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## A Behaviorally Specific, Empirical Alternative to Bullying: Aggravated Peer Victimization

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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** To test a behaviorally specific measure of serious peer victimization, called aggravated peer victimization (APV), using empirically derived aggravating elements of episodes (injury, weapon, bias content, sexual content, multiple perpetrators, and multiple contexts) and compare this measure with the conventional Olweus bullying (OB) measure, which uses repetition and power imbalance as its seriousness criteria.

**Methods:** The data for this study come from The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence 2014, a study conducted via telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample. This analysis uses the 1,949 youth ages 10–17 from that survey.

**Results:** The APV measure identified twice as many youth with serious episodes involving injury, weapons, sexual assaults, and bias content as the OB measure. In terms of demographic and social characteristics, the groups were very similar. However, the APV explained significantly more of the variation in distress than the OB ( $R^2 = .19$  vs.  $.12$ ).

**Conclusions:** An empirical approach to identifying the most serious incidents of peer victimization has advantages in identifying more of the youth suffering the effects of peer victimization. Moreover, its behaviorally specific criteria also bypass the difficult challenge of trying to reliably assess what is truly bullying with its ambiguous definitional element of power imbalance.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This behaviorally specific measure of serious peer victimization, called aggravated peer victimization, uses empirically derived aggravating elements of episodes (injury, weapon, bias content, sexual content, multiple perpetrators, and multiple contexts) and has advantages in identifying more of the youth suffering the effects of peer victimization compared to the typical measure of bullying.

The discussion of children who harm other children has been organized in recent years around the concept of “bullying”. The concept was first promoted in the research and social policy domain by the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus. For Olweus [1], bullying designated a category of peer aggression that was more serious than and merited special attention from ordinary

episodes of fighting, meanness, and harassment among peers [1]. He chose to define and operationalize bullying as intentional aggression that was repeated and that took place in a relationship where there was an imbalance of power, either physical or social.

This notion of bullying has had an enormous intuitive appeal as a mobilizing device for those trying to enhance children's safety. But as educators, researchers and policymakers have tried to advance the field, they have encountered certain persistent problems with the concept [2,3]. First, the concept appears to exclude or at least de-emphasize certain kinds of very serious peer victimization that nearly everyone wants to identify and prevent [4]. For example, a child could be very seriously injured or sexually assaulted by a peer, but if it did not involve a

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preexisting power imbalance then it would not be bullying. Second, whether there existed an actual power imbalance can often be a challenging judgment because differences in size, strength, gender, popularity, social status, and minority group membership can be very jumbled. Power imbalance is also not easy to measure reliably because it may change after an aggressive episode has occurred [5], when the bullying experience itself creates the perception of a more powerful perpetrator. Adding to the dilemma of what is truly bullying, it turns out that the colloquial meaning of the term for many children and parents does not necessarily even include a power balance dimension [6]. It is often applied to any act of meanness or aggression. Victims, parents, and school officials thus frequently disagree about whether bullying is occurring [7,8]. It also means that when research participants are asked to label incidents as bullying, very inconsistent definitions often emerge [6]. As a result of these problems, many peer victimization measures avoid the concept completely [9,10]. Others propose using an array of peer victimization categories such as bullying, harassment, and criminal assault [3].

Our research group has taken a somewhat different approach to the categorization of peer victimization. We have tried to gather accounts of a wide spectrum of peer victimizations and examine empirically the influence of various episode characteristics. In this research, some characteristics appear to have a particularly “aggravating” influence on fear and distress, including features like weapon usage, physical injury, and sexual content (sexual derogation, homophobic references, or sexual touching). This has led us to wonder whether there would be research and policy advantages to identifying more serious peer aggression based on these characteristics, rather than applying a “bullying” framework. We call this an “aggravated peer victimization” (APV) framework or, for short, “peer abuse.”

We use the term “victimization,” rather than “violence” or “aggression” because some of the behaviors, like exclusion and unwanted sexual touching, are not necessarily motivated by an intent to hurt or cause pain, which is implied in the strict definition of these terms.

One advantage could be that an empirically based approach would flag more of the seriously affected youth. While there are many measures of bullying or peer victimization [2], none of them are based on an empirical assessment of what features are associated with greatest distress. Yet another advantage might be that an aggravating elements approach based on clearly defined episode characteristics could possibly bypass some of the measurement ambiguity that has plagued the bullying concept.

However, the concept of power imbalance still poses a challenge in this regard. Our research and that of others has confirmed that perceptions by victims of power imbalance, at least judged after the episode, do correlate with indicators of greater seriousness and more harm [11–13]. Nonetheless, our concern is that preexisting power imbalance is often a difficult condition for external observers to ascertain and when applied by victim self-report can be confounded by the impact of victimization and the victim’s subjective attributional styles, making objective assessment of this component unreliable [13]. There could thus be advantages to an assessment of serious peer victimization that does not rely on power imbalance.

This study compares the results of classifying peer victimization by the conventional Olweus bullying (OB) measure using its implicit power imbalance [14] in contrast with an alternative approach using “aggravating elements” or what we call the APV.

We selected aggravating elements that have been shown in previous analyses to be associated with more serious effects: sexual content, weapon usage, injury, bias content, multiple assailants, and multiple different kinds of victimization contexts [12,15]. At the same time, we did not include a direct measure of power imbalance as an aggravating element. We will compare the children identified by these two approaches, examining, in particular, the ability of the measures to predict their distress using a commonly used measure of victimization trauma.

## Methods

### Participants

The data for this study come from The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence 2014, which was designed to obtain up-to-date incidence and prevalence estimates of a wide range of childhood victimizations. This particular study focuses on the 1,949 youth from the survey who were ages 10–17 at the time of the survey. Interviews were conducted over the phone from August 2013 through April 2014 by the employees of an experienced survey research firm.

### Sample

A nationwide sample was obtained using four sources: (1) an address-based sample of households from which cell and residential numbers could be dialed; (2) a prescreened sample of households with children from recent national random-digit dialed (RDD) surveys; (3) a listed landline sample (targeted on indication of a child in the household based on commercial lists); and (4) cell phone numbers drawn from a targeted RDD sample frame. It yielded a sample that with weight adjustments to current census features of race, gender, and socioeconomic status is representative of youth 10–17 in the United States. The details of the study are described in more detail in the study by Finkelhor et al. [16].

### Procedure

A short interview was conducted with an adult caregiver (usually a parent) to obtain family demographic information before asking to interview the youth. Respondents were promised complete confidentiality and were paid \$20 for their participation. All procedures were authorized by the institutional review board of the University of New Hampshire.

### Response rates

The response rates varied from 67% for the address-based sample [American Association of Public Opinion Research Response Rate 4] to 22.9% for the matched telephone numbers on file, 30.6% for the prescreened sample, 21.7% from the listed landline sample, and 14.2% for the cell phone RDD sample. Some of these response rates are low by historical standards, but they are as good as or better than what is typical at the current time in national survey research [17].

### Weighting

Weights were developed to account for differential probability of selection within and across the sampling frames and to adjust for nonresponse.

## Measurement

### *Olweus bullying*

The Olweus conventional bullying question gives respondents a definition of bullying, including both the elements of repetition and power imbalance and then asks if the respondent has been bullied [18]. The somewhat shortened version of the question we used read as follows:

Being bullied is when another student or students, say mean things, exclude another kid from their group of friends, tell lies or spread false rumors about you, hit, kick, push, or shove you around, or break, ruin, or take your things. When we talk about bullying, these things happen repeatedly, and it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself. We don't call it bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way. Also, it is not bullying when two students of about equal strength or power argue or fight. How often have you been bullied at school in the past year?

If the answer was yes, follow-up questions inquired about whether the bullying contained elements of repetition and power imbalance. "Did the person who did it have more power or strength than you? This could be because the person was bigger than you, was more popular, or had more power in another way." "Was this something that this person did repeatedly to you so that it happened again and again?"

### *Aggravated peer victimization*

The APV measure was intended to identify any youth who experienced victimization by a nonsibling peer in the past year that: (1) had sexual content; (2) had bias content; (3) involved a weapon; (4) involved multiple assailants; (5) resulted in an injury, or to identify youth who (6) experienced multiple types of victimization perpetrated by peers (i.e., physical assault and verbal aggression). The presence of any one of the above six elements qualified the youth as having experienced APV.

The presence of these six elements in the past year was assessed using 21 questions from the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) covering four general areas: property victimization (three items), physical assault (nine items), sexual victimization (six items), and verbal and relational aggression (three items). When a youth responded yes to one of the questions, a series of follow-up questions were asked to gather additional details about the incident.

The six aggravating circumstances were constructed as dummy variables using the JVQ items themselves and their associated follow-up questions. Youth were coded 1 on each variable if they had experienced the victimization in the past year at the hands of a nonsibling juvenile peer in any location. An incident was considered to have *sexual content* if it involved: an attack on the genitals, a sexual assault, flashing, or verbal sexual harassment/spreading of sexual rumors. *Bias content* was coded 1 for youth who responded yes to having experienced a physical assault based on their skin color, religion, place of origin, or sexual orientation. *Weapon involvement* and *injury* were coded 1 for youth who reported that a weapon was used or that injury resulted for any of the 21 victimization types assessed. *Multiple assailants* was coded 1 for youth who answered yes to a single

**Table 1**

Ability of Olweus bullying measure to capture youth with serious peer episodes

Serious element	Percent of row item missed by Olweus bullying question	
	Any location	At school
Injury	48.3	56.9
Weapon	59.5	57.0
Bias	42.9	29.2
Gang or group perpetration	40.5	41.0
Sexual content	56.1	58.5
Multiple victimization contexts	44.9	42.1
Any of above six	52.9	52.2

item asking if they had experienced a physical assault by a "group of kids or gang." Finally, *multiple victimization types* was coded 1 for youth who reported experiencing three or more different types of victimization by peers (of the 21 types assessed).

APV did not limit episodes to school. Note that the OB screener specifies "bullied at school," but analyses suggested that 12.4% of students endorsing the OB screener had reported no at school victimizations under the JVQ questionnaire items.

### *Current psychological distress*

Psychological distress was measured with 28 items about anger/aggression, depression, anxiety, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress from the Trauma Symptoms Checklist for Children. The Trauma Symptoms Checklist for Children has shown very good reliability and validity in both population-based and clinical samples [19,20]. In this study, the alpha coefficient for this scale was .93.

## Results

Using the conventional Olweus measure of bullying that provided respondents with the specific definition of bullying shown above (OB screener), 22.2% of the youth reported that they had had such an experience during the past year. However, when asked follow-up questions to confirm the key elements of the definition, many of the youth indicated that the experience in question did not contain such key elements. Forty-two percent did not endorse the follow-up question about power imbalance, and more than half (59%) did not describe an episode that was repeated. Thus, in total, only one third (34%) of the youth who affirmed a bullying episode in the screener actually had one that met both of the bullying definitional criteria of power imbalance and repetition.

Moreover, substantial proportions of the youth with the most serious peer victimizations did not endorse the OB screener (Table 1). Based on episodes in the last year identified through the JVQ portion of the questionnaire, the OB screener failed to identify 48% of those who had been injured in an assault by a peer, 60% of those assaulted with a weapon, 40% of those assaulted by a gang or multiple assailants, 43% of those who suffered a bias attack, and 56% who were sexually harassed or assaulted. Altogether, of those who had one of the aggravating elements, slightly more than half were not identified by the OB screener. As shown by the second column in Table 1, even when episodes were strictly limited to those that occurred in the school

**Table 2**

Characteristics of aggravated peer victims (APV) and Olweus bullying (OB) victims

Mean or percentage (95% CI)	APV	Olweus
	(n = 453)	(n = 343)
Age (years, mean)	13.8 (13.4–14.3)	13.3 (12.8–13.7)
Male (%)	56.9 (46.2–67.1)	50.2 (37.9–62.5)
Race/ethnicity (%)		
White	59.3 (48.2–69.4)	55.2 (42.4–67.4)
Black	15.6 (9.2–25.0)	15.8 (8.2–28.2)
Other	2.6 (.9–7.1)	2.9 (.9–9.0)
Hispanic	22.1 (13.8–33.5)	26.0 (15.8–39.8)
Family structure (%)		
Two parent	54.1 (43.2–64.6)	61.0 (48.0–72.6)
Parent and step/partner	13.1 (6.8–23.7)	13.4 (6.1–26.9)
Single parent	25.7 (17.5–35.9)	22.6 (13.8–34.8)
other adult	7.2 (2.8–17.0)	3.0 (1.0–8.5)
Socioeconomic status (mean)	-.37 (-.56 to -.20)	-.42 (-.5 to -.24)
Number of past year adversities (mean)	1.7 (1.3–2.0)	1.5 (1.1–2.0)
Missed school because of past-year peer victimization	21.5 (13.3–32.8)	15.3 (8.3–26.5)
Number of good friends (mean)	8.4 (7.1–9.7)	7.4 (6.2–8.5)
Percent of kids in highest 20% of Trauma Symptom Checklist scores	46.2 (35.8–56.9)	36.1 (25.6–48.2)

CI = confidence interval.

context, equally large portions of youth with serious episodes did not endorse the OB screener.

Using our alternative approach to peer victimization in which we classify youth on the basis of the presence of aggravating elements, 25% of the sample met the criteria for APV in the past year. Forty-seven percent of these APV youth had endorsed the OB screener, and 53% of the OB screener youth met criteria for APV.

Because there was considerable overlap between the groups, it is not surprising that on almost all demographic measures the APV youth were similar to the OB youth (Table 2). There were no significant differences in age distribution, gender, ethnic breakdown, family structure, or past year adversities. In the prediction of distress symptoms, however, the APV measure explained considerably more variation than the OB screener. In a regression, controlling for age and gender, the  $R^2$  for the APV measure was .19 compared to .12 for the OB screener. (The  $R^2$  for in-school episodes alone was .18 compared to .12 for the OB measure.) When we compared this statistically by entering the APV measure into a prediction model after OB, the  $R^2$  change was .10 and significant ( $p < .00001$ ), indicating the significant additional variance explained by the APV items.

## Discussion

The results from this analysis confirm some of the conceptual and empirical problems with the Olweus measure of bullying. When respondents were given the conventional OB screening question that included a definition and asked to identify if they had been so victimized, the majority of episodes reported did not, upon further follow-up, meet the official bullying criteria. Despite replying “yes” to the screener, a majority denied that the episodes involved power imbalance or repetition. This suggests that in spite of being given a definition, it was the colloquial meaning of bullying as generic peer meanness that governed the responses of many youth [6].

In addition, the OB screener failed to identify a large proportion of the youth with serious peer victimizations identified by other study questions, including episodes involving injury (48% missed), multiple assailants (40% missed), or sexual content (56% missed). These episodes were missed by the OB screener, we conjecture, not because they lacked power imbalance, but because when peer abuse reaches certain levels of seriousness, it acquires other labels like assault, attack, sexual assault, and bias crime. These terms override the term “bullying” which tends to connote a somewhat less serious and less criminal form of peer victimization. Again a colloquial meaning may be in force when the term bullying is used that inhibits the identification of much serious peer victimization.

This is a problem, on one hand, because we doubt that advocates and educators who are mobilized to prevent bullying really mean to exclude from their efforts these more serious victimizations. It is also a problem because the definition of bullying that is used in so much research and law also does not formally exclude these more serious victimizations, even though in colloquial parlance and real assessment contexts, respondents may actually be applying an exclusion. Some authors have recommended using multiple terms like bullying, harassment, criminal assault to insure full coverage of the domain [3]. But this does not solve the problem of where to draw the line if one is just assessing bullying and how to demarcate the important elements of peer victimization.

We contrasted the OB measurement to our approach that specifies serious peer victimization according to the presence of several behaviorally specific, aggravating elements. Aggravating elements included weapon, injury, sexual content, bias content, gang attack, multiple assailants, or several different kinds of aggressive behavior. This represents our proposal of how to define the domain (Table 3). This alternative APV approach identified 25% of the sample as having an episode. The approach was better at flagging the children who were experiencing distress symptoms. The amount of variance in distress explained by the aggravated elements approach was .19 compared to .12 for the OB measure. This makes sense if indeed the Olweus measure is failing to flag many of the more serious episodes.

Given these results, we believe there are several advantages to using the APV approach instead of the bullying concept, both

**Table 3**

Proposed aggravated peer victimization questions based on juvenile victimization questionnaire items

In the last year, did another kid your age hit or attack you on purpose with an object or weapon, that is, with sticks, rocks, guns, knives, or other things that would hurt?
In the last year, were you physically hurt in an attack from another kid your age? (“Hurt” means you could still feel pain in your body the next day or you had a bruise, a cut that bled, or a broken bone.)
In the last year, did a group of kids or a gang hit, jump, or attack you?
In the last year, did another kid your age hit or attack you because of your skin color, religion, or where your family comes from, because of a physical problem you have, or because someone said you were gay?
In the last year, did another kid your age try to hurt your private parts on purpose by hitting or kicking you there?
In the last year, did another kid your age make you do sexual things?
In the last year, did another kid your age hurt your feelings by saying or writing something sexual about you or your body?
In the last year, were you hit, attacked, picked on or called names in at least four or more different times and places?

in practice and in research. In research, we think it will be easier to achieve comparability among peer victimization measures, based on whether they assess for these core aggravating components. In practice, the APV will help school officials and others identify more of the serious peer aggression episodes and more of the distressed victims. The behaviorally specific APV should also be easier for practitioners to apply because it does not involve the complicated and often subjective concept of power imbalance, and it does not invoke a colloquial term like bullying that has very different meanings for different parties involved.

This does not mean that the APV is conceptually without any ambiguity. Debates could ensue about what exactly is sexual or bias content, a weapon or an injury. Fortunately, these are concepts that have lengthy histories of specification in legal statutes and social science measurement, so finding precedent and agreement on these issues is likely to be less fraught.

We should be clear that APV is an alternative method for identifying serious peer victimization but not for operationalizing the specific concept of bullying. Many episodes identified as APV will not seem to observers to fit into the idea of bullying. But APV is an alternative method for identifying the most serious forms of peer victimization that are associated with the most harm. We believe it encompasses more of the kinds of episodes that school officials and other youth serving professionals truly want to address in their prevention and intervention work. It will eliminate the need to try to decide which category an episode falls into—bullying, criminal assault, and sexual harassment.

Bullying researchers and practitioners may see a need to measure and assess for bullying specifically, which they may regard as a separate domain of exposures from APV, and this may be useful for some purposes. But this research does suggest that if bullying is actually meant to exclude some of the more serious and impactful forms of peer victimization like weapon assault or sexual assault, then the question is raised about where the line is to be drawn and what is the justification for drawing it. Should acts that qualify as crimes be excluded from the term bullying? But then, what should be done about classic elements of bullying like physical assaults or unwanted sexual touching or even threatening bias insults that, while technically criminal, are mostly not treated as such when they occur among children. Perhaps the term bullying should be confined to nonphysical and nonsexual forms of aggression, what is currently called relational or psychological bullying. But it is hard to divorce bullying from the element of physical threat. We are inclined to think that these problems make bullying a challenge for research and policy.

### Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that suggest that it is far from the last word in this conversation. The comparison between the aggravated elements approach and the bullying definition approach had a variety of problems that could impair the fairness of the contrast.

We also recognize that in introducing a new concept “aggravated peer victimization” we are adding to the number of terms competing for application in this field that already includes bullying, peer aggression, and harassment. We are also adding to the number of instruments, as well. Nonetheless, we think that the way in which we have empirically derived a concept that designates peer episodes that have a high likelihood

of causing lasting distress is unique in the literature and means that this concept will prove useful and receive preferential attention in the long term. It is worth pointing to the experience in a related field, where the term “intimate partner violence” has come to supplant an earlier term, “wife abuse,” that did not adequately reference important elements like violence between unmarried cohabiters and forced sex in marriage. Although older terms like wife abuse and marital rape continue to be used, having a more general construct has proven very compelling.

Finally, the findings in this article should not be read to conclude that while APV causes harm, the rest of peer victimization is benign. While the aggravating features we have identified here seem to be reliably associated with more distress, our research has consistently shown that even those children with less serious forms of peer victimization are more distressed than those with no victimization whatsoever [12].

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