

Bullying Behaviour, Empathy and Imitation: An Attempted Synthesis

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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter proposes a possible connection between bullying behaviour, empathy and imitation. The primary aim of our work is to provide a clearer understanding of bullying behaviour, by focusing on cognitive and emotional states that might cause bullies to show anti-social behaviour. We begin by providing a review of relevant research about bullying behaviour including definitions of bullying behaviour, the behavioural characteristics of bullies and victims, precursors of bullying behaviour, and several ideas about how bullies become bullies. This is followed by a discussion of empathy and imitation¹ where two contrasting case studies of autism and psychopathy are given to illustrate differences in imitation and empathic skills and deficits. Finally, we try to bring together these different lines of research and present the hypothesis that bullies possess well developed automatic as well as cognitive empathy, and that bullying behaviour is caused by an overemphasis of goal-directed processes of controlled empathy that work towards non-empathy. The importance of gaining a deeper understanding of empathic and imitation skills/deficits for different bullying roles is highlighted and discussed in relation to implications for anti-bullying intervention initiatives, where empathy and imitative interactive behaviour can be integrated.

1.2 What is bullying?

The pervasive nature and deleterious consequences of bullying and victimisation behaviour has generated a great deal of research interest over the past decade. Bullying behaviour is distinguishable from aggressive behaviour per se as it has to be a *repeated action that occurs regularly over time* (Olweus, 1999), and it *usually involves an imbalance in strength*, either real or perceived (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Bullying constitutes a diverse array of behaviours which have generally been categorised under the terms 'direct' physical bullying, verbal bullying and relational 'indirect' bullying (Björkqvist, 1994)². Direct physical bullying includes actions such as being hit, kicked or punched, and taking belongings. Verbal bullying comprises of name calling, cruel teasing, taunting or being threatened, and relational or 'indirect' bullying refers to behaviours such as social exclusion, malicious rumour spreading, and the withdrawal of friendships (Wolke *et al.*, 2000). There are different profiles involved in bullying behaviour namely, 'pure' bullies, 'pure' victims, bully/victims and neutral. Each profile is distinct in terms of behavioural and personality characteristics (Wolke & Stanford, 1999; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

1.3 'Pure' bully characteristics: Mindreading and empathy

Victims fit the profile of having poor prosocial skills, are unable to employ adaptive coping mechanisms, and are susceptible to internalised psychological problems such as anxiety and depression (Wolke & Stanford, 1999; Bond *et al.*, 2001). There remains uncertainty within the literature regarding the profile of 'pure' bullies. The traditional stereotype of bullies is that they are male, physically strong, not academically bright and resort to violence to resolve conflicts as this is the only response mechanism available to them (Sutton *et al.*, 1999). For example, Randall (1997) claimed that 'pure' bullies 'fail to understand the feelings of others' and 'have little awareness of what other children actually think of them ... a symptom of social blindness'. Other studies have reported that bullies are anxious, depressed, insecure individuals characterised by low self-esteem (Salmon *et al.*, 1998) who have problem behaviours (Farrington, 1993). In contrast, Sutton *et al.* (1999) argue that 'pure' bullies have a superior theory of mind and are actually extremely socially competent and have termed this 'cool cognition'. It is now believed that the ability of bullies to understand and manipulate the minds of others provides the context and skills for effective and recurrent bullying without getting found out.

¹ Since many subject areas are covered in this article, detailed literature reviews are not possible due to space limitations.

² We are not describing bullying in a clinical sense but refer to a set of behavioural traits as defined in the literature.

Linked into the notion of bullies having a superior theory of mind is the ongoing debate concerning whether 'pure' bullies lack empathic skills and whether this exacerbates the recurrent nature of bullying behaviour due to the bully not feeling any empathy or sympathy towards the victim. In support of this assertion, several studies have suggested that if a victim displays distress, this only serves to reinforce the bullies' behaviour even more (Davis, 1994). Sutton *et al.* (1999) believe that 'pure' bullies understand the emotions of others but do not share them resulting in a 'theory of nasty minds'. This is backed up by Evans *et al.* (2002) who examined a sub-set of children who were characterised by those close to them as being interpersonally negative, displaying spiteful and hostile behaviour and general anti-social behaviour. Findings revealed that these children could be described as having *inhibited* empathy rather than a *lack* of empathy.

Social intelligence and empathy are not totally independent of each other. Kaukainen *et al.* (1999) believe that empathy is characterised by sensitivity toward the feelings of others, whereas social intelligence can be applied without emotions in a cold hearted manner. Findings revealed that social intelligence highly correlated with indirect forms of bullying but not physical or verbal bullying. These findings are strongly related to the findings by Sutton *et al.* (1999) that 'pure' bullies have a superior theory of mind.

1.4 Precursors of bullying

Controversy surrounds the precursors of becoming a 'pure' bully and the persistent nature of this behaviour. This is likely to be due to the lack of theoretical frameworks and models to examine possible precursors, and the reliance on models explaining anti-social behaviour as opposed to bullying *per se*. Social Information processing models proposed by Crick & Dodge (1996) and later by Arsenio *et al.* (2000) provide initial attempts to explain the mechanisms of children's social adjustment and will be covered in more detail in later sections. Rubin *et al.* (1990) postulated that the deviant pathway for bullies is linked to dispositional and temperamental traits in the child such as being fussy, difficult to soothe, having insecure-avoidant attachment patterns which ultimately leads to hostility, peer rejection and externalising behaviour problems. The family background of bullies has also been implicated as a strong precursor for developing bullying traits. Bowers *et al.* (1994) and Farrington (1998) revealed that there was a concern with power in the families of bullies and a lack of family cohesion resulting in bullies feeling like they have little control at home. Stevens *et al.* (2002) considered the relationship between the family environment and involvement in bully/victim problems at school. Child and parent perceptions of family functioning differed substantially. For example, bullies described their families as 'less cohesive, more conflictual and less organised and controlled.' In contrast, parent perceptions only differed from parents of victims, bully/victims and neutral children by reporting more punishment. Conversely, the family background for victims of bullying indicated maternal over-protectiveness and critical and distant relationships with the father among boys. For girls, victimisation was related to maternal hostility. A common pathway for victimisation may occur when maternal behaviour hinders both boys' and girls' social and developmental goals (Wolke & Stanford, 1999).

A summary of research findings regarding the profile of 'pure' bullies points towards them as being socially intelligent and manipulative in social situations as opposed to the popular stereotype of bullies being psychopaths and 'strong but dumb and brutal characters' as frequently portrayed in movies and fiction.

1.4.1 How do bullies become bullies?

Since bullying behaviour is a relatively new subject in the psychology literature, research to date has mainly focussed on building character profiles of bullies based on cross-sectional data. There are no long-term longitudinal studies available that have considered the crucial questions of how bullies become bullies, and why some children become bullies while others develop into victims, bully/victims or neutrals. It is only recently that studies have begun to consider the stability of bullying roles over time but this has not shed light on the developmental trajectories for becoming a 'pure' bully. As discussed above, correlational statistical data can give some hints surrounding the circumstances that bullies are associated with, but such data have little causal explanatory power. Since bullying is such a complex behaviour, it is unlikely that some children are 'naturally born bullies', i.e. it seems unlikely that there is a simple genetic explanation such as a 'bullying gene'. Neither is there convincing evidence that bullies are being 'taught' directly to be bullies (e.g. by family, peers, or media such as computer games or television), although there is evidence to suggest that 'pure' bullies may come from families where the father was a bully, indicating links with social learning (Farrington, 1992). Also, it seems that being a bully is not a 'conscious' choice, e.g. a child who previously suffered from being bullied is unlikely to suddenly become a bully by conscious decision.

In the following we explore the possibility that particular events during child development, in particular during critical periods of socialisation, might provide predispositions for becoming a bully.

2 Imitation

2.1 Imitation and intersubjectivity

Developmental studies have identified important steps in the development of a child as a 'social being'. Early childhood interaction 'games' between infants and their caretakers play an important role in how children first make contact with the social world (cf. neonatal imitation research, e.g. Meltzoff, 1996). It has been suggested that imitation plays an important part in how intersubjectivity arises (e.g. Nadel *et al.*, 1999). Although imitation is also a powerful means for humans to acquire new skills, the social function of imitation is a stepping stone in the development of humans as *social beings*. Synchronisation of behaviour in infant-caretaker (playful) interactions leads to a meaningful 'dance' that allows the co-creation of intersubjectivity (sharing of experiences and emotions), and meaning in interactions (Trevarthen *et al.*, 1999). Note, that such games are dynamically emerging in face-to-face interaction, they emerge from 'local rules' of coordination and synchronisation, rather than representing a cognitively planned sequence of actions.

An interesting distinction, for the purpose of this paper, is to separate automatic from controlled empathy (Hodges and Wegner, 1997). A simple and developmentally early example of automatic empathy is automatic emotional empathy that helps infants and babies to share happiness and distress with others. Also, later in life emotional contagion still plays an important part in our lives, as a means to share emotional expressions or physiological states of others (e.g. we tend to smile when watching others smiling). Automatic empathy is immediate, and not intentional. Even in adults this helps us share feelings, i.e. experiencing emotions that we observe. This process for example helps us to experience some pain when we see another person being hurt. We cannot wilfully 'switch off' emotional contagion.

Controlled empathy, as distinguished by Hodges and Wegner, can be produced consciously and intentionally. It usually involves an effortful search for cues in one's own memory that could trigger automatic empathy, a process that we try to control, e.g. by controlling our exposure (actual or imagined) to the stimuli evoking this response. During controlled empathy we gain knowledge that we can use in a variety of ways, i.e. for the purpose of better understanding oneself, for better understanding others in order to help them, or for manipulating others / gaining a personal advantage. Cognitive empathy refers to the cognitive perspective, and means that an observer tries to understand how a target feels in a given situation. The cues available for the observer are the behaviour of the subject (including bodily and especially the facial expression of emotion) and the situation the target is dealing with. The result of this process of understanding is a cognition, e.g. "I think the target is feeling sad, because he lost his wallet." Cognitive empathy can also be automatic, too. For example, when remembering a particular person we might tend to adopt that person's viewpoints or opinions. Similarly, being situated in a particular environment might evoke automatic cognitive empathy that changes our state of mind (Hodges and Wegner, 1997).

Automatic processes of empathy help us to establish intersubjectivity with other people, and it allows us to share experiences: experiences that can be shared on the emotional basis, on the level of affect rather than physically experiencing exactly the same situations as the person we empathize with. Such 'second-hand' experience can be an indirect source of learning from experience, by sharing the effects and affective qualities of other people's experiences.

3 Empathy and Imitation

3.1 Deficits in empathy and autism

A general deficit in relating to other people and empathy has been discussed in the literature for autism, a life-long developmental disorder. People with autism show impairments in communication, social interaction and imagination and fantasy. A specific theory of mind (TOM) deficit has been hypothesised as a cognitive explanation of autistic behaviour (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985). Although the TOM explanation of autistic deficits has been accepted by many researchers, it is not uncontroversial. Primary deficits in emotional, interactive, or other factors central to the *embodied* and *intersubjective* nature of social understanding have been suggested as possible causes of autism. Affective theories see a lack of empathy, which in typically developing children develops through coordinated interchanges that result in intersubjectivity and emotional engagement, as central to autism (Hobson 1993). According to Hobson autistic children do not participate in intersubjective social experiences from early on in their lives in the same way as typically developing children do. Bruner and Feldman (1993) proposed the *narrative deficit hypothesis of autism*, that hypothesizes a failure of infants to participate in narrative construction through *preverbal* transactional formats. Many theories aim at explaining the underlying causes of autism, and we cannot provide a comprehensive review here (but cf. Jordan, 1999). For the purpose of this paper it suffices that researchers have highlighted two different aspects of empathy in typically developing children, namely a cognitive as well as an emotional side which, as we suggest, can be linked with controlled / automatic empathy as discussed above.

3.1.1 Deficits in imitation and autism

Discussions of deficits for children with autism with respect to imitation are controversial (e.g. Rogers, 1999; Charman *et al.*, 1994). Generally children with autism seem to have some impairment in imitation skills, in particular they seem less able to imitate actions and gestures. However, it has been shown by Nadel & Pez  (1993) that even low-functioning children with autism

can produce spontaneous imitations when encountering a non-autistic child, (cf. discussions in Nadel *et al.*, 1999; Nadel 2002). Others have suggested a possible link between autism and a neurobiological disorder in the “mirror system”, that is involved in establishing a connection between what actions one sees other perform, and what actions one is able to do (Williams *et al.*, 2001). It has been hypothesised that this mirror system could provide a ‘neural substrate’ for a simulation theory of empathy (Gallese & Goldman, 1998).

People with autism provide an example of the consequences of having difficulty in possibly both automatic as well as controlled empathy which makes it difficult for them to share experiences with others and to perceive others as *people* with emotions, goals and other mental states. As a consequence, although their behaviour might appear ‘rude’ or ‘cold’ to others, it is based on how they perceive the (social) world. People with autism generally do not lie, deceive, or manipulate: since they cannot perceive other people as ‘mindful’ they lack the notion of manipulating minds, and rather tend to believe that other’s perceptions and states of mind are identical to their own. This is very different from how psychopaths perceive the social world.

3.1.2 Empathy and psychopathy

Psychopaths suffer from an antisocial personality disorder. According to Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (Hare, 1991) psychopaths are described as superficial, egocentric, grandiose, lack remorse or guilt, demonstrate abnormal emotional functioning, lack empathy, are deceitful, and are manipulative. Interpersonally, Psychopaths on the one hand lack empathy, but on the other hand are very skilful at manipulating and deceiving others. Behaviourally, psychopaths are risk-taking, sensation seekers who act impulsively and get involved in criminal activities. Affectively, they display shallow emotions and are unable to form strong emotional bonds with others. Clinicians have characterised the emotions of psychopaths as “protoemotions”, i.e. “primitive responses to immediate needs” (Pitchford, 2001). Blair *et al.* (1996) reported that psychopaths do not have a theory of mind deficit although differences in processing emotional information have been suggested, which might explain why psychopaths have a lack of moral emotions (e.g. feel little guilt or remorse for their actions (Blair, 1997).

Psychopaths also experience “semantic dementia”. According to this concept, psychopaths would have an appropriate cognitive representation of the lexical meaning of emotions, but not the affective value normally attached to them (Johns and Quay, 1962; Patrick *et al.*, 1994). According to Cleckley (1984) the psychopath is able to reproduce adequately the “pantomime” of emotions, without experiencing the emotions itself. Psychopaths have been described as not possessing strong empathic capacities and are expected to be more self-centred, not to be propelled to suppress their aggressive impulses (Saltaris, 2002).

Martens (2000) revealed that a history of rejection; neglect; physical and sexual abuse; parental antisocial behavior, - substance abuse, and - divorce; adoption; and a bad and unsafe neighbourhood might be linked to emotional deficits in psychopaths. Also, the emergence of abnormal moral emotions later in life may be linked to temperament and attachment deficiencies in early childhood of the psychopath (Saltaris, 2002).

3.1.3 Psychopathic-Like traits in Children and Adolescents

In childhood and adolescence, patterns of psychopathic deviancy can be prospectively predicted to appear in later life (Saltaris, 2002). The most severely antisocial children are more likely to receive an adult diagnosis of psychopathy as well as a subgroup of conduct disordered children characterized by Undersocialised Aggressive Conduct Disorder (Johnstone and Cooke, 2004). Lynam, (1996 as cited in Johnstone and Cooke, 2004) suggested that the ‘fledgling psychopath’ is likely to be within the group of children who have both conduct problems and hyperactivity- impulsivity-attention (HIA) problems. This condition is linked with an early onset of behavioural disturbance and a more severe pattern of dysfunction in childhood, such as delinquency and offending.

3.1.4 Differences in empathy for autism and psychopathy

Thus, autism and psychopathy illustrate two extreme examples of the consequences of deficits in empathy: Autistic people have a fundamental problem with behaving socially and perceiving others as “persons that can empathize and can be empathized with”. Their behaviour might at times appear rude, insensitive or inappropriate, but this is not due to a wilful choice but is due to a lack of understanding of what behaviour would be appropriate. On the other hand, psychopaths are very skilful mindreaders and social manipulators, but the consequences of their actions are anti-social because of an extremely egocentric viewpoint that is possibly due to impaired processing of emotional information. Impaired emotion processing is likely to directly impact on automatic empathy by affecting the crucial link that allows us to relate to another person’s emotions and experiences. Psychopaths know that others have a mind, and they know how to manipulate minds.

3.2 Empathy and bullying behaviour

3.2.1 The distinction between automatic and controlled empathy in bullies

The hypothesis outlined above suggests that bullies direct controlled empathy in instances of bullying towards non-empathy. What predictions derive from this hypothesis, and how could it be tested?

Based on our hypothesis, bullies have unimpaired empathic skills as far as the processes are involved that trigger automatic empathy. Accordingly, they are able to express empathy, possibly in contexts outside schools. This hypothesis could be disconfirmed by evidence of a substantial impairment of automatic and / or controlled empathy processes, impairments that could prevent bullies from *genuinely* experiencing empathy. Evidence of bullies who only show bullying behaviour in certain contexts, but not in others, would confirm our hypothesis. It would point towards a picture of bullies as children who can strongly control their empathic skills, in the extreme case possibly even switch them on and off depending on the context (i.e. their own social goals). In a longitudinal study following the lives of bullies we would predict that while some bullies might prefer consciously to make a career as a “bully”, others might no longer show any bullying behaviour after a certain period (e.g. due a change in personal social goals).

If bullies are very much goal-oriented empathizers, we might find more bullies in situations where children are involved in strong competition for resources, e.g. competition for the attention / affection of parents / caregivers, competition with siblings or peers, or competition for elementary resources such as food in extreme circumstances. We predict that such contexts can facilitate bullying behaviour. Changing family and / or other environmental conditions should therefore influence the behaviour and motivation of bullies. There are no longitudinal studies which have considered the justifications that children provide for bullying others. However, there is some evidence that bullying may be related to critical life experiences, and personal social goals such as moving into a new school when dominance is initially being negotiated for new peer relationships (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). There is also evidence that children who are very aggressive to their siblings are likely to have problems with peers outside the family, namely rejection by peers and that the personality characteristics of bullies appear to be stable across social situations where there is ‘forced’ formation of the group composition (Dishion, 1986; Bowers *et al.* 1994).

In terms of bullying intervention, according to our hypothesis, an educational or cultural environment that focuses on problem-solving and goal-oriented behaviour should facilitate the occurrence of bullies since it supports their tendency towards goal-oriented empathic understanding.

An environment that raises awareness of bullying and the plight of victims should, according to our hypothesis, help bullies to refine their bullying skills by a) enhancing their understanding of how bad they can make the victim feel, and b) show them strategies and counterstrategies that they might use in further instances of bullying.

4 Bullying Intervention

4.1 Characteristics of bullying intervention programmes

There are a wide range of anti-bullying initiatives that have been developed and implemented in the hope of tackling and reducing bullying problems in schools. Farrington (1993) categorised intervention programmes as focusing on the bully, the victim or the environment as a whole. More recent intervention approaches include the use of virtual characters to induce empathy with the user (e.g. Woods *et al.*, 2003a; 2003b).

Intervention programmes which place emphasis on ‘bullies’ are diverse in nature and researchers have expressed contrary viewpoints in terms of the most favoured techniques. For example, the use of physical punishment to deter bullies was considered to be helpful by some in a study carried out by Stephenson and Smith (1989) whereas others such as Pikas (1989) with the ‘Method of Shared Concern’ and Maines & Robinson (1991) with the ‘No Blame Approach’ believe that physical punishment and reprimands are not effective in reducing bullies behaviour and suggest that bullies should be made to see and understand the view point of victims and make amends for their upsetting behaviour. These methods are usually carried out with the bully and victim individually and subsequently followed by a group discussion with the bully, victim and an adult group mediator.

The success rates of anti-bullying initiatives are difficult to evaluate in real-life situations due to the large differences between schools, school ethos, and individual differences between children and adults. However, the overall picture highlights that intervention strategies to date are successful in the short-term but do not have long-term success rates in terms of reducing and eliminating bullying problems (Roland, 2000; Eslea & Smith, 1998).

4.2.1 Empathy as a tool for bullying intervention programmes

If bullies use empathic skills mainly in a goal-oriented manner, can we change their goals? We believe not, based on evidence that insight-oriented intervention programmes seem not very successful, as discussed above. It is likely that any intervention trying to

convince a bully that they should change their goals will result in a bully who is even more aware of his/her goals. Likewise, any other 'cognitive' approaches towards educating bullies might fail for the same reasons. A similar counterproductive effect of insight-oriented therapy is being discussed for psychopaths: after such therapy psychopaths seem more likely to reoffend (Quinsey & Lalumière, 1995), possibly because it helped them to even further perfect their skills in psychological manipulation (Hare, 1993).

Thus, if not on the cognitive level, then can the emotional levels that are involved in automatic empathy be strengthened in bullies? Any empowerment of this kind would have to be taught on the emotional level, not the cognitive level of e.g. "explaining emotions" in discussions or writings.

4.2.2 The use of imitative interactive behaviour for bullying interventions

As a proposal for a behavioural intervention programme for children with a tendency towards bullying behaviour we suggest to investigate the impact of imitative, interactive behaviour.

As we discussed above, a major achievement in a child's childhood is to 'make emotional contact' with people, to share experiences, to create intersubjectivity, a crucial stepping stone in becoming a social being. Interestingly, this is not achieved by watching and analysing interactions from a distance, or by reading about it or being taught explicitly: it is mainly achieved through imitative interaction games. Such intersubjectivity that one can find in immediate imitation results from being part of an interaction. Immersion in the interaction, as well as a synchronisation and sharing of goals makes this interaction socially and emotionally important. Infants playing turn-taking and imitation games with their caretakers, either vocally or involving body movements, share emotional experiences, a key element in automatic empathy that "just happens". Later in life a "theory of mind" and cognitive processes complement this "immediate link" towards another person's feelings.

Thus, a bully might have to be reminded of what it means to connect to people. He might know how to connect to others in principle, but he might use this skill very selectively, e.g. directed only towards his closest friends, while for other children his cognitive control of empathy dominates. Such children might have to be reminded that the world consists of many other 'sentient beings' whose emotional states deserve attention, not just of bullies and victims (and other bystanders/neutral that can easily be ignored or recruited). We speculate that behavioural intervention programmes based on imitation and the elicitation of automatic empathic responses (e.g. emotional contagion) might help to strengthen empathic responses in children with a tendency towards bullying behaviour.

An important consideration for bullying intervention programmes concerns the environment and the individuals involved. As previously stated, intervention strategies which have focused upon trying to re-establish amicable relations between bullies and victims have received limited success. The inclusion of the whole family in intervention programmes for bullies could be explored, for example, the parents of bullies may benefit from being involved in imitation and empathy skills training. Evidence for this family involvement in intervention programmes is derived from Stevens *et al.* (2002) who reported that the family backgrounds for bullies had similar characteristics of aggressive children including less prosocial interactions, reinforcement of aggressive behaviour and inconsistent and harsh discipline methods. Therefore, it could be argued that if bullies participate in imitative and empathy skills training in isolation from family members, any new skills learnt are likely to short-lived as the rest of the family will not support any visible behavioural changes in the bully.

5 Conclusion

This paper is very speculative, due to very little information on "what bullies are" and "where they come from". Likewise, the causes and universal characteristics of autism and psychopathy are similarly controversial. Bullying is a growing and quite serious problem in schools (and elsewhere) worldwide. Intervention programmes so far have not been significantly successful, we therefore hope that a fresh perspective can contribute to future research in this area.

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