Relationships between bullying behaviours and the Dark Triad: A study with adults

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ABSTRACT

The current study is the first to directly investigate relationships between the Dark Triad personality traits and bullying behaviours. We also sought to design a reliable measure of bullying for use with an adult sample. The sample consisted of 657 participants (203 males; 454 females), aged 18 to 70 (*M* = 23.1, *SD* = 8.65). Participants completed the Short-D3, a measure of the Dark Triad personality traits, as well as a Bullying Questionnaire which was constructed for this study. Correlational analyses demonstrated that psychopathy was most strongly related to bullying, followed by Machiavellianism, and narcissism. However, our predictions for the differential correlations between the Dark Triad facets and bullying type were generally not supported. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a universal problem for elementary and high school students, with prevalence rates demonstrating that almost 30% of teens are involved in bullying as either a bully, a victim, or both (Nansel et al., 2001). Males typically report experiencing more physical forms of bullying, and females are generally victims of indirect bullying (Undheim & Sund, 2010). Long-term effects of bullying for both bullies and victims include an increased risk for depression and loneliness (O'Moore, 2000), lowered self-esteem for girls, higher involvement in delinquent behaviour (Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010) and a decrease in academic performance (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). However, much remains uncovered regarding the characteristics of bullies, victims, and bystanders which might permit the development of appropriate intervention strategies for these individuals.

2. Literature on childhood bullying

Three specific bullying criteria have been identified by Olweus (1995) to classify these behaviours. These criteria are: (1) aggressive behaviour directed toward an individual or group, which (2) happens repeatedly and over time, where (3) an imbalance of power is evident. A fourth criterion-the intent to harm the vic-

tim-has also been considered (Peterson & Rigby, 1999). While six participant roles have been identified in bullying research, these roles are often condensed into three broader categories: bullies, victims, and bystanders (Huang & Chou, 2010).

A number of factors may influence which participant role an individual assumes. For instance, research has examined how environmental and interpersonal factors such as social status (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009) and schools and the internet (Mason, 2008; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999) contribute to participant roles. Theories of cognitive and social empathy have also been used to explain why some bullies score well on tests of social intelligence, but display antisocial behaviours during observation (Ang & Goh, 2010). These studies have spurred interest into the investigation of bullies' personality traits. The present study aims to provide further understanding of the personality traits of bullies by examining a specific group of traits—the Dark Triad— that has been linked to aggression.

Bullying is strongly associated with childhood, and research has largely overlooked general bullying behaviour in adults with the exception of workplace bullying. In the workplace however, personnel managers have replaced the term 'bullying' with 'harassment', to refer to a broader range of aggressive behaviours (Adams, 1992). This causes researchers to lose sight of more serious types of aggression which also occur in adults (Randall, 1997). For this reason, a sample of adult participants was used in the present study. Evidence suggests that bullying in childhood and adulthood are similar, although occurring in different settings (Randall, 1997).

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3. Direct and indirect aggression

Research has identified two broad subtypes of aggression that may lead to different types of bullying. Direct aggression is characterised by openly confrontational behaviours in an attempt to directly harm the victim (Griffin & Gross, 2004). Conversely, indirect aggression refers to the use of non-confrontational methods to harm or damage another's peer relationships. With indirect aggression, the perpetrator cannot always easily be identified (Cappella & Weinstein, 2006), which provides a sense of anonymity and security. The identification of these disparate types of aggression suggests that bullies use various methods to aggress against others. As such, it is important to further understand how bullies differ from one another.

4. Characteristics of bullies

Researchers have traditionally believed that some bullies cannot adequately process social information (Randall, 1997). The Social Information Processing model attempts to explain a deficiency in social competence among bullies, and assumes that maladaptive behaviours are preceded by poor social abilities (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). However, this model has been criticised for relying too heavily on theoretical premises rather than empirical data (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010). Moreover, an assumption of the Social Processing model is that all bullies have similar social abilities, yet researchers are continually finding that some bullies excel in areas where others do not (Gasser & Keller, 2009).

Recent studies suggest that some bullies have a strong sense of cognitive empathy, or theory of mind, which helps them to bully more effectively. Theory of mind refers to the ability to understand that each person has a unique perspective on reality (Renouf et al., 2010). This ability allows children to describe, predict, and explain the behaviours of others (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). In Sutton et al.'s (1999) study on cognitive skills and bullying, bullies who consider themselves leaders, scored higher in total social cognition than victims, follower bullies, and defenders.

Additionally, perceived peer popularity may explain some of the variation within the heterogeneous bully group (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Prinstein and Cillessen (2003) challenged traditional beliefs of aggressive children as the loner-type, finding that bullies tend to possess higher social status. This interesting observation raises the question, why do some children who experience social success go on to bully others?

5. The Machiavellian bully

Machiavellianism refers to the tendency to manipulate and deceive others in social situations for personal gain (Christie & Geis, 1970). Peeters et al. (2010) found that the prevalence of Machiavellianism is higher in adolescents who engage in indirect bullying, since social manipulation is required for successful acts of relational aggression. These children may perceive aggression and manipulation as necessary to maintain social status or power within a group (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002).

Those who score high on Machiavellianism also tend to score higher on measures of cognitive empathy (Sutton et al., 1999), suggesting that the ability to manipulate others in social situations is related to the ability to predict and describe the behaviours of others. Notably, children who demonstrate indirect aggression score higher in cognitive empathy, but only among those low in prosocial behaviour (Renouf et al., 2010) Therefore, it appears as though some bullies use this cognitive ability to engage in successful acts of manipulation in social groups.

6. The narcissistic bully

Narcissism involves feelings of grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, and vanity (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010). While these individuals appear egocentric, it is often the case that they truly possess a relatively low self-esteem. In what has been termed the Theory of Threatened Egoism, it is proposed that narcissism directly contributes to aggression (Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004), and may be a defense mechanism to protect a fragile self-esteem. Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that aggression occurs only when a Narcissistic Injury—a psychological injury to one's self esteem (Goldberg, 1973)—occurs. Furthermore, this aggression manifests as direct aggression (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010). Threatened Egoism has been used to explain why some children with seemingly high self-esteem aggress against others.

7. Psychopathy and aggression

Three clusters of traits have been identified within the construct of psychopathy: impulsivity, callous-unemotional (CU) traits, and narcissism. Impulsivity is a multi-faceted construct, which has been defined as an increased response to provoked attacks and disinhibition of social restraints (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010). CU traits reflect interpersonal coldness, such as a lack of empathy or guilt. Both impulsivity and CU traits have been linked to aggression, and CU traits in particular correlate positively with proactive and reactive aggression (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2009).

8. Dark Triad and aggression

The Dark Triad refers to a combination of three socially undesirable traits: sub-clinical narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sub-clinical psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Although these traits are correlated—and thus merit being clustered together—correlations among them are typically quite modest (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002), so each may also be viewed as a distinct aspect of socially aversive behaviour.

Although the Dark Triad has not been studied in relation to bullying among adults directly, recent studies have explored aspects of Dark Triad traits in relation to childhood aggression (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010). Machiavellianism has been positively linked to adolescent bullying (Peeters et al., 2010), while psychopathy and narcissism have been positively related to aggression but not to bullying (Stickle, Kirkpatrick, & Brush, 2009).

9. The present study

The purpose of the present study is to extend understanding of bullies by examining bullying styles in relation to the Dark Triad, as well as to design a Bullying Questionnaire suitable for an adult population. Previous studies have used a variety of methods to measure bullying in children (see Ang & Goh, 2010; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1995), whereas the area of adult bullying is hindered by inappropriate measurement techniques (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002). While links to proactive and reactive aggression have been made in previous literature (see Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2009), the Dark Triad has not yet been investigated in relation to direct and indirect bullying.

It is hypothesised that individuals high in Machiavellianism and/or narcissism will report significantly higher rates of indirect than direct bullying, while psychopathy was expected to correlate more strongly with direct bullying. It is also hypothesised that psychopathy will correlate more strongly than the other Dark Triad traits to overall bullying behaviour, whereas narcissism is expected show the lowest correlations.