Peer and self-reports of victimization and bullying: Their differential association with internalizing problems and social adjustment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Researchers typically employ either peer or self-reports to assess involvement in bullying. In this study, we examined the merits of each method for the identification of child characteristics related to victimization and bullying others. Accordingly, we investigated the difference between these two methods with regard to their relationship with social adjustment (i.e., perceived popularity, likeability, and self-perceived social acceptance) and internalizing problems (i.e., anxiety, depression, and self-worth) in 1192 Dutch school children, aged 9 to 12 years. Perceived popularity and likeability were more strongly correlated with peer reports than self-reports, for both victimization and for bullying others. Self-perceived social acceptance correlated equally strong with peer and self-reports of victimization. Furthermore, peer reports of bullying were also correlated with self-perceived social acceptance, whereas self-reports of bullying were not. All internalizing problems showed stronger relations with self-reports than peer reports; although only the relation between self-reported victimization and internalizing problems was of practical significance. Despite our findings indicating that using only one type of report could be

efficient for examining the relation between bullying behaviors and separate child characteristics, both types of report are necessary for a complete understanding of the personal and social well-being of the children involved.

1. Introduction

Bullying behavior is defined as the repeated exposure to negative actions by one or more individuals over time. During those negative actions someone (the bully) intentionally attempts to inflict injury or discomfort upon another individual (the victim). Moreover, an imbalance in perceived or actual power exists between victim and bully (Greene, 2006; Olweus, 1993; Olweus, 2000; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Bullying behavior can be considered normative because it is "likely to be found in any relatively enduring human group that is difficult to leave" (Smith & Brain, 2000, p. 2). School classes are such enduring groups, and many studies about bullying focus on this particular group and corresponding developmental period.

Although the scientific definition is straightforward, the operationalization of this definition to assess victimization and bullying is less clear. Investigators use different methods and different informants—peers, teachers, parents, or the children themselves—to measure children's involvement in bullying. The earliest, and still most widely used method, is self-report, followed by peer reports (Cook, Williams, Guerra, & Kim, 2010). However, the advantages and disadvantages of these two methods are still hotly debated. Whereas several researchers advocate self-reports (Olweus, 1993; Solberg & Olweus, 2003), others prefer peer reports (Cole, Cornell, & Sheras, 2006; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Österman, 1996), and some have argued that both measures should be used together (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). According to the last view, both measures have their own strengths and weaknesses and should therefore be combined to complement each other. An important additional argument is that peer and self-reports appear to relate to different problems in children, as described hereafter. Relying solely on one method, therefore, may potentially obscure problems of children involved in bullying. The present study was conducted to further investigate this differential relation between peer and self-reports and children's problems observed in the bullying literature.

1.1. Peer and self-reports

1.1.1. Peer reports

Peer reports involve nominations or ratings given by group members or classmates. In nomination procedures, which are commonly used in bullying research, participants nominate one or more classmates that fit the description of a certain bullying role or type of bullying (Goossens, Olthof, & Dekker, 2006; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Perry et al., 1988). An advantage of peer reports is that subjectivity and errors are reduced because multiple informants are used (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Perry et al., 1988). In addition, they provide access to information typically hidden from adults (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Perry et al., 1988). Children are usually well informed about bullying behaviors of their classmates. One study showed that 60% of the children appeared to be bullied by their own classmates, and bullying mostly occurred either in the playground or in the classroom (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Nevertheless, classmates sometimes underreport bullying behaviors as well because they are not always aware of it, and not always present when it takes place (Card & Hodges, 2008; Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

1.1.2. Self-reports

Self-reports generally involve questions regarding the frequency with which a child bullied another child or was bullied himself or herself. Self-reports present a unique individual view of the situation (Juvonen et al., 2001; Pellegrini, 2001; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). They potentially convey experiences that others, such as peers, teachers, or parents could not observe or may not consider as bullying behavior (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Juvonen et al., 2001; Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003). The biggest disadvantage of self-reports is their subjectivity, given that they are based on the potentially biased view of only one participant. Victims, for instance, may perceive certain behaviors as bullying which are not meant as such.