



Abstract

The Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ) is the most widely used instrument to measure bullying, but there have been few studies of its concurrent validity. This study examined the correspondence of the BVQ and peer reports in identifying students who were victims or perpetrators of bullying in a sample of 202 middle school students. There was a weak correlation ($r = .12$) between BVQ self-reported bullying and peer nominated bullying and a moderate correlation ($r = .42, p < .05$) between BVQ self-reported victimization and peer nominated victimization. More students were identified as victims and bullies by peer nomination than by self-report. School counselors conducted follow-up interviews with 13 students identified as possible victims of bullying and found that both self reports and peer reports may over-estimate the prevalence of bullying. These results raise concern about the use of student self-report to measure school bullying.

Rationale

In order to assess the effectiveness of bullying prevention efforts, it is essential to have accurate measures for identifying bullies and victims. Although the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ) is widely used, there is very little published information concerning its accuracy in identifying victims or perpetrators of bullying. One reason for this gap is that the BVQ is administered anonymously, making it impossible to determine if a student's self-reports of being bullied or bullying others are correct. Students are promised anonymity in order to encourage them to respond truthfully, but anonymity makes it impossible to determine whether their responses are truthful, and thus, whether the BVQ results are valid. Several studies have shown that even a small number of students can substantially distort measures of bullying, weapon-carrying, fighting, and other high-risk behaviors through exaggerated or careless reporting on school surveys (Cornell, 2006; Cornell & Loper, 1998; Cross & Newman-Gonchar, 2004; Furlong, Bates, Sharkey, & Smith, 2004).

To address the need for validity research, this study took the unusual step of administering the BVQ on a confidential, but not anonymous basis—using code numbers rather than student names—in order to examine the accuracy of student self-report. Self-reports were compared to a peer nomination survey in which students listed names of classmates who were victims of bullying or had bullied others. In addition, data were available for a subgroup of 13 cases in which school counselors interviewed students who had been identified through self-report or by peers as victims of bullying.

Study Questions

1. What is the relationship between BVQ self-report and peer nominations for bullying others?
2. What is the relationship between BVQ self-report and peer nominations for being a victim of bullying?
3. Are school counselors able to confirm that students identified as victims of bullying were in fact involved in bullying relationships?

Methods

The sample consisted of 202 middle school students participating in a school-wide Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. It should be noted that the school had an ongoing bullying prevention program and had already achieved reductions in bullying. Ninety-eight (48%) students were boys and 104 (52%) were girls, with a mean age of 12 (range 10 to 14). Students were in grades 6 (37%), 7 (34%), or 8 (29%). The ethnic breakdown was 66% White, 19% African-American, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian-American and 6% Other. In the fall of 2005, students completed the BVQ and peer nomination form in their classrooms.

The BVQ is a 38-item self-report measure that asks whether or not the student had been bullied or had bullied others in the "past couple of months." Students who reported being bullied "2 or 3 times a month" or more were classified as victims, which is the standard cutoff recommended by Solberg and Olweus (2003). Analyses were repeated using a more inclusive cutoff of "only once or twice" or more. The same cutoff was used to classify students who admitted bullying others.

The peer nomination form asked participants to write the names of any students whom they knew to be victims of bullying or to bully others in the past month. Students were supplied with a list of all students in each grade. Standard cutoffs were based on students who were nominated two or more times (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004) and a more inclusive cutoff identified any student with at least one peer nomination.

Two school counselors conducted 13 follow-up interviews of students identified as victims of bullying by self-report or peer nomination. These interviews were carried out for intervention rather than research purposes, to determine whether the students were actually being bullied and if so, to provide assistance to them. The counselors followed their regular school procedures in investigating allegations of student misbehavior, which means that they also interviewed other students who might have witnessed or participated in the alleged bullying. The counselors completed a standard report form after investigating each case.

Results

1. Correspondence of Self and Peer Reported Bullying

BVQ. The majority of students (87.6%, $n = 177$) reported no incidents of bullying others in the past couple of months, 10% (20) reported bullying others "once or twice", 5% (1) reported bullying others "2 or 3 times a month", and .5% (1) reported bullying others "about once a week". The standard cutoff classified only 2 students as bullies, but the more inclusive cutoff classified 22 students as bullies.

Peer Nominations. Among the 202 students who completed the BVQ, 72% (145) received no peer nominations as bullies, 18% (37) received one peer nomination, 5% (9) received two nominations, 3% (6) received three nominations, and 2.5% (5) received four or more nominations as bullies. The standard cutoff classified 20 students as bullies and the more inclusive cutoff classified 57 students as bullies.

Using standard cutoffs, agreement between self report and peer nominations for bullying was 89%, with a kappa coefficient of $-.02$, n.s. Using more inclusive cutoffs, agreement decreased to 69%, with a kappa coefficient of $.06, p > .05$. Overall, the correlation between self-report and peer nomination was $r = .12, p > .05$.

Table 1. Self-Report and Peer Nominations for Bullying

Self-report <i>How often have you taken part in bullying another student(s) at school the past couple of months?</i>	Bully Nominations			
	0	1	2+	Total
It hasn't happened	129	34	14	177
Only once or twice	12	3	5	20
2 or 3 times a month	1	0	0	1
About once a week	1	0	0	1
Total	143	37	8	199

2. Correspondence of Self and Peer Reported Victimization

BVQ. More than three-fourths of the students (80%, $n = 161$) reported not being bullied by others in the past couple of months, 13% (26) reported being bullied "once or twice", 4% (8) reported being bullied "2 or 3 times a month", .5% (1) reported being bullied "about once a week", and 2% (4) reported being bullied "several times a week". The standard cut-off classified 13 students and the more inclusive cutoff 39 students as victims.

Peer Nominations. The majority (81%, $n = 163$) of students received no peer nominations as victims, 15% (31) received one peer nomination, 2% (4) received two nominations, .5% (1) received three nominations, and 1.5% (3) received five or more nominations as victims. The standard cutoff classified 8 students and the more inclusive cutoff 39 students as victims.

Using standard cutoffs, agreement between self report and peer nominations for victims was 92%, with a kappa coefficient of $.15, p < .05$. Using more inclusive cutoffs, agreement was 81%, with a kappa coefficient of $.40, p < .05$. Overall, the correlation between self-report and peer nomination was $r = .42, p < .001$.

Table 2. Self-Report and Peer Nominations for Victims

Self-Report <i>How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?</i>	Victim Nominations			
	0	1	2+	Total
It hasn't happened	14	15	4	161
Only once or twice	15	9	2	26
2 or 3 times a month	4	3	1	8
About once a week	0	1	0	1
Several times a week	0	3	1	4
Total	16	31	8	200

3. Counselor Follow-Up Interviews

The school counselors interviewed 13 students who were identified as possible victims of bullying by the survey. Only five of these students were actually victims of bullying in the judgment of the counselors. These five students included 2 who identified themselves as

victims, 2 who were identified by peers, and 1 identified by both self- and peer-report. The counselors judged that the other students had reported conflicts or arguments between peers of equal status, so that there was not a clear bully and victim relationship. They also judged that in several cases the students had identified a single incident of teasing that did not meet the Olweus definition of bullying.

Conclusions

Overall, more students were identified as bullies and victims by peer nomination than by self-report. The two measures produced weak agreement in the identification of students as bullies. For example, of the 177 students who said they were not bullies on the BVQ, 48 received at least one peer nomination for being a bully. These findings suggest that students may not be as forthcoming on self-report. Somewhat stronger agreement was found between self-report and peer nominations for victimization.

Other studies have found small to moderate correlations between self-reports and peer nominations (Achenbach et al., 1987; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Pellegrini & Bartini 2000). A fundamental problem is that there is no gold standard for confirming that a student is actually engaged in bullying or has been bullied. In practice, the determination that bullying is taking place is made by a teacher or school counselor who interviews the students and makes this judgment, but to our knowledge there are no studies of this process. Our counselors were trained in the Olweus program and conferred on their definition of bullying, but we did not undertake formal reliability training. Therefore, these results must be regarded as exploratory and require replication using more standardized procedures. Nevertheless, these observations cast doubt on both self and peer reports of bullying. Both self and peer report appeared to produce false positive identifications, perhaps because students tended to use an overly inclusive definition of bullying.

There are other limitations to these findings that require further study. Bullying rates were low because this school had already achieved reductions in bullying through several years of prevention efforts. Also, students may not have been as willing to admit bullying because the BVQ was confidential rather than anonymous. Nevertheless, these findings raise concern about reliance on BVQ self-report as the sole measure of bullying in evaluating a school's bullying prevention efforts.

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