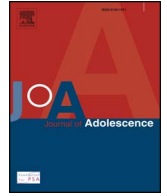


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Bullying victimization experiences among middle and high school adolescents: Traditional bullying, discriminatory harassment, and cybervictimization

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of the current study were to estimate the prevalence of nine types of bullying victimization among adolescents in Grades 7 to 12, and examine how these experiences vary according to gender and school grade. Data were drawn from the Manitoba Youth Health Survey. The sample size was $N = 64\,174$ and included boys and girls from Grades 7 to 12. Nine types of bullying victimization were assessed. Gender and grade differences were noted with girls being more likely than boys to report six types of victimization. The odds of bullying victimization were higher in Grades 8 to 12 compared to Grade 7. Effective anti-bullying intervention strategies need to address a range of victimization types and should consider gender and school grade. Interventions should start before Grade 7 and continue until the end of Grade 12.

1. Introduction

Bullying among adolescents is an important problem worldwide with serious immediate and lifelong consequences. Extant research has demonstrated that victims of bullying have elevated rates of school absenteeism (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Randa & Reynolds, 2014), lower academic achievement (Juvonen, Yueyan, & Espinoza, 2011; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Wigderson & Lynch, 2013), and a range of adverse mental health and physical health outcomes (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Due, Hansen, Merlo, Andersen, & Holstein, 2007; Fisher, Gardella, & Teurbe-Tolon, 2016; Gini, Pozzoli, Lenzi, & Vieno, 2014; Herge, La Greca, & Chan, 2016; Holt et al., 2015; Maniglio, 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Valdebenito, Ttofi, & Eisner, 2015; Winsper, Lereya, Zanarini, & Wolke, 2012; van Geel, Goemans, & Vedder, 2016). Consequently, understanding and addressing bullying victimization among adolescents has become a priority for parents, educators, policymakers, and researchers alike.

Traditional bullying—including physical aggression, verbal taunting and ridicule, and relational or social aggression—has been a focus of research for decades. More recently, the scope of bullying victimization research has expanded to specific forms of discriminatory harassment, which involves aggressive behaviour targeting an individual's personal characteristics (e.g., offensive comments about race or culture, sexual orientation or gender identity, body shape, size or appearance, etc.). Several studies have investigated the bullying experiences of different subgroup populations, such as racial minority youth (e.g., Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt,

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2015), gender and sexually diverse youth (e.g., Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Toomey & Russell, 2016), and overweight youth (e.g., van Geel, Vedder, & Taniol, 2014)—frequently reporting increased bullying victimization among these adolescents. However, nuances in the literature draw attention to the inadequacy of measuring general bullying experiences rather than specific forms of discriminatory harassment. For example, a recent meta-analysis found that ethnicity alone, measured as a demographic characteristic, was not strongly associated with victimization (Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2015); instead, studies which account for school ethnic composition have found that (1) greater diversity is associated with less victimization among racial minorities (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006), and (2) racial minorities may not experience increased bullying victimization when they are the numerical majority within a specific school (Agirdag, Demanet, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2011; Vitoroulis, Brittain, & Vaillancourt, 2016). Similarly, studies accounting for adolescents of different weights have observed that even those of a healthy weight report weight-based harassment (Bucchianeri, Gower, McMorris, & Eisenberg, 2016; Puhl & Luedicke, 2012; Taylor, 2011). Further, although research is sparse, it has been suggested that the consequences associated with discriminatory harassment are more severe than with general, non-discriminatory forms of bullying (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Taken together, it is clear that measures of traditional bullying do not capture all potentially harmful victimization experiences, including discriminatory harassment. These experiences are important to assess in measures of bullying victimization to gain a comprehensive assessment of bullying experiences.

In addition to traditional forms of bullying and discriminatory harassment, cybervictimization has emerged as a relatively new form of bullying victimization involving aggressive behaviour inflicted via the Internet or electronic devices such as mobile phones (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Tokunaga, 2010). Examples include abusive or threatening comments, accessing and misusing personal information, impersonating the victim, and circulating (e.g., via mobile phones or by posting online) harassment or private information (Bryce & Klang, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2014). Key features differentiating cybervictimization from offline victimization include the pervasiveness of the Internet in the lives of adolescents, the potential for a wide audience, the permanency of electronic media, and the potential for perpetrators to maintain anonymity (Kowalski et al., 2014; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). Research on cybervictimization has grown substantially in recent years, but despite many advances in our understanding, little investigation has been conducted on the disclosure of personal information online and implications for safety during online communication. Access to and misuse of personal information carries serious risks for adolescents and, as a result, is an emerging field of research (Bryce & Fraser, 2014; Bryce & Klang, 2009; De Souza & Dick, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Livingstone & Haddon, 2008); yet, to date, few studies in the cybervictimization literature incorporate measures of disclosure of personal information or unsafe communication (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009; Festl & Quandt, 2016; Kwan & Skoric, 2013).

1.1. Defining bullying

Bullying is commonly defined in academia as intentional and repeated aggressive behaviour towards another person where there is an observed or perceived power imbalance (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Olweus, 1993). This definition—which incorporates three key elements: *intentionality*, *power imbalance*, and *repetition*—has been at the foundation of the bullying literature. However, there is continued debate among researchers about whether this definition adequately addresses the conceptualization of bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014; Volk, Veenstra, & Espelage, 2017). Specifically, this definition does not correspond with adolescents' perceptions of bullying. Vaillancourt et al. (2008) reported that only 1.7% of adolescents included *intentionality* when defining bullying, only 6% included *repetition*, and 26% included *power imbalance*; similar findings have been reported in other studies (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016; Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006). Additionally, when adolescents were provided a definition of bullying, they were significantly less likely to report bullying experiences than adolescents who were not given a definition (Kert, Coddling, Tryon, & Shiyko, 2010; Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the operationalization of *repetition* and *power imbalance*. First, although incorporating repetition helps prevent adolescents from reporting trivial incidents, a single incident that causes substantial harm to the victim—such as being threatened or injured with a weapon—should not be overlooked (Volk et al., 2014). In the cybervictimization context, for instance, a single online post may be accessible by or distributed to a wide audience and, as a result, may cause continued harm to the victim (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015; Volk et al., 2014). Second, imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim can be difficult to measure, especially for cybervictimization. If the perpetrator maintains anonymity, it is impossible for the victim to know whether a power imbalance exists; alternatively, it has been argued that having the skills to use technology to harm others and maintain anonymity places the perpetrator in a position of power (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015; Volk et al., 2014).

Given the issues raised regarding its operationalization, this traditional definition of bullying has not been consistently used in the literature. As an alternative to using a global measure of bullying, a few studies have assessed several distinct forms of bullying simultaneously. For example, in a study by Freeman, King, and Pickett (2011) seven types of bullying were assessed (physical, verbal, indirect, sexual harassment, racial, religious, and electronic bullying), and in a study by Bucchianeri et al. (2016) five types of harassment were assessed (race-based, gender-based, sexual orientation-based, disability-based, and weight or physical appearance-based harassment). Similarly, in the current study, bullying was operationalized using nine items to measure distinct forms of victimization, including: physical bullying; bullying with a weapon; bullying, taunting or ridicule; harassment about race or culture; harassment about sexual orientation or gender identity; harassment about body shape, size, or appearance; bullying over the internet; being asked for personal information over the internet; and, finally, feeling unsafe when in contact with someone over the internet. While not a complete list of experiences adolescents may face, this study goes beyond traditional bullying (e.g., physical harm and name-calling) to cover more contemporary forms of bullying victimization including discriminatory harassment and

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