



Adolescent bullying and personality: An adaptive approach

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 July 2011

Received in revised form 16 October 2011

Accepted 20 October 2011

Available online 10 November 2011

Keywords:

Bullying

Personality

Adolescents

HEXACO

Evolution

ABSTRACT

From an evolutionary perspective, bullying behavior may be viewed as adaptive in nature. Moreover, as bullies may utilize both prosocial and aggressive means to achieve desired goals, they likely exhibit specific personality traits that allow for this bistrategic approach to survival. Therefore, after accounting for general aggression levels, bullying should be negatively associated with personality traits such as fairness and modesty (Honesty–Humility), but unrelated to traits such as forgiveness and tolerance (Agreeableness). Additionally, the intentional nature of the behavior suggests that bullying should be positively associated with instrumental, but not reactive, aggression. A sample of 310 adolescents completed measures of bullying, personality, and instrumental/reactive aggression. Results supported the hypotheses and are interpreted from an adaptive perspective.

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1. Introduction

Bullying behavior is defined as an imbalance of power between two individuals, where the stronger individual repeatedly causes harm to the weaker individual (Olweus, 1993). Adolescent bullying is a significant international problem (Pepler & Craig, 2008) with as many as 100–600 million adolescents directly involved with bullying worldwide, each year (Volk, Craig, Boyce, & King, 2006). Moreover, bullying has been documented by anthropologists studying modern hunter-gatherers (e.g., Briggs, 1970; Turnbull, 1972) as well as historians documenting past cultures (Cunningham, 2005; Hsiung, 2005). Given its tremendous ubiquity across different times, cultures, and geographies, some researchers have suggested that bullying may be (in part) an evolved adaptation (Kolbert & Crothers, 2003; Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, *in press*).

1.1. Bullying as an adaptation

The idea that bullying is, at least in part, the result of an evolved adaptation is supported by evidence beyond its ubiquity. Bullying is widespread amongst social animals ranging from fish (Alcock, 1988) to chickens (Masure & Allee, 1934) to chimpanzees (Goodall, 1986) where it is adaptive because it promotes access to physical, social, and/or sexual resources. Contrary to popular stereotypes, and unlike victims (Hawker & Boulton, 2000) or bully-victims (Mynard & Joseph, 1997), adolescent bullies do not appear to suffer many adverse effects from bullying beyond a heightened propensity to

engage in antisocial behaviors (Berger, 2007). In fact, bullies appear to be better off than average adolescents with regard to mental health (Ireland, 2005; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Volk et al., 2006), physical health (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2001), popularity (de Bruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2010; Juvonen et al., 2003), and social skills, including theory of mind, cognitive empathy, leadership, social competence, and self-efficacy (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). As in other animals, bullying appears to be sexually adaptive as bullies start dating at a younger age, are more active with members of the opposite sex, report greater dating/mating opportunities, and are more likely to be in a dating relationship (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). Furthermore, in situations of scarce resources, bullying may also be adaptive by increasing physical resources (Turnbull, 1972). Taken together, these data suggest that bullying is a plausible adaptation in human adolescents (Volk et al., *in press*).

A necessary, but not sufficient, condition for an adaptation is that it is linked to genes. In a cohort of over 1000 10 year-old twins genetic differences accounted for 61% of the variation in bullying (Ball et al., 2008). While it has yet to be determined exactly which genes are involved in bullying, one promising category of genes that influence bullying are those associated with personality (Volk et al., *in press*). A number of studies have shown that many aspects of personality have linkages with specific genes (e.g., DRD4 and aggression, Schmidt, Fox, Rubin, Hu, & Hamer, 2002; DRD4 and extraversion or 5-HTTLPR and neuroticism, Ebstein, 2006). These genes, and likely numerous others that have not been described, are plausible candidates for bullying given the significant connection between bullying and personality (Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001;

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Eysenck, 2006). This makes a study of personality and bullying highly relevant from an adaptive perspective.

1.2. Bullying and personality

Over the last two decades bullying, as a general field, has attracted a significant amount of research attention (Berger, 2007). However, relatively little research has directly studied the link between personality and bullying. Olweus (1993) outlined the typical personality of bullies as being tolerant of violence, impulsive, and unempathic. Studies using the Eysenck Personality Inventory-Junior reported heightened levels of psychoticism and modest increases in extraversion and neuroticism amongst bullies (Connolly & O'Moore, 2003; Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

Italian studies of bullying and Big Five personality revealed that children who bullied tended to show a similar pattern of low Friendliness (Agreeableness) and higher Emotional Instability (Neuroticism; Menesini, Camodeca, & Nocentini, 2010; Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003). A study amongst American children again found a negative correlation with Agreeableness, but no relationship with Neuroticism and a significant negative relationship with Conscientiousness (Bollmer, Harris, & Milich, 2006). Scholte and colleagues (2005) found that Undercontrollers (moderate to high scores on extraversion, low scores on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) were more likely to bully other children. Bullying has also been linked to moderately higher levels of callous-unemotional (CU) traits that include lack of guilt, lack of empathy, poor affect, and use of another for personal gain (Barry et al., 2000; Viding, Simmonds, Petrides, & Frederickson, 2009).

Thus the findings for bullying and personality are few, scattered in their measures, and largely atheoretical. We therefore propose studying personality and bullying using an adaptive theoretical viewpoint to explicitly shed light on why certain personality factors, and not others, are related to bullying. Ideally, this would involve using a personality scale that has an explicitly adaptive theoretical underpinning. As such, we chose to use the HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2007) to study the relationship between bullying and personality.

1.3. Current study

The HEXACO is an evolutionarily-informed model of personality that extends the Big Five model of personality by adding a sixth factor: Honesty–Humility (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The HEXACO model includes Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (Ashton & Lee, 2001). Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness are very similar to the standard Big Five representations of these traits (Ashton & Lee, 2001; Digman, 1990). The additional factor of Honesty–Humility is characterized by truthfulness, fairness, sincerity, modesty, and lack of greed. Agreeableness is characterized by tolerance, forgiveness, and low aggression; note that the low pole of HEXACO Agreeableness includes anger-related traits that are associated with Big Five Neuroticism. Emotionality includes traits typically associated with Neuroticism in the Big Five model, such as anxiety, fearfulness, and emotional reactivity, but also adds sentimentality and dependence. With regards to studying antisocial behaviors, the HEXACO offers a significantly better fit with the antisocial “Dark Triad” personality traits as compared to the Big Five (Lee & Ashton, 2005). What's more, the HEXACO differentiates between a willingness to exploit others (Honesty–Humility) and a tolerance and forgiveness of others (Agreeableness; Ashton & Lee, 2007). This is a critical distinction that differs from the general Agreeableness factor of the Big Five as it can

potentially differentiate adolescents who are selectively aggressive from those who are generally aggressive.

A significant body of research has shown that children and adolescents who are aggressive can enjoy significant adaptive benefits if they selectively employ both aggression and prosociality to obtain their goals (Hawley, Little, & Rodkin, 2007). Hawley has labeled these children as bistrategic controllers (Hawley, 2002, 2003) as they are able to employ two different strategies, one prosocial, one aggressive, to obtain control over desired resources. In support of relating Hawley's theory to bullying is research showing that bullies are selective in their aggression, attacking easy victims and/or those who can't hurt the bully's social standing (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksma, & Dijkstra, 2010). Bullies also appear to selectively employ their aggression to maintain/create strategic alliances with desired adolescents (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). The HEXACO offers the ideal measure to test whether bullies' personalities match the pattern of bistrategic control or whether they are generally aggressive. If bullies were the latter, we expect Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness to be equally important predictors of bullying. If however, bullying was a targeted behavior, we predict that bullying would be significantly negatively related to Honesty–Humility, but contrary to studies using the Big Five, there would not be a significant relationship with Agreeableness, particularly after aggressive behaviors were controlled for. Given our belief that bullying may be adaptive, we predict that any relationship between Agreeableness and bullying will be nullified by the inclusion of measures of general aggression as this would leave Agreeableness as a measure of sociability and capacity for reactive anger that is not confounded by a bullies' targeted aggression towards their victims. Thus we predict that only instrumental aggression will be predictive of bullying. If bullying is meant to be a deliberate, targeted attempt at gaining resources in a manner similar to bistrategic aggressive children, then instrumental, and not reactive, aggression should be the predominant predictor.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 310 adolescents (121 boys, 189 girls) between the ages of 10 and 18 ($M = 13.6$, $SD = 3.2$) involved in extracurricular athletic (e.g., hockey, gymnastics) or youth clubs (e.g., church youth groups, Pathfinders/Guides) from across Southern Ontario participated in the present study. The sample was generally White (85%; 13% Asian; 2% Black) and middle-class.

2.2. Measures

Participants were asked to give information on demographics (as discussed above), followed by questionnaires pertaining to social relationships in school and their primary organization or athletic group (the latter were used for a concurrent study of athletes' personal relationships).

2.2.1. Bullying

Participants filled out a bullying questionnaire (Volk & Lagzdins, 2009) asking how often in the last school term they had taken the role as a bully in terms of racial/ethnic, physical, verbal, indirect, or sexual bullying at school. For example, participants were asked questions such as, “In school, how often have you made fun of someone much weaker or less popular because of their religion or race last term?”, with answers ranging in frequency from one (that hasn't happened) to five (several times a week). A total score was created for bullying by totaling the values for each form of

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