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A qualitative study investigating adolescents' understanding of aggression, bullying and violence

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ABSTRACT

There is a general consistency across the research literature regarding the definition of bullying. This has filtered down into the construction of governmental and school anti-bullying policies around the world. However, research suggests that children and adolescents are failing to accurately identify cases of bullying. This in turn has implications upon the accuracy of our perception of the extent of the problem of bullying within schools. The current study aimed to investigate how 11–17 year olds understand and differentiate between terms relating to interpersonal peer aggression, violence and bullying. Fifty-seven (twenty male, thirty-seven female) participants were recruited via an opportunity sample. Participants took part in focus group interviews within which they were asked to provide a definition for a list of words relating to both traditional and cyber forms of aggression, bullying and violence. Thematic analysis revealed that the participants held a shared understanding of the terms relating to aggression, bullying and violence. Participants defined each term by describing the behaviors involved, their perception of the level of control the perpetrators of each type of negative peer interaction have and the perception of those involved. The implications of these findings for both policy and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There is a general academic consensus regarding the definition of bullying; a specific subtype of aggressive behavior defined as, 'intentional negative behavior that… occurs with some repetitiveness and is directed against a person who has difficulty defending himself or herself' (Olweus, 2011. p.151). Bullying is differentiated into two broad behavioral subcategories of *direct* and *indirect* bullying (Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010; Hampel, Manhal, & Hayer, 2009; Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & Ylc-Cura, 2006). Direct bullying refers to the use of overt behaviors which include physical attacks such as hitting, pushing, kicking (*physical* bullying; Wang, Iannotti, Luk, & Nansel, 2010), name-calling and threatening behavior (*verbal* bullying; Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Wang et al., 2010). In contrast, indirect bullying includes the manipulation of social relationships in order to socially isolate the victim (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010). This type of *psychological* bullying, also known as *relational* bullying involves behaviors such as rumor spreading, sexual gestures and verbal abuse and is carried out within the victim's social group (Corvo & deLara, 2010). Relational bullying can also be perpetrated via a technological device (termed *cyber* bullying: Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2010; Perren,

Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Cyber bullying, although previously isolated within the literature and investigated independently is rapidly becoming an increasingly dominant form of bullying (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Wade & Beran, 2011; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). The behavioral and affective overlap between *traditional* (behaviors which are not perpetrated via technology) and cyber forms of bullying are now being investigated (Hay, Meldrum & Mann, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008; Wade & Beran, 2011).

Victims of both cyber and traditional forms of childhood bullying have been found to suffer from a range of negative physical and psychological consequences including decreased self-esteem (Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2009), involvement in delinquent behavior (Lösel & Bender, 2011), increased drug use (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010), perceived lack of personal safety at school (Esbensen & Carson, 2009) and lower educational attainment (Beran, Hughes, & Lupart, 2008; Rothon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011). The effects of bullying can also impact upon long-term well being (Ttofi & Farrington, 2008), with victims facing an increased risk of suffering from depression (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002), anxiety (Lösel & Bender, 2011) and relational difficulties in adulthood (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007).

International research consistently signifies that childhood and adolescent bullying (following the definition outlined by Olweus, 2011) is a global problem (Mlisa, Ward, Flisher, & Lombard, 2008; Thornberg, 2010; Wang et al., 2012). In acknowledgement of the severity of the impact of bullying, the past decade has observed a notable increase in the construction of anti-bullying legislation around the world. Arguably, the

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most notable increase is within the United States of America. Although there is no federal legal requirement to do so, since 1999, forty-six of the fifty-one states now have legislation requiring schools to construct an anti-bullying policy (eight of which have been constructed since 2010).

Within England and Wales governmental policy dictates that each school must construct and implement an anti-bullying policy (The Education and Inspections Act, 2006 [89]: 1.b, 3, 5). Reflecting the definition of bullying reported within the research literature, the Department for Education (DfE) in England and Wales defines bullying as a, 'behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally'; with the definition of cyber bullying being extended to include the use of technology and victimization occurring, '24/7, with a potentially bigger audience' (DfE, 2011: 4). This definition is used to inform the construction of anti-bullying policies within schools and so effects how educators inform pupils about what bullying involves. This definition is also reflected within the media and within online resources designed to inform children and adolescents about bullying (BBC Newsround, 2011; BeatBullying, 2012). Despite the consistency in the definition of bullying across the research literature, governmental and individual school policies and the media, research suggests that children and adolescents may hold a less consistent understanding of the phenomenon to those researching the problem (Frisén, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010; Monks & Smith, 2006; Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Smith et al., 2002; Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

One method researchers have utilized to investigate adolescents' understanding of bullying is to compare reported involvement rates between samples provided with a definition of bullying compared with those that are not provided with a definition of the term. The findings from this area of research highlight inconsistencies between the understanding held by academics compared to children and adolescents. Vaillancourt et al. (2008) divided a sample of 8–18 year old participants into two groups; one of which received a definition of the term 'bully' (following the criteria defined by Olweus, 2011) and the other was asked to indicate their involvement in bullying based upon their own understanding of the term. They found that the group who were provided with the definition reported lower prevalence rates of victimization compared to those who were not provided with one; suggesting that this sample of participants considered bullying to include a different set of criteria than the widely held definition. Indeed, when the group who were not provided with a definition was asked to define bullying, they did not consistently report the criteria of repeated behaviors, intentionality, nor a power imbalance between aggressor and victim. In another study Frisén et al. (2008) simply asked 13 year old participants to define their understanding of what constitutes a bullying relationship. Like Vaillancourt et al.'s (2008) sample, the definitions offered by the 13 year olds were inconsistent and did not reflect the definition adopted by academics and policy makers; 70% of the sample did not mention repeated behaviors and 81% did not mention a power imbalance. Across the sample, the participants were more likely to mention the behaviors involved (indirect, physical and verbal) rather than the criteria by which they define these behaviors as bullying. By not perceiving the criteria of intentionality and repetition as integral to the definition, children and adolescents may perceive one-off acts of violence and aggression as bullying. Thus, when investigating the prevalence of bullying, without providing participants with a definition, participants may base their indication of victimization upon criteria which may differ from the specific criteria of interest to the researchers.

However, the findings from Frisén et al. (2008) and Vaillancourt et al.'s (2008) samples may not be representative of children and adolescents understanding in other participant samples. Children and adolescents' understanding of the term, 'bullying' may be subject to cultural interpretations or translations of the term. For example, the term 'bullying' itself does not translate across all languages to incorporate aspects of physical, verbal and relational bullying; with translations within the Spanish language not including the latter form of bullying for example. Similarly, the term 'cyber bullying' (which in English refers to bullying which occurs via any technological device) when directly translated into different languages does not consistently hold the same meaning as it does within the English language. For example, its meaning in Italian, German and Spanish is restricted to incorporate bullying behaviors using the internet only (Nocentini et al., 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Influences on children's understanding of bullying also include the child's experiences as they mature and witness the bullying behaviors of others (Monks & Smith, 2006, Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003) and the education they receive within school; which may make them aware of subtypes of bullying which they have not directly witnessed themselves. Thus, when comparing findings of international research, caution should be taken before generalizing the findings of research which does not provide participants with a definition of the term under investigation.

Further variations between the understanding held by academics and children and adolescences are that of the behaviors utilized and the individuals who are involved in bullying relationships. Rodkin and Berger (2008) suggest that children may hold a specific schema of those who are involved in bullying. They asked a sample of 10–11 year olds to nominate peers who bully other children. They found that participants tended to nominate boys who were physically and relationally aggressive as being bullies; suggesting that children may hold a specific schema of the gender of a bully. Although this finding reflects research which suggests that the prevalence of male involvement in bullying is higher than female involvement (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010), the findings of other studies suggest that females are just as likely as males to engage in bullying; but are more likely to use relational compared to physical strategies (Smith et al., 2008). The findings of Rodkin and Berger's (2008) study may therefore be a reflection of what children are witnessing and experiencing at school; reflecting only the overt behaviors displayed by males. Therefore, caution should be taken when generalizing these findings to participants from other cultures and even different participant samples as their experiences and what behaviors they witness may vary.

A further inconsistency between the understanding held by academics and children and adolescents is that regarding the behaviors they define as being utilized within bullying relationships. Maunder et al. (2010) found that when their sample of 12–16 year old participants was asked to identify behaviors from a list, indirect behaviors were less likely than direct behaviors to be identified as bullying. This perception does not reflect the research evidence which suggests that indirect forms of bullying are more prevalent than direct physical forms (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010). This area of research highlights discrepancies between adolescents' perception of bullying and the research evidence collected regarding those involved in bullying and the behaviors they experience. This discrepancy however may reflect the ambiguity of interpreting the purpose of behaviors associated with relational and indirect bullying. Characterized by behaviors such as teasing and rumor spreading, those not involved in indirect bullying may perceive such behaviors as playful and not intended to harm the victim; therefore they may be less likely to indicate them as bullying behaviors within questionnaires. However, the recipients of these behaviors, regardless of the intent (which may be unknown to the victim), perceive them negatively and report them as bullying. Therefore, the perspectives of those involved and those commenting on their perception of bullying may present differing representations of the perceived severity and intent of the ambiguous behaviors associated with indirect forms of bullying.

These inconsistencies between academics' and children and adolescents' understanding of bullying suggest that there are problems within the anti-bullying education process, whereby pupils do not fully understand what behaviors do and do not constitute bullying. The issue which arises from these differing understandings is that if