

Interrogation and False Confessions among Adolescents: Differences between Bullies and Victims

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Abstract: The principal aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between false confessions during custodial interrogation and group bullying using the “quadrant” classification: pure bullies, pure victims, bully-victims (i.e., those who are both bullies and victims of bullying), and those not involved in bullying. It was hypothesized that bully-victims would be most likely to have a history of giving false confessions when interrogated by police and pure bullies the least likely, with pure victims falling in between the two other groups. There were two separate samples, 7,149 Icelandic and 24,627 European pupils in the last two years of their compulsory education (mean age 15.5 years). The participants completed a questionnaire in class, which included questions about interrogations, false confessions and bullying. Over 95% of the participants answered the questions about bullying. The results showed that bully-victims were most likely to be interrogated by police and give false confessions when interrogated. Pure

bullies had a very low false confession rate, which was almost identical to those who were not involved in bullying. The findings suggest that bully-victims, followed by pure victims are psychologically the weakest during interrogation and pure bullies the strongest.

Keywords: Interrogation, false confessions, pure bullies, pure victims, bully-victims, victimization

Introduction

There is considerable evidence that false confessions to serious crimes do sometimes occur (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). The evidence comes from DNA exonerations and other cases of miscarriages of justice documented in the United States of America (Drizin & Leo, 2004) and the United Kingdom (Gudjonsson, 2003a, 2006). These cases are predominantly cases involving murder and serious sexual offences and only represent the “tip of the iceberg” as far as false confessions are concerned (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004).

Another method of investigating real-life false confessions is by conducting interviews or surveys of people in special populations (Gudjonsson, in press). These fall into six distinct groups; (1) studies among prisoners (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 1994; Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1996, 2001; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Einarsson, Bragason, & Newton, 2008); (2) suspects detained for questioning at police stations (Sigurdsson, Gudjonsson, Einarsson, & Gudjonsson, 2006); (3) forensic adolescents (Richardson, 1991; Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1996; Viljoen, Klaver, & Roesch, 2005); (4) psychiatric patients (Redlich, 2007); (5) studies among pupils in the final years of their compulsory education in Iceland (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir (in press b) and Europe (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir (in press a); and (6) students in further education in Denmark (Steingrimsdottir, Hreinsdottir, Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Nielsen, 2007) and Iceland (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Bragason, Einarsson, & Valdimarsdottir, 2004a; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Einarsson, 2004b; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir (2008); Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Asgeirsdottir & Sigfusdottir, 2006, 2007; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Einarsson, 2004a).

What do these various studies tell us about the reasons why people falsely confess to crimes? What they do tell us is that false confessions are typically multifaceted in nature, involve complicated social interactions, and usually result from a combination of factors (Gudjonsson, 2003). The reasons why suspects make false confessions typically vary from case to case, and even within an individual case there are combinations of factors and circumstances. For example, persons with a history of victimization are likely to be particularly susceptible to leading questions and interrogative pressure during a police interview (Drake, Bull, & Boon, 2008), but they may be interviewed in such a way that their vulnerabilities to give leading statements are not activated. In other circumstances young persons may provide a voluntary false confession to police in order to protect a peer who is bullying him into it without the awareness of the interviewer (Gudjonsson, 2003a).

Gudjonsson (2003b) suggests a model that focuses on the interaction between police factors (custodial and interrogative factors), vulnerability factors, and social-support factors (i.e., the presence of a lawyer or an independent person, referred to in England as an “appropriate adult”). This model provides a useful framework for understanding the potentially complex factors involved in the outcome of an interrogation.

Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) suggest that the risk of false confessions during custodial interrogation can be categorized into “personal” and “situational” factors. Personal risk factors are those associated with the individual characteristics of the suspect, including young age, low intelligence, personality (e.g. suggestibility and compliance), and psychopathology. Young persons are most vulnerable, particularly those who are of limited intelligence and have problems coping with interrogation and custody (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Gudjonsson, 2003a, 2006). In cases of youth, false confessions need to be considered in the context of peer relationships (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008). The types of false confessions are not well recognized due to not being commonly retracted and coming to the courts’ attention (Gudjonsson, 2003a). Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, and Asgeirsdottir (2008) found that the false confessions among youth were made to potentially serious criminal offences (i.e., property, violent and drug-related offences) with 37.1% of false confessors reporting that they had been convicted of the offence to which they had falsely confessed. Therefore, the social and financial cost of false confessions is considerable.

Among youth, the two main motives reported for giving false confessions to police are attempts to protect a peer and avoid police pressure (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008). Here the single most important situational factor is whether or not young persons are arrested by police and interrogated. Once in custody and interrogated, vulnerability factors may become activated, including those that are associated with the person’s inability to cope with custody and interrogation (e.g., suggestibility, compliance, psychopathology), young age, and dysfunctional peer loyalty. In terms of psychological vulnerabilities, Gudjonsson et al. (2007a) found that a history of multiple victimization (e.g., bullying, death of a significant other, being a victim of violence), and substance abuse (i.e. having attended substance abuse treatment, use of LSD), were significantly associated with false confessions. In a similar subsequent study, involving over 10,000 students in further education in Iceland (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008), a stepwise-discriminant-function analysis showed that three variables (bullying victimization, negative attitudes towards school, and delinquency) discriminated significantly between the false confessors and non-false confessors after taking into account the relationship between the psychological measures. These findings suggest that there is a significant relationship between victimization/life adversity and giving false confessions. The study provided strong evidence of the relationship between being a victim of bullying in childhood and adolescence and giving false confessions.

The present study adds to this previous study into bullying in two different ways. First, the type of bullying measured in the present study involves recent participation in group

bullying or being a victim of group bullying rather than having a history of individual bullying in childhood and adolescence. Second, it compares the vulnerabilities of bullies and bully victims. Studying differences in rates of interrogation and false confession among bullies, victims of bullying, and those who fall into both groups, is a unique feature of the present study.

Bullying has been mainly studied in the context of schools (Olweus, 1994, 1997; Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007; Nitza, 2009), but in recent years it has also received attention in other settings, such as prisons (Ireland, 2005, editor). Within a school context, bullying is an aggressive act where children use or abuse their position of power or circumstances to intimidate and harm other children (Craig & Pepler, 2007). According to Espelage (2003) bullying is best construed in terms of the individual characteristics of children interacting with the environment to create, support and maintain bullying behavior (Cited in Nitza, 2009). Bullying is a destructive interpersonal problem, which adversely affects both the bullies and their victims in terms of their development and mental health (Craig & Pepler, 2007; Juvoren, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). It often occurs in a social context (e.g., school, prisons, military) and peer-group setting, which makes it a group phenomenon (Espelage, 2003) and of particular relevance to the present study.

Ireland (2005) states that most research associated with exploring the characteristics associated with self-reported bullying used a “quadrant “ classification: pure bullies, pure victims, bully-victims (i.e., those who are both bullies and victims of bullying), and those not involved in bullying. Within this framework, Juvoren, Graham, and Schuster (2003) provide a theoretical direction for the present study. They found that, among young adolescents, pure bullies were psychologically the strongest group (i.e., have high social peer group status and few adjustment problems), pure victims of bullying were emotionally distressed and had low-social-peer-group status, and bully-victims were most psychologically disturbed of all three groups (i.e., most socially ostracized by their peers, were most likely to have conduct disorder problems, were least engaged in school work, and reported elevated levels of depression and loneliness). This suggests that bully-victims are most likely of all three groups to come to the attention of the police and be interrogated. In relation to those interrogated by police, pure bullies are likely to have the lowest rate of false confessions due to being psychologically the strongest, with bully-victims and pure victims having the highest rate of false confession.

Materials and Methods

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Results

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Discussion

The findings give strong support for the hypothesis that bully-victims (i.e., those who have a history of both bullying and being bullied) are psychologically most vulnerable in terms of being interrogated on suspicion of a criminal offence, and when interrogated, giving false confessions to police. Pure victims of bullying are the second most vulnerable group. Pure bullies, whilst at increased risk of being interrogated, have the lowest rate of false confession and their rate of false confession is almost identical to the rate of young persons who did not report any bullying behavior or being victim of bullying. The findings are consistent and, in broad terms, similar for the two separate samples (i.e., Iceland and seven European countries), and are comprised of over 30,000 pupils in their last two years of compulsory education (i.e., mainly 15 and 16 year olds).

Group bullying was reported by 22.9% and 42.7% of the Iceland and European samples, respectively, suggesting that group bullying may be a more serious problem among pupils in schools in Europe than it is in Iceland. The two largest bully groups were pure bullies and bully-victims. The criteria (cut-off point) for inclusion in one of the three bully groups were low in the current study (i.e., one experience during the previous 12 months of bullying, being a victim of bullying, and for bully-victims an experience of both at least once). Therefore, the present “quadrant “ classification rates may not necessarily be directly comparable with those of other studies and this was not the purpose of the present study. In addition, the current study focused on experience of group bullying rather than bullying by specific individuals. However, Solberg et al. (2007), using the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, found that bully-victims were overrepresented in the lower grades in schools and this may also apply for group bullying as tested in the present study. Solberg et al., suggest that a bully-victim group should be seen as a distinct group and treated separately in statistical analyses. This is what we have done in the present study with some important and unique results.

The high proportion of bully-victims who reported being interrogated by police (39.8% and 25.6% of the Icelandic and European samples, respectively, or 27% for the two samples combined), in comparison to 11.3% of the entire two samples, raises two important questions. Why is the rate of interrogation so high among this group? What are the implications of this high proportion of interrogation? The most likely explanation of the high rate of interrogation is that more members of the bully-victims group are emotionally disturbed and conduct disordered than the other participants, a finding consistent with those of Juvoren et al. (2003), and they are more involved in delinquency and associating with delinquent peers, which draws the attention of the police to them. This would explain the relatively higher rate of interrogation among the bully-victims in the two samples in the present study, which was much higher than that found for any of the other groups. However, it is noteworthy that all three bully groups had an elevated rate of interrogation in comparison to the other participants, where the rate of interrogation was very low (7.2% and 5.9% for the Icelandic and European participants, respectively, 6.2% for the two samples combined). This suggests that being involved in bullying, as a bully, a victim, or a combination of both, is associated with increased risk of arrest and interrogation. The most likely explanation is a high rate of delinquency and association with delinquent peers (Gudjonsson et al., 2006).

When discussing the implications of the high rate of interrogation among bully-victims, it is important to take into consideration the base rate of guilt (i.e., the rate at which the police are arresting and interrogating suspects who are genuinely guilty of the offence of which they are suspected). The base rate of guilt is likely to vary according to the countries and jurisdictions. The base rate of guilt in several Icelandic community studies is consistently about two-thirds (67%) of those interrogated, whereas in Denmark it is 51% and only 44% in the current European sample (Gudjonsson et al., in press a). It is likely that in small, sparsely populated countries, like Iceland, the police have greater knowledge of their potential criminals and arrest and interrogate a higher proportion of genuinely guilty suspects. The greatest risk of false confessions, other things being equal, is where the police are arresting and interrogating a large number of innocent people.

Bully-victims followed by pure victims, report the highest rate of false confession. These two groups have a unique risk profile, in contrast to pure bullies, who have greater resilience during interrogation. In previous research (Juvonen et al., 2003), bully-victims were found to be the most socially avoidant, conduct disordered, and had most difficulties at school. They are also most likely to have psychiatric problems (Kumpulaine & Räsänen, 2000). These youngsters are likely to have problems with fitting in socially and being accepted by their peers (Juvonen et al., 2003), which makes them vulnerable to peer pressure to take on a case in order to ingratiate themselves with peers of perceived higher social status, such as bullies, to take blame for others (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Einarsson, 2007), or to be pressured, tricked or manipulated by peers into criminal acts (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2007). It is likely that their history of being bullied and other types of victimization and life adversity make them susceptible to giving in to pressure whether being implemented by peers to take on a case for them or by the police during interrogation (Drake, Bull & Boon, 2008; Drake & Bull, in press).

Ireland (2005) emphasizes the need to look at the specific environment in which bullying takes place. For example, in prison the environment is hostile and bullying may be an adaptive solution to the bully's predicament. Similarly, Ireland refers to "coercive aggression" as one form of bullying in prison where prisoners are made to engage in activities they would rather not do. This kind of bullying may apply to peer group settings where people take on blame for antisocial acts they have not committed (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Einarsson, 2007). The school environment is undoubtedly a setting where young persons' psychological vulnerabilities and psychopathology are susceptible to exploitation by bullies and other manipulative individuals.

Ireland's (2005) review of the literature shows how bully-victims, in contrast to the other bully groups, tend to score high on measures of anger and hostility, emotional loneliness, and avoidance-attachment coping. These kind of psychological characteristics are associated with high compliance (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Brynjolfsdottir, & Hreinsdottir, 2002; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Einarsson, 2004c; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Lydsdottir, & Olafsdottir, 2008). Importantly in this context, there is recent evidence of a significant relationship between the kind of compliance found in an interrogative situation and in interpersonal relationships, including peer relationships (Gud-

jonsson, Sigurdsson, Einarsson, & Einarsson, 2008). Suggestibility or compliance in these situations, resulting in a false confession, is likely to be due to the maladaptive coping strategies of people who are vulnerable in terms of their personality, background or circumstances.

The present study has a number of limitations, including the self-report nature of the data, the fact that there is no information about the nature of the offences confessed to falsely, and the reason for the false confessions. No separate analyses were conducted for males and females with regard to bullying, which is a limitation (Solberg et al., 2007). However, within the European sample, Gudjonsson et al., (in press a) found that similar factors predicted false confessions in males and females, apart from a relatively stronger association among males with regard to a history of sexual abuse. Another limitation is that the cross-sectional nature of the data does not demonstrate a causal relationship between bullying victimization and false confessions. The current findings show that there is a significant association between group bullying victimization and false confessions, with clearly identifiable high-risk victim groups (i.e., bully-victims and pure victims of bullying), but a longitudinal study would be required to understand the specific nature of this relationship.

Bullying victimization is an important psychological vulnerability during interrogation in terms of false confessions. It interacts with other aspects of the interrogation process, including detention and the nature and duration of the interrogation process, and the relationship between the suspect and the police interviewers (Gudjonsson, 2003b). In the present study, bullying was conceptualized as a peer-group process and participants were rating their experience of it during the previous 12 months. In a previous study (Gudjonsson et al., in press b) of a slightly older group (i.e., students in further education), bullying was measured by an adapted version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ; Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005), which focused on life-long history of bullying in childhood and adolescence (i.e., up to the age of 18 years) by siblings and peers. A stepwise-discriminant-function analysis showed that three variables (bullying victimization, negative attitude towards school, and delinquency) discriminated best between false confessors and non-false confessors after taking into account the relationship between several psychological measures. The present study adds to this previous study by identifying high-risk victim bully groups (bully-victims and pure victim) and demonstrating how they differ from pure bullies in terms of interrogation and false confessions. This is the first study to demonstrate the potentially varied vulnerabilities of different bully groups during interrogation.

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