



# The emotional core of bullying: Further evidences of the role of callous–unemotional traits and empathy



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to further explore the role of callous–unemotional traits (CU) and empathy in bullying within 529 middle school children. We tried to advance limits of previous studies by accounting for a measure of victimization and considering age-related effects. Our results indicated that in younger students (mean age = 11 years and 8 months) the uncaring dimension of CU traits were positively related to bullying, but this association was completely mediated by a lack of affective empathy; in older students (mean age = 13 years and 8 months) the callous dimension of CU traits was directly related to bullying, and empathy was not associated when taking into account CU traits. The impact of CU traits on bullying in the transition from late childhood to incoming adolescence is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Bullying and emotions

Bullying is a subtype of proactive aggression defined as a relation in which aggressive behaviors are repetitively carried out towards a victim unable to defend herself/himself (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, 2010). Harassment displayed in bullying refers to a wide range of misdeeds (e.g., physical contact, attack to personal properties, verbal abuse, social exclusion and impairment of victim's relationships), representing both a serious risk factor for children's psychological well-being and a major problem for scholastic institutions in many countries as well as in Italy (Gini, 2008; Mene-sini, Calussi, & Nocentini, 2012).

To date, many psychological correlates of bullying have been identified; nevertheless, a number of questions have still to be clarified, especially in relation to bullies' affective dimensions. According to several studies on social-cognitive models, many children performing bullying behaviors were able to accurately process social information and had more advanced skills in theory of mind compared to reactive aggressive peers, but the formers used their skills in order to manipulate social environment and to achieve self-oriented goals (e.g., obtaining material advantages and/or a powerful position within peer group; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001;

Crick & Dodge, 1999; Salmivalli, 2010; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999a,b 2001). Moreover, many bullies (especially males) performed their actions without experiencing aversive vicarious emotions and without evaluating the emotional impact on victims, showing an impaired ability to share others' affective states. Several researches have provided considerable evidence that bullies had significantly lower affective empathy than peers who did not bully (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006, 2011; Stavrinides, Georgiou, & Theofanous, 2010).

### 1.2. Bullying and callous–unemotional traits

Some recent studies considered the role of callous–unemotional traits (CU, i.e., lack of guilt, lack of empathy, poor affect, use of others for personal gain) on bullying (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009; Muñoz, Qualter, & Padgett, 2011; Pardini, Stepp, Hipwell, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Loeber, 2012; Viding, Simmonds, Petrides, & Fredrickson, 2009). These personality traits designate a subtype of childhood-onset severe antisocial behaviors that are more likely to persist into adolescence and adulthood (Frick & White, 2008; Pardini & Frick, 2013).

The timely interest for the assessment of CU traits in juvenile samples resulted in the development of the Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2004), and suggested the presence of three specific CU dimensions: callousness (i.e., lack of empathy, guilt and remorse for misdeeds), uncaring (i.e., lack of care about ones performance in tasks and for the feelings of other people), and unemotional (i.e., deficient emotional affect). Both the callousness and the uncaring dimensions were found to be related with antisocial, aggressive, and delinquent behaviors, while the

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uncaring and the unemotional scales showed the strongest negative association with empathy (Essau, Sasagawa, & Frick, 2006; Kimonis et al., 2008; Roose, Bijttebier, Decoene, Claes, & Frick, 2010).

As for bullying, a general score of CU traits was positively related to direct bullying in British preadolescents (Viding et al., 2009) and to bullying behaviors in American preadolescent girls with high conduct disorder symptoms (Pardini et al., 2012). Other studies examined the role of different components of CU traits (i.e. callousness, uncaring and unemotional) in bullying. Fanti et al. (2009) found in 12–18 years old Greek Cypriot students exhibiting pure bullying scored higher on the uncaring dimension compared to those exhibiting low bullying, pure victimization, or a combination of bullying and victimization. A recent contribution of Muñoz and colleagues (2011) investigated the additive role of CU traits and other affective deficits in exploring bullying behaviors within a sample of British students aged 11–12 years. Results suggested that both cognitive and affective empathy were associated to bullying, but these associations did not emerge when the uncaring dimension of CU traits was taken into account. Authors concluded that the personality trait related to not caring about others was more important than empathic disposition in predicting bullying behaviors.

### 1.3. The present study

The present study was developed in order to further explore the role played by empathy and CU traits dimensions in their association with bullying, addressing some limitations of previous studies. First, given evidence of co-occurrence in the involvement in bullying and victimization (4–6% of the children are both bullies and victims; Salmivalli, 2010), we aimed to determine which characteristics were uniquely associated with bullying, controlling for the level of victimization. Moreover, the transition from late childhood into adolescence is a period of rapid biological, psychological and relational changes, that seem to have implications for the development of personality traits (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). Considering a life-span developmental perspective, we emphasized the importance of age-related changes in the considered variables, and we aimed to explore whether the impact of CU traits on bullying could be different at ending childhood and incoming adolescence. As suggested by Pardini et al. (2012), it is possible that CU traits become more pronounced during adolescence as these personality characteristics become more stable and solidified. Considering that, we aimed to advance past research comparing middle school students in grade 6th and in grade 8th; middle school in Italy consists of three grades (6th to 8th) and matches with the transition from late childhood into incoming adolescence: grade 6th is usually attended by students aged 11–12, and grade 8th by students aged 13–14.

Based on reported literature, we predicted that bullying would be more likely to show stronger and positive association with CU traits (especially callousness and uncaring), rather than with empathy. Moreover, we expected that this association would be more prominent in 8th grade students compared to 6th grade ones, due to the fact that CU traits in older children might be more stable in their personality structure, and able to play a stronger role in determining bullying behaviors.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants came from an Italian middle school located in Central Italy. School board approved all procedures, then parental written consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and

no incentives were given. The sample consisted of 529 preadolescents (247 boys, 46.69%) aged 10 years and 6 months to 15 years and 0 months ( $M = 12$  years and 7 months,  $SD = 1$  year and 2 months). Participants were equally distributed across grade 6th ( $n = 272$ , 51.42%;  $M = 11$  years and 8 months,  $SD = 6$  months) and grade 8th ( $n = 257$ , 48.58%;  $M = 13$  years and 8 months,  $SD = 6$  months). Our sample was primarily made up of Italian children (91.12%). Nearly half of the fathers (48.39%) and more than half of all mothers (55.96%) had earned a high school or university degree. The sample was representative of other middle schools in Italy. Data were obtained within a larger research program on bullying, emotion abilities and social adjustment.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Bullying and victimization

Bullying and victimization were measured by an 11-item self-report questionnaire (Menesini et al., 2012). Subjects were asked whether they had bullied others by any of the following eleven behaviors during the previous two or three months: (a) *having hit or beaten someone up*, (b) *having called someone bad or nasty names*, (c) *having teased someone*, (d) *having threatened someone*, (e) *having excluded someone*, (f) *having spread rumours about someone*, (g) *having teased someone because of their skin colour or culture*, (h) *having stolen or damaged objects*, (i) *having teased someone because of a handicap*, (j) *having teased someone because of their religion*, (k) *having called someone gay/lesbian*. A 5-point Likert-type scale was employed, from *never* (1) to *several times a week* (5). A similar section investigated the involvement in victimization. A mean score was calculated for each measure. Menesini et al. (2012) provided evidence for a mono-factorial structure in both measures; the Cronbach's alphas in the present study were .71 for bullying scale and .74 for victimization scale.

#### 2.2.2. Callous–unemotional traits

Callous–unemotional (CU) traits were measured using the *Inventory of Callous–Unemotional Traits* (ICU; Frick, 2004), a 24 items self-report questionnaire. Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed every item, using a 4-point Likert-type scale, from *not at all true* (0) to *definitely true* (3). The reliability and construct validity of the ICU have been supported in several different countries (Essau et al., 2006; Fanti et al., 2009; Kimonis et al., 2008; Roose et al., 2010). Across samples and languages, the best fitting factor structure showed a general callous–unemotional factor and three subfactors: callousness (e.g., *“the feelings of others are unimportant to me”*), uncaring (e.g., *“I try not to hurt others’ feelings”* – reversed) and unemotional (e.g., *“I hide my feelings from others”*). In Italy, ICU factorial structure was confirmed within a sample of preadolescents (Ciucci, Baroncelli, Franchi, Gollmaryami, & Frick, 2013); according to it, items 2 and 10 were excluded from analyses. A mean score was calculated for each measure; the Cronbach's alphas in the present study were .61 for callousness, .70 for uncaring and .65 for unemotional.

#### 2.2.3. Empathy

A 12-item self-report scale, *How I feel in different situations* (HIFDS – Feshbach et al., 1991) was used in order to assess empathy. 5 items measured cognitive empathy (e.g., *“I am able to recognize, before many other children, that other people's feelings have changed”*), and 7 items were referred to affective empathy (e.g., *“When somebody tells me a nice story, I feel as if the story is happening to me”*). Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed every item, using a 4-point Likert-type scale, from *never true* (1) to *always true* (4). A mean score was calculated for each measure. Caravita et al. (2009) confirmed the two-factor structure (removing item 11) in Italian children and preadolescents. Accordingly, we did

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