

## Relationship of Bullying with Affective and Cognitive Empathy among Adolescents

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### Abstract

*Bullying is a common issue experienced by adolescents worldwide. This makes it essential to look into the emotional aspects exhibited by those involved in such acts. Empathy is one such variable which can possibly promote either pro-bullying or anti-bullying behaviors. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between bullying and empathy. For this purpose, a sample consisting of 614 adolescents of age 12-18 years were drawn from various schools of Jammu, J & K. The required data was collected using Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2005) and Illinois Bully Scale (Espelage and Holt, 2001). The data was analyzed using Pearson product moment correlation. The results obtained indicate significant negative relationship between bullying, affective empathy and cognitive empathy.*

**Keywords:** Bullying, Adolescents, Empathy

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### Introduction

Bullying is one of the forms of antisocial behavior in adolescents that has received worldwide attention. Research in bullying pioneered with the works of Dan Olweus during the late 1970s. Bullying is commonly referred as an intentional act comprising of negative and harmful actions repeatedly inflicted by a more powerful person towards a less powerful one. There are different forms of bullying including, physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, kicking, attacking), verbal (name calling, yelling), relational (social exclusion, gossiping, spreading rumors) and cyberbullying (through the electronic means). It is a major public health concern. The prevalence of bullying ranges from 13 to 75% depending upon the measurement and definition of bullying (Swearer et al., 2010). A number of studies have also investigated bullying phenomena on Indian sample as well. Kshrisagar et al., (2007) reported that about 31% of children are engaged in bullying behavior. Malhi, Bharti and Sidhu

(2014) found that about 53% of students were taking part in any kind of bullying behavior and among these 19.2 % were the victims of bullying. Due to its high prevalence rates, it is important to have an understanding of the emotional characteristics of the individuals involved in such acts to deal with it.

Empathy is a foundational human attribute affecting both prosocial and antisocial behavior (Damon et al, 2006). It is suggested that empathy is ought to ease prosocial behavior and discourage antisocial behavior. Empathy is generally described as a multidimensional construct having both affective and cognitive components. The affective component of empathy is described as an ability of an individual to experience the emotions of another person (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972). The cognitive component is defined as the capacity of an individual to apprehend the emotions of another person ( Hogan, 1969 ). The multidimensional nature of empathy was first explored by Feshbach (1978). According to

Feshbach model, both emotional and cognitive elements of empathy coexist but cognitive abilities are regarded as essential requirements of empathy. It means that to recognize another person's emotions and to have one's own perspective is requisite but not adequate to have empathy towards others. Later, more researchers emphasized on the multidimensional approach to study empathy including both these components simultaneously (Cohen and Strayer, 1996). Empathy is often confused with sympathy but both these terms are distinguishable and different (Feshbach, 1975) because empathy focuses on the congruence between the affective state of the individuals involved. The affective response of a person should be similar to that of the target for empathy but not in case of sympathy.

Empathy- Altruism Hypothesis proposes (Batson et al. 1987) that when considering prosocial behavior, individuals having high empathy will react in order to reduce the negative emotions in others and help them. This could be due to either selfish reasons (to weaken their vicarious distress) or for altruistic reasons (to pacify other persons' distress). Also, such actions comforting others are performed since they lead to the experience or understanding of positive emotions like happiness (Batson et al., 1987). On the other hand, individuals with low empathy fail to alleviate the discomfort in others since their emotions are not moderated by vicarious experiences and understanding emotional states of others. Such people in fact are unable to link their antisocial behavior and emotional reactions of others (Hare, 1999). But it is easier to precede emotionally the repercussions of their behavior towards others for those who are high on empathy. Thus, empathy is able to discourage antisocial behavior by two moderating mechanisms. The first mechanism is associated with the cognitive element of bullying. It means

that the more an individual is able to comprehend the position of others, the less likely he will engage in antisocial acts (Feshbach, 1978). The second one is related to the affective component of empathy. Through this mechanism, the aggressor tries to mitigate his aggressive behavior by experiencing the pain of the victim and avoid the distress created or lessen suffering of the victim (Batson et al., 1989).

A review of 43 studies by Miller and Eisenberg (1988) revealed that affective empathy was negatively related to antisocial behavior, but it was present only when empathy was assessed using questionnaires. In another meta-analysis, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) reviewed those 35 studies which had used questionnaires to measure empathy. They concluded that a stronger negative relationship exists between cognitive empathy and offending than affective empathy.

Lovett and Sheffield (2007) reported a negative association between affective empathy and aggressive behavior. They concluded it existed only when empathy was assessed using questionnaires and for the sample of older children and adolescents and not among younger children.

Endersen and Olweus (2001) conducted the first study to examine the direct link between bullying and empathy. The authors revealed that there is a weak negative correlation between empathy and bullying ( $r = -0.15$ ). A larger negative relationship exists between empathy and positive attitudes towards bullying ( $r = 0.40$ ). Gini, Albeiro, Beneli and Altoe (2007) concluded that adolescents having lower levels of cognitive empathy are more likely to engage in bullying behavior. Negative correlation between bullying and affective empathy has also been established by other investigations (Chauxet et al. 2009; Correia and Dalbert, 2008). In another study, Caravita, Diblasio and

Salmivalli (2010) found that higher levels of affective empathy are related to lower levels of bullying behavior.

Some of studies which have examined both the components of empathy reveal a complicated relationship between empathy and bullying. Espelage et al., (2004) reported that there was a significant negative relationship between bullying behavior and cognitive and affective empathy among adolescents who bullied. Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) reveal that there is no significant relationship between cognitive empathy and bullying behavior but in case of affective empathy the scores were lower for those students who were involved in bullying. Moreover, for females there was a significant relationship between indirect bullying and low levels of empathy and for males between direct bullying and low levels of affective empathy. In another study, Jolliffe and Farrington(2011) concluded that adolescents with lower cognitive and affective empathy more frequently involved in bullying than those who were not. Recent investigations also show that there is negative correlation between bullying and both components of empathy (Belacchi and Farina, 2012; Poteat et al, 2013). But some researchers present contrasting results. Sutton et al (1999) reported a positive relationship between a measure of cognitive empathy and bullying. They argue that bullies understand the emotions of others but they do not share them. They lack skills related to affective component of empathy i.e ability to share and internalize feelings of others and are capable enough to manipulate others, having a “superior theory of mind” skills.

In a recent meta-analysis, Van Noorden et al. (2015) reviewed 40 studies evaluating the association between empathy and bullying involvement. They found that bullying is negatively associated with affective empathy but in case of cognitive empathy there are mixed

findings. Some researchers advocate for a negative relationship while others report that there is no association. These findings show that those involved in bullying may or may not certainly apprehend others’ feelings but their capability to experience their emotions is definitely less.

The review of literature shows that the relationship between cognitive empathy, affective empathy and behavior when studied together still remains unclear. Also, there is a lack of studies exploring these variables on Indian sample. The current study will help in looking into the emotional characteristics of Indian adolescents and contribute to the growing body of research on bullying in India. It will provide a better understanding of their emotional make up which can be helpful in encouraging positive youth development and also in preventing problematic behavior patterns.

### **Objectives**

1. To study the relationship between affective empathy and bullying.
2. To study the relationship between cognitive empathy and bullying.

### **Methodology**

**Sample:** The sample for the present study consisted of 614 adolescents (291 males and 323 females) with mean age 14.36 years from different government schools of Jammu district (J & K).

### **Psychological measures used**

1. Illinois Bully Scale (Espelage and Holt, 2001): Illinois Bully Scale consists of three subscales namely victim subscale, bully subscale and fight subscale comprising 4, 9 and 5 items each respectively. In the present study, only bully subscale was used which assesses the frequency of bullying behavior

(including teasing, name-calling, social exclusion and rumor spreading) exhibited by the participants over the last 30 days. There are five response options given to indicate their experiences which include “never”, “1 or 2 times”, “3 or 4 times”, “5 or 6 times” and “7 or more times.” The higher score indicates more self reported bullying perpetration. The minimum score for bully scale is 0 and maximum is 36.

2. Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2005): Basic Empathy Scale is a self-report 20-item questionnaire measuring affective empathy (11 items) and cognitive empathy (9 items). The

participants are required to indicate their degree of agreement for each of the empathy-related item. The respondents have to mark their responses on a likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree and strongly agree). There are 8 negative items for which the scoring is reversed. A total empathy score can be obtained by summing up all items score. For the present study, the score of affective and cognitive empathy have been used separately.

**Procedure**

The data was collected from various government schools of Jammu and Kashmir and the school authorities were made aware about the purpose of the study. Convenient sampling technique was used. A total of 750 questionnaires each were distributed and out of these 614 were used for the present study. The incomplete questionnaires were excluded.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software 20 was used to analyze the obtained data. The relationship between cognitive empathy, affective empathy and bullying behavior was assessed using Pearson product moment correlation.

**Results and Discussion**

The aim of the study was to assess the relationship between cognitive empathy, affective empathy and bullying behavior. Pearson product moment correlation method was used for this purpose.

**Table 1 : Pearson Product moment Correlation Coefficient**

	<b>Bullying Behavior</b>
<b>Affective Empathy</b>	-.171 **
<b>Cognitive Empathy</b>	-.180**

\*\*=p < .01

It was found that bullying behavior is significantly negatively correlated with both cognitive empathy (r = -.180) and affective empathy (r = -.171), but not strongly. It indicates that bullying behavior, cognitive empathy and affective empathy co vary together among adolescents. The negative relationship between bullying behavior and cognitive empathy is in line with the previous researches (Gano-Overway 2013; Kokkinos and Kipritsi 2012). In other words, adolescents lack the ability to comprehend the feelings and situation of others. Their capacity to discern the emotions of the individual they are bullying is low. The negative correlation between affective empathy and bullying behavior is supported by a number of studies (Raskauskas et al. 2010; Stavrinides et al. 2010; Sticca et al. 2013). It can be interpreted that adolescents engaged in bullying lack the ability to experience the emotions of others. Van Noorden et al. (2016) have reported similar results founding a negative association between

frequency of bullying and cognitive and affective empathy. The emotional insensitivity of adolescents engaged in bullying could be due to a number of reasons. It is possible that low levels of empathy works as a coping mechanism for them. Lack of empathy in bullies can possibly help them in dealing with the negative emotions and feelings that they go through. With difficulty in understanding others' emotions they might continue to bully more since such adolescents are unaware of the consequences of their actions on victims.

Further, it could even be possible that their emotional needs are not fulfilled. A person whose own emotional needs are not met would hardly be able to appreciate the emotions of others. Researchers in the past have also concluded that bullies are said to have a dearth of empathic skills (Arsenio and Lemerise, 2001). These individuals have a kind of "cold cognition" failing to understand the feelings of others (Bjorkqvist et al., 2000). Davis (1994) proposed that if distress is exhibited by a victim, it increases bullying behavior. Another possible explanation could be aggression and anger issues due to which they lack the inhibitory control and are unable to regulate their actions even when see pain of the victim. Though some researchers (Sutton et al, 1999) argue that bullies are "skilled manipulators" who are socially competent and understand others' mental states. It is not necessary that having empathy would lead to a person having a caring attitude towards others because being high on the cognitive component of empathy bullies may turn more antisocial and manipulate others. It is clear from the present study that adolescents involved in bullying are lacking empathy and it is suggested that different measures can be adopted which can improve empathetic skills in them. Parents can play an important role by being emotionally available for children and listening to them. They can encourage empathetic conversations

and tell them stories to foster empathy from the beginning stages.

### Conclusions and Implication

The present study will be useful for the school authorities to recognize those adolescents who are involved in bullying activities. It can be helpful in devising intervention plans focusing on both components of empathy and providing empathy training. Adolescents can be trained on both understanding and experiencing what others feel due to their behavior. Skills regarding perception, comprehension and regulation of emotions should be imparted since such skills prevent negative transactions that sustain bullying behavior (Kerig, 2007). Teachers can initiate such programs in classrooms which involve group activities promoting prosocial behavior and dealing with antisocial behavior. This will in turn be beneficial for the mental health of adolescents.

### Limitations

There are also some limitations of this study. It only focused on the those adolescents those were involved in bullying others and did not take into consideration the other roles which an individual may take up in the process of bullying like victim, bully/victim, bystander, etc. Also, the only medium for data used was the self report measures and other sources of information like peers and teachers were not taken into account. Moreover, it did not assess the causal relationship between the variables under study and the role of gender. All these issues can be addressed in future researches.

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