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Original article

A Behaviorally Specific, Empirical Alternative to Bullying: Aggravated Peer Victimization

David Finkelhor, Ph.D. [a,*], Anne Shattuck, Ph.D. [a], Heather Turner, Ph.D. [a], and Sherry Hamby, Ph.D. [b]

[a] *Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire*
[b] *Sewanee the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee*

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To test a behaviorally specific measure of serious peer victimization, called aggravated peer victimization (APV), using empirically derived aggravating elements of episodes (injury, weapon, bias content, sexual content, multiple perpetrators, and multiple contexts) and compare this measure with the conventional Olweus bullying (OB) measure, which uses repetition and power imbalance as its seriousness criteria.
Methods: The data for this study come from The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence 2014, a study conducted via telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample. This analysis uses the 1,949 youth ages 10–17 from that survey.
Results: The APV measure identified twice as many youth with serious episodes involving injury, weapons, sexual assaults, and bias content as the OB measure. In terms of demographic and social characteristics, the groups were very similar. However, the APV explained significantly more of the variation in distress than the OB ($R^2 = .19$ vs. .12).
Conclusions: An empirical approach to identifying the most serious incidents of peer victimization has advantages in identifying more of the youth suffering the effects of peer victimization. Moreover, its behaviorally specific criteria also bypass the difficult challenge of trying to reliably assess what is truly bullying with its ambiguous definitional element of power imbalance.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This behaviorally specific measure of serious peer victimization, called aggravated peer victimization, uses empirically derived aggravating elements of episodes (injury, weapon, bias content, sexual content, multiple perpetrators, and multiple contexts) and has advantages in identifying more of the youth suffering the effects of peer victimization compared to the typical measure of bullying.

The discussion of children who harm other children has been organized in recent years around the concept of "bullying". The concept was first promoted in the research and social policy domain by the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus. For Olweus [1], bullying designated a category of peer aggression that was more serious than and merited special attention from ordinary episodes of fighting, meanness, and harassment among peers [1]. He chose to define and operationalize bullying as intentional aggression that was repeated and that took place in a relationship where there was an imbalance of power, either physical or social.

This notion of bullying has had an enormous intuitive appeal as a mobilizing device for those trying to enhance children's safety. But as educators, researchers and policymakers have tried to advance the field, they have encountered certain persistent problems with the concept [2,3]. First, the concept appears to

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* Address correspondence to: David Finkelhor, Ph.D., CCRC, University of New Hampshire, 125 McConnell, 15 Academic Way, Durham, NH 03824.
E-mail address: david.finkelhor@unh.edu (D. Finkelhor).

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exclude or at least de-emphasize certain kinds of very serious peer victimization that nearly everyone wants to identify and prevent [4]. For example, a child could be very seriously injured or sexually assaulted by a peer, but if it did not involve a preexisting power imbalance then it would not be bullying. Second, whether there existed an actual power imbalance can often be a challenging judgment because differences in size, strength, gender, popularity, social status, and minority group membership can be very jumbled. Power imbalance is also not easy to measure reliably because it may change after an aggressive episode has occurred [5], when the bullying experience itself creates the perception of a more powerful perpetrator. Adding to the dilemma of what is truly bullying, it turns out that the colloquial meaning of the term for many children and parents does not necessarily even include a power balance dimension [6]. It is often applied to any act of meanness or aggression. Victims, parents, and school officials thus frequently disagree about whether bullying is occurring [7,8]. It also means that when research participants are asked to label incidents as bullying, very inconsistent definitions often emerge [6]. As a result of these problems, many peer victimization measures avoid the concept completely [9,10]. Others propose using an array of peer victimization categories such as bullying, harassment, and criminal assault [3].

Our research group has taken a somewhat different approach to the categorization of peer victimization. We have tried to gather accounts of a wide spectrum of peer victimizations and examine empirically the influence of various episode characteristics. In this research, some characteristics appear to have a particularly "aggravating" influence on fear and distress, including features like weapon usage, physical injury, and sexual content (sexual derogation, homophobic references, or sexual touching). This has led us to wonder whether there would be research and policy advantages to identifying more serious peer aggression based on these characteristics, rather than applying a "bullying" framework. We call this an "aggravated peer victimization" (APV) framework or, for short, "peer abuse."

We use the term "victimization," rather than "violence" or "aggression" because some of the behaviors, like exclusion and unwanted sexual touching, are not necessarily motivated by an intent to hurt or cause pain, which is implied in the strict definition of these terms.

One advantage could be that an empirically based approach would flag more of the seriously affected youth. While there are many measures of bullying or peer victimization [2], none of them are based on an empirical assessment of what features are associated with greatest distress. Yet another advantage might be that an aggravating elements approach based on clearly defined episode characteristics could possibly bypass some of the measurement ambiguity that has plagued the bullying concept.

However, the concept of power imbalance still poses a challenge in this regard. Our research and that of others has confirmed that perceptions by victims of power imbalance, at least judged after the episode, do correlate with indicators of greater seriousness and more harm [11–13]. Nonetheless, our concern is that preexisting power imbalance is often a difficult condition for external observers to ascertain and when applied by victim self-report can be confounded by the impact of victimization and the victim's subjective attributional styles, making objective assessment of this component unreliable [13]. There could thus be advantages to an assessment of serious peer victimization that does not rely on power imbalance.

This study compares the results of classifying peer victimization by the conventional Olweus bullying (OB) measure using its implicit power imbalance [14] in contrast with an alternative approach using "aggravating elements" or what we call the APV. We selected aggravating elements that have been shown in previous analyses to be associated with more serious effects: sexual content, weapon usage, injury, bias content, multiple assailants, and multiple different kinds of victimization contexts [12,15]. At the same time, we did not include a direct measure of power imbalance as an aggravating element. We will compare the children identified by these two approaches, examining, in particular, the ability of the measures to predict their distress using a commonly used measure of victimization trauma.

Methods

Participants

The data for this study come from The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence 2014, which was designed to obtain up-to-date incidence and prevalence estimates of a wide range of childhood victimizations. This particular study focuses on the 1,949 youth from the survey who were ages 10–17 at the time of the survey. Interviews were conducted over the phone from August 2013 through April 2014 by the employees of an experienced survey research firm.

Sample

A nationwide sample was obtained using four sources: (1) an address-based sample of households from which cell and residential numbers could be dialed; (2) a prescreened sample of households with children from recent national random-digit dialed (RDD) surveys; (3) a listed landline sample (targeted on indication of a child in the household based on commercial lists); and (4) cell phone numbers drawn from a targeted RDD sample frame. It yielded a sample that with weight adjustments to current census features of race, gender, and socioeconomic status is representative of youth 10–17 in the United States. The details of the study are described in more detail in the study by Finkelhor et al. [16].

Procedure

A short interview was conducted with an adult caregiver (usually a parent) to obtain family demographic information before asking to interview the youth. Respondents were promised complete confidentiality and were paid $20 for their participation. All procedures were authorized by the institutional review board of the University of New Hampshire.

Response rates

The response rates varied from 67% for the address-based sample sample [American Association of Public Opinion Research Response Rate 4] to 22.9% for the matched telephone numbers on file, 30.6% for the prescreened sample, 21.7% from the listed landline sample, and 14.2% for the cell phone RDD sample. Some of these response rates are low by historical standards, but they are as good as or better than what is typical at the current time in national survey research [17].