Unique effects of different components of trait emotional intelligence in traditional bullying and cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether different components of trait emotional intelligence (or trait emotional self-efficacy) were uniquely related to traditional bullying and cyberbullying in a sample of 529 preadolescents (mean age of 12 years and 7 months), while controlling for the other forms of bullying/victimization. Binary logistic regressions showed that the dimension of emotional intelligence concerning the regulation and use of emotions was negatively related both to traditional bullying and cyberbullying; however, this association did not emerge when traditional bullying was controlled for cyberbullying, whilst it still emerged when cyberbullying was controlled for traditional bullying and both forms of victimization. Differently, the dimensions concerning appraisal of own and others' emotions were not deficient in children performing bullying and/or cyberbullying behaviors. Despite high co-occurrence between traditional and electronic bullying, our results suggested that these two forms are distinct phenomena, involving different personality traits. Implications for interventions are discussed.

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Introduction

Emotional correlates of bullying

Bullying is a relationship in which an individual, or a group of individuals, intentionally and repeatedly perpetrates aggressive behaviors towards someone unable to defend himself/herself (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, 2010). Traditional forms of bullying consist of physical, verbal and covert forms of aggressive behaviors. Recently, the new phenomenon of cyberbullying has emerged; it is characterized by several offensive acts (e.g., harassment, cyberstalking, spreading of rumors, intimidation, etc.) inflicted through various technological means such as emails, instant messaging, blogs and chat rooms (Menesini, Calussi, & Nocentini, 2012; Smith et al., 2008; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Previous studies found that males were mainly engaged in physical bullying, while females were mainly engaged in indirect bullying; no clear gender difference emerged for cyberbullying (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Several evidences converged in indicating that traditional bullying increases during childhood, having its peak during preadolescence, and decreases later

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(Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005; Fitzpatrick, Dulin, & Piko, 2007); cyberbullying is committed mainly by preadolescents and adolescents who are increasingly using new technologies to engage in personal interaction, but also in harassment against peers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

The role of emotions in traditional bullying has emerged from the debate about bullies' social information processing: whereas aggressive children were found to have problems at the initial stages of processing (i.e., encoding and interpretation of social cues), many bullies seemed to quite accurately perceive their social world and to posses more advanced theory of mind skills (i.e., the ability to recognize others' emotions, intentions, beliefs and goals); rather, they displayed a "biased" response evaluation styles, choosing self-oriented goals regardless of the consequences for others (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Crick & Dodge, 1999; Gini, 2006; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999a, 1999b, 2001). These evidences were supported by several studies on empathy and bullying: affective empathy (the ability to share others' affective states) rather than cognitive empathy (the ability to read and understand others' feelings) was the real bullies' deficiency, especially in males (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006, 2011; Stavrinides, Georgiou, & Theofanous, 2010). Bullies were more prone to display a "cold cognition", a theory of mind formulated in instrumental terms without access to the empathic understanding of others (Sutton et al., 1999b). The intensity of the experienced emotions and the scarce capacity to regulate them (i.e., proneness to anger, emotional lability/negativity, and low levels of fear reactivity and effortful control) are the other emotional processes that influence generation and performing of bullying behaviors, even if bullies seemed skilled as well as other peers in emotional display rules knowledge (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001; Garner & Hinton, 2010; Terranova, Sheffield Morris, & Boxer, 2008). Moreover, Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) suggested that children's self-efficacy evaluation in regulating emotion constitutes an important component of the response evaluation process. According to Bandura's theory (Bandura, 2001; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003), we argue that self-efficacy beliefs in regard to emotional skills strongly contribute to social behavior. The present study furthers previous research by examining how bullies self-perceive their emotional skills.

Despite of few exceptions (Ang & Goh, 2010), research has disproportionately focused on traditional forms of bullying, while the role of emotions in cyberbullying was scarcely explored: there are several reasons to expect differences in emotional characteristics of cyberbullies considering that these children are removed from the face-to-face interaction with their victims (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009).

Bullying and emotional intelligence

The term "emotional intelligence" (EI) was used for the first time by Salovey and Mayer (1990) to indicate the subset of social intelligence that involves several emotion-related abilities: appraisal and expression of emotions in self and others, regulation of emotions in self and others, utilization of emotions in problem solving. The components related to perception, appraisal and expression of emotions constitute the basic psychological processes, while the components of reflective regulation and use of emotions are abilities that develop later and emerge as more closely integrated with other skills (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Schutte et al., 1998). Over time, different definitions of EI have been advanced and they have included broader non-cognitive aspects, such as competences, skills and personality traits (Bar-On, 1997; Goleman, 1995; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Today there is a general consensus in considering "trait EI" and "ability EI" as separate constructs. Trait EI (or trait emotional self-efficacy) refers to personality and consists of self-perceptions and behavior dispositions related to the emotional domain; it is measured by self-report instruments. Ability EI refers to cognitive processes and consists of a series of emotion abilities as they emerge in the maximum-performance test (Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007; Warwick & Nettelbeck, 2004). Previous studies have revealed a superiority in both trait and ability EI for females and a developmental trend indicating the growth of EI scores with age (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; De Caro & D'Amico, 2008; Schutte et al., 1998).

Quite apart from theoretical definitions of the topic, trait EI seems to play a crucial role in social adjustment (for a review, see Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008): specifically, children with higher score of trait EI were more likely to reach good academic achievement and to experience positive social relationships, while they were less likely to behave against school rules (i.e., unauthorized absences and exclusion from school; Mavroveli, Petrides, Sangareau, & Furnham, 2009; Mavroveli & Sánchez-Ruiz, 2011; Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004). To date, only few studies were implemented to directly investigate trait EI and bullying. Mavroveli and Sánchez-Ruiz (2011) observed a negative association between a total score of EI and both self-reported and peer-reported bullying in a sample of English primary students. Kokkinos and Kipritsi (2012) found that a total score of trait EI was negatively associated with both direct and indirect forms of bullying in a cohort of Greek primary students. Considering several subcomponents of trait EI, Lomas, Stough, Hansen, and Downey (2012) found that the understanding of others' emotions was negatively associated with bullying in a small Australian sample of preadolescents, suggesting that students who failed to understand others' emotions were also unable to understand the consequences of their offensive actions; nevertheless, the low number of participants suggests caution in generalizing the results.

The above-mentioned studies are crucial due to having investigated a new field in the research on bullying, showing that self-beliefs about own emotional skills are important correlates of the topic. Nevertheless, they did not simultaneously consider the different forms of bullying (i.e., traditional bullying and cyberbullying) and the different dimensions of trait EI (i.e., emotional appraisal, use and regulation). In our opinion, the importance of considering different dimensions of trait EI is a key issue: self-beliefs about appraisal of others' emotions, appraisal of own emotions, and use and regulation of emotions