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Winter 1-2016

## **Moving beyond the Emphasis on Bullying: A Generalized Approach to Peer Aggression in High School**

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### **MSU Digital Commons Citation**

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# Moving beyond the Emphasis on Bullying: A Generalized Approach to Peer Aggression in High School

*Christopher Donoghue and Alicia Raia-Hawrylak*

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Heightened attention to bullying in research and in the media has led to a proliferation of school climate surveys that ask students to report their level of involvement in bullying. In this study, the authors reviewed the challenges associated with measuring bullying and the implications they have on the reliability of school climate surveys. Then they used data from a sample of 810 students in a large public high school in New Jersey to evaluate the merits of using a more generalized definition of aggression in school climate research. Similar to national surveys of bullying, the authors found that boys were more likely than girls to be involved as aggressors, victims, and victim-aggressors for verbal aggression, physical aggression, threats, and damage to property. Girls were more likely to be involved in social aggression. Few differences were observed in aggressive behaviors by grade, but grade level moderated the differences by gender for all types of aggression. The findings demonstrate what school social workers can expect to learn about school climate by using a survey instrument to measure the prevalence of specific categories of aggression that do not include the requisite power differential, a minimum duration of victimization, or an intentionality test.

KEY WORDS: *bullying; high school; peer aggression*

**B**ullying is one of the most discussed and researched phenomena facing children and adolescents in the United States. Children who bully others are the subject of many individual-level studies that isolate personality characteristics such as self-esteem (Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011) and disorders such as depression and anxiety as factors associated with being a bully or a victim (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Rimpelä, & Rantanen, 1999; West & Salmon, 2000). Reports of bullying that purportedly lead to suicide or mass violence have been widely covered in mass media, and these stories have added pressure on lawmakers to take a firm stance against bullying in schools. In response, legislative bodies have constructed laws that seek to impose disciplinary consequences for children who engage in a wide variety of aggressive acts, such as physical or social aggression, cyber attacks, harassment, and intimidation, all in the name of a broad-based antibullying effort.

Although there is obvious merit in promoting awareness of these harms, Collins (2011) has noted that there is no basis for the idea that *bullying*, or repeated acts of aggression committed by a stronger individual (or group) on a weaker individual (or

group), is on the rise. Bullying is just one of the many forms of aggression, such as scapegoating, individual honor contests, and intergroup fights, that are commonplace in institutions of both children and adults. It has also been noted that overly broad definitions of the term “bullying” create confusion and can result in difficult cases of litigation (Cascardi, Brown, Iannarone, & Cardona, 2014). Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras (2011) have described this problem as a lack of conceptual consensus that can hamper comparative research on aggressive behaviors and cloud information used for the development of responsive prevention strategies (Carrera et al., 2011).

In this article, we analyze the main components of the most widely accepted definition of bullying and take account of the challenges encountered in its measurement. We then review studies of national-level data on bullying and consider the ways in which decisions about how to measure bullying have influenced the reported scope of how large the problem is in schools. Finally, we examine the results of a school climate survey that piloted a new set of measures for generalized forms of peer aggression, instead of bullying. The goals of this study are to assess the problems that arise from using bullying as

an umbrella term for all acts of aggression and to propose a new approach for measuring aggression as a component of school climate without restricting student responses to the confines of a rigid definition of bullying or counting every aggressive act they report as a bullying incident.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the classic definition of bullying, Olweus (1993) referenced purposeful and repeated negative acts committed by one person against another, in a situation where the aggressor has more power than the victim. This description is used most commonly in the academic literature, but competing definitions are often found in legislation, in school policies, in the media, and among the members of school communities, including children. For example, Vaillancourt et al. (2008) found that when Canadian youths ages eight to 18 years were asked to construct their own definitions of bullying, nearly all of them emphasized negative behaviors; however, only 1.7 percent of young respondents included intentionality, 6 percent included repetition, and 26 percent included a power differential. The study also found that students who were given a standard definition of bullying reported less victimization than those who were enabled to use their own definition. Similarly, Kert, Coddling, Tryon, and Shiyko (2010) found that respondents provided with a definition of the word “bully” reported significantly less bullying behavior than those not exposed to the word or its definition.

In a qualitative study exploring reasons why students do not seek help or report to adults, deLara (2012) found that the definition of bullying proposed by Olweus (1993) and used in schools can be problematic when it differs significantly from youths’ experiences. Youths generally defined bullying as “when someone is mean” yet were aware of the differences between their definitions and those of adults; in some ways this awareness mapped onto fears of not being taken seriously if they were to report instances of victimization (deLara, 2012). Monks and Smith (2006) explored the role of age and experience in students’ coding of behaviors as bullying. Younger children were found to be more inclusive in their definition, whereas older children were more constrained by their awareness of definitional conditions of repetition and “power asymmetry” (Monks & Smith, 2006). Monks and Smith concluded that experience does not strongly influence definitions of bullying, but “cognitive capaci-

ties” for distinguishing across various dimensions of behavior account for age-graded differences.

Additional work has identified various subcategories of bullying behavior according to where it takes place, the reciprocal nature of the action as proactive or reactive, and the relational and even gendered nature of particular types of behaviors (Hong & Espelage, 2012). In a review article, Hong and Espelage (2012) used Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework to review risk factors for aggressive behavior within various contextual levels. The effects of micro-level relationships with parents and peers and school connectedness in general were responsible for the most direct influence on bullying behavior (Hong & Espelage, 2012).

Student definitions of bullying may also be influenced by their individual characteristics, their actions, and their perceptions of self. Students who acknowledge involvement in aggressive activities have been found less likely to define those acts as forms of bullying (Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002). Similarly, in a study by Monks and Smith (2006) in which students of various ages were given cartoons to define as bullying or not bullying, aggressors were far less likely to identify the cartoons as bullying. Furthermore, girls have been found more likely to consider the impact on the victim (Frisén, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006), and boys have been found more likely than girls to include a power differential in their definition of bullying (Frisén et al., 2008). Some evidence suggests that students decide that bullying has occurred only when a sufficient amount of harm has been caused to the victim (Donoghue, Rosen, Almeida, & Brandwein, 2015; Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011), and students may downplay the extent of the harm that they perceive occurring in these situations (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003).

Qualitative research has found that students, parents, and teachers have difficulty deciding what constitutes a power imbalance and when an incident is serious enough to be considered bullying (Mishna, 2004). According to Chan (2009), the challenges of applying the standard of a power differential are numerous. Because most dyadic social relationships involve a number of characteristics that could lead to power imbalance, such as an age difference, body size, or a greater degree of experience or popularity, there are many types of conflict that may be more rightly described as an abuse of power than as an act

of bullying; and viewed in retrospect after an aggressive incident has occurred, it is a reasonable tendency for observers to view the situation through the traditional lens that assumes the aggressor must have more power.

The intention to do harm to the victim has also been cited as a subjective criterion that evades measurement in research (Carrera et al., 2011). In Cunningham, Cunningham, Ratcliffe, and Vaillancourt's (2010) focus group research, students reported that incidents labeled cyberbullying were often attempts at humor that had unintended effects, or were acts of retaliation by students who had been victimized by other means in the past. In another study of Taiwanese secondary school students and educators, students were less likely than educators to believe that malicious intent was behind aggressive acts (Cheng, Chen, Ho, & Cheng, 2011).

The evolution of multiple definitions of bullying may be due to the measurement challenges posed by requiring a minimum duration of repeated aggression, and the presence of a power differential between the aggressor and the victim. In surveys such as the School Climate and Bullying Survey, which is frequently used in studies of bullying (Ashbaugh & Cornell, 2008; Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; McConville & Cornell, 2003), students are asked to count an incident as bullying only if the aggressor has more power than the victim. The respondents are told to ignore conflicts between people of the same strength. The requirement of the power differential may be problematic because of its subjective nature. It may be difficult for youths, as well as adults, to assess and conceptualize what is meant by "strength" (Chan, 2009). Possible definitions of power might include physical size, prowess, popularity, and the ability to incite fear, but it is unclear how a child, teacher, or parent should make these comparisons between the aggressor and the victim. Less visible forms of power may be present as well, such as superior intelligence, a broader vocabulary, the capacity to engage in effective premeditation, and the awareness of a potential victim's greatest vulnerabilities. By coming forward to report a case of victimization, a child or adolescent may be risking further stigmatization by acknowledging that he or she was the weaker individual in the conflict. Collins (2011) has argued that an increasing number of aggressive incidents that do not meet the traditional definition of bullying still end up being categorized as bullying.

## MEASURING PEER AGGRESSION AND BULLYING IN SCHOOL

Estimates of the prevalence of bullying in schools are confounded by the lack of consensus in how to define it. Using the traditional definition of bullying with a power differential, Nansel, Haynie, and Simonsmorton (2003) used national data collected in 1998 to estimate that 16.9 percent of students in grades 6 through 10 were bullied either sometimes or at least once or twice, whereas 19.4 percent had bullied others sometimes, or at least once or twice per week. A larger portion of the sample (29.9 percent) reported having been engaged as a bully and a target. In another national survey conducted by the National Education Association, school personnel were asked to report the extent to which they found bullying to be a problem in schools (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2011). In this study, bullying was defined as "intentional and repeated aggressive acts" that are often characterized by a power differential. Eighty-nine percent of teachers reported that they had witnessed bullying at least once per month, and 44 percent described it as a moderate or major problem.

The School Crime Safety Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (SCS/NCVS) provides more recent estimates. This survey does not instruct the respondent to apply the power differential criterion; however, it refers to aggressive acts as "bullying." During the 2010–2011 academic year, 27.8 percent of 12- to 18-year-old students reported having been bullied at school on at least one occasion. More specifically, 17.6 percent said that they had been made fun of or insulted; 18.3 percent had been the subject of rumors; 5 percent had been threatened with harm; 7.9 percent had been pushed or shoved; 3.3 percent had been made to do things they did not want to do; 5.5 percent had been excluded by others on purpose; 2.8 percent had had their property damaged; and 9 percent had been bullied with technology.

The SCS/NCVS also allows for comparisons by grade and by gender. In 2010–2011, 31.4 percent of girls and 24.5 percent of boys reported being bullied during the year. For girls, the most likely form of victimization was rumor spreading, with 23.8 percent reporting to have been a victim of such an act. For boys, being made fun of or insulted was the most likely form at 16.2 percent. Students in grades 6 through 8 were more likely than students in grades 9 through 12 to say they had been victimized.

Among high school students, sophomores reported the highest level at 28 percent, followed by freshmen at 26.5 percent. Juniors and seniors reported less victimization at 23.8 percent and 22 percent, respectively. In all grades, students were most likely to report that they had been a victim of rumor spreading, followed by having been made fun of or insulted.

Recognizing that schools are interested in reducing all forms of aggression, [Finkelhor, Turner, and Hamby \(2012\)](#) have called for policies that would enable schools to devote less time trying to discern whether negative behaviors constitute a prescribed definition of bullying, and instead move “beyond bullying to include peer sexual assault, dating violence, gang violence and single episode assaults” (p. 274). In states such as New Jersey, in which school social workers, counselors, and school psychologists are designated as antibullying personnel, there is an increasing need for these professionals to be particularly responsive to forms of aggression that fit the standard definition of bullying, regardless of whether this type of aggression is the most frequent or harmful in their school.

In this study, we piloted a new school climate questionnaire that seeks to measure the frequency of a broad set of aggressive acts commonly identified as forms of bullying, but without using the term “bullying,” or asking students to consider a power dimension, a minimal duration of the behavior, or intentionality. The objective of the survey was to provide the school’s antibullying personnel with a more inclusive picture of the aggression that students experience by aggression type, gender, and grade level. The results enabled administrators at the school to develop a targeted approach to addressing aggression in their school.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

The sample for this study consisted of students attending a large suburban high school in a middle-class area of New Jersey. Recruitment letters and consent forms for parents were sent home with students in all grades. In accordance with [New Jersey P.L. 2001, c.364 \(C.18A:36–34\)](#), regarding surveys on antisocial behavior, parents were required to provide written informed consent to enable their children to participate. As an incentive, we offered all students returning their form a chance to win one of four \$25 gift cards. Entry into the raffle required

only that the forms be returned. Participation was not required. Students over the age of 18 were given a separate adult consent form on the day of the survey. After a two-week period, 74 percent of the students had returned their consent forms, with 77 percent of them granting parental consent. The sample was further reduced by students who missed school on the day of the survey and those who chose not to participate. Recent guidance from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) recommends asking about gender presentation whenever possible but without calling unnecessary attention to transgender status ([HRC, 2015](#)). Because the school administration was interested in gender differences, we asked students to report their gender as male or female, or they could select the option for prefer not to answer. Those who did not answer the question were not included in the final sample because gender differences could not be detected. The final sample consisted of 810 students, or 46 percent of the student body and 83 percent of those who had been given parental consent. Each of the participating students completed the survey online, in a school computer lab, under the supervision of the research team.

### **Measures**

The questionnaire comprised questions on the frequency of several forms of aggression and victimization. For verbal aggression, students were asked how often they had been teased, called mean names, or insulted on purpose by other kids in the last month. They were also asked how many times they had done this to others. For both questions, the response choices included never, once or twice, about once per week, and several times per week. Students who said they had been victimized at least once or twice were coded as victims of verbal aggression. Those who said they had been the aggressor at least once or twice were coded as verbal aggressors. Students who reported that they had been an aggressor at least once or twice, and a victim at least once or twice, were coded as victim-aggressors. We also measured physical aggression, social aggression, threats, damage to property, and cyber aggression using the same question formats and coding schemes (see Table 1).

### **Analysis Strategy**

We began by assessing construct validity and internal consistency of the six types of victimization and the six types of aggression. A correlation matrix (not shown) of the four-item frequency of victimization in the last

**Table 1: Aggression and Victimization Measures for Incidents Occurring in the Last Month**

Type	Measure
Verbal aggression	
Victim:	I have been teased, called mean names, or insulted on purpose by other kids.
Aggressor:	I teased someone else, called them mean names, or insulted them on purpose.
Physical aggression	
Victim:	I have been pinched, slapped, hit, kicked, shoved, or punched by another kid.
Aggressor:	I pinched, slapped, hit, kicked, shoved, or punched another kid.
Threat	
Victim:	Someone threatened to hurt or fight me.
Aggressor:	I have threatened to hurt or fight someone else.
Social aggression	
Victim:	Someone told lies or spread rumors about me or tried to get people not to like me.
Aggressor:	I told lies or spread rumors about someone or tried to get people not to like someone.
Damage to property	
Victim:	Someone tried to damage or destroy my things (such as a notebook, a book bag, or a cell phone) on purpose.
Aggressor:	I tried to damage or destroy someone else's things (such as a notebook, a book bag, or a cell phone) on purpose.
Cyber aggression	
Victim:	Another person wrote mean things about you, called you mean names, posted something to embarrass you on purpose, or threatened you using the Internet, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology.
Aggressor:	I wrote mean things about someone else, called them names, posted something to embarrass them on purpose, or threatened them using the Internet, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology.
Victim-aggressors:	Students who were both victims and aggressors.

month (never, once or twice, about once per week, and several times per week) for verbal aggression, physical aggression, threat, social aggression, damage to property, and cyber aggression showed a range of Pearson correlations from .19 (social aggression × damage to property) to .41 (physical aggression × threats), with a total of seven that were weak (below .30) and eight that were moderate (between .30 and .50). A composite victimization scale, averaging the six victimization frequency scores, showed a Cronbach's alpha of .72. For aggression against others, a correlation matrix (not shown) yielded associations between .22 (social aggression × physical aggression) and .43 (damage to property × cyber aggression), with a total of two that were weak and 12 that were moderate. The Cronbach's alpha for a composite aggressor score, averaging the six aggression frequency scores, was .70. A preliminary analysis indicated that boys scored higher than girls on both the composite victimization scale (mean difference = .07,  $p = .012$ ) and the composite aggression scale (mean difference = .10,  $p < .001$ ). An analysis of variance showed no significant differences in the composite victimization scale or the composite aggression scale by grade.

In the following section, the differences in the six victimization types and the six aggression types, as

well as the variable for victim-aggressors (described previously) are examined individually. The comparisons are drawn between the percentages of those who were victimized, those who aggressed, and those who did both, at least once or twice in the last month compared with those who reported no involvement, for ease of interpretation. Independent sample *t* tests for the differences in the overall frequencies (never, once or twice, once per week, several times per week) of victimization and aggression confirmed the same results by both gender and grade.

## RESULTS

The initial sample comprised 56.6 percent female students and 40.5 percent male students. The remaining students (2.9 percent) either skipped the question on gender or selected prefer not to answer, and were excluded from further analysis. When describing their race, students were able to choose from multiple selections. Students identifying as white alone or white/multiracial, constituted 88.1 percent of the sample. Asians made up 6.8 percent, Hispanics or Latinos 5.4 percent, black Americans 3 percent, and American Indians or Native Americans 2.6 percent. Freshman-level students made up

**Table 2: Percentages and Two-Sample *t* Tests for Aggression Role, by Gender, and ANOVA for Aggression Role, by Grade (*N* = 810)**

Aggression Role	Male	Female	<i>t</i> Score	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	<i>F</i> Score <sup>a</sup>
Verbal aggression								
Victim	62.1	56.4	1.65*	57.3	52.5	59.8	64.6	1.86
Aggressor	54.0	33.4	5.81***	40.2	38.3	39.9	50.1	2.55
Victim-aggressor	42.4	26.3	4.77***	28.6 <sup>b</sup>	29.0 <sup>b</sup>	32.2	42.9	3.88**
Physical aggression								
Victim	27.8	15.7	4.09***	21.8	20.4	21.9	18.5	0.30
Aggressor	21.2	0.9	4.80***	15.2	13.1	15.1	11.8	0.45
Victim-aggressor	15.8	7.1	3.77***	12.5	10.6	11.3	0.8	0.74
Threats								
Victim	16.9	0.8	3.79***	12.1	10.5	11.1	12.8	0.18
Aggressor	9.8	4.0	3.11**	4.9	4.9	7.7	7.9	0.92
Victim-aggressor	6.6	2.1	2.94**	2.2	3.7	5.1	4.8	0.98
Social aggression								
Victim	28.2	43.4	-4.60***	38.0	37.0	34.2	40.7	0.66
Aggressor	13.7	21.9	-3.10**	16.5	20.4	16.7	21.2	0.78
Victim-aggressor	8.6	16.1	-3.30**	11.2	14.2	12.5	14.8	0.50
Damage to property								
Victim	15.3	7.9	3.13**	13.0	7.4	11.6	11.0	1.05
Aggressor	6.2	1.3	3.50***	3.6	1.9	3.9	3.7	0.70
Victim-aggressor	4.5	1.1	2.78**	3.1	1.9	2.2	2.7	0.26
Cyber aggression								
Victim	16.9	19.5	-0.97	21.3	14.9	18.5	18.0	0.90
Aggressor	7.4	7.2	0.11	6.2	9.3	7.3	6.9	0.45
Victim-aggressor	5.6	5.7	-0.06	4.9	6.8	6.4	5.7	0.39

Note: ANOVA = analysis of variance.

<sup>a</sup>Degrees of freedom = 3.

<sup>b</sup>Significantly lower than for seniors ( $p < .05$ ).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

27.8 percent of the sample, sophomores 20 percent, juniors 28.9 percent, and seniors 23.3 percent.

In Table 2, the percentages of students who reported being a victim, an aggressor, and a victim-aggressor are reported by gender and grade level. Both boys and girls were most likely to say that they had been victims of verbal aggression, with 62.1 percent of boys and 56.4 percent of girls reporting. Verbal aggression was also the most commonly identified type of aggression that boys and girls admitted carrying out, both as aggressors alone and as victim-aggressors. Boys were found to be significantly more likely than girls to have been a victim of verbal aggression ( $t = 1.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ), an aggressor ( $t = 5.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a victim-aggressor ( $t = 4.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Boys were also significantly more likely than girls to have been a physical victim ( $t = 4.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), aggressor ( $t = 4.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and victim-aggressor ( $t = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The same gender pattern was found for threats, with boys more likely than girls to have been a victim ( $t = 3.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ), aggressor ( $t = 3.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and victim-aggressor ( $t = 2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and for damage

to property, with boys more likely than girls to have been a victim ( $t = 3.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ), aggressor ( $t = 3.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and victim-aggressor ( $t = 2.78$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Girls were significantly more likely than boys to have been a victim of social aggression ( $t = -4.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ). They also were significantly more likely than boys to have been a social aggressor ( $t = -3.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or victim-aggressor ( $t = -3.30$ ,  $p < .01$ ). No gender differences were observed for cyber aggression. With respect to grade level, a significant difference was observed only for verbal victim-aggressors, where a significantly greater percentage of both freshmen ( $p < .05$ ) and sophomores ( $p < .05$ ) were found in comparison to seniors.

In Table 3, the gender differences in aggression roles are examined across the grade levels. For verbal aggression, the largest gender difference by percentage was found among sophomores, but none reached the  $p > .05$  standard for statistical significance. For aggression and victim-aggression, the significantly greater proportion of boys relative to girls was present among freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. For

**Table 3: Percentages and t Score Values for Aggression Role, by Grade and Gender**

Aggression Role	Grade 9			Grade 10			Grade 11			Grade 12		
	Male	Female	t Score	Male	Female	t Score	Male	Female	t Score	Male	Female	t Score
	Verbal aggression											
Victim	59.8	55.1	0.71	61.7	47.5	1.63	60.2	59.6	0.10	68.8	61.6	1.03
Aggressor	49.1	32.2	2.59*	50.8	30.7	2.54*	50.5	32.9	2.70**	67.5	39.3	3.98***
Victim-aggressor	35.9	22.0	2.28*	39.3	22.8	2.19*	41.9	25.7	2.56*	54.6	34.8	2.71**
Physical aggression												
Victim	29.9	14.4	2.85*	27.9	15.8	1.76	28.0	17.9	1.77	24.7	14.3	1.74
Aggressor	21.7	9.3	2.56*	21.3	8.1	2.22*	21.7	10.7	2.18*	19.7	6.3	2.61*
Victim-aggressor	17.0	8.5	2.53	18.0	6.1	2.17*	15.2	8.7	1.48	13.1	4.5	1.98
Threats												
Victim	17.9	6.8	2.56*	14.8	7.9	1.29	17.2	7.1	2.25*	16.9	9.9	1.35
Aggressor	6.7	3.4	1.11	6.6	4.0	0.69	11.8	5.0	1.79	14.3	3.4	2.44*
Victim-aggressor	3.8	0.9	1.44	4.9	3.0	0.60	9.7	2.1	2.28*	7.8	2.7	1.45
Social aggression												
Victim	25.5	49.2	-3.77***	36.1	37.6	-0.20	26.9	39.0	-1.96	27.3	50.0	-3.26*
Aggressor	13.2	19.5	-1.27	13.1	24.8	-1.90	11.8	20.0	-1.71	16.9	24.1	-1.22
Victim-aggressor	6.6	15.3	-2.10*	9.8	16.8	-1.30	7.5	15.7	-1.98*	11.7	17.0	-1.03
Damage to property												
Victim	19.8	6.8	2.88**	11.5	5.0	1.40	15.1	9.4	1.27	11.7	9.8	0.40
Aggressor	7.5	0.0	2.93**	4.9	0.0	1.76	6.5	2.1	1.52	5.2	2.7	0.85
Victim-aggressor	6.6	0.0	2.73**	4.9	0.0	1.76	3.2	1.4	0.85	2.6	2.7	-0.03
Cyber aggression												
Victim	18.7	23.7	-0.92	9.8	17.8	-1.34	19.4	17.9	0.28	16.7	18.8	-0.33
Aggressor	7.5	5.1	0.73	8.2	9.9	-0.37	7.5	7.1	0.11	6.6	7.1	-0.15
Victim-aggressor	5.6	4.2	0.47	6.6	6.9	-0.09	6.5	6.4	0.01	4.0	5.4	-0.45

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

physical aggression, the significantly higher proportion of male victims relative to female victims was found only among freshmen, with the other grade levels showing no significant differences. For physical aggressors, the significantly higher percentage of boys was the same for all grade levels, and for physical victim-aggressors, a significantly higher percentage of boys was found only among sophomores. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be victims of threats in freshman and junior years, aggressors in senior year, and victim-aggressors in junior year. Boys were also significantly more likely than girls to be victims, aggressors, and victim-aggressors for damage to property. No other significant gender differences were observed for the other grade levels for either threats or damage to property. The significantly higher proportion of girls involved in social aggression was observed only among freshman-level victims and victim-aggressors, senior-level victims, and junior-level victim-aggressors. No significant differences were observed in cyber aggression in any of the four grades.

## DISCUSSION

Several limitations should be noted before considering the significance of the study's findings. Because the questionnaire did not permit students to identify with a gender other than male or female, we cannot be sure that all of the boys and girls in our sample fully identified with the selections they made, nor can we account for any gender differences in the school aside from those between the boys and girls who self-identified as such. Our sample was also limited to mainly white students living in a middle-class suburban area. These limitations make generalizations impossible; however, the results demonstrate what can be learned from measuring generalized peer aggression instead of relying on the traditional conventions in measuring bullying.

In this study, we have outlined the challenges encountered in measuring bullying using traditional criteria, reviewed the results of national studies of bullying based on these methodologies, and reported the results of an alternatively styled school climate survey that focused on generalized peer aggression instead of bullying. The results demonstrate what school social workers, counselors, and psychologists can expect to learn about their school climate by using a survey instrument to measure the prevalence of specific categories of aggression that do not include the requisite power differential, a minimum duration of victimization, or an intentionality test.

Measuring the extent of bullying has become a ubiquitous feature of school climate surveys administered to children. A wealth of data and measuring instruments are available for this purpose, but students are rarely asked about aggression in general, and they are often told to exclude equal strength aggression when taking surveys on school climate. For this reason, it is unclear whether students would report the same prevalence of aggressive acts at school if they were permitted to consider all forms of aggression, and not just those that are repeated or characterized by a power imbalance. This limitation in the existing research raises questions about whether the patterns in aggression and victimization overall, as well as the patterns by gender and grade level, are the same for bullying and for more generalized acts of aggression.

In addition, an overemphasis in schools on the effects of bullying is problematic for conceptual reasons, such as the fact that aggressive roles may be fluid because individuals may be at one moment victimized and at another participants in carrying out aggression. Parents and teachers are often advised by school personnel that equal strength conflict is normal, but when a power differential is involved, it is a form of bullying. This distinction between normal conflict and bullying is important because counselors use different protocols for managing equal strength conflict and bullying, and there are different mandated reporting and investigation procedures under states' specific antibullying legislation. As such, students and parents may interpret this to mean that bullying is the only form of aggression to be concerned about, or that equal strength aggression is acceptable. In addition, the emphasis on antibullying programs in schools and the high degree of media attention surrounding bullying may signal to parents and students that complaints about victimization are more likely to be heard if they are described as bullying rather than equal strength conflict.

Similar to research results on bullying, we found that boys were more likely to be involved in physical aggression and girls were more likely to be involved in social aggression (Esbensen & Carson, 2009). We also found that boys were more likely than girls to report being involved in threats and damage to property. Grade-level effects on the roles played were minimal, but grade-level data showed that the differences between boys and girls were not consistent across all four years. By providing information of this kind to school administrators, it is

possible for them to identify what the most problematic issues with aggression are in their school. Generalized aggression data can be useful for identifying where the greatest prevalence of aggression is taking place, and who are the students most likely to be victimized or engaging in aggressive acts. By using a reporting method that does not rely on the word “bullying” or require a minimum duration of aggressive acts, there is less potential for students to use subjective judgment when deciding when to admit to an act or acknowledge they have been victimized. By permitting students to report equal strength aggression in addition to aggressive acts characterized by a power differential, it may also be less justifiable for students to underreport aggressive acts due to a perceived difficulty in assessing levels of power. Asking about aggression without requiring a power differential to be present also may enable students to report without feeling that they must identify with the label of being a stronger bully or a weaker victim. The absence of an intentionality requirement can be effective as well if it leads to reporting that would have otherwise been discounted due to a reluctance to attribute malicious intent to others, or an acknowledgment that we can never really be sure what people intend.

Practitioners generally agree that a whole-school (or ecological) approach is preferable for reducing bullying behaviors (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011), and there is reason to believe this would be true for generalized aggression as well. This approach is considered most effective when it is informed by data indicating patterns in victimization and aggression. By measuring all forms of aggression in school surveys, not just those that meet the definition of bullying, school administrators may gain a more complete picture of the challenges posed by peer conflict at school and respond more effectively. Knowledge of the scope of aggressive behaviors, which may or may not be chronic and involve a power imbalance, can enable teachers and other school personnel to be more vigilant about all negative behaviors, whether or not they are in the realm of liability for antibullying rules.

We used new measures of peer aggression and intentionally excluded cues in the questionnaire that would prime students to think of a typical bullying situation, such as the presence of a power differential, and the need for acts to be repeated to be included. We also conducted our analysis with a large sample drawn from just one school. In our efforts to gather

the data, we found that school administrators were interested in measuring bullying because of the new state mandates to protect students from this particular form of aggression. We expect that the advantages to be gained from using the more generalized definition of aggression in high school studies of school climate are not yet known and may be difficult to assess at this time when students, parents, the education community, and the media are focused so intently on mounting antibullying campaigns. For these reasons, we have sought to begin a new dialogue that moves beyond bullying and inspires new research on peer aggression that is not limited by the narrowness of one specific form of aggressive behavior. **CS**

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Original manuscript received March 10, 2015  
 Final revision received May 28, 2015  
 Accepted June 25, 2015  
 Advance Access Publication November 24, 2015

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