



Fearful victims and fearless bullies? Subjective reactions to emotional imagery scenes of children involved in school aggression



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ABSTRACT

Being aggressive has been related to fearlessness, low empathy and premeditated antisocial behaviors. The current study examined how school bullies and victims respond to affective situations presented through imagery. It was hypothesized that victims would perceive fear imagery as more fearful than bullies, demonstrating their proneness to fear and high behavioral inhibition. Bullies were expected to perceive fear imagery as less fearful and experience less negative affect, based on their callous-unemotional characteristics. Children participated in a tone-cued imagery experiment during which they imagined for 8 s twelve pre-normed scripts describing fear, anger, joy and pleasant relaxation. Children rated their experienced emotions of fear, anger, joy and sadness for each scene. Bullies responded with low levels of fear to fear imagery and across emotion types and reported overall higher positive affect, even during provocative anger scenes. In contrast, victims responded with higher fear, anger and sadness. The varied emotional responses appeared to be partly explained by group differences in behavioral inhibition, which was high in victims. Results are discussed in light of aggression theories and potential interventions.

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1. Introduction

School bullying involves repeated physical (hitting, kicking) and non-physical (isolating, gossiping; Karatzias, Power, & Swanson, 2002) aggression toward children who are perceived as weaker and less dominant, with negative consequences for both perpetrators and victims (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012). Individual differences on how children encode and process emotionally evocative situations during social interactions, interpret and respond to the behaviors of others, and their motivation toward obtaining rewards and avoiding punishment play a significant role in school aggression (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1996).

Aggressive children tend to be hyper-vigilant to hostile cues and attribute hostile intentions to others (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski, & Newman, 1990). Differences in emotions, in addition to interpretations, are also important, as some children feel positive after engaging in aggression (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001), which may relate to their poor emotional empathy towards the pain of others and difficulty in recognizing expressions of fear and sadness (Blair, 1999). Motivationally, aggressors show resting hypo-arousal, documented by heart rate and skin conductance measures (Raine, 2002; Scarpa, Tanaka, & Chiara Haden, 2008),

and may engage in aggression for sensation and arousal seeking purposes (Wilson & Scarpa, 2011). Aggressive children also demonstrate little fear for negative consequences to self and others, and low sensitivity to punishment (Dierckx et al., 2014). Emotion processing and regulation difficulties characterize both children who display aggression (Beauchaine, Gatzke-Kopp, & Mead, 2007; Fanti, Panayiotou, Lazarou, Georgiou, & Michael, in press) and children with internalizing difficulties (Beauchaine, 2001) who are often their victims. For example, victims show more sadness in unpleasant situations (e.g., Boulton & Underwood, 1992) but it is unclear if this is a cause or an outcome of victimization (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). To the extent that emotional responses represent action dispositions (Lang, 1979), understanding the emotions of bullies and victims in specific contexts can elucidate the processes involved in bullying, the aim of this investigation.

As a form of aggression, bullying is one of the DSM-5 criteria for conduct disorder. For this reason, research on children and adolescents displaying conduct problems (CP) is relevant to bullying. A subgroup of these youth are characterized by high levels of Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits, which include lack of remorse and empathy, callous use of others, shallow emotions (Fanti, 2013; Moffitt et al., 2008) and are considered precursors of adult psychopathy (Essau, Sasagawa, & Frick, 2006). CP children high on CU-traits tend to be fearless and insensitive to punishment (e.g., Frick & Morris, 2004) and may have been poorly socialized because

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of their insensitivity to the distress of others (Frick & Viding, 2009). They are calculated and premeditated in their aggression to receive particular rewards (Roose, Bijttebier, Claes, & Lilienfeld, 2011) rather than angry and reactive to provocation (e.g., Hughes, Moore, Morris, & Corr, 2012). CP children *without* CU-traits tend to be anxious, with intense, uncontrolled emotions. Their aggression is mostly reactive, hot-tempered and impulsive (Frick & Viding, 2009).

These two profiles of aggressive children, which reflect the new specifier in the DSM-5 criteria for Conduct Disorder, i.e., with or without Low Prosocial Emotions, seem to reflect the characteristics of children involved in bullying: bullies typically hold a positive attitude towards violence and are low in anxiety and fear, resembling CP + CU youth, whereas victimized children who become bullies themselves (bully/victims) are disruptive and impulsive, with intense emotional reactions that may be reinforcing to their perpetrators, resembling CP-only youth (Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004; Schwartz, 2000). Bully/victims tend to have symptoms of internalizing pathology and high distress, display impulsive and retaliatory aggression, and demonstrate poor emotional regulation (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009; Schwartz, 2000). On the other hand, victims are passive, submissive, anxious and insecure (Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998). Like bully/victims, they show increased reactivity to threat and high amygdala activation (McCrary et al., 2011; Pollak, 2008) and are prone to anxiety and depression (Idsoe, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2012; Meltzer, Vostanis, Ford, Bebbington, & Dennis, 2011).

Therefore, prior evidence indicates that traits related to fear, anxiety, behavioral inhibition (e.g., McNaughton & Gray, 2000) and callousness may relate to the behavior of bullies, victims and bully/victims, affecting how they perceive, interpret and respond to emotional situations. These differences, in combination with other risk factors including genetics and socialization (Ball et al., 2008; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997), may predict the different roles children adopt in the bullying phenomenon.

2. Current study

This investigation examines (a) difference in CU-traits and behavioral inhibition (as an index of fearfulness and anxiety) between bullies and victims and (b) how bullies, victims and bully/victims differ in their emotional responses. It was hypothesized that bullies will respond with less fear and anger, in situations meant to provoke these emotions, due to their callousness and un-emotionality. In contrast, victims and bully/victims were expected to respond with greater fear and negative valence across emotional situations due to their proneness to intense negative affect.

To address these questions the well-established tone-cued affective imagery paradigm (e.g., Panayiotou, Witvliet, Robinson, & Vrana, 2011) was used to evoke emotions, where participants memorize and briefly imagine scenes, pre-normed to reflect specific emotions. Imagery has been extensively used to study individual differences in emotional responses (Cuthbert, Vrana, & Bradley, 1991) because it activates associative networks in memory, evoking all aspects of emotions, physiology, subjective experience and action dispositions (Lang, 1979). Group differences in fearful, angry, joyful and sad reactions to emotional situations and the degree to which these are interpreted by differences in CU-traits and BIS are examined. Understanding how perpetrators and victims respond affectively can clarify why they behave aggressively or submissively to others and elucidate the mechanisms that perpetuate bullying. Such knowledge can inform interventions that address how children process and respond to information in their social environment.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The sample was drawn from screening 943 children (518 female), from 21 schools in Cyprus (5th–8th grade). Schools and classes were selected randomly from the Nicosia and Larnaca districts. Children whose parents responded to invitation by providing informed consent were administered a questionnaire package completed at school in group format. From this screening sample, 91 children (37 females; $M_{age} = 11.90$ at time of experiment) selected as bullies ($N = 13$), bully-victims ($N = 15$), victims ($N = 15$) and control ($N = 48$) participated in the experiment. Children were assigned to groups based on their responses to the Revised Bullying and Victimization Questionnaire (BVQ; Olweus, 1991). They were identified as bullies if they scored above one SD from the mean of the bullying distribution and below average on the distribution of victimization scores ($n = 27$). They were categorized as victims if they scored above one SD from the mean of the victimization distribution and below average on the bullying distribution ($n = 35$); as bully/victims if they scored above one SD from the mean of both distributions ($n = 33$) and as controls if they scored below the mean on both distributions ($n = 754$), following prior research (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009). Only children whose parents at screening consented to participation in the experiment were contacted. For controls, a random sample was selected and contacted for participation in the experiment. Univariate ANOVAs verified that the groups differed in bullying and victimization: bullies and bully/victims scored similarly and significantly higher on bullying than both victims and controls, $F(3,80) = 60.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .69$. Victims and bully/victims reported significantly more victimization than bullies and controls and did not differ between them, $F(3,80) = 93.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .78$.

3.2. Measures and materials

CU-traits were assessed with the child self-report version of the 24-item Inventory of Callous-Unemotional traits (ICU; Frick & Morris, 2004; e.g., "I do not feel remorseful when I do something wrong"), rated on a 4-point Likert-scale (0 = not at all; 3 = definitely true). The ICU is valid for community and incarcerated youth in Cyprus and the U.S. (Fanti et al., 2009; Kimonis et al., 2014). In the screening sample Cronbach's α was .82. Of the screened children, 17% scored one SD above the mean on CU-traits. Within selected groups, 16/27 bullies scored above 1SD in CU, 4/35 victims, and 18/33 of bully/victims ($\chi^2(3) = 65.38$, $p < .001$), demonstrating the frequency of CU-traits among children who bully others and their rarity among victims.

Behavioral inhibition/activation. The behavioral inhibition system & behavioral activation system scales for children (Muris, Meesters, de Kanter, & Timmerman, 2005) is a twenty-item version of Carver and White's (1994) BIS/BAS-scales. Only the seven BIS items, scored on a 4-point scale (0 = not true, 3 = very true), were used in analyses (e.g., "I feel pretty upset when I think that someone is angry with me"). Alpha for the screening sample was .70.

Affective imagery. Stimulus materials were 12 imagery scripts (three for each of four emotions: fear, joy, anger and pleasant relaxation). They were selected as the best representatives of each emotion among 32 scripts normed on an independent sample of children and adolescents ($N = 61$; 39 females; $M_{age} = 12.2$) on valence and arousal and specific emotion described. Scripts were adapted for use with children from scripts described previously (Panayiotou, Brown, & Vrana, 2007; Panayiotou et al., 2011) and standardized in Greek (Panayiotou, 2008). Scripts consisted of one sentence, a mean of 24 words and references to physiological

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