

**CLARIFYING THE RELATION BETWEEN  
BULLYING AND SOCIAL COGNITION**

**by**

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## Abstract

In an effort to resolve a current conflict in the literature, this project investigated the relation between social cognition and bullying by assessing theory of mind, emotion understanding, empathy, moral emotions, and bullying for aggressive children compared to prosocial children. A new measure was developed to assess the social cognitive constructs; bullying was assessed via self, peer, and teacher reports. Participants were 18 second graders, with the results presented in a descriptive case study. Moral emotions was the most useful for differentiating aggressive and prosocial children—prosocial children were more likely to score well, while aggressive children were more likely to do poorly. Results for theory of mind were mixed - teacher/peer rated bullies had high theory of mind, while peer rated bullies scored low. The empathy scores were not what would be predicted from past research, and emotion understanding was also not useful for differentiating aggressive and prosocial children.

**Keywords:** Bullying; social cognition; moral emotions; empathy; aggressive behaviour; theory of mind

*Dedicated to Chloe and Charlotte Neyestani*

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## **Introduction**

### **Bullying**

The modern study of bullying can be said to have begun with Olweus in 1978 (cited in Smith, 2004), who defines bullying as being repeatedly exposed to intentional injury or discomfort (Olweus, 1997). Still, there are varying definitions in the literature, as noted by Griffin and Gross (2004). Nevertheless, according to Greene (2000), a sizeable group of researchers have agreed upon the following features of bullying: intent on the part of the bully to inflict harm or fear, the aggression repeatedly occurs, the victim does not provoke the bullying by being aggressive himself, it occurs in familiar social groups, and the bully is or is perceived to be more powerful than the victim.

Prevalence rates are alarmingly high in Western countries and are believed to be increasing (Carney & Merrell, as cited in Griffin & Gross, 2004). In large studies conducted in the UK and the US, 75% of children reported being victims of bullying (Carney & Merrell, as cited in Griffin & Gross, 2004).

There are various types of bullying behaviour and many different methods of assessment. To date, the picture is not yet clear and further efforts are required to clarify the nature of bullying if we are to take steps towards successful prevention and intervention.

### **Theory of Mind and Bullying**

Theory of mind refers to an understanding of mental life—thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, feelings, etc.—that allows us to explain and predict behaviour. A

growing body of literature outlines the details of theory of mind development from infancy to adolescence, and this development is explained by several different theories (for reviews, see Flavell, 2000, and Hala & Carpendale, 1997).

Currently, there is a debate in the literature as to whether children identified as bullies are deficient in terms of theory of mind, or are in fact especially skilled at understanding the minds of others (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). One major stream of research has found that aggressive children show deficits in social information processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996; Camodeca & Goossens, 2005)—this is the familiar view of the bully as socially inept. This work is largely based on Crick and Dodge's (1994) 6-step model of social information processing. In the first two steps, social cues are encoded and interpreted (i.e., the child decides what happened in the situation and why). Third, the child selects a goal or desired outcome. In the fourth and fifth steps, possible responses to the situation are generated then evaluated in terms of self-efficacy for carrying out the action and expectation of outcome. Finally, the selected response is enacted. Aggressive children are thought to be deficient at some stage of processing such that the likelihood of engaging in aggressive behaviour is increased. Studies based on this model have found, in particular, that aggressive children are more likely than other children to attribute hostile intentions in ambiguous social situations (as cited in Crick & Dodge, 1996). Camodeca and Goossens (2005) found that bullies exhibited deficits at each stage of social information processing.

There is recent evidence, however, that some bullies may have superior theory of mind abilities, and that these skills are used to manipulate and control other children (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Gini, 2006; Sutton & Smith, 1999; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999a, 1999b). Bullying is often defined as a systematic abuse of power, implying

dominance, which requires social skills and manipulation, as well as planning (Sutton et al., 1999b). A bully requires some insight into the minds of others in order to choose victims, decide on appropriate times and methods, maximize the vulnerability of victims, attempt to avoid detection, etc. Since bullying occurs in a social context (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Berts, & King, 1982) with children taking on well-defined roles (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Österman, 1996), knowledge of and ability to manipulate mental states would be an asset to a bully intent on maintaining inter-role relations. Theory of mind skills are particularly likely to be implicated in indirect or relational forms of aggression.

Research has revealed two distinct forms of bullying: overt or direct aggression (including physical aggression and verbal threats) and relational or indirect aggression (involving social exclusion, rumour spreading, and other forms of social manipulation) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz & Björkqvist, 1994). It has been posited that relationally aggressive children, as opposed to overtly aggressive children, would score better on social-cognitive tasks, as social manipulation seems more directly related to the ability to understand and anticipate other people's thoughts and reactions (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukianinen, 2000; Sutton et al., 1999b). However, current theory of mind research on bullying has not separately assessed overt and relational bullies—all bullies have been treated as a single group (Sutton & Smith, 1999; Sutton et al., 1999b). It is possible that relational bullies alone are responsible for the bullying-theory of mind relationship. Therefore, the first goal of this project was to separately assess overt and relational bullies.

On the other hand, there is also evidence that children who do well on theory of mind tasks are more likely to behave prosocially (focusing on the needs of others, for

example by helping or sharing) (Moore, Barresi, & Thompson, 1998). Understanding the thoughts and desires of others can lead a child to recognize when others need help and what behaviour is called for in a given situation. Research is needed to determine what leads a child with good theory of mind skills to engage in bullying versus prosocial behaviour.

## **Emotion**

Various emotional processes have been suggested as a potential explanation for the relationship between theory of mind and bullying (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Sutton et al., 1999b). Specifically, children with good social cognitive skills may need emotion understanding, empathy, or to experience “moral emotions” such as shame and guilt in order to behave prosocially. In this view, theory of mind skills are likened to a neutral tool that can be used for positive or negative purposes depending on emotion skills.

Emotion understanding is a sub-category of the overarching construct of emotional competence (see Gordon, 1989; Saarni, 1988) involving the ability to recognize emotions and situations likely to give rise to various emotions. It has been found that children with good knowledge of emotion are more likely to behave prosocially (Denham & Couchoud, 1991), while children with poor emotion understanding—mislabelling emotions, for example—are more likely to be aggressive (Denham, Bouril, & Belouad, 1994; Denham & Couchoud, 1991). A potential explanation is that bullies do not anticipate that their actions will lead to emotional distress in their victims, or cannot recognize the signs of emotional distress when it occurs. More recent research, however, challenges this view. Sutton et al. (1999b) found that bullies had higher scores on emotion understanding than other children, including prosocial defenders of victims.

It is conceivable that good emotion understanding could be an asset to bullies, who could use this knowledge to manipulate and intimidate, especially in relational aggression. To help clarify this issue, this project assessed emotion understanding. Perhaps being able to understand others' emotion is not enough if these emotions are not shared or there is no concern for the victim—in other words, there is a lack of empathy.

Empathy is an emotional response resulting from understanding the emotion of another person; moreover, it is similar to or congruent with the feeling of the other (Zhou, Valiente, & Eisenberg, 2003). Two related constructs, sympathy, and personal distress, while previously included in a concept of global empathy, have been differentiated because of conceptual concerns related to divergent findings in empirical studies (Zhou et al., 2003). Sympathy springs from empathy—it is an other-oriented affective response involving feelings of concern and the desire to help ease the other's distress, while personal distress is a self-focused, negative emotional reaction such as anxiety or discomfort stemming from recognizing the distress of another. Sympathy, but not personal distress, has been found to relate to altruistic behaviour (Batson as cited in Zhou et al., 2003). The current project assesses empathy and sympathy.

More recent research distinguishes between cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Cognitive empathy is understanding others' emotional states via perspective taking, and affective empathy is empathic concern, or sharing the emotions of others. This definition of cognitive empathy is virtually the same as my definition of emotion understanding for this project.

Empathy has been positively associated with prosocial behaviour and negatively associated with aggression from middle childhood to adulthood (Björkqvist et al., 2000; Olweus & Endresen, 1998; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994). In bullying research, bullies have also been found to have lower empathy than prosocial defenders of the victim (Maeda, 2004). Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) reported that while bullies showed no deficiency in what they termed “cognitive empathy” (understanding of emotional states—what is referred to as emotional understanding in this paper), they did have lower affective empathy and total empathy. Based on their findings, I would expect that bullies in my study, as found by Sutton et al. (1999b), may score well on emotion understanding but low on empathy. Gini et al. (2007) found that high levels of empathy were positively linked to prosocial victim-defending behaviour, and that boy, but not girl bullies, had low levels of (affective) empathy, a common finding in the literature. An explanation for this is that most bullying assessments focus on physical bullying which is more common in boys, and neglect relational aggression, which is more common in girls. The current project controls for this potential confusion as it is one of the few to separately assess the two types of aggression.

In addition to emotion understanding and empathy, moral emotions may be another relevant emotional process involved in bullying behaviour. Arsenio and Fleiss (1996) were among the first to suggest that the main deficiency of aggressive children is that they do not sense that victimizing others is morally wrong. This moral deficit could explain why some children with good social cognitive skills choose to use them to inflict harm upon others. According to Menesini, Sanchez, Fonzi, Ortega, Costabile, and Lo Fuedo (2003), “bullies behavior is significantly related to their moral understanding of the

consequences of antisocial behavior, and in particular...the role of the emotions surrounding moral transgressions such as guilt and shame” (p. 516). Guilt and shame are termed “moral responsibility emotions.” High levels of guilt have been associated with prosocial behaviour in numerous studies and shame, though distinguishable from guilt, shows a high degree of overlap (Menesini et al., 2003). In contrast, the emotions of indifference (lack of negative emotions in response to a harmful behaviour) and pride (self-satisfaction related to the performance of detrimental actions, focusing on personal gains and disregarding the consequences to victims) reflect the process of moral disengagement (see Bandura, 1991). Not surprisingly, moral disengagement has been positively related to aggressive behaviour and bullying and moral responsibility has been related to prosocial defending behaviour (Bandura, Caparara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Gini, 2006; Menesini et al., 2003).

In line with the findings of these reviewed studies on various emotional processes, the second goal of this project was to include assessments of emotion understanding, empathy, and moral emotions as possible mediating variables in the relationship between bullying and social cognition.

## **Participant Roles**

A final issue of interest to understanding bullying is the “participant role” of children involved in bullying. As introduced earlier, work in this area has begun to approach bullying as a social process, where children take on well-defined roles in the bullying situation (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999; Sutton et al., 1999b). This understanding has led to the creation of peer-nomination measures that assess the participant role of children, revealing whether they take on the social roles of ringleader



bully, follower of the bully, reinforcer of the bully, victim, defender of the victim, or an outsider to the entire process. Significant differences have been found among the social cognition scores of the various participant roles, with bullies and defenders scoring highest (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Gini, 2006; Sutton et al., 1999b). Again, however, no distinction has been made in previous studies between overt and relational bullying. Accordingly, the third goal of this project was to assess participant roles in conjunction with the type of bullying (overt or relational).

## **Prosocial Children**

Given that an important goal of the project was to reveal the social cognitive differences between aggressors and prosocial children, I decided to go one step further than using the participant role(s) of the defender of the victim (and, arguably, the outsider) as a measure of prosocial children and add an additional role referred to as simply “prosocial.” This is meant to capture being prosocial outside of a bullying situation—simply going out of one’s way to be helpful, kind, generous, and considerate to others.

According to Warden and colleagues (Warden & Mackinnon, 2003; Warden, Cheyne, Christie, Fitzpatrick, & Reid, 2003), despite agreement in the literature of the need to investigate the sociocognitive abilities of prosocial children, there has been little empirical study, and aside from their own study, no comparison of generally prosocial children with bullies. Using a self and peer nominated questionnaire method, they found that prosocial children were better than bullies and victims at social problem solving, and prosocial girls demonstrated greater empathic awareness than other children.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Most research on bullying has focused on children above the age of eight years (as cited in Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2005), although it is known to occur frequently at younger ages (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al. (1999) and Ladd & Ladd (1998) as cited in Monks et al., 2005; Monks et al., 2003). Therefore, this project investigated 7-year-olds. Eighteen second-graders (11 boys and 7 girls) from a classroom of 19 served as participants. (One girl did not provide consent and thus was excluded from the study.) The large (500+ students) school is located in East Vancouver and is known to be an inner-city, lower SES school with a large immigrant population/many ESL students.

### **Emotion Primer**

At the onset of testing, the need for a primer was realized. For the first few children, emotion language did not come easily. A simple primer was developed in which I explained that we would be talking about feelings and showed them a sheet depicting various emotions in cartoon faces. They were asked two questions: "How would you feel if you got a present as a surprise?" and "How would you feel if your favourite toy got broken?" If needed, I helped them to choose the appropriate face and label the emotion. We found that administering the primer made it easier for them to access emotion language necessary to answer the emotion understanding questions.

## **Assessment of Bullying/Participant Roles**

Usually, assessment of participant roles is done via peer nomination—many researchers believe that this is generally the most accurate way of assessing social behaviour (as reported by Monks et al., 2003; also Pelligrini & Bartini, 2000). This method, however, is subject to flaws. First is the influence of social pressure or cliques (Griffin & Gross, 2004), which makes sense since the entire classroom of children are typically taken one at a time to answer the same questions about the behaviour of others—there is likely to be conversation and even pressure among the children about who to nominate. Second, informed consent procedures may prevent some children from being included in the list of potential nominees, obscuring important data (Griffin & Gross, 2004). Third, recent social or personal problems such as an argument among peers or a negative mood on the part of the nominator could lead to nominations not based on stable, typical patterns of interaction (Griffin & Gross, 2004). Fourth, there is some evidence that children are more likely to nominate their friends for any role, since they have more knowledge about their friends' experiences (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002; Monks et al., 2003). Still, research has suggested that children are adept at identifying bullies and victims from their peer group, and peer report methods have been found to be reliable (Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2000; Warden et al., 2003).

Self reports are difficult to rely on because of social desirability and the self-serving attribution bias, especially with aggressive behaviour, which may lead to over-reporting of prosocial behaviour and underreporting of aggression (Monks et al., 2003). Little is known about the reliability of self-reports in young children (Monks et al., 2003), but Olweus (1994) found that self nominations were correlated with class aggregated peer nominations (although this was not found in another study (Pakaslahti &

Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2000). It may be that self reporting is most reliable for the more socially acceptable roles of the victim and defender, which were shown to correlate with teacher and peer reports in a study by Monks et al. (2003).

Teacher reports offer an additional perspective, but this is of course limited to behaviour of which teachers are aware. There is likely to be variance in how attentive teachers are to aggression amongst their students, and relational aggression is especially likely to be concealed from teachers. In addition there is the possibility of bias on the part of teachers based on their own experience with a given student (Crothers & Levinson, 2004). Teacher reports of behaviour have been found to be reliable (Ladd & Profilet, as cited in Monks et al., 2003), and to correlate with peer reports, especially for the role of the aggressor (Monks et al., 2003; Pakalahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2000; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Warden et al., 2003). Some researchers claim to be confident in the accuracy of this method (Olweus, as cited in Crothers & Levinson, 2004), while others believe that teacher reports grossly underestimate the true amount of bullying (Smith, 2004; Smith & Sharp, as cited in Crothers & Levinson, 2004).

Due to these issues, a multi-method approach has been recommended by many researchers (Crothers & Levinson, 2004; Griffin & Gross, 2004; Monks et al., 2003). Accordingly, to increase validity, self, peer, and teacher nominations were obtained in the current project.

## **Participant Role/Emotion Assessment**

In order to make the participant role scale appropriate for use with younger children (7 years of age), the original instruments (Salmvalli et al., 1996) were modified

from questionnaires into an illustrated story, to make the behaviours more concrete and reduce verbal task demands. In order to assess the type of bullying concurrent with the participant roles, there were two separate stories based on the original scale—one portraying an incident of overt bullying, and one portraying an incident of relational bullying. The original scale included both types of bullying, but failed to differentiate between the two. There was also a third story developed to assess prosocial behaviour. My methodology extends previous work by Monks et al. (2003), which also used cartoons and assessed bullying type. In contrast to this study, however, where participant roles and type of bullying were assessed separately, with two different instruments, my work combines the two assessments into one measure. I incorporated into this measure a simple empathy question, several emotion understanding questions relating to the story, and an assessment of moral emotions.

The incidents portrayed in the three stories were real life experiences reported in the book, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* (Gordon, 2005). The characters were gender-neutral animals, so that children would not feel they had to nominate classmates of a certain sex. Each character represented one of the participant roles of bullying: the ringleader bully, the follower, the victim, the defender, and the outsider [the decision was made to omit the role of the assistant bully as previous research has found that younger children cannot differentiate this role from that of the follower (Monks et al., 2005), and the roles of the bully, assistant and follower seem to be measuring the same underlying construct even with older children (Gini et al., 2007)].

In the overt story, the victim is teased at school for wearing a coat made by his/her mother. Initiated by the bully, the victim experiences direct verbal aggression through teasing and is then pushed to the ground by the bully who then instructs the

follower to hold the victim's arms while the bully draws on the coat with a piece of chalk. The defender approaches the bully and the follower, asking them to stop, and then proceeds to comfort the victim. The outsider, described as liking but not often playing with the victim, watches the bullying without doing anything.

In the relational story, the victim waits at home for friends (the bully and follower) to pick him/her up on their walk to school, their daily routine. The bully comes up with a plan of ignoring the victim and spreading an untrue rumour that the victim wets the bed, telling the other students not to be friends with the victim. The follower agrees and the two walk past the victim's house without going to the door. The victim sadly makes his/her way to school and is ignored by the bully and the follower. The students begin chanting "bed wetter" and everyone is against the victim. The defender tells the students they are silly for believing the rumour while comforting the victim, and the outsider watches the scene with concern but does not get involved.

The prosocial story follows the same format as the other two to maintain consistency, including an episode of bullying and the same participant roles as characters, although the issue of interest is the behaviour of the prosocial character—someone spontaneously going out of their way to help and support another. The story opens by showing a teacher announcing to a class that there is going to be a field trip involving a bike ride. The students are all excited to hear this news, except for one who looks embarrassed—this student does not know how to ride a bike. The student attempts to learn to ride after school when the prosocial character notices and offers to help. The bully and follower characters come over and tease the learner (victim), the prosocial character defends, and an outsider observes without interfering.

The stories were followed by a series of questions to assess social cognition and the participant roles of classmates. A simple assessment of empathy was obtained by asking children how they felt after hearing the story and why. Any type of empathic response qualified (e.g., I feel sad because the victim was teased or I feel happy because the defender helped).

For emotion understanding, participating children were asked to attribute emotions with justifications for each character (“What was X feeling? Why? Anything else?”). Any reasonable explanation was accepted, and answers could range in complexity from a single emotion without justification, through multiple emotions (two single valence emotions, e.g., the victim felt sad as well as scared) to mixed emotions (two mixed valence emotions, e.g., the bully felt happy about being powerful as well as sorry for hurting the victim). This scoring system was based on Harter’s (1982) work outlining the sequence of steps in emotion understanding.

For moral emotions, following the procedure of Menesini et al. (2003), participants were asked to imagine that they were the bully and describe how they would feel after committing the acts of bullying, and why. Responses were classified as reflecting moral responsibility (guilt, shame) or moral disengagement (indifference, pride). Each of the two were further broken down into the following categories: within moral responsibility, an answer could be classified as fitting one of three levels—egocentric responsibility (focus on external negative consequences), conventional rules (social norms), and empathy; and within moral disengagement, the levels were egocentric disengagement (focus on benefits to the self), deviant rules (going against social norms/rules), and absence of empathy.

As an additional assessment of theory of mind, the measure initially asked what each character was thinking, but students had difficulty differentiating between thinking and feeling, so I changed the wording to ask them to justify the behaviour of each character (e.g., why did the defender help; why didn't the observer do anything). This permitted the assessment of social cognitive skills as well as potentially revealing the reasons students get involved in bullying, stay out of bullying, or take action to stop bullying—reasons that could be exploited in the interests of bullying prevention.

Finally, the measure included peer and self nominations for the participant roles. First, children were shown photographs of each child in their class (except one who did not agree to participate) and asked to nominate students whose behaviour matches that of each character in the story. They were then asked whether the person acted this way a little or a lot of the time. Finally, they were asked which character *they* acted like most, and why.

## **Teacher Questionnaire**

The project included a questionnaire, closely based on the original participant role scale (Salmivalli et al., 1996), in order to provide teacher nomination data for the participant roles. It was comprised of 34 behavioural descriptors: 6 for the roles of the bully, the follower, the defender, and the outsider, 4 for the victim (each of these broken down into type of bullying) and an additional 6 descriptors for the prosocial role that was not in the original scale. These items were not related to bullying incidents but prosocial behaviour in general (e.g., goes out of way to help others, supports and encourages others). The teacher was given one questionnaire for each student and asked to rate children for each behavioural descriptor on a 3-point scale from rarely to often. The



teacher initially had difficulty answering for some students, claiming that she did not have access to sufficient information to answer properly—as a result I added a N/A option.

## **Empathy**

According to an expert on empathy, Nancy Eisenberg (Zhou et al., 2003), self-report questionnaires are preferable to other measures such as empathy stories based on reasoning about hypothetical situations. The disadvantage, however, according to some researchers, is that social desirability has been found to be related to answers (Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, Miller, et al., 1991). Still, according to Endresen and Olweus (2001), this has not been convincingly shown to be a problem.

Children were presented with a commonly used procedure for assessing empathy (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, Carlo, & Miller, 1991) in which they were asked to answer 6 questions, such as: “When you see another kid who is hurt, do you feel sad for them?” If the answer is yes, children were asked whether it is a little (yes) or a lot (yes), and likewise with the reverse. [These questions were interspersed with a few filler questions (e.g., “do you like reading books?”) as well as additional questions (assessing peer acceptance, personal distress, and prosocial behaviour) of interest to my supervisor who was using these data for an unrelated project.]

## **Theory of Mind**

An adapted version of Lalonde and Chandler’s (2002) procedure was used to assess theory of mind. This procedure utilizes puppets and line drawings, and taps

children's interpretive understanding—the recognition that two people can legitimately hold different interpretations of the same stimulus. This is a milestone in theory of mind development that typically is accomplished around the age of seven years (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006).

The measure was administered twice on two separate days. In one, children are first shown a line drawing—of a witch and a ship, for example. Then the picture is put into an envelope so that only a restricted view is visible, which shows the bow of the ship and the witch's hat. Two puppets, which have not seen the entire picture, are brought individually to the scene, and the child is asked what the puppets would think the picture portrays. In the other administration, children are presented with the restricted view first (e.g., only the bow of the ship and the witch's hat). They are asked to guess the contents of the picture before it is revealed, then placed back into the envelope before the puppets are brought in. For full points, the child must recognize not only that neither puppet will know what the picture truly portrays, but also that each puppet may provide a different response. Partial points are awarded when children know that the puppets will not know the true image, but believe that both puppets must provide the same response.

## **Experimental Conditions**

Students were interviewed individually on two separate occasions, during class time in a separate room. Each session took 20 to 30 minutes to administer, although a few children took longer and had to be brought in for a third session. (Children were also presented with an additional measure, “the happy victimizer task” for an unrelated project.) At the beginning of each session, verbal consent was obtained and children

were assured of confidentiality and told they would not get in trouble for anything they say.

Participants chose a sticker upon completion of the study and were told not to speak to other students about the games (so as not to ruin the fun). The peer nominations are an especially sensitive subject to be potentially discussed among the students, for example, by asking or telling who they nominated for which role. I did not want my study to instigate any conflict but cannot be certain this did not occur, since there were a few students who seemed aware of the procedure before it was explained.

## **Predictions**

Initially I had predicted that relational bullies would score higher than overt bullies on theory of mind, that defenders and relational bullies would have the higher theory of mind scores than the other roles, and that scores on the emotion measure(s) would differentiate bullies with high theory of mind scores from non-bullies with low theory of mind scores. Practically, I was unable to obtain a large enough sample to test these predictions, so I will treat the results as a qualitative study of a single second grade classroom.

## Results and Discussion

### Theory of Mind

Scores on the theory of mind measure ranged from 1 to 4 (full points) with a mean of 3. The frequency distribution was as follows: one 0, two 1s, two 2s, one 2.5, five 3s, and seven 4s. The mean for the boys (2.7) was slightly below the overall mean, and the mean for the girls (3.14) was slightly above the overall mean.

### Emotion Understanding

Children were asked to provide emotions and justifications for the various characters in each story as an assessment of emotion understanding. One trend was that characters' emotions tended to be justified by their actions (e.g., "He felt mad because he pushed Walrus"). The question was intended to elicit an explanation of the emotion (e.g., "He felt mad because he just found out he failed a test") but the students provided answers to justify their chosen emotion (e.g., "I think he was feeling mad because he pushed, and when people push, they must be mad"). Since this was a relatively common occurrence, I accepted these justifications as long as they made sense.

Another issue that arose is that many of the students provided the response "mean" when asked how the bully or follower was feeling in the story. From my perspective, the label "mean" describes the actions of the bully but does not qualify as an emotion. Thus, when this occurred, we probed children further to provide a feeling word: "what B [bully character] *did* was mean—how do you think B was *feeling* when

they [we refrained from using gender pronouns since we wanted the animals to be gender neutral so children could choose classmates of either sex] acted that way?" Usually this resulted in the response "mad/angry," but occasionally children were unable to choose an appropriate emotion word.

Some children needed to be shown the emotion primer with the facial expressions as a probe when they were unable to provide an emotion attribution. Some children also needed probing for the justification of the emotion.

After providing one emotion attribution and justification, children were asked if the character could feel anything else, giving an opportunity to provide an additional response. Thus, scores could range from 1-6 for each participant role (single emotions without justifications, single emotion with justification, two same valence emotions with one justification, two same valence emotions with justifications, two mixed emotions with one justification, two mixed emotions with justifications) for a total of 66 possible points (five roles each for the overt and relational stories, one role of interest in the prosocial story). The mean score was 24 (range 17.5 to 42; SD 6.8). The mean for the boys was about a half a standard deviation below the overall mean at 21.4, and the mean for the girls was just over a half a standard deviation above the overall mean at 28.7.

Ten children (55%) provided mixed emotion attributions: six (33%) did so once, two (11%) three times, and one (0.6%) five times. There were more mixed emotion attributions in the relational story than the overt story (5 vs. 8). This finding is slightly better than expected based on previous research, which found that only children over 7 years (Donaldson & Westerman, 1986) and 10 years (Harter & Buddin, 1987) consistently provided mixed emotion attributions.

The most popular emotion attributions for the role of the bully in both stories were mean and mad (explained by the bullying actions in both, and in the relational story mad at the victim), followed by happy (e.g., for being successful, enjoying bullying). Children made a clear distinction between the role of the bully and the role of the follower in their responses for the role of the follower. Although the most popular answers (mean, mad, and happy) were the same, the explanations differed. Children thought the follower would be mad because he/she was bossed around by the bully (overt) and mad at his/her own involvement in bullying, indicating that children appreciated the fact that the follower may not have truly wanted to be involved. Children who thought the follower would feel happy said that this was due to the fact that the follower him/herself was not teased. A couple of students mentioned that the follower was essentially forced to listen to the bully—if not, he/she would have no friends. These results suggest the possibility that some children actively participate in bullying, even though they would prefer not to, so that they can maintain friendships and avoid being the target of bullying themselves.

The most popular emotion attribution by far for the role of the defender was mad at the bully and follower for teasing the victim, followed by sad that the victim was being picked on, and happy/proud/brave for helping. For the role of the observer, the most popular response was sad—because the victim was bullied, because he/she ignored his friend being hurt, followed by “okay/normal” because he/she was not involved or teased, mad because of the teasing, and scared/shy to get involved and become the target. Agreement was highest for the role of the victim—most said the victim was sad because he/she was teased. Mad was provided as a second emotion only, and explained with the same reason.

The prosocial character was believed to feel happy and “helpful” for helping. (Students providing “helpful”—a behavioural descriptor—were probed as described earlier: “how did [character] *feel* about being helpful?” This usually led to the choice of “happy.”) A few children also said that the prosocial character was mad at the bully and follower for teasing the victim. This indicates that, as intended, there was a conceptual difference between the prosocial story and the other two stories, despite having the same structure—the emotions of the prosocial character were seen as removed from the bullying that occurred in the story. Instead, the children were focused on the prosocial behaviour, which was not seen as a response to the bullying, but as a deliberately planned act.

## **Behavioural Justifications**

Children also provided behavioural justifications for each role (e.g., “Why do you think [defender] helped?”) as a measure of social cognition as well as to shed light on the potential reasons children may be involved in or stay out of bullying. There were 11 justifications in total. Children were awarded a point when they provided any reasonable justification. Scores ranged from 3 to 11 with a mean of 8.2. As was reported in the previous sections, the mean for the boys was slightly below the overall mean at 8, and slightly above the overall mean at 8.4 for the girls (SD 2.4).

In contrast to the emotion attributions, the behavioural justifications given for the bully were very different between the overt and relational stories. In the overt story, almost all children thought the bully bullied because of the victim’s homemade coat. Almost all children thought that the relational bully bullied because he/she no longer liked the victim/no longer wanted to be friends. Most children thought that the follower in

both stories bullied because he/she was friends with the bully, and a small number said it was because he/she did not like the victim. The defender was seen as defending primarily because he/she was friends with the victim or did not want the victim to be sad. A few children said the defender helped because he/she wanted to make friends with the victim.

In both stories, most children thought that the observer did not intervene because he/she was afraid of becoming a target of bullying. Several children in the overt story also thought the observer did not help because he/she was not friends with/did not often play with the victim. In six instances, children indicated that despite the bystanding behaviour, the observer truly wanted to help. These results are compatible with those of Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè (2008) who found that social self-efficacy (belief in one's level of functioning/ability to perform a given behaviour in the domain of social relationships) was related to the adolescent observers' inaction—in fact, it differentiated observers from defenders.

The most popular justifications given for the prosocial character's behaviour were that he/she wanted to help because the victim did not know how to ride a bike and that the two were friends. It seems that again, children understood the distinction between the role of the defender in the overt and relational stories and the prosocial character in the prosocial story.

## **Empathy**

There were two assessments of empathy in this study. The first was the question “How do you feel after hearing this story?” followed by “why?” and “anything



else?” which were asked after each of the three stories. The mean was 2 empathic responses. As expected based on previous research (e.g., Endresen & Olweus, 2001; Maeda, 2004), the average for girls (2.6) was above the overall mean, while the average for boys (1.5) was below the overall mean—the biggest gender difference in the entire project. There was only one student (male) who did not provide at least one empathic response. Six students (33%) provided empathic responses in all three stories.

In the overt story, sad/bad/sorry (because the victim was bullied) and happy (because the defender helped) were equally popular attributions. In the relational story, sad/bad/sorry (because the victim was bullied) was much more popular than happy, which was the second most popular response. In the prosocial story, responses were almost equal between happy (that the victim learned to ride a bike) and sad (because the victim was bullied). It seems that relational aggression made a stronger emotional impact on the children than overt aggression, overshadowing the positive actions of the defender, whereas in the overt story, the defending actions were most salient. A few children gave answers like “normal” or “ok” because it was “just a story.” Four students (22%) provided a second emotion of a different valence—mixed emotions—in one story.

In the second assessment of empathy, students were asked 6 questions and asked to indicate whether they agree “a little” or “a lot,” or disagree “a little” or “a lot.” For each question then, scores could range from 1 (a big no) to 4 (a big yes) for a total of 24 points. Scores ranged from 11 to 20 with a mean of 17. The gender breakdown followed the pattern of many of the previous results, and those of previous research (e.g., Endresen & Olweus, 2001; Maeda, 2004): boys were just below the overall mean at 16.2, and girls were just above at 17.7 (SD was 2.4).

## Moral Emotions

Children's understanding of moral emotions was assessed by asking children how they would feel if they were the bully and why. This was done twice—after the overt story and after the relational story. The most popular response was mad, often with reference to the bully's actions, as was found in the emotion understanding questions. Perhaps these children were not actually putting themselves in the place of the bully, and answered the question the same way they answered the emotion understanding question (“how was the bully feeling in the story?”), suggesting that the measure may have lacked validity, at least with these few children, in that the two measures may not have been assessing separate constructs. One child in fact stated “same as before.” Also as in response to the other measure, several children answered “mean.”

In order to count as reflecting moral responsibility, children had to provide not only an appropriate emotion close to guilt/shame (e.g., sad, sorry) but also an appropriate justification (e.g., because it is not good to hurt people). Otherwise it would not be apparent whether the children were answering in a detached way, as in the emotion understanding questions, or actually imagining themselves in the role of the bully. Some children named appropriate emotions that were not justified. Seven children (39%)—five males and two females—provided justified moral responsibility emotions. One child (female) did so for both stories—the others, just once. As described earlier, responses could be classified into one of three levels. None of the moral responsibility responses were level one; five responses were level two (conventional rules), and three were level three (empathy). There were slightly more moral responsibility responses in the relational story (5 versus 3). This is in line with the results of the empathy question, where the impact of the relational story seemed to be stronger. Here, there was more of

a sense of guilt and shame when children imagined themselves in the role of the relational bully than in the role of the overt bully.

As with moral responsibility, to be labelled as reflecting moral disengagement, responses had to include an appropriate emotion close to pride/indifference (e.g., happy, proud) as well as an appropriate justification (e.g., because I got everyone to do what I said). Only two students did both (one boy and one girl). The boy's response ("happy because I was having so much fun") was labelled as level one (egocentric). The same student also provided the answer "okay" for the other story, but did not attempt to justify it. The girl said she would feel powerful because she made someone do something, which was also considered to be level one disengagement. There was a third student (male) who claimed he would feel happy in both stories, but when asked why, he said he did not know. In response to the emotion understanding questions, he also said that the bully would feel happy, suggesting he could have been answering this question similarly, but in the emotion understanding measure he was able to provide justifications, suggesting he may have understood the distinction between the two questions.

## **Participant Roles**

Each student provided a self-nomination ("which character do you act like most?") after each of the three stories (so the question was asked a total of 54 times). In some cases, children were unable to provide a self-nomination, and in some cases, children provided two nominations. Not surprisingly, the most popular self-nomination was for the defender (25). Children, as adults, are likely to be affected by social desirability. Running a close second was the role of the victim (20). Although not the social ideal, being victimized is less blameworthy than the other roles and is often

deserving of sympathy—thus, social desirability could be involved here as well. There were five self nominations for the role of the observer, and three students chose the role of the bully (one did so twice, the others, once). None of the students chose the role of the follower.

Children were also asked why they behaved in the manner of the chosen character. I was interested in the reasons children thought they acted in particular ways, what it was about them that led them to do those things. In a lot of cases, children did not seem to understand this question the way it was intended. For the role of the victim, for example, in almost all of the self nominations in the overt and relational stories, the justification was a description of certain events (e.g., because people blame me and pick on me). For the victim self nominations in the prosocial story, the justifications were “I also don’t know how to ride a bike” (or do not know how to do something else). These children were explaining that events in their life matched events in the character’s life, but not answering the question of why they get picked on, or what it is about them that leads others to bully them. Some children were probed further, that is, “why do you think people blame and pick on you?”, but did not have an answer.

The role of the observer was also justified with reference to actions (e.g., because I just watch), as well as the role of the bully (“sometimes I’m mean”), but in one instance, the child responded to a probe (“How come you are sometimes mean?”) with “to scare people.” For the role of the defender, children were able to give the kinds of justifications I was looking for: to make them feel better; I like to help; I have to be a good girl; my mom said. It was possible to make distinctions among the justifications similar to the levels of moral responsibility emotions. A level one egocentric reasoning

justification was “I help my friends because I like my friends,” level two (conventional rules): “because it’s nice,” and level three (empathy): “so the person won’t be sad.”

If participants chose the role of the defender, they were asked if they would only help their friends, or if they would help anyone. Out of the 25 defender self nominations, there were 13 cases where children said they would help anyone, 8 where they said they would only help friends, and 4 instances where the question was either not asked or not recorded by the experimenter.

After the overt and relational stories, children were reminded of the actions of each character, presented with a board with individual photos of each classmate, and asked to nominate classmates for each of the five roles. After the prosocial story, they were asked to nominate a classmate only for the role of the prosocial character. When they provided a name, participants were asked if the person acted like the character sometimes or a lot of the time. A “sometimes” nomination earned one point and an “a lot” nomination was worth two points.

The total number of nomination points ranged from 2 to 28, with a mean of 13.7. Several students were nominated for multiple roles, and a few were even nominated for each of the five roles. The highest number of nomination points for any given role was 8.

As already described, teachers provided behaviour ratings for each student in each of the five roles, separated by bullying type. She also included (unasked) some notes on each student.

As mentioned earlier, peer and teacher nominations seem to be the most reliable method of assessing bullying-related behaviour. To begin analyzing the data, I found it

easiest to sort students into the following groups: students for which there was peer/teacher agreement as to their participant role, students with high peer nominations, and students with high teacher ratings. There was also one student with an unexpected profile—rated high by peers as involved in bullying, and also rated high by the teacher as being involved in defending and prosocial behaviour. These groups will be discussed in the next section.

### **Peer/Teacher Agreement**

There were two students with peer/teacher agreement for the role of the bully, four students with high agreement for the defender and prosocial roles, and one student with high agreement for the role of the relational victim. These three groups will be discussed in turn.

### ***Bullies***

One student was rated highly by both teachers and peers as a relational bully and relational follower—a female, not surprisingly, given that females are more likely to be relationally aggressive (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). She received high teacher ratings for the role of the relational bully, relational follower, and the relational victim. Some children involved in bullying are referred to as “bully/victims” when they participate in both social roles, and have been found to have a different psychological profile than children involved in only one of the roles (as reported by Griffin & Gross, 2004). (The agreement, here however, was high only for the bully and follower roles.) Her peers nominated her for many different roles in both stories, including the prosocial character.

Her score for behavioural justifications was almost perfect (1 SD above the mean) and she had good theory of mind understanding (3/4, at the mean). These results fit the profile of the skilled bully outlined by Sutton et al. (1999a, 1999b), and made good sense, given that she was nominated only as a relational aggressor—manipulating friendships, exclusion, and rumour spreading seem to require more understanding of the mental states of others.

As may not have been expected, however, this same individual scored high on most of the emotion measures. She had one of the highest scores for emotion understanding, including mixed emotion attributions. She provided empathic responses for each of the three empathy questions, including one of the few mixed emotion attributions. Finally, her score on the empathy questionnaire was high. For this girl, at least, emotion understanding and empathy did not prevent her from using her social skills to harm others. Of course it is also possible that her good theory of mind abilities led her to realize what kind of answers were socially desirable in the empathy measures, and that she provided these without necessarily feeling them personally. Another possibility is that low empathy may be related to bullying behaviour only in boys, which has been found in several studies (e.g., Gini et al., 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), although this could be due to the fact that bullying assessments tend to focus on overt bullying which is more likely to involve boys. Although emotion understanding had been hypothesized to mediate the relationship between theory of mind and bullying, it is also possible that understanding others' emotions could be an asset for a bully. The bully could use this information to choose victims, capitalize on their fears and insecurities, manipulate their feelings and friendships, and maintain dominance, especially with relational aggression. In support of this view, another study found that that although

bullies were empathically deficient, they were competent at emotion understanding (which they termed cognitive empathy) (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

The one emotion measure with the potential to explain bullying behaviour is moral emotions. The girl in question said that if she were the overt bully, she would feel “powerful” because she “made someone do something.” I considered this to reflect the moral disengagement emotions of pride and indifference at level one—egocentric disengagement—as the focus was on benefits to the self, while harm to the victim was overlooked. (In the relational story, her response “angry” “because I didn’t want to be [the victim’s] friend” was not considered to reflect moral emotions.) For this relational bully, moral emotions were the factor that differentiated her from a child with good theory of mind, emotion understanding, and empathy who chose to use these skills in the service of good. This is consistent with what has been found in previous research—moral emotions have been negatively associated with bullying and aggressive behaviour (Bandura et al., 2001; Gini, 2006; Menesini et al., 2003).

For her self-nomination, this student always chose the defender character, saying she would help anyone, not just friends. Her rationales could be categorized as level two moral responsibility (conventional rules): “I have to be good,” “My mom said.” It seems that for her, these rationales are not strong enough to motivate moral behaviour.

All of her explanations for the covert story involved friendships: the defender helped because he/she wanted another friend, the bully and follower wanted to be friends with each other and not friends with the victim, the follower listened to the bully because he/she wanted to be the bully’s friend. I paid special attention to the emotion attributions and behavioural justifications for the roles for which she was nominated, as



these could provide insight into the reasons for her actions. She thought that the relational bully was angry because he/she did not want to play with the victim, and wanted the victim to be scared of him/her. These responses have the same flavour as the response “powerful” that she gave for the moral emotions question. The reason she gave for the relational bully’s actions was that he/she had a new best friend. Even in the prosocial story, where the content has nothing to do with friends, her answers reflected a preoccupation with friendships. She said the prosocial character helped because he/she wanted to get a new friend, and felt good about his/her behaviour because he wanted to help the victim get more friends. The focus on friendships in a relational aggressor is not surprising given findings that children are relationally aggressive with their close friends, and that relational aggression is associated with high levels of intimacy and exclusivity within friendships (Grotperter & Crick, 1996).

On the teacher questionnaire, the teacher noted that this student was “bright, but flaky—up in the clouds” and that she “lacks self-confidence.”

The other student with peer/teacher agreement for the role of the bully (both overt and relational) by both peers and the teacher was also female. The teacher gave her higher ratings for these roles than her peers—in the peer nominations, though she was nominated for the overt and relational bully, her highest scores were for the overt observer and the relational defender. The only area of overlap between teacher and peers were the bully roles.

Many of her scores are similar to the previously discussed student in that they were high—even higher, in fact: perfect score on the theory of mind task (4; one standard deviation above the mean), one of the only perfect scores on behavioural

justifications, high score (3/3) on the simple empathy questions, including mixed emotions, a high score on the empathy questionnaire, and the highest score of any participant for emotion understanding (42; over 3 SD above the mean) including many mixed emotion attributions. In contrast to the other girl, however, this student provided a response reflecting moral responsibility at the second level (conventional rules): (If I were the bully, I would feel) “greedy, because hurting people is not good.” It appears that in this case, moral emotions did not explain why this student chose to use her skills in the service of bullying. Interestingly, though, she provided the same response for the moral emotions as she did for the bully, suggesting that she did not actually put herself in the role of the bully for the moral emotion questions but instead answered in a detached way, as with the emotion understanding questions (which seemed to occur with several students, as discussed earlier). It is also possible that she is so socially skilled that she knew how to make herself look good in her responses.

For her self-nominations, she said she was most like the overt victim (because “people blame things on me but I didn’t do it”), the relational victim (“people blame things on me”) and the relational defender who would help anyone (“because I don’t want to make people cry and get hurt; if they do, I take them to the office”), and the victim in the prosocial story. When asked why she thinks people blame things on her she replied “because we’re enemies and she doesn’t like me but sometimes I go to her house and we’re friends.” According to the teacher’s notes, she is “popular, but her bite can sting. She uses foul language—occasionally the ‘F’ word! Some of the girls have ‘problems’ with her.” Clearly she is involved in conflicts with friends—perhaps in her self nomination explanation she was referring to the other girl rated as a relational bully. This would

make sense, as mentioned, since relational aggression is often used within friendships (Grotmeter & Crick, 1996).

### ***Defenders/Prosocial Children***

There were four students who were rated highly by both the teacher and peers for the prosocial roles. Surprisingly, three of the four were male. Previous research has found that girls are more likely to show prosocial behaviour (Monks et al., 2003; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003). One of the four was considered to be a relational defender, one to be both a relational and an overt defender, and two an overt defender, relational defender, and prosocial character.

Interestingly, three of the four students had scores at or below the mean for most of the measures. One had particular trouble with the emotion understanding questions and some of his answers were incoherent. He did receive a high score on his empathy questionnaire, however, in contrast to the other two who were at or below the mean. Perhaps his prosocial behaviour is motivated by his experiential emotions rather than his understanding. Two of the three had good scores on theory of mind (one got 2, one 3, and one 4). The fourth student (the female) had more of the expected profile—all of her scores were above the mean, some quite high. All four of them, however, provided some type of moral responsibility emotion—two were level 2, and two provided an appropriate emotion which was not justified. It seems that moral emotions was the only measure able to differentiate the bullies from the prosocial children. In this classroom, understanding others' mental states, emotions, and behaviour, and even empathy did not necessarily lead to prosocial behaviour and the avoidance of aggression. Only children who appeared to feel a sense of moral responsibility for their own actions were

reported to engage in defending, helping, and sharing behaviours, while those who seemed morally disengaged were more likely to be reported to be aggressive. Gini (2006) had similar results—children were assessed with a cognitive task, an emotion task, and a moral emotions task, and the key finding differentiating defenders from bullies was their high moral sensitivity.

Two of the four received peer nominations for only the non-aggressive roles (defender, prosocial, observer, victim). In addition to these roles, one also received one point for each of the follower roles, and the other one (the female with the more typical prosocial profile) received a total of 4 points for the bully/follower roles. Three of the four self-nominated for the role of the victim, while one said he was most like the defender in each story. It is interesting that most of the defenders saw themselves as the victim despite their reported brave behaviour. The teacher gave these four students ratings for the defender and prosocial roles, as well as rating one of them to be an overt observer. The fact that most of the nominations by both students and the teacher were for the prosocial roles increases confidence in the accuracy of the role designations. In her notes, the teacher commented that three of the four were popular with classmates and even staff—prosocial children have been often reported to be popular (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003).

Three of the four said that the defenders in the stories felt angry because the victim was being teased (in addition to sometimes also feeling sad for the same reason or happy because he/she helped). Perhaps experiencing anger in response to witnessing injustice acts as a catalyst for defending behaviour. Most of these four students' behavioural justifications for the defender roles reflected empathy—the defenders were said to have helped in order to lessen the suffering of the victim.

Previous studies have found that defenders have high levels of empathy (Gini et al., 2007).

Given the small numbers, it was not possible to make distinctions between those nominated for the defender roles and those nominated for the prosocial role.

### ***Victim***

One student was highly rated by both peers and teachers as a relational victim. She also received high peer nominations and moderate teacher ratings for the prosocial character. She nominated herself for the role of the covert victim but her explanation did not make sense. In the other stories, she said she was the defender and the bully. According to the teacher's notes, this student comes from a "very dysfunctional family, has inconsistent attendance, and tries very hard to do schoolwork."

Her score on emotion understanding was above the mean—she did much better on the covert story, the bullying type with which she is said to be involved. In the overt story, although she technically scored some points, all of her emotion explanations were based on actions that did not necessarily follow from the emotions, reflecting limited understanding (e.g., the bully was mad because he was laughing at the victim's coat). She scored low on behaviour justifications, as most of her responses did not make sense. She scored high on theory of mind (4/4), just over average on the simple empathy questions and low on the empathy questionnaire. This pattern is similar to what has been reported in previous research, except for the high score on theory of mind - victims have been found to have low social cognition (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Gini, 2006; Sutton et al., 1999b). It is likely that emotion understanding and theory of mind could help a potential victim avoid becoming a target, and that without these

skills, children are more vulnerable to abuse at the hands of a bully. Of course, it is unknown whether the social cognitive deficits found in victims are a cause or consequence of victimization. This is a worthy avenue of exploration for future studies, using longitudinal designs.

## **Peer/Teacher Discrepancy**

Notably, the highest peer-nominated bully/follower in the class was highly rated by the teacher not only as an overt bully but also as an overt defender, relational defender, and prosocial character. His peers also nominated him for the roles of the observer and the victim, and he got two points for the prosocial character, but no nominations for the defender roles. He self nominated as the overt observer, “my friend beats people up but if I go in he’ll beat me up too” (although when asked to provide a peer nomination for the overt bully he nominated himself: “no one helps me, I’m tough enough”), the relational bully (one of three students to choose the bully) “my old friend makes me do stuff he doesn’t want to get in trouble for,” and the victim in the prosocial story (because he cannot ride a bike).

This boy’s profile matches in some ways with those of the bullies—he scored at the mean for theory of mind and the empathy questionnaire, above the mean for emotion understanding, got one of the few perfect scores on behavioural justifications, and a high score (3/3) for the simple empathy questions. But, like the defenders/prosocial children, he also scored highly on moral emotions, as one of only three children to provide a response considered level three—empathy. One way to interpret the results is that he has all of the socio-cognitive-emotional tools at his disposal and at times uses them in the service of good, and at times to harm others.

He reported that the overt bully would feel “evil” because he did not like the victim’s coat and that the relational bully was mad because the victim had made fun of him one day, and that in both stories, they bullied because they did not like the victim. Perhaps this is a reason that he himself engages in bullying. According to the teacher’s notes, he is “bright, but a bit scattered. Cries easily, a bit lacking in self-confidence. Says his younger brother can beat him up.” This description could be seen as reactive aggression, which is “characterized by affective, impulsive, defensive, and hostile responses to perceived threats” (Gasser & Keller, 2009, p. 129) and who displays the hostile attribution bias in response to ambiguous provocation situations—others are perceived as mean and threatening (Crick & Dodge, 1996). According to the literature, it is the proactive aggressor who is more likely to have superior social cognition (Crick & Dodge, 1999). Considering him a reactive bully could help explain why he had high scores on most of the measures including moral emotions yet still engages in aggressive behaviour—maybe despite feeling morally responsible with a sense of empathy, his reactive response to provocation is so strong that any moral responsibility is overpowered and he cannot stop himself from reacting aggressively.

## **High Peer Nominations**

Some students received high peer nominations for certain roles with which the teacher did not agree. One was a peer-nominated observer, two were bullies, and one was a follower.

### **Observer**

One student got high peer nominations for both the overt and relational observer, as well as a few points for the overt bully, overt follower, overt victim, relational victim, and relational defender. The only high teacher rating was for the combined total of the victim ratings (overt and relational alone were not high but when combined they were high compared to the other students). He self nominated as the overt observer “because sometimes I stare” (he also nominated himself when asked to nominate a peer for the overt victim), the relational victim (“I don’t know why”), and the victim in the prosocial story (“I don’t know how to ride, I need help learning other things too.”) The teacher described him as “special needs, very slow.”

Many of his scores were very low—he scored low on behaviour justifications, one of the lowest in the class for emotion understanding, and had the lowest score on the empathy questionnaire. (The experimenter had great difficulty obtaining his answers for the relational story—he gave nonsensical answers that had nothing to do with the story and we had to take him back three times to complete the story. This may be why his scores are so low for emotion understanding and behaviour justifications.) However, he scored high (4/4) on theory of mind and average on the simple empathy questions, even providing a mixed emotion response. And he was one of the three students to provide a moral responsibility emotion considered to be level three. He provided a moral emotion in the other story as well, but it was not sufficiently justified. These results can be seen as in line with the previously reported results—despite having low scores on many of the other measures including empathy, the moral emotions are what seem to keep him from engaging in bullying. The role of the observer is often considered to be a prosocial role,



as observers do not take part in bullying, and have been found to have good social cognition (Sutton et al., 1999b) and empathic concern (Gini et al., 2008).

Although many students reported that they thought observers did not intervene out of fear of becoming a target of bullying, this student was not one of them. He said the observers did not help because they were tired (overt) and had nothing to do/no one to play with (relational). Discovering the reasons for observers' behaviour is a worthy pursuit for bullying interventions. Future research would do well to investigate potential ways of encouraging observers to take action to stop bullying. A recent study (Gini et al., 2008) reported that both defending and bystanding behaviour (that of observers) was positively related to empathy, but the key difference between the two groups was that defenders were more likely to have high social self-efficacy and observers were more likely to have low social self-efficacy. Rigby and Johnson (2006) also found that children who reported intention to intervene in bullying situations had high levels of self-efficacy. Outsiders may fail to act if they do not know what to do, they are scared of becoming targeted by the bully, or they might do the wrong thing. Other personal abilities may also be relevant.

### ***Bullies***

Two male students were peer-nominated as relational bullies. They received fewer nominations for other roles—in fact, they were nominated for almost every role. The teacher did not give either child high ratings for any of the roles.

The two have, for the most part, similar profiles. For the simple empathy questions, they both scored low: one provided only one (borderline) empathic response, while the other was the only student who did not provide any empathic responses. They

both scored low on the empathy questionnaire and emotion understanding, at or above the mean for behaviour justifications, and low on theory of mind. The one who scored 0 for the simple empathy questions had the lowest theory of mind score (one of two 1s). He did not provide moral responsibility emotions nor disengagement emotions for the moral emotions measure, but the other child gave a response reflecting moral responsibility, although it was not sufficiently explained: "sorry to do everything like that." The lowest scoring child refused to self nominate in two of the stories, saying he did not act like any of the characters, and chose the observer in the relational story. The other boy was one of the three to choose the role of the bully, and did so in two of the stories; ironically enough, this was in the overt and prosocial stories, while for the relational story in which he got the most nominations for bullying behaviour, he chose the defender. When asked why he bullied, both times he replied, "because I'm mean sometimes." When asked why, he said, "to scare people," reflecting a lack of empathy and moral disengagement. A lack of empathy was also reflected in his explanation for the actions of his nominated role, the relational bully, who he said bullied because he wanted to make the victim feel sad. The other bully said the relational bully bullied because he did not want to play with the victim. Both bullies said the relational bully felt angry with the victim.

The low scores of these students reflect Crick and Dodge's (1994, 1996) image of the "oafish" unskilled bully who needs to rely on force to get needs met. Not only were these bullies deficient in terms of theory of mind, but they were among the lowest scoring students on empathy as well. According to some researchers, empathy is necessary but not sufficient to encourage prosocial behaviour (Gini et al., 2008; Maeda, 2004), which has held true for the results of this project. It is surprising that one of the

bullies provided a moral emotion, saying he would feel sorry for the very behaviour he was nominated for displaying, despite self-nominating as a bully (twice) and describing himself as mean and having the intention of scaring others. It is interesting that the bullies who also were recognized by teachers were aware were the ones fitting the profile of Sutton and colleagues (Sutton & Smith, 1999; Sutton et al., 1999a, 1999b) socially skilled “Machiavellian” bully, while the ones nominated only by students fit into the opposite category. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the latter two were mainly involved in relational aggression, of which teachers are often unaware (despite the fact that the teacher did provide high relational aggression ratings for other students).

### ***Follower***

One boy received high peer-nominations for the relational follower. He also received a few points for the overt follower, overt observer, and overt victim. The teacher did not rate him as high on anything; in fact, she chose “n/a” for almost every question on the questionnaire. She noted, “he is a mystery to me, so quiet...starting to socialize more by end of year.”

His scores for theory of mind and emotion understanding were average, and high for behaviour justifications. Thus, the social skills deficit model does not fit this student. For empathy, he scored high (3/3) on the simple empathy questions, and one standard deviation below the mean for the empathy questionnaire. Since the simple empathy questions are likely more subject to social desirability, the low score on the empathy questionnaire may be a more accurate representation of his level of empathy, and it could be that a lack of empathy is at least partially responsible for his involvement in

bullying. Low empathy has been reported in followers in previous studies (Maeda, 2004). This theory is supported by his responses to the moral emotions questions, both of which reflected moral disengagement—he was one of only three students to provide disengagement emotions and the only student to do so twice. His answer for the overt story “(if I were the bully I would feel) happy because I was having so much fun” was classified as level one—egocentric reasoning, as it focused on benefits to the self, but his response for the relational story “(I would feel) okay,” was not able to be categorized because when asked why he would feel that way, he said he did not know. A lack of empathy and sense of moral disengagement are the most likely explanation for his behaviour. It is interesting that he was not nominated as a bully—it seems his involvement in bullying is not self-initiated and occurs only in a supportive role.

An empathy deficiency is also apparent in his responses for emotion understanding. He thought the bullies and followers in both stories would feel happy because they liked bullying people—in the relational story, where he is reported to be the follower, he added that the follower would also feel happy because he was not getting teased, and both followers were reported to hurt the victim because they were friends with the bully. These responses may provide some insight into the reasons for his involvement—he may be friends with a bully and fear that he will become the victim if he does not help the bully. His self-nominations do not seem to provide further clues, as they were all for the role of the defender, even though he received no peer nominations or teacher ratings for these roles.

## High Teacher Ratings

### *Defenders/Prosocial Children*

There were four students (three boys and one girl) who were highly rated by the teacher for the prosocial roles—one, the girl, as both the overt and relational defender, one as a relational defender and the prosocial role, and two as only the prosocial role.

The three boys, all of whom the teacher rated highly for the prosocial role, had similar profiles—for the most part, low scores. All had low scores on emotion understanding and behaviour justifications, all scored at the mean or below for the simple empathy questions, and although two provided potentially moral emotions (i.e., happy and sad), none were sufficiently justified to be counted (they did not know why they would feel this way). Two had low theory of mind scores, one high; and two had high empathy, one low. For the two with high empathy, this would be the most likely factor involved in their prosocial behaviour. The low scores on the other measures are surprising given previous findings that prosocial children have good social cognition and score well on moral emotions tasks (Gini, 2006; Sutton et al., 1999b). Since these defenders were only considered as such by the teacher and not by peers, it could be that the teacher ratings are less reliable—the defenders with teacher/peer agreement all displayed evidence of moral responsibility,

The fourth female student presents an interesting profile. She also had high empathy, but on both measures, and lower emotion understanding, but scored almost perfectly on behaviour justifications. She had the lowest score in the class for theory of mind (the only student to get 0/4), but had the highest score for moral emotions (the only student to provide two moral responsibility responses—one level two, and one level

three, also reflecting empathic awareness). Her responses on the emotion understanding questions also reflect empathy—many of the characters were said to feel sad that the victim was being hurt, although she said both defenders helped because they were friends with or wanted to be friends with the victim, and when she self nominated for the defender roles, she said she would only help her friends “because I like them,” which reflects egocentric reasoning rather than empathy. Her profile fits well with some of the other results from this project—her prosocial behaviour can be explained with empathy and more importantly, moral emotions, and her case indicates that theory of mind is not in fact necessary.

## Conclusions

The main finding from this project was that performance on moral emotions differentiated aggressive children from prosocial children. Defenders, prosocial children, and observers were more likely to show evidence of moral responsibility, whereas bullies and followers were more likely to show evidence of moral disengagement. This is in line with what has been found in previous research (Bandura et al., 2001; Gini, 2006; Menesini et al., 2003). Menesini et al. (2003) explained this finding with the egocentric reasoning they found to characterize bullies. Another perspective comes from Bandura. According to his social cognitive theory of the moral self, moral emotion mediates the relationship between moral reasoning and moral action (as reported by Gini, 2006). It could be that most children understand what behaviour is right in a given situation, and if they are morally sensitive they follow through on that action, but moral disengagement will prevent them from doing so.

The theory of mind results were mixed—while the bullies with teacher/peer agreement had good theory of mind, the bullies nominated only by peers had low theory of mind. If the peer-nominated bullies were overt bullies, this could be explained by the fact that relational aggression is more likely to involve good social cognition, but this was not the case, as all bullies in the study were involved in relational aggression (some were also reported to be involved in overt). As for defenders, who were expected to score well, three of the four teacher/peer reported defenders/prosocial children had good theory of mind, at or above the mean, and three of the four teacher-rated defenders/prosocial children had low theory of mind scores. These discrepancies are significant given that most bullying research does not use a multi-method approach. Any

single method in this study could have revealed different results, and even with multiple sources the results are hard to interpret. My sense of the overall results is that moral emotions, and not theory of mind, are most useful for differentiating aggressive from prosocial children.

The findings related to empathy did not fit neatly into what has been found in other studies. While most research would predict that bullies would have lower empathy and prosocial children would have higher levels, in this project most of the bullies scored high on the empathy questionnaire and several of the defenders/prosocial children scored low. Although some have surmised that empathy is necessary but not sufficient for prosocial behaviour (Gini et al., 2008; Maeda, 2004), these combined findings do not support that theory. Importantly, the bullies that scored high were those with good social cognition, which could lead them to anticipate desirable responses. Perhaps other methods, including physiological correlates of empathy, would be more accurate and more likely to differentiate aggressive from prosocial children.

Emotion understanding was also not a useful construct for differentiating these two groups. Many defenders/prosocial children had low emotion understanding and many bullies had high emotion understanding. As discussed earlier, this understanding could easily be used to increase a bully's effectiveness. Emotion understanding is a component of social cognition, which has been found to be well-developed in bullies (Gasser & Keller, 2009; Gini, 2006; Sutton & Smith, 1999; Sutton et al., 1999a, 1999b).



## Future Directions

As mentioned earlier, future research should examine the differences between defenders and observers, and consider potential ways of encouraging observers to intervene. Based on what is currently known, bullying interventions should encourage empathy and assertiveness for all children (Gini et al., 2008).

It is possible that a different emotional process is implicated here—emotion regulation, for example. One study found that defenders and outsiders had higher emotion regulation than bullies (Maeda, 2004). This possibility should continue to be explored.

The distinction between proactive and reactive aggression is likely to be useful in clarifying the relation between bullying and social cognition. The work of Dodge and colleagues (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1996) as well as Camodeca and Goossens (2005) has found differences in the social information processing of proactive and reactive aggressors. There seem to be proactive and reactive bullies, and each group may have a different profile. There is also some evidence that different emotional processes may be at work with the two groups (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). This possibility also should be explored in future studies.

According to Gasser and Keller (2009), the difference between socially competent and non-socially competent bullies involves the idea of the bully/victim, with the non-socially competent bullies involved in both roles. These children are more likely to be reactively aggressive and could form the group of bullies without good social cognition. Perhaps the children involved only in the bullying role are those responsible

for the good scores on social cognition measures. Future research should take this possibility into account.

## **Limitations**

This study is subject to several limitations. First, perhaps most importantly, the size of the sample is too small to justify inferential interpretations of the data. The results must be treated as a descriptive case-study specific to this particular classroom of 18 students.

Second, whereas the construct of bullying refers to behaviour, the measure asks children to nominate self/peers as matching behavioural descriptions. It is possible that some children are not aware of bullying, and further, due to social desirability, children are likely to under-report their own involvement in aggressive roles, and over-report their involvement in prosocial roles. While the teacher questionnaire compensates for social desirability effects, it has its own weakness as teachers are often not aware of bullying, especially relational bullying. Direct observation of behaviour is a more accurate way to assess social behaviour, although this is also likely to obscure relational aggression, and it introduces the observer effect (Crothers & Levinson, 2004).

Finally, as this is a correlational study, the direction of effects reported is unclear. It is possible that the experience of bullying facilitates social cognition rather than the reverse (Sutton et al., 1999b).

## Implications

The study of bullying and its relation to social cognition has important implications for bullying interventions. Without an accurate understanding of the processes involved in bullying, little progress will be made. In fact, interventions based on the assumption that bullies are socio-cognitively inept may be inadvertently empowering bullies to achieve greater success (Sutton et al., 1999b). In addition to these practical applications, adapting the participant role scale for use with younger children and concurrently measuring participant role and type of bullying is a significant contribution to the bullying literature. Exploring further the relation between bullying and theory of mind, in particular by including the distinction between overt and relational bullying, has the potential to shed further light on current debates in the area. In addition, assessing emotion understanding, empathy, and moral emotions can help clarify the *nature* of the relationship between bullying and theory of mind. Although not predictive, this small study suggests that moral emotions are likely to be of particular importance for an understanding of bullies and bullying.

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