The Assessment of School Bullying: Using Theory to Inform Practice

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the conceptual basis for and meth- ods used to assess school bullying, including the core bullying behavior elements of repetition, intentionality, and power differential and instru- ments needed to foster comparability across studies and to improve the precision of intervention capacity. Common bully self-report procedures (Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, Olweus, 2004; Reynolds Bully Victimization Scale, Reynolds, 2003; The Bully Surveys, Swearer, 2001) are examined for the thoroughness with which they assess these core elements that distinguish bullying from other forms of peer victimization. It is concluded that bullying assessment can be enhanced by systematically including all core bully behaviors, more thoroughly examining sources of power differential between bullies and victims, and giving more attention to the dynamic nature of the bullying process. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address:* [*<docdelivery@haworthpress.com>*](mailto:docdelivery@haworthpress.com) *Website:* [*<http://www.*](http://www/) *HaworthPress.com>*  *2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Bullying, measurement, school violence

Bullying is recognized as a significant problem affecting youth in American schools (Colvin, Tolin, Beard, Hagan, & Sprague, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Nansel et al., 2001). It has been linked with school and community violence (e.g., Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003) and bullying victimization has been identified as a common factor among school shooters (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004). Researchers have hypothesized that bullying is a com- ponent of a “cycle of violence” that begins with bullying at the elemen- tary and junior high school levels, and then can progress to dating violence, harassment, and assault at the high school level (Colvin et al,,1998; Stein, 2003). In adulthood, aggression may display itself in the form of child abuse, hate crimes, or other domestic violence, which is passed on to the next generation of children who react by act- ing out as bullies at school (Colvin et al., 1998). There is consensus among researchers that chronic bully victimization is associated with a range of negative academic, social, and emotional outcomes (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Nickerson, Brock, Change, & O’Malley, 2005); hence, it demands the attention of educators.

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The quality of understanding of youth experiences with bullying and peer victimization hinges on the ability to effectively assess these con- structs. Since the inception of bullying research, various assessments have been proposed to measure this form of peer victimization. Despite the availability of measures, an assessment originally developed by Dan Olweus in 1978 (and more recently modified) has remained the most popular method for measuring bullying (Pellegrini, 2001). For example, the World Health Organization recently administered a version of Olweus’ measure to over 15,000 American youth (Nansel et al., 2001). Although the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (original and revised versions) has been widely used and modified in a large number of stud- ies, other measures have been proposed that also show promise (e.g., Reynolds, 2003; Swearer, 2001).

Bullying is a specific type of peer victimization and, as such, requires special attention to measurement. Because of the repetitive nature of bullying and the power differential that makes it nearly impossible for victims to defend themselves, bullying is an especially harmful form of victimization. As such, bullying has a special status as a form of victim- ization, necessitating that it is clearly distinguished from other types of peer victimization.

This paper presents key theoretical issues in the effective assessment of bullying. In particular, it focuses on how self-report assessments measure victimization.1 Although there are many psychometric issues related to measuring bullying, our focus is solely on theoretical topics. More specifically, this paper considers important issues in developing and selecting assessments that include the following: the purpose(s) of the assessment, the definition of bullying presented to students, and how the assessment conceptualizes bullying.

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# PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT

Assessments of bullying have various functions and the intended implications of the assessment can be used to select the appropriate measurement tool. Most often, bullying assessments are used to gather prevalence rates and determine national trends. At a macro-level, this information impacts the development of laws and policies on the state and federal scale (Limber & Small, 2003). At a local level, schools may use prevalence data for school safety planning or to facilitate “buy-in” from school staff, students, and parents when implementing interven- tions. When using an assessment to gain a general sense for rates of bul- lying, it is important that the assessment is brief and can capture many forms of victimization.

At an individual level, assessments of bullying can be used to under- stand the experiences of students. A comprehensive picture of the vic- tim’s experiences can inform secondary prevention and interventions efforts. Measures designed to assess individual experiences will most likely be longer and more comprehensive. They may ask questions along the lines of a functional behavioral assessment to identify factors that maintain the bullying process and develop plans to stop its reoccur- rence (Colvin et al., 1998). The purpose of the assessment guides the selection of appropriate methods and questions to best address the pre- determined goal.

# DEFINITIONS IN ASSESSMENT

Perhaps the most important theoretical issue to consider when evalu- ating assessments of bullying is how the measure *defines* the unique aspects of bullying as a subset of all peer victimization (see Nickerson et al., 2005). There is some variability in accepted definitions of bullying and there are certainly discrepancies in the extent to which measures are faithful to these definitions. The most popular definition of bullying was developed by Olweus (1978) and defines bullying as peer aggression that incorporates three components: (1) repetition over time, (2) intention- ally designed to harm the victim, and (3) involving an imbalance of power between the person doing the bullying and the person being bul- lied. This definition is accepted by most researchers in the field (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2003), with some investigators suggesting that there are additional components: (4) bullying is unprovoked by the vic- tim, and (5) bullying occurs within social groups when other peers are present (cited by Griffin & Gross, 2004). Issues related to how well as- sessments include each of the definitional components will be consid- ered next.

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Measures of bullying often begin by providing a definition of bully-

ing to students, and then asking a series of questions about whether the student has experienced bullying, as described. For example, the Re- vised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire provides the following defi- nition of bullying that is designed to incorporate the three major components of the term:

We say a student is being bullied when another student or several

other students

* say mean and hurtful things or make fun of him or her or call him or her mean and hurtful names;
* completely ignore or exclude him or her from their group of friends or leave him or her out of things on purpose;
* hit, kick, push, shove around, or threaten him or her;
* tell lies or spread false rumors about him or her or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike him or her; and
* do other hurtful things like that.

These things may take place frequently, and it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a mean and harmful way.

But we don’t call it bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way. Also it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight. (Solberg & Olweus, 2003, p. 246)

This description is designed to foster a common understanding of the term “bullying” among youth that incorporates all components of the definition of bullying. In addition, it offers examples to explain the types of behaviors that the investigator would like students to attend to, while providing enough ambiguity for students to consider other hurtful behaviors that are not explicitly listed in the definition.

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There are, however, several limitations to using a definition such as the one provided above and asking youth to rate the frequency with which they have experienced bullying. Some of these limitations are not specific to bullying assessments. In their review of recommendations for assessing child victimization, Hamby and Finkelhor (2000) advo- cate using short sentences, easy vocabulary, and simple grammar. They refer to a study that found that 80% of 9 to 11-year-olds can compre- hend questions comprising 1 to 9 words, but this percentage of compre- hension dropped to 40% of children when the questions were more than 20 words long.2

Another question is what the label “bully” means to youth. Land (2003) asked 147 U.S. secondary students to provide examples of “teas- ing,” “bullying,” and “sexual harassment” (without providing a definition for these terms). She found that repetition (the first component cited by the definition of bullying) was not included in over half of the exam- ples of bullying provided by students. In fact, slightly more students described examples of teasing involving multiple incidences (49%) versus examples of bullying (46% included multiple incidences). This finding suggests that students do not universally perceive repetition to be a key component in their definition of bullying (Land). When students are asked to make judgments about “bullying” it is possible that they use pre-conceived notions of the meaning of this term, rather than relying on the definition as intended by researchers (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefooghe, 2002). At a minimum, this raises questions about how youths read, interpret, and recall definitions provided by researchers while simultaneously integrating those definitions with their own experi- ences. As of yet, there is limited information comparing the validity of self-report measures that provide a definition of bullying and self-report measures that avoid using the term altogether. Any inconsistencies in youths’ capacity to uniformly adhere to presented definitions will intro- duce unwanted error variance into studies using these measures.3

Hamby and Finkelhor (2000, p. 833) suggest using behavioral check- lists over general terms, because terms may be “emotionally laden.” They note that higher rates of victimization are reported when participants are asked to indicate behaviors, rather than endorse a general label. A possi- ble explanation for this difference is that youth may be hesitant to admit that they were bullied, because they might associate bully victimization with weakness. In contrast, admitting to experiencing a behavior, for example, reporting that someone hit them, may feel like it reflects on the inappropriate aggression of a peer, rather than a personal deficiency. As an example, the Reynolds Bully Victimization Scale (Reynolds, 2003) is a 46-item scale that asks students to indicate the number of times in the past month that they have experienced various aggressive behaviors. Twenty-three items measure victimization behaviors (e.g., pushed around by other kids) and 23 items measure bullying behaviors (e.g., picked on other kids). Instead of using the term “bullying,” the items include behavioral descriptors in sentence form, next to a four-point frequency rating. Behavioral checklists like this one circumvent issues related to using a term and they allow researchers more specific infor- mation about types of victimization.

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However, checklists of behaviors have limitations, as well, because participants only respond to the behaviors that are explicitly listed–they may not capture all pertinent experiences. If the checklist is not compre- hensive, researchers may miss other types of victimization experienced (Hamby & Finkelhor, 2000; Schwarz, 1999). Griffin and Gross (2004) also refer to concerns in the literature that pure behavioral checklists, as currently used, do not take into account the context of bullying and the intentionality of students, a component cited in the definition of victim- ization by Nickerson et al. (2005). To further explore the way that the definition of bullying is operationalized in assessments, the three core components of the definition of bullying will be discussed in the next section.

# Repetition

Most measures of bullying ask students to rate how often they have experienced victimization. For example, students may be presented with a definition or a type of victimization experience and asked to indi- cate how often it has happened (e.g., “never,” “once or twice,” “three or four times,” “five or more times”; Reynolds, 2003). However, stud- ies have varied both in the time period that they designate as a frame of reference, and also in the number and type of response options provided (Solberg & Olweus, 2003).

There are several issues that arise from this method of assessing the repetition of bullying. First, for many years scale developers have been attuned to the way that the formation of frequency items affects ex- aminee responses. Schwarz (1999) wrote that response categories give respondents information about whether the researcher is interested in learning about low-frequency or high-frequency events. For example, a reference frame that asks students about victimization that they have experienced in the past year may make them think that the researcher is interested in rare events, whereas a reference frame that asks students about victimization in the past week may encourage students to con- sider more high-frequency but lower-severity events.4 Schwarz cites evidence that respondents are likely to endorse an average frequency when given several response alternatives. This finding suggests that survey response options convey normative information and respon- dents therefore are less likely to endorse extreme response options.

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A second significant issue in assessing the repetition of bullying is the theoretical question of whether acts must always be perpetrated by the same person to be considered bullying. Reynolds (2003) asked stu- dents how often they have experienced different types of victimization; however, there is no indication of whether the same bullying is repeat- edly acted out against the same victim. Although it seems unlikely that a student would be victimized by many different classmates over time without repeat offenders, this is nonetheless an important consideration in the conceptualization of the bullying experience. Bullying has often been conceptualized as a “process” or “relationship” between the bully and the victim (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 2001a; Pepler, Craig, & O’Connell, 1999; Rigby, 2002). It appears that current ac- cepted measurement practices do not address this aspect of repetition. Therefore, the vast majority of researchers are unable to answer such fundamental questions as whether a single bully who torments over time is as harmful to a victim as a classroom full of bullies who each contribute in small ways to victimization. It is hypothesized that chil- dren who are repeatedly bullied by the same student would try to avoid that student and fear *where* it might happen next. In contrast, children who are bullied by a large number of students may feel out of control because they are unable to predict *who* will initiate the bullying next. As of yet, questions about the impact of the number and type of bullying on locus of control, student reactions, and effective interventions remain unanswered.

# ONCLUSIONS

Despite major advances in understanding the impact of bullying, its impact on children, and interventions, assessment practices do not ap- pear to adequately measure all of the complex interactions involved with bullying victimization. Several recommendations emerge from this review. First, effective assessment tools need to be developed to ad- dress a specific purpose (e.g., measures of prevalence rates may need to be brief and include a broad range of experiences, whereas tools that as- sess an individual’s experiences may need to obtain details about the *process* of bullying and factors that maintain victimization). Second, measures should use developmentally appropriate language and in- volve simple wording and grammar. Third, assessments should ask about students’ experiences rather than using emotionally laden labels like “bullying.” Fourth, in addition to asking about the frequency of bul- lying experiences, questions should be designed to inform researchers about the intentionality and power imbalance inherent in bullying. Fi- nally, measures should move towards assessing the reasons that a vic- tim is targeted for bullying including potentially overlapping constructs such as sexual harassment, race-related harassment, and gang involve- ment.

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In addition to improving current measures of bullying, there is a need for new measures that are designed to assess the experiences of individ- ual students who are already victims of bullying and inform interven- tions. Although there are several promising measures to assess bullying at a school-wide or classroom-wide level, more direction on how to conduct a functional behavioral assessment or a clinical interview with children who experience bullying victimization is necessary. By work- ing towards more accurate and effective assessments of bullying, it will be possible to develop a better understanding of students’ victimization experiences.

NOTES

1. For pragmatic purposes, this paper will use the term “victim” when referring to the person being bullied and the term “bully” when referring to the person/people do- ing the bullying. However, it is recognized that these terms are subjective and depend- ent upon the definitions assigned to them.
2. Although it is designed for a slightly older age group, note that the above defini- tion provided by the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire has 174 words. This raises questions about how well the survey is understood by children of various reading abilities and how they make use of this information in responding to subsequent items. It is possible, for example, that some youth resonate with one aspect of the definition, retain that content in their working memory, and refer to it when answering questions about their bullying experiences. To be valid, this commonly used definitional ap- proach to measuring bullying victimization would need to show that all students re- tained all elements of the 174 word statement when they completed subsequent items.It also should be noted that many studies do not even present a definition, but merely ask youth, for example, how often they have been “bullied, harassed, or teased.”

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1. It is also possible that recent experiences that bother a youth may be forgotten

months later and/or their attention focused on more recent experiences.