



# Agreement among students', teachers', and parents' perceptions of victimization by bullying

Michelle K. Demaray\*, Christine K. Malecki, Stephanie M. Secord, Kelly M. Lyell

Psychology Department, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 June 2013

Received in revised form 14 October 2013

Accepted 16 October 2013

Available online 28 October 2013

### Keywords:

Bullying

Victimization

School violence

Perceptions

## ABSTRACT

Bullying is a growing problem in many schools today, and accurate perceptions of bullying and victimization in schools are necessary in order for programs aimed at intervention for bullying behaviors to be effective. The current study examined agreement among students', teachers', and parents' perceptions of victimization across gender and grade level by surveying 137 students in grades 3–8, and their parents and teachers using a common measure of bullying. Overall, students reported the highest levels of victimization, and teachers reported the lowest levels of victimization. This pattern was consistent across gender, but inconsistent across grade level. Students and parents had moderate agreement correlations on levels of victimization, whereas teachers and students had low agreement correlations on levels of victimization. Overall, when students and parents or teachers disagreed, the disagreement was an underestimate, rather than an overestimate on the adult's part.

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## 1. Introduction

From a social-ecological perspective, bullying and victimization are influenced by multiple contexts that the child is embedded in, including home, school, peers, and the community (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). While many bullying prevention and intervention programs aim to include these multiple influences, few studies have assessed the degree to which multiple sources are aware of and agree on the extent of bullying occurring at the child's school. While perfect agreement of perceptions may be an idealistic goal, it is important for research to investigate patterns and underlying reasons for discrepant perceptions of victimization. This is essential for the effective development, implementation, and evaluation of bullying prevention and intervention programs. The current study adds to the literature on bullying by examining school-wide agreement among perceptions of bullying and victimization in a unique sample that consists of parallel ratings on victimization from parents, teachers, and students for each participant in an entire school.

### 1.1. Overview of bullying in youth

Bullying is becoming an increasingly significant concern in many schools, with as many as 30–35% of elementary and middle school students reporting being involved in bullying as either the bully, victim, or both (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Nansel et al., 2001). Furthermore, it is commonly reported that both bullies and victims

experience poor psychosocial adjustment (Nansel et al., 2001). It is well established in the literature that victims of bullying tend to report low self-esteem, poor peer relations, poor academic achievement, and greater levels of internalizing and externalizing distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, aggression) than their peers (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2007; Lopez & Dubois, 2005; Paul & Cillessen, 2007). Bullies may also be vulnerable to a myriad of issues. For example, significant relations among bullying behavior and anger, misconduct, depression, impulsivity, and maladaptive social skills have been found (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999).

While there are some inconsistencies in the way that bullying and victimization are defined, many agree that bullying can be defined as proactive aggression where the behavior is repetitive, intended to be harmful, and within a disproportionate power relationship (Olweus, 2010). Some researchers define bullying as physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, pushing) or relational (e.g., teasing, spreading rumors, excluding), while others define bullying as direct (i.e., physical or verbal confrontation) or indirect (less overt behaviors, such as spreading rumors or excluding) behaviors (Sveinsson & Morris, 2007). Bullying behaviors can be initiated by an individual student or a group of students, just as the victim can be an individual or a group of students (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004).

### 1.2. Agreement rates in bullying and victimization

The different assessment methods utilized in bully research tend to result in a wide range of prevalence rates for bullying and victimization (Swearer, Siebecker, Johnsen-Frerichs, & Wang, 2010). However, few studies have investigated the relations between who is reporting the bullying behavior and prevalence rates. Even fewer studies have examined convergence and divergence across sources within the same student. The current study utilized a unique sample that included

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Psychology-Computer Science Building, Rm. 400, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA. Tel.: +1 815 753 7077.

E-mail address: [mkdemaray@niu.edu](mailto:mkdemaray@niu.edu) (M.K. Demaray).

school-wide participation consisting of students, their teachers, and the majority of their parents.

The few researchers that have investigated agreement rates in bullying have generally found that teachers report lower estimates of bullying than students (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). For example, Bradshaw et al. (2007) examined the discrepancy between school staff and student perceptions of bullying behavior and bully-related attitudes in a large-scale study that included over 15,000 elementary, middle, and high school students and over 1500 school staff members in a public school district. Bradshaw and colleagues found that school staff underestimated the number of students involved in bullying, with the majority of staff reporting bullying rates of less than 10% and students reporting bullying rates between 20% and 30%. Furthermore, the results of this study indicated that the discrepancy between teacher-reported and student-reported bullying rates was larger in elementary school, with less than 1% of elementary school staff reporting bullying rates similar to elementary school students. Similar results were found in a study examining agreement rates among teachers and students in seven rural elementary schools in the United States (Stockdale et al., 2002), as well as among a British sample in an inner-city secondary school (Pervin & Turner, 1994). A recent meta-analysis investigating predictors of bullying behaviors found that informant source counted for significant variation in the reported prevalence rates. Cook, Williams, Guerra, and Kim (2010) found that prevalence rates reported by peer nominations were significantly lower than student and teacher reports (parent report was excluded from the meta-analysis due to the limited number of studies using parent report). Interestingly, the researchers found that prevalence rates reported by teachers and students were not significantly different. These results differ from the findings generally reported in the literature that find teachers report lower levels of bullying than students.

Research examining parent reports of bullying has generally found that parents also underestimate the extent of bullying behavior; however, to a lesser extent than teachers. The difference in discrepancy between student and parent reports as opposed to student and teacher reports may be due to the fact that children are more likely to tell their parents rather than their teachers when they are victimized. Houndoumadi and Pateraki (2001) examined teacher and parent awareness of bullying from the students' perspectives in a sample of 3rd through 6th grade students. Students reported that parents were more aware of and have talked to their children about being victimized, however teachers were more aware of and have talked to students about bullying others. This is consistent with prior research that has found that bullies are more likely to have damaged relationships with parents and perceive lower levels of parental support, and therefore are less likely to talk to their parents about their experiences with bullying (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Rigby, 1993). Additionally, Houndoumadi and Pateraki (2001) found that girls and younger students were more likely to tell their parents about being victimized. In a recent study examining parent and child concordance regarding teasing among 5th grade students and their parents, only 5% of the sample indicated disagreement between the child being teased (i.e., the child reported being teased, but the parent did not report their child had been teased) (Holt, Kantor, & Finkelhor, 2009). Only 2% of the sample agreed on the child teasing peers (i.e., the child reported they had teased peers and the parent reported their child teased peers). However, for the majority of the sample (78%), both parents and children agreed that the child had not teased others. In a study examining parent and student perspectives of bullying at seven rural elementary schools, Stockdale et al. (2002) found that students and parents reported similar rates regarding verbal bullying, however parents' estimates of physical bullying and victimization in general were significantly lower than students' reports.

Some studies have found that agreement in reported bullying rates may differ by type of bullying. In a study previously described,

Bradshaw et al. (2007) found that students and staff generally agreed on the frequency of types of bullying, with direct verbal forms of bullying (e.g., name-calling, teasing) being the most frequently reported type of bullying by elementary, middle, and high school staff and students, followed by physical forms of bullying (e.g., pushing, hitting). In a recent study, Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, and Bradshaw (2011) examined perceptual differences between students, staff, and parents regarding school safety, school belonging, and bullying among a sample of 11,674 students and 1027 staff at 44 elementary, middle, and high schools. Waasdorp and colleagues found that school level and type of bullying significantly impacted perceptions of bullying. The discrepancy between student and staff reports of witnessing bullying was smaller in elementary than middle and high schools. This finding differs from a study previously described that found that the discrepancies between teacher and student reports of bullying were larger in elementary than middle and high schools (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Surprisingly, Waasdorp et al. (2011) also found that as students reported higher rates of indirect bullying, teachers reported witnessing more bullying than students. This could be due to differing opinions between teachers and students on what "witnessing" bullying means. Students may not think that helping to spread a rumor or exclude a peer would represent a bullying situation.

In addition to type of bullying, discrepant viewpoints may be due to differing opinions on definitions of bullying. Research has found that teachers are less likely to consider indirect behaviors (e.g., exclusion, spreading rumors, etc.) as bullying and include repetitive behavior in their definitions (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). Parents and teachers may mistake verbal and social forms of bullying as playful behavior between friends and may not report it as bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Characteristics of teachers, such as previous experience with bullying, may also affect reports of bullying. For example, Waasdorp et al. (2011) found that school staff members who reported being bullied in the past were more likely to report witnessing bullying. Other variables, such as the size and climate of school, the age and gender of students, and the social status of the bullies and victims may influence teachers' perceptions of bullying (Holt et al., 2009). There is limited research investigating variables that influence parents' perceptions of bullying, although it is thought that similar variables such as parents' previous experience with bullying, and age and gender of the child may influence parents' perceptions as well (Holt et al., 2009).

Discrepant viewpoints among students, teachers, and parents on bullying have important implications for prevention and early intervention services. Many theories and much of the research on bullying behaviors support the notion of a social-ecological framework, which suggests that bullying and victimization are reciprocally influenced by the individual, family, peer group, school, community, and society (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). According to this perspective, the most effective bully prevention and intervention practices are those programs which take a multi-systematic perspective (Holt et al., 2009). Many of these programs (e.g., Bully-Proofing Your School, 2004) require collaboration among school staff, students and the community to appropriately implement the program and alter bullying behaviors and attitudes at school. Therefore, accurate assessment and interpretation of student, parent, and teacher reports of bullying is essential for these programs to be developed, implemented, and evaluated effectively.

While these studies have made important contributions to the literature, a major limitation is that the teachers completed questionnaires asking them to make global ratings of students' victimization as opposed to rating each individual student's level of victimization. The current study is unique in that the teachers filled out a questionnaire about *each* of their students. Furthermore, parents filled out a questionnaire about each of their children. This allows the researchers to examine *exact* agreement among students, their teachers, and their parents on perceptions of victimization. In addition, prior research has investigated agreement on total scores, which may be misleading. For example, a teacher and child may have similar total scores for levels of victimization but have endorsed different items. The current study

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