Children's Emotional Competence, Theory of Mind, and Classroom Social Behaviours

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Background

- Previous research on Theory of Mind and social behaviours has focused on clinical populations of children (e.g., conduct disorders or autism; Happe & Frith, 1996; Ozonoff & Miller, 1995).
  - Despite potentially scoring high on ToM tasks, such children often display social impairments.
- Previous research has explored ToM and social competence in preadolescence (Bosacki, 2003; Bosacki & Astington, 1999).
- To gain a full understanding of how ToM may translate to children's everyday social interactions, emotional skills must be considered (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001)

Background

- Social Behaviours
  - Social Withdrawal (anxious, avoids social interactions, Rubin et al., 2009)
  - Physical aggression (hitting, pushing, punching, Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Xie et al., 2002)
  - Relational Aggression (exclusion, rumours, Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Xie et al., 2002)
  - Hyperactive-Distractible (restless, disruptive, Ozcan et al., 2013)
  - Prosocial (helping, caring, Griese & Buhs, 2014)

Purpose

The current study explored the relations among middle school children's advanced Theory of Mind (ToM) and teacher ratings of emotional competence and social behaviours (e.g., social withdrawal, prosocial behaviours, aggression and hyperactivity-distractibility).

Research Questions

1. How is teacher-rated emotional competence related to children's classroom social behaviour?

2. How is advanced ToM understanding related to children's classroom social behaviour and teacher-rated emotional competence?

Participants

- 30 middle school students
  - Male *n* = 14; Female *n* = 16
  - Aged 8 years 10 months - 10 years 5 months (*M* = 9 years 4 months , *SD* = 4.51 months)
  - middle SES semi-rural Canadian neighbourhood
- 8 female teachers

Measures

- *Children's Emotional Competence Scale*
  - Based on Denham's (1998) conceptualization of emotional competence in children, teachers completed a 10 item rating scale of children's behaviors within the classroom (Cronbach's alpha = .94).

Measures

- *Children's Behavior Scale*
  - To assess social behaviour (e.g., hyperactivity-disruptiveness, social withdrawal, and sociability), teachers completed individual scales for each child's classroom behavior (Cassidy & Asher, 1992).
  - Teachers rated fifty-nine items on a 3 point likert scale.

Measures

- *Children's Social Behavior Scale*
  - To assess children's aggressive behaviors in more detail (i.e., differentiate between relational and physical aggression), the standardized CSBS was used (Crick, 1996; Harter, 1985).
  - Teachers completed the 15 item scale for each student.

Measures

- *False Belief ToM Task*
  - Assesses second-order false belief understanding. Adapted from second-order belief tasks used in past research (Astington, 1997; Hughes, 2011).
  - This task enabled the child to predict and explain the actions of the character who holds a false belief about a situation (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985).

Results

- Regression analyses revealed that teacher ratings of emotional competence significantly predicted teacher ratings of children's:
  - social withdrawal (b = -.34, $t(29)$ = -2.38, p = .02; R^2 = .168, F(1, 28) = 5.66, p = .024)
  - prosocial behaviors (b = .44, $t(29)$ = 8.05, p < .001; R^2 = .70, F(1, 28) = 64.86, p < .001)
  - hyperactive-distractibility (b = -.15, $t(29)$ = -2.94, p = .007; R^2 = .235, F(1, 28) = 8.61, p = .007)
  - relational aggression (b = .24, $t(27)$ = 2.36, p = .03; R^2 = .176, F(1, 26) = 5.57, p = .034)
- Emotional competence did not predict physical aggression

Results

- Regression analyses revealed that children's ToM significantly negatively predicted teacher ratings of children's social withdrawal (b = -1.81, $t(22)$ = -2.37, p = .03; R^2 = .212, F(1, 21) = 5.63, p = .03).

- No relations were found between children's ToM scores and teacher ratings of students' emotional competence, physical or relational aggression, prosocial behaviour, or hyperactivity-distractibility

Discussion

- As with shy/anxious children, children with lower emotional competence may struggle to initiate social interactions (Rubin et al., 2009)
- Children rated with lower emotional competence displayed higher ratings of hyperactivity-distractibility, perhaps because they may often experience negative emtions such as anxiety and frustration during challenging social interactions (Shure, 1999)
- The present results support past research that suggests higher levels of emotional competence related to higher levels of relational aggression (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2010).

Discussion

- Low ToM scores negatively related to teacher ratings of social withdrawal, suggesting t children rated as socially withdrawn may experience challenges interpreting others' thoughts and emotions
  - Perhaps ToM educational training for children may help to promote greater self-confidence and alleviate or weaken negative emotions and anxieties (Bosacki, 2015)
- Contradictory to previous research (Renouf et al., 2010), no significant relations were found between ToM and relational aggression and suggests the need for further research.

Limitations and Future Directions

- Limitations
  - Sample size
  - Cross sectional analysis
  - Teacher reports of emotional competence
- Future directions
  - Explore relations between young people's advanced ToM and various social and moral understandings and behaviours (e.g., acts of compassion for self and other, self-perceptions)
  - Cross-cultural longitudinal research
  - Social interventions (e.g., theory of mind training; Happe & Frith, 1996)

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