

A Bully By Any Other Name:
Is Relational Aggression a Gender Issue?

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect that gender plays on bullying. It was predicted that girls were bullies just as much as boys were. Also, that girls bullied differently, girls used mental and social type bullying tactics such as name calling whereas boys were more apt to use more physical tactics. Finally, it was theorized that girls were more likely to engage in relational aggression. However, during the course of this study it was found that girls were not more aggressive than boys are. Also, boys were found to use mental and physical tactics more than girls according to the statistics in this study. Overall, it was found that boys were more likely to be the aggressor, rather than girls that was assumed in the beginning of the study.

Introduction

In the present paper, the role gender plays into bullying is investigated. It is hypothesized that girls are bullies just as much as boys are. Furthermore, it is also hypothesized that girls are more apt to use mental and social bullying tactics (also known as relational aggression), whereas boys use more physical type aggression tactics. In conclusion, it is theorized that girls are more likely to engage in relational aggression than boys.

The APA Briefing Sheet on Bullying defines bullying as aggressive conduct which is intended to cause harm or suffering, which happens habitually overtime, and occurs in a relationship in which there is an imbalance of power or strength (2007). Bullying can take a variety of forms, including physical aggression, teasing and name-calling, threats, and social isolation (APA Briefing Sheet on Bullying, 2007). Bullying can be connected to scare tactics used against racial and ethnic minorities, gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual youth, and persons with disabilities (APA Briefing Sheet on Bullying, 2007). Relational aggression among girls can consist of : secret-telling, spreading rumors, alliance-building, isolation, exclusion from social groups and activities, verbally insulting, backstabbing, and using hostile body language (i.e., eye-rolling and smirking). Other actions include making fun of someone's clothes or how they look physically and bumping into someone on purpose (Skowronski, Weaver,Wise, Kelly 2005) .

According to Skowronski et al (2005), relational aggression tends to be most concentrated and apparent among girls in fifth through eighth grade. Research shows that this type of behavior often continues, although possibly to a fairly minor degree, in high school (Skowronski,et al. 2005). A study of 15,686 U.S. students in grades six through ten, published in 2001 in the Journal of the American Medical Association (Vol. 285, No. 16) is amongst the most recent to document the extent of bullying in American schools (Crawford, 2002). Psychologist Tonja R. Nansel, PhD, and colleagues established that 17 percent of students reported having been bullied "sometimes" or more habitually during the school semester. About 19 percent reported bullying others "sometimes" or more frequently; six percent reported both bullying and having been bullied (Crawford, 2002) .

Nansel and her colleagues also established a number of facts about bullying. They discovered that bullying occurs most often from sixth to eighth grade, with little difference between urban, suburban, town and rural areas (Crawford, 2002). Males are more liable to be bullies and victims of bullying than females. Males are more likely to be physically bullied, while females are more likely to

be verbally or psychologically bullied (Crawford, 2002). Bullies and victims of bullying have trouble adjusting to their surroundings, both socially and psychologically. Victims of bullying have more trouble making friends and are lonelier (Crawford, 2002). Bullies are more prone to smoke and drink alcohol, and to be poorer students (Crawford, 2002). Bully-victims (people who are both bullies and recipients of bullying) are likely to experience social isolation, to do poorly in school and to acquire negative behaviors such as smoking and drinking. (Crawford, 2002) In sum, there are very serious negative psycho-social consequences of being a bully and being bullied.

Dorothy Espelage, PhD, a counseling psychologist/researcher from Wisconsin, who with colleagues has studied 20,000 second- through twelfth -graders about the bullying, tries to disperse common misconceptions about bullying, such as that bullies are always unpopular (Crawford, 2002; Winerman, 2004). Amanda Rose, PhD, and her contemporaries at the University of Missouri-Columbia, found that seventh- and ninth-graders thought that their relationally aggressive peers were more popular than non- aggressive students (Winerman, 2004).

A study conducted by Amanda Rose and her colleagues to determine whether the connection between aggression and popularity may be due to unconcealed aggression, relational aggression or both, surveyed 600 plus third-, fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders about their peers' aggressive behaviors and popularity (Winerman, 2004 & Rodkin, et al 2000). This team initially found that both overt and relational aggression was related to popularity among the seventh- and ninth-graders (Winerman, 2004 & Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker 2000). But when this team later re-tested their respondents for relational aggression, the link between overt aggression and popularity was not there; however, when the respondents retested for overt aggression, relational aggression still predicted popularity (Winerman, 2004). Also, Nicki Crick, PhD, a University of Minnesota researcher and psychologist, found that while some boys exhibit relational aggression, girls show the behavior far more often (DeAngelis, 2003).

In general, it was predicted that girls would be the aggressor, just as much as boys were, when it came to bullying. It was also expected for the girls to bully differently than boys; girls would use mental tactics and boys would use physical ones. Both hypotheses turned out to be proven valid. What was not expected in this study was the fact that bullies tend to be more popular than their non-aggressive peers. Further studies should be undertaken to find out why bullies are more popular than their non aggressive peers. Also, studies should be undertaken to study why relational aggression is very common in elementary and junior high school students' behavior but diminishes in high school students' behavior.

Methodology

Participants

For this study, the desired sample size was ten to twenty participants. (Eleven) 11 people were asked if they would mind completing a short questionnaire related to a psychology course research project by a college student and all accepted.

The student spoke with 7 (seven) people in her home, 2 (two) people in their homes and e-mailed the questionnaire to 2 (two) people. No individuals declined to participate in filling out the questionnaire. Out of the 11 participants, 5 (five) were males and 6 (six) were females. The average age of the respondents in this sample was 19.6 years. The youngest was 18, and the oldest was 21. Respondents were selected from people either known by the

researcher or the researcher's children. Respondents were selected from DeFuniak Springs, Milton, and Pace, located in northwestern Florida.
Design and Methodology

The research design stemmed from the determination to understand the issue of bullying and the possible effects gender plays in relational aggression (bullying). Furthermore, it was important to learn from former students themselves, who were the aggressors: the girls or the boys? For this reason it was decided to use a survey questionnaire to find out the true aggressor, male or female.

The research method was questions on a short survey that included: two (2) informational questions, nine (9) five- point scaled questions assessing male peers and nine (9) five point scaled questions assessing female peers. Both of the five- point scaled questions required an answer of very frequently, frequently, sometimes, almost never, or never.

These questions were developed by the researcher, a student at Ellis College, New York Institute of Technology. Questions three (3) through eighteen (18) were used to determine the prevalence of: male to male, male to female, female to female or female to male aggression. No open ended questions were asked to minimize the amount of stress the respondent would feel when answering the questionnaire.

Question three (3) was asked because harassment was thought to be a common trait for male to male bullying. Question twelve (12) was used to see if harassment was used as tool for females as well as males. Question four (4) and five (5), invalid criticism and isolation were deemed to be a frequent tools for female on female relational aggression incidents. Questions thirteen (13), and fourteen (14) which were also concerning invalid criticism and isolation, were asked to determine if they were used by only females.

Questions six (6) and fifteen (15) were asked to determine if humiliation was used as frequently by males as females. Question seven (7), deals with being singled out for being different and was thought to be equally used by males and females alike. Question (16), was asked to see if there was any difference in statistics for the male or female incidents of being singled out for being different.

Question eight (8), was asked because it was thought to be a very frequent trait for male to male bullying. Physical threats, question seventeen (17), was asked because it was thought to be only a male to male action. It was also used to establish whether it was also used in female on female or female on male confrontations.

Gossip, name calling, and rumor spreading, questions (9), ten (10), and eleven (11) were asked to find out if they were a factor in male bullying incidents. The last three questions eighteen (18), nineteen (19) and twenty (20), also concerned gossip, name calling, and rumor spreading, were asked because they were thought to be the prevalent factor arising out of most all relational aggression incidents involving females.

Overall, the eighteen (18) five- point scale questions were used to find out the frequency of bullying over their high school career. This scale was also used to find out if the occurrence of bullying/ relational aggression was more prevalent in teenage boys or girls.

Procedure

Brief consultations for the purpose of instruction were held with prospective respondents explaining the purpose of the research project and obtaining written consent forms for their willingness to answer the survey questionnaire. At this time they were guaranteed complete anonymity, confidentiality, and that the findings were only for the purpose of a research project for a college level course. The actual collection days were from April 20 to April 25, 2007.

The researcher calculated the results and identified whether the data supported the hypotheses or if the results were associated to other aspects of the study.

Results

There were 11 (eleven) respondents ranging in age from 18 (eighteen) to 21 (twenty-one), that agreed to take the survey. (See chart #1)

Chart #1

Eleven people were asked to participate in filling out the survey questionnaire. 45.5% were males and 54.5 % were females. (See chart #2)

Chart #2

The analysis of the data involved three- step process. Data preparation was used first. This entailed reading the questionnaires, making notes on particular areas of interest; entering the data onto a computer and transforming the data into tables and graphs. The qualitative results from the questionnaire was calculated and categorized and assembled accordingly into groups. Secondly, descriptive statistics was used to describe the basic features of the data in this study. This expressed what the data showed and gave simple summaries about the sample of teens. The final method was the use of inferential statistics which the researcher used to reach suppositions that reached beyond the data alone.

The researcher used the Likert Scale to score the eighteen (18) multiple choice questions. The five-point scale was used because the data collected was ordinal. Each interval between each of two choices would be exactly the same. The scale was used as follows: one (1) for **never**, two (2) for **almost never**, three (3) for **sometimes**, four (4) for **frequently**, and five (5) for very frequently.

The questions three (3) through eleven (11), which dealt with male bullies, were evaluated on the above referenced scale. The median was calculated for each question for statistical analysis purposes. (See Table #1)

Median Ratings of Questions about Male Bullying

Table #1

Q3	Q 4	Q5	Q 6	Q 7	Q 8	Q 9	Q 10	Q 11			
	median		3	3.5	4	2	3.5	2.5	4.5	4.5	4.5

Questions three (3), which dealt with harassment from male peers received a median score **sometimes**. Question four (4), invalid criticism, acquired a median score halfway between **sometimes** and **frequently**.

Isolation, question five (5), garnered a **frequently** for the median score. Question six (6), which dealt with humiliation from male peers, obtained a median score of **almost never**.

Being singled out for being different by male peers; question seven (7) received a median score in the middle of **sometimes** and **frequently**. Question eight (8), dealt with physical threats, received a median score in the middle of **almost never** and **sometimes**.

Questions nine (9), gossip from male peers, question ten (10), name calling and question eleven (11) rumor spreading, all received a median score between **◆frequently◆** and **◆very frequently◆**.

The questions twelve (12) through twenty (20), which dealt with female bullies, were evaluated on the above referenced scale. The median was calculated for each question. (See Table #2)

Median Ratings of Questions about Female Bullying
Table #2

	Q 12	Q 13	Q 14	Q 15	Q 16	Q 17	Q 18	Q 19	Q 20
median	3	3	2	3	3	2	3.5	3.5	3

Question twelve (12), dealt with harassment from a female peer, received a median score of **◆sometimes◆**. Question thirteen (13), which dealt with invalid criticism, gained a median score of **◆sometimes◆**.

Isolation from female peers, question fourteen (14), obtained a median score of **◆almost never◆**. Questions fifteen (15) and sixteen (16), dealt with humiliation and being singled out for being different from female peers both received a median score of **◆sometimes◆**.

Question seventeen (17) that concerned physical threats from female peers received a median score of **◆almost never◆**. Gossip from female peers, question eighteen (18), acquired a median score in the middle of **◆sometimes◆** and **◆frequently◆**.

Name calling from female peers, question nineteen (19) garnered a median score in the middle of **◆sometimes◆** and **◆frequently◆**. Question twenty (20), concerned rumor spreading among female peers, gained a median score of **◆sometimes◆**.

The combined score for each set of paired questions were also rated on the scale as follows: one (1) for **◆never◆**, two (2) for **◆almost never◆**, three (3) for **◆sometimes◆**, four (4) for **◆frequently◆**, and five (5) for **very frequently◆**. The median was calculated for each set of paired (female and male) questions. (See Table #3)

Median Ratings: Overall Scores for Male and Female
Table # 3

	Q 3/12	Q 4/13	Q 5/14	Q 6/15	Q 7/16	Q 8/17
median	3	3	2	3	3	2

The pairs of questions three (3) and twelve (12) dealt with harassment, and four (4) and thirteen (13), dealt with invalid criticism, received a median score of **◆sometimes◆**. Questions five (5) and fourteen (14) dealt with isolation which gained a combined median score of **◆almost never◆**.

The two sets of paired questions, six (6), & fifteen (15) concerned humiliation, and seven (7) & sixteen (16), dealt with being singled out for being different, both received a median score of **◆sometimes◆**. The question pair of eight (8) and seventeen (17), about physical threats, had a median of **◆almost never◆**.

Question nine (9) and eighteen (18), on the subject of gossip, gathered a median score of **very frequently**. The two sets of paired question ten (10) & nineteen (19), with reference to name calling, and eleven (11) & twenty (20), about rumor spreading, gained a median score of **frequently**.

The combined scores for all the female as well as all of the male questions were calculated. Also, the combined scores for all of the male questions and female questions were calculated and a median score for each was obtained. (See Table #4)

Over-all Gender Related Median ratings

Table # 4

Median ratings	male	female	Over all
median	3	3	3

When the scores of all the male bullying questions were calculated a median score of **sometimes** was obtained. The same score of **sometimes** for the median was obtained for the female bullying questions. Overall, when all questions for both genders were calculated a median score of **sometimes** was obtained.

The main thing that was discovered during the research of this paper was that girls are not more aggressive than boys are. According to table #4 (above), Boys and girls are equally aggressive with a median score of **sometimes** for both genders. But when we looked at the scores where the male is the aggressor and compared them to the questions where the female is an aggressor a different picture emerges. Seventy seven percent (77%) of the median answers for the male as aggressor was higher than the when the female was the aggressor. It was hypothesized in the beginning of this paper that girls use mental bullying tactics and that boys use more physical tactics. According to the results of this survey that is not necessarily true. It is true that boys were found to be more likely to give physical threats, and humiliate others. They also received higher scores on previously believed female dominated actions such as gossip, isolation, rumor spreading and name calling. Harassment had a median score exactly the same for males and females. Humiliation was the only thing that the females had a higher score on than the males, when comparing their median scores.

Furthermore, when we look at the median score to see how aggressive the girls are compared to the boys, the boys still are more aggressive than the girls. Even when it comes to gossip and name calling- actions previously thought to be female dominated activities.

At the start of the research process it was thought that girls were bullies just as much as boys are. According to the median scores when one calculates all the scores of the female aggressor against the male aggressor, they come out equal. If one takes the median score for each question individually though, the male is the aggressor most of the time.

Also, it was suggested that girls used mental bullying tactics; whereas boys used physical tactics. This proved untrue. Boys were found to use mental and physical tactics more than girls during this research.

Finally, it was believed that girls were more aggressive than boys. This also proved to be untrue according to the research obtained. Overall, it was found that boys were generally more aggressive than girls.

Discussion

Nicki Crick, PhD, a University of Minnesota researcher and psychologist, found that while some boys exhibit relational aggression, girls show the behavior far

more often (DeAngelis, 2003). According to the median scores of this research project, when one calculates all the scores of the female aggressor against the male aggressor, they come out equal.

Psychologist Tonja R. Nansel, PhD, and colleagues established that seventeen percent (17%) of students reported having been bullied "sometimes" or more habitually during the school semester. About nineteen percent (19%) reported bullying others "sometimes" or more frequently; six percent (6%) reported both bullying and having been bullied (Crawford, 2002). When all of the results were tabulated, it was found that bullying occurred for all eleven (11) respondents at least sometimes (according to the median score).

One of the possible shortcomings of this study is that I used college level students. I think this type of study should encompass students in all grade levels kindergarden through twelfth grade. I think that if a broader selection of ages that were actually experiencing relational aggression were studied more accurate results would be obtained.

Another possible shortcoming of my study is the type of study I performed. Rather than a survey type experiment, an observation over time would be better suited to this type of research project. With observation one could also see potential dependant variables.

I do not think that I found anything in my research process that would limit my ability to generalize my results to a more general population. In fact, I believe the opposite is true. When all the scores for all eighteen (18) questions were calculated for all the respondents it was found that all had been bullied sometimes during their high school years. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that almost everyone in the general population has been bullied sometimes.

I do not think my results were atypical when factoring in the type of people I surveyed (ie college students). I believe that the results could go either way due to false reporting or forgetting of incidents of bullying over time.

I have learned during this research study that everthing affects the data being researched. The age of the respondent, the education level, gender and especially their willingness to be open with the researcher plays a pivitol part in the research process.

I also learned the value of further research studies. No one can answer the who is bulling more question with a handful of research. More in-depth studies need to be done about the issue of bullying.

There are many questions raised by my study. Some of which could possibly never be answered with any degree of accuracy. How many students that are bullied end up with mental problems later on in life? How many students end their life with suicide because of repeated bullying? How does relational aggression shape how we make and or keep friends? How many victims of bullying become bullies themselves? Do bullies remain bullies all their life?

I think a lot of obsevational studies need to be undertaken to answer some of these and many other questions related to bullying. I believe that statistics from actual cases from mental heath facilities could answer the question of how many students end up with mental issues later on in life. Due to the private and painful nature of the suicide issue, I believe reviewing newspaper and coroner reports would be one way of researching this issue. The rest of the questions could be answered with observation or the test-retest method of surveying.

The conclusions that I can draw from my research are that bullies are a fact of life in today's childrens lives. This could be used as a larger hypothesis to study how much bullying occurs on a daily basis in any given class room.

Another conclusion I can draw from my response is that respect and tolerance is on the decline. It could be used for a larger hypothesis to study how family values, such as respect and tolerance, are on the decline.

There was a three part hypothesis in the beginning of this paper. First was, girls are bullies just as much as boys are. This proved to be true.

Secondly, girls use mental tactics, whereas boys use physical ones. This hypothesis proved not to be true in this particular study. I think this proved untrue because of the ages of the respondents. If the respondents of my survey had been primary or secondary school aged children, I feel there would have been a different outcome. They may have remembered more same-sex bullying incidents than opposite-sex bullying incidents. The low number of respondents that I had to complete the survey could also be a variable in why this theory was not proven true.

Lastly, it was theorized that girls are more aggressive than boys. This proved untrue. In this study both genders came out equal as far as aggression was concerned. This could have been proved not true because of the low number of survey participants. I also believe the reticence of males to admit they have been bullied by a female could have skewed the results.

Works Cited

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Appendix 1: Survey questions

The survey included: 2 informational questions, 9 five point rating scaled questions assessing male peers and 9 five point rating scaled questions assessing female peers.

Place an X in the appropriate box to the following questions:

During high school how frequently did you experience the following actions from a Male Peer?

Very Frequently Frequently Sometimes Almost never Never

3. Harassment
4. Invalid Criticism
5. Isolation
6. Humiliation
7. Singled out for being different
8. Physical threats
9. Gossip
10. Name calling
11. Rumor spreading

Place an X in the appropriate box to the following questions.

During high school how frequently did you experience the following actions from a Female Peer?

- | | Very Frequently | Frequently | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| 12. Harassment | | | | | |
| 13. Invalid Criticism | | | | | |
| 14. Isolation | | | | | |
| 15. Humiliation | | | | | |
| 16. Singled out for being different | | | | | |
| 17. Physical threats | | | | | |
| 18. Gossip | | | | | |
| 19. Name calling | | | | | |
| 20. Rumor spreading | | | | | |

Informational questions:

Age:

Sex:

Appendix 2: actual survey questions as presented

Age:

Sex:

Place an X in the appropriate box to the following questions..

During high school how frequently did you experience the following actions from a Male Peer?

- | | Very Frequently | Frequently | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| 1. Harassment | | | | | |
| 2. Invalid Criticism | | | | | |
| 3. Isolation | | | | | |
| 4. Humiliation | | | | | |
| 5. Singled out for being different | | | | | |
| 6. Physical threats | | | | | |
| 7. Gossip | | | | | |
| 8. Name calling | | | | | |
| 9. Rumor spreading | | | | | |

Place an X in the appropriate box to the following question.

During high school how frequently did you experience the following actions from a Female Peer?

- | | Very Frequently | Frequently | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
|--|-----------------|------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| | | | | | |

12. Harassment
13. Invalid Criticism
14. Isolation
15. Humiliation
16. Singled out for being different
17. Physical threats
18. Gossip
19. Name calling
20. Rumor spreading

Appendix 3: informed consent form

My name is Robin South. I am a student in PSYC 370: Research Methods at Ellis, New York Institute of Technology. I would like you to take part in my research for a class project. If you agree to participate in the research, I will collect data by asking you two (2) informational and eighteen (18) five- point rating scaled questions and recording, via paper and pen, your responses.

There is no direct benefit to you from your participation in this research. All the information that I obtain from you during this research will be kept confidential. I will not use your name or identifying information in any report of my research.

After this research is completed, I may save my notes as part of my class work. The same guarantee related to confidentiality will apply to the safe keeping of the data.

It will take approximately 10 to 20 minutes to participate in this study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part and you may refuse to answer any questions or stop taking part at anytime. If you decide to cancel your participation, I will destroy any and all of my notes related to your data. If you have any questions about the research, you may call me, Robin South, at (850) 995-0995. If you agree to take part in the research, please sign and date this form in the spaces below.

I have read this consent form and agree to take part in the research.