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Differentiating Youth Who Are Bullied From Other Victims of Peer-Aggression: The Importance of Differential Power and Repetition

Michele L. Ybarra, M.P.H., Ph.D.^{a,*}, Dorothy L. Espelage, Ph.D.^b, and Kimberly J. Mitchell, Ph.D.^c^a Center for Innovative Public Health Research, San Clemente, California^b Department of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois^c Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To examine whether (1) among youth who report being bullied, differential power and repetition are useful in identifying youth who are more or less affected by the victimization experience and (2) bullying and more generalized peer aggression are distinct or overlapping constructs.

Methods: Data for the Teen Health and Technology study were collected online between August 2010 and January 2011 from 3,989 13- to 18-year-olds. Data from the Growing up with Media study (Wave 3) were collected online in 2008 from 1,157 12- to 17-year-olds.

Results: In the Teen Health and Technology study, youth who reported neither differential power nor repetition had the lowest rates of interference with daily functioning. Youth who reported either differential power or repetition had higher rates, but the highest rates of interference with daily functioning were observed among youth who reported both differential power and repetition. In the Growing up with Media study, youth were victims of online generalized peer aggression (30%) or both online generalized peer aggression and cyberbullying (16%) but rarely cyberbullying alone (1%).

Conclusions: Both differential power and repetition are key in identifying youth who are bullied and at particular risk for concurrent psychosocial challenge. Each feature needs to be measured directly. Generalized peer aggression appears to be a broader form of violence compared with bullying. It needs to be recognized that youth who are victimized but do not meet the criteria of bullying have elevated rates of problems. They are an important, albeit nonbullied, group of victimized youth to be included in research.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Study findings support the hypothesis that differences in observed prevalence rates are in part due to differences between youth affected by cyberbullying and generalized peer aggression (Internet harassment). Differential power and intensity are key features of bullying that discriminate between bullied youth who are more versus less impacted by the victimization. Both features need to be measured directly.

Bullying victimization is associated with psychosocial problems including depressive symptomatology, social and behavior problems, and substance use concurrently [1–4] and poor

psychosocial functioning over time [2,5–7]. Depending on the definition, measure, and methodology used, prevalence rates range between 9% [8] and 72% [9]. This wide variation has resulted in measurement issues increasingly being examined [10,11].

Disclaimer: The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Growing up with Media) and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development or the National Institutes of Health (Teen Health and Technology).

* Address correspondence to: Michele L. Ybarra, M.P.H., Ph.D., 555 El Camino Real #A347, San Clemente, CA 92672.

E-mail address: Michele@InnovativePublicHealth.org (M.L. Ybarra).

Measurement challenge #1

Bullying is traditionally defined as repeated aggression that is committed by a perpetrator who has more power than the

victim [12]. Some researchers have argued that differential power is *the* central defining factor that differentiates bullying from other types of peer victimization [13,14]. We lack data about whether and how this feature differentiates youth who may be more affected. If significant differences in mental health outcomes are attributable to the power dynamic, differential power should be measured directly.

Measurement challenge #2

Many researchers use the frequency response of the item (e.g., everyday) as a proxy for repetition. Bullying may also occur repetitively over a short period and then cease (e.g., because it was successfully addressed) [15]. Ybarra et al. [10] found that the addition of a direct follow-up measure of repetition did not significantly increase the precision of the measure. Whether it confers important information about the impact of the bullying experience, however, is not well understood.

Measurement challenge #3

In Internet victimization research particularly, studies of generalized peer aggression (sometimes referred to as “Internet harassment” [16,17]) have been included in reviews of bullying. This conflation is one explanation for the wide range of “cyber-bullying” prevalence rates in the literature. For, if generalized peer aggression is a broader form of victimization, we would expect higher prevalence rates for generalized peer aggression than for bullying, which has a more narrow definition. We would also expect that youth who are bullied would be identified as victims of generalized peer aggression. This is the first study to test the hypothesis that generalized peer aggression and bullying overlap when assessed separately within the same study using the same sampling and data collection methodology; and measure time frame.

Methods

The first two measurement challenges are addressed using data from the Teen Health and Technology (THT) survey; the third measurement challenge uses data from the Growing up with Media (GuwM) study.

Study 1

Data for the THT study were collected online between August 2010 and January 2011 from 5,907 13- to 18-year-olds in the United States. The survey protocol was reviewed and approved by the Chesapeake institutional review board (IRB), which is a private, paid Office for Human Research Protections-approved IRB, the University of New Hampshire IRB, and the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) research ethics review committee.

Participants for the current analyses were recruited from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) opt-in panel ($n = 3,989$). (An oversample of 1,918 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth was recruited through GLSEN’s listserv and advertisements on Facebook. The oversample were excluded here because analyses are focused on the general adolescent population rather than on differences by sexual or gender identity.) HPOL respondents were invited through e-mail invitations that referred to a survey about their “online experiences.” The survey questionnaire was

self-administered online. Qualified respondents were (1) U.S. residents; (2) 13–18 years old; (3) in fifth grade or above; and (4) provided informed assent. Median survey length was 23 minutes. The survey response rate was 7%.

Measures. Previous research suggests that inclusion of the word “harassment” does not affect endorsement rates of bullying [10]. As such, bullying was presented to youth with the following text: “Now we have some questions for you about bullying and harassment. Remember, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. Bullying and harassment can happen anywhere, like at school, at home, or other places you hang out. In the past 12 months, how often were you bullied or harassed by someone about your age...?” (1) in person; (2) by phone call; (3) by text message; and (4) online. Next, youth were asked “In the past 12 months, how often have others about your age bullied or harassed you by...?” (1) hitting, kicking, pushing, or shoving you; (2) making threatening or aggressive comments to you; (3) calling you mean names; (4) making fun of you or teasing you in a nasty way; (5) leaving you out or not letting you into a group because they were mad at you or were trying to make you upset; (6) spreading rumors about you, whether they were true or not; and (7) bullying or harassing you in some other way.

Response options were (1) never in the past 12 months; (2) once or a few times in the past 12 months; (3) once or a few times a month; (4) once or a few times a week; and (5) every day or almost every day to indicate *frequency*.

Youth who indicated they had been bullied at least once either through some mode or in some way were asked a follow-up question about *differential power*: “Was it by someone who had more power or strength than you? This could be because the person was bigger than you, had more friends, was more popular, or had more power than you in another way.” (Yes/no).

As an indicator of *repetition*, the youth who were bullied were also asked “When you were bullied or harassed in the past year, was it done repeatedly, so that it happened again and again?” (Yes/no).

Based upon these items, youth were categorized into one of the seven groups: (1) not bullied (i.e., “never in the past 12 months” on all bullying questions); (2) bullied + equal power (once or a few times in the past 12 months); (3) bullied + differential power (i.e., “once or a few times in the past 12 months” to at least one bullying item and “yes” to the question of differential power); (4) bullied + repeated (less than monthly; i.e., “once or a few times in the past 12 months” to at least one bullying item and “yes” to the question of repetition); (5) bullied + frequently (i.e., “once or a few times a month” or more frequently on at least one of the bully items, irrespective of their answer to the question about repetition); (6) bullied + differential power + repeated (less than monthly; i.e., “once or a few times in the past 12 months” to at least one bullying item and “yes” to both the question of differential power and repetition); and (7) bullied + differential power + frequently (i.e., “once or a few times a month” or more often to at least one bullying item and “yes” to the question of differential power, irrespective of their answer to the question about repetition). Categories #5 and 7 ignore the question of repetition because it reflects the youth who would be identified through the response options (i.e., without the additional follow-up).

Questions about the impact of the bullying (e.g., how much it interfered with relationships with friends, family; how upset

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