence suggests that indirect or relational forms of bullying such as social exclusion often require the manipulation of mental states and beliefs of others in the forms of gossip, rumour and lies. Yet these bullies are often identified as popular by their peers (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Kaukiainen, 1996). Such popularity may reflect a bully's ability to manipulate and their ability to play a critical role in controlling the structure and nature of peer group interactions. Although theory of mind understandings may not be as critical for overt bullying, many overt bullies have also be found to be relational bullies (Warden & Christie, 1997).

Bullying and empathy

Empathy is broadly defined as the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another (Davies, 1996). It is a multidimensional construct that includes a cognitive (the ability to understand the perspective of another) and an emotional (the emotional response such as helping behaviours) component. Empathy has many beneficial effects on attitudes and behaviour. For example, arousal of empathic concern

has been found to be associated with feeling sympathy for another's pain and with helping behaviours (Oswald, 1996). While it has been found that high empathy subjects are less aggressive (Mehrabian, Young & Sata, 1988), this result was not consistent when only affective empathy was measured (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988).

Current study

The question remains as to whether bullies use the social situation confidently (Sutton et al., 1999), or whether they differ in terms of social information processing deficits (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996). As yet there has been no direct examination of the relationship between the different forms of bullying behaviour, multidimensional empathy and social cognition. Further research exploring the relationships between bullying styles, cognitive and emotional empathy, and social cognition is therefore indicated, particularly as many bullying prevention programs include training in empathy and social skills (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between bullying behaviour, the dimensions of empathy and social cognition. Given that bullies have been found to possess good theory of mind skills when compared to their victims and supporters (Sutton et al, 1999), but tend to use these skills in negative ways, it was hypothesized that bullies, particularly relational bullies, would have higher cognitive empathy and higher social cognition skills than non-bullies, but that they would show lower emotional empathy.

Method

Sample

Participants in this study were drawn from two sources. Firstly, the sample included 105 adolescents from one Australian senior high school with an age range of 15 to 19 years (M=16.4, SD=.79, male=47, female=56). Secondly, 82 adults ranging in age from 19 to 57 years (M=30.4, SD=8.6) old were drawn from one Australian university. These adults were undergraduate university students. English was the first language for 96.3 per cent of the sample.

Measures

Bullying behaviours were assessed using the self-report Aggression Questionnaire (Little et al., 2003). This questionnaire distinguishes four dimensions of aggressive behaviour: Overt and relational aggression (the form), and instrumental and reactive aggression (the function). Little et al., take a dimensional approach to aggressive behaviour, in which individuals are characterised as more or less overt and relational in the forms of their aggressive behaviour, as well as more or less instrumental and reactive in the reasons for their aggressive behaviour. In this framework, overt

aggression includes physical and verbal behaviours directed at another individual while relational aggression includes intentional manipulation of, and damage to, another's social relationships. Instrumental aggression incorporates behaviours that predict self-serving outcomes while reactive aggression is more defensive, a response to perceived provocation. The questionnaire consists of six different aggression scales: Relational, overt, reactive relational, instrumental relational, reactive overt and instrumental. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not at all true to completely true for all 36 questions. High scores indicate high levels of aggression.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983) was used to assess empathy. The IRI is a 28 item self-report questionnaire consisting of four subscales: Perspective taking (the ability to adopt different points of view), fantasy (the ability to imagine oneself in the feelings and actions of characters in books and movies), emotional concern (the tendency to experience feelings of concern and warmth for others) and personal distress (personal feelings of unease in reaction to others' emotions). Responses are measured on a 5 point Likert scale. High scores indicate high levels of empathy.

Social cognition was assessed using two vignettes by Happè (1994). One vignette assessed cognitive understanding of a social situation while the other assessed emotional understanding. Answers were score as zero (fail), one (pass without reference to either mental or emotional state) or two (pass with reference to mental or emotional state). High scores indicated high levels of social cognition.

Method

Questionnaires were administered to the students by the researchers on a group basis during class time. To prevent any powerful affective states that may have been aroused by the Aggression Questionnaire influencing responses to the other measures, the social vignettes were administered first, the IRI second and the Aggression Questionnaire last.

Results

Using the aggression scale scores with criteria from Little et al., (2003) the following groups were created: Relational bullies (high instrumental and high or medium relational aggression), overt bullies (high instrumental and high or medium overt aggression), non-bully/high aggressive (high reactive and low instrumental aggression), and non-bully/low aggressive (low instrumental and low or medium reactive aggression).

Discriminate analysis was used to determine whether the six predictors-perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, personal distress, cognitive social cognition, emotional social cognition-could predict membership of bullying/non-bullying groups. The overall Wilks' Lambda was not significant, $\Delta = .82$, χ^2 (18, $N = 123$)

= 21.77, $p = .242$, indicating that overall the predictors did not differentiate between the four bullying and non-bullying groups.

Post hoc analysis using Spearman's Rank Order Correlation revealed significant (at 0.05 level) negative correlations between perspective taking and four of the six aggression subscales including all the subscales measuring overt aggression (overt $r_s = -.16$, reactive overt $r_s = -.15$, instrumental overt $r_s = -.17$, relational $r_s = -.19$). In contrast to previous findings which suggest that the emotional component of empathy plays a greater role in moderating aggression than the cognitive component (e.g., Oswald, 1996), a small but significant positive correlation was found between empathic concern and the two aggression subscales measuring reactive aggression ($r_s = .15$, $p < .05$)

Given that gender differences have been found in forms of aggression (e.g., Crick, 1995), the relationships between forms of aggression and empathy and social cognition were also investigated separately for males and females. No significant correlations were found between the subscales for males. For females, there were significant negative correlations between perspective taking and: Overt ($r_s = -.29$, $p < .01$), reactive overt ($r_s = -.24$, $p < .05$), instrumental overt ($r_s = -.20$, $p < .05$), relational ($r_s = -.28$, $p < .01$), and reactive relational aggression ($r_s = -.25$, $p < .01$). In addition, significant correlations were found between empathic concern and reactive overt aggression ($r_s = .20$, $p < .05$), and between emotional social cognition (as measured by the vignettes) and: Overt ($r_s = .25$, $p < .01$), reactive relational ($r_s = .20$, $p < .05$) and instrumental relational aggression ($r_s = .21$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Contrary to the hypotheses for this study, bullies were not significantly different to non-bullies on empathy and social cognition. These results do not support either the social skills model of aggression, which describes childhood aggression in terms of social information processing deficits and which suggests that aggressive children have social information processing deficits in terms of reading and encoding social cues (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1996), or the theory of mind perspective whereby bullies would appear to require good cognitive empathy and an ability to understand the social world well.

Some researchers have suggested that the emotional component of empathy plays a greater role in moderating aggression than the cognitive component (e.g., Oswald, 1996). In contrast, the current study revealed a small positive correlation between the measure of affective empathy, empathic concern and the two aggression subscales that measured reactive aggression. In addition, a small negative correction was found between the measure of cognitive empathy, perspective taking and the overt aggression subscales. These findings support previous research by Crick and

Dodge (1999), which suggested an inverse relationship between perspective taking and aggressive behaviour. However, this relationship may not be straightforward. For example, it has been found that low cognitive empathy was more strongly related to aggressive behaviour than low affective empathy, yet this relationship disappeared when intelligence and socioeconomic factors were controlled (Joliffe, 2004). This suggests that the relationship between empathy and aggression may be mediated by other variables.

Although the literature generally supports a relationship between aggression and empathy, the full complexity of this relationship is not clear. For example, a meta-analysis on empathy research conducted by Miller and Eisenberg (1988) found that questionnaire measures did support a significant inverse relationship between empathy and aggression. However, this relationship was not always evidenced, and results depended on how the construct of empathy was defined and manipulated. It appears from these varying results that a more rigorous concept of empathy needs to be developed. This is particularly important given the emphasis on facilitating empathy in many programs aimed at reducing bullying (e.g., Maines & Robinson, 1991). If the concept of empathy used to create these programs is not the most pertinent then these programs may not be addressing the problem as effectively as desired. Indeed, Sutton et al., (1999) have argued that what is often overlooked in the aggression and empathy relationship is the value component of empathy. That is, bullies value the costs and benefits of bullying differently to non-bullies and may not see bullying as a moral wrong. Moreover, bullies also appear to respond differently than non-bullies to victims of bullying at an emotional level (see Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). It may be necessary for further research to not only clarify the definition of empathy but to also incorporate a focus on values and emotion processing. However, just as Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) suggest, based on what is already known about proactively aggressive children merely trying to change their empathetic responses and moral values by focusing on reasoning processes alone will not be sufficient. Consequently, there is merit in revisiting the concept of empathy, and considering the new understandings that result from this investigation when designing programs aimed at reducing bullying behaviours.

Although previous research indicated that, overall, the relationship between empathy and aggression is similar for males and females (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988), in the current study females were found to have an inverse relationship between perspective taking and aggressive behaviour. Specifically, cognitive empathy appeared to be more important than emotional empathy as a moderator of aggression in females. There was a small positive correlation between emotional social cognition and the overt, reactive relational and instrumental

relational aggression subscales. For the male sample none of these correlations were evident suggesting that the pattern of relationships between empathy and aggression may differ for males and females. A similar inconsistency in relation to empathy was also found by Warden and Mackinnon (2003). This inconsistency warrants further investigation as it could have implications for bullying invention programs where the content and/or style may need to different according to gender. For instance the 'No blame' approach (Maines & Robinson, 1991) relies heavily on empathy on the part of the bully, a strategy, given the current results, that may be successful for girls but not for boys.

In summary, the relationship between empathy and social cognition in bullies and non-bullies was explored in this study. Contrary to the hypotheses, bullies were not found to have higher levels of cognitive empathy and lower levels of affective empathy than non-bullies. An inverse relationship between cognitive empathy and aggression, particularly for females, was identified. Given the focus on empathy in many anti-bully programs, further investigation of the relationship between bullying and empathy is warranted.

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