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Empathy and Involvement in Bullying in Adolescents

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Abstract

Bullying prevention and intervention programs often include empathy training. This study investigated how the cognitive empathy and affective empathy are related to bullying involvement. For this purpose, a questionnaire composed of Korean version of Participant Role Questionnaire scale (bullying, defending, and outsider behavior), and Korean version of Basic Empathy Scale (cognitive empathy, and affective empathy) were administered to 598 middle school students from 7 different middle schools in Gyeongnam province of Korea. The results, based on Structural equation modeling, showed that adolescents' cognitive empathy were indirectly linked to bullying behavior of adolescents' through defending behavior and outsider behavior. Adolescents' affective empathy were directly linked to bullying behavior. These findings could guide the development and implementation of prevention programs for adolescents' bulling. Implications and future research are discussed.

Keywords: *Cognitive Empathy, Affective Empathy, Bullying Behavior, Defending Behavior, Outsider Behavior*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a widespread problem in schools and associated with negative outcomes for both bullies and victims [1]. Bullying is a subtype of aggressive behavior in which bullies intentionally and repeatedly attack relatively powerless victims over time [1, 2, 3]. School bullying is characterized by intentionality, with direct forms of physical and verbal harassment and indirect exclusion from groups, malicious rumor spreading, and withdrawal from friendships [4, 5, 6].

Bullying has received increased attention internationally due to its high prevalence. About 35-40% adolescents reported having been bullied during their school time [7, 8]. Bullying occurs at all age levels, but peaks in late childhood to middle adolescence, ages 9-15 [9], and increases at the age of 13 to 14 years, a time when children had started middle school and then decrease [10, 11]. Bullying is a serious risk to psychosocial and school adaptations for both bullies and victims]12, 13, 14], and bystanders also have a high level of risk for comorbid mental health problems (depression, anxiety, substance abuse, etc.) [15].

Bullying is a triadic (bully-victim-bystander) rather than dyadic (bully-victim) relationship. The bystander is an active and involved participant in the social architecture of school violence, rather than a passive witness [16]. Bystander may either facilitate or ameliorate victimization. Bystanders can take on a variety of roles in which may include changing the power dynamics in a bullying situation [17]. But bystanders who play such a diverse role can sometimes experience more problems than bullies or victims of bullying [15], and feel guilty [18]. They also responded to bullying situations through moral disengagement [19], and reported that bystanders did not intervene because they did not know what to do in most bullying situations [18, 19].

Samivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjo¨rkqvist, O¨sterman, and Kaukiainen (1996) [20] proposed six roles in a school bullying situation. Besides being a bully or a victim, students can have the four bystander roles: reinforcer, assistant, defender, outsider. Several studies found that 8% to 14% were bullies, 13% to 28% were reinforcers or assistants, 8.7% to 18% were victims, 17% to 28% were defenders, and 12% to 29% were outsiders [20-24]. A number of typologies of school bystander roles were presented in the literature. Samivalli (1999) [25] proposed four bystander roles: reinforcer, assistant, defender and outsider.

Twemlow et al., (2004) [16] proposed seven bystander roles: bullying bystander, puppet-master, victim bystander, avoidant bystander, abdicating bystander, sham bystander and helpful bystander. Paull, Omari, and Standen (2012) [26] proposed thirteen bystander roles: instigating bystander, manipulating bystander, collaborating bystander, facilitating bystander, abdicating bystander, avoiding bystander, intervening bystander, defusing bystander, defending bystander, empathizing bystander, sympathizing bystander, succumbing bystander and submitting bystander. However, less is known about the bystander's role in the school bullying situation.

Empathy is typically conceptualized as a multidimensional construct with cognitive and affective components [27]. Affective empathy is the ability to experience another person's emotions (e.g., [28]), cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person's emotions (e.g., [29]). The association between empathy and bullying is unclear. In general, it has been well established that elevated levels of empathy are associated with prosocial behavior, yet findings on the association between empathy and antisocial behavior have been less conclusive [27].
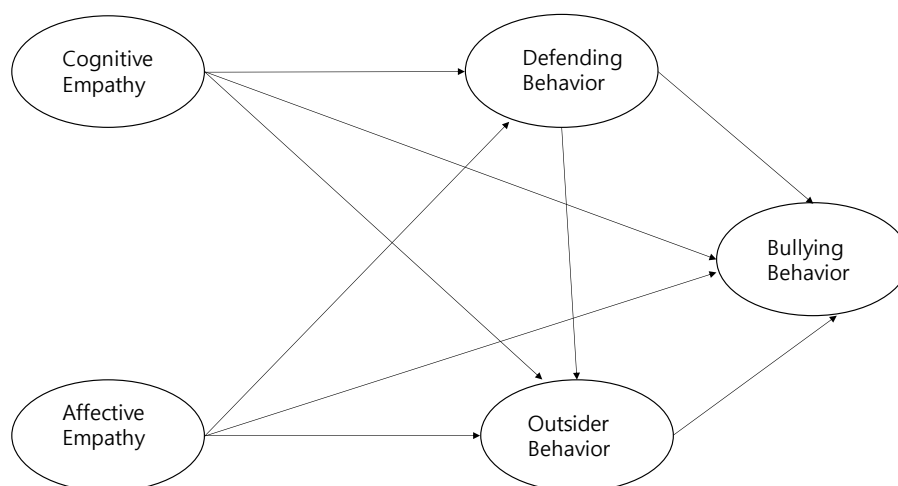
Bullying was found to be negatively associated with affective empathy (e.g., [30-37]). Whereas the association of bullying with cognitive empathy was mixed. Some studies finding a negative association (e. g., [30, 33, 34, 38. 39]) and cognitive empathy was also found to negatively predict bullying [30, 36, 39]). But others finding no association [40, 41].

A meta-analysis indicates bullying programs incorporating bystander interventions are effective [42], Of the Samivalli's (1999) [25] bystander roles, only the defender role is associated with a decrease in bullying behavior [43, 44]. Therefore, it is important for bullying programs to train bystanders to act as defenders, which can serve as a buffer against exposure to bullying [45]. The STAC program in the United States is a brief bystander bullying intervention program that teaches students who witness bullying strategies to intervene on behalf of victims. The STAC program was effective in identifying other types of bullying, teaching intervention strategies, and increasing confidence in acting as defenders to middle school students [46].

The association between empathy (cognitive & affective) and bystanding are contradictory. In one study both empathies were negatively associated with bystanding [30]. Whereas the other study a positive association with cognitive empathy and the absence of an association with affective empathy [47]. Another study both empathies were positively associated with bystanding [36].

Most of the prevention and intervention programs for bullying include empathy training (e.g., [42, 48]). Empathy is considered as an important factor [42, 48] to explain bullying behavior in various school violence prevention programs, and some of the school violence prevention programs, such as "Bullying Intervention in Secondary Schools" in Austria, "Youth Matters" in the United States, "Be-Prox" in Switzerland, "Ecological Antibullying Program" in Canada, and "SAVE" in Spain, are designed to develop empathy.

Despite the notion of bullying as a group process, little attention is typically paid to the association between empathy and other types of involvement of bullying, such as victimization, defender, and bystander roles [27]. And, previous studies provide contradictory results on how cognitive and affective empathy are related to different bullying roles. This study hypothesized that empathy can reduce aggressive behavior based on previous studies and bullying prevention programs and that it is a major variable that affects the defending behavior of bystanders in bullying situations. The current study is an attempt to find how cognitive and affective empathy are linked to bullying behavior. The objective of this study was to investigate the associations of cognitive and affective empathy with different involvement in bullying types (bullying behavior, defending behavior, outsider behavior). More specifically, this study set up a structural model that affects the two aspects of empathy, cognitive empathy and affective empathy, which affect bullying behavior (outsider behavior, defending behavior, and bullying behavior), and tried to identify how it works differently (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Data were obtained from 652 middle school students (312 boys, 340 girls) at seven middle schools in Gyeongnam province in Korea. In the survey, researchers visited a pre-selected school and asked the students to respond to the self-reported questionnaire for 15-20 minutes with the cooperation of the classroom teacher. All respondents were given a brief oral description of the study and its purposes prior to providing informed consent. Before their inclusion in the study, all participants gave voluntary consent for their participation.

2.2 Measures

Participant roles of bullying and victimization. Participant roles of bullying were examined with the Korean version of Participant Role of Questionnaire [49] developed by Salmivalliet al. (1996) [20]. The role types of peer bullying participants are outsiders (6 items), defenders (6 items, bullies (6 items), assistants (7 items), and victims (7 items). The internal reliability shown in this study is .94 for outsiders, .92 for defenders, .82 for bullies.

Empathy. A 10 item shortened Korean version of Basic Empathy Scale [50] was used to measure the empathy of adolescents. The Korean version of the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) was based on Jolliffe and Farington (2006b) [51]. The Korean version of Basic Empathy Scale measure 2 dimensions of empathy; cognitive empathy (5 items) and affective empathy (5 items.). The internal reliability shown in this study is .75 for cognitive empathy, .67 for affective empathy.

2.3 Statistical Analyses

A latent variable model was used to test the structural relationships among the constructs of interests. The primary research question was whether by standing roles (defender and outsider) mediates the relationship between the exogenous variables of empathy (cognitive and affective) and endogenous, outcome variable of bullying behavior. The analyses were conducted using the LISREL 8.80 computer program.

On the basis of a prior factor analysis of the measures of each scale using data from the present investigation, we divided items from the each scale into two parcels and summed together to form two measured variables.

To develop these item parcels. we fit a one-factor model to the 5 items assessing cognitive empathy, 5 items assessing affective empathy, 6 items assessing outsiders, 6 items assessing defenders, and 6 items assessing bullies. We then rank-ordered items on the basis of their loadings on this factor and assigned items to parcels to equate the average loadings of each parcel of items on the factor. This procedure was necessary to reduce the number of parameters estimated in the measurement models (e.g., [52, 53]).

Univariate and multivariate normal distribution of research variable indicators were tested with the PRELIS 2.80 and the test showed that a. non-normal distribution of bullying behavior indicators. Therefore, the robust maximum likelihood method (Satorra-Bentler Chi-square, S–Bχ^2) was chosen to assess the model fit. Other fit indexes were used to evaluate model fit: TLI (Tuker-Lewis Index or None Non-Normed Fit Index), CFI (Comparative Fit Index), and the RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation). Typically, A S–Bχ^2 test non-significant is desirable, the value of TLI and CFI should be higher than .90, the value of RMSEA should be lower than .10, and item errors should be uncorrelated with each other indicating a good fit.

3. RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the measured variables are presented in Table 1. The pattern and direction of these intercorrelations were as expected and suggested that little multicollinearity among the exogenous variables.

Table 1. Pearson Correlations Among and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

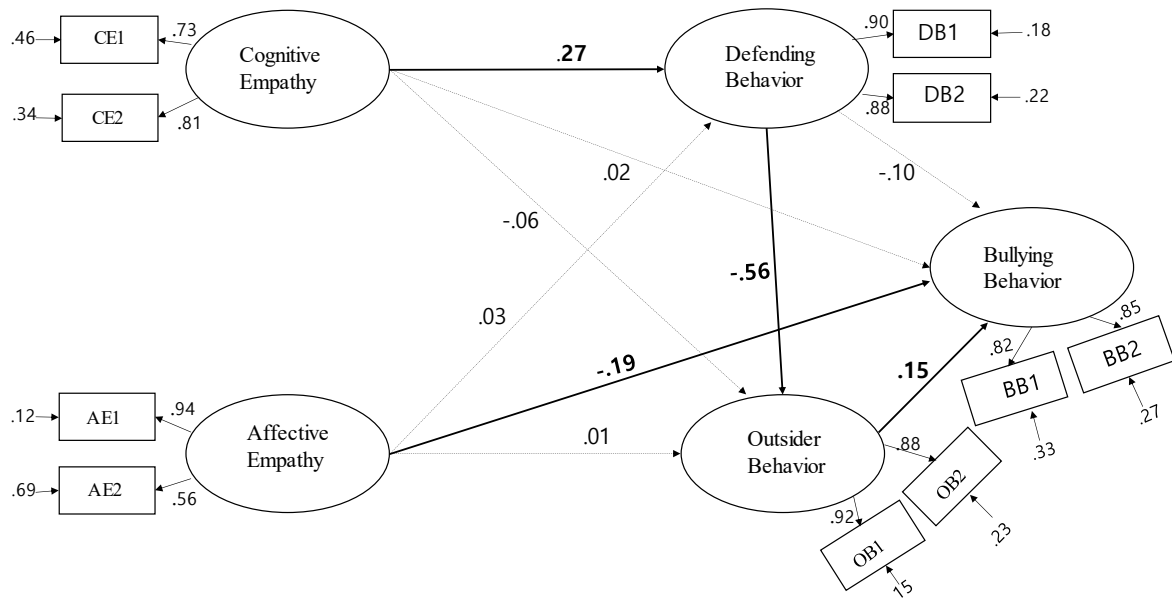| Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Cognitive Empathy 1	—									
2. Cognitive Empathy 2	.60**	—								
3. Affective Empathy 1	.38**	.46**	—							
4. Affective Empathy 2	.14**	.27**	.53**	—						
5. Outsider Behavior 1	-.19**	-.13**	-.12**	-.02	—					
6. Outsider Behavior 2	-.18***	-.11**	-.08	.02	.89**	—				
7. Defending Behavior 1	.21**	.22**	.17**	.09*	-.50**	-.47**	—			
8. Defending Behavior 2	.16**	.15**	.08*	.05	-.54**	-.51**	.83**	—		
9. Bullying Behavior 1	-.10*	-.14**	-.16**	-.06	.17**	.12**	-.16**	-.11**	—	
10. Bullying Behavior 2	.06	-.11**	-.19**	-.10*	.17**	.14**	-.17**	-.12**	.72**	—
Mean	7.30	10.86	7.31	9.40	6.42	6.48	9.68	9.37	6.45	6.49
SD	.90	2.05	1.74	2.36	2.62	2.81	2.77	2.80	3.28	3.66

Note. N=598. $^*p<.05.$ $^{**}p<.01.$

Model Fit

Inspection of the fit statistics for this study reveals that hyphothesized model proved to be very acceptable [Satorra-Bentler Scaled $\chi 2$ (25, *N*= 598) = 44.90, *p*< .01, *TLI* = .986, *CFI* = .992, *RMSEA* = .037]

Parameter Estimates

To estimate the hypothesized relationships among the latent variables, each of the endogenous variables were simultaneously regressed on their hypothesized casual antecedents. The unique contribution of the various constructs is represented by the standardized path coefficients. Structural path coefficients for the robust maximum likelihood solution are presented in Figure 2 and Table 2. Four of the nine predicted relationships were statistically significant in the predicted directions.

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of Hypothesized Model

All path coefficients are in standard metric

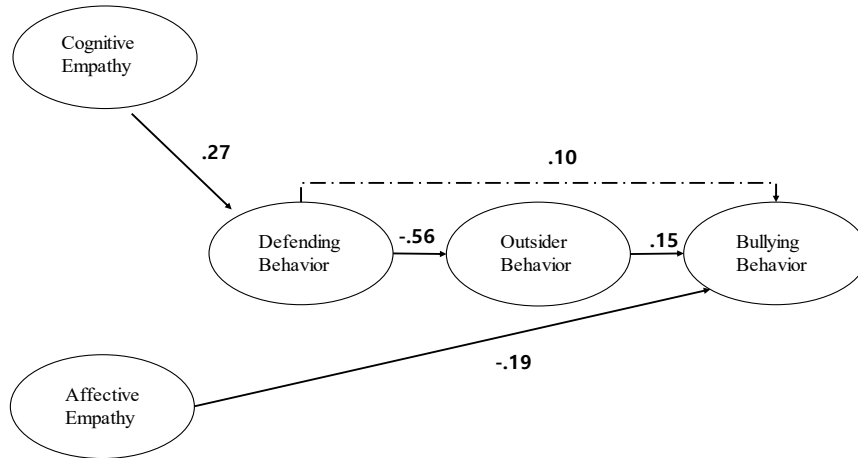**Table 2. Path Coefficients of the Hypothesized Model**

Criterion Variable Predictor Variable	Unstandardized (SE)	Standardized	*t*	SMC
Defending Behavior				**.08**
Cognitive Empathy	.33(.09)	.27	3.91**	
Affective Empathy	.03(.06)	.03	.53	
Outsider Behavior				**.33**
Cognitive Behavior	-.07(.07)	-.06	-.97	
Affective Behavior	.01(.06)	01	.23	
Defending Behavior	-.56(.05)	-.56	-11.03**	
Bullying Behavior				**.09**
Cognitive Behavior	.03(.07)	02	.37	
Affective Behavior	-.16(.05)	-.19	-2.94**	
Defending Behavior	-.09(.06)	-.10	-1.55	
Outsider Behavior	.13(.05)	.15	2.57*	

*Note. N=598. *p<.05. **p<.01.*

Of the exogenous variables, cognitive empathy was predictive of defending behavior (β =.27, t = 3.91, p < .01). Affective empathy was predictive of bullying behavior (β =-.16, t = -2.94, p< .01). Moreover, as predicted, the path from defending behavior to outsider behavior and from outsider behavior to bullying behavior were also significant (β =-.56, t = -11.03, p< .01; β = .15, t = 2.57, p < .05 respectively).

Effects of Empathy (Cognitive and Affective) on Bullying Behavior

The direct effects of empathy are displayed are presented in Figure 2 and Table 2. A variable's direct effect is the portion of its unique effect that is independent of other variables, whereas a variable's indirect effect is the portion of its effect that is mediated by other variables in the model.

Figure 3. Schematic Picture of Structural Equation Model of Hypothesized Model

Table 3. Effects of Empathy (cognitive and affective) on Bullying Behavior

Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect
Cognitive Empathy	.03 (t =37, *n. s.*)	-.06 (t =2.82, *p*<.01)
Affective Empathy	-.16 (t=-2.94, *p*<.01)	-.00 (t =-.29, *n. s.*)

Note. N=598. *p<.05. **p<.01

Present results (Figure 3 and Table 3) showed that affective empathy directly reduces bullying behavior (B =-.16, *p*<.01) but cognitive empathy does not directly reduce bullying behavior and indirectly reduces it only through defending behavior [B=-.06{(.33×-.56×.15=-.03) + (.27×-.10=-.03)}, *p*<.01].

4. DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to investigate the associations of cognitive and affective empathy with different involvement in bullying types. For this purpose, a survey was conducted on 652 middle school students (312 boys, 340 girls) at seven middle schools in Gyeongnam province in Korea.

The results obtained in this study based on Structural Equation Modeling partially confirmed predictions. Adolescents' cognitive empathy were not directly linked to bullying behavior of adolescents' but indirectly linked through defending behavior and outsider behavior.

This result is consistent with the results that cognitive empathy and bullying behavior has no association [40, 41]. The results of this study also indicate that bullying programs (e.g., The STAC program in the United States) intervenes in bullying by reducing the role of bystander through the process of promoting defending roles is valid. The results of this study also suggest that the core elements of the bullying intervention program are the promotion of the role of defenders through cognitive empathy enhancement.

Adolescents' affective empathy were directly linked to bullying behavior. This result is consistent with the

results that affective empathy and bullying behavior has negative association (e.g., [30-37]). The results of this study also suggest that affective empathy enhancement is an effective way to intervene in bullying behavior of perpetrators.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that affective empathy is directly linked to the reduction of bullying behavior, and cognitive empathy is linked to the reduction of bullying behavior indirectly through the reduction of bystander role by promoting the role of defender. Therefore, when developing the prevention and intervention program for adolescents' bulling in the future, it is necessary to consider the differential process of the cognitive empathy and affective empathy.

Researchers should replicate these results and also examine the other mediating variable in empath y and bullying behavior. However, since the variance explained by empathy in this study is small (9%), future studies need to explore and study other key variables related to bullying behavior.

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