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Factors relating to self-identification among bullying victims

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Abstract

While researchers often debate the use of subjective labels in school bullying research (e.g. "I am bullied . . .") as a methodological issue, responses to such measures should be viewed as a valuable tool for evaluating student constructs of bullying victimization. Accordingly, this study compares demographic and descriptive characteristics and bullying experiences of self-labeled bullying victims to those students who have been victimized but do not label themselves a victim. Among 192 rural elementary and middle school students, 21.9% said that they have been bullied while another 22.9% met victimization criteria but did identify themselves as such. Based on chi-square and MANOVA comparisons, self-labeled victims experience more specific types of bullying, more total bullying behaviors, and more frequent bullying than their non-labeled counterparts. In light of such findings, the authors discuss the implications of labeling and self-identification for both research and bullying prevention.
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1. Introduction

This study examines factors relating to self-identification among bullied children at rural schools. School bullying is a serious and insidious problem that continues to receive frequent research attention. Despite this intense investigation, however, our knowledge about many aspects of bullying remains limited or unclear, including our understanding of the unique characteristics and bullying experiences of children who identify themselves as victims and those who do not. This overall lack of clarity in bullying research results in part from the uneven mixture of measurement tools, varying time periods, and the inconsistent definitions and data collection techniques that have hindered the assimilation of published bullying studies (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefooghe, 2002; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Such hindrances are problematic because they restrict understanding about bullying and slow the identification of those distinctive qualities, bullying behaviors, typologies, subtypes, and contributing factors that might facilitate the development of meaningful and effective interventions.

1.1. Global and specific measures of bullying

Foremost among these methodological and conceptual inconsistencies is the procedure for classifying students as victims. Specifically, some researchers suggest that use of a "global", or overall, measure of victimization has the greatest utility (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). An example of such a measure is a question that directly asks "How often have you been bullied at school over the last 3 months?" (Olweus, 1986, 1996). In contrast, others believe that questions using subjective labels (like "bullied" in the above illustration) generate unreliable data (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). Such labels, it is argued, encourage dishonest answers because students will feel pressured to provide socially desirable responses (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Instead, student classification should be based on more specific behavioral indicators (Espelage et al., 2000).

Perhaps the most remarkable feature in this particular disagreement, however, is that it is viewed as a methodological issue. It is discussed as a matter of research design or as a point of response bias. In contrast, a more meaningful approach is to view student responses to both global and specific measures as an opportunity to explore student interpretations, constructs, and labeling in bullying victimization. Such an approach has the potential to aid in the identification of victim subtypes and in the assessment of students' bullying experiences.

1.2. Victimization and self-identification

A brief review of the literature on crime victimization suggests that those children who willingly identify themselves as "bullied" might have endured a different frequency or pattern of bullying than those children who are victimized but do not identify themselves in this way. For example, victims of serious and/or violent crime are more likely to report their victimization to the police (and thus openly identify themselves as a