Bullying...Who Decides?

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The following is an article written by Kelly Wester and Heather Trepal, CSI’s 2005 Research Award Recipients.

Bullying has been examined for years and has been found to range from 3% to 90% depending on how bullying was defined, how the researchers presented the questions, the demographics of the participants, and whether youth were asked about their role (i.e., bully, victim, observer). In almost every study, participants (teachers, parents, students) are presented with a definition of bullying behavior. These definitions have typically been defined by the researchers who are conducting the study, with little or no explanation as to what youths’ perceptions are of the definitions – or input on the behaviors they believe typify bullying.

Common Definition of Bullying

The most common definition agreed upon when studying bullying behavior was summarized by Nansel et al. (2001): Bullying is a specific type of aggression in which (a) the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, (b) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and (c) there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one. Although this definition is the most frequently accepted and used by researchers, youth have rarely been asked about their perceptions.

The few researchers who have asked students’ opinions found that students did not agree with the definition. Students believed that bullying did not necessarily have the intention to harm the other person but may be done because it was “funny” (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Madsen, 1996). The lack of understanding of what youth consider bullying to be may be why adults who work with youth are unable to effectively intervene. Typically, adults have failed to intervene in bullying situations because they did not recognize the behavior as bullying or did not know what behaviors constituted bullying (Boulton & Hawker, 1997; Gropper & Froeschl, 2000). Thus, the current authors believed that it was imperative that the gap begin to be filled on what youths’ perceptions were on bullying. In order to gather students’ perceptions, Q methodology was the research design used. Q methodology was selected because of its usefulness in organizing and measuring subjective perceptions of participants regarding significant personal experiences and describes subjective viewpoints (Brown, 1986; McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The major difference in Q methodology is that Q methodology analyzes and sorts people and their opinions, while typically in other analyses the variables or items are sorted. For more specific information on Q methodology and the analysis please refer to the research paper, which can be found on CSI’s website (www.csi-net.org).

Sample

A convenience, volunteer sample was used for the current study. Participants included 45 youth from one fifth grade elementary school classroom and one middle school, grades 6 through 8, from a middle-class, suburban community in the Midwest. Participants included 23 boys and 22 girls who ranged from ages 8 to 15 years (mean=11.64, SD=1.5). Fifty-one percent of participants were in fifth grade, 18% were in sixth grade, 11% seventh grade, and 20% reported...
being in eighth grade. The majority (64%) of participants were Caucasian, with 27% being
African American, 7% Native American, and 2% describing their ethnicity as other.

Q Sorting

Each youth was given cards that had 16 words that constituted bullying behaviors. These
words were received either from literature or from previous interviews with other youth about
bullying. The youth were then to sort the words on an upside-down continuum (see Figure
below), with the number on the bottom of the table indicating how many words the youth could
put in that column. After sorting out the words based on their own thoughts or opinions about
bullying, each youth was interviewed to inquire exactly what the words meant to them.

Bullying Q Sort Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least like bullying</th>
<th>Most like bullying</th>
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<tr>
<td>-3</td>
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<td>-2</td>
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<td>-1</td>
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Results

A total of eight factors emerged with eight values greater than 1.0, explaining 84% of the
variance. Correlations between the eight factors were extremely low, ranging from .01 to .33,
which suggests that each factor of individuals represents a different idea or opinion about what
constitutes bullying behavior. Although it is too comprehensive to provide all the information
about the analyses and factors in this article, each factor will briefly be mentioned with some
con-text or statements made by the youth.

Each factor was titled by the authors based on the way youth sorted the bullying statements
and the information provided by the youth in the interviews. The first factor was titled Physical
Bullying since the youth on this factor reported that kicking, hitting, punching, and fighting were
considered to be “most like bullying.” They also reported that “bullies tend to beat people up”
and “if someone doesn’t like someone, they’ll hurt them.”

Youth on the second factor, Progressive Bullying, stated that bullying starts off as
something verbal or smaller than physical behavior or violence, such as threatening to beat
someone up; however, the verbal behavior progresses to behaviors that are more serious and
physical. The youth on this factor sorted statements such as stalking/following, threatening to
beat up, and fighting as “most like bullying” and youth reported that these behaviors “can lead to
other behaviors, physical behaviors,” and bullies are “saying [they will] beat you up, threaten to
make you feel bad about yourself.”

The third factor was labeled Social Consequence Bullying. Youth on this factor indicated
that bullying consisted of behaviors from which an individual could receive a “record” from the
school or police (e.g., suspension, expulsion, arrested.). They reported that threatening to beat up,
stalking/following someone, and destroying property were “most like bullying.” Statements from
these youth revealed that bullying was something that one “can get a record, suspension for
threatening,” “[a] record by police for destroying property and stealing,” or “can get a record by
the principal for fighting.”

The fourth factor was titled Verbal Bullying since it was characterized by comments that
bullying was verbal in nature, including threats, teasing, and making fun of others. The fifth
factor was Intrusive Bullying. The viewpoints of the youth on this factor was that bullying
consisted of behaviors that intruded on one’s safety, personal space or belongings, or bullying
was about pressuring an individual to do something they may not normally have done.

The sixth factor was identified as Power Differential Bullying due to students reporting
that the bully was stronger, either verbally or physically, than the victim. Their interviews revealed that a bully tends to “pick on people, particularly pick on someone. Really hurt people, [and] physically harm [them].” Another youth stated that “usually people say it is a bigger person – height, bulk, size – that bullies a little person because they think they have a better advantage, but [that is] not true, a smaller person may bully too.”

The seventh factor was titled Psychological Bullying due to students characterizing bullying by psychological or mental acts. They reported that the statements “most like bullying” included stalking/following, making fun/teasing, and threatening to beat someone up. One female student conveyed that bullying is “scary, having someone watch your every move,” while another student reported that bullying is “more likely [to consist of] things that will hurt [victims] feelings, make them cry. Most [bullies] are insecure, try to make others feel smaller. Intimidation makes them feel bigger.” The final factor, factor eight, consisted of one 5th grade youth who had personal experience with bullying. Thus, the final factor was titled Personal Experiences with Bullying.

Discussion

As can be seen by the results in this study, while some youth have perceptions of bullying that fit within the definition and criteria of bullying, other youth perceive behaviors that are outside of the definition used by researchers and school personnel, as well as outside the four categories (i.e., physical, psychological, verbal, and relational) that are used for bullying behaviors. The most important message that arises out of this study is that youth have different definitions of bullying, even between themselves, and that individuals working with youth need to have a clear idea of what those youth consider to be bullying behaviors.

Through intervention and discussion, professionals (e.g., teachers, counselors, parents, administrators) can play a major role in diminishing the amount of bullying that takes place in the schools, neighborhoods, and other areas in the child’s life. Due to the invisibility of psychological, relational, and verbal forms of bullying (Gropper & Froshl, 2000; Simmons, 2002), professionals may have difficulty in recognizing the extent of bullying that actually occurs in their classrooms and schools and throughout a youth’s life. In order for these professionals to recognize more invisible forms of bullying and to effectively intervene prior to serious consequences (i.e., academic decline, trauma symptoms, and distress), one needs to begin to think outside the box that has been given to us through the original categories and definitions of bullying. Discussions about the diverse types of bullying behaviors should take place – with these discussions including youth. Professionals working with youth need to recognize that bullying is not simply physical aggression but bullying occurs on a continuum; however, one end of the continuum should not be considered more serious than the other as youth have their own individual perceptions and ideas. It is imperative that professionals working with youth understand and recognize the various forms that bullying and harassment can take. If one does not know what a person considers to be harmful, then how can he/she effectively intervene?

References


