



Exploring the relationship between personality and bullying; an investigation of parental perceptions



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The current study explored if parents perception of bullying was influenced by the traits of narcissism, emotional intelligence, victim sensitivity and entitlement and also examined the relationship between reporting and perceptions of bullying. This study also examined if narcissism and entitlement differed between Gen Y and Gen X parents.

Method: Parents of primary school aged children ($N = 124$) interpreted whether the behaviour in scenarios constituted bullying. Parents responded to questions assessing the four personality variables and reported if their child had experienced bullying.

Results: Narcissism, victim sensitivity and entitlement were associated with the propensity of parents to perceive behaviour as bullying. Furthermore, entitlement was uniquely associated with this propensity. A positive relationship was established between broader perceptions of bullying and the reporting of incidents. As expected the level of entitlement increased over the two generations represented.

Conclusion: Personality, particularly the trait entitlement, contributes to the differences in parents' perceptions relating to bullying. The current study suggest the need for future research on the implication of these differences.

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1. Introduction

Within the Australian context, due to the expanding numbers of children reporting incidences of bullying, bullying is considered to be at epidemic levels (Cross et al., 2009; Gillard, 2010). The increase of children identifying as victims is a major concern given the implications for their psycho-social development and wellbeing (Olweus, 2013).

Taking a social-ecological systems perspective, where bullying behaviour is considered a complex social phenomena (Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006), an examination of key stakeholders (e.g. parents) is required to gain a better understanding of why bullying behaviour is increasing (Harcourt, Jasperse, & Green, 2014). Investigating parental attitudes is critical as the success of school-based anti-bullying programs is dependent upon the cooperation of parents as key stakeholders (Tofi & Farrington, 2011). When faced with their child's account of being bullied, parents have an opportunity to refine and define the child's understanding of what constitutes bullying. They can also encourage pro-social coping strategies and request suitable interventions when required (Rigby, 2002). The early development of balanced and socially appropriate responses towards bullying is important (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008), as the consequences of bullying may remain reasonably

permanent in nature and persist throughout the lifetime (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982).

A growing body of research indicates the number of reported cases of bullying can be challenged as behaviour recognised as bullying is quite varied in nature (Department of Education & Training, 2015). This is, in part, due to the different ways groups and individuals conceptualise and define bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Studies have explored the way in which culture (Koo, 2007), gender (Goossens, Camodeca, Schuengel, & Meerum Terwogt, 2002), and age (Newgent et al., 2009) influence the definition of bullying and result in a diversity of behaviours identified.

A fundamental change in behaviours identified as bullying has been observed over the past two decades (Haslam, 2015). Previously, an incident required the criteria of repetition, intent and the presence of an imbalance of power to be present for a behaviour to be considered bullying (Olweus, 1993). Currently, broader behaviours are being recorded as bullying due to the "loosening" of the criteria thus increasing the numbers of incidents identified (Haslam, 2015). These changes are also reflected in the nature of parental complaints lodged with school authorities (Williams, 2016). Complaints of minor or isolated incidents of conflict between children are reported and, consequently, complaints from parents have increased (Williams, 2016).

Due to the broadening perceptions of bullying, social situations, once believed to be part of everyday life, are now deemed unacceptable - thus producing more individuals who identify as victims and more

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individuals labelled as bullies (Marano, 2004). Haslam (2015) defines these changes as a psychological conceptual *creep* with greater weight given to the subjective perceptions of the victim as to determine whether behaviour meets the criteria of bullying rather than a universal agreed definition. As such, individual differences may influence the interpretation of behaviour and, therefore, on the number of behaviours perceived as bullying.

Personality and its influence on an individual's perception of the world is central to our understanding of human behaviour (Hicks, 2010). In relation to bullying, researchers have explored the relationship between personality variables and the roles of the bully (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012) and the victim (Bollmer, Harris, & Milich, 2006) and the manner in which personality influences interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution (Gerlach, Allemand, Agroskin, & Denissen, 2012). What is not widely reported, however, is the manner in which personality influences a person's propensity to perceive behaviour as bullying.

While many personality traits could be explored, traits identified as influencing interpersonal relationships and conflict management have been selected for investigation. As the interpretation of perpetrators' motives and the ability to reduce the impact of conflict are influenced by the quality of the interpersonal relationship skills of the victim (Kowalski, 2004), narcissism, Emotional Intelligence (EI), entitlement and victim sensitivity were deemed appropriate to examine.

1.1. Narcissism

Often described as arrogant with the need to establish and maintain a perfect "grandiose" self-image (Smith et al., 2016), narcissists are hypersensitive to threats to their self-esteem which consequently undermines their ability to establish social support and trust (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Narcissists feel their behaviour is justified, often triggering conflicts in relationships (Moeller, Crocker, & Bushman, 2009).

Interestingly, narcissists display a disproportionately high intolerance towards individuals willing to engage in behaviour similar to their own (Wallace, Scheiner, & Grotzinger, 2016) yet display an inability to empathise or prioritise the needs of others and are likely to report higher rates of interpersonal transgressions in their daily lives (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003). Narcissists may also identify as victims as a way of "sweetening their success, discounting their failures, or justifying their own mistreatment of others" (McCullough et al., 2003, p. 893). Rasmussen (2016) purports that certain facets of narcissism may have a significant role in an individual's perceptions of certain phenomena. For example, vulnerable narcissism, depicted by negative affect, depleted self-image and interpersonal hypersensitivity, influences on how an individual perceives and responds to social rejection, criticism or insults and uncooperative play which are often present in the context of bullying (Rasmussen, 2016). It is suggested the trait of narcissism may be increasing adding to the interest of examining this variable (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Keith Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

1.2. Emotional Intelligence (EI)

EI positively influences outcomes across various realms of life (Cote & Miners, 2006). Within the realm of bullying, Kokkinos and Kipritsi (2011) explored the relationship between EI and victimisation citing those high in EI are employ problem solving and social skills necessary to develop strong interpersonal relationships which should reduce the occurrences of victimisation (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2011).

In addition, those high in EI are able to reduce or avoid conflict altogether (Salami, 2010). By employing constructive coping skills during conflict, individuals high in EI have a greater chance of understanding another person's feelings and are able to shift quickly from negative feelings to positive, making them more able to deal with unfair treatment calmly and efficiently (Salami, 2010). Subsequently, a key

objective of strength based bullying intervention programs is the development of EI skills (Domino, 2013).

1.3. Entitlement

Entitlement is described by Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, and Bushman (2004) as stable in nature, a belief that one not only deserves the best but disproportionately more than others. An increase in entitlement has been observed in the current generation of parents, often referred to as Millennials (Bonner, Marbley, & Howard, 2011). They have been described as a generation of 'entitled' and appear to have little concern for the impact they have on others (Bonner et al., 2011).

Parents, high in entitlement, are likely to defend their rights and the rights of their children to behave selfishly such as refusing to offer help to others, claiming larger portions of the pie (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010) or retaliating aggressively to unfavourable behaviour whether it be in the schoolyard, workplace or in personal relationships (Brummel & Parker, 2015). A deterrence strategy to avoid further suffering is the labeling of another's behaviour as bullying with no expectation of taking responsibility for their own role within conflict (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013).

Although accepted as a component of the narcissistic trait, entitlement is gaining more support as a separate construct (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009) and worthy of individual consideration as it specifically relates to the maladaptive aspects of narcissism which lead to interpersonal conflict (Campbell et al., 2004).

1.4. Victim sensitivity

Victim sensitivity does not reflect a genuine concern for justice for all but more a concern for self (Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010). Anger and moral outrage are exhibited when individuals perceive that others have acted unfairly towards them (Bondü, Rothmund, & Gollwitzer, 2016) often seeking retribution to avoid future victimisation. Despite doing their best to avoid victimisation, victim sensitive individuals may find themselves dealing with increased hostility from those who may have been inappropriately labelled as bullies (Bondü et al., 2016). As such, reports that those high in victim sensitivity inevitably experience difficulties in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships can be appreciated (Gerlach et al., 2012).

Specifically, individuals high in victim sensitivity find it difficult to differentiate between cooperative and un-cooperative behaviour, producing issues in their ability to determine the true intentions of others (Gollwitzer, Rothmund, Alt, & Jekel, 2012). Victim sensitive individuals, who interpret more behaviour as negative are also more likely to report more incidences of bullying (Bondü & Elsner, 2015). This behaviour, alternatively referred to as "hostile attribution bias", can appear as early as pre-school (Choe, Lane, Grabell, & Olson, 2013).

1.5. Gen X and Gen Y

Parents of children of primary school age today generally fall into two generations that of Gen X (dob 1963–1980) and Gen Y (dob 1981–1994). Although limited research is available directly related to the differences of perceptions in relation to bullying, certain characteristics have been identified that imply that differences are likely to exist. More specifically, Gen X adults were raised by workaholic parents, learning to be self-reliant and individualist, compared to Gen Y adults who were raised by highly structured and over-supervising parents who convinced their children that they are always winners (Bristow, Amyx, Castleberry, & Cochran, 2011). As such, it is likely that Gen Y parents, with their strong sense of entitlement, are more likely than Gen X parents to perceive behaviours as bullying if the behaviours do not afford their child what their child demands or that they perceive is entitled to independent of whether the behaviour meets any of the definitions of bullying.

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