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Brief Report: Emotional Intelligence, Victimisation and Bullying in Adolescents

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Abstract

In order to better understand bullying behaviours we examined for the first time the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) of adolescents, bullying behaviours and peer victimisation. The sample consisted of 68 adolescents from a secondary college. Participants completed a self-report questionnaire which assessed their EI, how frequently they engaged in bullying behaviours and how often they were the target of peer victimisation. Results of the study indicated that the EI dimensions of Emotions Direct Cognition and Emotional Management and Control, significantly predicted the propensity of adolescents to be subjected to peer victimisation. The EI dimension of Understanding the Emotions of Others was found to be negatively related with bullying behaviours. It was concluded that anti-bullying programs in schools could be improved by addressing deficits in EI in adolescents who bully others as well as those who are at a greater risk of being subjected to peer victimisation.

Investigations into the extent of bullying among Australian school children have indicated that between 10 and 25% are subjected to peer victimisation at least once a week (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Forero, McLellen, Rissel & Bauman, 1999). Research into schoolyard bullying has highlighted not only the undesirable prevalence of bullying behaviours exhibited by adolescents but also the adverse consequences associated with bullying (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2000). Being a target of bullying has been found to have negative impacts upon social and emotional wellbeing, academic performance and success later in life (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001). Considered to be a form of aggression, bullying behaviours are characterised by intent, power imbalance and are repeated over time (Olweus, 2000; Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Rigby, 1996). Although the understanding of precursors and maintaining factors of bullying in school aged children is rapidly growing, it is far from comprehensive (Olweus, 2000).

Previous studies focussing on bullying and victimization have reported significant associations between these variables and empathy (Gini et al., 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Adolescent bullying behaviours have been associated with low empathic responsiveness and empathic concern for others (Gini, Albiero, Benelli & Altoe, 2007; Richardson et al., 1994). The propensity of children to be victimised by their peers has been associated with lesser ability to recognise and identify the emotions of others, as well as understand the thoughts, beliefs and intentions of others (Gini, 2006; Sutton et al., 1999). Such skills are representative of the cognitive component of empathy – the ability to take the perspective of another. The reasons why such deficits would be common to children who are victimised by their peers has not received a great deal of empirical attention and is thus far unclear. For example, it is not yet understood whether low empathic ability precipitates victimisation, or is a consequence of experiencing victimisation.

Empathic abilities such as taking the perspective of another and understanding the thoughts, beliefs and intentions of others requires an awareness of other people and an understanding of

emotions (Batson, Early & Salvarani, 1997; Davis, 1983). These abilities are characteristic of the competencies assessed by EI (Mayer, DiPaolo & Salovey, 1990).

EI is a form of social cognition that encompasses the perception, analysis and production of behaviours specific to emotional content (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). People who have well developed EI are generally more aware of their own emotions and can manage and express those emotions effectively (Mayer, Roberts & Barsdale, 2008; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004). It has been shown that individuals high on EI are more likely to report positive relations with others and less likely to report negative interactions with close friends (Lopes, Salovey & Straus, 2003). EI competencies, conceptualised as distinct mental abilities that process emotional information, include the perception and identification of emotions, the use of emotional information to facilitate thought, emotional reasoning and understanding, and emotional self-management (Mayer, Roberts & Barsdale, 2008). It has been suggested that an understanding of the influences of social interactions in adolescents at school, such as bullying and peer victimisation, can be advanced when considered in terms of the construct of EI (Mayer & Cobb, 2000).

Although there are some suggestions that the development of EI in school aged children would be beneficial for creating positive school environments, there are very few empirical investigations to support such claims (Mayer, & Cobb, 2000). Considering the similarity between competencies assessed by empathy and EI, and, given that an association has been found between empathic abilities, bullying behaviours and peer victimisation, a few preliminary hypotheses can be generated concerning the relationship between adolescent bullying, victimisation and EI.

H1: It was hypothesised that a higher rate of self-reported bullying would be associated with lower understanding of emotions of others.

H2: It was hypothesised that a lower self-reported rate of peer victimisation would be associated with higher emotional management and control.

Method

Participants

Participants were students from a secondary college of approximately 1,400 students located in southeast Melbourne. The sample consisted of 68 (31 males, 37 females) students of ages ranging between 12 and 16 years (M=13.85, SD=1.06).

Materials

Emotional Intelligence

The 57-item Adolescent Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test (Adolescent SUEIT) (Luebbers, Downey & Stough, 2007) was used to measure EI competencies as it is an Australian measure that has previously shown high construct validity with other real-life behaviours in adolescents that have been theoretically linked to EI including problem behaviour (Downey, Johnston, Hansen, Birney, & Stough, 2010) and scholastic success (Downey, Mountstephens, Lloyd, Hansen, & Stough, 2008). It comprises the following subscales: Understanding Emotions of Others (UEO)(19 items, 'I can tell how others feel by the tone of their voice'), Emotional Recognition and Expression (ERE)(10 items, 'I can tell others how I feel about things'), Emotional Management and Control (EMC)(18 items, 'I find it hard to think clearly when I am worried about something') and Emotions Direct Cognition (EDC)(10 items, 'I use my 'gut feelings' when I try to solve problems'). Each item required participants to indicate how they typically thought, felt or acted using a five-point scale, where 1 = 'very seldom' and 5 = 'very often'.

A higher subscale score reflected higher proficiency for that particular EI skill set. Past research has indicated that the internal reliability coefficients of the four subscales scores range from α = .75 to α = .85 (Luebbers, Downey & Stough, 2007).

Bullying and Victimization

Peer relations were measured using the Peer Relations Questionnaire (PRQ) (Rigby & Slee, 1993). The PRQ was developed for children and adolescents, which specifically measures tendencies to bully others and the incidence of being subject to peer victimisation. The questionnaire consists of 11 items, with 2 subscales: Bully (6 items, 'I like to make others scared of me'), Victim (5 items, 'I get picked on by others'). Responses for each item are measured on a four-point likert scale ranging from 1 = 'never' to 4 = 'very often'. The PRQ has been found to be of adequate validity and has been found to have adequate internal reliability coefficients which range from α = .71 to α = .86 (Rigby & Slee, 1993).

Recruitment and Procedures

Parental information statements and consent forms were sent home to all families of the participating school via the weekly online newsletter. Students and parents provided written consent in order for students to participate in the study which was approved by the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee. Students with parental consent were taken from class in small groups, and asked to complete the survey in the school library with a teacher and researcher present to assist if necessary.

Results

Correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between bullying, peer victimisation and the EI dimensions.

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, range, skewness and kurtosis statistics and Chronbach's Alpha for the EI and peer relations dimensions. The means for the Adolescent SUEIT were consistent with previously reported scores from similar ages groups (e.g., Downey,

et al, 2010). Pearson's correlations between the EI dimensions and peer relations factors are displayed in Table 2.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Observed Range, Skewness and Kurtosis Statistics and Chronbach's Alpha for Scales

	M	*SD*	Possible Range	Observed Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
UEO	67.72	7.44	19-95	55-90	0.76	0.64	.75
ERE	31.87	5.31	10-50	18-45	-0.19	0.44	.69
EMC	55.25	8.77	18-90	40-82	1.02	1.27	.78
EDC	29.82	5.07	10-50	18-38	-1.57	3.45	.71
Bully	7.56	1.86	6-24	6-13	1.36	1.37	.71
Victim	8.84	2.94	5-20	5-19	1.18	1.86	.87

Note. UEO = Understanding the Emotions of Others; ERE = Emotional Recognition and Expression; EMC = Emotional Management and Control; EDC = Emotions Direct Cognitions; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

The bully peer relations dimension was found to correlate with the EI dimension UEO (r = -.21, p<0.01), indicating that participants with lower levels of UEO reported more frequent bullying behaviours than those with higher levels of UEO. The victim peer relations dimension was found to correlate with the EI factors EMC and EDC (r = -.30, p<0.01 and r = -.29, p<0.05 respectively), indicating that the propensity to be victimised decreases with higher EMC and EDC. Finally, a correlation between the bully and victim dimensions (r = .20, p < 0.05) showed that in the current sample, those who reported engaging in bullying behaviours also tended to report being subjects of peer victimisation. This finding is not uncommon in bullying research (see Dulmus, Sowers & Therlot, 2006).

Table 2

Correlations Between Peer Relations Factors, Emotional Intelligence Factors, Age and Gender

	UEO	ERE	EMC	EDC	Bully	Victim	Age	Gender
UEO	1.00							
ERE	.41**	1.00						
EMC	.42**	.44**	1.00					
EDC	-.12	.07	-.14	1.00				
Bully	-.21*	-.07	-.14	.02	1.00			
Victim	-.14	-.14	-.30**	-.29**	.20*	1.00		
Age	.25*	-.06	.15	-.12	.02	-.08	1.00	
Gender	.06	-.08	.09	.01	.25*	-.21*	-.23*	1.00

Note. N = 68, ERE = Emotional Recognition and Expression; UEO = Understanding the Emotions of Others; EDC = Emotions Direct Cognitions; EMC = Emotional Management and Control.
* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$

As there were significant correlations between the victim dimension and the EI dimensions, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with the four EI dimensions as the predictor variables and victim as the dependant variable.

The EI dimensions were found to predict a significant amount of the variance in peer victimisation. Summary statistics indicated that the overall model was significant ($F[4,67] = 4.07$, $p<0.01$) $R^2=0.21$. Inspection of the contribution of each of the EI dimensions revealed that EDC and EMC made statistically significant semi-partial contributions to the model (B = .35, $p<0.01$ and B = .35, $p<0.05$ respectively). Thus, these dimensions were the most important EI predictors of peer victimisation.

Discussion

The results indicated that scores on the UEO dimension of the Adolescent SUEIT related to the amount of bullying towards other adolescents such that lower scores on UEO was associated with higher self-reported bullying behaviours. Adolescents with a lesser understanding of the emotions of others may find it difficult to understand the consequences of their actions and not comprehend the adverse impact their bullying behaviour has upon others. The results also indicated that lower scores on EMC and EDC were associated with higher levels of self-reported peer victimisation. The results of the present study indicated that skills necessary for emotional management and control and the use of emotions in decision making to direct cognitions were significant predictors of adolescent peer victimisation. These findings imply that the propensity to be victimised by others is, in part, related to EI competencies. Given that bullying behaviours are considered to be based in part upon power imbalances, perhaps lesser ability to control one's emotional or cognitive response to aggressive peer interpersonal relations represents such an imbalance.

The findings suggest that adolescents with better developed EI skills are less likely to become targets of bullying behaviours which may have implications for managing bullying and peer victimisation within schools. Measures of EI may be utilised to identify students who show less developed EI competencies, which may allow for more targeted, accurate or timely intervention to protect students from the potential harmful consequences that are associated with exposure to bullying.

The identification of factors relating to potential victims of bullying behaviours may provide an opportunity to improve anti-bullying programs in the educational setting and allow teachers to move from a 'policing' role to inhibit the antisocial behaviours of bullies (Whitted & Dupper, 2005), to a more proactive role enabling potential victims to enhance their social skills.

If EI can be developed (e.g. see Ulutas & Omeroglu, 2007; Hansen, Gardner & Stough, 2007) it may be feasible to develop anti-bullying programs that focus on the development of EI in both bullies and in those who are at risk of being bullied. EI has relevance to success in many areas of life, not just antisocial behaviours in educational settings (Goleman, 1995). The development of EI competencies in students may therefore not only assist in the reduction of bullying behaviours in schools but may also assist to better equip students to be successful in other aspects of life.

Although these results report a preliminary empirical examination of this area of research, the sample itself was small. As a consequence of this, the findings of the current study provide a good basis for future larger studies. As the frequency of reported bullying behaviours and peer victimisation was relatively low in the current investigation, further, larger studies with schools where bullying is more present should be considered. Furthermore, it will be important to measure the impact of gender, school type, or the developmental trends of bullying and victimisation in relation to the development of EI in future research. The contribution of these variables was outside the scope of this research due to the sample size and pilot nature of the study.

Nevertheless, as this was the first study to assess the role of EI in adolescent bullying and victimisation, it sets a solid framework for future larger studies.

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