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## Personality and family relations of children who bully

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### Abstract

There is a paucity of studies on the personality and family relations of children who bully. The aim of the present study was to examine the level of Psychoticism, Neuroticism and Extraversion in a group of school going girls and boys who were bullied. A further aim was to examine the relationships that the children had with their families. The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Junior (1975) was used to measure the dimensions of personality and the Family Relations Test (Bene & Anthony, 1957) to elicit both the emotions that the children had towards each member of the family and the reciprocity of their emotions. The study comprised 228 children (aged 6–16 years), 115 of whom had been categorised as 'bullies' and 113 'controls'. The results indicated that children who bullied exhibited greater emotional inhibition and attributed significantly more negative statements to themselves than children who did not bully. The children who bullied also demonstrated an ambivalent relationship with their siblings, mothers and fathers. The controls on the other hand displayed positive relationships with members of their family. Moreover children who bullied scored higher on extraversion, psychoticism and neuroticism than their counterparts who did not bully. The findings highlight the need for early identification and the involvement of the family in the intervention of children who bully.

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## 1. Introduction

Significant associations have been reported between the tendency to bully others and poor family psycho-social health (Rigby, 1993). Stephenson and Smith (1987) found that children involved in bullying are three times more likely to have problems in the home. Family therapists have long regarded positive and effective communication in families as a critical determinant of healthy family functioning among adolescents (Duhl & Duhl, 1981). Family factors associated with childhood aggression are absence of a father, loss of a parent through divorce rather than death, a depressed mother, an irritable parent and marital discord (Wolff, 1985). Research indicates children who bully have a negative paternal and maternal relationship, which appears to play a part in the maladjustment of a child (Olweus, 1980). A fundamentally negative or rejecting attitude from the parent creates strong aggressive tendencies and hostility in a child (Bandura and Walters, 1959). Parents of very aggressive boys and delinquents have been characterised by a combination of lax mothers and hostile fathers (Andry, 1960).

Psychoanalysts have laid great emphasis upon the emotional attitudes of parents, especially mothers in the formation of the characters of their children. A cold and rejecting attitude on the part of the mother referred to as “silent violence” have been correlated with the bullying behaviour of the son (Olweus, 1980). Young children who harass or bully others in school tend to have over controlling and dominating home environments, indicating that this type of dysfunctional family doesn't produce empathy in a child (Manning, Heron, & Marshall, 1978). Paternal absence seems to affect boys more than girls, making the boys less aggressive when young, but more aggressive during adolescence (Zigler & Child, 1969).

Adolescents who experience low levels of emotional support and whose families are unsympathetic, are more likely to bully their peers (Rigby, 1994). However, it is not just a matter of parental attitude but the family situation in total. The ability of the family as a whole in sustaining positive and effective communication is seen as a vital component in the development of positive coping, social and personal skills. Adolescents who bully are more likely to come from families who are deficient in such skills. Bullies perceive their family as lacking in cohesion, they see their fathers as more powerful than mothers, and siblings as more powerful than themselves (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992). In a study of young male bullies Olweus (1980) found that their home environments are often violent. The fathers often used violent methods of punishing their children that may be related to the fact that the boy uses violence towards others. Parents who often use physical punishment and power assertive child rearing methods, frequently have aggressive sons. Behaviour towards peers is seen as resulting from a failure in bonding with a parent figure, giving rise to chronic insecurity and a suspicious nature.

The personality of an individual plays a large role in the presence or absence of bullying behaviour. The characteristics of children who bully include aggression (Olweus, 1993) lack of empathy, a strong need to dominate others and a positive attitude towards violence (Olweus, 1978). Bullying behaviour has also been associated with unhappiness, a dislike of school, depression (Slee, 1993) and low self-esteem (Mynard & Joseph, 1997; O'Moore & Kirkham 2001). A child's personality is greatly influenced by their upbringing and experiences. Therefore the experiences of children who come from less cohesive, or dysfunctional homes may be related to their personality type. A personality based explanation of bullying was favoured by Olweus (1984). At the same time he acknowledged the role of early child rearing practices in bullying. Aggressive children are

reported to lack internal controls such as guilt and anxiety over aggressive behaviour and empathy, and that these are an important determinant of whether aggressive behaviour will occur or not (Megargee, 1971; Staub & Conn, 1973).

Insufficient ego development may also point towards impulsivity, the inability to delay gratification and poor behaviour control often observed in aggressive and anti-social individuals. Thomas and Chess (1977) showed that a child's temperament may have an influence on behaviour. Children who are irregular in their eating and sleeping habits, intense in their emotional responses, aggressive, irritable, and who adapt slowly to new situations and show a great deal of negative mood are those most likely to develop behavioural problems. Children who demonstrated these characteristics from birth onwards were reported to push, hit and fight more in nursery school (Billman & McDevitt, 1980) and to have "Difficult Child Syndrome" (Graham, Rutter, & George, 1973). As parents become more assertive in discipline and punishment, the child responds more aggressively which can play a part in the development of a bully (Randall, 1991; Sroufe 1988).

Interestingly, Eysenck's theory of criminality (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964) and theory of anti-social behaviour (Eysenck, 1977), suggests that such conduct could be found more frequently in people with high scores on extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. Some research has also indicated high psychoticism scales (Slee & Rigby, 1993b) and high neuroticism scales (Byrne, 1994) in children who bully. It is suggested that extraverts are more prone to crime and anti-social behaviour, because they pursue rewards without fear of consequences, and are impatient and impulsive. Extraversion is not the only personality predictor of delinquency and anti-social behaviour. The relationship is usually stronger when high levels of neuroticism are also involved and a high psychoticism level is an even stronger predictor. The high neuroticism scorer has been described as anxious, moody, often depressed and having strong emotional reactions. Neurotic tendencies are believed to intensify emotional reactions. High psychoticism scorers are typical of people who are solitary, lacking in feeling, cruel, hostile and enjoy upsetting others. They seldom feel guilty (Eysenck, 1977). These personality dimensions contain many characteristics of those found in children who bully (O'Moore, 1995; Slee, 1995). Thus, the aim of the present study is to examine further the personality and family relationships of children who bully.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Subjects*

There were 228 students who took part in the study. The sample comprised of 107 girls and 121 boys ranging from 6 to 16 years of age, from seven schools, four of which were primary and three post-primary. A modified version of Bankside Boys' School and Lamont's Girl's schools questionnaire (Keise, 1992) was distributed in group form. On the basis of the questionnaire the participants were categorized into either a bully group or a control group. There were 115 students who were classified as pure bullies and 113 who were controls. To be classified as a pure bully the participants needed to nominate themselves on the questionnaire as a bully, be nominated by at least two other students in their class as bullies but not nominate themselves as victims of bullying. The requirements of the control group was that they did not nominate themselves on the questionnaire as either a bully or a victim and that they were not nominated by any students as either of these.

## 2.2. Measures

A modified version of Bankside Boys' School and Lamont's Girl's schools questionnaire (Keise, 1992) was distributed in group form. Direct references to Bankside and Lamont schools were omitted and the students were asked to name the students who bullied in their class. The Family Relations Test (1957) was used to investigate the direction and intensity of the child's feelings towards individual family members and the child's estimate of their reciprocal emotions towards him. The test includes the active manipulation of objects in a play situation. The Family Relations Test (Bene & Anthony, 1957) was administered on a one to one basis with each participant of the study. The participants were asked to give information about their family, giving their names and ages and that of anyone else they wanted to include such as a grandparent or someone that might be living with them at the time of the study. It was explained that they had to pick a box to represent each member written on the scoring sheet, including one to represent themselves. Once the family figures were chosen, the family circle was placed on a table in front of the participants. The participant was then shown the cards, which contained statements. Once they had read the card themselves or had it read to them by the researcher (their choice) they were instructed to post it into the box (or the person), to which they felt it applied. When they felt the card applied to themselves, to place it in the "self" box, when they felt that the card did not apply to anyone in their family circle, to place it in the "nobody" box, and finally, if the card applied to more than one person to state to whom the card applied. There were no time limits enforced for this test, the length of time taken to complete the test varied significantly between participants. The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Junior (JEPQ; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) is a self-administered questionnaire that is designed to measure four personality variables in participants between the ages of 6 and 16 years. The four variables are Psychoticism (P), Extraversion (E), Neuroticism (N) and Lie (L). The JEPQ was distributed in group form to each of the schools. The students wrote their age and gender on the front page in the areas provided. They were instructed to circle the "yes" or the "no" following each question and to answer every single question whether or not it seemed relevant to them. The students were informed that this was not a test, that there were no right or wrong answers, that the answers simply reflected the way they felt and that all information was completely confidential. On completion of the questionnaire each one was then checked and the student rectified any answers omitted on the spot. *T*-tests were used to analyse the results of both tests.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Family relations

From Table 1 it can be seen that there were significant differences ( $P < 0.05$ ) produced in the Nobody category across each of the four response groups of the Family Relations Test. The bully group assigned less negative and more positive emotions to Nobody. This indicated that the bully group, more than the control group, inhibited the expression of positive emotions towards or from their family members as well as exhibiting more negative feeling to their family. It can further be seen in the Self category that there were significant differences in the scores ( $P < 0.05$ )

Table 1

Mean (SD) scores for children who bully and their controls in relation to response groups on the Bene–Anthony Family Relations Test

	Nobody		Self		Siblings		Mother		Father	
	Bully	Control	Bully	Control	Bully	Control	Bully	Control	Bully	Control
Negative	4.8	8.62	0.24	0.04	1.82	0.92	1.59	1.56	1.92	1.20
Incoming	(3.62)	(4.79)*	(0.67)	(0.27) *	(2.14)	(1.17) *	(1.86)	(2.01)	(2.39)	(1.51) *
Negative	4.37	9.12	0.79	1.32	2.54	1.66	1.37	0.74	1.33	0.60
Outgoing	(3.85)	(6.04) *	(1.32)	(0.67) *	(2.91)	(1.99) *	(2.06)	(1.60) *	(2.26)	(1.47) *
Positive	3.92	2.09	0.41	0.46	1.53	2.44	3.63	6.57	2.08	4.27
Incoming	(3.56)	(2.89) *	(1.52)	(0.88)	(1.83)	(2.18) *	(3.50)	(3.39) *	(2.49)	(3.18) *
Positive	3.94	3.02	0.81	0.35	1.89	2.16	3.41	6.61	2.26	4.58
Outgoing	(3.53)	(2.48) *	(1.26)	(0.78) *	(2.44)	(1.60)	(3.132)	(4.56) *	(2.58)	(3.71) *

\*  $P < 0.05$ .

between bullies and controls for the Negative Incoming, Negative Outgoing and Positive Outgoing items, but not for the Positive Incoming ones. Thus the bully group attributed significantly more incoming and outgoing negative emotions as well as outgoing positive feelings to the self than the control group. Differences were also found between the bullies and controls in respect of the Siblings category across the Negative Incoming, Negative Outgoing, and the Positive Incoming and Outgoing response groups. However, the differences for the Positive Outgoing did not reach statistical significance.

Mothers received significantly more negative outgoing items, from the bully group than from the control group. The bully group also placed more positive statements, both outgoing and incoming to Mother than did the control group. However, the bully group demonstrated an ambivalent relationship with their mothers as neither the positive or negative items exceeded two-thirds of their combined number. Results also indicate that the bully group had an ambivalent relationship with their father. A significant result ( $P < 0.05$ ) was found for all response groups in the Father category. The control group presented, in contrast to the bully group, a predominantly positive relationship with their fathers.

Table 2

Mean (SD) scores of children who bully and their controls in relation to the EPQ Personality Dimensions

EPQ	Bully	Control
Psychoticism	4.83 (3.25)	2.13 (2.24)*
Extraversion	18.70 (3.41)	20.69 (2.56)*
Neuroticism	13.36 (4.56)	9.51 (5.00)*
Lie	9.02 (4.85)	9.40 (4.59)

\*  $P < 0.05$ .

### 3.2. Personality

There were significant differences between the children who bullied and their controls in Psychoticism ( $P < 0.05$ ), Extraversion ( $P < 0.05$ ) and Neuroticism ( $P < 0.05$ ) as measured by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Junior (see Table 2). The results indicate that the children who bullied scored higher on the Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism scales than did the control group. There were no significant differences in the Lie scale between the bully and control groups which demonstrates the bully group did not dissimulate more than the control group (see Table 2). Differences were found in relation to gender, in respect of higher levels of Neuroticism ( $P < 0.05$ ) across the female participants. Also primary and post primary children in this study were compared and it was found that they differed in respect of Neuroticism ( $P < 0.05$ ) and Psychoticism ( $P < 0.05$ ), reflecting that the primary aged participants scored higher on neuroticism and psychoticism than the post primary aged participants.

## 4. Discussion

The children who bullied in the present study placed more positive and less negative cards in the Nobody box than did the controls. This indicates a greater inhibition among children who bully to express their emotions freely towards the various members of their families. Frost (1969) found that delinquents attributed more negative items to the Nobody box than any other group though the difference was only significant in the Outgoing category. The bully group in the present study also placed more negative cards in the Self box which may indicate low self-esteem. This is supported by Austin and Joseph (1996) and O'Moore and Kirkham (2001) who found that children who bully had lower self-worth. Both Slee and Rigby (1993a) and Boulton and Underwood (1992) have argued that self-esteem is affected by bullying as children who bully report feeling 'worse' about themselves following an episode of bullying. The bully group in the present study demonstrated an ambivalent relationship with their siblings, which may indicate some sibling rivalry. Clinical experience with the Family Relations Test (1957) suggests that the boys referred for school problems are more often involved with one or more of their siblings than with each parent. The bully group also demonstrated an ambivalent relationship with both their mothers and fathers.

In contrast, positive, well-adjusted relationships were demonstrated for the control groups across the father and mother categories. These findings support Olweus (1978) who found that a mother's negativism, characterized by a lack of warmth and involvement, permissiveness of aggression and parent's power assertive child rearing methods were associated with children's bullying behaviour. Also research by Roland (1987) found that negativism on the part of the mother and father and negativism between the parents also contributed to bullying in a child.

The bully group in this study scored higher on Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism than the control group. This supports the theory of criminality and anti-social behaviour proposed by (Eysenck, 1977; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964). Furthermore, significant differences were found between the groups in relation to gender demonstrating higher levels of Neuroticism in girls who bullied than boys who bullied and in relation to age where the primary aged bullies

scored higher on neuroticism and psychoticism than post primary bullies. This is supported by O'Moore and Kirkham (2001) who found that adolescents who are “pure bullies” are less anxious than those who do not bully others. The higher extraversion of the pure bullies in the present study confirms the trend found by Mynard and Joseph (1997). While Mynard and Joseph did not find the difference between their “bully only” and not involved groups to be statistically significant, they did find their bully only group to be significantly more extraverted than their bully–victim group and their victim only group. The tendency also towards neuroticism and psychoticism that Mynard and Joseph (1997) noted with regard to their pure bullies was shown to be even more marked in the present study. In contrast to the present study the lack of statistical significant differences in Mynard and Joseph's study may reflect the different criteria used to classify children as “pure bullies” and “not involved” in bullying.

Mynard and Joseph (1997) included in their bully only group children who reported that they were high bully–low victim and furthermore their non-involved group contained children who were low bully–low victim. O'Moore (1995) reported very significant differences in personality and conduct disorders where the groups were more homogeneous than those of Mynard and Joseph between “bullies” and children who are not involved. Also differences in self esteem have been found when one takes into account the frequency of bullying among a group of “bullies” (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Further support for the higher levels of neuroticism in the present study among children who bully can be found in Byrne (1994). Slee and Rigby (1993a) also reported psychoticism to be associated with bullying but like Mynard and Joseph (1997) they found it to characterise more sharply the bully/victim group. This study found that the bully group did not have higher levels of dissimulation than the control group. Similar results have been found by Saklofske (1977) where badly behaved boys scored lower on the Lie scale than well-behaved boys and Mynard and Joseph (1997) where a group of bullying children scored lower than children classified as not involved in bullying.

In conclusion the findings of this study suggest that personality and familial relationships play a large role in the bullying behaviour of a child. When schools are dealing with the problem of bullying, family members need to be involved in the process. In this way the risk factors can be identified and dealt with in an effort to put an end to the behaviour. An area of further research would be to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of personality and child-rearing methods and whether interaction between them would have preventative and rehabilitative potential.

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